

Death Magic 381

Chapter 381: Travels

"Excuse me, my lady," said a tall, clean-shaven man with little to no hair remaining. Blue eyes, a common trait among those in high-standing, or so what was written once in an article, sternly placed itself to she who spoke. A brown-suit in a peculiar style, two bodyguards stood outside the room. Dorino's secretary found information linking the man who saved him to this very building. Stood at the epicenter of the district named Leonval, to the north of Melmark separated by a bridge over an ever-flowing river. Leonval; described many as the heart of Alphaia for it was there all major companies, conglomerates, and more, made their headquarters. From industrial to magical, any factory or research facilities had to have their base of operations here. An unwritten rule as it made traveling and trading with one another easier. There also were those who chose to have their main-offices at the port located to the East.

Amidst the endless tall-offices, skyscrapers, each differing per their finance, one stood equal to many of offices. One owned by the imperial family, one named Alpht. It was here were meetings concerning states and such were discussed. The Emperor held the highest floor of the building. Rare was it for people to go up and meet him for it was a privilege.

"-May I ask to see the man who saved my life?" asked the man courteously.

"May I know who you are?" said Amber, the famed ruthless medium to the Emperor. It was impossible to get one's point across to her strict and vigil personality. Brought up to be but mindful of others, she trusted none, not even blood. Cynical to her very heart – nothing, and it meant nothing, would ever get by her.

"Director of Meldorino, Dorino," he said with authority.

"Ah, the company on the verge of collapse. Pretell, have thy come for sympathy or?"

"Nothing of sorts, my lady, we made acquaintance yesterday, have thy forgotten?" said with underlying frustration, the face kept strong.

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"I remember," she said sat further back into the chair with cross-arms, "-I asked the emperor of knowledge for the man you spoke of. I got no response, so, I can but say one thing, do leave us alone, there's no time to be wasted on a manhunt of an imaginary man who punched an S-class to death."

"You jest, I saw the whole scene unfold, I can have hero Starlight vouch for my claim."

"Starlight," she gnarled, "-the presumptuous showman who thinks about popularity opposed to being a hero, what a joke. Words from his mouth are tantamount to finding a needle in a haystack."

"Enough!" hands slammed against the table, "-disrespect me as you may, the heroes are people to be held in high regard. I can not for what thy opinion is on the matter, what I believe stands firm, if it wasn't for heroes, we'd not have seen such a peaceful life," pushing aside the chair, he dashed for the door.

"Mind thy step," said a man in the doorway.

“What a surprise!” said Dorino stopped short of blowing a fuse, “-fate does has its way into one’s life.”

“Yes, yes,” said Staxius peering the lady behind the desk, her face was emotionless, a boulder none moved for years, “-Mr. Dorino, may I ask why thee here?”

“Surely the truth mustn’t be so blinding.”

“You’ve come to meet me?” he shrugged.

“Yes, more precisely,” an invitation card glimmered with the light, “-it’s a soiree organized for celebrating the new-years. Many guests of interest would be present, I’d appreciate it if you were to accept the invitation.”

“A social gathering, I graciously accept,” with a nod, the man left with his bodyguards.

“Are you simply going to stand there gawking or are you coming in?” said Amber insolently.

“Cut the attitude,” said Staxius, “-is that a way to treat an acquaintance.”

“Please, even though we’ve worked together in the past, it doesn’t mean we’re friends, and anything closer to that.”

“Hard to get,” he said mockingly, “-nevertheless, Amber, thou need be vigilant. Mr. Dorino may come off smug, a smugness based on fact for he’s successful. There are many things to consider during a tête-à-tête, best learn, the great-wall of Alpht isn’t as sturdy as in youth.”

“Here’s the more reason I despise you, King of Arda, always lecturing and treating me as if I were a kid.”

“You are one,” he took a seat, “-one as hard as a mull and as dumb as a doorknob.”

“How flattering,” a few gasps of laughter escaped provokingly, “-why are you here?”

“I’ve come as a counselor to thy brother. We’re family now,” he stood, “-bear that in mind on my next visit, Amber.”

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Well-lit and spacious, he headed to the elevator. ‘An invitation to a new year’s party,’ thought Staxius as it opened, ‘-I made better progress than I thought. Taking over Meldorino is the next goal. Establishing good relations is a priority. 31st of December is in five days.’ Opened to a large hall, turned to the left, a red-cushioned double-door stood from the minimalistic décor.

“Father-in-law,”

“Emperor,” opened to an even bigger room. File cabinets were to the right in rows as if allies in a supermarket. To the left were taller bookshelves arranged alphabetically. Before Sultria’s desk stood another more casual, couches with a little table for keeping nonessentials.

“It sure is dimly lit here,” commented the king.

“No worries,” a push of a button had the curtains parted with minimal effort. As if unveiling a treasure, the landscape behind was of the blue sky with spots of white. Brighter compared to the sky in Hidros, a little difference changing the perception of many.

After seeing Godfather Renaud off, Staxius took to the capital in haste. Mr. Dorino came for a visit, he wanted to see the savior. Instead, as Sultria reported over the phone, the efforts were in naught. The Director was met with the great-wall. Amber's mood was of no joke, she didn't care who or what stood before – sentence after sentence, the modern-day Gatling-gun, each word she spoke pierced the fragile soul of visitors and potential partners. A few hours later, he arrived at an already empty office. Thoughts of how to restart the connection with Dorino took most of the previous night away. Surprising was it that the man was persistent. 'I'm so glad for the mentality of not taking no for an answer,' thus the day continued.

"What now?"

"I suppose we should head to the AHA?" said the Emperor rhetorically.

"It's not supposed, we must go to the AHA. I've yet to forget the reason I'm here," facing the door, "let's go. You'll explain the situation in the car."

Silence to thunderous, they drove north. AHA's headquarters were the exception. Their headquarters were to the north, a long drive, a very long drive away.

"Emperor, could you plot down all the airfields on this map?" a holographic display came from the phone.

"Sure."

Melmark, the capital city, was located inside the province of Scaica. Directly north were two provinces, Dostein and Subrea after which came another named Whuotan. Those were the four-provinces consisting of the North-Alpha.

'There's an airfield close to the border, the drive there will be a day or two at most. AHA's headquarters are in the far north of Subrea. Going from south to north will take a week or not two, at most. The sheer-size of Alpha is grand – the best is to travel by air.'

"Is there something the matter?" asked Sultria.

"I spaced out for a bit," said he stuck in traffic. The number of vehicles on the main-road was vexing.

"I didn't expect us to be stuck in traffic this late in the afternoon."

"We're going to AHA right?"

"Yes, by car I presume?" the tone didn't match the expression and aura, there was a feeling of not wanting to travel.

"No, we'll take a plane at Subrea. I have an engagement to attend on the 31st, in no way will I lose on such an opportunity," without a moment wasted, he reached for the phone.

"Hello Cake."

"Good afternoon, boss, what can I do for you?"

"I need a jet, have them fly over to Subrea, the coordinates have been sent."

"I just received them, what model would you like?"

"Don't we only have the V12?"

"No, Midas created the V12-Mk-2. It comes equipped with the AFR as well as the new jet-engine. It should go twice as fast as the prior version."

"What of the V12 then?"

"We sold it; a client offered around 25 Million Exa for it."

"I'm hoping you didn't?"

"No need to say anymore, Boss, the V12 was stripped of all classified components. We did leave a good enough engine, in case of breakdown, they'll come to us. There should not be a cause for concern."

"Have them sent over," he smiled, '-a new plane developed by Midas, this will be interesting.'

The name Midas, chosen as a homage to an age-old story. Similar to GateSix, Midas was part of Phantom's Research Organization. Their focus was on research and development of Air-based vehicles and weapons. The latter being kept confidential for security purposes. Producing a few planes per year, inconsequential parts were outsourced to factories in Alpha, a reward for being allies. Put into action during the war, Midas was a cornerstone in turning the war into the Federation's favor. The supreme leader in air-based technology and combat. Rumor had it that a genius, a once in a century scholar, specializing in the field of aeronautics was in charge of their operations. Phantom had more than let to believe.

"Are we there yet?"

"No," said Staxius pulling close to the hill-station. Similar to Marrowy, going to Subrea meant going around the mountains, and dangerous were the narrow fog-filled roads. "We'll stay the night here," said he.

"Hello travelers," said a lady behind a brightly colored counter, "-what would you like?" Menus were displayed on the wall behind on screens.

"Is there the possibility of lodging for a night?" asked Staxius courteously.

"Yes, we've a motel around back," giving a once-over, "-may I wonder to who you are?"

"No one particular, just the same as thee, workers trying to make a profit in the less than the loveable economy."

"That much is true. Go on, take a seat, I'll have someone tend soon," off they were to a window-seat.

"Was it wise?"

"Wise what, in no way does she need to know our identity. Take the habit of eluding the question, the more fame one has, the harder it is to be private."

“Fine, fine,” said he checking the menu. A glance around showed few seats and fewer people. The roads outside weren’t frequented that much. If it wasn’t for this hill-station, it would have been a hassle to find food.

“Hello, may I take your order?” asked a boy in his sixteen. Sultria kept on order till the boy ran out of space to write.

“Is that all?” asked him with a smile.

“Yes, should be plenty.”

He left with a skip. Showing the order to the lady, both hugged in relief. “That was nice of you,” said Staxius.

“What do you mean?”

“Business is slow. It’s obvious, just look around. I’m sure making a living is tough. Ordering all that food will be beneficial, more so than you think.”

“I had to do something.”

“Well, the new problem is how are we going to eat all of it?”

“No need to fret,” came a seductive voice.

“We’ll help,” came another less womanly but more charming.

“Don’t forget me!”

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“Gophy, Intherna, and Adete. I’m so glad you’re here,” he smiled and called on the waiter. The trio caught the eye of a few of the customers. Not that it was apparent, both Gophy and Intherna were beautiful, beautiful enough to put the stars and idols to shame. Tis why Yuri was impulsive at the funeral.

“Yes sire, how may I help?”

“I want the order to be tripled, my friends here are starved.”

“T-tripled,” he stared blankly, “-with pleasure.”

“And you say I’m the one who’s nice,” added he in jest.

Chapter 382: Asuna Muld

“Succulent,” said Sultria wiping his mouth. The meal ended with them taking a walk outside. Cold and damp, the hill-station was more deserted than first appeared. A singular asylum for those who lived across the vicinity. As directed by the nice lady, there was indeed a motel of a few generous floors. The interior was simplistic, a proof of the hard times. The window gave on the front of the establishment. A narrow road led further into the heart of town. Many o’ windows could be seen across the motel, windows of which were closed and never parted.

"I'm glad we took the same room."

"The town has an eerie feel. I'd give it to the weather. The few people we came across were nice, accommodating, and helpful." Pulling the couch closer to the window, Staxius lit a cigar with a bottle of whiskey beside.

"Are you sure it wise?"

"Yeah, don't worry," he puffed, "-this isn't enough to get me drunk." *Snap,* "-I've cast a barrier around. Tell me more about AHA and why you called on me."

"Sure," he pulled on the other couch to sit opposite. The cool breeze entered with the swaying curtains. "Whuotan is under attack. The reports date to almost a year ago. From fighting villains, the Allied Heroes were given the task of fighting the invasion. Needless to say, our forces overwhelmed the beasts at first. Just as a sigh of relief was going to be breathed, the beasts evolved to match and adapt to our DNA. I was left out of the matter entirely. Well, until it grew out of hand and here we are."

"Honestly," puffed he once more, "-you know nothing of the situation, do you?"

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"I'm afraid not."

"Not the matter, what of the AHA, how does it work, what's the basis for their actions, and how does their organization work."

"I thought you already knew?"

"I'm referring to the things kept hidden."

