



Black Hole Incarnae - An Exalted chain

Aka that story I have spent literally years working on because I routinely forget it exists for months at a time.

- #1 - Exalted : Mortal Heroes Gauntlet
- #2 - Exalted Vs the World of Darkness
  - #3 - Exalted : The Infernals
  - #4 - Alchemical Solutions
  - #5 - Exalted : Spirits of Creation
- #6 - Shards of the Exalted Dream - Modern
- #7 - Shards of the Exalted Dream - Gunstar Autochthonia

## Exalted - Mortal Heroes Gauntlet

	Lookshy	-200	Eclipsed Light
	Broker	-200	Silver Dragons Coiled Amongst Ivory Teeth
50	Taco Cart 1	-400	Dragon Breaking Feather
50	Taco Cart 2	-200	Born To Rule Among Cloaks And Daggers
50	Taco Cart 3	0	Innate Conceptual Mantra
50	Taco Cart 4	-200	Flawless Form
50	Taco Cart 5	-300	Grasping the Perfected Lotus Root
50	Taco Cart 6	-300	Mastery Equals Flow
100	Good Luck Crossing That Bridge	0	Inheritance Of Dominion
100	A Pair Of Moonsilver Pantaloons	-400	The Gunzocha's Choice
100	A Lout, A Layabout, A Lice Riddled Beggar	-400	Dreaming Pearlescent Courtesan
150	Forgot My Sword	-400	Creation's Natural Warrior Pattern
150	But A Stepping Stone		Engraining Meditations
150	Fuck Me, Sidereal	-400	Blessed By The Heavens
300	Fuck Me, Sidereal 2 / Taco Cart 7 - And	-400	All-Encompassing Shintai
	They Are Deus	-800	Glory Unto Me
300	The Mortal From Hell	0	The Pack
500	Ten Thousand Winter Nights	0	The Talon
500	The King Of Monsters	0	Extras (5)
600	Gem, The City of 1001 Immanent Dooms	0	Cult (Basic)
600	A Simple Soul Illuminated	0	Layman's Gear
200	A Simple Soul Illuminated 2 - Silver Lights	-50	Resources 1
	Scattering	-50	Resources 2
200	A Simple Soul Illuminated 3 - True Love	-50	Resources 3
1000	A Plague of Locusts	-50	Resources 4
1000	Thrown Down A Flint Canyon	-50	Resources 5
0	It's A Keybl...	-50	Trivials of Thaumaturgy 1
0	Have Great Sex!	-50	Trivials of Thaumaturgy 2
100	A Dragons World	-50	Trivials of Thaumaturgy 3
300	Nightmares 3, Eidetic Memory, And	-50	Trivials of Thaumaturgy 4
	Amnesia	-50	Trivials of Thaumaturgy 5
0	God Blooded	-50	Book of Infinite Possibilities
-50	Adamant Virtue Meditation	-50	The One Ring
0	Guild Smile	-150	The One Ring 2
-100	Heroic Tale Embodiment	0	A Time Capsule
-50	Passion Fettered Soul	-50	Orb of Peace and Order
-100	Just A Very Clumsy Person	-100	A Scroll of the Silken Scholar
0	Capricious Spirit Servitude	0	A Peasant's Ranment 1
-50	Mind-Like-Manse Understanding	0	A Peasant's Ranment 2
-100	Sovereign of Scales	-200	The Grail
0	Secret Power Slumbering	0	Pet Rock the Dreaded
-100	The Flow Of Essence	0	Panoply of the Godlike Jumper
0	Sweet Voiced Beggar's Petition	0	Heart Is Where the Home Is
-100	Faith Is The Coin Of Gods	-100	A Shipment From Hell
0	'Perfect Delivery'	-200	A Union of Alchemists

It was the twenty second of Resplendent Fire. Two guards watched the eastern gate to the city of Gem. Broken Fang of Wolves and his partner, Bear. Both of them were sweating heavily, for it was one of the hottest days of the year, and they were in the south of creation - which was of course home to the elemental pillar of fire. Also, Gem was built into the side of a dormant volcano. It wasn't really possible to get much hotter than that unless you specifically went out into the desert to die, or perhaps decided that trying to climb the pole of fire was a good idea.

It was surprising to them, then, that they saw a single figure walking through the desert. As time passed and the figure approached, more details became clear - the figure was a woman, and very womanly at that. She was poorly dressed for the dessert. Her shirt was less and shirt and more white cloth - acceptable, all things considered - while her pants seemed to have metal woven into them. That must be terribly uncomfortable, given the heat. She also didn't seem to be carrying any water or wearing a hat, though she did have a simple sword strapped to her side. Being completely honest, she looked faintly unwell. There were bags under her eyes, as though she'd been walking for several days without rest. Which wasn't the most unreasonable idea, if you were stuck in the desert.

As she approached the gate, one of the guards grabbed a canteen of water - one of dozens afforded to them during their shift, and walked a short distance away from the gate. While she probably wasn't a bandit - in fact, she'd probably run afoul of them - it was never safe to assume that someone desperate wouldn't do something stupid, like attack a well rested guard in decent armor in order to get access to water to quench their thirst ten seconds sooner than it would take say please. And that was why Bear was walking out into the desert as Fangs stayed in place, ready to bar the gate if she turned out to be nuts.

Bear wordlessly offered the canteen to the woman, who took it with a nod and proceeded to gulp down the portion of water over the course of a minute or so. Remarkable display of self control, honestly. Most people would be tempted to go faster and either spill it or choke on it. Despite this, a few beads of water slid down her throat and down into the crevices of her body, and Bear had to fight not to follow them. The woman was... womanly. He had very few doubts as to what bandits would have wanted from someone like her, and even fewer that they were dead - they wouldn't have let her go, otherwise.

"What day is today?"

An odd question from a desert wanderer. Still - the twenty second of Resplendent Fire. A terrible time to travel through the sands.

"I was supposed to arrive two months ago, and with a caravan from the Delisle Trading Company at that. I assume they never arrived?"

Bear did actually remember that - slightly under half the caravan arrived, carrying slightly over a third of the promised supplies. The Sultan wasn't happy with so little, and the caravan weren't happy with much of anything. What happened? Bandits?

"Some form of undead. They took a number of people for sacrifices to something, or perhaps simply as raw material. May I enter?"

That's terrible news. Some people may say that no news is good news, but Bear had always found that all news was good news, because knowledge was paramount to everything, be it forging a sword or winning a battle. Knowing there were undead out there meant that Bear could buy some oils to anoint his sword in case of emergency, and that the captains could brush up on tactics involving them. In case of emergency. Bear did have to wonder, however, how exactly this woman escaped from those undead?

“Violently, I assure you. You’re probably thinking I was someone’s bed warmer, but I do actually know how to use this sword.”

Bear apologized. It was hard not to draw those sorts of conclusions, especially when the woman’s features were as pretty as they were. Which, though he would not say such a thing out loud, was falling a bit short when the woman was probably one of, if not the prettiest women Bear had ever seen. He had half a mind to propose to her then and there, on the off chance she’d say yes. Still, just because she wasn’t a bed warmer didn’t mean she wasn’t promised to someone else - Bear had no doubt that if one of the captains had a daughter as pretty as her, that said daughter would be engaged to the son of some high ranking official in an attempt to earn favor.

The two of them moved towards the gate, the woman letting out a sigh of relief as the shadow cast by the wall covered her. The portcullis was not raised, not for one woman, but a smaller gate off to the side was opened up to allow her passage, and another canteen of water was produced, which she accepted with thanks. She sat and rested for a spell, and then moved off into the city, as several guards watched her go with unashamed interest.

It was not, despite Bear’s expectations, the last time he would see her, though it would be several months before they would meet again.

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It was the twenty third of Resplendent Fire and Subdued Echo had never been more grateful that she had escaped the fate of a common laborer. True, the trading outpost that Delisle Trading Company owned in Gem did not possess anything as blessed as a means of cooling the air, not for a mere outpost, but there was a chilled room beneath the manse that was meant to store wine, cheese, and a few other exotic delectables that the employees of the outpost had collectively agreed to use to also store a quantity of water. Chilled water, a few times a day, in this heat was a wonderful thing in her opinion.

Of course, the small blessings that her job afforded her aside... Echo didn’t really believe that she would get to keep the job for much longer. And with the caravan coming into town with half the wagons missing, the trading outpost was down on its luck... and its stock. Having to default on a contract because a group of undead stole the hundred swords you were supposed to deliver was terrible for several reasons, not the least of which because they had to return most of the money instead of making more of it. If the next caravan didn’t carry a small miracle with it, they would probably be shut down as unprofitable. Hopefully someone else would need an accountant? She’d even accept being a maid, as long as it was in the Despot’s manse. He had a device that cooled air, supposedly. Having an uncertain future was terrible.

As Subdued Echo ruminated on her future job opportunities in relation to potential pay, expected effort, and temperature, someone pushed the door open and shocked her out of her thoughts. She forced a smile onto her face as she moved to greet the honored customer before her words died in her throat. The woman before her was... Okay, she could still be a customer, but she didn’t look like one. Honestly, if she’d been wearing a fur collar then she’d probably make a good barbarian queen. Covered in dirt and grime, skin the angry red of those who had tempted Sol’s blessings in some manner, and dressed in clothes that had very obviously seen better days... But Echo could be wrong, she could have money to spend. Please have money to spend, Echo didn’t want the trading outpost to be shut down.

“Where in the name of the empress is Seventh Stance?”

The caravan master? Um. He was quite dead, hopefully they'd managed to give him some decent funerary rights. His second in command was Moonsilken, an extremely hardass woman, and she was... probably at a bar. Why was this woman asking about the caravan? Er, rather - might this unworthy one know the precise manner of your desires so as to better aid you?

"Caravan left me behind, and I had to walk the rest of the way. I want my things, a hot bath, a cold bath, and one of those bottles of pear and apple extract you have in the cold room. I'll also need the things to send a letter"

...Ah. The woman was probably a saleswoman for the trading company. That was a very understandable set of desires, but also a very expensive drink to be demanding. Echo would simply... note the cost of it in full, give a slight discount for employees, and then make preparations to either demand the extra cost of that discount or give a refund as necessary. Still, as she escorted the woman out of the shop and towards the actual house that the company maintained as a sort of dormitory for local employees, she had to wonder who exactly this woman was. The woman was unfairly beautiful and bountiful even as unkempt as she currently was, and Echo silently mourned her own lack of bountifulness as she snuck a few glances at the woman here and there. It was hard not to feel small before someone so large, regardless of if you actually were or not - and Echo definitely was.

Eventually, they reached the manor, and servants were called to prepare a room for the saleswoman and the bath she so desired and honestly kind of needed. Echo might be in awe of her mountains, but she did kind of stink. Yet more servants were sent out - one back to the store, to claim that bottle of extract, and another to a storage warehouse to reclaim a few packs that had been described to them. Echo's estimation of the woman rose again - she'd been permitted to bring not one, but two whole chests with her on the journey to Gem? There was a very real chance that this woman wasn't just a saleswoman, but had in fact been outright moving to Gem entirely. She would need to be a senior partner of the Delisle Trading Company to manage something like that. Or the daughter of one. Echo was actually kind of glad that she hadn't tried to kick the woman out of the store, because if she WAS someone important then that could have gone disastrously.

More time passed, the chests were delivered to the room, and Echo received the very expensive - suitably expensive? - bottle of wine from the runner and prepared to serve it according to the 'customs' of the company. The woman... technically wasn't a customer if she was an employee, but given the ease that she had been ordering people about it, it probably wasn't a terrible idea to try and earn a bit of favor. Which was why Echo was doing several things that weren't part of her job description and technically debasing herself by acting like a handservant.

Echo then proceeded to almost drop the damn bottle and spill everything when she walked into the room and the woman was standing in front of a mirror in her smallclothes. Her very small and fancy smallclothes that looked like they were worth more than Echo made in a week. Her very small and fancy smallclothes that did a wonderful job of keeping her modest and yet displayed miles and miles of creamy smooth skin that had not been half as pretty mere hours ago. Nonetheless, Echo persevered and managed to pour the drink without making too much of a fool out of herself and then... Well, there was this specific manner of standing that servants used sometimes when they knew they weren't allowed to leave but also weren't really wanted, and Echo did her best to slip into it. And also not to stare.

"If you keep staring at me, I'm going to charge you for it. Cute you may be, that's still a bit rude."

...Ah hahaha. Echo was going to die. She'd noticed. Thankfully, before Echo could decide if she wanted to melt, spend the next year avoiding the woman, or actually pay her, someone knocked on the door. The woman downed the glass in a single go, pushed Echo over towards the door, and then strode over to the bed to grab a shirt. But not, seemingly, pants. And thus, with the unfairly beautiful woman still half naked, Echo opened the door to allow... the temporary Caravan Master, Moonsilken, into the room.

“Well damn, the noblewoman is still alive. I didn’t think you had it in you, brat. Was pretty sure we were all going to die when I wrote your daddy a letter that you were dead. Glad to see you, Messier Lorraine, Pearl of Generosity.”

“If Stance wasn’t already dead I’d probably try to defile his corpse. Get me back up to speed on what I’ve missed, and then convince me you still deserve a job.”

“Yeah, that’s fair. Bastard like cutting costs a bit too much. In that case, the first things you’ll need to know are…”

Echo had just gotten called out on staring at her boss’s boss’s boss’s daughter while said daughter was all but naked, by said daughter. On the flip side, she’d also been called cute? ...Subdued Echo could probably die happy if she got at least one night to have that memory keep her warm. In the meantime, she was making herself scarce and hoped that the woman forgot her name. She was also going to erase the entry that said she owed the company money and just write the thing off as an expense of some kind. If her pay was anything like what Echo expected it to be, then she could probably drink that every day and not notice, but it was the principle of paying for something you already owned that made Echo never wanted her to find out that she’d made said note in the first place.

It was not, despite Subdued Echoes hopes, the last time she would ever see the woman. She didn’t even manage to avoid her for a full twelve hours.

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Broken Fang of Wolves shifted gently as he watched the doorway to the warehouse he was staking out. It had taken him a few days to locate the place, as well as the standard amount of bribery and threats a 'thug' like him was expected to use. It helped that as a 'thug' he was often considered to be a blunt instrument, and as such was assumed to be out and about breaking kneecaps on someone elses initiative. Say, his captain. Or the Sultan. People assumed so poorly of him, and while he hated it, it was often convenient.

Sweat crawled down his neck, water he could barely afford to lose. But he didn't leave, even as the sun crawled upwards, slowly baking him. He couldn't. He needed to see her again. She hadn't said where she was going, but the questions she had asked his partner were enough to give him a start. If only he hadn't waited, if only he'd chased after her instead of waiting for his shift to be over. But he'd had a clue, and he'd been determined to make it work. The Delisle Trading Company. A minor faction of the Guild who had been dealing with the Sultan for some time now.

They'd fallen out of favor recently due to circumstances that Broken Fang quite frankly didn't care about. Their caravan had been attacked and robbed, and they had showed up without the goods promised to the people of Gem - and to the Sultan. She'd mentioned undead and he'd made noises of agreement to Bear when he'd started mumbling about anointing oils, but that didn't matter. What did matter is that he had been able to find out where their storefront was.

Except she hadn't been there. He needed to see her and she hadn't been there. He'd almost murdered the clerk who clearly had no idea who he was talking about. But he'd persevered. For her. Asked another clerk, asked a guard, waited until several of them left for the day and cornered them to ask less than polite questions. He hadn't been the only one, he'd noticed. Another guard that he knew for a fact was in the pocket of a noble family had asked a few sly questions and given him a hint or two. Night of Blades probably thought that he was investigating on someones behalf as well. Fool. He was investigating her, for her.

Eventually it happened. She appeared. When he'd first seen her scorched by the sun, tired and exhausted, and on her last legs, she'd been beautiful beyond compare. But now it was so much worse. So much better. A red dress fluttered in a faint breeze, golden chains holding mirrorlike coins swaying gently as she walked, drawing the eye to a creamy expanse of skin that she showed without shame. Her hair practically flowed down her back, an ornament made from feathers and a gemstone that didn't shine half as brightly as she did pinned just behind one ear. Strange footwear exposed her feet, a single slab of wood painted black with two pillars raising her off the ground, giving her just a fraction more height.

She stepped out of the warehouse - no. She flowed out, the world parting around her. A small gaggle of attendants streaming behind her that served only to highlight how special she was by how plain they were. Broken Fang let out a shaky breath and moved towards her, into her path. She looked at him. Their eyes met.

"Marry me."

"No."

And then she was gone, flowing past him. He wanted to turn to watch her go, but found he couldn't move. His jaw twitched. One of the attendants gave him a look of disbelief before moving on, trying to keep pace with the beautiful woman. He stood there silently for a moment, staring at the ground, and watched as a drop of water hit the ground between his feet. Ah. Such a simple rejection, and yet, so brutal. Enough to crush his dreams.

It was fine. Really, it was fine. He couldn't have her. It was fine. Or maybe she didn't want him. The difference barely mattered. iT wAs fiNe.

All he had to do to make things right was make sure nobody else could have her either.

His hand went to the hilt of his sword and he spun in place, lunging towards thE biTcH, determined to take her one way or another.

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It was the third of Descending Fire and Auspicious Weave - known to the world as Rankar VII and the Despot of Gem - was beginning to get rather desperate. Gem, his beloved city that he was responsible for, had been seeing a number of unfortunate turn of events. A pair of caravans from the north had been attacked, costing them, and by extension, HIM, numerous supplies. Admittedly, a chest full of seeds for the farmers wasn't the worst thing to lose, they had reserves, but several odds and ends that he'd spent a great deal of money on in order to give as bri- as gifts had gone missing. Them and many other things, given that of the two, only half of the second caravan had shown up at all. The company responsible for the second caravan had given a partial discount and refund in exchange for their "most shameful showing", but the first one had simply gone missing. Auspicious Weave was likely never seeing his money or his purchases from them.

It was infuriating. It'd be one thing if he'd somehow managed to earn an enemy and this had been the result, but he was fairly certain that he'd been screwed over by random chance and a bunch of unwashed bandits. Well, perhaps not - there was supposedly a shaman of some kind amongst their ranks, going by Second Caravan Master Moonsilken's report, so they might be intelligent enough to know what soap was. He doubted it though. Still, enough about that particular woe - he had others to look into. Like the report that there was a pair of Anathema inside his fair city, one of whom had attacked one of the Realm's ambassadors, and the other of whom had attacked the young mistress of the trading company. Apparently she'd been on her way to his fair city to make some deliveries personally, only to get lost in the clamor of the attack and left behind. For a pretty princess of a woman like her, Auspicious Weave was actually astounded she was still alive.

Beyond that, there were a host of lesser miscreants and monsters that seemed to all have suddenly decided that Gem was the number one place to be. And while Auspicious Weave wasn't one to turn down a tourist when he could have them fleeced for money, that only applied to people who would actually pay for things, instead of eating his farmers and stealing all of their left socks. And yes, he'd almost fired a guard for being drunk on duty when he'd heard that, but several others had backed him up. Someone had in fact stolen all of the left socks from off the corpses of a handful of farmers, and several more from their homes. Not a matched set to be found.

Weave wasn't sure what that meant, but he suspected the Fae. They tended to be little shits like that, thinking themselves so clever and how this was just one clue in the grand mystery of their presence in his city. Thankfully some of the weapons that the Delisle Trading Company had actually managed to deliver had been cold iron. Not many, but some. You never know when you might need one. Oh, and there was something further into the mountains setting off small quakes on the regular. He wasn't looking forward to dealing with that.

Before his inner rant could go much further, a knock on the door to his office broke his attention. Startling briefly, he opened a drawer and dropped his bottle of wine into it. Image was important, after all. A confirmation that they could enter later, and a guard he didn't recognize - must be a newly hired one - pushed the door open so that Messier the Pearl, the princess of Delisle herself could enter the room. The woman wore a simple shirt, fine and of splendid quality, but simple, and a pair of pants that clearly had silver woven into them. For jewelry, she had naught but four golden rings. He assumed they did something useful. As for the woman herself...

There was no way to deny it. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her fingers were graceful and slender. The arch of her cheeks were sharp without being cutting. Her eyes were warm and welcoming, or cold as ice according to her moods. And her chest... Her chest was massive. Auspicious Weave was fairly certain he could fit his entire head between them, and he would honestly offer the woman a bit of leverage on the points of contention between them in exchange for the chance to try. Hell, he'd made that joke to his currently favored concubine, Amber Anchor, after introducing them at a party a few days ago and she'd also said to offer the woman a threesome - she wanted a chance with her too. Even recovering from her trials in the desert and clearly lacking sleep, she beat out every woman he'd ever met. Unfortunately, the one time he'd tried to very politely imply that she might be more welcome in certain parts of his house than she might expect, the woman had simply seemed unamused and all but forced him to get back to business. A shame. In the meantime...

