

Death Magic 731

Chapter 731: True Demonlord [62] [Finale: Part 3]

“Human, how are you alive?”

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, from when thee were born until thee dies, I, heir to death, hold in mine hands the strings of which binds thee to reality, by my authority, I order said chain to be severed: Tactus Interitus.

“W-who a-are you...” the knotted expression untangled upon breathing the last breath, the remaining image being Igna Haggard.

‘Lord Death,’ dropped to the gritty ground, the stairway to floor sixteen opened yonder. Every blink sent jolts of pain, blood stained the outfit, ragged and torn, brownish red, ‘-the true unknown of the world,’ the body gave and tumbled onto his back, ‘-is you. Persephone is a childhood friend of yours, you cursed us to suffer for her sake. Relinquishing the weapon was more trouble than imagined – without it, the later generations were doomed to fail. Increase of power without a sufficiently adequate outlet; I thought I fought against my weaknesses. My story isn’t glamorous, I’m no hero, I’m afraid. She might be dead and I have no way of knowing. It all feels wrong, a deeper scheme, someone’s behind my defeat, I don’t care for it. I can’t do this alone, I need help, Origin, someone, my head feels dreamy, I want t-to s-sleep.’ Outside showed the 20th of December, and inside was the unfortunate end of Igna’s journey into the Underworld. The element unconsciously went into a dormant phase; the heart pulsed at long intervals; the already pale complexions divulged into an actual corpse. History often repeats, the outcome never guaranteed.

An empty black space masked inside a replication of the night sky held two chairs, one in which sat Origin and the other, Igna, “-my other self,” said Origin, “-the battle’s arduous; no element to support the regeneration, the crushing aura of the underworld. There’s no winning, the expanded realm has nullified any of our abilities – the anti-death trial. Every four hours, the body expires to revive an hour later, the cycle repeats, immortality from the nightwalker’s blood have saved thee. You can’t hear me, the consciousness’s locked in constant battle; the journey might end,’ a hopeful glance shot to a blurry portal, ‘-the old representation of you would have made it a few floors below and eventually claw his way to the bottom floor, each rebirth would have skyrocketed his powers. I see the outcome clearly, after rescuing her, you’d have gone into hiding, frightened about the overwhelming power – recluse into a life of a hermit. How interesting,’ he smiled, ‘-your companions are worried. The path may be carved out on thy lonesome, yet, behind thee walks guardians and a realm. The time will come,’ he smiled, ‘-the time will come when the realm is expansive enough to greaten thy powers, help will arrive. Take the moment to rest, my dearest other self, the trial will peak sooner or later.’

Days, weeks, months, time sprinted through the calendar, plucking away at the numbers uncaringly, eventually, the date read 30th of November X102, a full year later.

“Lady Gophy, we’re ready,” said a squad of ladies who stood beside whiteish winged horses.

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“Good, Brvya, we’ll stand by and jump into battle. Are our forces ready?”

"Yes, my lady," she nodded, "-Cora and lady Starix have split our army."

"Excellent," she stood peering over a courtyard filled with soldiers – most bore armored vests, black outfits, and handled large and expensive-looking weapons, prominently, guns. She turned on her heels, wrapping her shawl around her neck, '-the day's here,' her black hair grew longer and swayed from the heated inside breeze. A large hallway, carrying beautifully crafted pillars, unblemished tiled floors beige and golden rimmed, held maids on each side. The sound of her heels echoed and met against the chatter of three similarly dressed individuals.

"Greeting's ladies," said Gophy.

"Good morning to you too," they answered, the entourage consisting of, Intherna, Miira, and Lilith.

"Today's the day," commented Miira, "-the realm's expanded beyond our imagination."

"All the domain stuff bores me," added Intherna, "-you sure we can't teleport there and help him?"

"No," returned a composed Lilith, "-our forces are on standby in case he calls for them. We don't need to intervene. Gophy said before, Igna is a man of strong will, he will figure a way out the situation."

"Good," replied Intherna sarcastically, "-which is why we left him into the underworld for almost a year. Time moves slower here, how many years must he have suffered through, constantly dying, reviving, and dying."

"No time to argue," added Gophy, "-today I shall turn my blunder right. Miira, do look after the realm while I'm away."

"What about the children?"

"The three devils," she chuckled, "-order them to stand down," a blackish hue converged at her soles, "-I'll be off." *Teleportation.*

"And she's off."

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"Listen, Intherna," warm hands slithered from the back into a gentle embrace, "-we know, and we understand. His being lock in such a vile place isn't to be proud of, nonetheless, the fight is against a being of supreme stature. The year hasn't been wasted, Gophy and I worked without rest to find a solution," whispered softly, "-and we've found one. The transmutation of Totrya into the Shadow Realm. The whole domains on par if not greater than the other domains, a hidden world known to only a select few," they teleported to the opposite end of the castle.

"Look around," intervened Lilith posed gracefully against a balustrade, "-the population expanded, children are born whose soul belongs to the Shadow Realm. Villages, towns, and many others have sprung, those we transferred have greatly advanced the general way of life. Igna's constant deaths made a world's life possible, double strength on each revival, then double said prior boost, it stacks up to infinite lengths."

"I know," her scarlet locks hummed, "-my tone and words may and will be wrongly interpreted. I love the Shadow Realm, and I love us, our growing family. My rank's risen to the status of High-Tier goddess, I can't argue."

"The Shadow Realm truly is a place of idyllic pleasures," said Miira, holding Intherna and Lilith's hand, "-people are happy, nothing is granted for free, they work, they gain; not thoroughly equal but merit-based. The place we call home is the best," she cheered, and in good reason. A metropolis of tall fetching skyscrapers propped inside the capital, expansion carried beyond the walls – the emphasis was placed upon the railway, there's no place a train can't reach.

Landscape swaps for the Overworld, '-the spell is ready for activation. Wait just a little longer, Igna, I'll undo my mistake.' Her tall figure stood strongly before a barrier into Totrya, the Azure wall rested behind, after the thick fog.

"Lady Gophy, I've been waiting."

"Lady Vesper," she returned courteously, "-per the agreement, I've come to transmigrate thy world into the Shadow Realm."

"About time," they entered, arriving at a purples sky of two suns, "-Scifer's domain," pointing to the side, "-is crumbling, nothing lasts forever. What little remains of power was drained a month ago, the world's collapsing on itself. Lady Miira must have relayed the details?"

"Yes, tis the reason of my appearance," she smiled, "-Scifer's domain has absorbed a realm before, correct?"

"No, his majesty decided against." The hill sloped to a humble village of monsters, basked in a purple backdrop, poorly cared for fences, starved-looking villages, abandoned children rummaging in the upper fields, "-humans," added Vesper, "-prisoners of war."

"Prisoners?" returned a questioning gaze.

"Wrong choice of words, they were captured by other monsters. The humans are our foe, some of our warriors find it amusing to bring strays. It is cruel, yet, rodents' art be left alone."

"War is cruel," they crossed the village center whereby a lonesome man desperately tried to drink water from the well. The monsters kindly assisted his plea, the man showed no sense of gratitude content of filling the stomach.

"Father, father," said a little boy sprinting from a desolate-looking building, "-I found an apple."

"Good job," a hastily snatch of the fruit sent the boy on his bottom, meanwhile the adult ravaged the food, "-stop being useless and find more!"

"Ignore them," whispered Vesper.

"A jarring sight." The journey followed onto the backs of wyverns, flying over a thickly covered forest. In the distance loomed sharp ending cliffs, rough terrain, and vindictive gusts. Vesper ordered the descent, the forest ended, a distance which grew upon closing ground.

“Here we are, the heart of the realm,” said Vesper, “-the grave to Scifer and alter to the supreme god, Kronos.” Chatter would but stall the process; Gophy’s stern expression advanced to the center, a massive circle of the scale equal to the mountains of Totrya rose to the purple sky, a coarse edged staff buried onto the ground, her arms pressed in prayer, every word recited levitated in a dulled black font. *World Transmigration,* her hair shot upward in tandem with the surrounding, the very fabric of reality shook, ‘-done,’ she smirked and clapped.

“Welcome to the Shadow Realm.”

“Wait...” paused the assistant, “-are you serious?”

“What, did you expect some greater show of power or some convoluted chanting?”

“Y-yeah?” her shoulder rose.

“I apologize for the disappointment. Scifer’s realm has now merged with the Shadow Realm. Lady Vesper, you will leave for Rosespire shortly, an ambassador needs to join the council. The foggy barrier is admonished.”

“What about our forces training in the overworld?”

“Nothing is changed,” she replied convincingly, “-they’ll spawn in the overworld, fight, level-up, and return when the strength is adequate. Moving to and fro is simple, a portal’s ready for action, till later, lady Vesper.”

‘There, the realms have merged and evolved into a greater world. Igna it’s time to wake, my friend.’

Dust covered the floor in layers, *thud,* ‘-my companions,’ blood pulsed, ‘-the Shadow Realm,’ the vision opened to the same sight a year ago, ‘-what happened?’

‘An induced comatose state for self-preservation.’

‘Origin, I saw the Shadow Realm expand and grow, what does it mean?’

‘You’re a Watcher of the Realm, once the consciousness yielded, the mind fluttered to the next best place.’

‘I see,’ he sat upright, dust and dirt littered his body, ‘-the pressure’s stronger than ever, I don’t feel strong,’ scrambled to a stand, ‘-how long has it been...’

“Ten years,” replied Origin, “-in this world that is.”

“Bad, this is bad.”

“Truly,” added Origin, “-there’s no telling what side-effects it will have.”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do,” *Death-Element: Unleash Aura,* “-I have to rescue mother, I need to, I must.”

“Good, then fight.”

‘Ten years,’ he moved to the next floor, ‘-the pressure of the realm doesn’t affect anymore. Gophy’s done it, the realms have been merged.’

Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing; Realm Expansion, ‘-the realm is strong enough to maintain the connection.’ Opposed to swallowing the area, it focused onto Igna, effectively becoming Mantia himself, ‘-much better,’ movement regained its flare. Devils of the underworld leaped for battle; ‘-I’ve wasted too much time.’

Summon Forth: Vengeance,

“My master,” it leaped with a grin, “-I’ll kill them all!”

CRASH, “-HALT!” a headless horse galloped on the air, “-Igna Haggard, many years have passed. The Tower is a place of torture for mortal souls, there’s no further need to conquer for the obstacles and monsters have been removed. Thy presence repulses me, I should better,” *clang,*

“-should better what?” he turned slowly, “-teleporting behind again, I’m sorry to say, the sneak attack won’t work anymore,” Orenmir rose from blocking the attack, “-the reason I lost has been fixed.”

“The pressure has no use,” stepped back, “-I see, then, follow me instead. I shall gather my army for one last battle. Alas, the one named Persephone is but an empty shell,” he forcefully teleported them outside, “-a decade of torture,” showcased confidently, “-look at her body and visage, is it not the definition of pity and terror?” magma bellowed from the depth, a tinge of sadistic pleasure wrote on Zagreus’s visage, “-she’s alive but not, dead, but alive, tell me, will rescuing her be of any use?”

“True her body may be weak, her mind beaten beyond recognition, I’ll still fight.”

“Imbecile,” *clap,* pure entities vested in white overalls, fluffy wings, and white halos, summoned, “-I’ve yet to test the might of my army,” more creatures clawed from the very magma itself, one by one, the numbers increased ten-fold till the army of the underworld stood, “-the stronger foes are greater demons, boss level monsters who guarded the tower, where they stand ready to bring death. What say you, little man, fight or not?”

“Little man?” he snickered, “-afraid to say,” *COME FORTH, MY COMPANIONS!* black portals opened, “-I’m not alone,” the goddesses’ arrived in bearing murderous intent, “-death has come.”

Chapter 732: True Demonlord [63] [Finale: Part 4]

“I may be little, whimsical, and powerless, however, before us stands four guardians and a whole realm ready to take on a supreme being’s territory.”

Intherna shot a curious glance backward, met Igna’s gaze, smiled, and faced forth. Purest flames ever seen or felt manifested in the shape of a dragon’s wing, the outline, closely matched that of the phoenix, in more ways than one, her power had grown exponentially. Beside her stood the proud Gophy, a resting melancholic expression simmered into faint splashes of sadistic pleasure. The noble visage, the true epitome of dignity in strength and mannerism, altered to match the situation. Chaotic waves of energy(bearing cackles of lightning) flashed along her arms and legs, the presence around her core sunk the realm itself. A few steps back stood Miira and the lusciously posed Lilith. The former chose a recluse position at Igna’s side, not too close nor too far, her arms grew scales of emerald green, a shimmering glee torched her lips red, her blond hair, lighter to the point of being white, swam in the sea of her aura. Thus arrive Lilith cradling Beelzebub, veins of dark hue dug into the very ground, expanding

forward to create a wall of thorns. Lastly, the devoted residents of the Shadow Realm, a step outside shifted the persona into a mindless straight-faced line. Weapons at the ready and mind on the task at hand – the armies stood strongly against one another. Each sensing the other’s power, boss class monsters, rating beyond the ranking of Tier-1 Platinum, scanned thoroughly, their opposition, a squadron of Valkyries straddling winged horses.

“Amusing, Igna Haggard, very amusing,” fired Zagreus, bold-faced and annoyed, “-calling onto help won’t achieve much.”

“Silence, damned brat,” fired Gophy, “-you address us now,” the four generals shuffled to the vanguard, “-I’ve stood by and watched for the longest time.”

“We itch to fight,” added Intherna maliciously, “-what semblance of pride thee have shall be burnt to ash.”

