

## Death Magic 631

### Chapter 631: Asmodeus, and the King of Monsters

'Quite the welcome,' the stove blazed in an epic battle of utensils against the chef. The television blasted through the hallway; the children loved it. '-Hidros dark-guild politics doesn't interest me anymore. Alpha's in my sight, I have around 10 million exa. Without Elvira's special talent, I have a slighter chance of making a fortune. Ingredients for the drugs have arrived. Bemuses me how the anger towards her death was channeled into the ascension to being a demon-king. On said note, I wonder if the demons have made it alright?'

As was said, the scenery swapped for a wasteland of sand and desolation. Surrounding dunes felt like walls guarding the arena. Gophy and Intherna waited with stern expressions. "-And you call yourself worthy of being Igna's closest confidants?" Intherna smugly said.

"What if we do?" returned a heavily injured Asmodeus, "-I've promised to stand at his side no matter the obstacle."

"Same here," coughed Kul, "-I've never been pushed back so hard in my life," her arm reflectively wiped the sweat-ridden forehead, '-Butler's down for the count," she side-glanced. A puddle of blood and tears soaked the dried desert. "-Don't count me out," he said with a feeble thumbs up.

"Gophy, Intherna," approached Lilith, "-do let them pass," she kindly requested, "-Asmodeus and Beelzebub are my children, I can't very well let them endure much torment."

"Listen here," the words flew from Miira, her arms matched the intent, "-I don't want nepotism in the trial," her docile expression marred to hot-blooded ire, "-only the worthy shall be Igna's close confidants." Tension grew, the demons had fought all out against two of the four. The result was as said; a laughable defeat.

Asmodeus gathered his strength and pushed to a stand, "-how about a deal?" the eyes burnt vividly

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"Speak," replied the straight-faced Gophy.

"Lord Igna has given his approval. As crowned king of the monsters, he has become the embodiment of what the world views as evil. Will goddesses choose to be at his side, us demons, are strongly bound by our code. If matters went awry and the gods launched an attack, would you stand and fight or flee, and perhaps change sides?"

"Good point," nodded Gophy, "-Miira, Intherna," they gathered behind her strong presence, "-God is in our title alone," she smirked, "-our alliance is firm and unshakeable. No matter what is thrown, we'll eventually win," a remarkable confidence spawn from facts and a legacy of winning, one foiled by the defeat and death of Staxius Haggard. Around said time, they were but ducklings watching and waiting. Was the man worthy of their support or not, the ego of being dubbed 'divine' blinded fact from fiction. He saved them and was repaid in his own death. Even then, before the scythe came to take its due, he staked the bestowed symbols into a realm for their safety. He had an unconditional way of caring. These emotions gathered to create a tungstenesque bond.

"Tis the vow we made," an eruption of resolve and strength froze the ground rigid. Doubt and underlying objective faltered, unstable words and motifs were put to the gallows. The brief silence told but one thing, '-lie and you're dead.'

"It doesn't matter," refuted Kul, "-I want to help my master," she stared Gophy straightly, "-the history and well-crafted bonds do not interest me in the least. I'm here to serve one purpose and tis to serve him to the best of my abilities. We know the pain of losing our leader. Lady Miira can vouch for my saying so, the battle was unfair and bound for failure. We were unlucky if only our master was able to revive and not protect the rest of us. In a way, the reincarnation of Staxius carries our dead master too. It's bared for all to see, Origin's part of him, the truth Scifer wanted to discover has merged to a being of death."

"She speaks the truth," nodded Miira, "-I honestly was happy to see familiar faces around."

Gophy's long hair swayed left to right, the ever-seeking stare traveled from visage to visage, "-Miira's proven her judgment is never wrong, therefore, I'll trust her."

The blond hair suddenly flowed, the gust intensified, \*clap,\* the landscape moved to Rosespire's palace.

"Let's discuss the duties of the fellow demons," proclaimed Adete.

"No," said Miira, "-they are to do as they wish," she smiled, "-we're best suited to take care of the Shadow Realm and intervene when matters are hopeless. They're demons, and they've lived in the mortal realm for longer than we have. Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Kul, and the Butler will be of greater help in Igna's schemes and current goal."

"I disagree," voiced Lilith, "-Beelzebub will stay in the Shadow Realm. He's gotten weak."

Thus, lunch was served in the mortal realm. '-what are they talking about?' wondered Igna. éclair joined for the scrumptious meal.

"Hey, Draconis, I still think the Children of Matra is better than the stupid Shooting-Star talk show."

"Are you stupid?" he grimaced, "-children of Matra is a dumb show about icky romance. The actor is a hero and super-star, he looks too smug, I don't like him."

"Then, Shooting-star whatever show is just for perverts to drool over potential idols. What a stupid idea, they talk about love, while my show displays the relation in great detail."

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"Ha-ha," he pulled out his tongue, "-I don't care, Matra is stupid, stupid hot boy, stupid dumb actresses."

"Would you both kindly," a fork hurtfully screeched against the plate. They yelped and covered the ears. Strained expression scrambled to Igna's visage, "-we're in the middle of eating, do not fight."

"Pops," said Vanesa, "-don't do that," her palms stapled against his cheek, "-feed me and don't scratch the plate, it will make the food bad."

"Sorry," he patted her head and glared, "-you two better watch it."

\*Humph,\* they defiantly looked away and continued the argument in an albeit milder tone. Little did he know, the trouble had just begun. A surge of malignant energy dowsed the adjacent corridor black, three figures materialized on the remaining chairs.

“Hello again, master,” cheered Asmodeus, “-long time no see, I hope I wasn’t late.”

“BIG BROTHER ASMODEUS!” exclaimed Draconis, “-what brings you here,” he leaped across and launched a nuzzle attack.

“Stop slobbering,” he held the boy by the armpits, “-what happened to the table manners?”

“Sorry,” he winked, “-I’ll change it tomorrow,” took point on Asmodeus’s face and kicked in a backflip, “-good to see you again,” he laughed maniacally.

“My troublesome little brother,” a reminiscent expression of dread seeped the lifeforce. Igna returned a sympathetic nod of, ‘-I know, welcome to hell.’

“Quite the party,” commented Kul, “-the food looks delicious.”

The sudden entrance barely dented the cavalier expression. The butler’s stare sent shivers, ‘-ominous,’ he scanned to lock on the culprit, “-what do you want?”

“Master, about our deal. You’ve yet to name me.”

“Oh yes,” fingers to his chin, “-let me think,” the eyes closed. Vanesa wasted no time in cleaning their plate, two morsels of meat gone in two bites. For one as lazy as her, she ate with a mindset of it being her last – a true glutton.

“Got it,” the lids reopened with a sparkle, “-Gravy.”

The table choked, “-pops, he asked for a name, not what we’re having for dinner.”

“No, I like it,” he smiled, “-Gravy, it’s uncommon.”

“-and stupid,” added Kul slyly.

“If the name is adequate, I suppose it ought to work. I had Raven as secondary to Gravy; if you’re happy with it, so am I.”

“-AHAHAHAHAHA.”

“Master played you a fool,” sniffled Kul.

“Good job,” applauded éclair, “-great banter.”

“Whatever,” water sips dowsed his embarrassment.

An hour or so later, Saniata and Draconis resumed their shows. A serious talk about the future was needed. The study’s quiet decorum felt best. The new companions lounged on the couches whilst Igna took notice of the computer. News about the incident in Hidros made worldwide acclaim. The murder of a manager didn’t spawn much traffic, not as much as the war between reclusive underworld factions.

“Master, might I trouble thee with a few questions,” inquired Asmodeus.

“Go right ahead,” he spun and listened attentively.

“What are the current goals?”

“To build an underground faction abled to rival the current hotshots in Alpha. Movement is limited since there’s no backup or political figure we can pull. Right now, éclair and I are trying to break into the world of entertainment. I have a personal stake in becoming an a-list celebrity. I will see what Alicia undertook turn reality.”

“What about the faction, what must we accomplish?”

“Make money, a lot of it,” he chuckled, “-money makes the world go round. We don’t have much to start with aside from 10 million from my guardians. I prefer not to touch her generosity,” he twitched.

“I have an idea,” said Asmodeus rubbing his palms connivingly, “-a gambling house.”

“Gambling house,” Kul’s expression sank, “-no way that’s going to work.”

“Don’t forget,” a pair of die summoned in his palms, “-I’m devil of gambling and lust. Two things needed for an absolute hold on humans. I could make use of my harem and earn us money,” he smirked, “-just say the word and I shall have an army of men and women ready to do thy bidding. The best part, they craved for intimate interaction, tis their way of staying alive. Hence, no need to care for money or incident. Demons are immortal in their own way.”

‘We can benefit a lot from the lust and gambling business. Asmodeus, Kul, and Gravy are competent, far smarter, and stronger than humans. I’ll do things the way it’s meant to be,’ he inhaled, “-Asmodeus, would you consider being the head of a new underground organization.”

“Like a puppet ruler?” he voiced.

“No, as an actual kingpin. My objective of being a star stands true.”

“Therefore, it’s impossible to fully get involved in the underground,” returned Gravy, “-won’t it be harder, what about fighters, they need to place a name and face to their leader.”

“We don’t need guards,” he smirked, “-I’m a thirty-thousand strong army on my own. Besides, fighting isn’t an issue. You and Kul can easily defeat angels if push comes to shove, what is a few Sultrian?”

“I like the idea,” grinned Asmodeus, “-what shall we do, puppet master?”

“First, we purchase a motel and an apartment for the workers,” the tone relayed more than words, “-we need publicity, let’s push the boulder uphill. Once ready, the business will carry itself.”

“A motel for my workers, I understand much, what about the apartment?”

“A place of residence for said workers. It doesn’t matter if they’re slaves, I want them to be free and able to make their decision. After all, the demon-king should grant his servants a medium of entertainment.”

“Works for me either way,” said Asmodeus, “-let the plan begin.”

“Understood. From today forth, Asmodeus is the Kingpin, Kul the hitman, as for Gravy, you’re aid to the Kingpin.”

“What about the name?”

“Raven,” he laughed.

The objective set by Courtney didn’t seem out of reach. Who better to embrace the darkness than demons. The intervention of new companions neatly interlocked with the current quest. The study emptied to only éclair and him, ‘-the apartment will also serve in distributing narcotics. Succubus and incubus working the night, the ultimate seducers. I can’t believe my luck. Phase one is to gather enough capital to purchase a gambling house. We can use the motel to host private events. I guess I’ll have to use the money...’ he gritted.

“Master, I have great news,” announced éclair, “-I have liquidated assets and gathered around twenty million Exa.”

“From where?”

“My private information broking business,” he chuckled, “-I prepared for the day my master might require funds to start a new endeavor or is ruined by other factors.”

“I can’t possibly accept-”

“Please,” he grasped Igna’s shoulders, “-as a personal butler, I must confess, without your intervention, I’d have never been able to walk the earth. Not to forget, my core is safely hidden inside the Shadow Realm, this body grows stronger each day, consider it my way of appreciation.”

Chapter 632: Confidence

Day rose on the horizon, Asmodeus awoke to a particularly cramped bed. “Come on ladies,” stray hair awry on his chest and arms. Beautiful unclothed maidens awoke as he said, they sat on their knees and leered the demon invitingly.

“Oh my prince,” said one licking his chest to the neck, “-why wake us so early,” a seductive side glance sent amorous pleasure to his heart.

“Ladies,” he sat against the headboard, “-I’m afraid it’s not late.”

“Yeah, the hell is not,” returned a slightly annoyed roommate, “-Asmodeus, I know the whole deal about the prince of lust is important,” an angered Gravy waited with arms crossed, “-the alarm is enough to wake us both. Moans and simple whispers will but hamper the process.”

“Highness, the lowly side-dish is spouting words,” pointed a very well-defined figure.

“Do beg our pardon, virgin sir,” nodded another, “-I don’t seem to understand vegetable, sorry,” a tilt and a smirk sufficed.

“GO TO HELL!” he thundered, the crowd ‘poofed’.

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“Don’t be hard on my harem,” he swam to the edge and slipped into warm loafers, what remained of decent clothing slipped onto the floor. A downward glimpse turned to, “-I’m sorry,” a blanket hung onto his large member, “-morning wood,” he shrugged and laughed.

“Honestly,” they facepalmed.

Immediately next door, Kul awoke beside the headless faces of specters. “-Ghosts?” she sat and gestured the finger downward, a semi-visible lance impaled whoever they were, ‘-how very ungentlemanlike,’ a sleeping gown lavishly went about her shoulders, ‘-waking a lady with a curse.’

“Good morning,” echoed the corridor. éclair waited impatiently; the doors opened concurrently. ‘-What’s happening?’ spoke the neighbors with gestures. Asmodeus shrugged and said, ‘-I don’t know?’ the well-mannered Gravy sorted his tie and ambled to the retainer’s side.

“G-good morning, éclair,” returned Kul.

“Yes, it is a good morning. There are a few things we need to discuss,” he vehemently targeted Asmodeus, “-I understand your harem came to pay a visit?”

The misunderstanding cleared, he posted against the entrance and smugly grinned, “-yes they did,” he winked lustfully, “-I’ll invite you on their next visit, let’s have the experience of our lives.”

“Asmodeus,” the floor rocked, “-prince of lust or whatnot,” he stomped and slammed the adjacent wall, “-look into my eye, and tell me, is having an orgy at fucking three in the morning necessary?”

“Best time to do so,” he replied nonchalantly, “-three am is when my harem gets in the mood, don’t blame me as tis the devil’s hour.” The pressure cracked the lovely painted wall.

“Don’t anger me,” the pressure eased, a beep escaped from the lift. Heavy steps stomped; long white hair washed by Kul’s face to stand beside éclair.