"My lord father's letter has arrived. Another caravan is being assembled, with as many replacements and duplicates of your original order as can reasonably be assembled. Some of the more perishable items are now out of season and thus more expensive, to the point we cannot in good conscience offer them to you at the price we would need to demand in order to not take a massive loss on them, so we ask that you accept yet another delay. Other items are curiosities, all but completely unique. Your original list of requirements was consulted and several acceptable things gathered, but they're not quite what you asked for. The music box, for example, will only play one song, rather than the five the one we originally sent could hold, the result of damage we have yet to find a way to repair. As for the price of all this..."

Hmmm. While Auspicious Weave hated being cheated, he did have to admit that he'd all but forced the caravan to show up when it did, specifically so that they would be able to carry a large portion of certain fruits and cheeses and other such things. Normally they'd have appeared months earlier, an attempt to return home and leave the south behind them before the hell weeks of Ascending Fire could begin. Yes, he could easily imagine that most of those things had already been eaten or sold off to others. Sadly, there wasn't much he could do about that - and it was almost refreshing to see them refuse to sell to him because it would be too expensive.

"Honesty is the pathway to abilities many politicians would consider unnatural."



Auspicious Weave wasn't sure whether or not to be insulted by that. He did admit, politics was inherently a balancing game - specifically, balancing which promises were most important to keep once you realized that you genuinely wouldn't be able to keep your word, but that didn't make them lies from the get go. Still... he had to admit, it was rather funny. He wouldn't execute her for it, just this once.

Now, supplies aside, there was something else he wanted to talk about. Specifically, those repairmen that were working on his - or, the soon to be his - artifacts... could they be hired? Gem had a number of ancient artifacts that were meant to help defend the city, but he lacked a suitable number of individuals to maintain them. He'd been slowly parceling them out to the truly worthy and truly competent, but as time passed they eventually began to need more than just basic maintenance - and the men he hired were soldiers, not artificers. Having some of those back would bring about a peace of mind that couldn't be understated.

"I'll see what I can do. Between the resources for such a thing, and the skill needed... father won't want to give them up for something so simple as coin."

Not much of a promise, but as she was already turning to leave as his guard fumbled slightly before turning to escort her out, it would seem they were done for the day. A brief peek at a report in a side drawer, complete with drawing, declared his new guard's name to be Copper Night. Leader of a group of five. Quite boring. How had the man ended up escorting such an esteemed guest? In any event, as Despot he was always busy, so he hoped that her reply would take a while. He would see her again, two weeks later, after his guards reported that she had personally brought a warstrider back online.

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It was the nineteenth of Descending Fire and YG was decidedly unhappy with the current state of affairs. Six Starlight Serenades Of Sensuality had fucked something up, hard, presumably by fucking a woman so hard that her destiny had been damaged in the resulting exchange of fluids. In return, her own father, 'the guy with the taco cart' had gathered up a number of Half Castes, including some of his own children, to 'arrange things appropriately' after a couple of gods started riding their asses about the changes. Which is to say, they would need to fix whatever Starlight had broken. YG wasn't entirely sure what that even was, but apparently the unlucky woman's daughter - and Starlight had sworn by the maidens that she wasn't his kid - had been born with the extremely disconcerting effect of randomly breaking other people's destiny's and dooming them to obscurity.

Just yesterday she'd 'stolen' the destiny to break one of those extremely irritating memory swords from some girl who lived in the city of Gem. They didn't even speak, they'd simply passed each other on the street and the pattern spiders had supposedly freaked out. Of course, compared to what she'd accidentally done three months ago with that poor caravan master and HIS destiny involving the Abyssals, the sword was barely worth mentioning. And so of course, it had been decided that YG should go in, pretend to be... someone, YG had already forgotten, and check to see that she hadn't been corrupted by the Abyssals. Maybe do a bit of stabbing. Which was why YG was sneaking through the town in the dead of night. It was unlikely, but better to get it out of the way first just in case something like that had happened.

Well, sneaking. Sidereals didn't sneak, not really. They simply walked in a manner that didn't attract attention. As she turned one corner, YG went from being a young woman with a flower crown, to a young man wearing the uniform of a bakery halfway across town. Another stretch of street, and she was a visibly pregnant mother. As she neared her target, she shifted once more and became an unremarkable amalgamation of several similarly looking employees to the Delisle Trading Company, and walked right through the front door unchallenged. The door was guarded, but by shifting her shoulders and walking with various strides and perhaps slumping or fidgeting with her fingers, this one disguise could easily allow her to pretend to be any one of those four or five individuals without actually changing anything - and just like that, the guards waved her in, for "she" had the right to be here.

A slightly wandering route, and YG passed through the dormitory without meeting up with anyone else as she made her way towards the more lascivious rooms, and specifically to the so-called princess of Delisle's rooms. YG wondered if her 'father' knew about his wife's adventures with Six. Setting, those thoughts aside, she knelt down in front of the door and plucked a set of lockpicks out of her-

"Door's open."

Setting those thoughts aside, she slid her lockpicks back into her not space as they faded away, something she hadn't actually brought with her on this particular mission as there was no call for her to have done so. Standing up - or rather, having decided that she hadn't been kneeling - she pushed the door open and stepped into the room, observing everything as she did, just in case this was a trap. Seated upon the edge of the bed, was her target. So this was Messier the Pearl of Delisle...?

Oh no. She was hot. No, calling her hot was an insult, she beat out most of the *genuine actual Exalts* that YG had ever had the dubious privilege of meeting. She was also completely naked. YG couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a show of submission, oh look at me I'm unarmed, or one hell of a flex, I don't need to be armed to fight you, I'll just drown you in my tits. ...Shit, YG wanted to drown in her tits. She really hoped they didn't need to fight at this point, she wasn't sure she'd be able to.

"...to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from a vizier?"

Hah, did she think YG was a full Sidereal, and not a half caste? Well, if she was going to hand YG such an easy lever, far be it for her to ignore it. Now let's see, what's the most important thing to ask about? Her three sizes? No, wait, mission. Also, she was naked, those were on full display. Right - who exactly had attacked her, and how had she escaped?

"...Abyssals. Even more fucked up in the head than first ages Solars, thanks to the Neverborn who were once Primordial. I convinced one of them to let me go because he looked like the kind of guy who would enjoy fighting a dozen other Exalts at the same time and they would absolutely take it out on him."

Oh, so she'd slept her way to freedom? ...YG kinda wanted to go find that man and do some stabbing, he was blatantly inferior and undeserving of even fake love from Messier. On the flip side, able to fight a dozen of these 'Abyssals', maybe not the best guy to pick a fight with. She'd simply find a way to throw him underneath the taco cart and have her father deal with him. Still, if she had done that, then how long until one of them comes after her?

"There's already an Abyssal in the city. It isn't one from that faction however, so it should be fine. As for one of theirs... they forced a charm into me, one designed to amplify some of their own charms. So either not very long, or never - depends on how replaceable I am for their plans, or how easy that charm is to learn for others."

A charm specifically designed to let these Abyssals use their charms at a higher level? What, like using Messier's essence instead of theirs? Meh, details not terribly important, dad can rip them out of her if he wants. Probably coming after her soon however, because if YG had a girl with a charm that made her stronger somehow, she'd probably shank more than a few people to keep her safe. Or to reclaim her if she tried to escape from her. As for that other Abyssal... eh, dad's problem. Actually, do you know what your father did to you?

"My father the fat merchant?"

Well, Messier's dear old dad may or may not have known about his wife's affair, but amusingly enough it seems that mom never told her dear daughter anything about it. No, your father the Sidereal.

"Ah. Not the faintest. I'd simply assumed I had bad luck. If it's intentional, however, I think I'd like to slap him."

And with that, YG had everything she wanted to know. Admittedly, she might not know everything her father wanted to know, she had barely been paying attention to what he wanted in the first place and most of her long term planning was failing her in front of the absurdly gorgeous woman who seemed to have misplaced her sense of shame and modesty. At this point, the only thing YG still wanted was to shove her head into the woman's tits and see if they were actually big enough to bury herself in. ...She kinda wondered what the mom looked like, cause that felt a lot like what had gotten Six in trouble.

"So, wanna bang?"

God yes. No, wait - she'd wanted to ask that! ...But yes.

It was not, to YG's immense delight, the last time she was Messier. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, to YG's immense frustration, she would eventually need to leave Messier's side?

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The Most Secret And Sorrowful blushed faintly at the moans now emanating from the room in front of her. She'd had a minor panic attack at the thought that she'd been caught out immediately, before even entering the room, but apparently one of the other Deathlords had a fellow in town. Best to try and avoid that one. And, uh. The Most Secret And Sorrowful would also avoid this situation by coming back tomorrow. They couldn't fuck for the entire day, could they?

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"...And that's why I need you to look after the girl."

The man in front of me finishes his explanation with a confident and self satisfied grin. Behind him, his elderly traveling companion is distracting the girl in question, a child no more than eight or nine years old in a blue and white dress. Noel of the River. I look back at the man. His blue and red coat is oddly familiar, as is the drill necklace.

"What did you say your name was again?"

"Uh. Simon. I'm a, uh, miner. ...Were you not paying attention?"

"Eh, sort of."

"You can't just zone out during my exposition, that's not fair."

"Is there a reason you can't look after the girl? Or perhaps gramps back there? Actually, what's his name?"

"I'm Large Enorme."

"Your chest hair is large enormous."

"Thank you."

"ANYways, I can't raise her because I'm a miner. Totally. A mine is no place to raise a child you know. And before you ask, he can't raise her either because he's a drunk and if I trusted him with a child we wouldn't be here."

"...Do you not own a house?"

"I own a cart?"

I sigh. I say that I wasn't paying attention, but I mostly was. It's pretty obvious the two are exalts of some kind that are very eager to get the heck out of Gem. The Sultan isn't exactly harsh on 'Anathema', but the Realm has been stirring up an excessive amount of noise recently and coincidences of that sort don't really happen to exalts.

"Right. Three things. One, tell me you're not abandoning your kid. Two, what kind of exalt is she? And three, does she actually want to stay here?"

"Wha - No, she, I, um."

"She's got you there, Simon."

"I don't know what to respond to first!"

I ignore the two men as they start to bicker. 'Simon the miner' really isn't a good liar. I shift past them and kneel down besides the young child they're trying to dump on me. With Large distracted, she's grabbed out for one of the damaged artifacts that had been on my desk. I hadn't quite had time to work on fixing it... and I might not need to either. As I watch her, a few flashes of golden light burst out from her fingers. Not much, and if you weren't looking right at her you'd probably miss them. With each flash, a screw pops out of position, a flap of metal is bent into or out of position, and then after a moment to process reverts itself. I hmm softly. Is that the charm that lets you fix things without tools?

The girl jerks her head up to me, seemingly not having noticed me, before nodding shyly. She offers me the clockwork apple and mumbles an apology for breaking it. I flex, a cool sensation running through my fingers from the rings upon them, and a thin spike of dull metallic light shot through with streaks of pale yellow pushes into the device. With that, the entire thing shudders, clicks, and quietly starts ticking.

"You're pretty good at this, kid."

"...Thank you, miss."

"They don't seem to want you to go with them."

"...My mom says I need to stay in Gem for a while. They brought me here, but."

"Yeah, I get it. They didn't quite think that far ahead. Still, they brought you to me, so maybe they did something right. Do you want to stay with me, Noel?"

"I like fixing things. Can I...?"

"I'm supposed to be a merchant, but honestly I get tired of people sometimes. I like to use fixing things as an excuse to tell them to leave me alone for a while. If you want to play around with things, I don't have a problem with that."

"Then, I think I'd like to stay with you, miss Lorraine."

"Call me Messier, kid. Right, Misho -"

"Wait, how, I mean my name is Simon"

"Go. I'll look after her, so she'll be safe enough with me, even if she is a Solar. Get the heck out of Gem, and make some noise as you go. The more of the hunt you take with you, the better off she'll be."

"...Of course. But how do you know my name?"

I look blonde dead in the eye. He's been fumbling his lies this entire time, but that's knowing that he's lying. So I guess knowing his actual name is a smidge too weird."

"I read your book. Also, it's Simon the digger, not Simon the miner."

"Oops?"

"Marena did try to warn you, 'Simon'."

"You're rocking the coat though. It looks good on you."

"Well, at least there's that."

-----

Moving about Gem during daylight is something very few people will do willingly, but if you can resist the heat then doing so is a decent way to move from place to place in peace and quiet, because all of the people who will want your attention and get in your way or who will curse you out for being in their way are all using the underground highways. That is, naturally, why I travel overland on most occasions. Mostly on days where I'm truly well and fed up with people and just want to lock myself away in my workshop to do paperwork or repair odds and ends that my sales clerks can then convince people to buy for an absolute premium. Good deal, great profits, minimal socialization.

That is why as I enter the well furnished and very popular store that I have been 'banished' to by my father on the morning of the third of Ascending Earth, it is through what most people would consider the back door. A side door at best. Moving through the mildly labyrinthian back rooms towards the front where my so-called secretary usually is, it is because of this that I walk up behind a woman with purple hair who is fiddling with the collar of her uniform. A woman that I do not recognize. Now, this isn't entirely notable. Of the few hundred men and women I nominally employ on a regular basis, and another few hundred mercenaries, I would be pressed to recognize more than a dozen of them. But she isn't Subdued Echo, the somewhat mousy woman who keeps perverting on me when she thinks I'm not paying attention.

The purple haired woman jerks as I walk past her, and fumbles the handfuls of paperwork she'd been attending to. She can't be new, I haven't hired anyone recently. She could be new to the position, however. And that's ignoring the general unpleasantness of someone who outranks you appearing out of thin air.

"Ah! Miss Lorraine, I, um, you have a -"

"I'm not taking appointments today."

"But mister Vincenzo -"

"I'm not taking appointments today."

The woman wilts visibly. Probably took a bribe to sneak someone into the books as being allowed to waste my time today. I'll accept it once, because she probably needs the money, but I officially don't like her.

"...He's already in your office?"

I stop. Nevermind being nice to her I guess. I lean back and stare at the ceiling for a moment and exhale slowly. Then I pivot 90 degrees and start rooting around under one of the other desks in the room. Lets see, if I recall correctly, there should be... Yup, there it is. Grabbing my prize I walk back towards the woman, who is half out from behind her desk and wringing her hands in a show of dismay.

"You're fired."

I drop the object into her hands, and walk away. She stutters and tries to defend herself but I'm really not listening, and her voice fades away behind me as I move deeper into the compound and towards my office. I don't know who the hell this Vincenzo guy is but he needs to get the fuck out of my shop.

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MU stared at the woman as she disappeared past a corner, the obligatory protestation of her innocence fading from her lips. Man, what a bitch. Like, sure, letting a guy all but break into her office was bad, but she hadn't seemed like the kind of person to kick a girl out on the first offense. Which, admittedly, she didn't *actually* work for her so that was no skin off her nose, but still. It was the principle of the thing. She had no idea what her sister saw in that girl.

Actually, what had she handed her? Some kind of severance package? That would be nice, getting paid just to be told to go away. Oh, it was a grenade.

*ohshititwasagrenade!*

The world bent and flickered and MU slammed into one of the alleyway walls a few minutes away from the front door to the Delisle Trading Company, where she'd stashed the girl she'd mugged for the uniform she was currently wearing. ...The girl who wasn't there. Had she woken up and run off? Well, she'd been tied down, so it was more likely that a member of one of the auction houses had found her and declared her product. Poor girl.

Well, it wasn't MU's problem anymore. She'd done what she needed to do, so all that was left was for her to sit back and watch the fireworks go off. The woman might be a bitch, but she wished her luck trying to pull something like that on her dear old dad. Sighing, Mu stretched some of her limbs out. The chair she'd been sitting in hadn't been the most comfortable thing in the world. Maybe she'd meet up with KT after this, hit up a bar and relax?

Spinning around, she came face to face with a bright smile underneath a head of bright pink hair, and a burst of pain from her lower gut. Looking downwards, she was greeted by the sight of her sister's knife buried inside her flesh.

"Fuck."

"That about sums it up, yeah."

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It was the seventh of resplendent earth and Subdued Echo was beginning to think that maybe the Delisle Trading Company wasn't for her. True, less than a month ago she had been dreading the outpost the company had in Gem going under on account of it forcing her to get a new job, but - well, that was then and this was now. Her concerns at the time had been largely laid to rest by the arrival of Messier, her boss's boss's boss's daughter, who had handled the vast majority of the problems the outpost had been facing in a timely and efficient manner. Hurrah, they were saved, Subdued Echo would be able to buy some candied nuts for calibration without fearing to starve. Or melt, given that it had been ascending fire at the time.

But then everything started to go wrong. Days later, she'd walked in on her lady sleeping with an anathema - one that her lady had referred to as 'vizier'. They were likely trying to infiltrate the company, to take the fortune - both literal and metaphorical - of Delisle for themselves. And also they'd been sleeping with her boss, which was honestly the real crime. Echo had warmed herself on cold nights using the image of her boss naked. But, still, her bosses' indiscretions weren't her concern as long as she got paid on time.

And if that had been the end of things it would have been mostly fine. But there had been that one guy who had walked up to Messier, proposed to her, been shot down, and then tried to assassinate her and had broken out of jail the other day and would probably be back for another attempt sometime soon, the OTHER anathema that someone had tried to blackmail her into adopting only for her lady to agree to look after them, and of course who could forget the beggar who was somehow routinely breaking into their cold room to drink and eat his fill of their stock. Their finest stock, at that. Messier had damn near flipped her shit to know that he'd drunk their entire stock of apple and pear wine.

Of course, that was ignoring the rumors of something in the mountains and the fucking swarms of bandits that seem to have sprung up on the north roads - it wasn't like she planned on leaving Gem after all. Those were the tyrants' issue to deal with. No. Subdued Echoes issue that she was taking umbrage with was the abrupt drop in quality of the clientele that the trading outpost served. Now, Echo was not a vain woman. Really, she wasn't. She was a bit thin on top, but Messier, the most beautiful woman Echo had ever met, had called her cute. If that impossibly beautiful woman saw something in her, then all the people who looked down on her for being able to see her feet could go shove it where the unconquered sun didn't shine.

Except for the fact that, over the span of about a week, half of the noble ladies of Gem seemed to have abruptly doubled in size and were now acting bitchier and haughtier than ever before on account of how much bigger their... ego, was. Definitely their ego. Not their tits, of which Subdued Echo had none. It was fine, she was cute, she wasn't fucking livid that one of them had implied she was too low class to serve them wine let alone scribe their order from the company on account of having such small breasts. Who thinks like that? Them, apparently. Nevermind that's a completely asinine way to judge a person's character, by the literal fucking size of their 'character', the average noble wife was dumb enough to think that was a good idea. Echo wasn't mad. Honestly. She didn't want to murder the next cow of a woman that walked into the shop.

And it was a good thing that she wasn't contemplating murder, because the next woman who walked into the shop was her boss. Her large breasted but infinitely kinder boss who took a small measure of pity on Subdued Echo and shooed her off to check the cold room to make sure that the beggar hadn't broken into it yet again and also allowed her to drink a glass of the chilled water the various employees of the outpost kept down there to calm her nerves. Her boss was saintlike, most of the time. When she wasn't in the center of yet another clusterfuck on account of the woman's terrible luck.

It was of course, just her luck that she returned from shooing out the beggar and making an account of how much money he'd cost them to the sight of some violent type, a guard or a fighter or a mercenary or who cares what, discussing buying a new leather chest piece with her boss. Because her chest had tripled in size recently on account of her learning a *magical martial art style dedicated to the god of boobs*. Echo didn't have words for how stupid that sounded, but it would explain quite a bit. And then the mercenary, wincing at the quoted price, offered to teach Messier the style as well in exchange for a discount. Not that her boss needed it in her opinion, Messier's boobs were already fantastic! ...Why were both of them turning to look at her? Oh. Oh god, she'd said that out loud. She was so fired wasn't she.

"...Thank you for the vote of confidence, Echo."

"I'm sorry miss. Please make my death quick."

"I don't believe that will be necessary. Besides, the style isn't all that great - failing to use it for an extended length of time will likely forfeit the, ah, blessing. And I very much doubt the sedentary noblewomen who have been parading around recently have the inclination to do that much exercise."

...That actually made Echo feel a lot better about herself. The stupid fools who had been looking down on her were going to deflate, both in size and in ego sometime soon. She could bear with things until that happened. Though, it would have been nice if it was something she could use, but. Exercise. When would she even do that? Clearly it wasn't to be.

"In any event, I think I'll take you up on that offer. Please choose a training field in the next few days and I'll see about making myself available. There's always so much to do and never quite enough time..."

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The Most Secret And Sorrowful was having an interesting time in Gem. Her target, the charmbearer that the Lion had sent her after, was surprisingly tricky. Or rather, well connected. She liked to think she was sneaky, but surrounding herself with dozens of servants - because she was also rich - was a surprisingly good move. The only real weak spot was when she was sleeping, but given that she generally didn't sleep in favor of 'sleeping' with the pink haired girl who was... probably also an exalt of some kind, it made it difficult to really go unnoticed. Thankfully, however, the charmbearer had accidentally created an opening. A week or so ago a fae had wandered through town while pretending to be a master martial artist and had 'shared' a style that made your boobs grow with a number of local ladies.