“I’ll try to make the death pleasant,” said Lilith coyly, “-though I’d much prefer lord Hades’ himself, you lack a certain sense of masculinity.”

“Whatever they said,” returned Miira.

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“Well, well,” the squared forehead, a placeholder of the boldly thick eyebrows, crinkled, the straightness of the lines jarred into sharp-edged waves, “-aren’t thee confident.”

‘With them here, there’s no need to worry,’ a boulder summoned, ‘-good luck my companions, I wish thee well.’

“Igna Haggard,” flew over the tropes, “-move thy stead into the fray,” she commanded, “-this war is retribution for thy humiliation.”

“Not so fast,” a secondary portal opened at Zagreus’s side, among the guests Voraum, Kazalon, pawns under the guidance of Cimi, a demi-god, “-I have allies too.” Beside Cimi rose three; Pols, Squil, and Dral, each with the strength of a demi-god, “-what say you,” the horse galloped to a soft landing, “-shall we begin?”

“Very well,” replied Igna stood in the middle of the four generals, “-let’s begin.” *Woosh,* they blinked, a sharp flash blinded the burnt scenery grey – leaders clashed and so did the respective armies. Angels took to the skies, the Valkyries, led by Brvya, gave chase. Soldiers subconsciously took advantageous positions and fired; the advancing opposition scarcely made progress.

“Gophy, Intherna, Miira, please make short work of the demi-gods,” shrugged Lilith, “-I’ll summon the World Tree and enhance our strengths.”

“I’ll cast Phoenix’s Rize, the hotter it gets, the stronger our forces will become,” winked Intherna.

“Leave the frontal attacks to me,” said Miira tapping her closed fists.

“Allow me to sow the seed of chaos,” Gophy seductively bit her lips, “-witness the reason why I’m called the Goddess of Chaos,” a mere point of the finger, not even strenuous, summoned a tiny speck of white. A moment’s confusion went through the trio’s mind, expectation of a cacophonous explosion fell short,

to say the least. A fluffy ball of white, innocent and cuddly, glided to the concentrated forces. Goblins laughed; the battle momentarily stopped to shun the spell. Alas, never to judge a book by its cover, before comments were made, the innocent orb made contact, the screech of a thousand banshee boomed, shaking the very foundation of the platforms. Monsters, fighters? No, the goddess tore through the ground they stood, efficiently wiping out 30 percent of the forces, “-any comments?” asked she throwing a smug wink.

“My turn,” said Lilith – the fight moved further forward, those abled of physical attacks went close, the barrier of thorns perked up in a skeletal spiral, casting a massive shadow, the skeletal soon flourished into a majestic tree. Hefty foliage birthed tiny specks of white. Snow in the underworld, a preposterous idea made true. Above Lilith’s creation flapped the vague outline of the legendary Phoenix – it alone stumped morale, the wings fluttered, dropping specks of flame to warmly lit the advancing forces.

“I’ll be off,” said Miira.

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“Will she be fine?”

CRASH, the bludgeoned visage of Pols crashed beside Lilith, “-I take my worry back,” she tiptoed away from the vestige, “-go on Beelzebub, summon a few friends to play along.”

“Really mother?” the toddler’s eyes lit, “-can summon them?”

“I’ll go fight over there,” said Intherna hastily, “-the boy’s going to use magic, we better.”

“I agree,” firmed Gophy, “-the stench alone will make me pass out,” her comment caught his ear, the puppy dog eyes watered, “-I meant strength,” returned in a panic, “-strength, strength, not stench.”

Herein the second coming of Lord Death’s invasion, proxied by Igna, fought against Hades, proxied by Zagreus. Miira tore through demi-gods without breaking a sweat; the composed demeanor halting at instances to slyly grin at the next opponent. Fear installed; a tsunamic tide of battle crashed without care for mercy.

Clash, clash, clash, a cartwheel to the side barely avoided Zagreus’s spear, “-I’m stronger still,” he proclaimed.

“Much said for the horse,” *spat,* “-the steed mingles in the company of the lost head.”

“Enough chitchat,” he gritted, “-I’ll end the battle in a single stroke.”

“Pause,” exhaled Igna, “-look behind us, the war is near its end.”

“What?” he spun, the spear dropped, “-what happened?”

“Does the sight not explain the outcome?” the various injuries healed, “-look above,” angels so proudly displayed earlier crashed onto the central platform, “-my companions won the invasion. I forgot to mention, the four ladies you so easily dismissed earlier are, Gophy, high Goddess of Chaos. Intherna, heir to Rah, high Goddess of Fire. Miira, high Goddess of Kiant, Eternal protector of time. Lilith, Queen of Demons. The demi-gods in thy army had no chance, forget it, not even the army combined could have stood to one of them.”

“No,” confidence crashed spectacularly, he dropped onto his knees, “-why would they serve...”

“Not serving,” he smiled, “-they’re my companions, unlike cliches where the leader needs to be stronger, they’re far stronger than I. See, if ever someone dares to attack, the goddess will bring death. The pawns in thy army, well, nothing in comparison to those born in a distinctly firmer realm. My being stuck in an endless loop of death and rebirth spawned something truly frightening, the Shadow Realm’s power. I willingly abandoned the will to grow strong, at my level, and if I push it, I’ll only be able to reach a Mid-level god, in exchange, I’ve gained greater strength, a realm unshackled by-laws, abled to alter reality in inferior domains.”

“Who are you, really, the heir to death or what?”

“Part of it, for you see, I’m a Watcher, they who stand in the shadows, they who protect and fight, they who wield strength beyond comprehension to the gods, tis who thou face, the Watcher of the Shadow Realm,” he brandished Orenmir, “-we can continue – alas, thy forces have been ruined. What of Lord Hades, has he no clue of the invasion?”

“Fool, the forces may have been utterly destroyed,” he glared in desperation, “-my father will not take the insolence lightly.” A beckoning boom drew the fighter’s survival instincts, from valkyrie to goddess, “-someone bad approaches.”

“What of this transgression,” thundered, “-Zagreus,” the land churned and shifted, the platforms joined into one singular floating entity, “-tell me, child, what has happened?” volcanos rose at the back, the essence of suffocation deepened.

“They’ve invaded the Underworld,” eruption bellowed loudly, clouds of skull-shaped visages rose.

“-And for what reason must they have done so?”

“To shame thee, father.”

“Fool,” a flash of pure yellow lit the chubbily colored ground, “-three goddesses and the queen of demons. Quite the party,” the mass turned human, “-how am I going to deal with the matter?” it waited at the center.

“Lord Hades, my name’s Igna Haggard, I have come to rescue my lady mother, Persephone, who was wrongly abducted by thy son.”

“Persephone is here?” without a face to study, the tone gave much to be desired, judging the underlying emotions strained, “-very interesting, looks like my son has been up to a few deeds. I see quite the trouble has been sown,” a shrug of the hand dispelled Lilith’s World Tree, another simple blew out Intherna’s beast.

“Enough is enough. Lord Hades, will you or will you not return the lady to us?”

“Goddess Gophy, here I thought you to be dead?” a suspicious glance crawled up her legs to the face, “-why should I bother?”

“Your son lost,” added Miira, “-surely tis reason enough. They fought admirably.”

“Alas, guardian, bias is part of one’s strength. My son does what he wishes, right or wrong, I’ll seldom correct. You sure have guts to lay siege to a demon god’s castle,” the arms crossed, “-how about this,” monstrous proportioned castle walls rose in tandem, a castle tower ascended Hades to greater heights, “-what about this, Igna Haggard, fight, be a hero, and save the princess.”

“No thank you,” returned curtly, “-no interest in playing the father and son game. Demon God, am I the type to care?”

“INSOLENCE BOY!” screamed Zagreus, “-WHERE WAS ALL THE BRAVADO WHEN THEE SLEPT WEAKLY INSIDE MY TOWER.”

“He has a good point there,” shuffled Gophy and the rest.

“Seriously?” chin to the chest

“I mean, the boy is right,” shrugged Miira, “-you did die for a year.”

“NOT AGAIN,” he facepalmed.

“Ahem,” the throat cleared, “-has the bickering finished?”

“My, my,” a transient voice spoke omnidirectionally, “-am I late to the party?” a classily vested gentleman dropped from a portal, “-Lord Hades, excuse the visit,” a top hat bore the insignia of Hermes. He slyly, under the cover of the haut-de-forme, gave a reassuring grin, “-I bear a message of great importance from Lixbin.” The parcel delivered to which the man drew on a reading-glasses, spreading the note on a newly conjured table, “-I see,” the uncaring face veered in anger, “-Zagreus, my son, care to explain this?” the cheeks sunk in fury.

“What?” he shuffled close, “-oh...”

“BRAT,” the head slammed and shattered the table, “-Igna, forgive my son’s actions,” the boy bled, “-history doesn’t need to repeat, Persephone, albeit, had my fancy so long ago, led a humble life. I won’t pursue the battle,” the walls crumbled, the prisoner reappeared in a cocoon before which they hesitantly peeped, “-she’s gone through a lot, the torturers spared no mercy, I’ll see to it this trouble maker here is disciplined. If only I had known of the greater picture. There’s no healing her, I’m sorry.”

“Is that so,” he grasped her cold hands, interlocking fingers, “-I beg to differ.”

Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing. Reality or fantasy, rules of the mortal realm, laws governing the all-encompassing universe, cower before he who holds the key to the truth, he who’s able to unwind the very fabric of reality, what I summon is my to rule, and what is rule by I shall obey, god, demons, spirits, angels, thou art helpless. Realm Expansion – Aronot; World Breaker.

“Heal, revive, grow stronger. Injuries inflicted, pain experienced, emotional turmoil art henceforth nulled,” the words altered the domain’s laws, “-wake,” the wounds disappeared, time seemed to backtrack, Courtney’s exaltedly pressed lips eased.

Conjured from the powers of which rules the law of nature, summoned to aid, mine quest art be left alone. Reality is as I dictate, matters affected by my words ought be reflected in the outside world. Realm Retraction Shadow Realm Variant – Aronot.

Chapter 733: Year X10

'After healing Persephone, companions of the shadow realm returned to their peaceful abode. The four guardians gave a cheerful goodbye, and I was left to my own devices. Explaining the events to mother took quite the toll, her questions needed to be answered concisely. We returned home, or what I thought was home; the portal opened to Rotherham, a land whereby the town expanded into a city. The three skyscrapers from amidst the new challengers – newer brands plastered their insignias, a contest of grandeur begun, fatefully beautifying the cityscape in the process. We headed to the hospital and allowed mother to rest.,' A brusque wind blew through the central plaza, cuddled atop an elevated platform carrying trees and an olden esthetic. Statues and works of art, most prominently, the frame of a book made in bronze and adorned by hanging light bulbs, exuded a cozy comfort. Away from the book of Bronze, very original in the name, rose marble statues crafted by the famed Elth, an undoubted genius of the new century. The many figures represented women, demi-humans, and the many trials to a stable way of life. Context, subjective in nature, didn't much matter to the young and in love. High-school uniforms of the recently built, Rotherham Academy, were spotted at the '-lover's point,' located on the outskirts of the plaza. Romance in the air, '-very brazen,' he pondered, the outfit wrecked from the prior battle. Sleeves were an illusion, the shirt became a dirtied vest, the pants, shorts, and shoes, nonexistent. Earrings, lenses, smartphones, every gadget that made Igna, Igna, was gone. He sat lonesome on a bench, gazing upon the starlight sky, '-the world threw much. Ten years spend in constant death and rebirth made one thing clear, the boon of double strength has transferred to the shadow Realm's core. Doesn't matter does it, if gods choose to attack, I won't have much to say, it'll either be a win or a loss.'

"Would you care for a smoke?"

"Huh?" from the stars to the voice, "-aren't you one of the angels?"

"Correct," a gentleman of fair complexion, robed in white, crowned by golden laurels, walked and sat, the lips carried a cigarette, "-arch-angel now," he puffed and offered a smoke, Igna accepted and puffed. An adjacent light, amber in color, shyly fell on the entity – sharply grey pupils, a thinly drawn brow curved, curly hair hid the forehead partly. A rounded nose carried a softly carved bridge, linking at the glabella, the prominent forehead, unlike the brow, seemed to cast a crude shadow onto the sharp eyes. Each time he spoke, the glance would glide onto whatever he focused on. The jawline, sharp and concrete, neatly bundled the clean-shaven cheeks, a ring of gold prominently hung on the earlobe, "-the valkyries spoke of mercy and repentance; repaying kindness in full, the words went over my head."

"An angel," they exchanged agreeable nods and watched the stars, "-couldn't see the extent of the strength, I do apologize."

"Mention not," a circle-shaped smoke puffed, "-Igna Haggard, I was released by lord Hades, '-go and live,' was the exact words. We watched lady Persephone be tortured day in and day out, after a week, seeing our horrified expression, she bore a mask of bravado, smiling as opposed to screaming, the courage made the punishment louder and unbearable,' he reached out his palm, '-look here,' a black feather summoned, '-angels who sin and go against their morals fall from the grace of the mighty one. I've sinned, rather, we've sinned. After the battle, I saw fit to kill my fellow angels, my hands' reek of blood, and my wings dripped in their last vows. There was no resentment, their death proved to be

salvation, and I decided to take the blunt. There's no going back, I've killed to save my fellow angels and fought to repay the kindness shown. I'm masterless and without a purpose, I'm lost."

The words waned heavy on Igna, the nonchalant expression sunk, similarities of the tale could be matched with his, "-I see," the cigarette ended, "-I don't know either," replied gravely, "-I've been on the constant fight against schemes of this realm and the intervention of Lucifer and the gods. I have no idea why they'd be interested, there is an infinite number of worlds bearing similar features to us, why this of all place?"