"If it's politics then sure. The AHA isn't funded by the Empire, rather, they're funded by companies and powerful businessmen. AHA is farther from being the helper of Alpha, tis rotten to the core. Those at the top aren't heroes, no, it's those with large sums of money to spend. The focus is on being popular, the flashier one is, the better. More public attraction meant more money, and more money was profit. Profit put inside the coffers of the leaders instead of the betterment of the people. You know how focused our culture is on idols and movie stars. We thrive on entertainment. Starlight's adventure has released a show not long ago. Him being the new and upcoming hero representing the AHA, sales went through the roofs. Kids gobbled the show as if starved animals – the choice of audience was perfect. It spawned many spin-off shows, figurines, toys, merchandise, you name it and it was there. A massive boom for AHA. Well, that was before Starlight lost his flare – the jokes, casual nature, grew boring. People wanted more action, more grit. Try as they may, the heroes could but be dogs wagging their tail at the chance of being chosen. Favoritism is made awfully clear with the class system between heroes. How dare we say we're the same as the Guild in Hidros. There, the adventurers have a purpose, a will to save those in need, they are the heroes, not us, not what has become of them with power. When all is said and done, AHA is nothing than a factory for producing content for kids. I'll give you an example of a hero so badly treated the whole thing was covered. Asuna Muld, a hero who went by the nickname of Luna, was once the most promising hero the people had seen. Before formerly being recruited by the AHA, her activities were independent and garnered the praise of many. Why would people not love her, a charming personality, her tight bodysuit, and a lovely figure was subject to many fanatical fan-groups

to be formed. She skyrocketed to the top of the news overshadowing exploits the AHA had made. The fame brought had many offers of going to the movie industry. She only did one film, Luna on Earth. It hit, by hit, I mean, sales figures were in the billions. In an interview, upon asked whether if she would star in another movie, the response given was, *-I'm honored of the privilege to experience the movie industry for myself. I enjoyed every moment of it, though, I think my calling is still to fight villains and help my fellow comrades.* The very next day, she joined the AHA. On the surface, people loved her, she seemed to be on the top of the world, well, that was before the incident. Underneath her suit, underneath her makeup, laid a stain placed by the AHA. More specifically, the son of one of the backers. He took a liking to her; one thing led to another, they acquired revealing and incriminating pictures of her partaking in narcotics. The blackmail began during her shooting Luna on Earth. The son demanded her to be his – with the pictures against her, the movie, and fame. She could but nod. I sadly have a few clips of what the son recorded. Her being abused and tormented, very illicit imagery. Her cries echo to this day in my head. Sexually abused to satisfy the lust of a sadist, her fate grew worse. The announcement to join the AHA was done out of necessity. The substance abuse increased, her bank-account lowered, the abusive boyfriend kept on recording their nights. Then, one day, after a blunder causing the death of a brother and sister of eight years old, the people shunned her for being careless. They didn't know how much she suffered. In the end, from that incident, the popularity dwindled, the son grew bored, the bank account emptied, her addiction turned destructive. Alpha then woke to the sad news of her passing away. Ruled as a suicide, the real truth was of the son's action. The way he made love was borderline assault, her overdosing on narcotics made her dull to pain, no screams meant no fun, and it ended in tragedy. She was strangled to death; the post-mortem picture is of her smiling. The Hero named Luna, trapped and killed by the actions of AHA. A private investigation by my team revealed that the dependence on narcotics was triggered by a visit to AHA headquarters. Her real age, despite her looking 19 was 35. A mother of a boy who studied at Hidros in the art of becoming a mage. Tis all I know of her past, as for how she met her end, you know it well."

"Cry me a river," said Staxius untouched meanwhile cries came from the back.

"What's the matter with you?" sniffled Gophy who soon teleported away. Intherna did the same in a subtler manner.

"Did you feel nothing from that?" asked Sultria with watery eyes.

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"No," he said taking a puff, "-her story is sad. Her narcotic addiction, was it God's Ale or Angel dust?"

"Both, how did you know?"

"I figured as much," he paused, '-they gave a high enough dose to have her hook for life. Quite a good way to have a person self-explode, the AHA are lions in sheep's clothing,' then and there came a moment of inspiration. The scheming mind showed a course that would be entertaining.

"Emperor," said he, "-let me ask. Who are the people in charge of the AHA?"

"I rather not say, that information is unknown to me – we know they are rich and powerful, tis the short of it."

"Asuna, the hero named Luna, her end was abrupt. Do you know her child's name perchance?"

“Yes, it’s Olaf Muld.”

“Olaf Muld, you say he’s studying mage-craft, what field exactly?”

“Magiology the last I heard of it.”

“I knew it,” he smiled, “-you do have a soft heart. The boy knows his mother died, but not the real reason. The studies are being paid by the Imperial family.”

“That’s an outstretch if I heard one, what would possess thee to say that?”

“It isn’t a lie though,” he smirked, “-Sultria, my son-in-law, you’re an open book. The actions in the diner prior, the way you cried upon retelling the story. Strong and compose on most days, thee only cries if the issue has thy involvement. Why would the Emperor of Sultria know the life of a singular hero as opposed to countless others? The interest in Asuna Muld’s case instead of the AHA. Remember, I asked for the latter? The response I got was that you knew not. The truth is that you didn’t care. As for Asuna, a far more complex and deep case, you knew it all too well, you knew it as if being part of the investigation. The conclusion drawn is simple, thou hath the means to know what thee wants.”

“I yield, Asuna was a close friend of Mother. Her birth is closer to being royal than one might think. Mother was she who took on Olaf’s financial troubles.”

‘Not to mention she sunk into despair because of the drug we made. I must do her death justice, I care not for how she died. I do love exposing the strong – Alpha is fun.’

“Do you have a picture of Asuna perchance?”

“Yes, here,” he showed via phone.

“Black-hair, she’s young and strong. Tell me, Sultria, do you believe in ghosts?”

“I mean, what is a ghost. The art of magic dispels the fear of the spiritual.”

“I know, yet, the fear of what comes after death is there – people believe in reincarnation and ghosts.”

“I guess it’s just about right. I’m not scared of death, I’ve seen it all too well.”

“What of the businessman or a spoon-fed rich heir?”

“What are you referring to?” Sultria’s eyes sparkled.

“You caught my intent,” resting the cigar, he took a sip, “-Asuna needs justice. You say she was a close friend of thy mother?”

“Very close, one could mistake them for sisters.”

“Then it’s sorted. Let’s have the AHA have a taste of their own medicine. I’m in the mood of causing a revolution.”

“What of the monster problem?”

“I’ve accounted for it already,” he grinned, “-fate is very much a lady who has my heart. Gophy, I need thy help.”

“What’s the matter?” asked she who materialized with no signs of cries.

“I’ve a plan in mind,” he showed the picture, “-does this lady remind thee of anyone?”

“She looks like me. Of course, I’m prettier by all accounts.”

“Yes, tis what I’m getting at, Gophy, you resemble her in some weird way. Listen, Sultria, I’ve decided. The AHA is going to pay, especially the rich-spoon fed heir. I’ll make sure every penny is returned to him who lost everything.”

“What’s the scheme then, what are you plotting?”

“Tis a secret, I’ve a vague idea, it’s best you not bother with the details. Call it a night,” the windows shut, “-I’ll go for a stroll, Gophy will stand as guard,” *click,* shut the door with him dashing down the stairs.

‘If the leaders are rich people, I should be able to get in their good favors on that soiree. Dorino’s reach is big. The monster problem, Asuna, Gophy, there’s a link I can exploit. Nothing like a bit of scheming. Do people believe in ghosts, who knows, but I’ll make sure they remember karma exists,’ knocking over stray pebbles, he walked along the alleys onto a stone-path headed to the outskirts of the town. The view was of an endless drop onto a steep slope.

“Lady Gophy, what did thee think of the king’s words?”

“Nothing much,” she sat woefully over the window, “-there but one thing to wait, and tis of a scheme. The story you recounted was of utmost grief. I think Master sees Asuna as a way to make amends for a girl he knew long ago. A girl who went through a similar type of injustice.”

Chapter 383: The AHA

Awake and readied, after breakfast in the very accommodating diner, they drove once more. Gophy alluded to something last night, a sentence she cut for not wanting to tell. As a result, Sultria’s mind couldn’t focus, he wanted to know of what she referred to. Wanting to ask, the words came to a stop after gazing upon the blank, expressionless face. A feeling of certain dread woke from within. ‘Better leave the subject out of the conversation,’ thought he as they sped.

The journey would be silent. No words exchanged; the passing of scenery was all the entertainment to be had. A well-founded silence as schemes and ideas came one after the other, the plan of enacting revenge would take a few months, even a year at most. The time he had plenty for war wasn’t a threat, not just yet, not in Alphaia and Hidros’s case. The Kingdom of Elendor was another matter entirely. The shipment of weapons reached its destination without hassle with the profit only but increasing.

A few hours later, the road came to a gentle downward slope. The land, from arid and very rich in greenery turned warm. The trees weren’t green but of a yellowish hue, the little temperature change had greater effects. Sugarcane fields encased by a barrier went for acres.

“Isn’t Subrea the province where research and academics are most relevant?”

“More towards the center,” replied Sultria with a listless voice.

Raising an eyebrow, the focus turned to the landscape. The roads were large with few vehicles. The tarmac seemed to boil and turn blurry. Passing a village over a hill, flat-land stretched out onto forever. Wearing straw-hats paired with tools; a farming village with a glimpse of technology in terms of machinery.

“There’s the airfield,” pointed Sultria in a sudden change of persona. A clean-landing strip with a jet under a modest hangar.

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Same color scheme and same design, the jet was a little bigger than the prior version. The engines were more imposing for once.

“Hey Boss,” said the pilot sat in the shade whilst waving a copy-book.

“Hey, when did you get back?”

“05:00 early morning, I never expected it to be this hot.”

“Neither did I,” he paused to scan the area, “-where are the others?”

“My co-pilot went to pay homage to mother nature. We’re only two today, boss.”

He stopped shy of speaking, a badge caught the attention off-guard, “-on thy shirt,” pointed Staxius, “-is that?”

“Yes,” stood the pilot in a salute, “-Pilot First-class, Julien Lyndoch.”

“Pilot Second-Class, Eric Thompson,” came another flustered voice.

“The badges,” acknowledged Staxius, “-you’re from Sotepios, why art thou here?”

“We were asked by Lady Cake to come to support the Boss.”

“It’s a bit overkill.”

“Why do you say that?” turned the clueless Emperor.

“Sotepios is a jet-fighters training facility. The regiment is so hard and the academic so confusing only a few make it to be pilots. Not to mention the class system, the better one is, the harder their certification exam.” Indeed, was it tough for they were another facility owned by Phantom. Manufacturing weapons and vehicles were good and all, however, if humans couldn’t operate, what was the point. Based on the name of the legendary steed of Goddess Syhton, Sotepios was a winged-horse with the glow of stars. To put the comparison of skill, it was as if using a great-sword to slice an apple. Even the lowest-ranked pilots were considered top-fighters in the bigger picture. Air-supremacy, Staxius’s obsession led to said venture. As to how one entered; candidates were picked from various places, mainly, the training camp for the Argashield Federation. Those with potential were immediately transferred. Sotepios, in the eyes of the public, was another training base for the Federation – the truth was hidden yet again.

“So, Boss, are we going?” asked Julien.

“Let’s,” the door opened to a fully-built interior.

“What’s over here?” the design was reminiscent of the TU-03 at the back.

“Oh, it’s an addition for convenience,” said Eric pressing a button, “-a storage area with two escape hatches. One for dropping parachuters and the other one for loading cargo.

“There’s a bike,” he pointed.

“The Monif-4T, she asked to relay this,” a note was handed over.

Dear brother, I’m leaving you the bike since I got my baby at home. Make sure to not scratch it. I know how you like black; therefore, the color scheme is different. Don’t cause too much trouble for tis my job.

‘I swear, she made me purchase it on a whim. Guess transport is sorted for when we land.’

“Boss, would you kindly take a seat for we’re taking off,” spoke the intercoms. Locked tightly, they settled with the engine alive and breathing fire. As for the car, a farmer was paid to have it clean and kept inside the hangar.

“Father-in-law,” said he sat opposite.

“What is the matter?”

“You always baffle me, how is it possible for one to have such power and money. Are you sure thou art real?”

The same question yet again. Choosing to ignore the curious boy, he stared out the hublot without care. Food and drinks were given by the co-pilot who worked as an assistant to their needs. Luxury and power and its finest. There was even a bottle of champagne in golden-foil brought over; the price of it being in the 10,000 Exa

Three hours from one end to the other, they landed at the City of Arkta, the heart of Subrea. Densely packed; the buildings weren’t as tall as in Melmark. Over yonder flying above the city, the border leading into Whuotan stood unperturbed.

“We’re here now,” said Staxius muffled by a helmet.

“Yes, let’s go to the AHA. I’ve informed them of our arrival,” he screamed as to fight against the loud wind. Tall and dark, away from the city on a secluded plot of land with access being a bridge over a canal, security hailed for them to stop. The procedure was short for a single name sufficed. Black against the blue-sky, an enormous shadow with it casting its own onto the parking lot. Expensive cars were lined one after the other. For an organization sworn to protect the people, in no way was it true to have enough money for such indulgence. Tis would have been the conclusion before what Sultria recounted, the tragedy of Luna.

“Emperor Sultria VI,” said a man dressed in an expensive black suit. He held only a mustache as facial hair and a very chubby stature, the product of having sat on his laurel, “-we have been expecting thy visit with utmost pleasure,” said he smugly. A red-carpet was rolled with attendants, mostly ladies viewed as pretty, bowing their heads. No smiles, nothing, the stares were to the ground, the carpet.