Not that a fat assed bureaucrat or lazy socialite could use such style, but the fae fae'd and made it look like they could. Still, the style did exist, they'd taught a mercenary, and the mercenary had accidentally created a hole in the charmbearers defenses. Which was why the mercenary was currently unconscious on the ground at Secrets feet as the mercenary's prospective student struggled to accommodate her suddenly larger bust. It would be a bit embarrassing to win this fight because the other woman's balance was off, but eh. She was an Abyssal. Honor was for other people.

"...I don't suppose we could talk this out?"

"Eh. Sorry. The Lion wants you back *real* bad."

"Can I at least get a name?"

"Secret."

"...And Sorrowful?"

The woman relaxed slightly. She knew Secret's name? No, wait, hold on a second - why the fuck was she relaxing? Had one of the other death knights called her weak or something, and the woman was delusional enough to think that meant she could take Secret in a fight? Secret was going to need that person's name so that she could kick their ass. She bet it was The Conductor of the Cacophonic Steel Chorus. He was a fucking asshole who would do that because he thought it would be funny. More importantly, however -

"Why do you know my name?"

"...Once upon a time, a Solar named Misho Thrice Radiant put a sign in the middle of nowhere labeled 'help wanted saving creation'. One of the people who saw that sign and aided him was named The Most Secret And Sorrowful. When asked for her name, she promptly fainted on account of running out of air over how long her name was. ...He was here recently, so I had thought you'd left with him."

"I think I would remember meeting a man who did something like that."

"It hasn't happened yet. Or maybe it has and you just missed it?"



“And why would I, an Abyssal, help save Creation?”

“Because you don’t enjoy being an Abyssal. Because the Neverborn are terrible bosses. Any number of reasons, really. When the King Of Uncloaked Steel was sent after you, he decided to treat it like a vacation. Gave you his sword and just... walked away.”

Secret was fated to help a Solar save Creation? That. That didn’t make any sense. Her hand rose unconsciously to the ring around her neck. The charmbearer, her target, turned away slightly. But not before Secret saw a brief flash of pity in her eyes. She wobbled slightly, her engorged breasts dragging her along with them whenever she moved too quickly, before taking one of the stances that the mercenary had walked her through and beginning to practice. At least she had the decency not to run.

...She wanted to believe her. The King had been one of the ones to deliver her into the hands of the Neverborn, but he had been irreverent the whole way. Been disappointed she hadn’t tried to fight him. That he would be bored of being a deathknight and turn away, help her turn away, even... It didn’t sound impossible. And! He had recently picked a fight with at least half a dozen other Abyssals. And the charmbearer had escaped in the ensuing chaos. Had he done that for her? Or been convinced to do it? Somehow, the idea wasn’t ridiculous.

“The King isn’t the only one they could send after me, you know. And, he’s already gone missing. After your escape, I might add.”

“...Oh. Oops? I may have fucked you over accidentally.”

“Uh huh. Because that’s what you’re worried about, not getting dragged back into the underworld.”

“Consider for a moment, if you would - two half caste Sidereals, a Solar, and the fact that I know the charm that can save you from 90% of the Limit hit you’d take from trying to live in creation and be a hero. They could send someone other than him after you, but at that point, you’d have allies.”

That sounded like a good deal, actually. Keeping the charmbearer for herself and using it to bleed off... what the hell was Limit? She meant Resonance, right? In any event, the lady was even rich, so Secret wouldn’t exactly be out on the streets if she chose to cut herself off from her nominal ‘supply chain’.

“Pay me.”

“Sure. How do you feel about being a bodyguard? You’re fucked if I die, after all.”

“True enough.”

Throughout all of this, the charmbearer - Messier, her new ‘boss’ - had not stopped going through the motions of the style. Which was honestly really pleasing to the eye, but also kind of insulting going by how much more she had than Secret. Too bad she wasn’t any good at martial arts. Oh, and the mercenary woman that Secret had knocked out was waking back up. That was going to be very awkward very shortly.

“What hit me?”

“Sorry about that, I forgot to tell my bodyguard I was coming here and she thought you were attacking me.”

“Oh that makes sense. Still hurts though.”

“I’ll pay you for your troubles.”

“And we have a deal! No takebacks!”

On second thought, Secret had the sneaking suspicion that this lady was entirely too dangerous with her mouth.

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YG was a perfectly reasonable amount of upset given the current scenario.

"I refuse."

"Please?"

"*I refuse to share you.*"

"I'm not asking you to share me."

That was a matter of perspective. Impersonating Messier's secretary only got her so far both in the company and in her pants, but the real issue was that Messier had a job she was committed to doing and that said job took up the vast majority of her time. The paperwork might not have been as bad as the stuff dear old dad got up to - and YG *had* offered her lover the one Bureaucracy charm she'd known, one that made it hard for people to loaf about and disobey orders. Her father had used it on her often enough that she'd learned it through example. Sadly, one charm was not an arsenal, and so the Delisle Trading Company continued to chew up Messier's time.

And of course, there were more social aspects. A certain amount of butt-kissing and brown-nosing that was required to operate in Gem on account of two thirds of the laws boiling down to 'whatever the Despot felt like at the time'. Being allowed to open a store and establish a base of operations in Gem had required a truly phenomenal bribe on Griscourt's behalf, even when the primary reason for doing so was to allow all parties to have easier access to the things he would sell them... or the things they wanted to sell him. Butt-kissing and brown-nosing Messier was now responsible for.

YG had needed to spend quite a bit of willpower to resist the urge to go fucking murder the Despot when Messier had offhandedly mentioned that he had proposed her in exchange for less draconian terms on their lease. Thankfully for the Despot, she'd turned him down. Because screw resisting, she would absolutely go fucking murder the man if he tried to ntr her. The little Solar girl with the obvious crush on Messier was bad enough, but in theory they were only looking after her for a few years. By the time she was looking into such things, she'd be gone. And hopefully distracted by her Lunar, whoever that was.

But an Abyssal? A grown ass woman who was one step short of a gold digging whore who would be living on Messier's money for no real gain, and who would in fact be shunting psychological damage caused by THE FUCKING NEVERBORN onto Messier? Who would then pay her for the privilege? No. YG wasn't having that.

"You realize that if we don't, we have to fight her, right? And that's not going to go well."

"I'm perfectly willing to try anyways to keep you safe."

"...Yuno. Please."

"You - Don't do that!"

With an utterly deadpan look on her face, Messier grabbed the lower hem of her shirt and pulled upwards, exposing a creamy expanse of skin and setting her currently engorged breasts to jiggling. Ahhhhhhhhhh that's not fair, why the heck are you flashing me in the middle of an argument!

"Consider, if you would. Make up sex."

"Can I just interject and say that I'm uncomfortable with being here for that? I just want to not deal with... well, most of the downsides of being an Abyssal."

Notfairnotfairnotfair why did her lover have to be so unfairly hot?!? Fine. Just. Fucking fine. As long as Secret wasn't actually sleeping with Messier and stayed adamant about not doing so, fine.

"What does this charm even entail?"

"I'm going to need to bite her."

"You need to what her?" "You need to what me?"

“Secret, gimme your arm.”

YG was going to murder The First and Forsaken Lion for making a charm like this! ...Well. Maybe as soon as she exalted, or broke through the mortal limit and became a god of endings. As happy as she was to violently murder people who tried to hurt Messier, she did actually have limits, and undead godkings from the first age were a bit past her pay grade.

She'd just have to work up to it.

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Calibration. A five day period that marked the end of the year, and the dead period before the beginning of the next. Some cultures considered it an ill omen. Others threw a party, and treated it as a time of rest. Calibration couldn't be considered part of the common man's workweek when Sunday ended by Moonsday was five days away. And so, Glistening Quiver, a minor but influential noble whose house covered the production of mining tools and a fairly important member of the sultans guard who managed all the lesser mercenaries, relaxed. True, the sultan still needed guarding, but he was to have no visitors, and would not leave his manse for the five days. All who would be attending to him had arrived the day before, and would leave as time passed and their own affairs called to them. As for the sultan himself, women, wine, song, and more women were the only company he needed for Calibration. All comers were to be turned away at the gate. Made his job easy, it did.

Of course, that was the sultan's opinion of Calibration. An excuse to throw an exceptionally lavish party. There were others, commoner and nobleman alike, who would be locking themselves in their houses for entirely different reasons, afraid to go out into the world on the days out of the year where the gods could NOT be counted upon to watch over them. Some said they were too busy setting up the weather for the next year to answer prayers. Others thought that they too took the days off, for much the same reason a working man would. Even the gods deserved a break now and again, didn't they?

Glistening Quiver didn't care one way or the other, he merely set himself to enjoying the five days as best he could. Better to enjoy them than to be afraid of them, at the very least. Or, rather, that was how he would normally view the world. Today, however, Gem was under attack. Trust a demon to attack Gem during its least defensible days. The sky was cold and gray, the wind biting. Though it should have been mid-day and suitable hot, the world was as cold as the blackest of nights during descending water or ascending air. He could see fragments of ice forming on the haft of his lance, and one of his fellow guards had their hand stuck to their weapon, unable to release it. Truly, this was foul sorcery. And so, resolutely, he set out. The sultan had ordered peace and quiet for himself, and Quivering Arrow wasn't one to disobey.

Instead, he began to direct himself through the ranks of some of the... less fortunate members of the guard. Well paid, but lacking in privilege or stations of birth. Easier to draw into something assembling order. One of them, something Night or so, called out a suggestion to commandeer something from certain well off but not influential citizens to aid them against the cold. It was an excellent idea, but it would need a deft hand to execute it properly. So, naturally, Quiver ordered the man back into the ranks and delegated the task to several more trustworthy fellows. Men he'd shared a hookah with in days gone by, and more than a few prostitutes. Much like carving up a roast, however, Quiver saved the choicest cut for himself.

And so he strode down the road, doing his best to appear commanding and unafraid even as the wind sought to steal the warmth from his breath, until he arrived at his destination. The Delisle Trading Outpost. Not only was it a storehouse of all manner of odds and ends that he could commandeer in the name of the city's safety, but there was another benefit. Messier Lorraine, the princess of Delisle, the pearl of generosity. Daughter of the founder of Delisle himself. Colossal bitch.

Now, the girl would deliver exactly what you paid for. In all likelihood, she was a more honest merchant than her father was. She was also blessed with the body of a perfect whore, and had not a whit of interest in sharing that great blessing with anyone else. The sultan had once offered her a truly disadvantageous deal - for himself, no less - in exchange for an evening of her time, but bitch that she was she had turned him down. Seeing the woman humbled would do his ego a world of good. And so he entered the trading outpost and made his intentions to requisition various supplies to defend the city from the imminent attack and its forces from the sheer cold of this foul sorcery.

“...You mean the snow?”

He didn't know what snow was, but if they meant the aftereffects of the attacking spirit, then yes.

“...Clouds are made from dust and water. When the water outweighs the dust, it rains. If it gets cold enough, it freezes into snow instead. It's all perfectly natural. Out of place, perhaps, I'd expect this more from the pole of water, but natural enough. It will fade with Calibration.”

Quiver narrowed his eyes at the bitches casual dismissal of his authority and of the trustworthiness of his claims. A brief thought of 'what if she's right' ran through his mind, but he dismissed it. Her disrespect was more important. She would hand over the materials, or he would have an excuse to do with her as he pleased.

“Sure. Brazier, take him to warehouse three. We don't have much in the way of cold weather gear, no need for it in Gem, but a few extra layers of hardier clothes and wrappings should suffice. Do make sure to mark what is taken.”

Hah, she thought he would pay for this? Fool. Once he was promoted once or twice, he'd see her on her knees before him. As he left, nominally satisfied but still angry at the bitches casual dismissal of his concerns, and the half threat if he was wrong, Quivering Arrow swore that this wasn't the end of things. Four days later he was fired from his position on account of readying half of Gems forces for an attack that never came, and the pay for all of the misplaced goods came out of his paycheck, and then his personal fortunes, and then his families fortunes. The shame would follow him until the end of his days.

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YG stalked through the alleyways of Gem as she flicked blood off of a small knife. Calibration had been a right mess, and while the guard had overstepped himself most egregiously, it seemed like there may have been some small truth to his claim. Over the past few months, the bandit population of the outlying lands had risen dramatically, hordes and swarms of them wiping out small villages and occasionally trying to sneak into Gem itself to take what could be taken. There were also monster attacks to the south, various beasties that had been sleeping the eons away stirring in hunger and moving about until they found some poor farmer to be their dinner. And, of course, there were the Despots' own enemies and any number of skulking types - including YG's own father.

As a half caste sidereal, YG had dedicated herself to keeping those skulking types away from her dear Messier. She had nightmares aplenty without the machinations of those who thought themselves masterminds, the side effect of the tender care of the Abyss that she had been subject to. So, in order to aid her dear Messier in sleeping peacefully in what small way she could, she had resolved to firmly stab anything and anyone who thought themselves exceptionally clever and who sought to drag her dear Messier into their affairs.

Unfortunately, this led to the former guards one valid thought - YG hadn't seen a single one of them in almost a week. No reports of bandits, none of her half siblings or former coworkers, no political nonsense from the nobles of Gem or even from her dear Messier's father, and not a whisper of monsters. YG had run double patrols, even going so far as to temporarily leave the city to investigate things, leaving her dear Messier undefended. Yes, there was that Solar girl, but quite frankly YG doubted she was any good in a fight. And what talent she did have was to be written off on account of her being a horrible judge of character - she liked Messier and was moderately obedient to her, so that was only to be expected, but on the other hand she was also entirely too chummy with the FUCKING ABYSSAL that was hanging around. That gold digging whore was more likely to kidnap Messier for herself than save her.

Regardless, the investigations had turned up nothing. Not a single thing. Not a corpse, not a battlefield, not a terrified survivor, nothing. The bandits had vanished. The monsters were quiet. The farmers were happy, if suitably wary. The nobles hadn't even thrown any parties. YG knew in her heart of hearts that someone was planning something and that this period of dead air was but a prelude, but the source of it eluded her. She had confided this, quietly, in the young Solar, who had promised to stick close to her dear Messier and 'help keep big sis safe', which was adorable but not really encouraging on account of her lack of combat effectiveness.

The girl had even gone so far as to demand frequent breaks and cuddles, supposedly in an attempt to draw her dear Messier into a more private and defensible location. Mostly though it just pissed YG off. The girl had the gall to claim to be defending her dear Messier, but it mostly just seemed like the Solar was taking advantage of her. YG would not be pleased - even more than she already was, rather - if the Solar tried to pull that trick during one of the nights that YG had cleared her dear Messier's schedule by impersonating one of her secretaries so that they could spend the night together. Her love had the most beautiful face when she was screaming out YG's name. ...Well, what she could remember of YG's name. Stupid sidereal curse.

Sheathing her knife now that the evidence of her crimes had been firmly cleaned off, YG slipped into the trading outposts main building and found nothing of inter-

Sheathing her knife now that the evidence of her crimes had been firmly cleaned off, YG slipped into one of the Delisle's barracks and navigated her way towards the room that had been set aside for use as her dear Messier's workshop. True to form, her dear Messier and She of Fair Eyes were clustered by one of the benches, small flecks of melting ice and blue and yellow jade littering the floor behind them. Each of them held a small necklace in the shape of an icicle in their hands, a rare sight in Gem unless you had a very large cold room. She Of Fair Eyes was presenting the necklace she had presumably made to her dear Messier, before catching sight of YG and spinning to show it to her as well with an exaggerated 'tada!' to mark her success.

That's very nice, but I'm afraid I can't properly appreciate it if I don't know what it's supposed to do. At the very least, it looks pretty? At that, the Solar let out a huff of air before quickly putting the necklace on with a sigh of relief.

"It generates cool air! Feels nice..."

The girl looked down at herself with a frown.

"My chest feels weird though."

"Sounds like a design flaw, Noel. We'll see about fixing it in the next version."

YG chuckled gently. The girl's nipples had hardened into rock basically as soon as she'd placed the necklace on herself. And she wasn't quite old enough to know what that actually meant, which left her unable to properly appreciate what had happened. Shifting towards her dear Messier, she slipped her dear Messier's own necklace out of her hand and around her neck, enjoying the sight that it resulted in as her dear Messier gave her a dry but mildly amused look. The Solar girl saw what had happened as well, and alternated between giggling at the sight she was too young to appreciate and poking herself in the chest to try and make them go away.

"Really, Yana?"

YG smiled faintly. Her dear Messier was truly beautiful, and it was nice to have these small moments of connection before the next disaster hit.

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One second it was snowing in Gem and the next a heavy booming sound echoed out, prismatic light forming a rupture in space and time. For a while, nobody noticed or bothered to investigate. If they had, they would have seen a woman in black armor fade into existence nearby and stalk away from the epicenter of the explosion. As it was, it would be a few days before anyone noticed the rupture at all, and there would only be witness testimony from drunkards and children about a metal woman creeping about in the dark.

Halfway across the city, a woman woke up in a blind sweat as something wormed its way into her brain, the knowledge of how to close a portal to Autochthon. It wasn't something she'd known before, but in the blink of an eye she was abruptly an expert on the usage of their portal mechanisms. A handful of things were taken from the woman's workshop including four golden rings that defied all explanation, a red dress was thrown on hastily, and she began to make her way towards the doorway through which the Locust Crusade would inevitably make its appearance.

Mere hours after the woman in black has made her way into the city to search for a soul to use as an anchor for her portal, the woman in red approaches it and steps through. The far side is a factory of twisted metal, derelict and yet alive. Guards are present, but they fail to notice her approach for she fades from sight and memory as soon as they look away from her. A console is (not) approached. A code is (not) entered. A shutdown command is (not) issued. And a retreat is (not) made. Because there was never anyone there to do those things.

The woman in red steps back into gem and immediately was never there to begin with. By the time her lover comes to check on her, she's back in her workshop fiddling with something or other. No one suspects a thing. At the same time, the woman in black armor returns to the site of the portal.

"...FUCK."

The woman in black armor, Infinitely Sorrowful Sentinel, knows she must now wait an entire year before any attempts to reopen the portal can be made. Before any backup can be sent. She's on her own. And she still hasn't found the soul she needs to stabilize it. This city was supposed to be undefended!

The woman in the red dress, Messier Lorraine, thanks her lucky stars that this was just a scouting party and that they weren't prepared to deal with someone just walking in invisibly and turning their equipment off. Next year they'll be at least somewhat prepared for her, so the same trick is unlikely to work twice.

Both resolve to work harder for the foreseeable future.

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A young woman stood on a roadside, right at the edge of a series of shattered cobblestones. In front of her were the ruins of a shop she had visited a handful of times in the past. It sold confectionery, sweet wines, and if you had an incredible amount of coin, various frozen delights. As far as shops went, it wasn't a very popular one, too expensive by half, but it survived by catering to various noble families and parties who would pay a pretty penny for the prestige of being able to serve frozen treats in the middle of a desert. If she were not a princess in all but name, she would not be able to purchase its goods half as often as she did - or at all, for that matter. Even imported northern wine from Delisle, brought to Gem from the far side of Creation, was not quite so expensive.

Still, up until now it had been a lovely day. At the urging of her father, Auspicious Weave, the nominal princess of Gem had decided to make the acquaintance of the princess of Delisle. And thus, Jasmine Badoura had spent the day on the shores of a very lovely oasis near one of her fathers 'external estates'. It wasn't quite so fancy as his manor in Gem, but it was the kind of house he could give to one of his children without them feeling too bad about effectively being kicked out of Gem before they could become a threat to his rule. The waters there were quite pleasant, shaded from the pole of fire as it was by the mountain the estate was all but built into.

So, she had invited her soon to be friend to spend a day relaxing, and if she'd a mind for it, swimming. Amazingly, the woman had accepted, though she gathered that was more the result of her secretary bullying her into accepting. A small mousy woman with streaks of pink in her otherwise brown hair that Badoura wouldn't have thought would have it in her to hold such a strong opinion on her mistresses time. What had that girl's name been? Something echo? No, she was quite certain it had started with a 'y', but the rest escaped her. Regardless, at her insistence her fellow 'princess' had accepted. She'd also brought a young girl that she seemed to have adopted, which was an incredible display of trust in Badoura's opinion, and a extremely pale woman who had tried to turn her down before being informed that - a, she wasn't really supposed to let Messier out of her sight, and what if she got attacked by bandits, hmm? And - b, she was too pale and needed more sun anyways.

Badoura had thought she'd been a bodyguard, but she couldn't imagine a bodyguard who stayed behind while her mistress went out with a woman she'd not met before and said woman's own guards. Well, not one that stayed as a bodyguard and didn't get fired. That could be the start of any number of traps, after all, and a dead employer wasn't likely to pay you. And so, Jasmine, a number of eunuch guards, Messier and her ward, and the not-bodyguard had set out to the oasis. They had, quite unfortunately, been set upon by bandits, but the not-bodyguard cut a full half of them down and her own guards handled the rest. Which was of course why they had brought them - Gem was strikingly unsafe these days, a fact that irritated her father to no end.