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"Allow me to shed some light. What is said is true to some extent, the heavenly realms are tacky and let's say, idle. The gods share their blessing and powers to other worlds, rule over their domain and live life without much chance. Lucifer is another matter entirely. Not a god, in reality, the Church worships him as God. Veneration and undying loyalty boasters his power, faith has the power to alter fate. Thus was his way of saying f-you to the other gods. To the reason why this particular realm is attacked, there's none. There was and still is the realm of Draebala, a world ravaged by the fights between gods and demons. I wouldn't put much stock in the heavenly politics, tis whimsical and everchanging. Lucifer's on an expedition to find the book of Gehenna. The truly wicked souls to ever live are trapped inside the hidden domain."

"Question," an eyebrow rose, "-how was the information acquired?"

"By assimilation of my own kind. I share their memories, a matter of simple deduction led to my assessment."

"A fallen angel seeks refuge to one who loses the battle, what a joke."

"Lord Hades is virtually unbeatable, same to Zeus and Poseidon. Dispelling lady Intherna and Lilith's spell must have been a shock. Given the current vessel, your powers are limited."

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"I doubt I'll recover boon of divinity – my standing as a deity was lost the moment I died by Zeus' sword. Conniving bunch, no matter the strength I amass, I'll never be on par to one gifted with the boon of a godly body."

"Interesting," he lit another cigarette, "-you were a god previously?"

"Yeah, God of Death to be precise. I've returned to the title of Heir to Death."

"Dire situation," he puffed, "-if becoming a god isn't a viable solution, why not become a demon god. They are ridiculously strong and weak to 'good' might grant the edge."

"Not interested," he sighed, "-that title is best kept for Hades and his aid, I have no business interjecting. Who knows," the palms clasped, "-the blood in my vein is a thing to behold. The Nightwalker's legend..."

"You said something?"

"Forget it." By the time they realized, the attire wasn't one to be viewed favorably. One bore the outfit of a homeless man while the other bore a singular robe, or in the eyes of the general public, a bath

towel, a degenerate and a pervert. The case wasn't much helped either seeing the 'lover's point,' stood little more than a stone's throw away. Under the shackles of the cold night, armed officers arrived at the scene.

"Good evening gentlemen," heavy boots impacted the stone tiles, "-we've received calls of two weirdoes hanging at the plaza enjoying a casual smoke."

"Officer," said Igna frugally, "-we haven't seen them, do take the plea someplace else. Lights from the cars sure are ripe to blind a bystander."

"You got jokes," the bold-faced man, stuffy and wide, "-let me enlighten, the weirdoes are you two."

"How come?" returned the other, "-I'm dressed favorably, can you not see the silk on my robe?"

"Listen," said the officer with dismay, "-the robe is nice an all; silk or whatever, the fact remains, the thing looks like a bath towel, and flashers have been prominent around these parts. It doesn't please me; you're coming to the station." Processing the event short-circuited, Igna and the acquaintance found themselves at the station, situated at a few minutes' walk to the train station.

Cold and rectangular, a reinforced door, empty inside save two slabs hung at knee height against the wall, held a thinly laid mattress, "-forgot to introduce myself earlier, I'm Raphael, previous archangel of restoration."

"Previous?"

"I'm a fallen angel now," he remarked, "-the light's dimmed, the night feels nice, I'll head to sleep."

"Raphael, if thee wishes to follow me, I must implore a vow of fealty."

"Not necessary, the contract's been forged – proxied by Brvya. I'm bound to the Shadow Realm, thus, bound to you. A good night's rest is rare to come upon, please, spare me the interrogation."

"Sure, have a good night, Raphael," reluctantly left the mouth, '-what's his problem?' the gaze firmed to a gated rectangle. Moon's humble ray landed atop the angel, casting shadows of the iron bars onto the otherwise canescent robe. Dust held in suspense, granting the illusion of a smaller world. 'No use arguing,' he laid sideways and faced the grated slot, a faint passing of the stars weighed on the eyelids, '-a good night's rest.'

Time elapsed, one year, in reminder, brought many changes to the world and its politics. Various reports told of the Wracia Empire's stable foothold onto the new continent. Alphaia, on the eve of August past, suffered a massive blow ending in catastrophe. Odegawoan's borders shut, an outbreak of mutated variant of the Monster Curse led itself to be associated with the common cold. The illness, previously untraceable, showed the truly ravaging effects. After being infected, the highly contagious illness spreads onto the victim's skin creating rashes and sores, the excruciating pain has most bedridden, a systematic attack on the internal organs has the patient fighting life and death. November marked the first case of malady reported in Hidros, more specifically, Kreston. To make matter worse, a secret report known to only the leaders of the Federation, wrote strongly about Phantom's casualties against King Juvey's new military, the stronger PMC, the Cobalt Unit. The borders were pushed back, Elendor stands on thin nails, another battle, and the war ended in the king's favor. If only the battle remained on the ground, the sea, warships of castle-like proportions guarded the Marintia Bay, due south of Dreqai,

preventing reinforcement and supplies to make ashore. Alongside the sea, they newly revealed an anti-air turret capable of immeasurable damage. Enough about the war, the real turmoil spawned in Arda, the queen and prince's disappearance had the kingdom in peril. With no guidance nor aid, the Blood-King's Faction temporarily assumed control of the throne, maintaining the status quo against belligerent nobles and angered council members. The Federation, in face of potential revolt, decreed Arda to be ruled by Queen Gallienne until the Ardanian crown was rescued. Easel Run Gard and their crumbling economy skyrocketed. Lady Elvira took a gamble in search of new materials to provide energy, abandoned mines were refurbished and excavated by their mining company, Phantom Ore, fortune shone, the discovery of Maicite. A frequently occurring ore able to absorb mana and amplify the output – rarity aside, the sheer tenacity baffled researchers at Rotherham University. Studies proved it to be indestructible under the correct conditions.

1st of December X102, a radio played soundly beyond the door, a heavy mass halted and tapped brusksly. Much argument-sounding tone led to tinkles of keys around the lock, “-there's no need to be in such a hurry,” said the officer.

“How dare you imprison a member of the Dukedom of Rotherham, thy sovereign.”

“I beg your pardon my lady, tis but a simple case of miscommunication...”

“Silence, fat oaf,” heels scurried inside, “-master, please wake,” the radio hummed into a recognizable voice, “-master, it's past time you wake.”

“Can't a man rest easy,” listless on the uptake, “-I had a hyperactive dream,” he sat, bare feet to the cold floor, “-worse thing, I can't remember any of it.”

“MASTER,” a sudden jolt shook his core, “-excuse my familiarity,” spoke under the guise of a tight hug.

“Alta,” he returned the affection, “-I'm glad someone came.”

“The blunder is inexcusable,” side-glancing the officer, “-on thy name, I shall have the man sentenced to death.”

“Hold it with the death penalty,” he stood, “-no need for extreme, the night was pleasant.”

“Such a ruckus,” snarled adjacent the slab, “-keep it down.”

“Wake up, Raphael, laziness doesn't befit thee.”

“Whatever.”

Chapter 734: Rejuvenation

“My lord, pretell, who's this gentleman here?”

“Raphael, handsome and able at your service,” smugly returned.

“Able of what?” inquired promptly.

“Able of various tasks,” said a devious remark.

“Enough babble,” the interesting conversation halted, the trio, out of the police station a few minutes ago, found themselves promenading along the altered Rotherham. The place expanded, building rose to extreme heights, the populous wore smart-casual clothes, no expense was spared on advertisement. One who was stuck in a desolate cradle, the underworld, found the mind blown on plenty o’ occasions. Flying vehicles, moving displays, holographic smartphones abled to project the screen, counting among a few things. Large sidewalk routed adjacent to the expanded roads, halted at the populated intersection. Loud chatter through their phones, laughter from casual banter, and the constant checking of time, “-master,” said she in the cacophony, “-a lot has changed in the past year. First order of business, acquire new attire. What of him?”

“Raphael,” a scattered look behind revealed one lost to the novelty of a technologically advanced realm; stood taller than the average height, the neck strained to gawk the sky, a bloated vein flowed down inside the shoulder, “-he’s a companion of mine,” returned he unimpressed, “-he’ll do just fine.” ‘I hope.’

“You said something?”

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“No,” the crowd shuffled forth, “-let’s go,” he grabbed her arms, which in turn she grabbed Raphael’s. Steps increased through the vexingly arranged layout of the streets. Traffic grew to be an issue. Communities settled quite a way away in hopes of taking advantage of the evolving railway – most unbound by family and relations often took residence in either the suburban part of Rotherham or moved to Castella, southwest of the city, a thirty-to-forty-five-minute train ride away. Cost of life here greatedened, whilst Castella suited most normal office workers. Indirectly, Rotherham’s advancement towards Magiology and other fields, brought prospective talents to work and strive for greatness.

“Here we are,” commented Alta. An apartment complex rose before the trio – expectation to stay at the commonplace abode, stood closer to the three pillars, was replaced by an even taller complex that stood directly next to a circle-shaped mall. The circle-shaped description is one liberal and without much stock – a downward view in fact showed a circle, alas, from the ground, there laid various smaller shapes(not circular) intertwined, either an architectural marvel or the worse building to be made. A fake-hill and forestry were added to give the construction flare, and for it to stand above the rest, ‘-the jewel of Rotherham,’ said papers upon the announcement of the project. Center, the mall, diffused from modernness to nature, akin to a water droplet on tranquil water, the radius expanded until the seamless change into meadows of scrawny trees. In order to reach the complex, one had to amble through the well-tendered park. Whoever built the whole infrastructure was either a genius or a fool. Such being said, upon an extensive upward walk arrived the apartment building, rather, buildings. See, the community at first glance told of rich and elite. Four similarly shaped, rectangles were placed in four corners of a massive square plot, the paths linked at the center, a smaller plaza filled by idyllically decorated lanterns, tables, cottage-styled buildings, and a cozy atmosphere. To say the buildings were mere rectangles would be an affront for it did harbor balconies and stone bricks to accentuate the air of grandeur, “-the residential complex of the rich.”

“Really?” commented Igna, “-you say rich without tact, the whole aura screams of rich.”

"I know," she winked, "-why hide the truth," headlights swept against the stone-cold lamps and revved, "-see," the visage kept a smile, "-rich people," she said.

"Suppose it's alright," he shrugged and followed, the outfits weren't much to applaud – spare white-shirts and baggy trousers stolen from the officers. Building A, B, C, D, the order descended from most expensive to least – still, even the cheapest would cost the same to a manor. Surely enough, upon reaching the square, she took a sharp left. Those in smart clothes sat with an easeful glee and enjoyed breakfast, parasols added to the cozy esthetic.

"Pardon my asking."

"What is it?"

"Lady Alta, might I know of the relation between you and lord Igna?"

"Igna for short," he interjected.

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"Lord Igna then.

"The master and I are, let me think.'

"We're companions, family," he proclaimed, "-Alta here is my stewardess charged to oversee Glenda."

"Family?" she stopped shy of a greatly wide flight of steps, "-I'm touched."

"Don't get melodramatic," said a snarly comment.

"Sorry," she grinned childishly. Building A, especially the penthouse, gave straight onto the lively cityscape and the humorously named Halo Mall. The reception was most welcoming, personally greeting Alta and a top-notch display of hospitality.

Ding, "-Alta, you said tis an apartment, the service and reception below feels more akin to a hotel, an expensive one at that!"

"Oh, I forgot to mention," they stepped out the hall, "-the whole top floor is ours, do what thee may, there's room to spare, a private pool, library, cinema, and unrestricted access to the helipad. A slide of the card gave inside a marvel of interior design.

Alta stayed a short while before leaving, her words being, "-private matters need my intervention. Under no reason are you to leave the confine of the apartment. Please understand where I'm coming from, master, we don't want a repeat of last night."

"Sure, sure," they replied like children being lectured by their mother, the expansive door sealed shut. That was an hour ago, the time displayed 09:00 – Igna and the flushed-faced Raphael took to the balcony where the wind viciously blew. An automatic invisible barrier deafened the sound alongside the gust, to them, at that height, felt little more than a day at the park. Comfortable lounging seats sprawled atop a shiny wooden floor. They laid, feet kicked up, and drinks at reaching distance.

"Tell me, Lord Igna, how wealthy art thee?"

"No idea," he shrugged and sipped, "-I earnestly have no idea. We were stuck for ten years inside the Underworld and here, a year has passed; technology advances ridiculously."

"The city is amazing; I can barely imagine what the sight is like at night. Renting such an abode speaks of thy clout. Igna Haggard, I imagined us to live in a shack inside some densely thick forest, where food is acquired by fishing, hunting, and scavenging. The fear of monsters looms around every corner; how scarily awesome would that be?"

"A life of a hunter, live off the land and conquer the inner weakness. Sounds very good on paper, reality is, hunting isn't rewarding nor is fishing; mother nature isn't kind as is thought to be."

"So pragmatic..."

"No need for sarcasm," they sipped, "-monsters are the least of our worries. The world is riddled by schemes, humanity, and I use the term inclusive of every race, are out for each other's throat. No one is truly there to help, they'll plot, act, and fulfill vices. Death is anyone's threat, life perishes, regret and malice hangs, eventually culminating into physical form," he stopped, "-I'm ranting again."

"No need to stop, I don't mind listening. The city's advancement came at the price of nameless bodies, sacrificial lambs for a greater purpose."

"Yeah, boldly speaking, true," a whiskey glass rose to eye level, casting a reddish-orange hue through the distorted lens, "-a year is a long time to be away, I shudder at the thought, what's changed, who's new, and most importantly, are we afloat or has the ship sank into the never-ending depths of ill-fortune." The more they drank, the warmer the inside grew, a grin locked the lips in an approachable mien.