“Gentleman,” smiled Igna, “-it is a good day,” Vanesa and Saniata peered over his shoulders, Draconis confidently mimicked Igna’s stance.

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“Yes,” chuckled the prince, “-I mean, I did wake up to a lovely team of hot specimens.”

“Yes, hot,” he leaned, “-don’t do that again,” murderous whisper had the demon gulp.

“Pops,” complained Vanesa, “-I want food,” she pulled his ear.

“F-fine,” and off he was to the kitchen. Being tough around children was hard, especially since they didn’t care how he seemed.

Later on, before breakfast, éclair explained what had happened. The prince’s intimate party resounded across their floor, one on which the children stayed. Thus, at four am, he intervened and carried the distressed children to Igna’s suite. As demons, they knew what was happening – then again, the sounds were traumatizing per its right. The thought of chastisement troubled the prince till breakfast started. Kul’s outfit, or what little clothes hung around her waist and chest had éclair in pain. Young Draconis

didn't spare the light of day to make unsavory comments. She took the jest badly and lashed out. Vanesa and Saniata's constant bickering halted any chance of parenting the boy.

"Come on there," interjected Asmodeus, "-why are you angry at my little brother?" the latter climbed onto his shoulder and gawked.

"Tell her big brother," the arms crossed self-assuredly, "-I'm not interested in looking at the body of a virgin," he laughed.

"Body of a virgin..." her eyes glazed in disgust, "-prince of lust, care to tell the little boy to shut the fuc--"

"NO," he gestured loudly, "-no rude language before my brother. He's a witness to my greatness, I've allowed him the pleasures to see my performance plenty o' times. What I mean to say is, don't be worried, he's not interested in demons, especially unattractive ones," he scanned in a once-over.

"Hey boys, would you like to have a breakfast made by yours truly?" her voice sounded pure and pleasant, the intent told of another story.

"Quiet," the sweet aroma of deliciousness rolled into the dining hall. Quarrels stopped per a slap of the scent. The visible steam reached as if a witch's hand and asked for the table to approach.

"Food, food, food, food," followed behind, "-we're the food train," proclaimed Saniata. Draconis leaped off the prince's shoulders and joined. (The food train; a game the troublemakers fabricated. It simply involved a pan, a spoon, and a lot of noise. The leader had to regularly hit the pan, the 'cabins,' were to grasp the shoulders and walk) Havoc and carnage rained more than coordination, Vanesa practically clawed her way to keep pace. The next thirty minutes flowed without trouble. Right after Igna finished, the hype-duo of Draconis and Saniata made for the gaming room. The remainder snoozed on Igna's lap. The butlers handled the dirtied dishes.

"Asmodeus and Kul, please stay a moment, I'd like to discuss a few things." Meaningless glances said, '-we're getting scolded.'

"Don't trouble yourself," he warmly leaned into the chair, "-the harem and skimpy outfits are welcomed. I don't have qualms, do as is wished, there's no specific regulation to follow. Do as is pleased and remember to be courteous to the others. Cast a barrier the next time, the ritual is awkward as is, I don't want to hear how big the prince's member is or how much they want to be abused, do I make myself clear?"

"Oh..." the face flushed; "-it's embarrassing when you voice it so."

"I'm glad, you're somewhat normal, it's nice."

"What about me?" pouted Kul.

"The outfits," he nodded, "-do wear warmer clothes. The manor might be subject to impromptu visits, what then, will you walk outside and flash the guests?"

"Can't do," she refused, "-I feel comfortable..."

"Say no more, wear whatever, keep at least a mild sense of modesty."

“Alright, that I can do.”

The mood darkened, “-here’s the key to my bike,” it slid across the table, “-I want you and Kul to head into town and scout a location. The current red-light district is in Fulha’s district. Be on guard, the casinos are notorious for their ‘-on hand,’ type of advertisement. The cost will be an issue, therefore, scout for the motel first. Report to me once it’s done,” he slid over two bank cards, “-there, personal accounts. I’ve deposited 100,000 Exa on each. Spend it as is wished, tis payment for being my companions.”

“Hell yeah,” cheered Asmodeus, the horns lit in excitement, “-a small fortune to spend,” he stopped and gave a stern look, “-can I gamble with it?” the mouth watered.

“Do as you wish. Go on now, get changed, and leave.”

The bike blasted out the gates and onto the main road. They took the express-way circling Odgawoan, located at the town’s edge. The journey was long and without traffic. Usually, people chose to drive in the city despite traffic as the round trip lasted longer than waiting. The exception, a fast vehicle.

‘Feels quiet,’ figured Igna, ‘-my package should be arriving soon,’ an hour elapsed. The studio serenaded melodic passages on the piano. Inspiration came unexpectedly, for one wanting to break into the entertainment world, he had to use his strength. The reluctance of being better in various fields disappeared. ‘-My boons are my talent,’ he thought and played, ‘-I’ve worked hard to acquire my powers. If they give me an edge over others, then so be it.’ Inherit humbleness altered in all-inspiring confidence. ‘I finally accepted myself. Decades have elapsed, I was foolish and ignorant. Always rejecting my powers and abilities to care for others. Those days are long past, I’ll make my goals true, none’s going to stop me,’ it spawned from Origin’s knowledge and heart.

\*Knock knock,\* a red-light of ‘recording,’ dimmed.

“Master,” said éclair, “-the package has arrived. I’ve moved it to the basement. Shall I seal the alchemic room or will you do the honors?”

“I’ll take it from here,” he left the warmly colored studio, “-I’ve recorded a full-length track. Care to mix it?”

“I’d love too,” he nodded, “-music is mathematics after all.” After the porch and into the bar, a passageway opened underneath the counter. Excessive security guarded access. Nonetheless, he escaped into the brightly lit cellar. To the left laid an open large resting area. In it were sofas, tables, empty slots for expansion. To the right were many o’ blank doors stamped on a blank wall. He carried to the end where a double door stood guard. Another scan sparked a buzz, it parted and slid. Multiple apparatus laid in wait, tall shelves harbored potions. Scrolls to count among the relics were placed on display. An improvement of the machine in Rosespire rested to the far right against the wall. ‘-They’ve moved my research papers and previous experiments,’ he strolled to a large experimental cell. In it laid a robust coffin.

‘There it is,’ he entered and glanced, ‘-the frozen body of an idol. Julius did a great job, she’s exactly the same. The face appears younger, I’m sure the fans won’t question the age. Besides, the world has witnessed an old man become young again, she should be fine,’ he knelt, a press opened the lid. White fumes escaped, ‘-cold,’ he thought and exhaled. The room locked; robust barriers summoned.

“The requirements have been met,” he kicked, the coffin lifted the body onto a table, “-I don’t require ancient symbols for the ritual. Origin is ancient himself,” the lips pressed in composure. \*Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing. Realm Expansion.\* A whirlpool drowned the cell, the bleakness replaced with a mosaic scape of awkwardly colored surfaces. The ceiling opened to a literal picturesque skyscape, it felt as if they were inside a painting. The birds flapped erratically, no flow in the motion, rather, forced and unnatural. A flick of the fingers summoned coverless books; the pages crumpled autonomously into origamis.

\*Souls bound to my soul, companions, servants, those who I’ve deemed worthy to stand at my side, heed me, heed mine voice, heed mine call. I, Igna Haggard, Heir to Death, call upon thy strength, arise Box of Soul – Release.\* a flash of light hurled out the chest.

‘Simple,’ the eyes shut, ‘-I need two pages from the book of Eami.’

The pinkish orb lingered above the lifeless doll, ‘-it needs to be acquainted,’ \*snap,\* a gust forced the instruction. The soul forcefully merged with the doll, ‘-and this should do it,’ paper-airplane dived into her forehead and heart, it pulsed. ‘-And it’s done.’

\*Realm Expansion – Release.\*

‘Didn’t even need my element,’ he stumbled, ‘-so much knowledge,’ the picture-like surfaces revived.

She noiselessly sat upright and blinked cluelessly. ‘She seems in good health,’ he heavily panted, ‘-the element is active, the soul’s accepted the body and her memories and personality are returning.’ Her cluelessness eased, the expression subtly changed as the hands and legs moved.

“Is that you?” she slipped off the table and held his visage, “-Staxius, it’s you!” her eyes watered, “-but how... I remember being pushed off a building.”

“-Yeah,” he patted her head, “-it happened a few years ago. You’ve been revived in the future.”

“Revived? I’m confused...”

“Sit down, I’ll explain what’s happened.”

‘What is there to explain?’ her eyes narrowed, ‘-the room is so clean, what am I doing here, it feels wrong. I was revived... no, the mob was hunting me down, I thought I’d try and end the suffering... the boy, wait... that’s not Staxius, the aura feels more confident and pleased... what is this?’

### Chapter 633: The Prince of Lust and Gambling

“You’re not Staxius Haggard, but the reincarnation of his soul, Igna Haggard. And, I actually died. You reversed time and saved my soul from the past. Once gathered, I was placed in this body and given life again,” she blew onto her cold hands, “-it’s a lot of work to bring back a dead idol.” Her kind gaze looked to the outside, “-the second time I was revived. First at the park, nowhere,” her knees pulled to her chin, “-I don’t understand why, why save me, I’m no one special. Just a girl with ideals and weak strength, I’m nothing to world leaders and famous actors, my fame in comparison is fleeting.”

“Call it selfishness,” he smiled, “-I revived you to fulfill my purpose. You must have made peace of death, saving the boy and getting shot. Quite the heroic way to die if I say so myself.”

“Actually,” she laid on her back, “-I had a lot of regrets. I wanted to make my killers pay,” her head locked onto his face, “-I’m sorry, I don’t know who attacked me, even now. They just wore black suits and followed.”

“Why were you in Melmark anyway?”

“A call,” she said, “-a call, I was asked to head to the capital and wait at the hotel. A representative of the five conglomerates wanted to talk, and if they already knew I was alive, why hide the fact.”

“What about the film crew?” asked Igna, “-any idea where they are or what they’re doing?”

“I sadly know,” her face sulked, the voice deepened in woe, “-when I reached Melmark, I received a damning message. Read something along the lines of, ‘-don’t come back, we’re under attack’ then silence, the people have died, what can I say more.”

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“Hard to track them,” he complained, “-I’ve searched countless newspapers and reports to no avail. Law enforcement has nothing to do with the incident. It as if they were erased from history.”

“Erased from history,” she gulped, “-now, that’s a bad way to die.”

“No matter,” strong on his feet, “-let’s get you a warm and satisfying meal. I have more to say, involvement in the underworld, etc.”

The revival wasn’t much a secret as it was a matter of time. Aceline had always played a crucial part in Staxius’s past life. Knowingly or not, her actions served to reshape the way people thought. The concert in Iqavea is a prime example, ever since then, no star has performed on said stage, no foreign stars anyway.

The duo of a prince of lust and a hotheaded demoness arrived at the park in Fulha’s district. Once at the bottom of town, they turned to the left following the road leaving for the airport. Carter lake stood at a two-hour drive from where they waited.

“We’re here,” gawked Asmodeus, “-look at them,” they pulled to an underground parking lot. Once up the sloped entrance, without helmets and items to restrain their movements, a big inhale sufficed to take the atmosphere in. Time showed late afternoon at a not so very active time of day. Not active for the gambling houses, the streets were occupied enough to be dubbed, ‘-popular.’

“Where’s the red-light district?” inquired Kul, her menacing eyes scanned past many o’ buildings and people, they of which returned a suffocated gulp.

“Why?” inquired Asmodeus leaning over her shoulder, “-are you that excited to witness the bonds of flesh?”

“Shut it,” her fist stopped shy of his nose, “-don’t talk nonsense, I won’t take it lightly, understand, prince of lust.”

“Fine, who went and crawled up your arse,” he spun and took to the higher streets. The Park, host of the skirmish between Codd and the gang cupped itself between enormous buildings. The journey through

town continued, drunkard young adults were a common sight. ‘-A tour around a zoo,’ figured Kul nonchalantly, ‘-this is boring.’

“Stop being a dead weight,” pleaded Asmodeus, “-your crappy vibe is going to ruin my luck,” the scenery swapped for the entrance of a curved hunk of engineering. Cleaned stairs climbed onto a revolving door. Guards presided over each side. Despite their pitch-black glasses, the intent was clear, one could imagine them giving a once over followed by a snarl. The dress code read formal. As it so happened, they wore formal attire. Kul saw the unfolding scene and sneakily tiptoed backed towards the street.

“NO,” glanced Asmodeus, “-be my muse for tonight,” he grasped her arms, “-we’re here to scout the enemy,” he dragged her up the stairs. A rush of slot machines and empty tables raged onto their stead. He conveniently ambled over and took 10,000 Exa worth of chips.

“I’ll be at the bar,” facepalmed Kul, ‘-his drooling, what an idiot.’ A lovely bar maiden waited in a skimpy bunny outfit. She straddled the stool and asked for a drink. “-My lady, is the bunny suit necessary?” she wondered.

“Not a suit,” replied the maiden, “-they’re my real ears and tail,” she struck a cutesy pose, “-are you not familiar with demi-humans?”

“I am plenty,” she downed the drink, “-never expected them in Alpha.”

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“Well, not many of us can afford a ticket here,” she chuckled and poured another, “-I come from a trader’s background.”

“Why are you working here then?”

“To pass time,” said she continually cleaning glasses or wiping the counter, “-Odgawoan’s quite the amusing place.”

“So, you say,” narrowed Kul, “-tis a pleasure to meet another fellow compatriot.”

“Likewise, miss?”

“Kull, call me Kull.”

“My name’s Ena Londaen from the Londaen Family of commerce. We’re part of lady Haru’s trading empire.”