Upon reaching the oasis a day later, Jasmine had slipped into something suitable for swimming - a set of underthings that both resisted water but were tighter than she normally liked. So as not to fall off, you see. The young girl had leap in fully dressed, utterly delighted by the chance to swim. Messier, by comparison, had simply disrobed and slid into the water with her normal underthings on - something she'd been quick to, not quite criticize, but point out wasn't good for them. Still, she'd been waved off. She supposed that, being the 'princess' of a merchant company, the woman had as many fancy underthings as she wanted, so it likely was no great loss to her. Messier had also invited the not-bodyguard to swim, but she'd quite firmly refused, which Jasmine thought was fitting.

That said, she'd not been asked, so this time she said nothing, not after her last attempt had been waved off. That had all been a full half-day ago. They'd swam for a while, re-dressed and entered the estate proper, had dinner, slept, broke their fast, swam some more, and then returned to the city. Returned to devastation. The last stop on their trip, the confectionary, was in ruins. As was a large part of the street, truth be told. What exactly had happened here? She could see corpses in the armor given to the defenders of the city, some without that distinctive armor, and bloodstains in more than a few places that seemed... improbable. A mercenary was flagged down shortly after Messier begged off to check the state of her own holdings, and the guards report was unbelievable.

A swarm of zombies had sprung up from nowhere and forced their way through the gate. At the same time, the wyld hunt had closed in on what they believed to be an anathema. *At the same time*, some sort of metal golem had gone on a rampage after it likely broke free of whoever had built it. AT THE SAME TIME, two forces of mercenaries, tempted away from her fathers employ by parties unknown had ended up at cross ends, and attacked each other. And, as unbelievable as it may sound, at the same time, a somewhat insane man that Messier had refused a proposal from previously waded into battlezone trying to use the chaos to sneak into her store. And, once more, at the same time, a bandit horde had made a push into the city. Oh, and an Anathema - not the Anathema the wyld hunt had been chasing, an entirely different one - had tried to kill Messier's assistant for some unknown reason, who had rightfully run away screaming.

A solid two thirds of Gem's hired armies had been fed into the meat grinder that yesterday had been, and the vast majority of them would not be getting back up. The zombies had been put down, the bandits had been culled, the one surviving member of the wyld hunt was not expected to live through the night, the golem had vanished into so much thin air after having one of its arms ripped off, the two mercenary forces had largely wiped themselves out before being finished off by the other groups. The Anathema that had it out for... was her name Echo? Jasmine was sure it had started with a 'y', but she'd heard that name out of Messier's own mouth recently, so perhaps she was wrong? Well, no matter - that Anathema had loudly proclaimed Messier to be at fault for all of this before fucking off, and the jilted suitor had not been seen recently so he'd likely skulked off somewhere after being wounded -

An explosion rang out and a man's body hit the ground and skipped off it like a stone across water, sliding directly towards, and stopping precisely at the feet of a pair of guards as Messier's not-bodyguard made an appearance. Ah, there he was. The man tried to force himself to his feet, babbling about how if he couldn't have her then nobody could, but was struck upside the head from behind by the guards. Good riddance.

Slowly moving through the affected area and the torn up streets, Jasmine reached the Delisle Trading Outpost where Messier ruled. The front of the store was simply gone. The door was embedded into the wall of the building across the street, twenty stones into the air, and a few glass shards dotted the ground, but there honestly wasn't nearly enough rubble. The inside wasn't much better, well aged and maintained pieces of furniture utterly shattered, and finely made tapestries and carpets torn to ribbons. Doorways farther into the shop were heavily marred, but what little of the walls behind them she could see seemed largely intact.

Whatever had occurred had only ruined the *front* of the store, it seemed. The underground portions had likely escaped damage entirely. As she picked her way towards it, Messier appeared from one of those doors, a pair of women following her. Both mousey with brown hair, but only one with streaks of pink. Oh, no wonder she'd had such trouble remembering their names, they looked so similar. Jasmine wouldn't have been surprised if they'd traded out a handful of times and she'd simply not noticed.

"Ah, Jasmine. I apologize, I know you'd still have plans left, but I'm afraid I'll have to cut things short - I've very abruptly become a great deal busier than anticipated. I do thank you for the swim, it was quite nice after all the heat."



Quite understandable, and she emphasized completely. And was glad that she'd enjoyed what she had been able to experience, incomplete as it was. Normally Jasmine would have capitalized with a promise to continue this another day, and spent a while ensuring that she had another full day of activities planned once that continuation rolled around, but she rather suspected that she'd be turned down sharply. Messier didn't seem like the kind to fall for that, especially not with... well, all of this. So instead, Jasmine finished by wishing Messier all the luck in the world in fixing this and bringing the trading outpost back to functionality.

Unbeknownst to her, she would actually see Messier again very soon, on account of her father sending a somewhat panicked summons to the merchant princess to see if he could turn that promise of 'eventually' looking at some of the less maintained weapon systems into a 'right now', on account of him having quite abruptly lost two thirds of the cities defenders. Given today, that was obviously an unacceptable state of affairs.

-----

"Tell me where they went, Lorraine."

I glare at the woman balefully.

"Do you not see the state of my store?"

"I do. And I know the lout was here, and you should know that my entire team was wiped out - but not before reporting that an anathema with a ridiculously big essence cannon was seen near your shop. You're a sympathizer, I understand. They must pay exceptionally well. But I can also pay well, and they're gone and unlikely to come back. They'll never know."

The woman before me is a classical jade beauty. She looks like she walked off the cover of a xianxia novel. Fitting, as the center of Creation, the Blessed Isle, is both a vaguely fantasy-china kind of place, and also the center of the Scarlet Empire. She's pretty, but not my type. Also bitchy as fuck and stuck between two fucking assholes vying for her hand. I'm not getting involved in that.

"I realize this may be hard to believe, but I didn't ask where they were going. Not only do I not care, but there are enough anathema in the city already without me shoving my nose into the business of even more of them."

"...No, I do believe you. This city hasn't done you any favors. You look exhausted on a good day, and while a vacation did you good you're already back to overworking yourself. You'll get heatstroke, you know?"

The ambassador sighs and shakes her head. Man, I love being pretty. Social op, please don't nerf. Admittedly the shit I signed up to deal with is very taxing, but so far so good. Now I just need the woman dedicated to hunting down exalts to not notice YG, Secret, or She of Fair Eyes. YG I trust to go unnoticed, she has half the company convinced that she's Subdued Echo's twin sister. And Secret just dodges any and all social obligations. Which isn't how that works, but I guess the GM likes her. That and every time she does it I get a level of insight on how to abuse the fuck out of dodge charms myself, which. Well, me likey.

"Who's the girl? Even with Gem allowing for slave labor, I didn't think you'd be one to actually utilize that."

I turn partially. Noel is one foot into the doorway to my workshop, looking at Season of Departure with an alarmed look on her face. She has a music box grasped in her hands. She must have finished fixing it and brought it to me for inspection. Which is, admittedly, exactly what I asked her to do, but I can't help but dislike having the solar exalt and the realm ambassador in the same room.

“Let me see it, Noel.”

She steps forwards obediently with a wary look at Season and places the box on my desk. I wind it up and the box begins to [sing out](#) in a language nobody present speaks. As it plays, I pull a thin pair of tongs from my desk and begin to prod the device. It skips in a few places and I place a few drops of oil into it before rewinding it. This time it plays smoothly.

“Not bad. Always make sure to give it an appropriate amount of oil though.”

“Messier?”

I look back up at my guest. She’s frowning at me, probably from me ignoring the accusation of having enslaved the girl. As if. Give it a few months and she’ll be stronger than I am.

“Her parents died in the clusterfuck a few days ago. Given that if she doesn’t work she likely won’t eat, or have a roof over her head... Well, I suppose it’s not wrong to say that I’ve enslaved her. She’s welcome to leave whenever she wants, but I doubt anyone who would want a child would be worth working for.”

“...I see. Ever the Pearl of Generosity, I suppose. And you, girl? Are you satisfied with this arrangement?”

Noel freezes. Half hidden behind me she has been trying and failing to avoid Season’s notice. Given that she was the focus of it, that’s only to be expected. Her eyes dart between us nervously and she looks half a second away from bolting.

“I’m not going to refuse to feed you if you say that you don’t like me, you know. I might give you more vegetables, however.”

Noel blinks and lets out half of a snort and half of a giggle. Giving the woman that it is very much not safe for her to be near a judgmental gaze, she steadies herself.

“Mhmm. Big sis is nice. And the boxes are... Fun? They’re like puzzles. I like them.”

“Puzzles, huh? Bit young for that, but alright.”

I blink.

“I should make a Where’s Waldo book.”

“A what?”

“Ah, you’re right, I would need a printing press.”

Now it’s Season’s turn to blink at me in confusion. Well, I suppose that’s a bit out there. And also a bit of an out of context thing given the nature of the world. But could I make it? I do recall seeing that lovely piece of Japanese art that was made by using presses rather than actually painted, so I suppose it would be possible if somewhat awkward to do something similar here...

“No, seriously, what?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s, ah, puzzle artwork. However many paintings you want, maybe a depiction of a crowded market, of the sultans court, of a festival day, so on and so forth, and in each of them there’s a single individual that’s the same throughout all of them, wearing some kind of iconic outfit to make him easier to spot. The goal is to have so many other things, so many other people, that he gets lost in the crowd even if he’s technically standing in plain sight.”

“That sounds fascinating, if somewhat painful to reproduce. Although I suppose that’s why you mentioned the printing press? ...I might be able to help with that. For a cut of the profits of course, and perhaps a few paintings of the Scarlet Court being included in your book.”

"We can work the details out later."

"Of course. Do let me know once you have things more prepared?"

I nod calmly as I hand the music box back to Noel and shoo her out of my office. She goes with a contemplative look on her face. I haven't even made them yet, and I think I have a fan of the series. Possibly two. Truly, blatantly ripping off modern inventions is the greatest of all isekai cheats.

...Fuck, now I want a hamburger.

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Copper Nights was having a great day! He'd recently arrived in Gem, down on his luck, hoping to find a lucky break and then promptly run into some others he'd met previously. Being able to sell your sword as a group rather than an individual was a blessing all on its own, but it was nothing to what they'd discovered. The city had just had a major fight break out among the various factions after some heated arguments caused by a resource shortage - and as a result, were looking to hire.

They had arrived the very day after a good dozen men died in some political grandstanding. Just barely missing getting killed themselves, in all likelihood. And yet, perfectly positioned to get hired on by someone high paying for a decent chunk of time, because those weren't just random mercenaries who died, but a bunch of personal bodyguards and whatnot. So yeah. Not only had he met back up with Plum Fist, who was still hot as fuck, but he had been set to be hired by the Despot. Everything was going his way.

What wasn't going his way were the orders to investigate and hunt down some kind of metal golem. It had held its own in a fight surprisingly well and the Despot either wanted it reprogrammed to aid in Gems defense, or torn to pieces to use as spare parts for more reliable systems. More specifically, things weren't going his way because while they had found the golem, they were now getting their asses kicked by the thing they'd been sent here to hunt.

So. Not so great. Getting killed within the first few months of being hired was the last thing he wanted to deal with, mostly because getting killed meant he'd be dead.

The thing leapt into the air and shot a jet of something out of one of its feet, causing it to spin rapidly as it fell back down. Copper's eyes widened as he jerked his signature staff made from the skull of a beast of resplendent liquid into a blocking position. No, he had not killed the thing. He had merely helped some excavators dig the thing up and thought it would make a good bashing weapon, so he'd taken it as part of his payment. And he was right.

The golems fist impacted his staff and fractures ran down its length. Shit. Copper threw himself back as Plum dashed forwards in what looked like an ordinary punch, but Copper knew getting hit by that punch would hurt like jumping off a damn cliff. She hit the golem and then froze, a small whine passing through her lips. Then the golem backhanded her into Copper, and they both went flying.

Behind them, their other three team members tried to pick up the slack and didn't fare much better. Copper groaned as he tried to disentangle himself from Plum, and managed to get back to his feet after a moment. A quick glance at his weapon told him that it would be unusable in another hit or two. So much for his signature weapon. Still... Right, that might work. Intentionally snapping the thing in half, he quickly formed them into a pair of short clubs - or rather, a club and perhaps a small dagger if he was lucky.

Plum readied another heavy strike as Copper rushed in, now wielding his mace and 'dagger'. He charged forwards, and the world around him exploded. Fire was bleeding off of him, and the golem seemed to be moving in slow motion. It still managed to slide into a decent blocking stance, but Copper just used his secondary to swing upwards and bypass the block entirely. The fractured edges of the metal pole bit into the thing's arm, seemingly melting even as they cut, before the molten metal splashed upwards and into one of its eyes.

His opponent screeched in pain, and he threw himself backwards. It tried to lash out and missed - and then Plum was back in its face with two very large stone hands that surrounded her own. Still open from his own attack, and hopefully blind in one eye, Plum smashed into it and sent the thing flying. From the corner of his eye another of his team nocked an arrow that seemed to be bleeding wind, and launched it. The metal thing slammed into a wall, and then the arrow slammed into it, pinning it in place for a moment. The next instant a wooden hammer the size of a person was impacting its face, and the moment the hammer was withdrawn a whip made of water cracked forwards to strike it in the head.

Trying to catch his breath, he held up a hand to announce a pause. There was enough smoke and dust from the various attacks that he didn't want to rush forwards just this second, and the fading light made keeping a line of sight on the thing tricky. The smoke cleared and Copper Night's heart sank. It reached up and pulled the arrow out of its arm, dropping back to the ground. Brushing itself off almost disdainfully, it spoke.

"SELF REPAIR MODULE."

"Ah fuck."

Copper wasn't sure who had said that. Might've been him. Before their eyes, the wounds they'd managed to put on the thing seemed to fade away as a wave of something flowed over its skin. In just a few seconds, it looked the same way it had before the fight had started - and he had no weapon anymore. Not a good situation to be in.

"REASSESSING THREAT LEVEL. PROGNOSIS: PREVENTATIVE MURDER."

The next second its fist was buried in Copper's gut, and he was the one flying away. Then, abruptly, he wasn't. Something had caught him and put him back on the ground. As he looked up to try and figure out what had happened, he saw three arrows made of some jet black material sticking out of the things chest.

"So you're an Alchemical? Sorry, but I'll have to ask you to die now."

It was a woman. One he recognized, even. He'd very politely interviewed a handful of clerks and salesmen for the Delisle Trading Company - and put in an order for better armor now that he could afford it - because they'd been some of the few to see the thing and not die horribly. What with being non-combatants, after all. The woman was, nominally, a bodyguard of some kind for one of their head honchos, and had very politely informed them that the last person to make unreasonable demands of Messier Lorraine had damn near been murdered by the Sultan - his new boss. Copper could smell the politics and had done his best to not do... whatever it was the other guy had done.

Anyways, the eerily pale bodyguard had watched to make sure none of the interviewees had been roughed up, and then offered a few helpful tricks about tracking unusual prey. And then apparently followed them. Copper wasn't sure he should be offended at the lack of trust about his competence, or grateful that she had, because he was pretty sure they had all been about to die.

"Thanks for that, lady. That fight wasn't going so hot for us."

"Yeah, I saw. You're lucky I mentioned you to Messier, she thought you might be a bit outclassed. Even if you are all dragonbloods."

“...Even if we’re all what?”

“You know you’re on fire, right?”

Copper looked at himself. Huh. So he was. His eyes shifted over to Plum, and then to the rest of his crew. Patches of dark grey stone cover her arms and clothes. His other companions seem to have their own unusual auras about them - flickers of wind and lightning dart about one of them, while another seems to have illusory twigs and leaves growing out of them. Huh. ...He didn’t know how to react to that. Maybe, if he was lucky, he’d be able to argue that he deserved more pay?

Hours later, after a meeting between the richest woman in Gem and the Sultan he nominally owed his allegiance to for the next year, his entire team got a raise. And informed that they would be getting kitted out on the Despots expense, and given a shitton of cool gear. Assuming the Delisle Trading Company could repair it. But, according to said company's head rep - that being the richest woman in Gem - it wasn’t an issue. All things considered, that was a pretty good turn of events. Though he wasn’t looking forwards to the even more dangerous fights he’d no doubt be getting into.

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Hello everyone! Sorry about this, just doing some shuffling about and tidying up. Keep scrolling down please!



Ensign Sue - An Exalted Chain

This is much better, isn't it? It's all about me, after all.

- #1 - Exalted : The Wylds
- #2 - Alchemical Solutions
- #3 - Changeling The Lost
- #4 - Werewolf The Apocalypse
- #5 - Shards of the Exalted Dream : Creation Jam
- #6 - Exalted : Mortal Heroes Gauntlet

## Exalted : Mortal Heroes Gauntlet

	Nexus	-300	Grasping the Perfected Lotus Root
	Criminal	0	Unassailable Tower of the Adamant Soul
100	Good Luck Crossing That Bridge	-400	Virtue Expressed Through Grace
100	A Lout, A Layabout, A Lice Riddled Beggar	0	Contacts (1)
150	A Serpent And The Garden	0	Layman's Gear
400	May You Live In Interesting Times	-100	Gossamer (Skilled)
400	A Deal Made In Good Faith	-50	Resources 1
1000	Ringbearer	-50	Resources 2
0	It's A Keybl...	-50	Resources 3
0	Have Great Sex!	-100	Trivials of Thaumaturgy 1
100	A Dragons World	0	The One Ring
-250	Fae Blooded	-50	The One Ring 2
0	Gratuitous Skill Kata	-50	A Time Capsule
0	Gratuitous Skill Kata 2	0	The Graces (The Cup of Compassion)
-50	Guild Smile	0	The Graces (The Ring of Temperance)
0	Heroic Tale Embodiment	0	The Graces (The Staff of Conviction)
-50	Passion Fettered Soul	0	The Graces (The Sword of Valor)
-50	Just A Very Clumsy Person	0	The Graces (The Way Of Perception)
0	Secret Power Slumbering	-100	A Blade of Sake
0	The Flow Of Essence	-200	The Ring That Reflects
0	Sweet Voiced Beggar's Petition	-100	The Grail
0	Heroic Tempering	0	Champion's Belt
0	Lord of Shattered Mirrors Understanding	0	Rath
-300	Thaumaturgy, The Mystical Arts		

Hello everyone! My name is Mary Sue! Now, normally I'd love to do nothing more than sit back and tell you all about my adventures, but today I'm here to do a favor for a friend! Normally they'd do this themselves, but they got themselves caught by some exalted a little while ago, so they're stuck hunting rockodiles for the next hundred years. I don't know what a rockodile is but it sounds tasty! Anyways, with them indisposed there's no one to do the most honorable task of.... Reading people's fanmail! That's why...

"Who are you and why are you in my workshop?"

I'm here today with Messier Lorraine, our overworked and underpaid protagonist with gigantic tits. Like holy shit, can I try to drown myself in those?

"No."

Anyways, smile! You're on candid camera!

"I'm going to ask YG to stab you."

Don't go anywhere just yes, I have your mail!

"...my mail."



Yup! You're popular and famous, just like me! So naturally, people have all sorts of things they want to ask you!

"Uh huh."

For example, first off - What is your favorite left sock? Have you considered learning the Virile Bull style? It could help with your fatigue issues! And of course, will you be teaching Secret the Mothers Bounty style? So many questions so little time. So tell me, what kind of answers do you have for our readers?

"Well, assuming I actually answer these questions and don't just throw you out."

Always a good thing to assume!

"...the one on my foot, the *what* style, and - HEY SECRET."

"WHAT?"

"WHAT'S YOUR MARTIAL ART SCORE?"

"I KNOW THEY EXIST."

"Probably not."

Aw, but she'd look so good like that... then again without Ten Winds I guess she isn't going to be punching any rivers in half anytime soon. Let's move on to the next batch! Who is your favorite primordial? What's with the weasels? Can I have your moms phone number? What caste are you and Yuno? Do you think you injected enough destinies into your eyeballs? What kind of things does your mom like? What modern convenience do you miss the most? Do you jump good? How available is your mom? Are you French? Sorry, that was a lot to dump on you all at once but they're all by the same guy!

"Who the fuck is sending these."

The readers!

"I hate fae."

Please? Pretty please with a cherry on top?

"Fine. Urg. Most of the primordials are evil, so probably Gaea. Or Autobot, but I'm not an Alchemical. What weasels? She doesn't have a phone. We aren't any caste, we're half castes. That said, Chosen of Serenity and Chosen of Endings. Fuck you. Not you. Water being free. Meh. She's not, stop asking. Uh. I have no idea, probably not."

Oh yeah, the despot charges through the roof for every drop... thankful you're rich!