"-hence, I say, the very idea of Magiology impacting the world's advancement to be real and without adversaire. Raphael?" a twist to refill the glass, '-passed out,' he exhaled, '-archangel, what a joke, the man can barely hold the liquor. Matter of fact,' one hand the glass returned to the table, the other, grasped its long fingers about the bottle's neck, '-I barely feel the effects,' mouth to mouth, the liquid guzzled, he gulped. *Click,* "-ahh," a warm exhale led into a burp, '-that hit the spot.' Shadows stood in the entrance, '-I heard a click, the door opened?"

"C-C-Cousin?" a desolately scarred Julius, muddied hair and oily visage, watched under much stress. Beside him was another, éclair, "-why would..."

"Sorry," the liquor settled warmly inside, "-I don't know."

"Honestly," grunted éclair, "-you two are the same," he knelt and wiped Igna's mouth, "-prince Julius fell into woe following the incident, the whole of Phantom shook to their core. Lady Elvira fought tediously to keep the forces afloat and I did my best to keep us advancing. Apexi suffered much torment, the agency can barely turn a profit; who would have thought the disappearance of two people, lady Courtney and master Igna, to bring such woe and despair. Master, I arrived the moment we heard the news. Asmodeus, Kul, Midne, Starix, and Mammon are trapped in Ogdawoan due to the plague, they sent their best regard," a leather briefcase rose to the table, "-I've brought supplies. Master, take a shower, a suit's been readied."

"Forget about that," he leaped into the butler's arms, "-I've missed you, éclair."

“Master?” the sudden shower of affection warmed the heart, “-I did too,” said he softly, “-welcome home.”

“It’s good to be back,” the lostness rekindled into motivation, “-cousin,” he wrapped about Julius’s unbecoming status, “-you stink of sweat and alcohol. Mother’s back; might have been a year late, however, I’m here to celebrate thy wedding.”

“What wedding,” the chin held low, “-everything ended two months ago. She and I separated; I was too absorbed into my woe that I felt to sense her pain. She left on good reason, I-,” he dropped on the seat, “-I c-can’t a-anymore.”

“You idiot,” said Igna in jest, “-let’s freshen up,” turned to éclair, “-have some high-tier rejuvenation potions brought to the apartment. Also, I need Malley’s contact information, there’s a marriage to plan,” he confidently strolled inside, leaving the outside with warm smiles.

“What did I say, Alta, the master will always do his best for the sake of those he cares about. The trying long year has ended, Lady Courtney’s on way to a healthy recovery. Next problem is this fellow,” he sharply regarded the new face, “-I sense great strength from him, any idea?”

“Master said the man to be named Raphael, companion by the looks of things.”

“If the master approves, who are we to argue,” turned to the visibly conflicted Julius, “-my lord, lady Eira and thy lady mother have been deeply worried. They’ve said time and time again, the fault isn’t thine to bear alone. Drop the self-sympathetic act and face the music, forgive my tone, however, does such a display befit a prince. Your slump has affected the lives of many, even my master said the fault isn’t yours. Get up, have a shower, shave, dawn the suit, and smile. Despair is only effective when one has to face the pain alone – everyone knows the bond you and my master share is deeply rooted. Rise and walk for the man thee calls cousin has returned.”

“I guess it’s for the better,” he stood and sniffled, “-a warm shower might do some good,” the posture sloppily clambered inside.

Connection established, “-yeah, hello?”

“Lady Elvira, lord Julius, and my master will be ready shortly.”

“Good, I’m currently stuck in traffic. Have them at my office at noon, sharp, there’s much to be discussed, the situation at Elendor is about to boil over. Have the ambassadors reach out to the leaders, the Federation is calling a meeting, I want Igna to be present, schedule it for tomorrow, understand?”

“Yes my lady, it will be done.”

“Good work on handling affairs for the past year. éclair, the sister system is ready for deployment, starting today, you’re officially dismissed, return to thy master. Claire will act as an aid to the whole of the company, good luck.”

“The words are very much appreciated, good day to you, lady Elvira.” *Connection Ended.*

‘We’ll make it just in time,’ he exhaled, ‘-master, you sure like to play close to the fire.’

Chapter 735: Reports

Location, Savaview bridge on route to Castle town Garsley, ‘-perfect,’ wrote across Igna’s visage. No word exchanged, éclair, Alta, and the disheveled prince boarded a private jet. A few minutes elapsed from Igna’s sudden guzzling of liquor, the burning fuel rested neatly inside the stomach. Every so often, a sly little gas cloud would rise from the depth and veer its head in means of a concealed burp. The lavish interior matched the jet’s exquisite outside. Alta and éclair ambled to a work area nearest to the cockpit, Igna and Julius made for the travel area fitted with various devices. The prince’s prior face had seen better days, a shower, cleanly shaven cheeks, and a relieved expression lowered the overall tension.

‘He’ll be fine,’ thought Igna strapped to the leather seat, safety was most prioritized. The current vessel, the armed airliner used for local-continental voyages. Moving from Rotherham to Arda, Kreston, and even Plaustan cost much in ways of land travel. Recent interest in sea transport made it possible to take the boats. Local-continental voyages, specific to the current model, fast, agile, and most of all, equipped by an updated version of the AFR. ‘A year’s gone past; I got the gist of the world’s current state. My phone’s updated, the lens, and a custom-made pistol, a replica of Tharis,’ he looked to his hip, whereby the concealed weapon remained, ‘-can’t believe the first version has shot its last breath. Should be an easy fix,’ memory traveled to a moment prior.

After the shower, he ambled into the room to find an assortment of custom-made suits and a heavy-duty black briefcase. Inside it, same to a jeweler showing his ware to a client, the gun and smartphone caught the warm ceiling light. The beauty stole his breath for Tharis’s barrel, silvery with a line of red running through the middle, bore the carving of a dragon’s head. The grip, a lush assortment of gold and precious stones – in a way, the new Tharis truly was a gem. What’s scarier was the functions; battle-tested AFR inferring to Claire and her automatic targeting system. Mana transfusion from host to weapon drastically altered, ‘little input, massive output,’ “big bang,” scribbled onto a sticker to the side. The makers, ‘Gate-Six in collaboration with the Alchemist Sect.’ Phantom’s best mind worked on the project.

Liftoff, reality snapped to. A tablet softly slid across the table, “-master, please have a look at our progression. I’ve limited information to only our assets and have taken the liberty to arrange another report for Phantom as a whole. Take your time, we should arrive in around 45 minutes.”

“Understood,” he nodded. The butler, prominent since the last encounter, confidently made his way to the front, the suit, dark-blue with stripes of darker blue, deepened the air of mystic and strength.

“Ahem,” heels clopped from opposite the butler, “-my lord, I’ve brought the report of Glenda. Here,” tablet in palm, a flick across the screen transferred the file immediately, “-I’ll tend to the prince. Call on me if anything arises,” the well-built figure faded out the field of vision.

‘Let’s see,’ eyes to the screen, “-Status on Odgawoan. Since the acquisition of the count’s property, Raven’s grown exponentially. The surface business of gambling has constantly turned a massive profit. The amount of money spend on average has far outreached the local competition. Emphasis on improving reception and hospitality has greatened the effect on new visitors. Asmodeus’s schemes to steal clientele from other casinos have placed the company under the close watch of nefarious parties,” the message suddenly vanished, *-for more information, please verify thy information,* ‘-seriously?’ he sat straight-faced, the black screen reflected the emotion, a smooth glance to the side displayed the clouds, *-information confirmed,* burst a slight vibration. “-Far as the world is concerned, Raven is the

name of the company running Von. Mammon's presence has truly inflated overall profits. More information can be found in a separate file. Manufacturing and distribution of Narcotics. Puppets stationed at the main manor have been working nonstop in the production, stocks are at an all-time high, no requirement for rest has boosted productivity. Raven monopolizes the underground market, plans for exportation of excess to the Dark-Guilds are in negotiations. Such is to say, laundering the money's grown tenuous. We've backed the police chief, Jula, into a permanent spot in the Odgawoan council. The military forces stationed for the protection against monsters are threats. An incident on the 6th of August in Alice's nightmare, involving the disappearance of a deliveryman and the cargo, after much investigation by the Codd's agency, has revealed a faint lead, the scent of a new player, one who outsmarted Starix's plan. Additional information is needed for further judgment. In other news, the matter pertaining to the election of Odgawoan's mayor, a certain Baron named Marko Arton, who Kul rescued from a mission gone array, won the elections. Raven officially runs the town from the shadows; we control the politics and the underworld market. For now, involvement will be minimal, the families are ready for a counterattack. Expansion of the company outside the town is difficult, more time and finance are needed to slowly buy out the competition. On paper, the results are very favorable if not for the plague – the virus and curse of the monster plague. Business, just as Raven were to explode into the bigger stage, was forcibly halted by the uprising. Though I prefer not to include personal thoughts on the report, I would very much like to add this, the uprising happened a few months after the military's stronghold of the monsters. Bigger channels have reported experiments on bioweapon, utilization of the plague to destroy civilization from within." The latter ended on a high note, a shiver ran down the neck, '-chemical warfare; interesting proposition. We've used it before, the Aedric mistress of plague is my daughter, might be worth exploring her potential in war scenarios' the pages shifted to a new report, '- Phantom hasn't been on form lately. A strong competitor, the Cobalt Unit, and their PMC have declared war. The gun's trade is at a bottleneck, advancement in weaponry, though at one point Phantom held the knife, the Cobalt Unit seems to have grasped a sharper blade – reverse engineering of our technology has led into the monstrously efficient counter to Phantom's deadly forces. War at the border of Elendor is proof enough. Scholars at the University of Rotherham have stumbled on an unbreachable wall of incertitude. Magiology has grown stagnant, the subject is common knowledge around the world. Every higher power country has its own variant on the mana-catalytic engine. Cimier blatantly voiced their alliance with the Conglomerates. Spear-headed by Snow, the mafia of Iqavea, deliberation of a union of each organization, regardless of Snow being a forgotten part of Cimier, are on their way. The conglomerates have used said occasion to launch a campaign appealing to the emperor, and most importantly, the church. GateSix and Midas are working in accordance to improve Phantom's forces," it ended, the time displayed 10:30, Savaview waited below. The airfield, located at the ex-noble district, soon lined in the pilot's sights.

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'I should have time to read about Glenda,' the file opened, "-Glenda's grown over the months, the disappearance of the queen and her son has left a deep gap in how the country will operate. Queen Gallienne has decreed Glenda to be the temporary capital of the kingdom. The population's number is at a decline; children and young women have gone missing frequently. A private investigation was assigned to the matter – we've yet to hear from the man. That aside, the commonly thought of extinct lizardmen are slowly gaining their numbers. Demi-humans of every species, quick to bear children, are gradually

returning the numbers to how it was before. Empty villages regain residents, the monster problem's been minimal. Elves of the council have insisted on healing the ancient tree. King Gla Hartslon of the allied elven nation (including dark elves) has declared the tree to be their kingdom. Nothing can be said at this time, the majority vote is in their favor, no actual rulership means the tribes are free to split and erect their own kingdom. Unity is best served when under strong leadership, queen Gallienne's decree was to limit revolt and stability to the people, those of the upper-class know-how flimsily the kingdom truly is. Suffice to say, Glenda's benefited from the jump in popularity, the neighboring villages too. Prosperity has blessed the town after much strife, the subject to raise the rank from Viscount to Count has been put on hold by the council,' the report ended.

Fingers to the furrowed brow, 'so much information,' a sip of watermarked the gentle touchdown. Flowing scenery of which were stone-bricked buildings moved to a stop.

"Master, we've landed," said éclair.

Soon after, the bright heat of Dorchester fired daggers onto the ground, the air felt hot to the breath. "-this way," said éclair.

"Julius, are you well?" he jumped back a few steps, "-cousin, hanging thy head will not bring her back," he voiced loudly, a gesture to Alta had the lady shuffled to the front, "-come on cousin, tell me, is something bothering you?"

"Everything cousin, everything bothers me. I can't shake the uneasy feeling, will Malley want me back after what I've done, she's an able lady, finding a suitor should be simple. What if she's already married, what will I do then..."

"We'll kill the husband and kidnap her."

"Now isn't the time for jest," he exclaimed.

"Who said I was joking," returned a cold-hearted voice, a silvery colored car waited patiently, "-if tis what thee wishes, sky is the limit, cousin, sky is the limit." Alta held the door open and closed it the moment the duo entered and sat. Julius's expression stuck in shock, '-kill and kidnap?' pondered loudly.

'What's the priestess up too,' wondered Igna, '-let's see,' the updated lens worked faster and smoother, her information, location, and current activities came to light, '-connect to her microphone,' he thought – the device obeyed.

Loud chants were heard, a populated marketplace – the current location, a stand, displayed, "-how much for the ring?" asked a rougher sounding voice, the type that spoke deeply through their nose.

"That'd be 350 Exa."

"Bring the price right down," rebutted, "-Malley, you sure this is the ring you want?"

"Yes," she spoke softly, "-get it, I don't care anymore, what was important is lost. I've already surrendered."

"So melodramatic," it said briefly, "-I'll take one, 300 Exa," dismay of the merchant was heard softly, "-reading those novels seems to have altered thy way of thinking. What are you, the tragic heroine of those romance novels, a quest to find the right one?"

“Stop pestering, what sort of gentleman brings a lady to such a place for a date. Here I thought we were to enjoy a nice lunch and I find us doing business.”