“Director Leo,” said the Emperor taking off the helmet, “-I appreciate the hospitality.”

“Mention it not, sire, for tis our privilege to attend to he who rules our realm,” yet came another presumptuously phrased sentence.

“Don’t mind my asking,” he stared the bike, “-but is it adequate for one as great as thee to travel in such, unbecfitting, transport?”

“Unbecfitting thee says,” said Staxius taking off his helmet, “-I suppose one would make the correlation of affordability to two-wheels.”

“Pardon my saying so. I apologize for speaking out of terms.”

“No, worry not,” smiled Sultria, “-tis a perfectly fair assessment, I thank the concern.”

“I second the Emperor,” he stepped to Leo and peered upon the shorter man, “-please, have someone attend to my moderate steed,” the keys were handed. Confused beyond words, Leo glanced around seeking an answer. The King assured his standing as being higher than Leo. The latter could but smile emptily until one came to help.

“Should we continue?”

“Yes, Emperor, let’s,” said the director shaking from the experience.

A generic office on the highest floor was common and uninteresting. The prejudicial belief of authority associated with a big-chair, large empty desk, and opened windows to the beauty of the outside.

“Emperor, may I have the reason for the sudden visit?”

“I received reports of the monster invasion, hence my coming. I wish to hear the details in person, not through a mediator.”

“It would be best told by they who’ve experienced the fight first hand,” a press later had the door opened with three ladies in tight-body suits and masks walk.

“Emperor, here are one of the AHA’s top-heroes; the Feline-force. From right to left, Taji Muko, Mi Muko, and Emi Muko. Each time their name was called, one gave a meow or made some gestures relating to cats.

“H-how may we serve?” said Mi, the eldest of the group.

“Acquaint thyself with the Emperor. Emi, you’re coming with me, I have a job for thee,” after which the chubby-man waddled outside practically drooling with hands around her waist. The secretary soon took as overwatch, her glare made the heroes tremble.

“Care to explain?”

“I’ll speak,” came forth Taji who felt her sister’s withdrawal, “-Monsters unlike the ones at Hidros began to appear suddenly. Many heroes before us fought the beasts without care for why such a thing was happening. We were smug to think they be so weak. In the past few months, villain activity around Alpha has the Allied Heroes run-thin. We can’t afford to give any more members to the protection of

Whuotan. Evacuation is being planned, we all but need permission from the emperor,” the conversation went back and forth for more than a few minutes.

“Majesty, is there anything you wish knowing?” asked Sultria with a gut feeling.

“Sure,” he stared Mi, “-my question is for you. I heard the heroes of Alpha are strong with a stronger sense of justice. Answer me this, if perchance a situation came where either you’d save a life and lose popularity or abandoned one and be hailed as a hero, which would you choose?” her face lit with a newfound passion.

“Emperor,” the door opened as she was to speak, “-we sadly have to dispatch the heroes. May we see you on a later date? Taji, Mi, let’s go,” he said strongly.

“Pardon me,” said Staxius who bumped against the heroes on their way out.

“Forgive me.”

“Majesty, is there anything I can assist with?” asked the secretary.

“No, we’ll be leaving for now,” they excused themselves. The way the workers viewed the duo on the way out was different. A complete change, one of which was belligerent and unforgiving. No care to the ranks – a clear intent of being intruders.

‘It’s far worse than I think. AHA isn’t anything close to being helpful to the populous. What in the hell was the Feline-force about. The suits weren’t anything to protect nor help them, it’s fanservice if I’ve ever seen one. Overly sexualized to attract viewership. It’s a good way to make money, got to hand it to the puppet-masters, they know how to play their cards.’

“What was the question earlier about?” they sped along the road.

“Nothing much, there wasn’t a point in getting an answer. I phrased it in a way only to provoke a reaction. Tis why the Director walked in rather conveniently. As for the trio, I didn’t sense any power from them, they’re normal individuals. Didn’t you notice how he took away one of the sisters? I’m sure it wasn’t for show, we were in the midst of a hostage situation. The secretary stayed behind to ensure their silence.”

“Why didn’t you do anything?”

“There was nothing I could have done.”

“Come on, don’t give me that. Isn’t the King of Arda all-mighty?”

“There’s so much brute-force can give. AHA is rotten to the core. Never go there again, we’ve been blacklisted. The way the workers stared. The killing intent, pure and unforgiving. There isn’t much Hidros can do to help. Evacuating Whuotan is a good idea.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Didn’t I say, a revolution?”

Along the hot road towards the airfield where waited the plane, there came an obstacle. One of which couldn’t be broken using threats nor killing, the connections ran deep. A critical observation was left

out. Cimier's involvement, human-trafficking. Seamlessly bumping against Mi, her shuffle showed the mark of a slave-crest.

Chapter 384: The Jester

The day of the 31st of December came at last. Melmark's roads, town-square, and various shops, stores, were in the festive mood. At the end of a dense year, the relief around the faces was written in bold. Aceline's new film would premier later at night. Five days elapsed since the meeting with the AHA. Staxius did well beside the Emperor's side. Good advice on the matter of state and how to intervene in the monster invasion. Rather than fight, they stuck to protecting the populous, a full-scale evacuation of the citizens was issued. The Alphian army stood steadily as pillars. Shelters and centers were at the ready inside Dostein and Subrea. Lodging in the form of hotels and more was provided free-of-charge. Many of Whuotan saw the truth of the revolt, the beasts had killed many o' folks.

"Good day, people of Alpha," a simultaneous broadcast sliced through the idyllic atmosphere. "It's good to see the festive spirits," said a figure on channels, screens, and electronic devices across Melmark. The city came to a halt, the intriguing figure dressed in black stole the limelight. "Such peacefulness, such joy," he said with a smile and giggle, "-how utterly useless," the tone sunk to one of hate, "-how cruel must this world be," the emotion changed again to joyful. "Allied Heroes of Alpha," the screen swapped to a room with a hostage tied in the middle. "I give you two hours to come find me. Hope, what a nice word. Hope, you people believe in Heroes too much. I've come as a messiah to spread the real truth – hope isn't in everyone's fate. Hope is for the chosen," the camera moved close to the victim, "-look at her," he removed the bag over her head, "-the girl's eyes are filled with hope. She knows someone is coming to rescue," without mercy, he stabbed her arm with a fork unleashing a deafening scream of pain. "Two hours," following a clap, the screens display not only one, but a room filled with kids of all genders and ages. "Listen to me," grabbed onto the camera, "-two hours is more time needed. Catch you later," giggles turned to mute and darkness.

Streets came to a stop; people were quick to go on social media. Enraged crowds headed for the AHA. Heroes were demanded to be dispatched. Thus, a thorough search began.

"Emperor," came a maid with a tablet, "-have you seen the news?"

"No, what of it?"

"A hostage situation," said Staxius staring out the mansion window. Lady Loftha stood in the garden and broke into pirouettes, a graceful ballerina. "There was broadcast not too long ago of a villain preaching about hope or some nonsensical thing."

"Here are the details," said the maid showing the footage.

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"How despicable, what's the AHA doing?"

"Looking for some way to turn a profit?"

"Surely they mustn't be that greedy."

"I can assure you one of them is going to die, no hero allied with AHA will be able to save them."

“What of you?” raised he a good point, “-what of the Hero King. Can’t you intervene and save the day?”

“Absolutely not, this is a problem for the higher-ups at the AHA. The more people realize how futile their heroes are, the better it will be for the villains.”

“Siding with the evil-doers?”

“No, siding with justice. If they can’t save those kids, then what’s the point? How do they have the audacity to say they’ll protect the continent if they can’t manage that much. There’s a clue left by the perpetrator, open thy eyes, the answer is simple, hidden in plain sight. Only he with the unclouded and unbiased with a true sense of righteousness will come to their aid.” It struck home how precise the thought process was. Still, Sultria’s sense of wanting to help didn’t yield. He was quick to send out a force of his own to aid in the rescue. The mansion turned to chaos with the King still as a rock.

“No, no, no,” came another broadcast exactly one hour later, “-I asked for heroes to come search, not the public service. Police, special forces, what in the hell are you thinking?” a gun raised to the first victim’s head, “-tis for the heroes, the worth, the harbinger of hope. If I see involvement from any secondary party,” *BANG,* the bullet grazed her nose, “-she’ll die first. I’m not opposed to ending the new year’s party early; after all, who would not want to start with a bang.”

Panic ran rampant. The AHA who reached to the public service was cut from communication. It all came to the hero’s ability. The lack of training, focus, and determination made many up and coming stars into revenue machines. Neither could they save a life, nor themselves.

‘Pathetic,’ thought Staxius watching the live-feed of the hero’s efforts. The media were all over the incident; broadcast of people’s opinions was played across radio and television.

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Our heroes will come to the rescue, I believe in the AHA, we are blessed to being born in Alpha.

Hope will prevail, the power of faith can break the strongest of mountains.

I agree with the villain, our heroes are too complacent. I don’t even know if I’m following people sworn to protect or idols. There’s no difference, if the girl dies, I blame the AHA.

Should have seen this coming ever since the incident with Luna.

The sole mention of the name relit the extinguished flame of her suicide. Many conspiracies of her death being a murder went around the many sharing platforms. Questions with no answers, Melmark’s festive evening changed to fear and ire.

“What are our heroes doing?” asked a masked voice.

“They’re trying their best, sir, no need to worry,” said Leo sweating profusely.

“I worry, of course, I worry. Who was it that brought up the case of Luna, I thought said stain was cleaned. Leo, don’t you dare have our organization fail.” Pressure from top and bottom all but stacked.

Far, far away, Staxius headed to the soiree. The radio played constant news of the happening of Melmark. ‘The new years is pretty exciting. Guess the five days were worth the hassle. Let’s see if it all

works out. Heroes, prove to the public thee exists. Not the fakes who preach to popularity, no, those who have a sense of duty. Will Alpha live to standard?

"Fifteen minutes remaining," laughed the figure sat on a swing. Each broadcast was in a different location. The last seemed to be a hangar or storage-space. The large echoes made it clear. Dressed as a jester, the mental health concerned many watching. The people were jaded, many after the initial shock, went their the usual business. Families shopped for the late-night dinner. Only a few were preoccupied with the lives. "It's funny to see how hard the heroes are trying," he took the camera and jumped around. "Five minutes remaining," the video-camera flipped over, "-my babies are ready to fire at a press of a button. What sound will they make, crush, crash, or maybe silence? Who knows, I'll be busy laughing at their cries for pity."

Ding, ringed an alarm, "-five, four, three, two, one," *beep,* the guns fired with him laughing maniacally. "You see, you see," a pile of smoke rose, "-you see, you see, heroes are worthless. Children with families waiting for the arrival killed by the incompetence of the AHA, such sadness. It makes me also want to cry... HAHAAHAA."

"You seriously need professional help."

"Ohh, what is this," he pointed the camera to the voice, "-a plot-twist, could this be a hero!"

"Should I bother to answer that?" long black hair, a tight bodysuit with weapons at the ready, the bullets were but dust. "What is the matter with you?" she asked with a smirk, "-don't sell heroes so short," in a flash, the camera fell to face the fight. Live, an epic show of power and skill ended with a bitter taste. She won the fight, "-haha, get pranked," the fight against a robot.

"Here's an interview," displayed on the news, "-from our correspondent at the port, take it away."

"Hello, who would have thought a battle took place in this beautiful oceanic view. We have the privilege to interview the hero who saved the day," it panned to the lady.

"What's your name?"

"Luna," she replied calmly.

"Lady Luna, how did you know of the location?"

"It was a simple matter of being attentive. The purpose was to always serve the people. I'm just glad I made it in time. I do want to advise the population to be careful, there might be more attacks in the future, you never know."

"Thank you for saving the hostages, I'm sure Alpha is grateful to have thee as it's guardian." With a nod, she dove headfirst and disappeared. Social media blew up. The return of Luna trended as a topic all across. Her figure, height, and visage matched her recorded measurements. Speculation, rumors, a mystery served to skyrocket the popularity of she who saved the day. Needless to say, the higher-ups of the AHA were livid.

Massive gates opened to the sound of an engine, a lovely estate of modern-architecture and design posited itself against dusk. Dorino's mansion was a work of marvel. From lights to curtains and even the type of lamp installed, each fitted a particular theme.

Scheduled at 18:00, he made sure to come fifteen minutes before. Parked, Staxius's allure seized the wondering glances of men and women alike walking across the exquisite garden and cared yard.

"I'm glad you made it," came Dorino with a smile.

"Tis my pleasure to do so," nodded Staxius, "-here," he presented a box in which contained a very expensive signet ring, "-a present for the troubles of discussing with Lady Amber."

"You really shouldn't have," with a grin, the jewelry was a perfect fit.