“Oh, you must be familiar with her, yes?”

“No, actually, I’ve never met her. Only father is allowed to speak. The whole war in Arda caused plenty of worry for us traders, it’s a hard life.”

“Must be,” she downed yet another drink, “-I do hope I’m not intruding on your work.”

“No,” she left a kind grin, “-speaking to guests is why I love the job.”

“Cool with me.” Concurrently in the next room, the slot machines rang, the dribble of chips had the few visitors curiously follow the sound of money.

"Damn dude," explained a stranger accent, "-you won the jackpot," he laughed.

"Beginner's luck," he exclaimed, "-doing slots all day is boring. Ain't there a poker table, blackjack, or anything up for games?"

"Don't worry," added another, "-our boss is coming to play poker soon, a table will open up, don't worry." They slyly rubbed their hands, he sensed trouble, more importantly, money, the arousal of the gambling addiction visibly altered the eye color. The visage dropped into an emotionless state, the ever-sinking abyssal glare had the entourage forcefully cough. "Did I scare you?"

"Ah man, what the hell," they chuckled.

From the bar, between the sip of whiskey, a group of lavishly dressed prominent figures ambled to a vacant poker table. "Look at them," she lit a cigar, "-hotshots?"

"Yes," whispered Ena, "-they're members of the underworld here. They use nicknames; so, I can't tell you who they are. One thing for sure, they're sore losers and prey on heavily stacked players."

"Is that right," she asked for a pint, "-I'll take this to my friend. Prepare me the best drink you have; I want to see the match unfold."

The curious bunch led Asmodeus to a poker table. Buy at price said of 250,000 Exa, the exact amount won at the slot machine. A heavily dressed man sat and leered at the others. The entourage split to whisper, "-I see," he nodded, "-have a seat, newcomer."

"Don't mind if I do," he took the one opposite 'boss'. Adjacent chairs were soon occupied by ladies and men. The friendly stares spoke of their acquaintanceship.

"Here," a cold glass pressed against Asmodeus's cheek.

"-what," he yelped, "-oh, it's just you," he accepted the drink, "-what happened to the drinking contest?"

"She'll bring us drinks, don't worry about it," the table was very much annoyed by her sudden appearance, "-beat them to a pulp, they're going to cheat, show them what the prince of gambling can do," whispered Kul.

"This is perfect," the face sunk into borderline murderous intent, "-I'll show them."

Thus, drinks were brought by waiters. Kul took a seat and waited. The first few hands were lost, they bullied the newcomer. The ladies began to tease and question his intellect. Not once did the mind falter. The dealer's cardistry bewildered the coming audience. The exchanges between him and the 'boss' were very suspicious. Then, on the fifth hand, where three players backed out, a duel to a 100,000 sized pot laid in wait, the river came down and won the game. He flipped his card and threw it at the center.

"Good bluff," winked he at the 'boss', "-I like the dealer, his good, the card handling is top-notch, a bit too good I fear." An assistant way into the shadows signaled to stop the sleight of hands. Menacing puffs covered the table. What followed was a carnage, Asmodeus won hand after hand, bullying the others when he called. The winning went from 250,000 to 1,000,000 in the last hour. One against one, the presumptuous personage went all in. Never during the game did he speak, the earlier round confidence flushed down the drain. The river card flipped and he won.

"Good game," he said, the match ended. A tip of 2,000 flung towards the dealer. Murderous intent bubbled, '-that's my queue,' figured Kul. The money transferred to the bank account, "-good profit," said he cheerfully sliding down the handrail out the casino.

"Yeah, sure," she followed, "-what about your fans, should we do something about them?" figures followed their steps.

"Let's," they jumped into a dark alley.

"You're good," said the boss of before, "-what's your name, buddy?"

"Asmo," said he, "-what about you, old man?" gang members guarded the alley from both side.

"It's Esvalo, I'm the right-hand man of a gang," he approached with hands in pocket, "-now, I want to make an offer."

"What offer?"

"Join my gang," said he, "-keep the money and join us. Talented poker players are what we need."

"Sorry Esvalo," he smirked, "-I've sworn allegiance to another man. I heard you were sore losers," he glanced at the back, "-I see the slimy tongues are there too," he narrowed to the ladies.

"Leave them out of this," said the man, "-I'm not a sore loser," he gestured, "-just someone who hates to lose money."

"Same difference!" cried Asmodeus, they pulled handguns and aimed, "-do something."

\*Clap,\* countless tiny specks fluttered into the alley, "-old man," she fired, "-guns don't work on us," \*Snap,\* the pistols disassembled, "-I can easily wipe out this whole district if I wish it," the ground trembled before her aura, a dark orb summoned, "-remember our names, we'll be back soon. Keep the fight for another time," it flung to a lonesome gunman and cleanly carved through his chest. A swipe materialized countless of the same orb, "-what say you, mister, take the loss like a man or be slaughtered like a dog."

"Survival of the fittest," he laughed, "-good, good," he nonchalantly turned, "-keep the money and welcome to Odgawoan, Asmo. We'll meet again."

The alley cleared, "-why use such a dangerous spell..."

"Actually, it was the weakest I have," her expression didn't falter once, "-why didn't you fight, isn't the prince greater than a high-tier demoness?"

"I'd rather not sully my hands," he yawned, "-come on, we've made 1.2 million tonight, cheer up a little."

"Oh please," they ambled into the freshly bustling street, "-we need to scout for a location."

"Yeah, yeah," he walked carefreely, "-the red-light district is north of here. I did my research."

"So you knew?" her eyes narrowed.

"Obviously."

The amiable scuffle was watched by a certain shadow, the light of the street reflected against the binoculars, “-they’ve left and defeated Esvalo. I don’t sense malice.”

“Fair enough, return to the hideout, I have another matter you need to attend to,” the presence vanished.

“Did you sense it?” side-glanced Kul.

“I did,” he puffed, “-who cares, we’re strong.”

Chapter 634: Checkmate

“Why tell me this now?” inquired the newly revived Aceline.

“Because,” he leaned to place a hand on her knee, “-I need your help. I’ve said what I wanted to say, my involvement, and the future that is to follow. You’re the only one who knows so much about me ever since I’ve reawakened.”

“What if I take this information to the officials,” her eyes narrowed, Igna resettled into his chair. The studio over the tinted mirror, the instruments, and the atmosphere had sparked interest in the idol’s heart.

“Nothing much will happen,” he slid towards the mixing board, “-you were killed by the Patek’s, that much I can assure. I thought about the why, when, and how, for months now, the conclusion is, Patek’s did it. They wanted to silence the unnatural bond between you and their heir. Don’t think you’re the only one who’s suffered at their hands. My companion had her best friends killed, and she proceeded to die by their hands. I know the culprit but cannot move against them, that’s how powerful the associates of the conglomerates are.”

“How, then,” the expression eased to give the fullest of attention.

“Break them from the inside,” he smirked, “-I know someone who has no interest in being part of the conglomerates, the man who is behind the blossoming of the entertainment district, a chef, and a very spirited individual. Amsey from Lum.”

“I remember him,” she snarled, “-the smug old bastard. He never cared for the world of cinema, always going on about cooking and the good old days. He’s not bad per se, tis the snake-filled entourage.”

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“The old man has regained his vigor,” he smiled, “-a lot of things have changed. Aceline, you’re the missing piece in what is to come of us,” he held out a hand, “-I don’t expect much. Be yourself and sing, tis all I ask.”

“On one condition,” she lunged for the handle, “-I always wanted to see how well a god could play music. Show me the resolve through melodies, and I shall reply in faith.” He agreed with a gentle smile. Her heart somewhat skipped, the way Igna carried himself felt dignified and kind, different from Staxius. “-He has an overwhelming personality and charm, I can’t but be attracted to him. I feel at ease, never mind my situation, being killed and revived; it doesn’t matter when he’s around. He’s not afraid to say and show emotions anymore. Perhaps I’m paranoid,” she sat and he settled before a grand piano, “-there’s a layer of anger waiting to be peeled. If anyone gets in his way, they’ll pay the ultimate price.”

"Hey, are you ready?" he startled her reflection.

"Y-yeah," the voice cracked, "-sorry, tis a bit worrisome. Singing after so long. My voice's different and rusty."

"Obviously," he remarked, "-the body is an imitation of the original. Don't misunderstand, it's highly capable, the stamina and physical aptitude are over the charts. Starting again will be a tedious task. Pride might not allow so, but I beg, sing, illuminate the world as you did so many years ago. Do it again, channel the stage, remember the people, the emotions, the good things spawned from singing your heart out," the piano sprawled into life, singular lingering notes visibly sprung and hung. She imagined a map of countless notes ambling around the room. 'Save the world,' he thought, '-it's your song in my arrangement of woeful melodies. Feel the emotions, remember what it was like, grab the microphone, and sing. It's the only way to move forward, grab it and sing, SING, ACELINE, SING!' the rigidity and forceful rhythm increase grabbed the singer by the neck and dragged out. She inhaled and mumbled the lyrics, and then hummed it. The voice had a clearer, more mature strength to it, a dignified air of a monarch. One reminiscent of magnificent queens leading her army into battle.

Meanwhile, a very flustered Kul and content Asmodeus returned. The gates opened without a word said, the moon was a third of the way till sunrise, the bright yellowish glow outlined the manor splendidly.

"Good evening," said éclair, "-do take the lady to her chambers. We shall speak of the matters tomorrow morning."

"Alright," \*hic,\* "-I'm not drunk... just tired," she limped into Asmo's arms.

"Yeah, she's not drunk," he sarcastically added, "-take her to bed, I want a hot shower."

"I presume the two are back?" voiced Gravy on the first floor.

"Yes," nodded éclair, "-you're taking the devils to bed?"

Unbeknownst to the household, sunrise arrived auspiciously. Doors to the studio opened harshly, Draconis stood in the company of Asmodeus. "What happened here?"

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"A sleepover," commented Asmodeus. Instruments were littered around, sheet music and the likes flung as if trash. A nameless face had slumped on the couch, whilst Igna had his head down on the keyboard.

"Master, time to wake up," said he.

"POPS!"

'That voice.' The eyes reopened, "-Draconis," \*boof,\* a shockwave carried across the wall, "-what did I say about spearing people."

"I can't help it," he pouted, "-Saniata and Vanesa are still sleeping. I want to play..."

"Calm it boy," a father shuffle of the hair had the boy giggle, "-let's go play soccer, the field's ripe for morning exercise."

“Sire,” interjected éclair, “-what should I do about Aceline?”

“She’s our esteemed guest,” they exchanged fist bumps,”-let the pot simmer for a bit.” Those enigmatic words annoyingly pestered him, what did he mean, was it a metaphor or just an order for breakfast. ‘Ought to care for her,’ he side-glanced, ‘-still, what he did was very impressive.’

Down below, as the sun rose to a visible height, an orangish white ball went from side to side. Draconis had no qualms unleashing the ‘youthful vigor’. Unsurprisingly, Igna matched and returned the strike in kind. A passing game turned ‘-who’s going to get hurt first.’

‘The conglomerates,’ he thought and played, ‘-I have a rudimentary idea for a plan. A simple strategy to ruffle the order of things. I can’t go head-to-head just of yet, and I doubt I’ll ever will without Phantom, Elon’s Dynasty, and the Dark-Guild’s support. Them alone shows how powerful the opponents are. Tis but a game of wit, I’m most acquainted to Amsey, he’s the top dog for the entertainment side of Alpha. Ansoft and Apexi’s bad blood comes from the other conglomerate’s interference. The groundwork for a potential blindsided attack is there. Come on Amsey, take the bait.’ He subconsciously full-powered the ball out of the manor’s bound. Draconis all but fell on the grass and cackled, the vigor seeped into the soil as sweat.

Kul and Asmodeus stumbled to the dining hall. Breakfast was prepared courtesy of éclair.

“You two had fun,” remarked Igna.

“You don’t understand,” complained Kul, “-I had too much to drink,” she slobbered onto the fatigued Asmodeus.

“What’s the prince’s excuse?” fired Gravy.

“Another meeting at three o’clock,” he said, “-my guests were rather savage. I can’t feel my lower back.”

Saniata and Draconis opted for an easy breakfast. The latter had presumably built a secret base in the trees around the property. “Vanesa.”

“No pops,” she refused, “-I don’t want to play with them,” her face dawned a sulk, “-I hate moving around. Sleep is best for me,” and so, she curled in his lap as if a cat and slept. Aceline quietly sat through the arduous morning.

“Everyone’s gathered here,” proclaimed Igna, “-please, welcome the newest resident of the manor, the pride of Hidros, Aceline.”

“Pride of Hidros?” Kul lifted a brow, “-I’ve heard the title on the Arcanum.”

“Me too,” yawned Asmodeus, “-the table spoke of her greatly yesterday. Something about being a plaything for the higherups.”

“I guess the stories live through time,” she exhaled and firmed a smile, “-my name’s Aceline Randle, ex-idol and movie star.”

“She’s a close friend of mine,” returned Igna, “-and yes, for those asking, I revived her to be part of our team.”

“Make sense. My name’s Kul, a high-ranking demoness.”

“Mine’s the dark Prince of Lust and Gambling, Asmodeus, call me Asmo for short.”

“Gravy,” said the butler, “-butler to Igna Haggard.”

“My name’s Vanesa,” she yawned, “-the whatever of curse, Igna’s my dad, good night.”

“The two outside are Draconis and Saniata, my children,” said he, “-don’t be fooled, no one here is human, not even you, Aceline.” She accepted her fate remarkably well, part of it was due to last night’s jamming session. She poured her heart and soul; the reawakened version of her voice had Igna tremble from the start.