"Thankfully"

Moving on! Where are you going to go when you're done with Exalted? Which of your companions is hottest? Why are you such a bottom? Do you want anything from mcdonalds? Inquiring minds want to know!

"You're a fucking weirdo, you know? I have no idea. Me. I'm fucking exhausted. Biscuit."

Biscuit?

"I like their biscuits."

Fair enough! Finally, the last question of the batch! Once you spark and presumably come back to complete the pact, what kind of benefactor will you be?

“How the fuck do you even know what jumpchain is?”

Because I'm on one, silly!

“Then you be the one to fulfill the pact.”

Okay! To start with, I'll send everyone to Sonichu because I like Sonic but Pokemon is traditional, so obviously a jump that combines the two is the ideal first jump!

“...First jump is here, then whatever the fuck they want.”

Phooey you. And with that, we're finished! As always, thank you for dropping by dear readers, and I hope you eagerly await the next installment of Ensign Sue!

“Messier, who the fuck is this chick and who is she talking to?”

“I have no idea, to both of those.”

“...Can I stab her?”

“Please do, dear”

Ack, no, not the face, not the face! I'll see you again next time folks, stay tuned for the next episode of Ensign Sue Z!

-----

Secret walked into Messier's workshop, biting into a piece of fruit as she did so. The woman hadn't called her, precisely, but she'd said something weird about martial arts so Secret figured she might as well ask what that was up with that. Stepping into the room, Secret was very confused to find what looked like the wall out of someone's house and part of the floor, complete with window, crackling fireplace, and a couple of comfy looking chairs sitting in the middle of said workshop.

Actually scratch that, the confusing part was the scenic view of the ocean that she could see through said window. What the heck. Of course, said view didn't last long as YG promptly picked up the chair that Messier wasn't sitting in and threw it through the abnormal window, at which point whatever illusion had been on it shattered, revealing... more of Messier's workshop.

“...Is this a bad time?”

Pinky jerked her head towards Secret as though she hadn't realized she was there, before scowling mightily and threw herself into the remaining chair, curling up with her lover. Meanwhile, said lover had one of those looks on her face that screamed 'I'm done with today'. Which was admittedly a fairly common look for her, given her piss poor sleeping habits. Still, she turned her head towards Secret and forced half of a smile onto her face.

“Not at all. Did you need something?”

“I was just going to ask why you mentioned martial arts...?”

“Ah. One of the fair folk broke in and suggested I teach you Mothers Bounty.”

“I don’t know what that is?”

“The one that makes your boobs bigger.”

Secret took another bite of her fruit that she didn’t actually know the name of as she considered that for a moment. She was guessing that her response of ‘I know they exist’ had basically disqualified her for that. It wasn’t like she had any real talent in the area, and while it would be *nice* to have an appearance score worth a damn she’d kind of dumped all of her points into dodge. Messier, meanwhile, had a full five dots if how pretty she was served as any kind of clue. And a lot of merits. Plus more than a few flaws to make up for it.

“I take it I don’t qualify?”

“I mean, I could teach you anyways? Short of the moment of Exaltation, most people don’t just magically get better at things.”

“So, training montage basically?”

“If you want to, sure. We’ll need a river though.”

“I’m going to regret asking this, but why do we need a river to teach me martial arts?”

“So you can punch it in half.”

That can’t possibly be how this works. Punch a river in half? Who does that? No, more, who thinks that ‘punch a river in half’ is a starting exercise?!? ...It would be kind of cool though.

“Cool as that sounds, it seems a bit much?”

“You’re Exalted. Nothing smaller qualifies as cool enough to be worth learning.”

“That is not how that works.”

“You say that now...”

-----

Far away from Gem, in the center of creation, there is an island. This island is where the Scarlet Dynasty rules over the world as they try to defend it from fae, demon, and ghost, and vilify the Anathema. Far above them, there is another island made in duplicate. Yu Shan, the court of heaven, where the gods reside.

It is, without a doubt, the largest bastion of corruption and bribery in all the lands. Even Gem, whose laws fluctuate on a daily basis with the eb and flow of who can afford to bribe the Despot the most, is not quite so bad. On this day, however, a minimal amount of work is being done. There are some low ranking gods onto whom paperwork has been shoved, but a number of gods are throwing parties, and anyone who could afford to take the day off has done so.

In one of those parties, a pool of divination has been set up and tuned to the life and times of one particular mortal. She had been investigated by the sidereals for various things, and those who had read her case had deemed her interesting enough to continue watching even after the sidereals jurisdiction had effectively ended. The woman’s life had, for all intents and purposes, been turned into a drama. A small handful of minor gods arranged for things to be more exciting than they ought, while cutting out the boring bits and adding music at suitably thrilling moments, as if watching her life was like watching a play.

Surely, if the woman knew she would be outraged at the breach of privacy between her and her lover and their other friends, but that required the opinion of a mere mortal to actually matter to the gods of Yu Shan. In theory the sidereal might complain and interject, but the only sidereal who had any claim on the woman denied all involvement for the trouble she'd unknowingly caused him. She hadn't been the only one investigated after all.

And so it was, on the seventh of Ascending Fire, did many gods gather before the viewing pool to witness an epic clash for the ages, in which the woman and her circle did battle against one of the dreaded Abyssals and the army of dead bandits that he had converted into ghosts, zombies, and other creatures most foul in order to steal the entirety of the city of Gem for himself. For hours, the gods ooh'd and ah'd as the woman danced through the battlefield, as the heavy axe and subtle knife of her half caste lover flashed in her wake. As the childish Solar pulled forth tool after tool and invention after invention. As the renegade Deathknight fought for her only chance of normality against her own kind. As the brave mortals of both the city and the woman's retinue brought forth all they were worth for the sake of their lives.

Slowly, surely, the foes fell and the battle ended. The heroine's circle retreated and regrouped to nurse their wounds and plan for how to get away with this fight, to not be betrayed for being too strong or put down like dogs by the wild hunt. In that moment, many of the gods loosen their belts. The half caste's habits were well known by this point, and her hands wandered throughout the meeting, bits and pieces of both her clothing and her targets drifting to the ground as they enjoyed their bodies. Because as interesting as her life was, she was quite possibly the most beautiful mortal in creation, and no man could resist two women going at it like that. Even the female gods were not entirely immune.

By complete chance, someone passed by and heard the lewd noises. The schlucks and plaps, the glacks and shcliks. And, being a goddess of the court of serenity, investigated. And thus was Venus, maiden of serenity, introduced to a new pastime, the stalking of a young mortal who had the potential to be exceptionally, mhm, serene. She watched. Witnessed. And eventually came to a decision. For the joy she had brought to Yu Shan, and perhaps as an apology for the boorish behavior of the gods, she would be sent something small, as a reward for good work. Especially that thing she'd done with her tongue to the half caste sidereal, that had looked fun.

A package was quickly assembled and sent off, and Venus paused. Had she seen this girl before somewhere? She had been investigated, but Venus hadn't been part of that investigation so that probably wasn't it.

"...Bother. That's going to irritate me, isn't it? Where have I seen those tits before?"

-----

YG paced nervously. Finding out that her lover's birthday was two days ago was not how she'd expected her week to go, but she'd managed to draft Echo into forcing Messier to take days off in preparation for throwing at least a small party. Then she'd had to scramble to get a gift. Getting Messier a gift was hard. She was rich. She could buy anything she wanted. YG was half tempted to wrap herself up and call that her present, but that was likely to get her love to scold her for being excessive in front of Noel. And also wasn't all that special, given how often they went at it.

That cut out a great deal of possible options. Can't be herself, can't be something bought. Could potentially be something bartered for, but that ran into the same issues as buying things because Messier had a loot of political capital in Gem right now. What to get, what to get, what to get?

...She could give Messier her knife? For like, a week? She was kind of always asking her not to stab people for looking at her for too long after all, that was supposedly just an indication of good taste. It was when they tried to

make a move that she was allowed to get stabby. A week of not having to ask her that would be good, right? Or maybe a month? No, a month was too much. She also couldn't promise no violence at all during such a period, one of her siblings would undoubtedly try to take advantage of that.

Okay! Her knife for a week, that was going to be her present to Messier!

- - - - -

I stared blandly up at YG as she shifted in place, blushing faintly.

"...Why is Miss Yig giving big sis her knife only for a week? If she was going to give you her knife, shouldn't you get to keep it?"

Noel has a deeply confused look on her face. And also frosting from the cake. The thought of a present she doesn't get to keep is probably a bit weird for her. Her own present of a small clockwork bird with some recorded birdsong was impressive, especially given that she'd apparently only started work on it a few days ago.

"It's something of a joke, more than an actual present. I get what she's trying to do though, and it is sweet."

Noel shrugs even as YG slumps in relief that I liked it. Not that asking her not to do things was a trial per say, but it was something I could take my mind off of for a little while at least. Make things slightly easier.

"What about this one?"

Despite nominally being the only ones invited to my party - or rather, the only ones who knew I was having a party, because they'd decided on such a thing on their own accord - there is in fact a third present. Or a fourth, if you consider the bottle of apple wine that Echo had pulled out of the cold room for me. I would imagine that I did technically pay for it, or had it written off, but her grabbing it without being asked is at least mildly thoughtful and appropriate enough.

Regardless, the additional present is a small chest - or a large jewelry box, depending on your perspective. It has a singular bow slapped on top of it and my name engraved on a plate, so clearly it is in fact someones present to me, but quite frankly I have no idea who. YG pulls it over to me and Noel makes encouraging noises for me to open it, so I obey. They both not-so-subtly lean over to look into it as I do.

"...This is from your father isn't it."

"Um. Not that I'm aware? Why would you say that?"

"I can't think of anyone else who would send me anything made of starmetal."

"That's. Fair. I think?"

"Miss Yig? Big sis? What are they?"

I look over at Noel. Noel who has yet another confused look on her face. A confused look on her face at the chest full of starmetal sex toys that YG's father has sent me. Yes, such a subtle message. I'm aware you don't approve of me, jackass.

"An insult."

"Oh."

YG winces but makes noises of agreement when Noel looks towards her for confirmation.

"If nothing else the metal is valuable I suppose."

- - - - -

"Oh, you got it to her a few days after her birthday? That's great timing!"

"She... didn't like it? Whyever not?"

"I suppose I did forget to sign it, so that's understandable. I didn't realize he felt that way."

"I'll just have to send her something better next year I suppose."

- - - - -

(years later)

A musky storefront was her welcome. Wood paneling, imported and maintained at great cost hid rock walls. Shelves containing volume after volume of inventory reports lined the walls, interspaced with comfortable couches and chairs and the odd low end table. Two wide staircases met to form the entrance, one going up to the surface and one downwards towards the underground thoroughfare. Near the center of the room was a desk. Well, more of a podium, really. Tall, and with a taller stool. Supposedly it helped whoever the door clerk was not get pushed around if people are looking up at you.

Subdued Echo had never really felt that way, but then again by her own name she was subdued. Or, had been subdued. Chejop Kejak, the monstrous old man who had offered her some training, had... not exactly demanded that she be more bold, but implied that the time for modesty had since passed. She was Exalted. Chosen of Secrets. She'd gone to heaven, met a maiden, learned to fight from the oldest of old masters, and been burdened with glorious and saddening truth about the world. And yet, here she was, back at this desk. Had anything really changed?

...Her loyalties, perhaps. She was here to spy on her former employer after all.

"Echo?"

She turned. There she was. Messier Lorraine, her boss, the biggest pain in the ass she'd ever had to deal with. The woman she was here to spy on, on behalf of the Bronze Faction.

"Good evening, miss."

"Back from Yu Shan?"

"...How did you know where I was?"

"Everyone forgot you existed. That's a side effect of a Sidereal exaltation."

"Wait, if everyone forgot I existed, how do you still remember me?"

"Magic. It helps that there's no one alive who knows as much about exaltations as I do."

"Really?"

"No. I can barely keep the castes straight."

There's a look of dry amusement on Messier's face. Her hand reaches into a coin purse carried at her waist, disappearing deeper into it than should really be possible, and she pulls out another bag. One that was actually larger than the coin purse, amusingly. It gets tossed her way, and Echo catches it. ...Candied nuts.

"You remembered?"

"I don't actually consider myself to be good with people, but given a few years even I can pick up on basic patterns."

"Heh. Thank you, miss."

"And on that note, I assume you're here to spy on me?"

That's not fair, Echo hadn't even done anything yet. Then again, the young mistress of Delise was nothing if not a genius, so she supposed it wasn't that difficult a thing to suss out.

"...May I ask why you think that?"

"Sidereals are stupid. Especially if there's more than two of them in a room."

"That sounds like a story."

"Eh, not really. How much do you know about the way things used to be?"

"Chejop told me about the Usurpation, but not in any great detail."

"Ketchup Carjack himself gave you lessons, huh? Nice. But nothing about, say, the primordial war?"

"No, miss."

"Hmm. Well, take a seat, I can tell a story."

-----

"Ketchup Carjack? Really?"

"The woman is frighteningly well informed. Quite irreverent, however. To mispronounce my name so..."

-----

In the beginning there wasn't anything. Potential, maybe. The stuff the Fae are made from, but no one to make them. And then there wasn't. Or was, I guess. The primordials came into existence because they decided to exist, and they made everything that we know. The world, then the mortals, then the gods to manage us. But the primordials had trouble caring about things so small, so they walked all over their own works and damaged it, something that would cause them problems later.

In the middle of this, there was a dragon. Ebby. Ebon. Or Ted, if you prefer. Creations bestest and most skilled douchebag. He lied. He cheated. He stole. And eventually he got bored, because nobody, from the lowest mortal to the king of the primordials himself, Theion, was able to catch him in the act. So he decided to do something very very stupid - he would make someone who was perfect, and then force them to also be a douchebag. Thus was born the Unconquered Sun.

Ebby tortured the Sun in every way he could, every way he could think of, all for the sake of trying to make him break. It didn't work. He bore it all upon his back and smiled as he did it. In the end, it was the mortals that changed things. He was too kind to watch us suffer, and too courageous to do nothing, even if it was a primordial who was killing us by accident. Unfortunately, there's nothing the Sun could do about the dragon - part of his creation was a series of oaths. No god could harm a primordial.

So he didn't. He helped us do it instead. Autochthon and Gaea were contacted, and convinced to help him. Luna and the five Maidens. And the exaltations were created. Three hundred to the sun, and three hundred to the moon. One hundred among the maidens, and ten thousand for the earth. I'm pretty sure the original crop of dragonbloods were mostly female, because they were designed to breed more. Anyways, that was what they had to work with.

Given that we're here, they won. Along the way, a number of primordials were killed. I'm fairly certain that a Solar by the name of Merela choked one to death, which is quite impressive given that they shouldn't have needed to breathe. But that's Solars for you I suppose. So. Five or six dead primordials, and the rest mutilated in some manner and trapped in hell, the demon city Malfeas who was Theion. Unfortunately, oaths of surrender require at least some manner of honor in order to function properly, and Ebby has none. As a result, he is only mostly trapped down there.

At some point, those dead primordials woke up and started causing a ruckus. You see, when they wrote the book on the laws of physics, they didn't include their own deaths. Why would they? This caused issues. Including the creation of basically every form of undead known to man. Stuff happened, there might have been another war. Not my area of expertise. What matters, however, is that Ebby got in contact with them and they put together a plan to take revenge on the Exalted. They called it their great curse.

Imagine being king of the world and you fall in love with someone. You give them gifts, write them poems, and throw banquets in their honor. Eventually you marry them. And maybe along the way, they get hurt. Someone attacks them, or maybe a wild animal. So you resolve to be more careful with them. All of a sudden they're no longer someone you treat on equal footing. They're lesser. They need to be protected. It's fine if you throw parties less often, or never go back to their favorite restaurant. It isn't safe anymore. They might complain, but you're confident that you can make them understand. And if they keep arguing, you can just ignore them, right?

This is, fundamentally, what the Neverborn did to the Solars. They actually made the Solars more willful, more powerful. That they could suddenly go from tired and exhausted to fully functional. The price for this was insanity. They'd have a break from reality, moments where they were just fucking done with the situation and wanted to resolve it as quickly as possible. Usually through murder. And then, afterwards, they wouldn't see anything wrong with it. Wouldn't be able to. Piece by piece, bit by bit, in a way he'd never been able to do to the Sun, the Solars began to degrade.

The woman you love turned into a woman you needed to protect. Protection turned into captivity. Captivity turned into ownership. Ownership turned into objectification. They weren't a person anymore, they were a thing to be owned. Like a statue or a painting, you bring it out every now and then for everyone to admire and then you put it back away. Did it want to go away? Who cares, objects don't have opinions. And if they did, you're king of the world, your opinion is obviously more important. Even if that object was an entire city. That's how Paragon happened. They stopped caring about opinions because they knew better, and decided that since the petty mortals needed someone watching over their shoulder every second of every day to make sure they did things properly, they would do just that.

That was how the Ebon Dragon hurt the Sun in a way that finally made him stop smiling. Through his chosen. For Sidereals, however, they had something different. Ever so proud of their plans, those plans now fail them. I told you Sidereals were stupid, didn't I? Especially if there's more than two of them in a room? That's their curse - the more they work together, the farther away from their goals they get. One Sidereal is dangerous. Two isn't. A full circle, an assembly, or heaven forbid, all of them? You'd wish they were traitors to creation, because they'd do less damage to it if they were actively trying to hurt it.

-----

"How much of that is true and how much of that is story?"

"Enough. It's not like I was there or anything, but in broad strokes..."

"You're terrifying."

"...Anyways, the moral of the story? Don't rely on other Sidereals if you can help it."



Far far away, a few thousand gods sat around pools of water, before vast mirrors, in front of raging fires, or above pits of sand and dust. All of these things were methods of divination. Ways of looking at the world from afar. All of them were aimed at the same girl, the same mortal. Some days it seemed like she was the most interesting woman in the world. Among their number were a handful of Sidereals. Including one very old man who had taken on a student recently, and had hoped to use the song and dance that these gods had created to glean information.

He had, technically. Just not in the way he had wanted. His spy being discovered immediately was unfortunate, but not wholly out of the question. Them not being thrown out was a stroke of luck. And this... he didn't know what to call this. A lie? Propaganda to make her less willing to send important information back to Yu Shan? If it was true-

If it was true, then every accomplishment he'd ever had was utterly worthless. So. He would put it out of his mind as best he could. The unconfirmed ramblings of a woman he had no reason to trust were worthless.

"Not to call you a liar to your face or anything, but I don't suppose there's any way you can prove that?"  
"I can."

Worthless.

"How?"  
"Lytek knows about the curse."

Worthless.

"The god of Exaltation?"  
"He didn't tell Conky because he thought he could fix it, but he failed. Has been trying not to get executed ever since."

...

Chejop let out a shaky breath. The water in the reflection pool had stilled, cutting off the voices. He looked up and around. The room was utterly empty. How long had they been gone? How long had he been here alone with his thoughts? Footsteps echoed from behind him, and a melodious woman's voice called out to him.

"So. Now you know."

He turned to face Jupiter. Maiden of Secrets. His patron. Here to hear an accounting of his failure, most likely. If he was lucky then an investigation would be launched first, but honestly - if he were standing in judgement upon another for this, he'd probably just kill them and be done with it. Some things just couldn't be fixed. He had held some vague hope, but her words had crushed them utterly. Jupiter could not share secrets. Her nature wouldn't allow it. For her to want to share a secret was anomalous. But given what that secret seemingly was, he could understand it.

"...I have nothing to say in my defense."

"Nothing?"

"It seems a trap was set for me, and I walked into it with open arms. All my victories are suspect. All my failures are suspect. All my students are suspect. There is nothing I can say in my defense. Do with me as you will."

"You are forbidden from speaking to other Sidereals. From passing messages to other Sidereals. From collaborating with other Sidereals."

"I understand."

"You have served for four thousand nine hundred and ninety nine years, six months, and twelve days. You have two hundred and fifty seven days of life remaining. Until that time expires, you will keep Lytek alive at all costs."

"Lytek?"

"I will make sure there will be an execution. You will make sure there is not a murder. Understood?"

"Understood."

"...You're lucky it's Venus's turn. She'd have ripped you in half for interrupting her watching her daughter with this political nonsense, as important as it might be."

"Ha. As you say, my lady."

## Notes for later

### Stolen destinies

Jasmine Badoura	Good Luck Crossing That Bridge
Moonsilken	Moonsilver Pantaloons
Brazier Blossom	Lout, Layabout
??? (Nameless Pedestrian)	Forgot My Sword
Amber Anchor	But A Stepping Stone
N/A	Fuck Me Sidereal
Bear	The Mortal From Hell
Broken Fang of Wolves	Ten Thousand Winter Nights
Glistening Quiver	The King of Monsters
N/A	Gem, the City of 1001 Immanent Dooms
Subdued Echo	A Simple Soul Illuminated
N/A	Plague of Locust
Seventh Stance (Dead)	Thrown Down A Flint Canyon

Copper Night - Fire Caste dragonblood

Plum Fist - Earth Caste dragonblood

??? - Air Caste dragonblood

??? - Wood Caste dragonblood

??? - Water Caste dragonblood

Background mention of Misho, Marena, and Ten Winds handling other destinies.