"I must have forgotten my manners," quick to hold out a handshake, "-I've yet to formally introduce myself, Dorino, tis a pleasure to make mine saviors acquaintance."

"Staxius Haggard."

"Please, make thyself comfortable, snacks and drinks are served in the ball-room, a butler shall escort thee there."

"I'll find my way, thanks for the hospitality. I do wait patiently for our conversation later."

"Yes, indeed, Sir Haggard, indeed we shall do so."

Stepped inside the moderately large room for a mansion, there was an exceptional number of guests. Not ordinary folks either, people of high-class and prestige. Their mannerism spoke volumes, a setting more or less familiar to him. Not wanting to indulge, he walked confidently to a door leading to the veranda where rested a few tables and chairs.

"Excuse me,"

"Y-yes,"

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No, go ahead."

A quick exchange to a lady who seemed to wait for something. Her visage was melancholic, her long-dress seemed to match her expression. Sat next table across, he puffed slowly and gently. Dressed with a suit brought from Arda, one worn during formal reception at the castle, it drew the eyes of many. The watch he wore was of a prodigious watchmaker. Moname was written in calligraphy on the dial.

Her partner came soon, a man with broad shoulders and elegance. The ring on their fingers as well as the intimacy was a telling sign of being engaged. Her smiles felt empty, forced weirdly. Not that she could have helped it, her face moved naturally to the handsome man.

"Excuse me," said her partner, "-would you kindly?"

"Yes, with pleasure," he stood, "-I'll excuse myself," he returned inside where Dorino stood with a confused expression.

"Ah," nodded, Dorino sprawled, "-Sir Haggard, I had the gift appraised by a fellow friend, the gentleman on my right, and it seems that you might have made a mistake. This piece is valued over 500,000 Exa."

“Sir Dorino,” smiled Staxius courteously, “-there’s no mistake. The gift is a mere token of my appreciation, after all, a good connection can be worth more than money.”

Chapter 385: Lady Shino Pierre Gaso

“Very much true,” laughed Dorino in the classic rich manner, “-for half-a-million, I think the connection might be a little overrated.”

“No, Mr. Dorino, I see thee worth every penny.”

Returned to the appraiser, the man kept eyeing the ring, the jewel, metal, and design, all so uncommon.

“May I ask to where the masterpiece was made?”

“Arda, my home. There are plenty of far more expensive items. Ardanian culture is one of our world’s most rich and intriguing. Born in Alpha, thou art known to how the humanoid shape may vary according to their DNA. Such is a result of the united mindset of accepting one for what they are, I really admire it. Do come to visit, I think it be a good experience.”

“Yes, yes,” laughed the appraiser named Lucas. Out of the people around, his way of dressing was nostalgic. A robe-like suit with long hair tied with a hair-clip, a mixture of lady’s fashion for a man. Earrings, bracelets, and many accessories matching the attire, not over nor underwhelming, a perfect fragile balance.

“Mr. Lucas, may I ask a personal question?”

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“Yes, go ahead,” he agreed with full attention.

“Are you perhaps from Dorchester or familiar with the Dorchestrian culture, more specifically, the village of Krigi?”

“I’m surprised,” taking a step back, the happenings of the ball were ignored to him, “-never did I think someone to know the birth-place of my mother. I personally never visited, but my mother was gracious enough to grant me the honor of knowing. Would it be fine if I ask thee the same question?”

“I’m a native of Krigi. Purely on guesswork, I’d say your lady mother fled to Alpha during the great-war?”

“Yes, that is very much correct. Mr. Haggard, you do impress.”

“Likewise, Mr. Lucas, tis a pleasure to see our culture and rituals to not be lost to the ravages of time,” arms laid across their chest, they bowed, followed with a hug, and exchanged kisses.

‘The formal greeting allowed to the village chief and his family.’

“You knew,” he smiled, “-you know, I’m sure of it!”

“Mr. Lucas, let’s have dinner soon, I’d love to meet thy lady mother.”

“Sure, we’ll refer to Mr. Dorino for details,” turned to the perplexed man, a hasty nod paired with a smile finalized the arrangements. Thus, the party began. Many formed differing clicks based on standing

and wealth. As an unknown, Staxius was left out of the conversations to stare out a window with a cigar in mouth. He didn't mind being alone, the presence and way of movement, speech, and overall mannerism, created an impact big enough to have curiosity aroused. Body-language was what mattered at a fundamental basis – a skill mastered in the teenage years. From 18:00 to 19:00, Mr. Dorino went to meet and welcome the guests. The conversations ended in the same fashion, 'pretell, who's the alluring man staring out the window?' with a smile, he'd reply, "-a friend, do you wish to make his acquaintance?" most simply, the bashful nature of the ladies was to decline in a way it said the opposite. They weren't used to making the first move and were content at staring. The men, on the other hand, were on edge. Used to being fawned based on their name alone, created a minute amount of gossip.

"How nice is it to be the center of attention," said a tired Lucas, a youth in his best years. Hard as he could have tried, there were lipsticks and bite marks on his neck.

"How nice is it to be the focus of the ladies," said Staxius with a grin, "-the love bites surely must be impolite."

"No need of concern," he said taking out a scarf, "-I'm ready for any occasion."

"Casanova, tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance," said he in jest.

"Please, I'm not as great as he you speak of. The man was known for having ladies fall head-over-heels, a love they never experienced, a man of charm and intrigue."

"I take it thou idolize him?"

"One could say so," he leaned with back against the wall, "-a man who could have anyone. Unlike me, the one I wish for is yet to be found," the voice came to a stop, the accent and tone were audibly tired.

"Waiter," hailed Staxius, "-would you kindly have my friend a drink or two."

"You didn't have to," said Lucas.

"I only but asked, thank the waiter instead of me."

"You sure are interesting, Mr. Haggard, or should I say, Blood-King of Arda."

"You're a man of knowledge as well."

"Surely thee jests, anyone of an inkling of interest at the outside world will be bound to come across the King of Arda. There are rumors of thee owning Phantom, are those true?"

"Yes, I don't mind admitting. Phantom is my arm's trading company, and we're willing to sell as long as thee have the capital."

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"Unbiased and clear, just as the stories say. Alpha is in alliance with Arda. Not many know the news – I think, just the announcement of our emperor courting a lady, and one as beautiful as the Princess of Arda, was sufficient."

"Drinks, sire," said the waiter.

“Thank you.”

“My reputation is still fairly unknown, sure, people know the name but not the man. Time will tell, my friend, time will tell.” The slow chugging of air being sliced caught many ears. Lights blinked against the star-filled night; a helicopter hovered above the well-maintained yard. Soon to descend, it landed with guards leaped to provide security. Only after the rotors came to a stop that the ones inside stepped out. An emblem of a flower indicated who they were.

“The guest of honor is here,” said Lucas with a hint of dismay.

“Way to make an entrance, who are they?”

“Seriously?” he paused, “-Lady Shino Pierre Gaso, of the Gaso Group, one of five biggest conglomerates in Alpha. I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

“I never came across her name in my travels, so I’d not know.”

“Considering you spent half a million on a gift to Mr. Dorino, I figured you knew who would come today.” Ignoring the question, the relatively noisy hall came to a prolonged silence.

“Lady Gaso,” said Dorino escorting her inside the ball-room where the crowd stopped breathing, her piercing gaze eyed everyone to then fix on the men. Her steps were sharp and dangerous, in a nervous manner, the conversations resumed.

“Now that’s a way to make an entrance. Her presence cut the breath of many.”

“That’s lady Gaso for you,” her walk continued with Dorino bowing head each time she spoke. A long red and white traditional dress from Alpha. A bun with hair flips, with locks of hair swaying off the side of her head. Thin eyebrows, the stare held the fierceness of a tigress. Arrived at where men of equal power sat, she took over the conversation and had them in her palms.

‘She’s interesting.’

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll go have a walk, let’s continue our discussion later,” he left for the outside. Most specifically, they examine the helicopter.

“Excuse me, sire,” hailed a guard.

“No need to fret, I’m here to only observe.”

“Go ahead,” to which one was assigned to watch. Circling the craft and taking breaks every few steps, ‘-figured as much,’ he moved to the car and sat.

Calling Cake...

“Hello boss, how can I help?”

“Hello, sorry if I’ve disturbed.”

“No worries, I was on way to the office, what happened?”

“Have you heard of the Gaso Group?”

“Yes, they’re rich and powerful. Highly influential in Alpha, why do you ask?”

“Any connection to Meldorino?”

“The company is under the Gaso Group, that’s why I haven’t been able to take over it yet. It’s a bidding war I tell you, why, is the Group causing problems?”

“No,” he smiled, “-I do so happen to be in the presence of Lady Gaso. I need information, tell me everything about them, and I mean everything – contact Godfather Sable, I’m sure he has something on them.”

“It just so happens I prepared the very same thing on potential targets. One thing to know is her dealing with Phantom. We sold her the DD2 Armored variant for five million.”

“I saw the very same helicopter.”

“There might be more in the skies, we do sell what we make, part of it. Midas is proficient at finding clients – tis a given.”

“I’ve received the file. See you later, Cake.”

“Have a good day, boss.”

Gaso Group owns seven luxury brands including Meldorino. In recent years, profit has been low. Meldorino was the first to be liquidated to break-even after a hard year. Those are the rumors; her vindictive nature is reason more of why buying out Meldorino is tough. Godfather Sable’s informants say Shino Gaso has a hand in the underworld and links with Cimier. The Lerado incident might have had a hand to do with lady Gaso. There’s knowledge a company of the DG is trying to buy-out companies from Gaso. It leads me to suspect her involvement.

‘Cake, you always want to take on the final boss before preparation,’ the faint salty scent of sea forced a sneeze. “A shower might have done some good,” he mumbled, *knock, knock.*

“What’s the matter?” rolled the windows revealing a flustered Dorino.

“I’ve arranged for you to meet with Lady Gaso. Tis my way of repaying the favor, go ahead, Mr. Haggard, make the most of this New Year’s Eve.”

“I do appreciate the offer,” opened upwards, “-let’s not have the lady waste time.”

Lights turned blinding, the walk to where she stood felt long and slow. The returning glares were of disapproval, the other directors, under her command, were tired and tipsy.

“Lady Gaso,” said the director, “-here’s the man who saved my life.”

She gave a once over to settle on his face – her arms crossed, the face held a stern expression, one of boredom.

“Yes, hello, glad you saved my fellow comrade’s life,” her speech was fast and uninterested.

“Staxius Haggard,” he returned in a similar fashion, “-not to be disrespectful, but a lady of power should mind her speech and mannerism well.”

“And why should I do that?” she frowned, “-why should I care of someone who’s unimportant.”

“Such insolence,” he smiled, “-said behavior could have thy head put to the sword.”

“Are you threatening me?” the introduction turned sour, those around were left to wonder if she’d have another fit of rage.

“Not in the least, I’ve all but been courteous,” with a nod, “-let me introduce myself. I’m Staxius Haggard, Blood-King of Arda, and Leader of the Argashield Federation. Lady Gaso, thou must take the habit of addressing anyone and everyone in respect. Might I remind you, there are far more influential people in the world.”

“King of Arda,” she rose an eyebrow, “-are you perhaps the leader of Phantom?”

“Yes, that much is true, why do you ask?”

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“I apologize for my prior behavior,” said she giving a curtsy.

“I apologize for making thee uncomfortable.”

“I’m Shino Pierre Gaso, President of the Gaso Group.”

“Staxius Haggard,” a heated first conversation turned to a peaceful introduction.

“May I offer us to have a seat to a more reserved space?” asked the lady.

“Sure,” thus they took to the first-floor inside the study. The fireplace burnt away slowly, the amber color gave a soothing atmosphere.

“Majesty,” said Gaso with a sharp tone, “-not that I wish to be arrogant, I personally care not for social standing and hierarchy.”

“The act earlier was to not be disrespectful in the eyes of thy directors? I saw their expression upon saying my title, you choose to conform to their beliefs as to not cause trouble down the line.”

“Do you find pleasure in saying out loud what the other is thinking?” she said with a hint of annoyance.

“Tis a bad-habit of mind, I rather say it to be more of a unique feature.”

“Thou art arrogant,” she sighed, “-let’s speak of why I chose for us to have a private conversation.”

“Is it the liquidation of Meldorino?”

“Why don’t thee have the conversation by thineself,” her eyes rolled.

“Point well made.”

“It is as you said, I’ve decided to have Meldorino be liquidated. I know Phantom owns 30% of the company; thou art planning to have more stocks bought?”

“Correct.”

“Thought so, here’s my offer, I’m willing to sell how many percentages of the company you wish to buy.”

“What rate?”

“1% for 100,000 Exa.”

“You do know the economy is in peril. 100,000 Exa for 1% in a company on the verge of bankruptcy seems idiotic,” fingers pressed together, he watched intently at her reaction.