“Money is what keeps the family afloat, you truly think it’s easy to care for that ready-made brat?”

“Don’t talk badly about him.” *End of connection.*

‘Might have a slight issue,’ the vehicle soon wrapped inside the town, area changed to a quieter place to the east of the inside, a memorial area for fallen fighters during the Krestonian invasion. ‘-Must be the place,’ they stopped shy of a line of packed buildings opposite which were slightly tilted stout trees, the overhung foliage shielded from the sun, ‘-a fresh breeze,’ thought Igna.

The darker framed entrance led into a cozy restaurant, “-where are we going?” asked Julius, a bell signaled their entrance, the keeper peeped from the counter(forward and to the right) and gave a friendly smile. “Please take a seat.”

A spark riddled the empty room in tangible nervousness. The pink-haired Malley sat in the company of another gentleman. *gulp,* regret washed the prince’s face, he turned, or would have, Igna sharply grabbed the arm and pulled, “-cousin, you bare the blood and name of a Haggard. Stop acting desperate,” attention firmed onto the lady, visible pain on Julius’s face riled ire, “-Malley,” he thundered to her table, “-we have much to discuss,” said a bloodthirsty scowl.

Chapter 736: ‘-éclair plotted the excursion.’

“I-Igna?”

“I see no reason why you should cower,” he scanned top to bottom, a slight shake of her hand and rapid breathing, “-we’re friends, are we not?” his shadow loomed atop, “-unless there’s something you ought to say.”

“N-nothing, I was just on a little walk, that is all,” she amusedly returned in a fit of panic, “-a little walk, nothing major.”

“How very interesting,” he shuffled to her side, “-Gophy and I recently met. My companions are ready for their next toy, how great would it be for you to visit them.”

“Far enough, sir,” fired a man across the table, “-intimidation has never solved anything.”

“Look at you,” the gaze swapped, “-a gentleman through and through, I see the overcoat and hat aren’t much to scowl at. They are made from the finest material,” he side-glanced Malley, “-no wonder the lady would be interested.”

“Igna, enough, please,” blond hair shimmered in the interior’s amber lights, “-she’s moved on, I should follow suit. Don’t do what I think...”

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“Cousin,” he smiled maliciously, “-the little indiscretion isn’t your to worry about. Remember what I said on the trip long ago, I explicitly warned thee from getting attached – the pain you caused is always a mess to solve,” he skipped to the prince’s lowered head, “-hold thy gaze straight,” the index lifted the

clean-shaven chin, “-no matter what happens, the more trouble is thrown, I’ll be there to dig thee out. We’re family, never forget.”

“Cousin...” tears down a man’s face had equal, if not, more impact than a lady in tears, especially if the former be sincerely honest, “-thank you,” he said holding his head to the ceiling, “-I’m not crying.”

“Honestly,” exhaled Igna, “-Alta, éclair, please escort Julius to the window table, I have a business to attend to,” the warm expression dissipated.

“Malley, I understand why one would choose to run after the state he had grown into. I get the point of view, yet, the way you went about trying to rekindle his heart and soul was wrong. Does thy vein flow with idiocy or blood?”

“Excuse me,” white tissues bundled out a closed fist, “-I may not know the relationship you have with Malley, the maliciousness is truly unbecoming a noble. I’m sure you know better,” he stood, skipped over closed confined seat and table, rose a hand to grasp Igna’s shoulder, “-you deserve wor-”

“Silence,” thundered across, the room shook, the man froze, “-I prefer weaklings not to stain my suit,” he smirked, “-FALL TO THE GROUND,” the body fully prostrated, “-tell me, what’s your name.”

“Igna, no,” whimpered Malley.

“You’d better keep thy mouth shut,” gritted he unforgivingly, “-don’t forget your place, if not for him, you’d have been left to die. Either sit down and watch or I’ll kill him first and sentence thee to live in the company of my companions. Love, people, anything can be replaced – shouldn’t be hard to have my cousin easily swayed into hating thy guts, especially if he knew you bore a child from another,” he murmured closer.

“The child is his,” she said softly, gaze to the suffocating date-partner, “-tis Julius’s offspring.”

“And?” he leaned, tilted the head ominously, “-my word is what’s necessary. The child can be taken care of easily, I mean, his mother is here enjoying lunch while the babe is missing. What isn’t known will forever remain unknown. Besides,” he lunged and pinched her chin, “-I’m a man of different personas. Unluckily for you, I’m in a right mood today,” the suit-jacket lifted to show Tharis, “-this isn’t intimidation, rather, a fact. You’ve crossed Julius and his family, the prince was left to suffer – I’ll partly take the blame, however, what of you, his lover who’s decided to abandon him in where he needed the most help?”

“S-Stop it,” she exclaimed, “-enough, Igna, I’m sorry. Lady Elvira should know the truth,” her eyes fluttered upward, “-look,” she grasped his collar and pulled, “-look damn it, look, do my eyes lie. I love Julius more than anything I could ever imagine, he saved me and gave me a nice life, how ungrateful do you think I am. A lowly priestess found bliss in the company of another, how about that,” she yelled, “-I LOVE HIM, DAMN IT, I LOVE HIM!”

“Y-you d-do?”

“Julius...” she gasped, “-why?”

"I'm sorry," he jumped into a tight embrace, "-I'm sorry I caused so much pain, I was lost and desolate. The many times you tried to console me, I heard but chose self-pity. I lost sight of what was important, I'm sorry, so sorry."

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"I-Igna?" her warm tears landed atop the prince's shoulder.

"Get up," shifted to the man, "-agent for Phantom?"

"Yes sire," he gave a salute, "-Blue, at your service."

"W-wait, wait, wait," the embrace eased, "-Igna, tell me, was the killing intent true?"

"Obviously," he firmed her question in action, "-I wasn't mad, rather, annoyed. The clues stacked one after the other, the willingness to carry phone propriety of Phantom, the conversation at the market which I remind were based on 'master and servent', didn't match the painted picture. The coat," referenced to the previous encounter, "-a crude interruption was the clue I needed. Subconsciously or not, the body reacted to protect the nature of the separation. The previous statement, 'intimidation has never solved anything,' was in its way, another lead. Fear for one's life isn't worth much when one has already faced death; thus, the babe."

"Correct," the party shifted to a bigger table, the prince waited impatiently for her side of the story.

"Welcome to Casey's," said a slightly frightened attendant.

"Might we order today's special?" inquired éclair.

"Today's special?" whispered Alta curiously, "-know something I don't?"

"Yeah," he replied, "-apparently the man who makes the meals here is top-class. A graduate from Leko's academy a few years ago."

"Will that be all?"

"Yes."

"éclair, I heard you mention Leko..." the stare narrowed.

"I apologize, the chef on duty graduated from the academy. Above-average throughout the career," a character sheet slid across the table, "-he's also a part-time tutor. It would be wise to judge his personality through the meal." Silence settled, the lady in question returned to her seat, a flush-redness remained on her cheeks. The prince took no qualm to interlocked their fingers and pat her hands, "-tell me what happened."

"I had a cryptic pregnancy. Lady Elvira discovered my condition on a visit we paid her. Said the stress wouldn't be good and told me to distance myself from you. Shames me to admit, I was relieved to run – seeing you in such a state made me want to commit some unspeakable acts. I rather not relive the memories. Blue, the man Igna boldly slammed to the floor was actually a bodyguard assigned. He bought me this ring as a keepsake."

"In other words, I'm going to become a dad?"

“You already are a dad,” she smiled, “-I gave birth a few months ago. The babe’s at home. I received a message from éclair telling me to head for Castle Garsley, no idea why.”

“I see,” sighed Igna, “-éclair plotted the excursion. Thank you.”

“Mention not, master.” Lunch arrived on a hot platter, the chef, tall and fair-skinned, slid expertly across the pizza in slices, “-meal is served,” he nodded and left. For a special, the menu didn’t lie, the food deliciously steamed. Before long, the table dove into the pleasures of boiling hot, biting through melted cheese.

Bell rung, “-master, we’ll head on to Rosespire. I’ve asked for transport to be arranged,” the door hung ajar.

“No need to trouble thyself,” replied he, “-I’ll take the expressway. See you tomorrow,” the shiny steed drove into view, doors opened, and the party eased to his lonesome. ‘-Julius and Malley seem to have made up,’ turned on his heels.

“Have you forgotten something?” inquired the keeper.

“Might I have a few words with the chef?”

“Sure, head on to the back, I give 20 minutes before the tables start to fill.”

“Understood,” a dive into a clean white interior brought nostalgia, ‘-the alchemist of cooking,’ he thought to himself, ‘-who would have guessed the climb from such a profession.’

“Excuse me?”

“Pardon the intrusion,” he ambled to the cooking station, shy of which stood a stone-brick oven, “-my name’s Igna, I was a student under Chef Leko.”

“A fellow chef. The name’s Bryan,” he pulled tightly onto a fiery red bandana, “-chef Leko, it’s a shame what happened. He taught me much, how can I be of help?”

“I felt curious as to what happened to the academy. Information is rather scarce.”

“The wife took over,” they soon shifted to the back alley, “-seems like the prestige’s managed to stay. No idea why the frenzy of cooking has taken the world by storm. What about you, why interested in her affairs?”

“I said it before, I’m curious.”

“Let me give you a word of warning, the academy is on its way to self-destruction. The lady has signed contracts with Kura’s Trading Corp. Most of my elite students are sent to Alphaia on orders from the Kura, which doesn’t sit well in my stomach. Some I heard have scored employment at renowned hotels, others, silent. Whatever she’s plotting is bad, well, coming from a chef who ran from the academy, take it with a grain of salt. I’ll be off, the restaurant’s about to be full.”

“I appreciate the information, Bryan.”

“Call me anytime,” he chuckled, “-I’ll be sure to help out.”

'Call me anytime he says,' a stroll gave onto the foliage-covered street, '-interesting fellow.'

One memorial to another, flowers around the church bloomed and were prettier, '-I'm surprised the priest remembered. I've made it back,' he stood before the gravestones, '-and on time I might add. Feels like we're back to how it started. Ten years truly does change one's perspective. The festive month, I'm ready for the long-awaited vacation.' Respect paid, the church's archway faced north, the slopes of the hill, covered by buildings, paid no heed to the raging sun.

The journey back began at a bus station, the latter located east of the town. He took the one headed to Gisel Station, built farther to the west after the ex-noble district. There, upon reaching the station, the mix of stone bricks and metal ceiling didn't aid in the ways of heat. Trains waited patiently, the central station of Dorchester had tracks sprawling across the province, hosting even a weekly trip to Arda through the north-western canals.

'It says to take the train to Riverwood station.' Signposts were welcomed, however, not much useful. At wit's end, '-help desk,' written across in sharply painted letters. The cabinet, small and stuffy, held station workers, "-can I help you?" they asked.

"Riverwood," they restated, "-head on down and turn to the right, it should be on line 05. Hurry, leaves in about five minutes. Many plights later, upon crossing a tall beam holding a clock, he climbed on board the wagon reading, '-first-class.' In here, passengers were of the wealthy demography and often empty. No luggage meant an easier time, '-01, 02, 03,' read a bronze plate.

"Good day, sir."

"Good day, my lady," he tipped his head and shuffled to the window seat, before which sat a stuffy dressed figure keeping her head inside a hardcover book. A few minutes later, the cabin reopened to welcome a warmly dressed gentleman, her visage flushed and they immediately locked into a tender embrace.

"Sorry, you had to wait, darling."

"No, I'll wait, no matter the quandary."

"Please, is it much to ask for thy intimate time to be shared intimately?"

"I apologize, sir," said the gentleman, "-we have been apart for so long. The excitement of eloping is invigorating."

"As he says," said the lady, "-we're in quite the predicament. We apologize for the inconvenience."

"There's nothing to apologize for," he replied courteously, "-I only said so since intimate moments are to be shared privately and not open to a stranger. I'll arrange for a new cabin if thee wishes for more private time."

"No, don't strain thyself on our account," said the man smiling wholeheartedly.

"No issue, I promise," said Igna, "-I'll look for another cabin, take care." *Sniff,* the entrance shut, '-I've smelled that before,' he glanced through the window, '-weird.'

Chapter 737: Mystery on the Riverwood Train

A horribly gathered crowd scattered by what transpired. The train guards waited at the Riverwood terminal, here, a massive clock rose above the metal shields of a roof. What occurred was an event to never forget, Igna made his way to the outside, whereby a smaller group of 'in-the-know,' sort of personas stood. A slender man, ghastly pale to some extent, long neck, and sharply shaped ears, exited to be showered by impressed gaze; the passengers knew. Hip in his step, a charm to his sneer – long fingers carefully flipped through a small orange notebook. The inviting attention seemed to be a fading thought, he scribbled, taking moments to glance and amble his way through the platform towards the beforementioned, 'in-the-know,' personages.

'What an interesting fellow,' thought Igna, memories of the proceedings couldn't be clearer, '-their kind really exist,' he pulled through the astounded shuffles of a listless crowd, lighting a cigar in the process. Yonder to the sky, a somber veil flipped. An ominous gust brought in mild flutters to the concrete ground, the lightness dulled to match against the overhanging veil.