Introduction turned report of yesterday. Igna sat and listened. Gravy courteously escorted the idol to her chambers where multiple outfits laid on her bed.

‘He made 1.2 million from gambling. The title isn’t for show after all.’

“My lord,” interjected Asmo, “-I don’t really care about the money. The thrill of winning sufficed. There’s but a lowly favor I wish to ask.”

“Keep the money and gamble,” he returned.

“Read my mind,” he laughed.

“We’ve scouted a prime location for the gambling house. There’s a motel for sale, I haven’t checked the price nor its condition, the emplacement befits our agenda.”

A distant should of rotors perturbed the meeting. Panic held the table in worry, Igna waited smugly. ‘-He took the bait,’ he stood, the conversation stopped. A nod to éclair told what was needed. The guests were soon escorted to the bar, whereupon, Amsey’s stature giddied. Asmo and Kul were tasked to visit Fulha’s district again. No matter the era or persona, the schemes, and constant evaluation made a boy into a power-hungry fiend. One can say, the scheme started the day they met, an unconscious effort. Igna left a strong impression as he broke down Alicia’s flaws. Then, the time elapsed, Amsey grew wary under the limits of taking personal actions. Vorn’s sudden kidnapping left a large hole in Ansoft’s agency. The other idols and potential stars were drug addicts or fell into the world of adult entertainment. The publics’ outrage at how their favorite stars were treated instigated a response from Amsey, he had to make a change and do it quick. The stain of red wine on a white shirt couldn’t be cleaned so easily. Their ranking fell by the efforts of a single man, Igna. On one side, Apexi’s popularity grew in Hidros whilst Ansoft’s fell into disarray. An all-consuming darkness wrapped the reenergized chef. Angelic feathers glided into the confusion, a light, and a helping hand.

Aceline crossed into the bar, her light-colored outfit shocked him to a gasp.

“Hey there,” said Igna, “-I trust you’ve heard her sing.”

“I did,” he sniffled, “-the new rendition of Save the World is beautiful. The emotions are there for the world to hear, I can’t express my joy. I thought Aceline died so many years ago, there she is,” he slid off the stool, “-in flesh and blood,” he knelt, “-I’m so happy right now. As a fan and follower, it truly hurt when the putrid air of Odgawoan sullied a pure idol. Money, fame, and drugs, you fell prey... I’m sorry.”

"No need for dramatics," said Igna, "-Aceline died, she truly did. Was killed by the mob."

"-did you?"

"Correct," they joined for an early afternoon drink, "-I said I was adamant in joining the world of entertainment."

"Igna's too complicated for his own good," voiced Aceline, "-long story short, we're going to start a band. I want to take back what I lost, and for that," she crossed arms with Igna, "-I'll ally with my friend."

"Acquaintances?" the brows furrowed.

"Yes," they replied harmoniously, "-We go way back," a shared smile relieved Amsey's nerves.

"Igna," a dash for the shoulders startled him and the idol, "-I need you," he begged, "-join my agency, join Ansoft. I thought I could get away and be smug," a glance to Aceline showed the uncertainty, "-many of the idols have opted out of re-signing contracts... we're out of options, I'm out of options."

'Checkmate.'

Chapter 635: Dealings with the devil

"I accept," said Igna, "-on one condition. There won't be any contracts involved. Consider us the helping hand to boost Lum's popularity. And yes, the statements very obnoxious and self-centered, I'm certain we can do it. We'll agree on a verbal contract here and now," he smirked, "-making a deal with the devil is a fatal one, are you sure about the endeavor?"

"Anything to keep my business afloat."

"Tis settled. From today onwards, Aceline and I shall be part of Ansoft. Treat it as if we've signed a contract. Don't announce it just yet," he looked on through the ceiling towards the studio, "-let us prepare a song first. Tis Aceline's big return, I won't spare any expense."

"I expected so from you," back on his feet, "-I apologize for the plea, tough times tough decision. What about payment?"

"I'm thinking a 70-30 split in our favor."

Hands to his chins, "-let me think," the eyes shut, "-deal."

Amsey's helicopter returned to its nest. Aceline and Igna stood beside the helipad and waited. She threw meaningful glances around the premises, tis the first time the sun warmed her skin, the first time the wind chilled her into a shiver.

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"How about it?"

"How about what?"

"The deal," the lift opened, "-are you interested, or no?"

"I am," her stance firmed her words, "-no way I'll fall behind again."

“Good,” it dropped to the ground floor, “-Aceline,” they stepped out, “-life here is monotonous. Do as you wish, there’s plenty of food to go around. As said before, I have ulterior motives. éclair’s looking for small jobs to get us in the market. I’d highly advise starting a social media account. The Arcanum is a beast o’ thing.”

Forward an hour later, Igna locked himself in the basement. In the alchemic room, narcotics were soon stacked in a hidden compartment. Cheap produce turned white-gold, the narcotic of preference, Angel’s Dust. God’s Ale became a classic; the reputation and prestige increased the price of a single bottle with only a single source of distribution, godfather Renaud’s faction.

The idol could be found in the studio slumped over a desk. Bright hue grazed her face mercilessly, the keys tapped at a slow pace. Learning new skills was very much a hassle, not so much for fast learners. The Arcanum soon bore no mysteries, from old videos to idols of the present, she scoured and digested the competition. ‘Idols and movie stars are different. The latter is more sought after and highly paid, the former is but the road to stardom. The agency of choice is Leina, five of their top artists are A-list celebrities, they’ve stormed the world of cinema. Once the populous locks onto their favorites, there’s no stopping the snowball effect. As for music, I see a lot of genres and bands. Can’t gauge a correct estimate on who’s the best. Apexi has more singers than Ansoft. Xius and the best guitarist in the world, Vorn and their elite band of musicians, and S-Kiss, a three-man band favorite by the ladies. Good music requires good people and good faces, how sad a truth,’ she glanced to the empty recording room, ‘-I’m really alive, I can’t believe it. A new chance to sing and accomplish what I sought out. This time, Igna’s at my side,’ a blissful smile eased her slouch, ‘-always at odds end, our past life sure was a mess. War and the greed for power, I saw everyone succumb to the dark side and never return. Who am I kidding, I’m no different. I was lost and fell prey to drugs and sold myself to climb the Alphian ladder after my talents were shunned. I hate the industry but adore the music, everyone’s trying their hardest.’ Bored of the research, the fingers dubiously scrolled and stumbled on random videos, ‘-this is...’ the speakers rattled, ‘-Igna’s guitar.’ Awestruck by the skill, ‘-another video,’ she clicked to see him playing the piano, ‘-what is this guy made of.’ More videos showed more instruments, he did it all, ‘-how inhumane can a person get?’ the lips furrowed in frustration, ‘-what about this?’

“Ahem, hello?” a well-dressed Igna shuffled away from the camera, “-Hello, hello,” instruments stood behind. “-Igna... is it recording yet?” whispered a soft voice.

“Yes, it is!” he fired, “-cut me some slack, why do we have to do this again?”

She sat and held a pure smile, ‘-what are they doing?’ the eyelashes blinked at the shenanigans.

“A message to our future selves,” the voice jumped into shot, “-hello, hello,” she sharply turned to kiss Igna, “-my name’s Alicia Raze. I’m petrified,” she sat on Igna’s lap, “-future me, I hope we’re doing well. Meeting your mother and aunt was a fright and a half, I can’t believe people like them exist.”

“No badmouthing my guardians,” he pinched her cheeks, “-and for future me, nothing I’ll say will make sense. Come on, you’ll probably cringe at this,” he shrugged, and softly caressed her cheeks, “-this little lady here sure is a mess.”

“Don’t make me out to be a freak,” her pitched heightened.

“Yes, yes,” he ambled to the camera, “-I hope the future is great for the both of us. I want her to be happy and live a normal life. My world and hers differ, still, she allowed me to experience the companionship of another. I can’t ask for more, listen to me, future self, if something ever happens to her, I know you’ll never forgive yourself, but for my sake, try to keep calm. We both know the pain of losing someone precious, the list is long and without end. Don’t seal the heart anymore, we’re reincarnated, let’s live and enjoy it.”

“Stop talking to the camera...” she groaned.

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“You told me to do this video,” he returned.

“NO, I WANTED TO DO IT SO WE COULD HAVE MEMO-” a shadow crossed the screen, the video cut.

“-I-Igna?” the headphones muted the outside, “-d-didn’t see y-you,” her face flushed.

“Obviously,” he closed the videos, the mood suddenly changed, “-I wish you never saw it.”

“Why not,” she brazenly stood to his might, “-you and her have such a charming relation, I felt the warmth... what happened?”

Straight-faced, “-she was murdered.”

“-I-” the words choked at her throat, “-I-I-I”

“What’s done is done,” he made for the door, “-I came to say tea’s ready,” the handle melancholically shut, the sublime afternoon rays faded for a dim interior. ‘-Why did I...’ between the screen and the person, ‘-how foolish can I be,’ she facepalmed, ‘-I’m such an idiot.’

Onto the world of gambling, the duo arrived at the prime location, the red-light district. Narrow streets and narrower alleys, the premise of said district was entertainment. Escort services weren’t illegal or prohibited, only shunned upon. The moral implication sufficed to keep the sane away. The promenade showed lanterns, smoke pipes puffed clouds, ladies in robes waited, and invited drunkard visitors. Thus, after a five-minute walk, they arrived at the prime location, a remnant of a fountain served as a roundabout for pedestrians, the path splits into the four cardinal points. The northern path headed for the casinos and ‘real’ entertainment district. The eastern part continued effortlessly in Carter Lake’s vague direction. The south, also known as the ‘-main’ entrance, bustled with makeshift theaters, eateries, inns, and taverns. A budget place for the budget holiday. Lastly, the west – it carried to motels and hotels as well as the residential area for the impoverished, one could say the slums, although, the particularly high-standard of sanitation and basic life commodities said otherwise.

Kul scouted a relatively good-shaped one-floor abandoned motel to the southeast. The main attraction was the space of its backyard, the surrounding land was large, very large, and could easily accommodate a manor with space to spare. It also straddled with feet firm on both streets headed in and out of the red-light district.

The more they promenaded, the clearer became the painted picture, ‘-men in tracksuits, local ruffians bearing tattoos of their affiliation.’

“Kul,” puffed Asmodeus, “-is that the place?” he sat near the dried fountain.

"Yeah," she joined, "-looks out of place, doesn't it? wasted land. See those men,' she side-glanced, '-they're the guardians of the district. We must look shifty as hell right about now." The words fell empty, the prince ducked out her cautionary warning, "-hey there," he waved obnoxiously, "-can I ask a few questions?" he locked arms around the men's shoulder.

"Who are you, mister?" asked one of three, "-this place isn't for the likes-"

"Chill out boy," he sealed the man's lips with a 'shush,' "-I can tell you three are from the ruling family. Take me to the leader, I want to negotiate about that property."

"Look," chuckled another, "-a big shot trying to invade our territory."

"A lot of dumbasses have tried to buy the place, they say the same thing; -we'll get the district to greater heights, let us open up a restaurant or some bullshit. Get outta here, we don't need any."

"Au contraire mon ami," he pulled the three closer, "-I want to open a motel," he winked, "-my girls are feisty little devils, once you have a taste of them, there's no going back."

"Who are you?" they pulled away,

"-a fellow mobster," he replied.

"What family, what gang?"

"The Raven's."

"Never heard of you..." A twist of fate blew harshly at the side. A group wandered into sight. A short and heavy man walked surrounded by ladies and guards.

'Isn't that?' Kul's stare befell the man who squinted and nodded, a glance to the hurdled mess rose a thunderous, "-what's going on there."

"No need to worry," said the ruffians, "-another drunkard weirdo."

"Old man Evalo," said Asmodeus, "-I didn't know you were here."

"Look at you," he took a swig from a metal flask, "-the talented poker player, Asmo. We met yesterday, what brings a talented man like you here?"

"I've come looking for property," the cheerful smile lowered the initial reluctance.

"Sir Evalo, please, ignore this fool," said the ruffians, "-we take responsibility for such trash wandering your territory."

"Don't say another word," thundered a murderous fiend.

"I see the lady is present too," he gestured, the scenery swapped for a modest smoke-filled room. Yellow lights reflected against the brownish surfaces, a thick sponge of suffocation, and gunpowder filled the air. A table-top fan blew away, "-I'll reintroduce myself. I'm Evalo Vermillion, the man-in-charge of the red-light district."

"You control the land, not the businesses. I heard the Vermillion are loan sharks vibrant from the history of brutality and sheer violence."

“Good on you,” he complimented Asmo, “-it’s true, we’re the landowner of most of Fulha’s district. Other families come to us if they want to start a new adventure or burn another business to the ground. Nothing’s out of line, the only rule is to not hurt the families’ belongings. Nobody wants a war, not now anyway.”

“Question,” interjected Kul.

“Ask ahead.”

“Isn’t there supposed to be a right-hand man we talk to?”

“Too much hassle. The boy’s a bit on the savage side, he’s at one of the brothels. Sure loves his women.”

“Let’s discuss business,” said Asmo, “-money speaks, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he smirked, “-you want to make a deal on the motel and its land?”

“Yes,” they exchanged firm glances, “-on the condition we do it legally.”

“What you mean legally?”

“I want authentic papers and the actual rights to the land. My deal is simple, we’ll buy and make it the home base for my family, the Raven’s. There’re no gambling houses here, and I know you love a good bit of poker. What you say, up for it?”

“Legally,” he paused, “-lucky bastard. The head of the family loves legal deals, says we don’t need to spill blood for it, I have the papers right here. We can come to an arrangement for the correct price.”

“How much.”

“Ten Million.”