Chapter 386: New Year

“The price is justified by the brand, Meldorino is well-known.”

“Being popular doesn’t equal it being good or anything remotely to that. Take Kale the cruel, the man was popular for having invading villages, skinning the men, impaling the woman, and assaulting the children. He’s very famous, ask anyone with a vague fragrance of history knowledge, and the name is bound to come. Therefore, being popular or famous isn’t worth 100,000 Exa.”

“Fine, what of the numerous branches around the globe, do those not mean anything?”

“Are you referring to the closed showrooms, might I remind thee, Meldorino is but opened in Alpha.”

“What of the goods, the products, surely, the clothes and accessories are sure to amount to something.”

“Heritage, should I bother to give another example?” paused to check her reaction, “-I’ll do so either way. Heritage, what a scam, don’t get me wrong, there are examples to be loved – in our context, heritage of Meldorino, the products might I remind are outsourced to rather low-costing factories. Being the first to invent a concept might be a selling point. The idea of owning an item of relic is enough to have thy mouth water, sadly, the truth of old being better is wrong. Innovations happen every minute, hour, day, around the globe, discoveries are being made. Meldorino’s heritage compared to other famed brands is but a pebble on the road.”

“What then,” she said angrily, “-are you implying Meldorino is worth naught?”

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“Frankly,” stared coldly, “-Meldorino is worthless. Tis but a name, a plastered onto attire and accessories of which are made by others. I do understand the reason for cutting cost and such. Don’t take me a fool,” said he fluently, “-I’ve done my research and so has my team. The sole reason we’re after Meldorino is it has nothing that makes it, it. Tis another luxury brand for people of wealth to spend their money.”

“What of you,” said she, “-what of Phantom, thou made a big speech on originality and such, what have thee done to follow said ideals?”

“My lady,” he smirked to lit a cigar, “-Phantom is an arm’s dealer, we were the first to consider the business of warfare and bloodshed. The five-year war had us climb at an unprecedented rate. The DD2-Armored variant was bought from Midas, a company under Phantom. Like them we have GateSix, specializing in guns and much more. We do outsource simple parts to other factories, that much isn’t to

be lied about. Nevertheless, the engine, technology, come from our research, from our scholars working day and night. We could overengineer products, I mean, we've already done so during the war. Not for retail products, profit, and ease of replacement if ever there is damage." Her stance faltered from the continuous flow of confidently spoken words, no response came to mind. Puffed, "-I'm not opposed to stand and debate. There's a difference between leading a continent and a conglomerate. You worry about losses, I worry about the population. A misstep and the whole kingdom could be destroyed. Not that I doubt thy skill and ability, it's obvious you're a lady of utmost competence and young of age. A strong persona, fierce attitude and not wanting to back out of a deal, it's good traits for a leader, very good traits," leaned closer, "-there's also Cimier," he whispered to then relax against the chair, "-you in the underworld are bound to secrecy. You must have heard of the Dark-Guild, surely you must, for there was a massacre not a few days ago, the Lerado Tragedy."

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing of relevance to this negotiation," extinguishing the cigar, "-the price, my lady, how much art thee going to sell?"

Her face flushed in embarrassment; the fingers trembled, "-thou art quite the negotiator," said she with a tone of defeat.

"Nothing of the sort," said he with a smile, "-I all but said facts and figures. Since there's naught to discuss, I'm willing to buy Meldorino and their assets."

"How much," her eyes flared with a hint of mischief.

"I do want you," said he, "-I'm expecting for thee to have thy vindictive nature kept under wraps. My name isn't often associated with good deeds, the Blood-King title doesn't come to any old chap inheriting a kingdom, no, not in the least."

"Are you threatening me?" she smiled nervously, "-I'm backed by Cimier."

"Cimier," he frowned, "-the cowards who aren't willing to show themselves. It matters not who backs thee – I don't mind taking to the battlefield personally," a ball of white flame twirled around his opened palm, *snap,* a sudden burst along the arms to levitate in a circle around his head. "The bodyguards assigned to survey this room are asleep, in no way is the conversation reaching the outside world."

"Resorting to violence?" said she keeping a strong front.

"No," the flames vanished, "-tis but parlor tricks. An accurate show of strength might have thee fall unconscious and even die; I wish not such a fate upon an acquaintance."

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"Fine, fine," stood near the window, the warm breeze of a coming new year brushed her hair sweetly, "-how much are you willing to pay?"

"75,000 Exa for 1%"

"Isn't it a bit cheap?" said she.

“The annual earning of Meldorino has fallen to a mere three million. I’m offering to buy the remaining 75% for 5,250,000 Exa, a good deal considering the trying times.”

“80,000 Exa for 1%.”

“Don’t push your luck,” said he.

“Didn’t thou say my personality being a very good trait? 5,600,000 seems like a good deal to me.”

“To you, it’s a good deal,” he paused, ‘-her chopper is the same price as the damned company. How the times have changed.’

Simultaneously, the celebrations came in form of fireworks lighting the night. A private show organized by Dorino stared the duo who negotiated, start to finish, the display was of utmost beauty. “I’ve confirmed the amount, 5,600,000 for the rest of Meldorino.”

“Are you agreeing to my demand?” she said with a blank expression, a look of shock in most cases.

“I could lower the price if that is what thee wishes?”

“No, no,” quick to backpedal, “-consider it a deal, Majesty,” they shook hands.

“What of the method of payment?” asked she.

“A direct transfer to thy account should be sufficient. Why, is that an issue?”

“N-no, five million isn’t easy money to have lying around, not in one’s personal account.’

“Oh,” he returned her gaze with a look of disdain for the phone showed, 55,800,000 Exa. “Who in their right mind would have so much cash lying around,” said he avoiding the topic, “-let’s go over the trade, what will it be?”

“Could you come over to the office tomorrow, I’ll have the papers and transference readied tomorrow. To whom will it be, thy name or Phantom?”

“Phantom,” said he proudly, the New Year’s began on a high note.

“Now this is a matter of personal choice, as the coming new owners, what will happen of Meldorino?”

“We’ll leave the Gaso Group and focus on rebuilding relations and brand as a whole. It wouldn’t be fair to remain in the Group after my speech on uniqueness. That’d be hypocritical, don’t you think.”

“A king has to stand by his words, guess the saying is true. The words given by a king is worth its weight in gold.”

“Only if the king is of a good repute – still, action speak louder than words,” checking the clock, “-let’s return to the party.”

“Let’s, the negotiations lasted far longer than expected,” said she in relief.

“May I offer an arm,” he said at the door, “-an escort to a very lovely dressed lady?”

“Quite an amazing change in persona. From threats of deaths to now a gentleman,” a tender grin escaped the tight expression, “-it’s not often one gets to be escorted by a king,” giving a curtsy, “-I accept the offer.”

“Business, social, and personal lives must be split. The negotiation is over, we’re speaking as people united by the common thread of birth and death.”

“A very good sentiment,” said she, “-I must say I had a lot of fun. Such pressure during a negotiation, it was a battlefield.” Their steps echoed against the marble staircase leading into the hallway. People returning from the washroom stopped before crossing their paths. Arms in arms, the walk soon had them in the ball-room. An unknown close to one of the essential figures in the world of business. Speechless, the Directors stood to only sit back down.

“Thank you for the escort,” said she with a nod.

“The pleasure is mine,” a quick bow followed by a kiss on her hand, he turned to vanish in the crowd.

“How does a man who referred me as Casanova earlier explain this development?” asked Lucas a little flushed from drinks. “You caught the biggest fish of all.”

“No,” stood at the same spot, “-there’s nothing of sorts. I found her personality likable, her unrefined way of dealing with people forced action on my part. Well, who is to care of such technicalities, how was your night?” a glass of whiskey rocked back and forth, the ice made a ting with each rotation.

“Pretty eventful,” waved Lucas to a crowd of ladies eyeing him flirtatiously.

“The one in yellow was she who bit thee?”

“Are you psychic?”

“No, I so happened to notice her lipstick on thy neck. How was it, did you cross the point of no return?”

“Not in a million years, I’ve yet to find the one. Old fashioned or not, I’m saving myself for the special occasion.”

“Pure yet playful, what a strange combination.”

Meanwhile, in the distance, Dorino’s arm moved strongly pointing to an argument with Lady Gaso on the receiving end. Her head shook in dismissal to which he turned and beelined for the window.

“Mr. Haggard,” said he enraged, “-what is the meaning of this?”

Taking a sip, “-Mr. Dorino, whatever I say this moment will go through one ear and out the other. Have a cigar and relax,” he offered, “-let the fresh breeze carry the thoughts of fury. Deep breaths, calm thy mind.”

The soothing nature had him follow each instruction, “-the wind is pleasant.”

“Now, to the matter of Meldorino, I’ve bought the whole company. It will belong to Phantom starting tomorrow.”

“B-but,” he tried to argue but couldn’t follow.

“I’m not that cruel a man,” giving a reassuring smile, “-I’ll have thee as new Director, the employees will retain their jobs. I’m a giving man, let’s toast for tomorrow.”

“Friend,” said Lucas, “-tis already tomorrow,” laughter followed.

Soon, as celebrations were over, people took to the door one by one. Staxius was last to leave for he stayed to speak with Dorino and Lucas. The latter would stay the night, to which they exchanged goodbyes.

‘What was there hard about buying Meldorino. I guess working over phone is less effective than face to face. Manipulation, tis astounding how easy it is to force a person into thinking what I wish them to think. I led her to believe Meldorino being worthless as a company. I shudder for tomorrow, who knows what she might do. Until tis on paper, there’s nothing to prove the negotiations, well, that is before I sent her money with the statement being for purchase of Meldorino. She has to follow through – I made sure the news of Phantom being the owner spread. If she backs out, her credibility will plummet with the company she so dearly wants to keep. Check-mate, Gaso Group; the next phase of the plan begins at last.’

On the flight home, Lady Gaso’s mind was filled with the details of the deal. She was at a loss, in the bigger picture, the deal seemed fair. The added pressure of the directors congratulating on the deal left a bad taste. Thus, a new year began. A new year with Alpha as a target for ventures in both the business and underworld.

Chapter 387: Meldorino’s rebirth

“Another meeting finished,” commented an assistant of the Emperor. A semi-circular room with the ruler at the center emptied. Ministers of various holdings came for the weekly report and audience. The real reason the King of Arda was called, to assist in handling the many claims and distrust. The image reflecting outside didn’t project the many disagreements between leaders. A single thread held them all – the Emperor.

Heavy clops of boots shuddered out the two entrances.

“Why did it have to be today? The 1st of January; why.”

“Emperor Sultria!” called the same assistant.

“Forgive me,” said he tired from last night, “-I suppose the handling of this week is done?”

“Yes, Emperor,” came a monotonous voice, “-transport awaits thee outside. May thee have a good celebration of New year’s.”

“Majesty, are you sure?”

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“Yes, go on ahead, I have more business to attend too,” explained he slowly.

“As thee pleases,” quick on his feet, “-do drop by, my elder sister wishes to have an audience.”

Cleared to a hallowed desolate room, Staxius waited. Aceline's movie, after the premiere, would be in the cinemas at noon. Rumors over Arcanum, the medium through which people around the globe were connected, had it pegged as the best show of emotion one could see. Per the synopsis, the movie was romance. 'She's done it.'

Hero Luna saves 400 people from an explosion. More detail on the 15:00 news.

'Luna again,' thought he driving through tall-buildings, the traffic wasn't as bad as usual. 'She's taken the mantle of hero without an agency to another level – her uncanny resemblance to Luna, it does make me wonder, ghost.'

Soon it came upon a massive shadow of a giant. The car parked beside many other luxury vehicles. The Gaso Group's head office. The latter had the others felt as if kids, a giant with all the sense of the word. The reception area differed from the entrance the workers used, here, the ceilings were high, the floor cleared and the attendants lively and respectful. A restful smile that broke to say, "-good morning sir, how may I help you?" the same script, the same words for all the visitors. Trained to not judge by appearance, the fake smile couldn't be closer to the truth, a master at her profession.

"Good morning," returned Staxius, "-I have an appointment with Lady Gaso."

"Lady Gaso," she frowned doubtfully, "-let me check," quick on the uptake, her face lit to hide the prior expression. "Please, take a seat," he left with a nod.

The waiting room could only be described as obnoxious. The walls hung with countless awards of excellence for the various companies, the décor couldn't have been any less snobby. From couch to the floor-mat, it screamed of money. 'A psychological game,' thought he smoking a cigar, '-a show of power to have deals sway in the favor no matter the situation.'

"Sir,"

"..." he stared where the voice came.

"Lady Gaso has sent this man to escort thee up," said another attendant.