'Run through the events,' the platform altered, the signs displayed Rosepire. A hefty gathering waited for the train impatiently. Signs of the coming shower had many take refuge, no heed to the weather, he sat and puffed. Mothers viciously growled to which an understanding nod, sarcastic in nature, returned their way. The guards on duty didn't see much of a problem. '-A humble train ride heralded a matter of great interest. Where to start,' the eyes shut in reflection, '-encounter with the eloped couple was one very amorous. Her melancholic gaze before the man's arrival, the image's stuck, her humble clothes(what the wealthy considered humble) served to fool the normal masses. However, the lavishness in the dull-colored couldn't have fooled me. Thus, I met her, the lady whomst remains a mystery. The cabin door slid by the efforts of a man, they locked into a profound kiss, efficiently rendering the atmosphere awkward. We didn't speak much, first-class cabins aren't often booked, there, we exchanged goodbyes. At that moment, I thought privacy to be of utmost importance for the duo. Faint smiles on their faces, the doors slid one last time. Briefcase in hand, I made my way to the restaurant, yes, for transit of Dorchester and Riverwood, luxury was granted to those of deep pockets.'

"Greeting my lord," said a chipper bartender, "-what might I fix for you?" he asked, tapping the dark-brown counter.

"Is tea available?" inquired a gentleman from the side, promptly nodding his head as our introduction. I thought nothing of the matter and pulled my tablet from the case, éclair kept pestering, a fact which remained unchanged throughout.

"Tea, my lord?" fired the keeper, rising his nervous gaze, previously hidden under a cap.

"Yes, tea," said the gentleman nonchalantly, "-my dear," a shimmer washed through his face, "-are you nervous?"

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"Yes," returned the keeper, "-it shouldn't be an issue," he smiled.

"Truly it is something to be worried about," returned the gentleman, "-the fingers are chipped, your body's trying to fight out the shirt and the cap, my friend, are you perhaps not a bartender?"

"And?" the nervousness dwindled, "-I'll take it from here," said another similarly dressed keeper, "-I apologize for my colleague's blunder. We do have tea, what kind?"

“Earl tea,” he replied gravely, “-about the man’s demeanor, for one who works one-on-one with customers, the effort’s admirable, alas, the result fails. I say this sincerely, the man, a handyman, should really stick to the profession of choice.”

“Change is never a bad thing,” retorted the new barkeeper, his brazen face locked onto mine, the brows, slightly lifted, inquired to my purpose.

“A whiskey,” I replied.

“Whiskey at this ungodly hour?” commented my unusual drinking partner, “-forgive my asking, why?”

“Preference,” I replied, “-tea, milk, water, every man has his drink to spring energy in his step. Mine, albeit of the tipsy family, is a great companion to drown out the world’s trouble.”

“Elaborate response,” the drinks arrived in tandem, “-quite an intriguing fellow. Good day sire,” he tipped his head and shuffled to the back, I sat, uninterested by the encounter and sipped. Reports flooded my device – time must have skipped forward for the next memory is of a loud scream. At said time, most guests were at the restaurant, fancying their pallets with delectables. The train guards, ready for action, ran past, ignorant to the patrons. Dismayed snickers echoed; annoyance rattled the calm air.

“Murder,” said a shaky tone, “-there’s been a murder,” rampaged from the cabin area. A perimeter suddenly rose, two muscular figures stepped into the direct path to the cabin. Chatter skipped from table to table – a singular piece of information unleashed morbid curiosity. My rather strange partner rose from his seat, knowing full-well the guards blocked the doorway, “-excuse me,” he skipped forward, “-here’s my badge, I’m a detective.”

“Detective or not, the appropriate official will take command of the situation,” said one.

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“Silence,” elbowed the other, “-that’s Count Avian Stark, from the documentary, remember?”

“OH,” escaped the roundish man’s mouth, “-I didn’t recognize you. Please, step on in,” the pathway cleared, knowing or not, he shot a presumptuous wink at my seat and moved along. The wink was one inviting, advantage to being a noble,’ I displayed the family crest, ‘-is, I can do whatever I want.’

“Highness,” said the guards, “-please step on in, we only ask for thee not to interject against the investigating officers.”

“I’m but an observer today,” I replied.

The once-tight hallway closed even greatly, stuffy men bore the ‘dream dad’s body,’ of which was facial hair paired to an exceedingly hefty belly. At times, slithering past the pillars of meat felt arduous, the scenery outside past hastily. The trek halted at last, “-has anyone touched the bodies or scene before I arrived?”

“No, why does it matter?” fired an audibly important personage.

“Is it not obvious?” the focus briefly lifted to the questioner; “-an oaf brain can only comprehend so much. I’ve seen the state of the guards in employment, the company should be ashamed of such a show. No matter,” he refocused below, “-we’re in quite the predicament,” until said point, voices

projected a short mental image, nothing major. My crest sufficed till I veered my head into a literal representation of hell.

Blood splattered across the walls, two bodies, the lovers, died arm in arm. The man knelt with head to her lady's legs, a knife cleanly dug in his back through skin and bone, as for the lady, she bore the same melancholic expression, a clean-cut went along her throat, her left hand-dipped in a crimson color, laid face up in a cupping gesture atop the seat. A deeper scan revealed naught save the imprints of soles.

"Whiskey man," hailed the curious gentleman.

"Rather crude," I return unconcern at the familiar tone, "-would befit a noble to respect another."

"My o' my," he rose from the painful crouch, "-where are my manners, Count Avian Stark, Vian for short."

"Viscount Igna Haggard, son to the Queen of Arda."

"Ah," he scurried as if a child faced by a toy, "-the devil of Glenda, I've heard much through my sources. You wouldn't have knowledge about the duo, would you?"

"Fondly enough, I was in their company just before the train departed. They seemed to have eloped, is that sufficient?"

"Yes, and no," the posture laid back, uniquely long-fingers reached for a notebook, "-highness, might you be interested in solving the case?"

"No," I returned nonchalantly, "-it wouldn't bring much joy. I'm content in watching a famed detective go to work, please, guide me through the process."

"-AHA!" he exclaimed, "-just the type of response I expected."

"Count Stark, please, two of our guests have been murdered, now isn't the time to make friends."

"Fine," he spun, "-before we arrived, this officer," a brief nod, "-was first to the scene. Apparently, an old woman of dubious habits snuck a peek inside. Please, if you would."

The man, who stood in the hall, came closer to the entrance, "-the cabin was locked when I arrived. The windows are barred and closed. I can't see any other way of escape."

"Remember what he said well," commented Stark, "-doors work rather strangely, once locked the latter can only be opened using a key which is given after the train departs. Yes, I know what you're thinking, tis standard for any working door, however, there's the matter of it working without a key. It can be locked from either side, with or without, and only, I repeat, only, unlocked without a key from the inside. To solve the mystery, we ought to know how the duo died. From the looks of the bodies, the gentleman suffered a mortal strike through the heart – notice the clean slash across the lady's throat. He must have shielded the lady, died, afterward, the murderer took away at her." Whoever it was must have left the cabin, lock the doors, and leave. Am I correct?" he turned to the prior thunderous voice, "-is it not what thee hypothesized."

"Yes, the scene speaks much of the violence, why, you think my analysis is faulty?"

“Not necessarily,” he skipped outside and pointed to another guard, “-you,” he gestured, “-you watch the walkway to the restaurant, right?”

“What’s the report to this case!” argued the hot-headed man.

“It does, the couple didn’t leave their cabin. I’m sure lord Igna can attest. There are only two paths, the left heads further towards the washroom and cabins, whilst the right heads to the restaurant.”

“Yes, I didn’t see them,” confirmed the guard.

“See, there’s the proof. Your theory is held by the narrative that someone else entered the room, killed the couple, and left. Thing is, the couple locked the door, elopement brings paranoia.”

“How? They could have forgotten to lock the door, could happen.”

“Wrong again,” said Stark, “-Sir Henso, the answer lays in the windows, they’re closed. What sort of people only shut the window and not the door, the premise is ruined.”

“Windows could have been closed when they arrived.”

“No, the windows were clearly open,” I replied.

“See,” he winked, “-Lord Igna served as my witness. The state of the bodies isn’t very much natural. The possibility of a third party isn’t completely out of the picture. Look again, the lady, she died painlessly, I wonder,” he moved closer, “-the murder weapon, look at the handle. Lord Igna,” a glance over his shoulder, “-please, come see this.”

I leaned over, “-Yes, what about it?”

“A standard issued knife used by the workers from the import-export department, highly taxing work on the body,” a glee washed his eye, “-the mystery’s solved.”

“Excuse me?” gritted Henso.

“Worry not old friend, you were on the correct track. Closed window and door and biggest giveaway is the lady’s finger. Lord Igna, confirm this for me, was the lady right or left-handed?”

“Left-handed, she sat opposite me and held her book with the left hand.”

“Look at the blood on her fingers, the melancholic expression on her face. The door was very much locked. Could you bring the barkeeper over?” a helper ran to carry the errand.

“What are you plotting?”

“Can we lift the man’s body?”

“Sure,” they shrugged, it felt wrong to part the couple. Part of me understood where he wanted to take the theory, he needed confirmation, as soon as the body dragged to the opposite seat, the theory turned reality, “-blood on the sleeve,” he remarked, “-splatters on the shoulder and chest,” he smirked, “-I firmly say, the mystery has been solved.”

Loud clashes sprinted to the hallway, “-nowhere to be found,” panted the helper.

“Search for the man!” he ordered; the guard mobilized. I watched the folly unfold, curiously enough, Henso wasn’t very impressed. Twenty minutes remained before us and Riverwood.

“Tell us what happened already?” sighed Henso. Notes scribbled brazenly, Stark paid no heed, the deep grey pupils wandered from spot to spot, searching and thinking of potential outcomes. The pencil halted abruptly, “-here’s what happened.”

Chapter 738: Avian Stark

“The scene says of premeditation; we can assume someone wanted to kill. The mortal blow via the knife speaks volumes. Hence my conclusion, the man, if we are to dig a little in the character will be discovered as scum, the representation of malice. Igna, you referred to the lady being rich, the man, by what can be read from the outfit, is of lesser social standing. Elopement happens if parents do not agree, and the latter is rare at best. Lower social standing parents have no qualm about what their children are doing, matter of fact, after the age of maturity, they blatantly try to get rid of their children, to work, further studies, it doesn’t matter. What I said prior is based on a study conducted by the University of Loe. That aside here’s what happened, I draw my conclusion on prior knowledge. A similar case took place in Melmark a few years ago; an heiress, despite the strong words from the parents, fell in love. Alas, the world doesn’t easily accept the union of two parties at the extreme end of wealthy and moderate.”

“Enough,” cried Henso, “-will the lecture do good in solving the case or what?”

“I’m explaining the motive. Heed my words well,” he glared, “-further interruption will be left for I to blame the incompetency of the train guards. I’m sure my employers would drool at the prospect of exposing effortlessness. Now then, back to my monologue. The couple wasn’t exactly a couple, the man, a leech, wanted the lady, heiress’s fortune. Romanticism was the lack of the killer’s intent,” he pointed at the man’s body, “-he killed the lady. It must have been an easy job, for one who’s quite nicely built. The blood splatter across the shoulder isn’t from trying to help the lady, no, when he slit her throat, the splatter sprayed, the motion was clear. The lady sadly awoke to a bleeding neck, still sat in the prison of a cabin. Blood on her fingers came from touching her mortal wound subconsciously. The man, after slitting her throat, veered to check his back, there, the unfathomable happened, she must have spoken with her last breath or at least done something to call for his attention. He must have spun in horror to see her breathing – hence arrives the next scene, the introduction of a new character, the bartender we met earlier. This, I sadly say, wouldn’t be known to either lord Igna or one-time travelers, the guard for the hall can surely attest,” a seeking gaze shot outside, the receiver, nervous, stumbled on his word, “-fret not,” added lord Stark, “-tell us about the policy.”

“The policy about food serving. It is customary for an attendant to check on guests who haven’t had lunch or were cooped in their lodging. We take pride in tending for the guest’s needs.”

“-and, the attendant turned to be the butler. Did you see him enter the hall?”

“Yes, he arrived to check on the guests, frankly, I needed to visit the washroom. Jolye kindly stood in my place.”

“Right,” the grin lengthened, “-Jolye, a recent employee to the company, is the personal guard to the lady. An heiress has her attendants. He must have walked in to check on her lady, saw her dead, rushed

inside – locked or not, he would have had the key to her room, and I base this on the man’s intellect and responsibility, he’d rush in, fatally stabbed the man, left the knife to avoid spilling more blood, avenge her lady’s death, then ran. There’s the matter of the other bartender,” a suspicious gaze loomed into the hall, “-could we have a work s with the same man of before?”

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The guards swiftly pulled the man across, “-what’s the meaning of this?” he pleaded.

“Tell me, are you truly a simple bartender or someone more important?”

“Fine,” he sighed, “-there’s no use keeping the truth hidden, our lady’s dead. My partner and I were assigned to discreetly keep track of her antics. She was a kind and generous soul, always wanting to help and always ready to leap into adventures. It was simple enough to call in favors.”

“Where’s Jolye now?”

“He jumped out a few minutes ago. Perhaps drowned in the river. So, lord Stark, do you have anything to add or shall I take my leave?”

“I see no reason to keep you around,” the slender figure crawled from the depth of the stained cabin, “-I’ll report the incident as is to my employees. Train guards, have their body readied for the next stop, the mystery’s solved and justice was dealt.”

Time shuffled a few minutes later, the officials gave a summary about what transpired. For the safety of the passengers, the cabin would be inaccessible for the duration of the trip. They were very much unhappy. I found myself sharing a table with Lord Stark, head’s deep into the battered-looking notebook. “See, lord Igna, how was the show?” he smiled.

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“Gruesome and uninteresting.”

He tilted his head as if taking offense, “-Is that so?”