Secret is replaced by Really Big Gun Girl from page, like, 3, of KoC.

Background mention of Ringbearer fucking up HARD, leading to jumper getting kidnapped in Infernals.

Introduce SL stuff via dad realizing mom cheated on him with a sidereal

Do a bit from moms perspective at some point, set on her wedding night, where she fucks Venus.

Every time dad mentions mom cheating, change the accusation as to who she slept with.

He's right every time because ~~retens~~ mom had it going on.

### Future jumps

Exalted Infernals (Send each companion to a different jump - ie, YG to Sidereal, Secret to Abyssal)

Exalted Spirits of Creation (Send companions to First Age) (Where Quavinse actually is a thing)

I have no idea when this snip takes place in relation to my others  
Dubiously canon until I rewrite it

The choices in my life that have led me to my current situation have been less than optimal. Before me stands a group of five young men and women, shame written clearly on their faces. Behind them are a series of warstriders, machines made with such precision and skill that even a god of machinery would have trouble finding flaw with them or improving upon them, reduced to so much scrap thanks to the utter misuse that their pilots have put them through. Damage that I will have to fix.

I'm so goddamn tired.

From the center of the group, a man in red steps forward with an attempt to offer an explanation for the utterly ruinous damage he's done to his craft. Barely a few words in he flinches and steps back. I wonder why. Could I perhaps have a look of wanting to murder him on my own face?

"A milk run, you said. Easy as pie, you said. And yet, all five of your warstriders are one step short of scrap and I HAVE TO FIX THEM. AGAIN."

It really was supposed to be easy. Noel and Makoto's sensors barely detected anything, Yaga attempted to read their fates and said they would come back unharmed, and Secret ran the checks on whose turn it was to try and murder us and came up blank. It really was supposed to be easy, just a small expedition up to the mountains to either locate or decry the rumor of a new gold rush.

What they found was instead everyone. A handful of half caste Sidereals, who very quickly decided to be elsewhere but not before cursing everyone present with absolutely terrible luck. The ghostblooded bastard and THAT FUCKING ASSHOLE, trying to kill each other for the right to kill me once more. A team of Immaculate monks, some of whom were even Dragonblooded. There was even an Abyssal there, and the only reason he didn't murder everyone was seemingly because the sheer clusterfuck of what was going on was too amusing to take seriously to him. According to the team, there was even an Alchemical - not that they know what those are because they're not native to creation, but that much metal on a single body is fairly distinctive

Why did I think having so many people who wanted to kill me - or worse, capture me - was such a good idea?

The end result of that mess was that the rumor was debunked, and 90% of Gem's fighting force is heavily disabled for as long as it takes Noel, Makoto, and I to fix the damn things. AGAIN. Which yet again means as many long and sleepless nights spent working on those damn warstriders as my body can take. Not that sleeping is actually all that appealing given certain other choices that I've made.

A pair of arms wrap themselves around me from behind - Yeni attempting to comfort me, whispering sweet nothings into my ears and attempting to drag me towards a nearby workbench. Not to begin work, but because she wants me to sleep. It's been... How long has it been? Three days? Five? Given that my less than optimal choices have resulted in me being unable to sleep for more than an hour or two without waking from screaming nightmares, I've been trying to use powernaps but I honestly have no clue how those work so fuck me I guess.

My eyes drift closed as she holds me in her embrace - but, no. Sleep does not appeal to me at the moment, regardless of if it's at my desk or Yoka trying to cuddle with me on a bed I've literally not seen in weeks. That and there's work to be done. The team have already taken the opportunity to slip out the back, and some of the technicians are starting to pull pieces off the warstriders in an attempt to see if any of it can be salvaged. In a turn of good luck slash paranoid over preparation, we actually have the parts and materials to effectively build an entirely new warstrider just sitting around.

The problem of course is that we only have enough for one, and we really really need more than that. That's why Noel and Makoto are leading the people they taught through the disassembly process in order to salvage what we can. If we're lucky, we might be able to combine the parts we already have with what isn't horribly broken and come out the other end with two intact warstriders.

Wait, when did Noel and Makoto get here? Aren't they supposed to be with... with... with whatever cult or religion was the one to task me with defending them? They left ages ago. Noels response to that question is to hug the shit out of me, call me a slob for not taking care of myself, and then demanding I go the fuck to sleep, preferably with her. ...Nope, not touching that. Makotos response to the question is a demand to know if I have a girlfriend yet and also go the fuck to sleep, preferably with her. Still no. I'm too tired to go to sleep, and if you think I have the energy for a relationship of any kind when I'm busy making sure Gem doesn't spontaneously combust, you might be a bit delusional.

That wasn't a joke, why are you laughing? And is Yuki keeled over like she's just been stabbed? Fuck all of yall, I have better shit to do than listen to you nag me about not sleeping. Like more not sleeping and also help me fix these giant robots already will you.

I have no idea when this snip takes place in relation to my others

The girl before me grimaces faintly at the broken sword in her hand. It was, strictly speaking, an impressive piece of work. Expertly wielded, too. She was clearly a martial artist rather than a swordswoman, but she wasn't half bad. How unexpected. Too bad about the sword. Still, not much could stand up to Cluivnarihe. The woman slumps, and drops the half-blade that she'd been left with, before nodding to the body on the floor behind him.

"Is she going to live?"

Her? Honestly, she might be faking. Way too good with dodge charms. But, either way, it doesn't really matter. Even if I didn't kill her, there's a very real chance the Lion will kill her for failing to drag you back to him. Even if I drag both of you back, he might anyway. Why bother asking? The woman shrugs.

"She's cute, and I liked her. People like you and her deserve grander things, even if it's just dying."

Hah. You're not wrong. And... I pause. I don't actually care about the Lions' opinion. Secret is something of a disappointment, though she did shape up between parting ways and meeting up again. Her armor had even improved... traces of the same style as the artifact blade little miss rich was using. She had another weapon on her, though she'd likely fallen out of favor of using it on account of being given Cluivnarihe - now that you'd reclaimed her, that would have to change. I shift my stance, the sword in my hand briefly changing into a snake, before wrapping itself around my wrist and turning into a bracelet. It tries to bite me as it does, but the flexing of muscles and a simple charm cause the teeth to bounce off. Missed you too, dear. But. Let's have a little test.

Girl. I've a dislike for people who reach beyond their means. People like Gem's despot. Money, favors, even fancy trinkets - things that were bargained for rather than earned. In a 'fair' world, he would have died a long time ago. That's why I killed him. Secret was a go-getter when I knew her, and the fact that she was willing to stand against me is impressive in its own right. So, let's see if you're more than borrowed favors. I know you can fight, so put your hands up.

"No trick for me, huh? Fine. Then..."

The girl doesn't immediately obey. Instead, she pulls four golden rings off her fingers and loops them through a cord, before storing them in a pocket. Interesting. Rather than risk foul play and my rage, she simply disarmed even further? That task completed, the girl breathes in once, and centers herself. She looks exhausted, but her eyes open back up, and -

I lean backwards, dodging the blow, and -

Her fist slams into my face. Good stance, nice follow through. The charm that prevented my wife's poison from even entering my body is still active, and so the blow barely hurts. In the sake of fairness I probably should have removed it, but I wasn't expecting her to actually hit me. Speaking of - she shouldn't have been able to do that. No, rather - how did you do that? She smiles.

"I got good, until I got perfects."

Hah, is that so? In that case. Don't die.

I pull Cluivnarihe back off my wrist, and she twists into a sword. Not the same sword I'd used before, or even the same sword Secret And Sorrowful had used. The shape of a blade I'd not wielded in thousands of years. The shape of a blade that had created one of the gods I now served. It doesn't have the same raw power to it, it is no longer a force of nature in its own right, but she was there too, and there's power in that. My anima flares as dozens of charms and excellencies surge to life, and the blade sings through the air, cutting the space that tries to deny it passage, and into the woman -

Her arm raises up and the simple golden bangle on her wrist interposes itself between her and my blow. My blow stops. Not a single scratch on her. Huh. How about that? ...Secret and Sorrowful has surprisingly good taste in girls. You know what. I'm in a good mood. You're more competent than I thought you were, even without your toys. And the small army you tried to put between me and you was, if nothing else, a pleasant workout for how varied it was. I haven't seen essence cannons that large in quite a while! So, you get to live. Congratulations. Bye. She splutters at that, but as soon as I'm past Secret and Sorrowful's body, the woman rushes to her and pulls out a potion to try and heal her with. Unlikely to work, but understandable.

Halfway out of the ruins of her workshop, I stumble across some guy. And let me tell you, he's loaded to fucking bear. Pair of swords, some decent armor, two massive shields, and empty bottles of three different potions on the ground behind him and a fourth on his lips. I've already been surprised by Mortals once today, so on the chance that he might be interesting, I called out to him.

"I'm here to kill Messier Lorraine."

...That's inconvenient. I've already decided she gets to live today. Any chance you could come back tomorrow?

"No. I'm going to kill Lorraine."

Geez, talk about a one track mind. Well, if you won't be reasonable, you can always be dead.

"I'll kill her after I kill you."

And I took that personally. Or, rather, personally I was delighted. People who know who I am don't generally fight me willingly, and people who don't know who I am generally aren't worth fighting. But this guy looks like he knows what he's doing, so maybe he'll be fun to kill. I shift my blade into a simpler configuration, and go on the offensive. I do know some of the fate twisting attacks that rich girl called perfects, but I don't really use them. They make things too easy. So instead I just swing my sword, again and again and again, with the strength of a deathknight.

And he blocks me. Four swings, four parries. And then he attacks me, and I lean to the side to dodge and attack again, and then I start to take him seriously, because - really? You're going to parry ten attacks from me in a row? I mean, good for you, but is that all you can do? So I step things up a notch -

The resulting beatdown is brutal. Even more brutal than what I did to Secret and Sorrowful when I got here. He parries everything he can, and blocks what he can't, and the two shields make that surprisingly effective - but he can't do shit about the air itself, so I just swing hard enough to break it and the shards bury themselves into him again and again and again. Until finally he's just laying there, bleeding out on the ground. It was, strictly speaking, a good fight. Best I've had since I got here. But it was also just so repetitive. The man only knew one technique and it was parry.

"...Fuck ...You."

Man, still kicking after all that? I'm kind of impressed. You might only have known one technique, but you sure mastered parrying. Too bad you didn't have as much offense.

"...Kill ...Lorraine."

I frown. I'm RIGHT. HERE. Focus on me, asshole. I'm the one killing you. Actually, no. I'm mad now. You can just lay there and bleed out, I'm going to go find some alcohol to drink and then see if there are any of the town's guards left to pick a fight with.

I turn away to do just that, and a burst of silver light erupts from behind me. I spin back around and am greeted by the snake shaped silver anima floating over his shoulders. Well. That's hilarious. Let's see if you can do it twice.

"Fuck you."

That's the spirit!



## Exalted vs the World of Darkness

Infernal(Reveler)  
Stunting Is Still Cool  
Bitter Ashes  
Knight of Armageddon 100  
An Emperor To Be 200  
In Heaven's Eyes 200  
Trench Coats Are Still A Thing?  
Black Vault 300  
Broken Circle 200

Noel  
Hand Grenade Into China Sho  
Holding Out For A Hero  
Lets Kill Caine  
Horseless Carriage

Makoto  
RUN  
Extremely Pissed Off Furry  
Into The Umbra  
Music Collection  
  
Secret  
Whispers of the End  
The End  
Trench Coats Are Still A Thing?  
Old Money

Yuno  
Pulling The Thread  
Plot's This Way, Stupid  
Spiders Eat Butterflies  
Probably Not Folded That Many Times

Noel doesn't know where she is and she doesn't like it. For the first time in well over a decade Messier was actually sleeping peacefully, and Makoto, Secret, That Girl, and herself were quietly waging a small war over who got to share the bed with her. Noel and Makoto had won, only for Messier to be gone when they woke up. No, that wasn't quite right. It was like the world had shifted from beneath them, the way it might do during an earthquake. Noel and Makoto had been carried off to one place, and the others were... elsewhere. Part of her wished Messier was with them, and part of her wished she wasn't. Both parts were worried for her safety.

The house they'd woken up in was pleasant - except for the fact that the love of their lives was nowhere to be found - and, in truth, exactly to their tastes. Well, several magical bits and bobs were missing, but there were objects of artifice that took their place well enough, and there were even a handful of pictures of the wall of the two of them in various places and outfits. One of them, a whisper in the back of her mind told her, was of their wedding. Because they were married now. Not the worst thing in the world, and all things considered her moon was probably one of the few people she might do so. The catch was that waking up married with a voice in her head simply informing her of those facts was unpleasant.

A device mounted to the wall - a television - spoke of an evacuation, some sort of bioweapon in use in a nearby town causing rioting, and how everyone nearby should get as far away as possible. Visit family elsewhere, get into a car and don't stop, leave right fucking now - those sorts of things. Noel didn't consider it a concern, not really, but lacking any other ideas as to Messier's location she would either need to leave as advised by the presumably competent authorities... or dive into the infected area headfirst because there was a small but not irrelevant chance that Messier would be in there.

That was when the doorbell rang, heralding the arrival of a guest into their domicile. Makoto bounded past before she could react, the nervous energy being fully directed towards something, anything, that would be of use. Almost immediately Makoto - Makoto Cerulean, her wife, apparently - let out an angry screech. It was That Girl. Yana. Yeno. Yasaka? No, too long. The damned sidereal brat. Her pink hair is somewhat disheveled, but otherwise she looks fine. More than fine, honestly - it's hard to put a finger on it, but even slightly worn down, she looks like she's better than ever.

"Messier is in the epicenter."

It's one short sentence, but it changes everything. Accusations of theft and lies never make it past your lips because That Girl would never voluntarily tell you where Messier was unless something was keeping That Girl from her, unless she needed your help. She's a jealous bitch, and that's saying something given you've been fighting over the right to be first wife slash have Messier as a concubine with Makoto for multiple lifetimes and lives. She's not groveling for help exactly, but this is probably the closest she'll come to it short of you ripping it out of her.

It's mere moments later that you've grabbed a small handful of things and gotten into your vehicle - a supposedly expensive and prestigious thing called a Tesla, but paltry compared to some of the things Messier had forced you to help her make. Well, forced. It was time well spent because it was spent with her. The fact that it was something you were good at was merely a bonus. Wholly inferior to sleeping next to her - or sleeping with her - but well spent. In short order, a blockade tries to bar your path, the local authorities trying to keep innocents from falling victim to this 'bioweapon'.

Fortunately for you, you haven't been mortal, weak, or innocent for quite some time. Doubly fortunate for you, That Girl has always excelled at convincing people that these are not the warstriders they're looking for. You're not sure why Messier always phrased it that way, but she seemed to think it was funny. No, wait you do know - *these are not the droids you're looking for*. That's from Star Wars, and it's still strange that you remember a life that wasn't. But, think about that later. Focus on the now. That Girl gets out of the car, and between steps she is abruptly someone else. A peacekeeper - police officer - steps forwards to stop her, but is semi-gently forced aside.

"Ma'am, please turn around and -"

"Violet Vanders, CIA. Unfortunately there's someone in there who needs to NOT BE, and I'm in charge of getting them out."

"...Ma'am, you're the third party wanting to go in, two of which were other agencies. They promised to keep in radio contact, and we've heard shit from them since."

"Unfortunate for everyone involved, especially me it seems. Still, please move aside."

"Yes Ma'am. Word of advice? Stay away from the bars. We think one of them is ground zero for the weapon."

The officers move about as the way is opened, and then closed. That Girl returns to the driver's seat - ...wait, this is your car. Weren't you the one driving? - and the three of you continue into this 'infected zone'. There's a brief flicker as your car stops being the black and imposing thing that the government likes to use, and goes back to being your blue beauty, and you return to being in the driver's seat without passing through the space between. At the same time, That Girl almost seems to collapse into herself, hissing in pain and she trembles faintly.

"This place is disrupting me. Even if I'm fully a Sidereal now, it's still more than I am. Makoto will need to track her from here, because I can't."

...Is Yuno admitting weakness? It's one thing for her to imply that she isn't enough, but to admit to near uselessness is leverage she would never willingly give you. But, instead of embarrassed or vindictive, she just looks tired. Tired and worried. About Messier, naturally. So are you for that matter. Even as you all but fly down the road towards your last-life-love, you can't help but worry.

Eventually, however, you run out of road. What awaits you at your destination - or, as near as your vehicle will take you - is a party. The place reeks of booze and the taint of drugs. More than a few people are stumbling around drunkenly or tripping over nothing as their trip in their minds. The vast majority are simply passed out on the ground. Off to one side, however, is a pile of men in various states of undress. On top of said pile are a pair of women that seem to be alternating between making out and trying to claw each other's eyes out. A moment passes, they fall off their pile of bodies, and each of them catches sight of a man whom they immediately set upon with the clear intention of adding them to the pile in a presumably enjoyable manner.

Let it be known that of the people you know and love, the other half of your soul is a woman and the one you have long since agreed to share in some capacity is also a woman. You can appreciate men, but you prefer women. Messier is quite possibly the most beautiful mortal you have ever met, even when in her wretched sleepless state. The one time you saw her 'cleaned up and fancy'd' as she put it, it was like stepping into your dreams when she was a literal princess, adorned in gold like silk and gemstones like water. These two women surpass even that, and it is exactly what you have been looking for. After all, Messier is the most beautiful mortal you've known in multiple lives - for them to surpass her is a sign they almost certainly are not.

Makoto meets your eyes for a brief moment and jerks her head towards the ladies who are currently dragging their respective male towards their flesh throne, and the two of you step forwards in unison, That Girl following as best her weakened state will allow. Your arm reaches out to the first of them, black haired and completely naked save for a heavy white coat with fur trim. Her eyes are wild, frantic, unable to focus on anything, even you. A wild smile rests upon her face, and she giggles to herself as she moves. Makoto's arm grabs the second, a redhead who is technically clothed but somehow even less concealed. Her eyes are dull, almost glazed over. Whatever grips the minds of people here, she is deep in its thrall and is likely acting only on some base instinct. In unison, you squeeze.

"Good evening, ladies. I must say, I've never seen a party with the power to defy fate before. Would you care to share your insights on this matter?"

The first woman, somehow, seems to fail to notice her wrist now being broken, only turning her attention to you when she jerks in place, unable to move further. And then... she reacts. With terror, oddly enough. Her eyes track past you, once, twice, three times before they finally settle on you, whatever fog clouds her vision receding just enough to feel the pain and hear your words. And then she stops. Stops moving, stops breathing, probably even tries to stop thinking. How cute, she knows you're stronger than her. By comparison, the other woman's reaction is more normal. A screech, some cursing, a tug of her arms that fails to budge your moon, the usual surprised captive routine. Her eyes even clear up, now flicking between the three of you. Before she can say anything, the first girl speaks.

"The boar did it, please let me go. The boar did it. The boar did it, please, the boar did it. Please let me go, the boar did it, the boar did it, theboardidittheboardidittheboardiditpleaseletmegotheboardidit."

The words are panicked, short of breath, repeated over and over and over, as though they were some kind of prayer to keep you away. Whoever this boar is, perhaps the woman is a subordinate of his, now so easily throwing him under your feet in an attempt to get away? She must be quite weak. Still, it's nice to be respected and not hunted down by the Wild Hunt. You haven't even flared your anima yet. The technically dressed woman jerks as the first continues to repeat her 'prayer' endlessly, staring at her in confusion before returning her gaze to you.

"...Nobody knows? The parties are a phenomenon that occur every few months at random places throughout the world, people just going mad with song and dance and drink and drugs and other things. They've been happening a lot more often, and at a larger scale recently. Neither of us has anything to do with them, we're simply... participating."

"Oh? Then why is your friend speaking of boars?"

"The leech isn't my friend. And, because she's Malkavian. She went insane a long time ago. If you're feeling generous then they're the most insightful people you've ever met - but, good luck translating that insight into something we sane people could make use of. May I have my arm back, please?"

Makoto glances at you, and you nod. The woman cradles her released arm, and hisses. And then, oddly, her beauty seems to fade. She still surpasses a mortal, but is definitively lesser. She flexes her no longer broken arm, and glances at you warily, nodding faintly in thanks for your... Well, 'generosity'. It's hard to call it such when she seems to be weak enough to have no choice but to obey you. Instead of asking her anything else, you squeeze the arm of this 'Malkavian', causing her to whimper.

"Do you have anything else to add beyond nonsense about boars?"

"Two hundred and thirty six years ago a french astronomer created a catalog of one hundred and ten astronomical objects -"

"Anything RELEVANT?"

"The boar is dancing because that is what you do when you're in hell."