"Very well," extinguishing the cigar, they went up the countless floor with elevator music playing its finest piece of absolute boredom. Conveniently enough, the Gaso Group's office was split to accommodate the other companies.

"This way, sir," said the butler opened to a carpeted floor. Statues, paintings of value, and work of art stood as if a gallery. The curtains were curly and not opened to allow the sun – lighting was a mix between bright and dim, it felt cold, the kind from when a man is afraid or readied to run.

"Lady Gaso," the door opened.

"Good," said she fixed on her screen, "-majesty, please, take a seat."

"Thank you for the escort," he nodded. Being thanked had the man fluster into a mindless state of confusion.

"Majesty," said she with her strict tone, "-I hope the travel wasn't hard," to which the screen turned off.

"It was rather pleasant," he smiled, "-have the papers been readied?"

"Yes," said she ignoring the doubt of last night, "-do read it over."

"I see," leaned back with legs crossed, "-yes, it's all in agreement," said he after a few seconds."

"Did you read it all?"

"Yes, there's no need for concern, the clauses don't put me in jeopardy, tis an honest transference of ownership."

"The matter of money," said she, "-could you send it on this account?"

"No problem," said he with a phone in hand. A call to the bank was in order for said amount of money was a fortune. "Yes, transfer six million."

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"Six million!"

"Yes, consider it a gift for our future partnership."

"I don't know how to react to such kindness."

"Tis a mere token of appreciation."

"For further trades," she held out a hand.

"Yes, for further trades, let fortune be a lady whom we can cherish."

Monday 1st January XX94; Phantom acquired Meldorino, the singular showroom, a workforce of around 40 people, and the rights to their products and brand. Cake's reaction was one of utmost pleasure, she screamed over the phone nearly deafening the receiver. Her efforts at breaking into the luxury market ended well. A small step to them becoming a pillar in the future.

Taking the elevator down, '-such a sorry sight,' a small room with multiple-computer screens and Dorino visibly stressed in another room.

"Who is that?"

"I don't know, maybe it's the debt collector?"

"Shush, don't speak out loud, that's a problem for the director, not us. We're backed by the Gaso Group, don't worry."

"Should have said it before they liquidated our shares, fired 90% of the workers, and sold everything, we're nothing but a name."

"Shut up, be grateful you have a job in this recession."

"Excuse me, everyone," said the towering figure stood at the doorway, "-could someone kindly call over Director Dorino?"

"He's done it this time," mumbled he who went to the director. Soon to glance at who called, an abrupt gasp after which he dashed for the door, never had the workers seen him so riled-up.

"Majesty," spoken sharply, "-you've come."

"Yes, indeed I have," he smiled.

"Is it true?"

"Yes, the deal has been finalized."

"Director," called a worker, "-may I be so blunt as to ask who this is?"

"Yes, you may," facing the crowd, "-this here ladies and gentlemen, is Staxius Haggard, Leader of Phantom and new owner of Meldorino. Before questions are asked, let me say this, our debts have been cleared, we're at the starting line beside Sir Haggard. Code of conduct be damned today, thee, workers still here were chosen for thou were the best in thy field."

"Director," came another, "-what does it entail?"

"Meldorino is leaving the Gaso Group," said the owner. "As the director said, we'll be starting again. My expectations aren't high, the pecking order will be the same with Director Dorino at the helm. Meldorino is going to break free from the shackles of commonness," in that instant came a message.

"Director, could you have the workers take the week off?"

"Week off, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, it will be a paid vacation, a gift for sticking to the company."

Soon to head to the privacy of the office, murmurs of who the owner went around the workplace.

"What is this all about?"

"Listen," said Staxius, "-I'm going to fund thee 1 million Exa as starting capital. The vacation will be paid for by me, should cost around 400,000 Exa. I'm returning to Arda in a day or two. Meldorino is going to change from a fashion brand to a watchmaking company. There are rich people jaded by high-end fashion and accessories. I've never seen anyone take watch-making seriously."

"What am I supposed to do, I know nothing of watches?"

"Study, Director, tis thy job. I'm going to go hunt for smaller companies and have them be part of Meldorino."

"The same tactic used by Lady Gaso, furiously buying out the competition."

"Yeah, have the workers pack up their bags, and you too. I've arranged for a new office not far away."

"As you wish, Owner," a push of the door had the workers' shudder. Never had they seen someone like him.

"Director," came one of the managers, "-what happened?" he asked.

“Everyone,” said he, “-everyone, pack up thy bags. The Owner has given thee one week to relax on a fully paid vacation.”

“Seriously,” he stumbled, “-Is that true?”

“Yes, very much serious. Meldorino isn’t going to die. Also, have the designer switch to researching watches.”

“A rebranding?”

“Yes, have everyone take interest in time-pieces, we’re embarking on a new journey.”

The subtle mention had them celebrating without rest. A paid vacation in trying times, what luxury. Out on the road towards a shorter less impressive building with *Renting,* written. A few people dressed in casual clothes cluttered around a car.

“You must be Mr. Haggard?” said the leader of the group.

“Correct, you’re Mr. Hanzal I suppose?” he replied with a nod. A handshake followed by a long and elaborate conversation. A few minutes later, it ended with another handshake, a deal was struck, rental of office space for the reborn Meldorino.

“Hello, Serene?”

“Hello, Majesty, happy new year, how may I help?” they spoke over the phone.

“I’m returning to Arda for a few days. Have Skokdrag and Haru go around to find the best watchmakers we have. There’s also a renovation job I need to complete for next month.”

“As you wish, have a good trip home.”

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‘That should take care of that,’ thought he on the way to the Marrowy. The radio continued to praise the exploits of Luna, an overnight celebrity. The AHA was very much angry. A new star came onto the scene to steal light away from the poster boy, Starlight. The latter was reprimanded severely for not performing well. It was a whole mess only known to the supposed heroes. The monster problem, after being talked many o’ times was simple. To have the Royal Army of Alpha set-up an outpost. It would serve both as a refuge and stronghold.

‘Everything does work out for the best,’ thought he on the jet returning home.

Landed on the 2nd of January, the capital was still in the celebrating spirit. The castle lit with a thousand flame. Unknown to most, upon the waltzing of guests on the marble floor, the king made his entrance. Eira, Xula, and Lizzie were preoccupied with tending to the guests.

“Majesty,” said Serene waiting for the arrival.

“Good to see you,” he said, “-it’s been a week?”

“I think more,” she refuted, “-shall we head for the celebrations?”

“Still at it?”

“Yes, you’d think they are celebrating as if the end of the world is close.”

“The end of the world,” steps taken into the castle, the walls faded. Time seemed to stop, a flicker of reality and illusion.

“Here I call on thee,” the walls changed for the openness of a green-field.

“I DID IT!” screamed a young boy with the same aura as Creation.

“Did what?”

“I summoned Death,” he laughed, “-father said if ever I was in trouble to perform the ritual.”

“And?” he stared to the blue-sky, ‘-damn you, creation.’

“I just so happen to be in a very bad situation,” the sun was soon to be blocked by a giant humanoid figure breathing fire.

“Save the village, please!”

“Are you serious?” he stood jaded by the situation. Unprovoked, the giant soon stomped the ground sending shockwaves around. “You’re asking he who controls death to save people, how dumb are you kid?”

“Death reaper or not,” he stared, “-I don’t care. Father said if I was ever in trouble you would help.”

“Listen,” amidst the carnage of the giant breaking the scenery apart, Staxius spoke calmly, “-what is there in return for me? I don’t want gratitude; I want something worth value.”

“What if I become your ally,” said he terrified by the onslaught.

“Why would I take a child for an ally, who are you?”

“I’m not a kid... I’m 1400 years old, heir to Creation.”

Chapter 388: Creation’s Heir

‘Heir to Creation,’ thought he summoned inside a bloodied circle. “To be sure-,” the giant took to throwing boulders towards the village.

“Do something,” cried the boy in fury. “THEY’RE GOING TO DIE!”

“-answer me this,” glanced Staxius, “-are you willing to serve me if I save the village and save this world?”

“YES, I’LL DO ANYTHING, JUST DON’T LET MY MOTHER DIE.”

“I heed thine request,” mercilessly gazing upon the village, the right hand stretched out with the triangle flickering, *Heed mine call, I, Staxius Haggard, call upon thy strength. Stop all who dare oppose mine own will, Death Element: Magical Barrier, Pentagram Variant, Hell’s Gate,* two pillars as tall as the giant rose from the ground, a gate manifested, a portal through which the weeping souls of the dead were heard coldly amidst the rumbling of the earth. Clenching the palm; the boulders of which was mistaken

as meteorites, crashed against the barrier. The impacts were so heavy it split into another thousand pieces of rocks and continued their path.

“LORD DEATH, YOU’RE GOING TO KILL EVERYONE!” screamed the boy once more. The sight played in slow-motion, a village on the brink of destruction with the savior stood with no sense of urgency, he but held a cavalier expression.

‘Quite troublesome,’ thought he ignoring the situation around, ‘-hell’s gate didn’t do much, I used the pentagram variant for naught. The giant is powerful; quite a shame I have Intherna and Gophy out on a mission,’ a sudden chop like gesture had the barrier vanish leaving the people defenseless.

.....

Many stood watching the end of the world, the protection gave a glimmer of relief, the faces were relaxed in a tangled manner. Yet, the impending doom came as no surprise, rocks fell one after the other around the vicinity.

Deep slumber, deep rest, awoken for the chance at retribution. Gate of which stands before mine way, open for thy master has come: Nevermore – Hell’s Gate, hand-pressed, the eyes closed, ‘-I need a new protection spell, merging hell’s gate and Abyssal Wrath seems appropriate.

Trapped or freed, the clutches of hell shan’t leave he who does wrong, it shan’t leave he who does good; for hell, the abyss, and its flame, are one of the same. Called to do me service, the world is but a gateway, the final destination has yet to arrive. Death Element: Magical Barrier, Abyssal Wrath Variant, Ploutonion. A secondary gateway conjured from a crack, a distortion in reality, the illusion broke for a second out which came a pentagram. Ancient symbols of the gods, mainly Pluto, another name for he who presides over death. The gateway was alive for it had hands made of the Void-flame stretched to grab the rubble – a single touch reduced the projectiles to naught.

“It’s your time, ugly,” said the God of Death as the Giant peered down insolently. *Woosh,* a jump followed by the ground carved onto itself.

“You’re strong,” said he hovering with the wings of the angels. The giant stood still, a stare-off between a god and an unknown, “-must be hard,” said he, “-must be hard to be created and then cast as a defect. I’ll give thee salvation, creature of Creation,” reached close, he patted the harbinger of chaos.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, from when thee were born and till thee die, I, the god of death, hold in my hands the strings which binds thee to this world, by my authority, I order thy chains to be severed, spell, Tactus Interitus.

“Rest well, o’ soul corrupted by the mindless curiosity of a boy,” from giant, it changed to its prior size – a man, a child, a babe, to then naught.

“Thank you so much.”

“Thee surely jest. Don’t think I’ve not noticed. The village, this realm, the monster, they are all your creation. Acting innocent...”

"Please," he interjected, "-I did create what thee said," the face moved to the village, "-I created them, yes, that I did. But, you see, I did it because I was lonely..." without a sense of guilt, he pulled on Staxius's arm and walked to the village.

The closer one got, the bigger and more beautiful were the houses. People walked with no particular uniqueness. It was as if puppets without faces nor names, empty beings wandering the streets to have the loneliness reduced. Walked on a bridge over a waterway, they came upon a quiet little tavern. The door opened with two figures, a man and a woman, cleaning and tending to the faceless guests.

"Welcome home," said the man whose face resembled vaguely to the living.

"The rumble outside had us worry," said the lady sprawling from behind the counter, "-promise us to never go away."

"Mother, father, this is my friend, I got lost and he brought me back."

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"Thank you so much," veiled by the dim lighting, their faces came to reality. Unequal eyes, noses of which didn't match their contours, a badly put together puzzle. The sight sent shivers down his back, '-is living in such an illusion fun?'

Hugs and kisses were exchanged to the boy. He returned the expression of love with affection of his own, yet, the face seemed lonesome.

"See," said he with lifeless eyes, "-this is my only home. I had to save it even if it meant calling on the god of death."

"Meet me by the waterway," the door shut as he left.

One by one walked the faceless figures with their faceless families. 'Such a sorry sight,' thought he with the water flowing gently.

"I'm here."

"Good," leaned on the stone-wall preventing from falls, "-about what we agreed upon earlier."

"Me becoming your ally?" the feet twirled nervously.

"Do I really have to ask," returned a cold voice.

"A c-contract is a c-contract," said he with the face wanting to glance away.

"1400 years living alone," added the God of Death, "-that's quite a long time. Creating a small world in a pocket dimension to soothe the solitude. Creation can be on the dense side, when all is said and done, Creation can only make what it desires but never gain it for themselves. Isn't that the truth?"