“I do not mean my words badly. I reached my conclusion long before you decided to check on the man’s clothes. I admit the way in which logic and careful examination were employed is very impressive. My methodology involves accounting the state of mind of the fellow witnesses, a big puzzle builds upon the clues – the link, testimonies, lies, truth, if one knows what to seek in a person’s lies, tis often better than truth. A lot can be learned by how a lie is told – it’s a way to glance into the person’s inner thoughts.”

“Interesting,” he smiled, “-I would very much enjoy thy company in the near future. Alpha, especially Odogwoan, is full of unsolved mysteries, schemes needing an outer perspective.” On those parting words, the memories shattered – before rose a dimly lit rectangle on which wrote ‘Rosespire’.

It would take a few hours before the sprawling capital city rose through the dense forest paths. Along the journey, the introduction to lord Stark lit the flames of curiosity. The Arcanum bore various articles, ‘-a man who’s never failed to uncover a plot, the famed Stark strikes again and solves the death of starlet Jennla,’ the same format followed till a well-written extract of the many cases.

“Casefile of Stark, Order 04, the lady of the hill. A body was discovered mutilated within the Sela desert. No clues were left by the killer, the state of the body made recognition impossible. Therein, the private eye flew to Iqavea, more precisely, Drejai. Many months elapsed till a working hypothesis reached the tables, in the end, Lord Stark not only uncovered her identity by the brilliant use of Mana identification but also found the one responsible, a member affiliated to Snow. The culprit was found dead the next day after lord Stark placed a name and face.”

“Casefile of Stark, Order 54, the royal heirloom, here, the report speaks of the most famous case. The heirloom, a priceless ring, thought to have been stolen by ruffians, told of signs of an internal struggle. The independent kingdom of Erransia, located to the South-west of the main continent, led to questions about the integrity of the factions. The task to find a ring, uncovered a deeper plot, a revolt by the king’s assassination. Before the event culminated, the killer – the prince, was caught red-handed trying to poison the king’s drink, a very cliched means of attack.”

‘The casefiles stacks on and on, he’s flown under the radar. The plots usually link to mysteries on the main continent. Starix was outmaneuvered in Alpha, a keen eye to observations is a sharpened weapon to build a greater ploy. He took the longer route, using the sharp senses to profile the attacker, how the event played out, and eventually, what to do to trap the suspect. A very scary adversary, the murder on the train was solved instantly – the scent I smelled on the lady was strong and unusually expensive. I smelled the same on the bartender, from there I knew they were related – how, no idea.’

Intrigue in a new character had him stuck in the casefiles till the central station.

The cloudiness of Riverwood followed onto the woeful Rosespire sky. People hurried out the train, parents tightly gripped their children, workers fixated on their watches, lunged forth into growing bottleneck. Without a fixed direction, he walked, making for a nearby café. The structure had long changed, where once the trains were separated into nobles and commoners, both jointly linked for greater understanding and haste. *Vrr, vrr,*

“Hello?” he answered overlooking the waves of passengers.

“Igna, Julius here, where are you?”

“In Rosespire,” he replied, “-what about you and Malley, everything ok?”

“Cousin, tis true,” the voice cracked, “-I’m a father of a young boy. He’s a few months old, I’m so happy I can’t express my emotions correctly.”

“Congratulations,” he smiled, “-where are you at the moment?”

“Somewhere down by Plaustan. Lady Elvira apparently bought a seaside villa to accommodate the new child – I swear I have no idea how she makes her money.”

“There’s a matter to think about,” they chuckled, “-by the way, where’s Aceline and Vorn?”

“Should be in Lei. Members of Vorn were signed to film a movie, I’ll have to phone their manager. I think Aceline should be at the office – she’s regained her flair, I mean,” a link soon jumped into the messages, “-Amber time is at the top.”

“Maybe I’ll pay her a visit,” the call ended. Onel booster trams circling the three expanded regions of the capital, a one bound to Lei, filled to the absolute brim, waited for more passengers. ‘How long has it been?’ hands to the railing, the transport shakily skid to a slow advance.

“In other news today, the queen of Arda and her son were found unconscious at their estate. Law enforcement has said the duo were drugged and kidnapped for political gain, Queen Gallienne has affirmed her fury and will to find the culprit.”

The tram arrived, ‘-word sure travels fast,’ he thought deeply before a neatly clean mountain of buildings. One in question situated somewhere to the edge of Lei, a great landmark considering, sadly, the expansion grew – borders pushed further northward. Ultimately, he found himself carving through the walkways of town. Outfits ranged from casual to street, a demographic of young adults made much of the state of the town, ‘-work and pleasure. Lei must have become the multimedia hub of Rosespire, the central point being Oatway’s street, I see recognizable Agency names. Advertisements are now a contest of flashiness. Shy north of the jam-packed street stood Apexi’s headquarters.

‘There it is,’ he stopped, ‘-looks old compared to the newer constructions. Scary what a few years can do.’

“Might I be of help?” inquired a guard held inside a concrete-roofed transparent cabin.

“Is Aceline around?”

“And you might be?”

“Iгна Haggard,” a show of the crest opened the gates immediately.

“Lady Aceline should be at the cafeteria, head straight then turn left, should be noticeable.”

“Understood, thank you for the help,” hands in pockets, ‘-I wonder if she’s aged at all. I came on a whim, the awkwardness of a long-awaited reunion, no,’ the paced halted, ‘-no, no, there’s no way she’ll be happy. I told her to leave Alphaia, we promised to make a band and song, guess the idea flew over my head – more I think the less I want,’ the point of no return stretched in the distance. Long straight back hair, almond-shaped eyes kept behind large round glasses looked at the entrance, a cream-filled spoon halted at her mouth, ‘-Iгна?’

“Hello,” he waved, the spoon dropped, she rose, pushed the chair, rushed for his collar, “-IGNA!”

“Long time no see, Aceline.”

“You,” she glared, “-where have you been!”

“Long story,” he smiled, “-how about letting go of my collar, the others are watching,”

“No, I don’t care,” she pulled, “-I waited, waited, and waited, no response, éclair, Julius, everyone was worried to no end. Where were you?”

“In another realm,” he whispered, “-there’s no point dragging on the past. Let’s catch up.”

Chapter 739: Two Realms

Lightning cackles into dim sparks. The humble hue glides ever so gently onto a charred ground, undoubtedly, a battlefield. Two nations faces one another, five empowered individuals glared at the opponent who bore four till three smaller entities were spotted. It had been a few hours ago, walking where many had stood, displayed cruelty and the extent of how much the will for strength could push living beings into committing such gruesome acts. The smell of burnt flesh, iron, and a mixture of rot and miasma, fills the ground into a darkened mist of despair. Survivors; some without arms, others without crucial parts of their bodies, clung for a chance at retrieval. Lifeless were piled to save space, winner or loser, it didn't matter, death grinned sadistically.

Curtains unveiled at the battle climatic end; high-tier spell, akin to those wielded by angels, flung on either side. Upon landing, large-scale devastation, sphere-shaped clouds rose – sun, unable to pierce the thick fog, retreated into somberness, habitants of below shuddered. All-encompassing and warm light gradually vanished; a line of grey sunk the battlefield in horror.

Cough, cough, cough, faint lights flickered across the mist, “-what happened?”

“No idea,” stones and rubble fell onto the cold ground, the sound of life clambered to a stand, dimmer lights lit in turn, “-who's alive?”

“Everyone, I think,” fired an unshaken voice.

“Too much effort, I'm tired...”

“No complaining till we get home!” unimportant argument set off to the side.

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“Whatever, this place is boring.”

“Don't insult...”

“Calm it, you're acting like children.”

“Well, we are?” returned a harmonious quip.

Two sharp claps resounded, those carrying lanterns halted to stare vaguely at the sound, “-the battle has concluded,” a gust blew, the fog dissipated instantly, bodies left to the elements regenerated, “-we're pleased by the display,” said four massively imposing figures, “-Vesper, representative of the Monster Realm, I, Miira, Guardian of Time, humbly accept thy realm's strength as our own,” a sharp line divided the forces, five to the left, elemental guardians – Lightning, Water, Earth, Fire, and Wind, brazenly gazed onto the opposition; Cora, Starix, Kaleem, Yuria, and the trio of, Draconis, Saniata, and, Vanesa. Shadow of large griffin circled the center and promptly landed; the resultant dust cloud rose in a show of strength.

“The battle was very well fought,” returned Vesper at the head of the King of Monster's army, “-we do apologize for the lack of personnel, our residents are still in the process of moving from realm to realm.”

“No offense taken,” replied Miira, “-have the army retreat, welcome to the Shadow Realm. We shall speak at greater lengths in the capital – provincial portals are readied for operations. Don't dilly-dally too much.” On said note, the guardians flickered into nothingness, proven warriors stared wholeheartedly, “-I hate to admit it, the monster army is strong.”

“Coming from Kaleem, a man of fist to words, I say I’m impressed,” returned Starix, “-they were very strong, especially those guardians.”

“The raw power of the elements,” added Cora, “-if this had been a real invasion, they would be considered on par to arch-angels. We’ve made a fearsome ally,” he grinned nervously.

“There’s no cause for concern,” a keen-eyed lady slithered into sight, “-we’re servants to our Monarch, the King of Monsters. Besides, Starix, you’ve met Kul, the master’s personal guard, her attitude should give a peek into our world.”

“We’re good friends,” returned Starix, “-she’s got a hot-temper and I dare say if she ever decides to unleash the real strength...”

“Yes, yes,” interjected Vesper, “-the four heroes, disciples of the General-Gods of the Shadow Realm. In accordance with our previous master, we shall follow lady Miira’s guidance until the master sees fit for us to focus on a new journey.”

“Lady, lady, are you strong?”

“And who might you be?” she glanced to the side, Draconis, enveloped by chaos energy, wove a ball of concentrated mana.

“A boy who likes to play,” he smiled grandly.

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chop, interjected a hasty Cora, “-no conjuring chaos energy in front of guests.”

“Cora...” he pouted, “-let me blow a little bit.”

Stood firm with arms crossed, “-no more chaos energy outburst for today. Saniata, if you would.”

“Understood,” the figure stepped from Kaleem’s overwhelming shadow, “-whatever am I to do with you, big brother...”

“No,” he looked away defiantly, “-I’m not going with Saniata, she thinks she’s too pretty or something. Look at her,” he pointed, “-short skirt and a white shirt, who wears that to a battle.”

“Brother,” she grinned, “-don’t bring up fashion,” five enormous balls of fire circled the group, “-one more word and I’ll kill you.”

“Try me,” an equally powerful outburst forced the observers to side-step.

“There they go again,” yawned Saniata, “-Starix,” she pulled onto his shirt, “-conjure a cloud for me.”

“Why?” returned she with knotted brow.

“Just do it.”

“Sure,” *poof,* the nonchalant visage sparked, albeit slightly, emotions definitely showed. “Warm fluffy bed,” she dove face first, “-fly to my siblings,” it obeyed and flew. Tension from the disagreement condensed into pure elemental strength.

“Should you not intervene?” inquired Vesper. A line of observers watched, both armies retreated long before the squabble.

“Out of the three devil children, Vanesa’s the strongest by a long stretch,” said Starix proudly.

“Oh please, just because she’s always listless and never raises a finger doesn’t mean she’s the type to kill on a whim,” fired Kaleem, “-it’s obvious Saniata has stronger control over the flame of Rah.”

“As your leader, I have to disagree,” Cora challenged their point of views, “-Draconis is far superior to the two combined. He’s not only mastered flames of his prior self – but is on way to conquering lady Gophy’s legendary ability of destruction.”

“Can a lady have silence for two minutes!” exclaimed Yuria, ‘-I’m envious...’

“Sorry,” they halted to face the children. Glances exchanged words, ‘-we should have been more careful, she’s the only one without a child to call her sibling,’ said Cora’s gaze.

‘You started it,’ fired Kaleem to Starix.

‘Don’t pin this on me,’ returned Starix to Kaleem, flickers of misunderstanding diluted into banter between close companions.

‘Must be nice to have allies one can call family,’ thought Vesper waiting in the background, ‘-the two realms have merged successfully. Raw essence in this world overflows, the children born here are beyond what my people have known to fight. The domain of Death, Time, and Origin, combined – scary. If the day ever comes where fighters of the Shadow Realm are called to arms, and I mean, in full-force, the universe might just cower.’

Per Starix’s comment, Vanesa ambled gently to the pair, gestured downwards, canceled the spells, and sent the duo plummeting into the ground, “-no more fighting,” she said laying on her stomach, “-Saniata, Draconis.”

“Whatever,” they broke her hold, “-stop being so mean to us,” said Draconis.

“No,” her eyes narrowed, “-the more you misbehave, the more I’ll use my powers,” her expression turned vile, a goo rose from her fingers, “-my accursed snakes are ready to pay a little visit.”

“NO MORE!” a whistle called onto the griffin, gust flung, “-LATER SISTER!” they leaped, latched onto the beast, and flew into the sun.

‘Quite the interesting bunch,’ thought Vesper.

“We ought to return to the capital,” said Cora, “-follow us, lady Vesper.”

“Lead the way,” and so, the two realms started their budding new relationship via a test of might. Who was superior, who was weak – the monster realm’s aces were strong, Cora and the rest might not have liked to admit, however, the elemental guardians, contrary to their names, were far stronger than anything they’d seen before save the generals.

A spacious terrace lined by an exquisitely crafted balustrade held a meeting. Retainers stood at the ready to serve, a large glass wall of many warm colors, waited as the backdrop, “-once again, I must say, welcome to the shadow realm,” added Intherna.

“The pleasure is ours,” said Vesper kindly gazing at the cityscape, “-never expected quite the level of advancement of the realm.”