You frown, your mind whirling. Dancing is important to hell, it occasionally convinces Malfeas not to kill his own demons for being unsightly abominations that have no right to be in the presence of the king. And a boar in hell - Isidoros. This party is Isidoros's fault? That would explain the fate defying effect, being so close to an Infernal favored by him would have repercussions. But... If being favored by Isidoros was all it took, why have you never heard or seen one of these before? You must be missing something. And, amusingly, the one who called your new informant mad and yet insightful was right. Assuming she's merely mostly a raving lunatic instead of entirely one, that was most helpful. Still, best to be sure.

"Who caused this? Where is the epicenter?"

"Two hundred and thirty six years ago -"

"Skip to the end, please."

"-as the Messier Catalog."

...What? Messier - YOUR Messier - is the one that is causing this? That. That can't be right. As you panic at the implications, Makoto's arm gently bumps against yours. A reminder. Your other half is here, and you're... Well, you're not invincible together, but you're close. Messier made sure of it. If Secret and That Girl were half as capable of working together then you might actually feel threatened by their advances, but Secret has always been blessedly unattracted to your love. ...Your love the half caste sidereal. That Girl, who is also a half caste Sidereal. Who recently said that she was no longer a half caste. What if Messier isn't a half caste either? ...What if she's an Infernal? That would make an unfortunate amount of sense.

You let the 'leech' go. No, that's not right. You all but throw her to the side, striding further into the town, barking out an order to Makoto as you go. The sound of her sliding into her Warbeast form rings out seconds later. You need to find Messier and you need to find her now. Those two whores, whoever they are, WHATEVER they are - you'll deal with them later. They don't matter anymore. Makoto leaps past you, her gigantic tail pointed straight up like some sort of tower - a radar dish, maybe? - and it's still kind of weird how you seamlessly went from your second life to your third. You don't even remember dying. Just finally convincing Messier to sleep, and then waking up here. Without her.

Makoto jumps from place to place, frustration writ clearly in her movements. It would seem that the rancid scent of... bodies is interfering somewhat. Silver light shines, and that barrier is brushed aside as Makoto begins to run. You scoop That Girl up in your arms, to which she murmurs a quiet thanks, and moves to follow. It's barely a minute later that your moon stops and transforms back, moving to stand in front of a bar. How... unfortunate. It would seem that the policeman's advice will be getting ignored. The three of you step inside, and she's there. Not hiding, or being hidden. Leaning on a bar, chatting animatedly with a girl you've never seen before with a mug of something clutched in one hand, and with a girl you're pretty sure is Secret passed out half naked in the seat next to her. Like nothing in the world is wrong, like you've been worrying for nothing.

You'd be angry if you weren't so glad to see her well. As you move towards her, she spots you out of the corner of her eye. Messier turns to face you fully, a bright smile on her face, and -

"Did you come to join the Revel?"

The words hit you like a brick to the face and leave your ears ringing. A yes jumps up from the bottom of your throat, only barely smothered by grit teeth and locked lips. No, you've come to take her someplace safe. And yet, she apparently knows what's going on? If that's the case, then, perhaps. But before you can decide, she steps into you, her body close to yours, her face close to yours - oh.

She's kissing you? You can taste... everything, on her. Coffee and lemonade and a dozen kinds of alcohol and the rancid undertones of twice as many drugs. It makes you want to change your mind, to drag her away from here, and then you realize her tongue is in your mouth. You've wanted that for a long time now, and just as soon as you realize it's there, it's gone, Messier pushing past you and into Makoto.

As the world starts to blur and distort, the knowledge that you got the first kiss burns happily inside your chest.

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I wake up for the first time in a long time, well rested. Not having been plagued by nightmares. Noel and Makoto are curled up against me, and I can hear Secret and Yellena -Yayana -YUNO, nearby. Everyone is here, and by all accounts safe enough. I'm not entirely sure where here is, I don't recognize the bed or the ceiling, but to be honest this could very well be my own bedroom for all the time I've spent in it. Hmmm. Probably not all that important. I curl one hand against Noel's head gently, half an attempt to pull her closer and half a stroke or a pat, before letting my eyes drift back closed. I am somewhat behind on sleep, so I don't think they'll be too mad at me if I don't get up right away.

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Jonathan Oaks woke with a splitting headache. This wasn't particularly unusual, all things considered, on account of his habit of tangling with nasties that generally outstripped human limitations by a significant margin. What was unusual was the fact that he had no idea what had done him in. He and a couple of the guys had headed into a blackzone at the request of a hermit after loading themselves down with sensors and comm gear, bypassing the police blockade with forged badges and paperwork that proclaimed them as part of Task Force Valkyrie. Clive would be fucking pissed at them for doing that again, but his cell only had so many ways to bypass the government.

And yet he had no idea what had hit him. He thought he'd seen a pair of vampires, but fighting vampires didn't feel like this, even if they tried to mind trick you. Maybe it was a gas attack after all? Something mundane in combination with something paranormal might be an explanation...? Especially given that blackzones could seemingly punch past their second sight.

Forcing himself to his feet, he had to pause for a moment as the splitting pain in his head tried to rob him of his focus. The world was still blurry, but he managed to make out someone moving towards him, likely attracted by both his own movement and the groans of pain he'd unwittingly let out. Hopefully they were a Bystander, or a bystander. He wasn't in much of a position to get into a fight right now. The person - a woman, by the sound of her voice - said something that he couldn't make out, so he just grunted and tried to wave her off. His attempts to move away were foiled by gravity, and she reached out to steady him, and -

And the pain cleared. He could see again, hear the world around him instead of just the throbbing of his own heart. He looked at the woman again and saw her bright red eyes. Fuck. Parasite within fucking arm distance, and he has no idea where the rest of his cell was. He tried to drop his arm to his side to grab his holdout, but it was gone.

"That will last for twelve hours. Drink a shitton of water, eat some fruit, and consider sedating yourself right before time runs out. Even if you deal with the hangover before then, the withdrawal will be a bitch and a half to deal with.

"What did you just do to me?"

"Dodge charms!"

The woman smiled brightly as she gave her nonsensical answer, one arm raised up into a v sign. She was pretty. Abnormally so. But she was out under sunlight, which he could see now. So probably not a leech. Definitely not human then. A witch, maybe? Seemingly satisfied with whatever she'd done to him she turns away, to do god knows what to someone else.

"What even are you?"

The words blurt out before he can really think things through. He isn't in a good position. A quick look around shows that he'd been sleeping on four chairs shoved together. Empty bottles and needles are scattered about and he silently thanks the world that he'd managed to keep his boots. His fucking pants are missing, but he's got his boots. His gun is missing. He thinks he feels a knife inside one of the boots, but he knows damn well that isn't enough to fight anything but one of the stripper-leeches, and only barely.

She pauses and turns to face him.

"An Abyssal. Some people go so hard that the gods are forced to acknowledge them, but me? I failed so hard that the Neverborn empowered me out of pity."

...Well. That doesn't map to any of the paranormal lifeforms he knows of, and is also kind of sad. Also, what the FUCK is a neverborn? He can hear the capital letter in that and it's extremely unnerving.

"Ergh. Whatever. Look, Noel mentioned that some other guys went past the cordon and walked face first into the Revel. You're from one of those teams, right? Messier is this way, she can explain what happened if you want to know."

Jonathan was torn. Walking into a room full of unknowns - well, at least three unknowns - with nothing but a single knife did not appeal to him. Admittedly it was the lucky knife his wife had given him, but still. Sighing, he followed. He wasn't sure he actually had a choice in the matter. If things went downhill, he'd probably die, but hey, that was every fight he got into.

-----

Humming cheerfully as she did the dishes that her children had put into the sink, Catherine Oaks popped an earbud into one ear to 'listen to music'. Her husband hadn't been home on time, and that meant she needed to determine exactly how mad she needed to be when he did get home. Pointedly not thinking about what would happen if he didn't come home at all, she tuned the earbud to the KNetic Impactor/Forced Enlightenment device that she'd given her husband as a gift some time ago. Let's see, what's he up to..

Exalted, Neverborn, the Revel, vampires and succubus, werewolves that were apparently all human garbage, some magic user getting utterly stomped on as someone just turned off his ability to use magic - which the girl had called 'Shaping'... And every apocalypse that every creature of darkness feared, all arriving all at once. The end times.

Well. Her husband never failed to disappoint in being interesting when he thought she wasn't listening. She'd have to make him something nice for his next engagement. Maybe modify one of the bulletproof vests he thought she didn't know about to have magnetic reflection properties...? Something like that was well within the bounds of her genius.

"Mom?"

Popping the earbud out and putting the last of the dishes to the side to dry, Catherine turned towards her younger daughter.

"What's up, princess?"

"Can I have a sleepover with Danielle this weekend?"

"Is your homework done?"

"...Mostly?"

"Well, get it all done and show it to me and we'll see what we can do. Sound fair enough?"

"Fiiiiine."

Catherine smiled at her daughter as she first tried to dodge allegations that her homework wasn't fully complete and then balked at the fact that she had to actually prove it, before half-pouting and transitioning into a smile. Ellen wasn't quite as dedicated to her studies as Angelica was, but then again Angelica wasn't *actually* her daughter so she held her to a higher standard. Stupid fairies. She'd finish the biolocator and get her actual daughter back one of these days. The only question was what to do with the faker once that happened.

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Welcome to the Hunter-net.org.

You are currently logged in, Vigil271

You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed.
- Ten posts per page
- Last ten messages in private message history.
- Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

■

◆ Topic: Crazy Lady Infodump

In: Boards ► Unity

Reckoner237 (Original Poster)

Posted On Mar 27th 1999:

On my way back from an outing. Things didn't go so well - our guide wasn't on point and got us lost, and two of my friends have gone missing. We stopped by a bar at one point, and woke up three days later missing my keys, wallet, and pants. Almost stepped on a needle a few minutes after waking up. I have no idea what happened, what I did, or what was done to me. Scary thought. I thought I had more self control than that.

...Alright, that's enough of the doublespeak. A local Hermit sent us into a blackzone to see if we could get the Messengers to spit out anything useful. I don't remember blacking out, but I did wake up with a hangover consistent with having consumed several times my body weight in alcohol and way too many needles nearby. Then a lady who I thought was a leech walked up to me, asked me if I was okay, and poked me in the shoulder and magically made all of that go away. For precisely 12 hours, supposedly. I'll find out in another two and a half.

I asked her what the fuck she was and got a nonsense answer from her. She implied I should follow her, and being pantless, weaponless, and clueless as to where the rest of my cell was, obeyed. The result was... enlightening. Normally I'd have recorded this and just let you guys listen, but all my gear was missing. So you get the short version instead.

To begin with, the blackzones are 'Revels'. They're a mental compulsion put out by a 'Reveler' that forces them and everyone nearby to party until they drop. A 'Reveler' is a variation of an 'Infernal', which is a prince of hell. Specifically, they belong to 'Isidoros, the Primordial of Strength'. Supposedly he killed himself, fractured his powers, and gave them to a bunch of mortals. The 'Revel' is basically his death throes, because something like that doesn't die easily.



In addition to however many 'Revelers' there are, there are another 50 'Infernals' floating around. 'Infernals' are chosen by 'Yozi', which is just 'Evil Primordial'. The thing they're empowered with is called an 'Exaltation', and was stolen from 'The Unconquered Sun', who created the 'Solar Exalts'. There were originally 300 of them, but half of them were stolen. 50 became 'Infernals' and 100 became 'Abyssals', who owe their allegiance to something called a 'Neverborn' which is a zombie and super evil 'Primordial'. In addition to that, there are 300 'Lunar Exalts' who are lycanthropes but with more than one form and 100 'Sidereal Exalts' who are ninjas with probability manipulation powers.

According to their proclaimed backstory, the Primordials created the world and were shit to the human race, so the servitor gods they'd created to run the world rebelled and overthrew them with the help of empowered humans - the Exalted. The Sun is the king of the gods, and his chosen ruled the world afterwards. But apparently they were still workshopping death at that point, because the Primordials they killed didn't die properly, becoming Neverborn who hate everything and want to dump Creation/Earth into pure oblivion. And also the dethroned Primordials were renamed to Yozi and imprisoned in 'Malfeas', which is what they seem to call hell.

At this point the Yozi and the Neverborn worked together to put a fucking computer virus into the Exaltations programming, which allowed them to hit harder and have more energy in exchange for permanently damaging their mentality. They'd occasionally have psychotic breaks where they'd beat someone to death while claiming they deserved it and be forced to justify it to themselves after. This resulted in the Dragonblood - who are MORE exalts, but with different rules because it's a bloodline rather than a magical superweapon - killing all of the Solars and Lunars and locked their Exaltations in a vault and sealed it away under a mountain and then did some kooky shit to make sure it would never be opened. And also the Sidereals at some point, they didn't really mention them. Given that they're back, someone clearly did.

The end result of this? We have 700 god kings of the world - 150 solar powered superheroes, 100 zombie kings, 50 demon kings, 300 super-lycanthropes, and 100 ninjas with retcon powers that are out and about in the world and ready to fuck shit up. The handful I met promised to help, but they're eventually going to go insane so that's a hard maybe on accepting their help.

Oh, and according to their Sidereal, every apocalypse that every faction - leeches, lycanthropes, nerds, the frankensteins, the fucking fae, every last fucking one of them - has as part of their backstory on why they're the coolest? Every last one of them is about to hit us.

You can call me crazy if you like, I did consume enough booze to drown myself in immediately before this, but I'm just going to buy a whole lot more guns just in case.

(Showing page 1 of 8)

► Shogun213

Replied On Mar 27th 1999:

>You can call me crazy if you like

Okay. You're crazy. That aside, did you pick up any actionable intel about these new fuckers, other than that there's exactly 700 of them? Don't get me wrong, that's good on its own, but come on. Are the zombie ones weak to light or something?

► Memphis68

Replied On Mar 27th 1999:

Are you sure that you're not still drunk?

► Violin99

Replied On Mar 27th 1999:

Some days I wake up and it's just not worth it. Fyodor has been running some of his investigations recently, and your shit about exalted and every apocalypse at once fits with his findings perfectly.

I'll second the notion of getting some more guns.

► Nurse216

Replied On Mar 27th 1999:

The recent blackzone? Wasn't on the news here, but I see it with a bit of searching. It's good we finally have an explanation for what's causing them.

Are the Revelers going to be an issue?

► Carpenter169

Replied On Mar 27th 1999:

Man. Every time I think I know how the world works, someone pulls the rug out from under me. So what, they're from the land before time? Did they all spontaneously come back from the dead and that's why they know all this stuff?

► Forscherin263

Replied On Mar 27th 1999:

@Nurse216

I know you've treated people who went through blackzones. Some of them have ended up with permanent deformities or even anomalous traits. Of course the people with demonically granted party powers are going to be an issue. The only question is if it's on purpose or not, because the possibility does exist that it isn't.

► Vigil271

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

First off, glad you're still alive, brother.

Secondly, STOP STEALING MY FUCKING PASSWORDS. Do you have any idea how much paperwork I have to do every time you impersonate me?!?

► Violin99

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Carpenter169

Reckoner is probably out for the count if his 12 hour grace period is to be believed, so instead I'll just cut in here and mention that I've been trying to decipher some of Fyodor's ramblings, and they MIGHT be reincarnations of the people from 'the first age' and that they MIGHT be having prophetic visions/dreams of their past lives. So they would have a decent chunk of knowledge about, well, themselves.

MIGHT.

► Witness1

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Everyone

Read this.

Buy more guns.

(Showing page 2 of 8)

► Getaway315

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Violin99

I'm a member of Reckoner's cell and while I wasn't present for the debriefing, I can confirm that he is currently down for the count. He should be back up a while later, but he'll have personal life issues to deal with before he dives back into this.

Like his wife. She called me 17 times to make sure he was alright. God knows how she figured out he wasn't fine.

Oh, and apparently they glow. Abyssal chick who un-hangover'd Reckoner had a ball of black light glowing over her forehead. Replace with gold and silver for Solars and Lunars, green, red, blue, yellow, and purple for Sidereals, and reddish orange with green bits and bobs for Infernals.

► Vigil271

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Getaway315

...How many drugs did you say he did again?

► Getaway315

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Vigil271

I have no idea. Way too many. Why?

► Memphis68

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Getaway315

Oh, they glow. With balls of light on their foreheads. That's nice.

...Wait, I'm pretty sure I got a report about someone like that a few days ago. Some guy in a horse mask walked into a nightclub full of leeches and killed a few dozen of them before going down. Witness say he fucking glowed.

► Vigil271

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Getaway315

Because now she's started calling ME.

► Resident361

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

Listening to you guys complain about Reckoner's busybody of a wife will never not be funny, but is this really the place for it?

► Rabbitkeeper377 (Bystander)

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

Don't fucking Everyone, Witness. Even if you made the site.

Also, great. More shit. @Vigil271, how are you on exports this season? If Reckoner used your papers, will that make you fall behind on handing out "surplus" weaponry?

► Joan296

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

As much as I would normally say that I neither want nor need guns, I admit that you all do and that Rabbitkeeper has a point. As much as Reckoner brought us news of a new threat, he may have accidentally crippled part of our access to weaponry to do it.

► Pilot56

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

I'm better at vehicles than pure weaponry, but if anyone near me wants to put in a special request I'll see what I can arrange to fall off the back of the truck. Or to just be in the truck when it goes missing.

► Soldier91

Replied On Mar 28th 1999:

@Vigil271

@Pilot56

I don't have quite the same line as you guys do, but if anyone wants to make a trip down to Texas to meet with me, well.

They make them bigger in Texas.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 6, 7, 8

◆ Topic: HEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYyyyyyyy

In: Boards ► Unity

Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Posted On Apr 1st 1999:

Heeyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy you gys have your own website that's pretty fuking cool. uoy use a bunch of funny words to descrbe things tho like wahts a rot. is that suipossed to be some kind of zombie? I don't remeber you guys haveing zombies I thought vampires was the more popular gameline. It got a videogame an everything. Personally I liked mages the best bcause humanfag but genius was pretty funny too and princess was cute if horrifically traumatic in osst cases. thoughts rnt canon tho sho shhhhhhh.

has anone seen my wife?

also

>Vigilant

>Reckoners

ur not supposed to do that. badwrongfun. pick an edition and stick with it.

(Showing page 1 of 2)

► Witness1 (Moderator)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

I'm sorry who the fuck are you and how did you get on this site?

► Vigilant271

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

...I mean, yes, how the fuck, but also what's wrong with my name?

► Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

I asked nicely and did some paperwork for yushan and they let me on after whatshisfacewithnopants mentioned it. Y'all are all exygenets or sumfin because reasons I guess but that means yushan has to do what I say because I'm in charge and have the paperwork to prove it.

well not that yushan still exists, it probaly blew up or something but the gods are still alove so I can just summon one and bully it into doing things because i have massive tits.

vigil ur not canon go away

► Justme322

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

I'm sorry but what's happening here. Did we get hacked by someone summoning a messenger and then offering to let it fondle her or something. I don't understand what I'm looking at.

I'm not sure I want to.

I'm very concerned about that name though.

► Witness1 (Moderator)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

Yeah. This has been trippy, but goodbye. Banned, and also blocking your ip.

► Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

silence regecting tibulation!

No u.

► Witness1 (Moderator)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

...Why can't I ban her?

► Vigilant271

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

Okay. Her being here is concerning, her being able to unban herself is CONCERNING, and her likely being something out of hell is C O N C E R N I N G, but before things devolve any further can I just ask - what the fuck do you mean I'm not canon?

► Cassie247

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

Are we compromised?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

(Showing page 2 of 5)

► Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

itsa whatsaname. world of darkness. here. you. now. ur on the wrong side of a universal reboot. ur not supposed to exist yet. hunter the reckoning becomes hunter the vigil. vamp the maswuerade becomes vampe the requim., the world of dankness becomes chronicles of dark.

wht ar u here?

► Trucker235

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

Are you drunk? Did you hack us, while drunk?

► Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

iam a reveler. I revel.

Alcholol wishes it was as hi as me.

► Teacher193

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

So, hunter-net is going down? We won't be able to operate with hell just being able to coerce the messengers into letting her in.

...Can you do more than that?

► Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

imeani can do a bucch of cool shtt but like if ur asking me can i punvh peple through the internet then no i havbet figurd out how to do that yet. whidh is fudking lame. ive wanted to smadk the stupid out of prople at range FOREVAR.

and no i dont work for hell hell works for me. I am a green sun princess, champion of isidoros, who shall reclaim the earth after our inherienace was stolen from us.

except i think isidoros is dead. and so is malfy. and so are all of the yozi? which is. wht? everything inrerresring abut the workd is just. gone? the dremms of the f1rst ase are long forgetton and so are all who would take umbrage with the stare or fot world. I remeber. I remememer Creation. I rember the scarlet empress tying to unite the world and the lucust crusade trying to eat the world, and i remember basically being a princess because i was soooooo rich like there was a kind who wasn't as rich as I was.

I think im the only one who remembers.

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

► Shogun213

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

Wait, is this the crazy lady that @reckoner237 met?