"..."

"I struck a chord, didn't I. Same as Creation, my job is to take what isn't mine. I take what is most precious, and that is the life of every creature be it god or insect. It's a cruel existence that I've come to love. I can't die, well, I can die only if I left my powers run rampant. I constantly fight the curses, malice,

and hatred of the living. In thy case, heir to Creation, you deal with the worst kind of cruelty, the cruelty to never be you, cruelty to never have what you want, the cruelty to not have a personality nor desires. The world you created, bright and cheery as it seems, is crying. The giant earlier was thy effort at having some fun – you summoned me to have one speak to thee, am I wrong? Why would the Creator of the realm be powerless before his invention.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Thou seeks salvation, thou seeks an end to solitude.”

“...” a slow nod of agreement came, “-kill me already, I’m tired and bored, there’s nothing to do, nothing to make, and nothing to see. Heir to the most powerful entity, what a joke, I never wanted to be in that position.”

“I understand how you feel,” said he with a smile, “-I understand the boredom of never facing a worthy opponent. I was weak, and now I’m powerful, no fight has me fear, the thrill is gone – not even a war could quell my bloodlust. Yet,” flash images of before crept forth,”-I shuddered,” said he, “-I shuddered for the first time. I, he who is feared by all, shuddered. The emptiness in your heart, this world, it’s sad – even I can feel it. Heir to Creation, I’m not arrogant – I can’t promise you salvation nor will I kill you.”

“What then, WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?”

“There’s another solution.”

“...” the nervous gestures stopped, “-who said Creation can’t be part of reality. Who said creation can’t be a normal person – we’re gods, and gods make up the rule, our word is law and law is what other obey, not us,” he held out a hand, “-come with me, I won’t make promises, however, I can say this; my world, the realm I live in is much more existing than here. Creation and Death are two sides of the same coin – Heir to the all-mighty, come and I’ll show thee the beauty of souls, humans, and reality.”

“W-what of father?”

“Creation,” from holding out a hand, he reached in to embrace the boy, “-you don’t have to worry. Become part of my family, be my ally – there are so many more dimensions with differing gods, differing rules, and differing adventures. what do you say, let’s embark on a journey, you and me?” The boy stared with an opened mouth, the words left him speechless. A single tear ran along the cheeks.

“It’s been so long since I talked to anyone. Father was right,” he said sniffing, “-The God of Death did come to save me,” he giggled. “I agree on one condition.”

“What may that be?”

“I’ll come to thy world as thy son, thy own blood.”

“Thee does realize I’m the god of death...”

“And I’m Creation,” *Snap,* a white light had him hover with circles and symbols hovering about, “-done,” said he with a smile. Tall, a sharp-jawline, white hair, red eyes, the teeth of a vampire, a sharp nose, pierced ears, the symbol of Creation, an infinity symbol, was engraved on the right palm. “I now bear thy blood, father, I’m a vampire with inheritance over the Chaos-Element.”

“Chaos magical element. Tis the first I’ve heard of it.”

“It’s a direct mix of your blood and the blood of creation. My body changed, it has thine blood running inside. I’m thy son, Father.”

“How am I going to explain this?”

“There’s no need to explain,” he laughed, “-history will change for my sake – I’ll be known as thy second progeny. My mother is Shanna Islegust, my father is Staxius Haggard. I have two sisters, Lizzie Haggard and Eira Haggard. Big sister Eira is in line for the throne.”

“By chance, what will happen to the world?”

“Nothing, it will remain the same with me in the mix,” he knelt, “-please, give me a name.”

“A name you say,” he paused, “-I got it, Julius Arnet Haggard,” he held out a hand.

“Thank you, father, I’m henceforth known as Julius Arnet Haggard.”

“I suppose we should head back,” the pocket-dimension crumbled on itself.

‘Where am I?’ soothing classical music snuck from out the ballroom, a sense of relief went from mind outward to the body.

“Father...” came a voice, “-father...” one familiar, “-please, wake up.”

Back to reality, maids and butlers quietly gazed upon their master. Beside stood Serene as for the voice, “-welcome home, father,” said a boy in his eighteen’s.

“Majesty,” said Serene, “-this isn’t the time to space out. Prince Julius came to welcome.”

‘The world did change. Creation’s heir is my son. Here I thought he was bluffing this whole time; the symbol of Infinity is still there.’

“I do apologize,” said the King, “-the voyage took more than I expected.”

“Mother, sister,” waved the prince, “-look, father is here!”

“The King has returned?” echoed the waltzing guests to a halt. There he stood in the doorway with the very much doted upon Prince.

“Papa,” soon to escape Rosetta’s grasp, young Lizzie dashed across the dancing floor.

“I’m back,” in arms, he spun with the princess giggling.

“I didn’t expect you to come so early,” smiled Xula with her eyes blinking sweetly.

“Congratulation on finishing your training at Claireville Academy,” smiled Eira, “-I see my younger brother is still hell-bent on becoming father’s apprentice.”

“Yes,” he replied, “-father said I could join him after I turn eighteen.”

‘Did I...?’

Chapter 389: Prince Julius Arnet Haggard

“Please, there is no need to stop on my account. May the celebration continue till sunrise,” said the king with a toast. Noble of birth and guests of prestige soon did as told. For the next hour, he entertained those who came for it was courtesy. The Queen, Prince, and Princesses could but watch from afar.

“Julius,” said Eira, “-did you know of father’s arrival.”

“Not as much no, I saw Skokdrag earlier inquiring about watchmaking and if he could borrow some from a fellow noble’s collection. My mind clicked, the only reason he’d do such a thing was if orders came from our father,” dressed sharply, Prince Julius was as handsome as they came. Same as Eira, Julius won the Inter-magical tournament to be known as the next Prodigy. Despite the offers from celebrated magical academies, he chose to follow the King. When asked by Queen Shanna, the response was, ‘-sister is doing everything she can to study hard. I don’t want to impose on her anymore, I want to find my purpose, and I think staying by father’s side will help me in that endeavor.’

“Once again, welcome back home,” said Eira retreated to the comfort of the balcony off side of the music-filled hall.

“It’s good to see you,” said he giving a hug, little Lizzie demanded more attention. Her selfishness was cute, though, in due time, said habit would change.

“I’ll call it a night,” said the king, “-my queen, please take care of the rest.”

“Sure,” said she smiling, “-go ahead, I’ll have Youst sent.”

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‘It feels like ages,’ the music grew far and silent, the hallways came to be empty and dim, no sign of life the more one walked. ‘Alpha took a lot of energy. Gophy, Intherna, I’m counting on thee,’ a black-oak door came broadly. A twist of the handle revealed the Royal-bedchambers. He hadn’t been here in the last five years ago; not since the day when the supposed cheating happened. *Click,* toggled to a warm candle glow, the heavy darkness lifted, the bed stood invitingly with comfortable pillows. ‘Seriously?’ a crack in the window left unchanged, a memento for said incident. A barrier was cast to not let the cold intrude. A big portrait faced the bed, Queen, King, Prince, and Princesses, a family picture was taken on Lizzie’s birth. ‘He did change history to become part of my family.’

“Hey, hey, wake up, father!”

“What is it?” just as sleep was to take the helm, Prince Julius snuck out of the party.

“I completed part of our deal,” said he smiling.

“Integrating the family, I assume you lived all those years and have a concrete memory of history?”

“Yes, I did live as thy child – the eighteen long years went by fast.”

“Did you have fun?”

“Oh, more than fun, I met new people, found friends, was blessed with a lovely and caring mother and siblings. Remove the part where war-affected our kingdom, I’d say this is close to paradise. It’s surprising to see the God of Death be viewed as a Hero during the Holy Kreston Invasion. I was studying at Skylar Magical Academy. Following thy adventures was fun – I’m impressed.”

“What about the real Father, Creation, the All-mighty?”

“Oh, I spoke to him beforehand. He said he didn’t care since this dimension is under thy protection.”

“Tell me more about thy life, my son, thee knows of my journey, yet, I know naught of thine.”

“Sure, father. I was born on the 4th of February XX75. This is where the first inconsistency comes into play. I know full well that you and the queen were married around 7-8 years ago. In no way would it be possible if I was born in XX75, almost two decades ago. Well, something happened, I don’t understand the full extent of it. History changed a little; it changed to fit my arrival, instead of meeting Queen Shanna at the end of the Holy-Crusade, thee met her far long ago. Being imprisoned for 16 years didn’t help the course of history. Long story short, thee and she met to have me as a child. Since Princess Eira is 24 years old, I think you met Queen Shanna on her diplomatic journeys to Dorchester. It’s a huge mess, how changing history can be troublesome. Skipping over said details, it all continued as plan. The Crusade, meeting with Julius, yes, I know why thou choose mine name. As her first child, mother treated me very well, I was doted upon by everyone. Despite the rumors of the queen having had an illicit relation, most understood the circumstances and soon the news would be known to all. I studied day and night, waiting for the day the young Baron would enter Arda. Thee might not have noticed on said day, Queen Shanna knew who thee were. She followed thy journey ever since thy passionate night. Her heart was filled with admiration for the one she loves – thus, the courtship, the establishment of a Guild in Arda to now. I most lived as a spectator, enjoying the company of my comrades – groomed to be a Prince is hard. Then, thy got married, I got to meet you, the past self. We got along; Eira came to be the Heir to the throne as she was eldest. She studied at Claireville Academy, won the Inter-magical tournament while I studied at Skylar Magical Academy. We did manage to meet on her last day at the academy – a friendly training match between our schools. She destroyed us, especially her little brother, her face, her eyes, the white hair, she didn’t hold anything. There’s nothing more of interest from that point, life continued till the Invasion – Arda in peril, the Blood-King faction breaking the alliance, and more. Quite a heavy story. Here I am, after so many years, I’ve come to finally meet him who I swore to be an ally.”

“History changed with me meeting Queen Shanna and having a babe well before our courtship. Tis rather savage, I wished for it to be under normal circumstances. Yes, I wish I remembered how and when it happened, sadly, the memories elude me.”

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“No wonder, the memories would have changed for every living being – well, all those who are mortal; it excludes the divine. You know of the prior timeline, not the new one.”

“As far as I’m concerned, I trust nothing more changed?”

“Yes, nothing more changed, everything is as you remember. Except for the part where I’m involved. Not worry, I did my best to not alter the course of history, I remained hidden and limited my involvement – after all, I’m heir to the All-mighty, there’s nothing I can’t do.”

“Well, Prince Julius,” sat upright, the hand reached to give a comforting slap on the back, “-we’re family now. Go catch up with lost time, Eira and Lizzie await; as their brother, you mustn’t let harm befall them.”

"I know, I know, it's just that Big Sister Eira is stronger, she protects us instead."

"How adorable," said he with slow blinks, "-forget not, she's to be married to the Emperor of Sultria. Young Lizzie remains; be a good big brother, as for I, sleep beckons."

"As you wish, father, I'll see you tomorrow," the door closed. A change in history to fit his presence. Creation's heir did a number on the time-line. It was as said, little too much was changed, the world remains as is.

A peaceful feeling of relaxation overcame the strain of everyday life. Sleep was on way, when "-Hey," came a whisper underneath the blanket.

'Not another one,' he thought and forced the eyes shut.

"Don't ignore me," said the voice close to the ears, a tingling sensation went from the neck down, "-wake up," said it again. Gentle lips seem to rest itself against the neck.

"AHH," he stood, "-what the hell is wrong with you," said he staring upon a modestly dressed Xula. "Are you serious... is this the time to be aroused?" her cheeks flushed; her eyes were of a mild pink.

"Shut up," she crawled atop with her index pressed against his mouth, "-don't say another word," the other hand caressed his chest to head for the stomach.

"I do hope the door is locked," he whispered to suddenly reach for an embrace, thus continued the night unknown to all. The bedchamber was as hot as a summer day, as hot as the boiling of water, and as hot as the hot springs.

'What a night,' thought he with the sun breaking through the curtains. Xula laid beside wrapped in the blanket, the cold morning was treacherous. *Muah,* a peck on her forehead signaled the start of a new day.

"Ay, majesty."

"Good morning, Skokdrag." Sat in a newly furbished meeting room, drinks were brought over by Youst.

"I heard from Lady Serene about the watchmaking endeavor. What's that about?"

"It's business, the market for timepieces has yet to be ventured in."

"No need to explain," a briefcase opened with three watches, "-these are what my apprentices made from the little information we got. What you think?"

"Beautiful," said he staring at the pieces, the back was of glass allowing to see the moving mechanical parts. "Did it really take a few hours to make these?"

"No, of course not. These are pieces from renowned watch-makers around Arda. The prototype of what my apprentices made is here," another case was placed onto the table.