“Are you stupid,” fired Asmo, “-ten million for a shitty building?”

“It’s the land, my friend,” he smirked, “-take my price or get out.”

“Ten million... How about this, old man Esvalo, let’s discuss it over a warm meal, my treat.”

“Sure. How about tomorrow at Konlda.”

“Deal.”

## Chapter 636: Money

18th of September. Aceline’s lively days were just started. Mornings were the same, Vanesa threw a tantrum and Draconis leaped out the toilet. Saniata slept late, the households’ eccentricities kept evolving. For the first time, Igna reawakened the fatherly instinct he lost. The more time passed, the more he remembered Eira and how she grew up to be a strong woman. Origin’s slight mischievous nature brought on flash images of how Eira and the others interacted so many years ago. She truly mimicked his way of upbringing on a battlefield. The people around her were so strong none dared lay a finger, the Silver Guardians; few history books have them as the strongest mercenary in the Dorchestrian Era.

News of the discussion reached Igna's laboratory. 'Go on inside,' pressed Kul.

"Stop standing in the way," said éclair, "-go inside or stay in the bar," he glared.

"We'll follow," they gulped. The counter opened to a secret world of endless possibilities. The emptiness brought a sense of relief, the cleanliness and closed-door calmed the nerves. A summary of the negotiations arrived a few hours ago, he made no response, and so, éclair thought it best to bring Raven.

"I don't get it," said Asmodeus. Kul and éclair stopped and stared. He scanned the basement with a grain of salt, the face nervously smiled, "-I'm frightened of Igna. I bare the title of prince of hell, then why, why is it I'm so scared."

"Not fear," said éclair, Kul also shared his thought, "-it's admiration, the fear is from having failed the master. Tis something most servants have to endure, the pain of failing the one you trust most is limiting. Time heals all, you'll get used to it," they inched towards the door, "-besides," it flung open, "-our master is kind."

"Hello," said he sat on a throne of white packages, "-Is there perhaps something I can help with?" he grandly leaned on one side and peered.

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"Master," nodded éclair, "-I've brought Asmo and Kul for their report. Might I assume these to be our produce?"

"Yes," he skipped over the load and watched firmly, "-I heard about the location, big land inside the red-light district. I couldn't have asked for anything more."

"Thing is," said Asmo shyly, "-the price is extortionate, 10 million for a humble shack."

"The land alone is worth not more than five million," said éclair, "-regardless of how one looks at it, the investment is bad. The red-light district isn't a place befitting business."

"I know," smiled Igna, "-the money will be hard to launder. Doesn't matter either way."

"Why that?"

"We have éclair," he laughed, "-not to brag, my butler is the best thing to ever live on the planet. He's immortal and all-knowing, I'd never be here without him."

"My lord," he bowed, "-you flatter me."

"No. Tis compliments where it's due," he reached and grabbed a packet, "-top-notch angel's dust. A single sniff and the host will forever be in our debt. The drug is highly addictive, even more so than the shit being spread nowadays. Side effects are partial blindness and hallucination."

"-Ours?" interjected Kul.

"No, the one being sold, they're bad for the consumer, tis equal to poison. The one we have is addictive, eases the mind, grants all the pleasure they want, and only leaves the user with a harder-hitting

hangover. Overdosing risks are there, but hey, I made it far better than the crap being sold.” The slow sound of machines piqued their interest.

“What’s that?” inquired Asmo.

“Ghouls,” he replied nonchalantly, “-they don’t have consciousness. I’ve programmed them to make Angel Dust, enslaved souls of the unfortunate humans I’ve killed.”

“Will we stick to angel’s dust?”

“Depends on how business goes,” the double door shut, “-produce is here. éclair will launder the money via the businesses scattered around Alpha and Hidros. Should be simple enough. The Alphan economy is 50% ran by black money, pressuring a few officials shouldn’t be much of a hassle.”

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“About our deal?”

“Asmo, my dear Asmo,” they climbed out the hovel, “-why worry so much,” the counter firmly locked by a seal, “-éclair and a few guards of mine will accompany you for the voyage.”

“What about you, master?” inquired the butler.

“I’ve decided on a potentially lucrative business,” he smirked.

“Which is?”

“Fine-arts and auctioneering,” a glance at the watch, “-I came across the advertisement earlier last night. They’re promoting the event; the main piece is a painting from Jean Frank. It’s a forest scenery painted using inventive techniques. The man’s counted as a genius artist.”

“Will you try and acquire said piece?”

“Obviously not, good art deserves its price, I have a single intent in mind,” the phone scrolled to a particular passage, “-nobles of any kingdom are welcomed to appraise their items and participate in the event.”

“I didn’t expect such a turn,” narrowed Asmo. The study soon harbored the others and continued.

“Neither did I,” commented Igna plastered on the screen.

“Nobles,” gulped Kul, “-won’t they look down on a baron?”

“They will,” he chuckled, “-or would have,” the screen flashed a beam on the opposite wall, “-my trusted Stewardess has elevated Glenda into the unnamed capital of Arda. The great wall has stopped attacks and promote growth for the demi-humans. People are visiting from the continent over, the Blood-King’s faction has been accepted as their kingdom. Popularity and money boost the lord’s standing,” a conniving half-smile later, “-the devil of Glenda has risen to the post of Viscount. We were given Xuen village to celebrate the ascension.”

“Goes to show how an elite entourage can benefit their leader.”

“Aside from so,” the projection swapped for a gemstone, “-Ikahmite, else known as magic reduction ore. This piece of rock would have earned a lot of money back in the day of magical warfare. Alphian, especially the upper echelon, loves their jewelry. Diamonds, rubies, sapphire, and more, none can truly stand up to Ardanite. A rare variation of Ikahmite, the gem changes color by the flow of mana in the air. Big stones are extremely exclusive, there have been only a few record ores to be found. The latter was given to the royal family.” \*Summon Forth – Box of Alche.\* Air sucked from the vicinity; the appearance of a bright shapeless mist blinded the visitors. Similar to a camera flash, the mass vanished to a beautifully crafted ring.

“The box of Alche?” interjected éclair.

“Correct,” he smiled.

“Excuse me, I’m confused...” reproached Kul, “-don’t leave us out the conversation.”

“Master Igna is blessed by Creation itself. In exchange for his abundant power, Creation gave the master the box of creation, Alche. Tis a relic, unlike anything one can ever imagine. A divine object of absurdity.”

“It grants the user the power to create anything from mana. The one I have is only useable by my soul, tis engraved into my very core. Same as the death element and Origin’s soul. Life as Staxius Haggard brought a lot of boons, things of which are so frightening one mustn’t know the location or even the name. Back to my point, this ring here,” they gathered to watch, “-has the biggest stone currently available in the world. I created it from scratch,” slid on the middle finger, “-special properties include,” the loosened space tightened, “-matching the finger. Depending on the mana, one can change the hue,” the control evenly partitioned the stone to allow different matching colors. “Here I present, the rarest gem in the world. The metal for the ring is Ikahmite and Alranda.”

“Impressive,” said they, Kul’s eyes glimmered at the gem’s sight.

“Can you make more?” inquired Asmo.

“Yeah, I can easily replicate the ring five more times. I won’t,” it neatly tucked into a lavishly suited box, “-Ardanite must be savored and praised, not taken for granted. Anyway, enough about the auction. éclair will act as lawyer for negotiations of the land. Don’t be afraid to bargain. If he senses wrongness with the papers, cancel the deal, we’ll find another way. I’ll head for Melmark later in the afternoon, the auction start at 19:00.”

“Master, I’ll have a private jet take-off from the 03 airfields.”

“We may not use Phantom’s influence and money, but we can sure use what’s ours,” said Igna, “-éclair’s private arsenal of planes and vehicles.” The discussion ended, éclair and the others made preparations for dinner. Igna prowled the Arcanum till 13:00 when heavy taps perturbed the afternoon nap. No word said, the lock clicked and the children ran to their guardian. Draconis leaped for his face, Saniata cannonballed his stomach whilst Vanesa drunkenly stumbled on the couch.

“Wake up pops!” said the boy loudly, “-wake up, wake up, wake up.”

“Pops’ ignored us for two days,” pouted Saniata, “-I say we call the authorities, this is a blatant act of child abuse.”

"I want to go out," yawned Vanesa, "-sleeping in the car is nice."

"Trouble makers," he held their mouths, "-I was trying to think," he glared down the entrance, "-Aceline, stop cowering and get in here."

"I'm sorry," her fingers fiddled, "-they asked me to open the lock."

"No matter," glances the children, "-let's go visit the capital," said he, "-I have business in Melmark. Staying home must be boring."

"A trip..." they side-glanced one another, "-a trip, a trip, a trip," the food-train swapped to the train trip. \*tuu, tuu\* whispered Vanesa.

"Listen closely, I want exemplary conduct. Draconis, Saniata, and Vanesa, you're going to represent the House of Glenda. Do not, and I repeat, do not do anything that will shame my name, is that understood?"

"Yes father," they nodded, "-on one condition," winked Saniata, "-this negotiation is two ways, my dear pops."

"How presumptuous," he held her cheeks, "-go on, what's the price."

"Food for me," said Vanesa.

"A new console," grinned Draconis.

"A lute!" said Saniata.

"Deal," he said, '-the EDO-4 SST should be at the manor.'

"Don't look dejected, Aceline, you're coming with."

Thus, the teams separated into their individual tasks. éclair, Asmodeus, Kul, and a few guards took to the sky via helicopter. The meeting place was a five-star restaurant atop the most expensive hotel in Ogdawoan, the gem of the sky, a helipad allowed for easy access. The amber sunset added to the prestige.

"Entrance is key," said éclair. Retainers were at the ready to welcome the guests.

"You have an obsession with first impressions," sighed Asmo, "-time to fight."

"First impressions are everything," the entranced parted for the group. A high standard was an understatement. The décor was 'in your face' type of lavish, the guests wore outfits in the thousands of exa. The restaurant split into lower and upper areas. The latter was empty with class. The lower had the guest's cast contempt gaze at the arrival by helicopter.

"Over this way," said the attending waitress, they continued along the upper area. The red carpet spawned a sense of superiority. Lovely jars and masterful works of art hung to the side, if not for Igna's reference to art, the pictures would have gone unnoticed. A reserved suite followed into Evalo and his team waiting patiently.

“Greetings, Esvalo,” said Asmo, “-I see you’ve brought company,” a reference to the entourage of beautifully dressed ladies. One of them came to be an up-and-coming model for Ansoft.

“Likewise, Asmo,” he grinned, “-a handsomely dressed gentleman and the ever-belligerent lady, how can her stare cut me so sharply,” they sat.

“To my right is éclair, my lawyer and good friend. To the left is Kul, my business partner and protector.”

The horizon faded to the dusk’s tender embrace. Melmark’s nightlife spawned to fruition. The private jet landed; the EDO-4 SST waited as he left. Perfectly in shape and ready to drive. The only one of its kind, as a four-seater, the place wasn’t lacking.

“Pops,” said Draconis, “-how rich are you?” the scenery moved, the lamps reflected against the shiny paint job.

“Very,” he chuckled, “-was very rich. We’re relatively wealthy,” he took a detour through Usu’s boulevard and passed the busy station. Suspended tracks made for a mouth-opening drive. Without realizing it, they arrived at the northernmost part of Melmark. Tall buildings hid the skyscape, the auction was hosted at Pastia’s Theater.

#### Chapter 637: Auction/Negotiations

Pastia’s Theater, a star-stuttered theater where many renowned figures have performed over many years. The immediate entrance drew attention, and not in a good way. The car, a very dignified and stunning lady, the lavishly dressed children. Remove the rumbunctious attitude and none be the wiser to their identity. When push comes to shove; the energetic Draconis acted humbly and kept a low profile. The listless Vanesa’s face glowed, there was energy in her step. Lastly, the very egotistic Saniata, her revenge lost meaning somewhere along the way as shown by the subtle changes.

Pillars of marble passed them; hurdled guests pressed judgment.

“Good evening,” said an attendant with combed hair and an earring.

“Good evening,” replied Igna, “-I’ve come here to offer an ancient artifact from my house.”

“Do pardon my intrusion,” he gave a once over, “-about the relic, we have made a point to only accept items from nobles.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” he firmed the doubt, “-to stop counterfeits, the history of scams is known to me.” The noble crest tied to a golden chain gently laid on the table, “-Viscount of Glenda, and son to the Duchess of Rotherham, Igna Haggard.”

“My,” he gasped, “-your reputation precedes you, my lord. The moniker of the devil is one hefty to bear, is it not?”

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“Perhaps yes, and perhaps no, who can really tell,” without a wasted motion, the ring materialized into the open palm, “-this object has been in my family for decades. A special order I made; I can assure its quality.”

The attendant gestured an appraiser over. The latter arrived with a monocle and rustic cologne. “-Is this the piece?” he inquired with most of the pronunciation at the tip of his mouth. “By the grace of Luna,” he coughed, “-tis the biggest stone of Ardanite ever to be seen. The ring’s imbued with fortification magic, the metal is a compound of Ikahmite and a few others.”

“-H-how much are you willing to accept for the ring?” gulped the attendant. The commotion garnered attention from the supervisor. A lady of slightly old age, she approached glaringly. Light reflected against her frameless glasses, “-what’s the commotion about?”

Igna gasped, the fist clenched, “-S-Sophie Mirabelle...”

“Excuse me?” she glanced over her lowered glasses; “-do I perhaps know you?”

“No, no,” he smiled, “-I know you from the tales my uncle shared before his death. The SSS-ranked mage, and first ally he made, Sophie Mirabelle.”

“Uncle,” she took a closer look, “-are you perhaps related to the late Staxius Haggard?”