“The place rules itself nowadays,” said Miira, “-our intervention isn’t much required. Efforts from the Watcher have brought fortune and strength superior to any realm to currently exist. I speak on the matter from the perspective of one who’s experienced countless realms.”

“-What of the other gods, won’t they be angered?”

“I have no idea,” said Gophy, her mind churned reasons why Hermes would personally assist Lixbin.

“I know that expression,” commented Intherna, “-there’s a ploy involved again, right?”

“Hermes and the letter,” added Lilith, “-Hades was well-placed to win the battle, the letter ultimately saved us.”

“Didn’t lady Miira say the realm to be stronger than another?”

“It’s half-right and wrong, we’re strong and not at the same time. The measurement of the strength of a domain is highly influenced by the presiding god, and in our case, tis Igna. Without a shadow of a doubt, the plane we live in is on the way to creating more life and channeling it into its own universe. I’m sure knowledge of the ranks is known to us, the hierarchy of watcher, gods, angels, and humans – the realms also follow a similar pattern. We’re at the top and on the bottom, that’s the catch. As we speak, the core, Krono’s sickle, has woven across time and space – making us untouchable. The Shadow realm is, by all means, a world within a world, a universe within a universe, an existence reliant on the culmination of Death and Time. To lady Vesper’s question, the answer is subjective. I say, the better answer would be to leave the matters to god – very cliché; still, our god is technically Igna, the watcher.”

“A perplexing prospect to say the least,” her eyes locked onto pastries, “-what then?”

“All the realm talk is boring,” added Intherna, “-speaking about said matters won’t change anything. How about we talk of Hades. The demon god didn’t exactly retreat, I’m sure damned Zagreus isn’t going to take the loss standing still.”

“Nothing can be done about the matter,” said Gophy, “-I did take the initiative to close the rupture in Fuda Mountains. Sadly, another rupture cracked to the north of Alpha. Hades army is on the offensive.”

“Persistent little pests,” added Intherna.

“Pardon the intrusion, I have something to add.”

“Go ahead, lady Vesper.”

“Here’s the deal, the tower inside Plaustan is about to be conjured. Strong adventurers have made it to the 198th floor. The history of the tower must be kept alive, without the constant stream of humans fighting, our forces won’t gain strength. I heard Achilles teamed up with Eraalko, the demi-son to the goddess of the seasons. Together, they’ve strid to the top. On floor 100th, the first Demonlord, a lady,

was defeated soundly. Next is the main boss, the second Demonlord on the 200th floor. The tower's legends need to captivate the newer generation. Here is my plight and I'll need the acceptance of the council – the creation of a tougher tower, more complex, riddled with traps, labyrinth, and treasures. Heroes defeat demons, the staple of fantasy stories that have captivated children from birth, potential adventurers hooked by the prospect of fame and glory," a scan across the faces, "-my proposition is this. Igna Haggard, King of Monster, will stand guard on the 200th floor on the day the adventuring team reaches the top. He will display his true might and take the title of Demonlord."

"Basically, he'll have to be a villain and defeat the adventurers?" summarized Gophy.

"Yes."

"I see no reason why he shouldn't," shrugged Miira, "-we've all heard the tale about how he conquered Yuria's world as a Demonlord. Should be a walk in the park. Once they reach the 199th floor, have the master teleported."

"Will do, I'll run by him later today."

"-I presume we don't have much to discuss?" Intherna asked boldly.

"Not that I know of," answered Gophy, "-Lilith?"

"Nothing here," she smiled, "-what about Miira?"

"I've spoken my fair share today," she smiled, "-the talk is concluded. Go make thyself at home, lady Vesper, I'm sure the land is bountiful."

"I will, thank you."

Chapter 740: Old Friends

A wander across the populated street of Lai seemed to greatly affect Aceline's prior mood. Step by step through the stone pavement, the density of the buildings rose onwards to massive proportions. Casting a curious look onto the foreign establishment, '-so many unexplored areas, a lot more happens than is ever credited for. Everyone who walks the street has objectives, dreams, a personality; a uniqueness alone to them. Aceline's in much of the same way, what's her aspiration, what does she want to accomplish. I knew I heard her voice when we were at the prison cell, the radio played one of her old tracks. She's returned to the limelight," before much longer, they were at the epicenter, the theater square continentally named Oatway Square. Its counterpart, Oatway Street, marked 01 to 05, laid in wait a short walk away. Traffic, the god-awful noise of traffic, amplified by the constant chatter from the city. In no way was the square a restful place, rather, a convenient commute/landmark for people to recognize. A statue of moderate stature stands overlooking the advertisement-filled street. Billboards three quarter that of buildings proudly advertised products – the makeup and fashion industry boomed, models, recognizable faces from Vorn, poured their beauty. Four benches at the four cardinal points guarded the statue. The seat to the south, which faced the north, and consequently the Oatway Street, cleared.

"Where have you been all this time?" inquired Aceline, her smooth hair swayed by the wind's whim. An overarching tree shielded what little sun was available. The combination of a face mask and spectacles drowned her character in the sea of frenzied youth.

"I'm wondering about the mask," cigar lit, "-is the popularity so much so you ought to shield thy identity?"

"And, would it be a problem," her head tilted, her concealed brows looked to the sky, "-an advertising blimp, look at the model on the picture."

"Oh wow," he motioned an applaud without the sound, "-I see the Pride of Hidros's had a warm welcome home. Very convenient the public doesn't ask questions."

"The tone seems rather cynical today, what's the matter?"

"I met an interesting fellow who may prove to be a nuisance in the near future. I was gone for a long time. For that, I apologize. Tell me, Aceline, how's life been?"

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"Normal I'd say, well normal for show business."

"I mean for you, not the organization."

"Personal life's been personal, I haven't done much in ways of socializing. Vorn and I grew closer, the shared bond of performers truly grew on us, I'm glad I met them, they rekindled my passion for music. I've honestly given up on the world of movies and shows, I'm content here, a singer who's the host of a cozy little radio show. Romantically, nothing of much interest happened, between my misgivings and fear of my prior life, the struggle's been at a deal-able level."

"I see," he puffed, "-you hired the violinist we met so long ago, I forgot the name and I care not to remember. The event in Alpha sure was a disaster, a festival turned to slaughter."

"He's a good kid," she smiled, "-currently enrolled at the music academy. The skill is there, he's better worth investing into the world of classical music. We bring him on to perform once in a while," she lowered her glasses to the tip of her nose, "-what about you and I forming a band..."

"We can still do it," he smiled, "-I'm afraid not professionally, state of things as is have shackled my hands. There's much to happen, I thought to take December off and enjoy a moment's rest, expectation didn't quite match reality. My promise still stands regardless of the medium, you said you were content by the current way of life, a humble commute of music and radio talk show – it's an inviting way of a life, tranquil and off the wave of media attention. What more can I say, it sounds like excuses."

"I know," she inched closer and rested her head on his shoulder, "-the promise is more than enough. Our friendship transcends the limits of life and death, we've known one another in our past life – look at us now, I mean, look at the cityscape. Technology, magic, people, everyone's advance so much – feels more of a dream, a pleasant one. Here I say, don't worry about the promise we made, I know one day we'll play in a band together – I've all the time in the world, since the rebirth, I found my body to be impervious to injuries. It heals instantly, regardless of my age, I don't seem to show signs of getting old. So you see, I don't mind waiting. The year went past, I met new friends, began a new life, I don't mind it anymore, I found my way forward."

"The strong Aceline," he smiled, "-I still vividly remember the first time we met, the performance you gave at Claireville academy. To change the world through music, someone with great ideals and actions

to back her thoughts. I was impressed and still am. There was a time where you lost yourself to the world of Odgawoan, narcotics, corruption, casting couch, the pride of Hidros's last cry. I'm glad you're back, experience the world and watch," he stood, "-I'm going to change the world," he turned, straight-faced, her expression, frozen in admiration, crumbled into smiles, they laughed out loud, calling on the attention of onlookers, "-the perfect scenario to say the perfect cliched line."

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"I know," her eyes watered, "-right on, it was so out of character I couldn't decide if it were to be a joke or not!"

"Change the world," the giggles kept on till a calming inhale, "-the latter changes, there's no need for our intervention," he held out a hand, "-let's take a walk, I'll recount what happened." Across the same pavements, alongside the same luxury shop windows, they spent an hour or two. The story of Hades and Persephone lit a flame, therein rose Apexi's headquarters, "-we're back," he finished.

"I know," she smiled, "-I had an awesome time. Welcome back Igna," a high-five echoed, "-if you need anything, reach out. I'll tell the others you said hi."

"Thank you," he nodded, the hands dove into the pockets, '-a nice time she says, suppose I did frequently burst into laughter. My mood seems better,' a glance at the phone showed bicolored pupils, '-Origin's happy, I feel his heart. Maybe this is what they call taking a break,' the horde of office workers swept him on his feet, '-should I bring back a present?' a confectionary stood across the way from the tram-stop, '-when in doubt, get sweets.' The door opened into a dark-tone room made of dark wood, the displays outlined by faint traces of gold, threw focus onto the items inside. Additional ornaments were unrelated to the sweets, a brown teddy bear, horns of a reindeer cupped in a corner, the name, Granlo's written in calligraphy, and a neatly dressed confectioner.

"How may I help you?" crawled from behind the succulent display.

"-Algeria," the name escaped, the glances exchanged, "-Tristin Algeria, right?"

"Yes, and you are?" she rose from the seat and shuffled closer.

"The Alchemist," he smiled, "-and you are, Tristin Algeria, the eccentric chef, vice-president at Leko's Academy."

"Let me think," she ambled all the way to the storefront, "..."

"Your hair's shorter and I see the teddy's on the counter. The world's a small place."

"I REMEMBER!" she exclaimed, "ITS YOU!" nearly headbutting the client, "-I REMEMBER KNOW."

"There's no need to scream."

"I apologize," she skipped to the door, turned on the sign which read, '-on lunch break,' skipped to a table, tapped the chair, "-let's chat." The table kindly gazed the outside through a semi-transparent lush curtain.

"Chat?"

“Yes, let’s catch up,” she smiled, “-I was getting bored of waiting for a client. Order anything you want, it’s on you...”

“On me huh,” he laughed, “-bring whatever you wish.”

“Understood, I’ll stuff myself on thy tab, thank you very much,” she sprinted to the display and expertly arranged the sweets.

A generous arrangement arrived, “-sorry for the wait.”

“Quite the assortment,” he commented, “-tell me, what’s a Red-collared chef doing here?”

“No idea myself,” her energetic tone eased, “-the Alchemist of Cooking, brings back fond memories. The highlight of my life was spent at the Academy, the rivalry between you and Kyle was one to behold. I mean, he worked so hard to get to his position and you, a nobody, tutored by Leko and the Medusa of Cooking, a highly anticipated genius in the cooking world vanished after Cle. Kyle became a celebrity while the former prodigy of Medusa faded into the background. Lady Yuki took a liking to him; I heard her daughter relinquished her claims over the family to pursue music. Last I heard of him was the marriage proposal sent for Syndra. I would be angry too if my mentor suddenly changed sides to my rival, the judging process was a fiasco. Regardless, Kyle became a superstar, an event of absolute wonder occurred on said day, the rejuvenation of Amsey, a legend in the culinary world. People still theorized how a meal could turn back time on a geezer. Man, I wish you had joined the academy sooner, who knows, you, Kyle, Juo, Patricia, and I might have become best friends.”

“I never wanted to be a chef, the position sort of fell into place. I knew little of myself, just a boy in a foreign place. I don’t regret cooking, the paths I followed eventually ended me to where I am. I met my mother, my family and remembered who I was meant to be. I’m very surprised you’re here, then again, Granlo is a world-renowned brand.”

“That we are,” she winked, “-thanks to me, I made most of their best sellers. How wealthy are you now?”

“Quite a blunt question, do you not have tact?”

“Stop being a silly sausage, tell me, I want to know. The suit looks expensive, the briefcase looks nice and clean, not to mention, you entered this shop, a place made to extortionate the rich for the chance to taste heaven on a plate. Sweets are a great way to win over a lady – our cheap price ranges in around 550 Exa.”

“Ask a lady about her age and a man about his wallet, both are taboo subjects. Since we’re akin to acquaintances, my official title is Son of the Queen of Arda, Viscount of Glenda, Igna Haggard.”

“A PRINCE!”

“Energy, calm it,” quick to exhale, “-you never told Kyle about your feelings, have you?”

“What brought this on?”

“Here I was expecting a bashful reaction, Tristin.”

"I've over the whole romance thing," her inhaling of snacks stopped, "-Kyle and I have grown distant, I can't remember the last time we spoke. Life moves on."

"Which is why a red-collar chef is out here working as opposed to advancing the culinary world."

"You have no right to tell me that," she glared, "-for someone who ran away from cooking, I take those words with great offense."

"Oh, stop it with the dramaticism. You wanted to know how rich I was?" he stood, "-how about an offer to work for me."

"No way," she denied, "-not going to happen, absolutely not. I'm happy working here, tis peaceful."

"And I say it's a waste of talent."

"Says the biggest waste of all."

"Listen, I don't have to answer thy questions. Tell me, Tristin, isn't it the dream of every chef to open up a place of their own. I'm willing to invest in your talents – the academy should have to train thee in the ways of managing a high-end restaurant. There's a look of dissatisfaction. I want to see the eccentric cook take to the stove once again. There's a multitude of ways to express thy feelings, and I know just the way which will benefit us in the long run. I seize a great opportunity when I see one, a stranded red-collar chef of the prodigious era left on her own is one I can't pass. Money isn't a problem," they exchanged contact information, "-", I can make the dreams come true. Call me if you interested," sweets in a neat back, "-see you soon, Tristin."