"Oh..." robust, built more like a weapon than an accessory, "-durable."

"I know," he took away the examples, "-we need more time to understand the inner-workings."

"It's good enough for our purpose," *ding,* a press of a button had Serene walk inside.

“Majesty, thee called?”

“I want to know the names and addresses of the watchmakers.”

“Already taken care of,” she smirked, “-I took the liberty and had transport fetch them.”

“Good thinking. Guild Leader Skokdrag, have thy apprentice work more on perfecting the mechanisms – I have a feeling it will play a big part in the future.”

“Yes, majesty, I’ll be on it.”

“Business?” asked Serene.

“Where’s Haru?”

“She’s at Roth.”

“Good, want to tag along?”

“With pleasure,” said the secretary.

Teleported to the entrance of the castle, Young Lizzie and Prince Julius were spotted running around the yard under the watchful eye of Rosetta. The sight never grew old, each time he came across a soldier, the latter would stop and salute. Argashield Federation, oppose to armor, they now wore uniforms of which were red and blue. Trained beyond the point one would say humane, the fighters were readied to fight and kill at a single notice. The military-focused Federation’s influence could be spotted as fortification along the castle walls, watch-towers in which resided marksmen. Elves dropped the bow and arrow to pick up the sniper rifle. Faster, easier, and deadlier, the peace was held tightly by them, the freedom fighters.

Dirt road replaced by tarmac; the streets were larger with vehicles as opposed to horse-carriages. New buildings were made of Ikahmold, a synthesized ore born from Alchemy. Cheap to make giving 50% magical protection and 2 times resilience – the ore was mixed with materials used to make the buildings.

“How has this place changed so much.”

“Product of war,” added Serene along the pavement. Trees were planted to contrast against the blandness of the new architecture.

Roth stood tall and high. Led by the four guild-masters and backed by the Royal Family, an asylum for those in search of a job.

“Excuse me,” said a boy bumping against Staxius.

“Mind thyself,” voiced Serene sharply.

“He apologized, there’s no need to get worked up,” returned a deep menacing voice from behind. A silver tag lit as he walked smugly inside.

“Motherf..”

“Stop,” said the king holding her arm, “-there’s no need for commotion.”

“Adventurers are so smug nowadays,” her tongue clicked.

“What you say missy?” stopped the broad man, “-we’re smug?” the furred muzzle, a scar running down the left eye, and the presence of a monster said coldly.

Chapter 390: éclair

“There isn’t a need for such a misunderstanding.”

“Fine, whatever, tell the lass to keep her mouth shut next time,” pulled inside, the beastman’s attitude reflected most of the adventurers.

“Why did you step in,” flailed Serene shamed for the insolence.

“Undue trouble will but stop a man. Come, let’s go, I need to speak to Haru.”

Roth in the many years changed to accommodate more machines. The circular center desk was replaced for vague space. Registration was moved to the upstairs. The vacant office of the ex-Guild Leader allowed said change. The ground floor was more of a waiting lounge area for planning and regrouping. Many adventuring parties, people dressed in armor whilst others wore military-grade outfit and weapons. Amidst the crowd, few humans were spotted mingling with the bunch. Adventurers from Oxshield, in search of jobs and such. The same could be said for the Ardanian fighters – few moved to the hunt near the Azure wall or climb the Tower of Aris. Achilles, after losing her way by Deadeye’s death, returned to the tower. Last of her was heard leading a new expedition atop the fortress.

“Here we are, the fifth floor,” a double door stood with *main office* written on the frame. Blinding as they came, the light from the sun flashed against the opening door. Two tables on either side with the respective guild leaders and faction written on notices. Smiting, Fighters, and Mage’s guild were empty with a load of paper scarred along the shiny desk.

“Hello, how can we be of assistance?” said a figure stood near the door.

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“We’d like to meet with Guild Leader Haru,” said Serene taking a strong step forth.

“Any appointments?” asked the guard. Almost unnoticed, the four desks were separated by a transparent barrier.

“Appointments?” snickered she who soon pointed at the King, “-will the visage suffice?”

“Majesty,” *gulp,* the barrier opened allowing passage.

“Thank you,” said she with a smug expression.

“I’m busy, what is the guard even doing, I told him to not let anyone-”

“Hello, Lady Haru,” the massive shadow peering down to her table had her speechless.

“Cat got your tongue?”

“Very funny,” said Haru with a straight face, “-what brings you here, majesty?”

"I've come to discuss business," he sat, "-mind giving us some privacy?"

"Sure thing, majesty," she bowed out the room. Transparent to shut, a singular light glowed on the ceiling.

"Should we skip the formalities and get to the deal?"

'Her attitude has changed. She's stronger and sterner. I can't imagine what happened to her.'

"Lady Haru, I came to propose an idea. Since thee are the mediator for all craftsmen around the province – you're the only person who can decide."

"Go on," said she with a pen rolling around her fingers.

"I, or should I say, Phantom, has acquired a luxury company in Alphaia," her face lit in anticipation. "From thy expression, I guess thee knows what I wish to say. The new company is being rebranded; fashion and attire are very much the rich's favorite past time. The Ardanian culture is very much unknown to the continent where the princess's going to live."

"I understand what thee wants," her fidgeting stopped, "-thee want us to have items readied to be sold at Alphaia."

"Yes, that is the idea."

"I'm interested, what products are thee thinking off?"

"Clothing, but, not common clothes – I want tradition noble garments fitted with jewelry and gems."

"It's going to cost a lot."

"The mine is at thy disposal for sourcing the gems, and yes, thee will have to buy it."

"Give me a moment," soon to take her phone, "-will accessories do?"

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"Yes,"

"Ok, hold on," she kept on ringing people whilst typing – multitasking at its finest.

"Done," paused to take a breath, "-for accessories, I'm thinking of leather bags made of wyvern scales and leather. We could add the fur from the plant Motus. It's rare and should fetch a few gold pieces on the market – there's bound to be someone hoarding that stuff."

"Back up," he halted her fast-paced lips, "-isn't wyverns ranked tier 3-2?"

"The more reason for it being called luxury. Majesty, I'll have a skill artisan work on having five readied. The clothes – I'll have the price sent forth in two to three days, how does that sound?"

"Perfect actually, what of the price, a rough estimate?"

"Let me see," her fingers sprinted across the keyboard, "-10,000 Exa per bag and 30,000 Exa for the attire without a gemstone, the price will vary accordingly."

“Expensive, I like it, have the orders be ready by next week.”

“Sure thing,” she slid a card, “-my contact info. Majesty, let the journey of trades begin.”

“Yes, let’s,” shaking hands, the partnership was settled. In said manner, the King went around the capital searching for potential workers and products. It took a few hours for them to return due to a phone call. The watchmakers were at the castle. Upon arrival, the five of them sat around a warm drink – they soon took to conversing about clocks and mechanisms. Dressed poorly with abandon for how they looked, it showed dedication to their craft.

“Greetings, majesty,” stood the five with a bow.

“Yes, take a seat.”

Settled with some unknown to how to act, legs moved, fingers fiddling to keep a sense of peace, “-I’ll jump right to the fact,” spoken strongly, time seemed to stop. “Are you five the best watch-makers in Arda?”

“Y-yes,” said one checking on the others.

“W-we are,” added another, “-we can vouch for one another in terms of skill.”

“I don’t care about that, what contribution has thee made?” inquired the King. Thus, one by one, they explained their skill and what innovation they brought. Using the Arcane Library, he knew about the intricacies of watch-making as to not be fooled. Preparation is what leads an army to victory, a thought applying to everything.

“Good, here’s my offer. I want the five of you to join forces. Become a part of my team, I’ll grant thee money, a laboratory, and most importantly, an audience to have the work shown. What of it, interested?” a moment of silence followed, “-please excuse me,” he left the room with Serene as overseer. Lightened, discussion about the deal took a turn for doubt.

“Hello, yes, majesty, what are you saying? The other watchmakers are willing to join our company and for free. What of the five here? What, if they don’t accept, we’ll have other more competent take their place, ok sure,” said in a way for them to barely hear the call, the faces changed.

“Did you come to a conclusion?”

“Majesty,” said one, “-we accept the proposal.”

“Welcome to Phantom, watchmakers. Go home and pack thy stuff, you’ll be staying at Rotherham from today forth. Not to worry, there will be rest periods. Understand, I want but one thing, and tis excellence,” turned to Serene, “-do you mind?”

“On it,” she winked as they were subconsciously pressured.

Settled, King Staxius returned to Alphaia in the company of Prince Julius. Creation’s heir was adamant about staying by his side. For the next few weeks, as the workers of Meldorino took a vacation, the watchmakers moved to Rotherham. Each was given a big enough apartment with a common workshop built expressly for them. The pay would be based on how good a watch would be manufactured. The

new office of Meldorino underwent a few renovations as did the showroom – Skokdrag took to personally supervise the constructions.

Over yonder, Aceline’s movie concreted her talent as an actress. She was made a superstar with more than a few followers. The Pride of Hidros grew to be a worldwide favorite, her cheery attitude and sticking to roots. She differed from her co-workers as they were mostly smug, not caring for their fans. Not her, she adored every single one.

Crime and villainous activity turned out to be slow due to Luna’s involvement. Date, 8th of January, Meldorino returned to work, the showroom was set to open next month. Leaving the Gaso Group did have speculation arise in news. The news which was overshadowed by Luna’s exploits. Rumors of her being a ghost had the excitement piqued.

‘Isn’t that the Feline force?’ mumbled Staxius browsing the multiple information from trusted sources. A video made an impact; the Feline Force’s name soon came onto breaking news. A scandal; a leaked video of one of their members shooting an illicit movie surfaced. It took the whole continent by storm as the trio were very attractive individuals. ‘What a shame,’ he watched it with no feeling, a blank gaze upon the demeaning video. ‘It looks staged, the acting is atrocious, her expression isn’t of joy, no, it seems forced.’

Calling Cake.

“Hello Boss, did something happen, why are you using the secret line?”

“I need status on éclair, is the AI ready for action?”

“Yes, the researchers have validated the use of the AI. What are the orders?”

“Patch me directly to éclair’s conscience, I want complete control over the spirit.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, the AFR will be a sub-program, the real reason I want éclair is to have a virtual Butler.”

“Ok Boss, I’ll send you to the lead-researcher.”

Changing Channel,

“Hello?” spoke a soft familiar voice.

“Hello, Clarise, is that you?”

“Boss,” her tone raised, “-how long has it been!”

“Six years, I think.”

“Has it been that long, no matter, need something?”

“Yes, I want to be patched to éclair’s mainframe.”

“Oh...” she paused; “-you want to have access to his mind?”

“More specifically, I want éclair to be my personal assistant in the virtual world.”

"I understand," her voice felt cheerful, "-what of the AFR?"

"He'll control both, come on, the spirit isn't such a weakling."

"Yeah, I know, the mid-tier demon. He'll only activate using thy mana. I've linked him to a few accessories; with them, the world should become even easier to control."

"Good, how will it be transported?"

"Teleportation of course," a black box suddenly materialized on the dashboard.

"Finally mastered the Teleportation spell?"

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"Took a few years but I did it. The box has a pair of earrings and glasses. The former is a direct communication to éclair, he has memories from being a demon paired with unlimited access to Arcanum. The latter is an interface through which the AI can interact visually."

Glasses and earrings on, a simple touch-activated the spirit. The world through the glasses was different, it displayed information about everything focused on.

"Master, Lord Death," came a gentle voice, "-why have I been awakened?"

"Take a look around, thy conscience should have a plethora of tools at thy disposal."

"I understand..."

"Boss, is it working?" asked Clarise.

"Yes, better than expected. Good job, Alchemist, I'm proud," the phone cut. For the past few years, Clarise led experiments on altering and creating an AI to help in controlling the entirety of Phantom. Limitless access to files and vehicles; only one man had the authority of giving orders, the leader of Phantom, Staxius. Not even Cake nor Courtney had the right to do so.

'Intherna's going to be mad if she ever finds out the one she fought against is now my assistant. She wanted another fight; I should probably keep to being ignorant.

Touching his earlobe, "-éclair are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," staring the video, "-analyze the origin of this film. I want to know who leaked and where it was shot."

"Orders confirmed."

'I knew it,' the details displayed onto the glasses, '-the AHA leaked the video for publicity, they don't want Luna to get more attention. The location is... I see, not that far from their main office. Arkta, why does it have to be so far away.'

Knock, knock, the windows rolled, "-father, are you going to stay in the car or come see what Guild Leader Skokdrag has done?"

“I’m coming, there’s no need to be in such a worry.”

‘The AHA are making their move, Luna might be in danger.’

“éclair, tap into the AHA’s communication, most specifically, I want a certain man to be investigated.”

“Orders Confirmed.”