“Yes. Please, take a better look at what I’ve brought today. I’d estimate the price in the tens of millions, and tis a conservative number.” A badge told of her title, ‘-organizer.’

Meanwhile, they debated on the ring, an inconspicuous hooded figure handed a lute at the next table. The appraiser glanced and said no, ‘-this feeling,’ he gulped. The figure silently retracted her hand then spun. The crimson pupils shut firmly, ‘-that mana,’ the heart raced, he reopened to the memory of another, the outside world faded, ‘-I can’t...’

The tales of the lute spoke of a wandering bard. A boy who suffered great ordeal for the sake of sufferance. The malignant regret in the instrument sufficed to have Origin react, the cursed Lute of Goddess Luna’s bard.

“Excuse me,” called the attendant, “-we’ve concluded on 20 million as the bidding price, is that acceptable?”

“Sure,” he nodded briefly, “-the history and heritage must add to the value.” Quick on the step, the watchers wavered at the sudden impertinences. The hooded figure swam through the hurdled entourages,

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“Night, the harbinger of desolation, ire, and cold,” the passage caught her ear to a curious stop,” -a cold of which men fears to the heart for he has scoured the Earth for food and provisions. He asks for naught but a warm bed, one shared with his loved ones. Sadly, tis not as is meant for he’s cursed. One to be abandoned as the night scare all. Fortune shines for he longs to see the night, to see the moonshine amidst the starry-filled sky. Day hides her true splendor. Dusk settles, her hue humbly pierces the darkened land, Goddess Luna arrived after the vibrant colored sunset rests. Our only source of light, the one who loves all – Luna. Oh – I wish I had seen thine majestic self before the many who are to sleep under thy watchful gaze. The one who acts as our bastion, we thank thee for being gracious. At night, where cold and hunger run rampant, we find salvation in thine shadow. She who helps the poor and rich alike, we thank thee for thine light. Under the cold sky, we wish we could see, whatever more thou have to offer,” the figure spun and stormed to Igna, “-Alas, us humans are but feeble creatures. Goddess

Luna, the ever gracious, how I wish I could reach out and touch thee, for thou art mine own salvation, In a moment of peril," the cloak unraveled to a boy bearing the features of a lady, or rather, the appearance eased to fit the genders.

"Color me surprised," said she, "-I never expected someone to know the wandering bard's tales," she tiptoed to match his stern expression, "-the story is only known to the resident of a higher plane."

"And I'd like to know why Goddess Luna has decided to walk the mortal realm," returned a cautious whisper.

"I wanted to enjoy the casinos," her posture slouched, "-us divine are bored, I need money to gamble..."

"You remind me of a certain someone," he cringed, "-sell me the lute."

"How much?" her eyes glimmered.

"Five thousand, not an exa more."

"Fine," she reached for her pocket, "-transfer the funds and have the instrument." An uncertain turn of events briefly held his attention.

"I apologize for the delay."

Concurrently at the restaurant, the discussion went back and forth. éclair provided crucial information on the drug trade, Esvalo returned the kindness in full. Desserts arrived, the table emptied, the escorts were slumped and heavily drunk. 'He used a drug earlier,' thought éclair, '-the same one used for Alicia's murder.'

"Here are the papers," smoke puffed onto the table, "-the price is 10 million."

"Let me take a look," said éclair. Kul and Asmo held their breaths, the legitimacy would make or break the advancement in the underworld.

"Looks to be in order," said he, "-nothing's amiss, and the current papers are original. Transferring ownership should be a matter of signing the papers and notifying the bank."

"I told you," smoke puffed with arms around the escorts' shoulders, "-the Vermillion family loves to do deal legally. Our properties are clear of suspicion, none can harm us," he winked, "-Odgawoan officials are in the great families' pockets."

"Can't you move on the price?" narrowed éclair, "-the papers are in order, however, the transference is over 500,000. Quite expensive for a piece of land," he judged accusingly, "there's a history there." The table fell silent, a subtle raise of the brow triggered éclair's investigative side. The refusal led to a deep dive through archives. 'Don't underestimate me.'

"There's no history there, the place's been abandoned because of many claimants. We can't do none about it."

"Claimants," glared Kul, "-Esvalo, I do hope the code of conduct isn't breached. Breaking vows of solidarity instated by the family is a grave mistake. Tell me now, are you sure?"

“Hold on a moment,” interjected éclair, “-Esvalo, care to explain the incident which happened five years ago. The owner hung himself. Ever since then, every owner has either been murdered or fell prey to suicide. Is there maybe something we’re missing?”

“N-no, it’s just coincidence.”

“Not at all,” he leaned, “-the Vermillion family’s very possessive. We give money then it’s death. Without evidence, the deal continues. The legitimacy of the papers is the bait. Do you think us fools?”

Asmodeus’ aura channeled into a storm of nausea, “-Esvalo, tell me, is this true?” the ground shook, many feared earthquakes.

“Trickery in the underworld,” minuscule orbs summoned above Kul’s fingers, “-is expected from the soldiers, not the bosses. Here we thought the families to be respectable.”

“I can explain,” said he nonchalantly, sweat caught the over-head lamp’s light, “-the killings aren’t our doing. Tis a gang from Alice’s Nightmare. They call themselves the 50 blood brothers. The owner was a member of their group. He killed himself after being betrayed by our family, we sat down and discussed. He did wrong, treating the people of the red-light district poorly. Before our hitmen arrived, he took his life alongside a worker of the district.”

“If we claim ownership, will they come after us?”

“Yes. We can’t risk attacking them, might trigger another war.”

“50 blood brothers,” snickered Kul, “-how childish.”

“Here’s my offer,” affirmed Asmo, “-give us the property for 7 million. In exchange, the 50 blood brothers will become the zero men squad.”

“You’re going to exterminate them?”

“No, we’ll destroy them.” A handshake sealed the deal, the Raven’s became the new owner of the abandoned motel.

Two hours elapsed; time was now for the auctions. The ring brought many nobles and rich businessmen to their knees. The absolute beauty and craftsmanship eclipsed the main event. Forest by Jean Frank, the pride of seeing one’s art being priced so strenuously gave a sense of achievement unlike another.

“Pardon me,” an attendant inconspicuously called to Igna. The auctions were well underway, the items were numbered and bid depending on their exquisiteness. Expected prices were dropped below the predictable margin.

“Anything the matter?”

“Please come with me,” said he, “-lady Sophie would like a few words.”

“Excuse me,” he nodded to Aceline and the kids, Saniata fell in love with the lute. She kept on admiring the instrument and wanting to play. A few strings were plucked randomly.

An audience with the organizer. The large corridor shortly led backstage. The staff watched enviously. "This is an absolute shame. I can not believe my art is being elapsd by a trinket from another country," the accent heavily emphasized on 'R's woven into the dialect.

"Ma'am," gestured the attendant.

"Lord Igna," her expression eased, a sigh of relief eluded her pressed lips inaudibly, "-glad you could make it."

"Who are you, mister?" refuted the troubled man.

"Viscount of Glenda," returned a stern tone.

"Viscount or not," he spun and stared, "-I don't care." The attitude made up for the lack of height. A presumptuous beret and denim jacket didn't make for much of an impression. "-I blame you for my piece being inattentive."

"Monsieur Jean Frank, I'm terribly sorry for the misunderstanding. I do say my words without offense, an artist, genius or not, must keep his station in mind. You may have a way with paint and brush, the way the world is envisioned in thy mind is captivating, that I accept. Still, tis nobles and people of money who give thy work recognition. If not for them, the paintings might as well colors on a canvas. I have seen talented artists be subjected to reality and fall to the depths of hell. Don't be disrespectful towards others. I say, fair man with a brush, treat others as you'd wish to be treated."

The auction of the painting concluded in the background for five million.

"Well, mister Igna," he silently waited, "-thank you for the inspiration," he laughed, "-the confidence and aura of absolute control. You're the embodiment of all-mighty," the words trailed to rejoin his manager, a man whomst which bowed and apologized for the behavior.

"My sincere thanks," said Sophie, "-Jean can be annoying at times."

"Suppose talented artists care more about their pieces than the greedy. Speaking about money," the ring on display, "-watch the nobles slobber over my ring."

"Our last entry," said the auctioneer, "-is a ring passed down the Haggard Dynasty. We're acquainted with King Staxius, arguably, the shrewdest man to ever walk the planet."

Chapter 638: Here it start

"The current owner of such piece is none other than the Viscount of Glenda, dubbed the Devil of Glenda for single-handedly fighting off an army of seven thousand. As was his uncle, the nephew has turned the heads of many in the world with hero-like exploits. The reason I bring the heritage in question is to prove a point, anyone who bears the Haggard name is destined for greatness." Without further ado, the piece arrived on stage on a red cushion. The atmosphere tensed, the words sucked out their lips. Close-ups of the object on the screen had the rich visibly salivating. Collectors, big spenders, nobility, lineage didn't matter, the item was worth the wait.

"Lady Sophie," gestured Igna, "-I see you're perplexed as to why the auction didn't go as predicted. Look at their faces," he pointed through parted curtains, "-they are being safe. The main piece of tonight belongs to us," he smirked, "-the starting bid is 20 million, I'm expecting the price to fetch twice the

price. Currently, the most expensive jewelry sold was the signet ring from the Emperor of Svinda in the 40 million range.”

“About our fee.”

“2 million,” he replied nonchalantly, “-I’ve transferred 2 million. Should cover the expenses for tonight,” giving a side-glance, “-must be worth its fair share.”

“You’re indeed very shrewd,” she watched attentively, “-paying 2 million without the bidding, how confident.”

“Tis the way the people feel,” the lens slyly displayed details of the resident watchers. Net worth and spending power were lit in five grades, C, B, A, and S. From lowest tier, 100,000 to 1,000,000. Next up, 1,000,000 to 10,000,000. Afterward, 10,000,000 to 50,000,000, and lastly, 50,000,000 to 100,000,000. The vast majority were in the C to B grade. Three A grade and two S grade. The starting bid priced out the two-bottom tier. The information showed the A graders to be nobles and the S graders as collectors. “-They’ll pay, I can bet my life on it,” he focused on suited man bearing one of the five conglomerates crest, the last of the five; Stiol. Their focus is dealing in arts and culture, they buy, sell, collect, and make a lot of money via connections to hidden millionaires spread across the globe. In layman’s terms, one can say, their trade is to spend money for others.

‘The heritage and magical property are too big a fish to pass.’ Moments from the auctioneer’s grand slam, “-over here,” hailed Igna. The pressured onlookers snapped at the interruption; a crack glazed across the frozen landscape.

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“What’s the meaning of this,” elbowed Sophie, “-please.”

“No, no,” he ignored her plea, “-I have business with the auctioneer.”

“Please ladies and gentlemen, the owner has requested a pause. We’ll have a short break.” Exasperation perturbed the tranquility, the announcement relieved many, \*clap, clap, clap,\* sharp steps against the wooden stage pulled the reins. The elated man viciously snatched the microphone and glared the onlookers.

“Igna Haggard,” said he, “-I apologize for the interruption for you see,” he placed a letter into the baffled man’s hand, “-I forgot a crucial part of the piece. The legitimacy of my uncle’s belonging is bound to be questioned. Therefore, in said envelop rests a handwritten letter, signed and stamped by the Ardianian Crest, from the late king. I’ll say it bluntly, the price of 20 million is far too little for what I possess, the evaluation was only for the gem itself, not the heritage. As Candice said, the auction will resume after a break,” he shrewdly pulled the mic closer, “-who knows, the item might not be for sale by the time it restarts.” \*Snap,\* the stage blackened.

“What was that about?” interjected Candice, “-the clients will be annoyed by the insolence.”

“I’m of noble birth,” he said, “-there’s no worth in me to care for others. I only but need to fulfill my agenda,” off the stage and to the back, “-Lady Sophie,” they crossed shoulders, “-watch the drama unfold.”

Emptied street save a few dubious characters, “-Lord Asmodeus,” said éclair, “-is the straightforward approach necessary?” The blacked-out jeep roamed to a stop. The neighborhood dubbed Alice’s Nightmare. Backpedal a few hours ago, Kul impatiently asked for a ride to the gang’s hangout spot. The sheer drive swept Esvalo off his feet.

“Very much so,” firmed the prince, “-don’t dillydally, driver, take us to their hangout.”

“Yes sire,” said an unknown face. Frequent amber-lit lamps passed their stead, the roads were ragged. Walls coated in spray paint of various gangs. Hurdled groups of four and five gave stern once over. The main road narrowed into rock and excrement littered alleys. The buildings took on an ugly appearance. Metal roofs, uncemented walls, broken cars, and rusted metal spikes and bats, residents would often glance through their opened doors. Curtains to the latter swayed unknowingly – on closer inspection, the audible scenery didn’t amount to much. A life of underhanded tricks had the common perpetrators, narcotics, violence, and lust. The last of the three was very apparent deeper into the prison-like layout of the buildings. Ladies in skimpy outfits puffed smoke. Stray members of gangs continually pestered and threw disgusting glances. They would but reply the same, “-money or drugs, I ain’t doing this for free, you ugly motherfucker.”

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They crossed the ‘tamed’ side to the ‘animalistic’ realm. Here, visitors were shunned. A poorly lit junkyard hosted unknown vehicles. Belt against flesh, distant gunfire, guttural screams, and lastly, a gang of fifteen white-hooded men.

“Ay, ay,” said one confidently stepping in the street, “-stop down there,” he yelled.

“Sire, what should I do?” sweated the driver.

“Do as he says,” replied Asmo, and so, the jeep pulled to the curb.

\*Knock, knock,\* the tainted window rolled to show a melancholically faced Kul and the ever-playful Asmodeus.

“Damn, you guys are dressed nicely, too nice for this part of the town. What brings you here,” inquired the ‘talker’ of the group.

“We’re looking for the 50 blood brothers,” said Asmo, “-we heard about the story of the suicide at the red-light district.”

The response didn’t spring much of anything, aside from the hooded outfits, the skull-designed masks hid the intent. The ‘talker,’ nodded to whisper into another’s ear. They came to an understanding and said the following, “-best turn around. We don’t want to cause trouble to unknowing visitors. We go by the name of Liie, our presence here is to stop unfortunate souls from straying too far. Turn the jeep around and don’t look back.”

“I’m sorry,” cried Asmo disrespectfully, “-did I ask for directions?”

“You don’t want to start trouble dude,” said the talker.

“Might I intrude,” voiced éclair, “-the business of which we’re here pertain nothing to the lies of Liie. As guard-dogs of the ruling gang, do mind thy station and let us pass.”

“What if I say no?” he pulled his gun, “-you lot don’t get the right to demand shit. Tis an order, turn around or die.”

“My, such god-awful pests,” sighed Asmo, “-do us a favor,” the longing eyes befell the weapon, “-take that toy someplace else.” The pistol disassembled by an explosion.

“Don’t get in our way,” threatened Kul, her nails sharpened, “-humans haven’t the right to interfere in a demon’s affair.”

“Let ’em pass,” said the leader, “-their funeral, we did our job.”

“Please have my sincerest gratitude, kind sir,” nodded éclair, the tinted windows rolled to shroud the interior.

“Crazy people...”

“What you say, chap?” said éclair, “-I heard your petite lips muffle a few words.”

“I said, crazy people,” gulped the driver.

A few minutes later, the labyrinthine streets led to a poorly lit playground. Music blasted on through the night, the bass shook the jeep, “-there’s the 50 blood-brother’s hangout,” said the driver, “-they normally meet at night. Hear the song? It’s their way of saying, do not disturb. Anyone who steps into the yard will face severe consequences.”

“Alright then,” the brusque sound of slammed doors had him jump, “-didn’t you hear what I said?” cried the driver.

“Loud and clear,” smirked Asmo, “-don’t worry, chap, Raven shall clean the mess,” he lazily stretched, Kul followed with murderous intent. Vague lance-shaped projectiles hovered about her shoulders.

“DON’T COME CLOSER,” cried an onlooker, “-I have a gun, one more step and you die,” the unassuming accented threat didn’t hold weight, the music swapped to one heavy and action pack. Drums pounded the speakers; gunfire weirdly matched the music.

“Those idiots,” snickered éclair, \*Barrier.\* Bullets deflected and whistled past the street. A stray nearly took the driver’s head, “-someone’s complacent.”

“God...” he blacked out. The rhythm increased, a blink from Kul fired a projectile of her own. Blood sprayed; the shooter fell from two floors high. The music built to a majestic drop, \*SMASH,\* the door exploded down the hall, the beat dropped, and chaos ensued. Kul and Asmo fought back-to-back, the startled members struggled for weapons. A glee in her eye and a grin on his face matched the soundtrack’s rhythm. He vaulted over tables, dodged incoming bullets, and fired with a weapon of his own. Kul slid to the other side, she but swiped and people died. A horde of six stormed her position with shotguns, \*bang,\* she leaped, graceful as a gymnast, recoiled against the wall, and landed with a bow. Scarlet fireworks of blood congratulated her performance. “-Nice mobility,” said Asmo, bodies fell in her wake.

“Nice shooting,” she replied. More stormed from the stairs, they locked eyes, the song peaked. The clouded moon cleared, the track gave the last crash to close the epic adventure, \*Crash,\* walls to the

second floor exploded, lifeless bodies of the leaders ate the pavement, leaving their skull for all to see. A mangled mess of flesh and bones forced a gag.

“Job well done,” congratulated Asmo, “-Sultrians or not, these people are weak.”

“Too weak,” she dusted off her shoulders, “-the matter of inheritance is resolved.”

Affairs in the theater snowballed into an avalanche of desperate dealers. Many participants slyly approached for private deals, ‘-look at these men,’ thought Igna, ‘-they say one thing and mean another.’ He entertained their questions, the legitimacy added to the show’s flare. Goes without saying, a few of the regulars weren’t keen on his attitude.

“My lord Igna, tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance. Your children are adorable, might I perhaps know their preference in clothing?” asked one blatant businessman.

“My, Lord Viscount, I see you have a taste for refined gems, might I perhaps interest you in more exquisite items,” she leaned, “-if you catch my drift,” offered a typical seducer. Thirty-minute elapsed, ‘-here he comes, the S-graded spender.’

“Igna Haggard,” said the smartly dressed youngster, “-I admire the display tonight, very entertaining. I’ve contacted my client; they are very interested. Expect the item to go for more than twice the price,” he slipped a handwritten card, “-do contact me if more items of value pass thee.” A tip of the head and off the man was on his merry way.

“I see my rival has spoken already,” said the other S-ranker, “-do try the world of art, tis profitable and suitable for a man of grandeur. So long, Viscount, I do hope our paths cross,” contrary to the other, he made no attempts for introductions.

The empty seated theater filled. Excitement boiled dangerously on the edge of anarchy. The organizers were impressed. Aceline kept Draconis, Vanesa, and Saniata under the radar. The lute gave ample distraction for the lass.

A flustered Candice defiantly ignored Igna’s gaze and made for the stage.

“You made the boy angry,” commented Sophie.

“I did steal the spotlight,” he chuckled, “-no matter, he’s a talented auctioneer.”

“Welcome back,” said he, “-the break wasn’t too much a hassle, I hope,” he cheekily referred to the debauchery of the greed of which the crowd breathed a burst of laughter. “As per the new addition of authentic papers, the price of the ring has moved to a starting bid of 30 million. Without any interruptions, let’s proceed.”

‘And here comes the money.

Chapter 639: ‘Family must take precedence’

“30 million,” said one. “40 million,” added another. The price climbed; the theater eclipsed the record easily. The more the auctioneer shouted, the more energetic grew the bidder. A fierce battle between the S-graders had the crowd on a tight leash. One after the other, the money kept being thrown, “-60 million.”

“Better than I expected,” thought Igna.

“120 MILLION,” shouted a man from across the room. The room simultaneously turned in shock. Most were acquainted with the current entourage.

“120 million, one, two, three,” and slam, the deal finalized. Thus ended a night of new beginnings, the potential of auctions and the art’s trade grew apparent. The organizer made a note to welcome the young noble. In her words, “-relics and works of art are very sought after here in Alpha. Due to constraints, there’s not much we can physically do. Therefore, the event tonight was an avant gout. Results were very generous, a two million donation from the viscount. You singlehandedly covered the profits from every piece put tonight, for that, I’m very grateful. Here,” she handed a card, “-there’s the location to my art gallery. Come by anytime.”

Negotiations took precedence. The tempest of goodbyes and good wishes stormed the dim corridors. Aceline made notes to run before the mess. Therein, she waited backstage in the company of a familiar attendant.

“Aceline,” said Igna, “-thanks for keeping an eye on them.”

“They were very quiet,” said she, “-I ought to freshen up. Mind taking over?”

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“Take Saniata with,” said he, “-can never be too careful nowadays.”

“Are you worried?” she wondered.

“Yes, I lost you two times already. No need for another. Get going,” and so, with lute in hand, the ladies ran for a private break. Vanesa calmly jumped onto his back, Draconis fixated on the phone screen.

“Lord Igna,” said the buyer, “-let us decide the payment method.”

He returned with a grain of doubt, the familiar face and suit didn’t inspire confidence. Led by Sophie, the duo made for an office upstairs. Warm coffee arrived on a silver platter, the tall ceiling breathed a sense of freedom. Looking up felt the same into Elysium, an intended misplaced peep to catch angels on their angelic stroll. Reason for said observation laid in the paintings, and domed roof of white. A divine themed asylum for the aftermath.

“How goes it, Pluton,” cups returned to the glass table.

“A member of Shadow’s faction?” sipped Igna, “-has lady mother asked for I to be spied upon. Was our fight really a matter to bring the organization into question?”

“They tasked me to oversee thine actions,” said he, “-selling off the ring to the late king, how very ignorant of you...”

“Hold on a moment,” he sighed, “-what I do is my business. My job is to create a faction able to rival the opposition. I must do so without the interference of the DG or Phantom.”

“Selling off such a precious ring is the way forward?” he smirked, “-not very smart, tis a priceless commodity.”

"You," he pointed, "-shut your mouth," \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* crystalized blood sowed the lips shut. \*Dialing Mother.\*

"Hello," she answered.

"Hello, mother, I'm very disappointed."

"I should be the one criticizing, how dare my son sell off such a precious item from our dynasty."

"Waste of breath," he facepalmed, "-listen, mother, I get you're trying to be my guardian. I appreciate it very much. However, I'd like to ask for kindness to be kept for in the household. I don't need interference, how can thee expect me to sit and watch whilst nothing was done when my mentor was killed. No, scrap that, the same happened with Alicia. Things are apparent, being rich and powerful makes one either smug or overly conservative. You and aunt have fallen into the latter half. There's an organization to feed, mouths, and people to care, I understand. They're family, tis nothing to be shunned for. My concern is how you rudely interfered in my affairs. I don't come to Rotherham and say how things are meant to be done. My task is as was given. This was a chance for me to step into the world of arts and make a profit. Phantom's involvement's but soiled the plan. Good job on keeping a watchful eye," the frustration kept on piling, the words turned daggers. She who listened dawned a face of annoyance, Elvira and Julius surrounded the phone. "Will Phantom provide the necessary funds?" he inquired.

\*Knock, knock,\* the interruption broke the argument. Courtney's visage bordered ire.

"Don't get worked up," added Elvira.

"Cousin is right," sighed Julius, "-I cannot approve for his tone of voice."

"Hell no," slammed Courtney, "-I won't accept this. Here I am trying to be a good parent."

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"Keep the guilt for yourself," whispered across the phone which led into a distant opening of the doors. The representative of Stiol hopped into view, "-pardon the intrusion," he said and welcomed himself.

"No trouble," said Igna, "-might I know of the current visit?"

"Ahh," he tiptoed, glanced over Igna's shoulder, "-the man's rather uncomfortable."

"Let him be," sighed Igna, "-pawns are meant to be wasted."

"The annoyed look makes the visit worth the trouble," he rubbed his hands, "-see, my client is very interested in the item, it borders obsession."

"Price," said Igna, "-this one here has offered 120 million, what about you?"

"The item hasn't been sold yet?"

"Not to my knowledge," the sofa buckled by Igna's weight, "-what say you, the deal's over for the sake of the outside world. The owner doesn't interest me, provide funds, and tis yours."

"I see," he walked to the table, "-the man my lady described is better than I expected."

“Better than you expected?” a frown threw the man off-guard.

“Slip of the tongue,” he dropped next to the shady character, “-this one has killed before,” he sniffed, “-not a pleasant smell.”

“Quit the theatrics, my stomachs rather angry. I’ve spent enough time here as is.”

“Fine, fine. My lady wishes to double the current price. 240 million for the ring.”

“On what condition.”

“Accompany me to dinner,” he said, “-I’ll transfer the money right away. I but need insurance to follow her wishes.”

“A dinner,” he looked outside, “-right now?”

“Can’t keep a lady waiting.”

“You see, I have children and a companion to take care of. Family must take precedence.”

“Tis no issue, bring the party, tis all in good faith.” The auction ended at last. Courtney ordered the man to halt the ‘supervision’. What was said over the phone brought questions more than answers.

“What now?”

“What you mean?”

“What happens next. The spy was found out, I doubt he’ll let our men safety tail him.”

“Don’t mind my interjection. How about we leave cousin to do his bidding, tis the quest after all. Rather, why be persistent on keeping so tight a leash.”

“I fear the worst,” frowned Elvira, “-my ability to foresee into market trends is arguably the best the world has ever seen. Business is but secondary to the reach we have. Throw a stray Igna on said world, if results do not suit the expected outcome, he might just change the damned world. He’s too powerful,” she glanced at Courtney.

“Can’t forget the consciousness backing his actions,” a chilly breeze rattled the windows, “-even when the man was weak and poor, he could change the fate of surroundings to suit his need. He’ll stop at no lengths to get what is wanted. The wielder of death magic is the embodiment of unfairness. No matter the slope, he’ll climb even if it means crawling up.”

“I dare say it’s uncertainty. I trust my cousin. His words were genuine, ‘family must take precedence’ the pain of losing people close to him must be a soul-ridden scar.”

“You bet,” threw Courtney, “-I hope nothing bad comes from the freedom. Don’t become Icarus, my dear son.”

‘Icarus was a failure,’ thought Igna, the scenery changed for a busier road, ‘-he relied on an old man to make his wings. As a result, he died. If only he had thought to question the wings. Hell, crafting for one for personal use was another viable option.’

Melmark at 22:30 was quite the show of technology. The AFR-guided car tailed Igna's sudden transit to a restaurant. Speaking of the tallness and exquisite nature of the surrounding would but waste time. The ways of richness had become bland. Don't be mistaken, the emotion spawn not from pride, rather, tis came from a jaded feel toward oneself.

"Here we are," the lift climbed to an empty restaurant. The staff flung bemused glances. All the seats were bought. After a short walk, a beautifully resplendent lady sat in the company of another. One bore the melancholic air reminiscent of the moon, as the other, she shone, rather, twinkled with her attention to the night. Her jewelry and preciously cared garments screamed of upper-nobility. Aceline and the children weren't much impressed.

"Pleasant night sky, is it not?"

"Depends on the person," returned Igna, "-tranquility can be both good and evil. Peace after the war is nice, and quiet before a storm is another matter. Goes to the simple question of, does one see the glass half-empty or half-full," the pragmatic response solicited a humble glance. Crystal-like sprinkles layered her hazel-colored irises.

"Luna and Syhton."

"I'm surprised you know," said the enigmatic Syhton.

"Goddess Luna gave it away," he sat and stared, "-I was under the impression the lover to Qhildir had been cursed to star... no, wait, forget it. The curse was but a ploy to fool the divine and mortal realm. The god of death did spare thine life. Gods are very childlike in their decision," a waiter arrived.

"What then?" she kindly tilted her head.

"Nothing, really. I've fulfilled my part of the deal. Tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance, Lady Syhton, and Lady Luna, I must thank thee for the lute. She's grown fond of it."

"No worries," said the exhausted Luna, "-I was to sleep."

"Manners," fired Syhton, "-reasons aside, I wished to meet the inheritor to Scifer, and Origin's will."

"If you wish to speak to Origin," the eyes shut, "-do so without restraint," the eyes reopened, crimson faded into white.

The next hour ended over a nice dinner. Vanesa and Saniata gave to fatigue. It had been a heavy meeting. Talks between two watchers were boring at most. Luna spent her time playing with Draconis and Aceline. Farewell exchanged; 240 million showed the current balance. 'A night well spent.'

"Don't pout at me," said Igna, "-I've fulfilled Vanesa's and Saniata's will. Luck has it, across the street is a game shop. Let's get what you wanted." They behaved angelically; good manners begot good rewards.

Out to the west, Asmo, Kul, and éclair headed home. Dusk hid as Dawn rose loudly. The manor screamed at the sound of Saniata's deathly yells. "WHAT HAPPENED?" the door burst opened; "-you guys ok?" sweated Igna.

"Good morning pop," smiled Saniata, "-I was playing the lute and singing," she pointed to a passed-out Draconis, his eyes rolled back.

“Turn off the alarm,” complained Vanesa, “-I need more sleep. Wake if food... I worked out for a whole week... hibernation...”

“Seriously,” he facepalmed, “-I thought you were in danger,” he grasped Draconis’s shoulders, \*Smack,\* “-wake up boy.”

\*Gasp,\* “-TIS LEVIATHAN’S SCREECH.”

“No, it was your sister’s lovely voice.” The sweet aroma of a hearty breakfast roused the appetite.

“Good morning people,” said red fiery hair, “-we’ve come for a house visit,” winked Intherna with a spoon and pan.

“Welcome back, I’ll have a shower, take care of the kids.”

“No problem,” she speared the boy in turn.

News loudly broadcasted on the flat-screen, towel around the shoulder, ‘-what’s the noise about?’ he ambled to the children eating cereal.

\*Breaking News: Gang violence escalates, 50 men found butchered in their house.\*

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“You responsible?”

“Correct,” smirked Asmo, “-also, congratulation on the 240 million.”

“A bit excessive for a ring, wasn’t it,” he chuckled, “-no matter, great job out there.”

‘They’re amazing,’ thought Aceline, ‘-a talent-filled entourage...’ her fist curled, ‘-what about me, what can I bring to the table...’

“Stop it,” nudged Miira, “-you’re part of the family too.”

Chapter 640: Alternate Worlds

“Have you heard of the massacre at Alice’s nightmare?”

“No, what happened?”

“A gang was exterminated from the face of the planet.”

“Common occurrence. Social media held the subject in high regard. Dude, it’s whatever, people die every day.”

“Don’t speak loudly.” Public transport to private cars, the incident traveled around Odgawoan. Most specifically, the current alliance of gangs. Split into two factions, Families and Gangs, each held their own. An agreement was signed many years ago by the founding members. A promise which eventually halted the massacre in said neighborhood.

“Brother, we can’t let them walk over us like that,” said a muffled voice.

"I know," replied the stronger man, "-one of our gangs was wiped out mercilessly. The news says the incident is a result of violence between our members."

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"The families don't know nothing."

"Not much we can do at the moment. Have a team investigate these two," Kul and Asmo's picture flung across the table.

20th of September, preparation for the motel's opening concluded. Aceline and Igna were held by matters of entertainment. After the record-breaking purchase of 240 million, many shady individuals were suddenly attracted to his wares. Needless to say, the popularity boost gained favors with Ansoft.

"Kul," yawned Asmo, "-are we done yet?" he leaned against a tilted mop.

"Don't start whining," retorted she. A stuffy scarf hid her fiercely shaped lips. The day kept on high, passersby went around the fountain. Nothing speaks of the district's underworld at said time of day. On the contrary, the cleaning pair were viewed as humble workers. Overgrown trees and grass were trimmed to a pleasant level. Seven million was worth the price. A glance at the back showed the potential to a grand manor or apartment.

After the front gate(a relic gathering of iron bars) came the broken stone brick path. A few alterations brought out the 'vintage'. Immediately after a few steps came to a dark-wooden double door. Here, the path diffused into a blocky layout. The front desk, small space of only a counter and a few seats, swapped into a smaller counter and empty waiting area. Previous wallpapers were ripped and replaced by a darker-themed esthetic. Following from the counter to the right came a large room readied with drinks and a bar. The barman(a puppet from Igna's collection) stood and watched. Aside from the blackout windows and heavy curtains, nothing went amiss for these types of establishments. Back from whence it began, a narrow doorway led into a long corridor of many doors. At the end rested the vague outline of a darkened stairway. Doors were but led to a larger room. The vileness of before evolved to a somewhat decent gambling house equipped with tables for blackjack, poker, roulette, and many others. Instead of puppets, the dealers were demons under the direct command of Asmodeus. The prince of gambling flung his weight without restraint. After a harsh night of playing games and winning bets, the clients surely wanted to let off some steam. Tis when Asmodeus's frightening set of powers comes into play. A single step up the stairs triggers one's libido, a sweet fragrance of perfume and pinky mist swept the mind into climbing to the heavens. There, sexual deviants prowled the corridors, demons and demoness waited with sensual glances at their prey.

A casual promenade along the outside showed but a normal building. Trees and tall hedges hid the windows. Trust is fundamental for their trade, the massive plot of land didn't only serve for expansion purposes, no. Rather, Kul's forward approach solicited an empty plot. Accidents might result in deaths, or, a beating. No better place than there. Come night, the Raven's venture into Odegawoan's underworld would begin.

\*Good morning people of Odegawoan, I'm your host Misty, from the Morning Fall Show. Shout out to those tuning into the live broadcast over at Lokka, look, I can wave at you, ha-ha. Many news outlets are talking about the potential of increasing gang violence, I say, forget it. Many avid listeners know of

Ansoft's sudden downfall. The mighty strong agency fell to the pressure of their idols and unsatisfied staff. I can say what I want because I'm a member of Golden Dawn. Anyway, the folks over at Ansoft have decided to pull in and host the annual Musical festival at the park. Not the one in Fulha's district but the central part to the north. Seems to have been a spur-of-the-moment decision. In any case, the date is set for the 30th of September, the performers will be announced later today.\*

"Hear that?" a cup raised to the flat-screen, "-we're going to have a blast," steam off the drink faded with a gentle blow.

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"Yes, I see that," said Igna, "-why are you here again?" a very headstrong Draconis wrapped around the shoulders and pulled.

"Seems fitting to discuss the event with you," he said, "-it's partly my fault the modeling gig isn't going well."

"Don't worry about that," he shrugged, "-I found a lucrative side-project."

"Is that why I see so many covered paintings layered around the room?"

"Yeah," the gaze turned distant, '-how can I tell him the painter is a goddess?' the mere thought quavered the stomach, '-didn't expect Goddess Athena's casual visit into the shadow realm. She's apparently good friends with Goddess Nike and best friend to Gophy.'

"Are you well?" inquired a worried Amsey.

"I'm fine, there's no cause for concern. Tis just flashbacks of a nightmare I had. No matter, those paintings aren't for sale, not just yet."

"You started a personal gallery?"

"Yes," said he, "-a quarter of a billion is a lot of money."

"I know, it's more than a fortune." Then again, the buyer wasn't a normal human. A deeper dive into why Syhton requested an audience showed signs of her existence as a personage of great influence. Her fortune counts amongst the top-ranked in the world, religion is a profitable business, said she.

"Shall we talk about the visit?"

"Fine," sipped Amsey, "-Misty said it clearly. Ansoft is hosting a festival to bring over fans and idols. The gap between is growing bigger, Golden Dawn has surpassed our ratings. Tis very hard to grip once a person falls."

"Apexi," mumbled Igna. The energetic Draconis fled for the gaming room, "-you want me to get support from Phantom's agency."

"Yes," he gulped, "-not for free, obviously, we're willing to pay and fly the artists over. "

"The urgency is understandable, however, that side of thing is for my aunt and cousin to decide," without reservations, "-there's the contact information." Humbled to a shell of his former self, Amsey returned for further negotiations.

'Aceline and I are working on a song. We need to create a band. A flashy start at the festival seems perfect... I doubt the simplicity. I'd rather follow on and have a small number of fans. The ultimate goal is to infiltrate the world of glitz and glamour.'

\*Floup,\* a blink and the purple sky of Totrya loomed on ahead. "King of monsters," said Vesper, "-I apologize for the sudden abduction."

"I do hope all is well?"

"No, actually," she swipe-summoned various portals, "-here's the issue. The world break spell was cast in many dimensions to increase the growth of our people. Lord Scifer had a great idea. Sadly, what we face is dire," one of the gateways enlarged, "-one of our conquered realms has been placed in jeopardy. Gods of their world have summoned heroes and spirited away souls from stronger dimensions to act as their guillotine, our people are being slain and exploited for money. Please, majesty, will thee help us in our quest?"

"How long will it take..." he asked.

"Times flows faster in the endangered world. Please, go to their aid, they need their king to protect the last bastion."

"Very well," he said.

Multi-dimensions are present, Scifer's slaughter and conquest of other worlds were of epic proportions. Similarly, hidden inside the Curely's dimension, a magicless middle-aged world crumbles by the resounding sound of a hammer. "BURN THE APOSTATE," echoed about. A snowy landscape of water and cold spans across. Stone-bricked bridges lay covered by the mess of fighters in leather armor.

"The land across the sea must be purified," screamed a man wearing a bear's pelt, "-we've crossed to vanquish the devil's tyranny," motivated by the war cry. Expressionless faces assaulted the castle doors with logs. Boiling oil poured off the castle walls, arrows rained to no avail.

"MORE SHIPS ACROSS THE SEA," screamed a watcher. Elven ears shook by the sound of drums, "-notify the master, our domain has been breached."

"You're not notifying anyone," a flash of lightning shook the wall, "-for I am Thor, Son of Odin," an effortless swing splattered brain matter across the cold battlements. The tank of a man leaped into a horde of hobgoblins, "-damned creatures of the devil," he hailed to summon lightning, a thunderstorm cackled the vicinity. Support of the neighboring nations arrived in stride. Aboard each ship stood a party of highly-skilled heroes able to conjure magic. Their boon of boosted individual enhancement carried weight across the unified kingdom of Nelfhao.

"Hear me, my people," proclaimed the emperor, "-on this blessed day, I, Emperor Hao, blessed by the gods, proclaim mankind's victory in our crusade against the vile demons." Devotees knelt in unison, the vibrant sun warmed the land, a good omen for years of oppression and constant struggle.

"My lord," the warmth swapped for the decrepit scape of frigid empty box of stone, "-Thor has laid siege, the unified nations are moving their forces against us. The monsters have lost," \*BANG,\* a charged hammer blasted the walls, five teams of five rushed into the throne room.

“You shall pay for thine sin,” said Thor, “-I’ve come to aid the heroes in their quest to purify the land.” Clad in exquisite and expensive armor, “-long have the people suffered,” said a knight, “-we must uphold our duty as heroes from another world.” They inched closer; ‘-I was summoned here for the sole purpose of killing monsters. My old life had nothing of value, I didn’t care. But here, the people venerate me, I can use fire-magic, the strongest in the world. I don’t ever want to leave this place, which is why, for the sake of my lover, I’ll return a winner. Everyone, no matter the kingdom, will fight for the sake of freedom.’

“Give it up, Demonlord,” said Thor, “-kneel before us and apologize for the years of abuse.”

“Don’t be smug,” said the seated man, “-demi-god or not, you haven’t the right to address I, lord of the castle, in such a manner,” \*clap,\* chained up maidens of the realm were thrown into the center. Disfigured expression, untreated wounds festered maggots. Vomit remains stained their clothes, “-HOW DARE YOU!” fired the heroes.

“Why he asks,” mocked the Lord, “-when monsters are slain and tortured, does it not solicit a response from thine heartless soul. Monsters have feelings, and we work towards one purpose, to become strong.”

“Stop with the chatting!” cried Thor, “-we have reclaimed the Cohe island. Without a place to hide or escape, what is there left?” butchered body of monsters flung to the front, “-tis the end, vile invaders, we shan’t stand for the cruelty any longer.”

“Heroes,” said Thor, “-ready your weapons!”

“My lord,” begged the attendant, “-let’s retreat, the castle is lost. The death of a demon-general isn’t worthy of such a tainted battlefield.”

“Listen to me,” he grasped the throne, “-the fortune is those who can choose where they die. I’ve sadly outlived my stay. The people were stronger, we must accept and face death.”

“Well said,” a pulse of energy shook the room. Black smoke-shrouded red carpet, “-how goes it, heroes of other worlds,” an ominous presence loomed.

“Who are you?” fired Thor.

“Death,” he smirked and glared.

“DAMNED PEST,” Mjolnir darted with an inhumane throw, blink and the projectile vanished.