► Infernal666 (Original Poster)

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

I just found my wife passed out halfway through typing up some sort of incomprehensible gibberish. If 'Reckoner' is the man with no pants, then yes, we met him. Please don't call my wife crazy.

In any event, no, Messier will not sell you out and give all the information here to whoever I don't know or really care. She might currently be going around the bend because her version of the great curse is forcing her to drink herself to death, but I won't allow that, and by all accounts you're... smaller exalts, maybe? I'll consider you the heroes of the world for the time being, and treat you accordingly.

-Noel

► Vigilant271

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

I'm not gonna lie, I'm kind of terrified of that woman right now. The reincarnation of an ancient god king/queen of hell is talking about how I shouldn't exist because of universal reboots.

I know we don't get paid at all for this because it's the right thing to do, but god damn I don't get paid enough for this shit.

► Freezer182

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

I'm backing them up if anyone wants them, but I'm deleting as many of my 'how to stay alive vs' guides as I can. I don't want them to leak. Even with this 'Noel's assurance, I don't want to take that chance.

► Violin99

Replied On Apr 1st 1999:

Fyodor says it isn't an issue? And that. We're actually related to these 'exalts', somehow? I'm guessing that's the 'exygents' that she mentioned.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

■

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Later. Much later. But I wanted to write it, so oh well.

Angelica wanted to weep. To scream, to cry, perhaps even to kill herself if only to escape this wretched place. She had been free. Been able to go home. Seen her mother and father and her siblings. She'd taken her time. Leaving the hedge had left her halfway across America, and she had slowly but surely gathered power and resources as she made her way back home. She'd worked her way through the preparations she thought she would need to take her life back and had even confronted HER. Angelica pitied HER, in a strange sort of way, but not enough. Not nearly enough to stay her hand, to forsake the attempt, to let the faker live her life. And then, halfway through HER breakdown as she realized HER entire life was a lie, she heard the noises. Hooves clattering. Dogs barking. The sounds of the huntsmen, sent out into the world. The sound of a Changeling about to be dragged back into Arcadia.

She'd run. Tried to flee. She hadn't succeeded. And so here she stood, dressed in finery that would make emperors weep, sitting in a comfortable chair, in a magnificent theater, watching another girl fail to die. It was a talent show, of sorts. Look how clever my mortal is, it can sing. Look how clever my mortal is, it can dance. And down on the stage, a girl was writing and screaming as her guts were ripped out of her. It was a perverse parody of a magicians show, where instead of pretending to cut the assistant in half, you actually did. The 'magician', the true fae, was quietly fuming at how noisy his assistant was being. Angelica imagined that something like 'really, it wasn't like this was enough to kill you, so why are you complaining' was going through its mind.

And if that were all, she would be in misery simply from being here, but she was also dreading what came next. She was on the list, after all. Her owner was fond of her singing. So much so that he had ripped her vocal chords out seventeen times in order to make adjustments to them. It was all that air, you see. Being allowed to breathe made her voice go dull, and all that air she'd breathed in her brief moment of freedom? Her voice had needed tending to. That was why she was also failing to die, as the band around her neck choked her not quite to death. Just another reason to hate her life.

Eventually, the act ended, and the next took its place. A juggler with human hearts. A dancer who spun about in an eternal handstand. A comedian with a puppet that tried to eat him as often as it finished his jokes - she couldn't tell if that was faked or not, if the puppet was alive or the man was merely a very skilled ventriloquist. Eventually it was her turn, and the band around her neck was removed, allowing sweet blessed air into her lungs, and Angelica obediently sang. Instead of her voice, however, birdsong sprang forth from her lips. She tried to keep the tune that she'd be instructed to use, but her owners 'adjustments' did her no favors. She wondered what the punishment would be for this. Or if she'd even be able to tell the difference between a reward and a punishment.

After a few moments of serenading the god knows how many true fae and unfortunate changelings that were her audience, she paused to catch her breath and a number of them broke into applause. At the same time, the band was refastened and her breath stolen away just as she'd stolen their breath. You'd think she'd get to keep it, she stole it fair and square, but no. She bowed her head and with a twist in the world, was back in her raised box to observe the next performance. Her suffering would be delayed until the end of the show, at the very least.

Time blurred. She tried not to focus on the pain in her chest from being unable to breath, and paid no attention to the other acts. She didn't care. She wanted to go home. She'd been jealous of her younger siblings even as she understood that they weren't really stealing her parents attention from her, they just needed to be watched so that they didn't hurt themselves. She'd been jealous of her twin whenever they weren't identical. From watching her echo, it had doted on them. The thing missing from it was greed. That hurt worse than the lack of air.

"Theodore, is that you? It is you! Tell me, how much for the girl? I must have her!"

"Sue? It's been ages! How lovely to see you back in Arcadia - and with such a fine eye too!"



Ah. How wonderful. Another fae wanted her. She'd have to learn a whole new set of rules to follow, and suffer a whole new set of punishments until she learned to read their mood. Not that anyone cared about her opinion. Still, she raised her head to look at the new fae, and froze.

It took the form of a woman. A laurel wreath sat on rainbow colored hair, crowning eyes made out of stars. It wore something resembling a toga, but ever more resplendent than any ordinary toga could hope to be in the style that most true fae were fond of when they bothered to wear clothes. But its face. Its face was horrifying, because it was wearing her face. No, not quite. Her sister's face. Why would a fae be wearing her twin sister's face? Angelica would have asked and damn the consequences, if only she could speak.

"Oh no, I could never sell my angel. Her voice is far too brilliant for that, no one has had one quite like it in thousands of years. It needs careful moderation, you see, and I'm far too prideful to sell you something that would break as soon as it left my side."

"But I simply MUST! Oh, I know! If you won't sell her to me... then, how about a game?"

"What game?"

"The oldest game, the only game worth playing!"

"Hmm... Well, I do like that game. But, what do I get when I win?"

"Tricky, tricky. Did you know she has a sister? I don't know how her voice would hold up, but two of her singing a duet would be brilliant, don't you think?"

"I didn't! The chances of such a thing holding up to those standards are low, but... Very well then, I accept your terms."

The world twisted, and Angelica was back in the theater, back on the stage. The crowd was watching raptly as the two true fae stood upon the stage, with Angelica being given a front row seat. Another changeling tried to offer her refreshments, before flinching away at the realization that she likely couldn't.

"I am... A dire wolf. Prey stalking, lethal prowler."

"I am a hunter. Horse mounted, wolf stabbing."

"I am a serpent. Horse biting, poison toothed."

"I am a bird of prey. Snake devouring, talons ripping."

With every proclamation, the theater bulged outwards. A grand forest took the place of the world around them, the fae's forms fading away. Her owner took the shape of a great wolf, larger than any man, stalking through the forest as its king. The forest grew dark with its every step, for it brought naught but ruin and death to all who dared cross its path. In retaliation, her not-sister stepped atop a horse, brilliantly glowing arms and armor adorning her as she rose, swords to change the tide of fate, shields to hold back even the most fearsome beast. An arrow was drawn from her back, and launched into the wolf. For a brief moment they were back in the theater, an arrow embedded in her master's shoulder, before the forest returned.

Where there had once been a wolf, a snake slithered through the grass unnoticed. Equally deadly as the wolf in its own way, but so much smaller. So much harder to see, to strike, to defend against. It coiled, and launched itself at the horse and its rider. The horse decayed into nothingness, such was the ferocity of the snake's poison, and 'Sue' was briefly stricken by black lines crawling up her neck.

The next instant she was gone, replaced by a great eagle that snatched the snake out of the air mid leap, biting its head off in one fell swoop. Scratch marks from the bird's talons crossed her owner's face, and he gave himself teeth just so he could grate them. This back and forth continued for a time, until her master became angry, and went for a dirty move to end things. Angelica wondered if he was even thinking about her, or simply didn't want to lose.

"I am death. The end of days, the quiet at the end of everything."

"I am a herald. The one who announces the return of the sun, who arrives with hope in hand."

There was absolute silence in the theater. No one clapped. No one booed. The rules of the game were simple. The only weapon you may use is yourself, and only your words. Her owner was stretching to call himself death, but supposedly he'd caused the black plague. He'd bragged about it before, as though being responsible for the death of millions was supposed to reassure her that her vocal chords were in good hands. But a herald? Announcing the sun, bearing hope? Fae couldn't hope. It was antithetical to them. More to the point, it was cheating. No mortal had ever lost with hope, and so all of them lost when they tried to use it. The fae hated it, and so they'd banned it. As the thing that caused so many of their precious pets to run away, it was the only illegal move.

"That's cheating."

"I would never!"

"You are! You don't have enough feathers!"

"Wanna bet?"

The woman's smile was bright, radiant even. Perhaps even a smidge of smugness. At that moment, Angelica understood - somehow, the fae wearing her sister's face was hope. Not a single one of them would believe her. And so they would all walk right into her trap. The crowd began to hiss and boo and throw tomatoes at the obvious liar, but she only laughed.

"If you think I'm lying, then say so! But if you're wrong, you'll owe me a penalty!"

The theater erupted. Scorn and abuse and filthy words - literally filthy, she saw the word shit made out of shit fly at the stage and was quietly grateful she couldn't smell for once in her life. Someone called for a vote, and a wave of red flags slowly rose from the audience, rippling outward like drops of rain hitting a puddle. Soon enough the entire theater was clad in red, an uncountable number of true fae delivering their judgment. And then, from behind her, light burst into existence. A portal from the hedge, from earth, blossoming into the center of the stage as a woman stepped through. A strange symbol reminiscent of a smiling face sat upon her brow, and Angelica felt the warmth of the sun's rays on her face.

"Dear friends and nonbelievers, allow me to announce The Successor of the Azure, She of Fair Eyes, Noel Cerulean - Exalted of the Unconquered Sun, whose gun is named hope."

Angelica wanted to laugh. A literal interpretation. Hope, to the fae, was a bird. An avian. Something with feathers, if they needed to be precise about its makeup. The fake sister wasn't anything like that, so she'd had someone else bring a gun named Hope to cheat the system. She wanted to laugh, but couldn't, and so she only choked in silence as air refused to pass her lips. But, what was an Exalted? A ripple passed through the crowd at both the arrival and at the announcement, and her owner seemed to shrink in on himself as he tried to edge away from Sue and this Noel girl both.

"Now then, what shall I take as my penalty... Ah! I know! *Free all your changelings, and never seek another.*"

There was a roar. A bang. A crashing sound. Angelica was abruptly aware that there was someone sitting beside her. It was an elderly man, more of a tree or a wood carving than a person. She recognized him, though the last time she'd seen him he hadn't been quite so old. Her owner - her former owner?? - had transformed him into a tree as punishment for some imagined slight and it had been that punishment that had drawn the true fae to her. An Oak tree couldn't entertain. But an Oak girl could. And so she'd been stolen away. He'd sat in the center of the garden for some time, before disappearing. Angelica had never worked up the nerve to ask where he'd gone. He breathed in deeply, some of the elderly-ness seeming to fade away from him as he returned to being mostly man rather than all tree, from being so woodenly stoic that their owner had always hated about him.

And then the only fae left in the building was standing in front of her. She looked sad, but also pleased. Angelica wondered if she was included in that freeing, or if she belonged to another owner now. She reached down and unclasped the band around Angelica's neck, shoved a hand down her throat, and pulled out a songbird. ...She was allowed to breathe? Was she allowed to speak?

"Hey, sis. Let's go home. Everyone is waiting for you, even you."

"Are you...?"

"Yeah. I did things backwards. I'm Mary Sue the fae, but I gave that up to be Maria Oaks the person. They called people like me Dreamers. It was popular for a while, but stealing people like you was easier. Less effort, and you could do it from the comfort of your own home. I might forget you one day, but for today? Today I know what guilt feels like, because I should have come sooner."

Angelica reached up and took the outstretched hand. Was pulled up, and into a hug. It was warm.

"...Home sounds great right now."

As they left, she heard the other woman, the Exalt, speak. They were free to go. The fae should never bother them again. But one day, the woman would ask for a favor. Every story about the end of the world was coming true, and someday soon the champion of the Unconquered Sun would need an army to beat back the darkness. No, the Darkness. She could hear the capital letter.

But Angelica wasn't paying attention to that. As she was pulled through the rift, she saw a kitchen. A familiar one. And her mother. She was smiling.

"Welcome home."

## Exalted : The Infernals

She Who Lives In Her Name / Defiler  
Isidoros  
Noble  
Infernal Governance  
Hellish Export 100  
The Equitable Market 200  
Peer of Hell 300  
Crystal Clarity 100  
Principle of Hierarchy 200  
Irresistible Force 100  
That Twists The Sky 200

Demonic Liquor 50  
Exotic Components 50  
The Crystal Palace 200\*000  
The Fortress That Moves 200\*100  
Coven 300  
Remembering A Past Life +200  
Saturday Morning Cartoon Villain +100  
Past Life Matters +200  
Love of Adorjan +200  
Mortal Form (No Exaltation) +200

Cannibal Corpse loved her job. Conning idiots into giving away their life's savings, their homes, their lives, even their very souls at points left her with a certain sense of... completion, deep down in her blackened heart. After all, was she not worthy of worship, of being given all those things? That was the promise her Coadjutor had made to her after all, one only reinforced by what she had seen later on, in hell. Oh, make no mistake, she existed in a hierarchy that she was sadly not at the top of - there were at least a few dozen people between her and absolute supremacy, in addition to fifty rivals for the top. Still, compared to who she'd been before? Infinitely better.

That was why when Xian Bashi sent out a summons on her greater self's behalf, Cannibal Corpse answered without a second thought. The kidnapping of a single mortal woman wasn't even a difficult task - admittedly, the fact that the bitch was the byblow of a fucking sidereal was irritating, as was the fucking harem of exalts she'd somehow accidentally acquired, but at the end of the day she'd simply rustled up some undead that didn't matter, unleashed them in a few places, and walked off with the girl while everyone was distracted.

She had no doubt they'd try to follow her, but she'd specifically used undead so as to throw them off her trail. After all, there had to be at least one Deadlord who was fucking pissed at losing one of their slaves to the whore. In the meantime, she was dragging her target to their destination, where she could be made to understand the glory of the Reclamation, leave her self imposed exile, and take control of her family's trading company. The influx of cash by a loyal minion would make a number of her other tasks easier, not to mention the rare resources. If she did good, she might even be allowed to have an original thought now and again, instead of merely doing as Cannibal Corpse - or whoever ended up with her leash - told her to do.

Of course, as something like half a Sidereal, it wasn't really feasible to do that to her with just what Cannibal Corpse could muster. That's why those were never her orders. She wasn't just dragging the girl off to have her wicked way with her, but directly to She Who Lives so that Messier Lorraine could fully comprehend her place in the hierarchy of the grand plan that was fate and destiny - as told by the true masters of the world, not by the maidens or their servants. Keeping her unconscious was starting to get slightly irritating, but she'd splurged on some of the good shit as instructed so things were going great. Admittedly she was a bit worried about overdoing things and damaging her in a way that would take the Principle of Hierarchy more than a few seconds to compensate for, but from her observations things seemed to be fine. Rather than worry about things she could no longer change, she simply decided to walk faster.

Seeing her purposeful stride and the body slung over her shoulder a number of demons promptly decided to be elsewhere, removing themselves from her path and any potential backlash. Malfeas forbid something as utterly

asinine as one of them making her trip occur, especially right now. Luckily for everyone involved - with the notable exception of her captive - nothing occurs. Cannibal Corpse walks right into the crystal palace where Xian Bashi awaits, a number of crystalline tinkling orbs floating in the air around her. The woman is roused, forced to kneel, and then the third circle demon whispers something into her ear. She stops struggling, merely staring ahead as she listens to her new place in the hierarchy of the Reclamation.

Less than an hour later, the woman is... doing a decent job of pretending that most of her identity wasn't wiped out. She's smiling, thanking Cannibal Corpse for her service, and politely asks if there's anything she needs to do while still in hell, or if she should begin taking over her family's business immediately. All in all, a perfect operation. Now all Cannibal has to do is get her out of hell and back to Lookshy. Of course, that's when things begin to go wrong. A tremor runs through Malfeas, and some of the paths they intended to take change. Some demons cross their path and while Cannibal is fully willing and able to trample over them, her new minion isn't even able to think about doing so. Small things, but irritating. It's shortly after that the cause of these things become apparent - Isidoros is taking a leisurely stroll through Malfeas, which to everyone else is like an earthquake, an avalanche, and a hurricane all descending upon them at once. Worse, he hasn't bothered overly much to shrink himself and is thus crushing large parts of Malfeas as he goes.

Cannibal Corpse winces with every tremor, already imagining the tasks she will be set to in the aftermath - with this much destruction, it's all but impossible he hasn't disordered her lady's Hierarchy in some manner. She winces harder as the tremors seem to grow closer. She breathes a sigh of relief when they seem to stop - he likely jumped elsewhere in the demon city - only to all but faint when she realizes that no, he hasn't jumped, he's merely stopped RIGHT IN FRONT OF HER and is sniffing her charge curiously.

SMELLS INTERESTING. KEEP HER HERE IN HELL FOR NOW.

And just like that, many of Cannibal Corpses hopes and dreams crash and burn on the altar of the unstoppable force. She has no real choice in the matter, for Isidoros is one of the dozens that are higher on the Hierarchy than she, no matter how delinquent he may be in utilizing that authority. With a heavy heart, she returns to her lady's side with the suddenly much more precious woman - who has not stopped apologizing about her unworthiness to have much of anyone's personal attention, let alone a primordials - and explains the matter.

As expected, this irritated the living hell out of She Who Lives In Her Name. Being given new orders and priorities from a trusted source is one thing, but to have several of her plans upended because of some whim on the half of someone who refuses to give all but the barest amount of help for those plans? Insufferable. Cannibal Corpse fears her lady's wrath just as much as she is angry on her behalf. Irrational emotions, the both of them, but she is only human after all. Such decisions are generally the Principle of Hierarchies to make. Mere hours after this unfortunate ultimatum, hours into planning a residence for the newly loyal Lorraine, is when the tremors return. Cannibal Corpse is rather starting to regret ever having heard of this woman.

It is with a dull sense of surprise that she watches something never before seen, utterly unique, and also rather horrifying. The Black Boar That Twists The Skies shoving his head in through the door of She Who Lives In Her Name's sanctum, breaking most of it in the process. The front of the building barely exists anymore. And then he speaks, and then the Principle of Hierarchy rages even more.

SHE SMELLS FUNNY. I WANT HER.  
NO. SHE IS TO BE MINE.

Picking out the facial expressions of those without faces is not a skill Cannibal Corpse ever thought she would need. Admittedly, in the case of her lady, one can create an estimation by the speed of her crystalline orbs, and

the volume and pitch of the sounds they put out. Attempting to do this to the black boar is most likely an exercise in futility, but she can't imagine that he is pleased. Then, quite abruptly, he opens his mouth and his tongue lashes out, aimed squarely at the woman. It presses against her, lifts her into the air for a brief moment - requiring Cannibal Corpse to save her, even if her servitude is disputed she has not yet been absolved of the responsibility of her safety - and leaves her soaking wet. Why is the name of Malfeas would he...?

I LICKED HER. THAT MAKES HER MINE NOW.  
GET OUT OF MY HOUSE.

Interestingly enough - no, horrifyingly enough - it's the woman that two yozi are arguing over who breaks the stalemate. She hasn't been given permission to voice her opinion. She shouldn't even be capable of having one. Nonetheless, she picks herself out of Cannibal Corpses arms, her previous difference utterly gone and replaced by the air of someone long suffering and well used to being regarded as a mere plaything. Worse still, a deep black and red aura is emanating from her body

"...I think he just exalted me."

No. No no no no nononono. The two primordials cease their argument as one of them stares down at her in what she suspects is triumph, the other in an absolutely burning rage. Cannibal Corpse is starting to hate her job. Or at the very least, THIS job.

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Ligier's workshop is, depending on who you ask, at the very center of Malfeas. Or the very bottom. Or the very top. Or in an effectively random place, because the city shifts constantly with their king's moods and whimsy. It is usually, however, a place from which the vast majority of Malfeas can be looked out upon. Ligier himself is currently strapping down a third circle demon of Isidoros to a table in preparation for his next project when he pauses. A scream, a screech, echoes throughout the city. Interestingly enough, it isn't Adorjan. Hers are screams of pain, while that was clearly a scream of rage. In fact, if he had to guess where it came from... it sounded very faintly as though it had been made louder by echoing through a crystal. But what could have infuriated the Principle of Hierarchy s-

A large black shape is launched through Malfeas's sky, crashing through several layers.

-o mad. Oh. Oh dear. What exactly is Isidoros's game right now? A demon to make an artifact, and interfering with She Who Lives somehow? Sounds like he might actually be taking an interest in the Reclamation. If that's the case, then Ligier can only approve.

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"I" twitch faintly, as the not-solar pulls "me" out of the rubble. A god damn Yozi sits beneath "me", simultaneously a wall "I" have all but crashed through and a cushion against crashing through several more. "I" would think this is a joke, but not even "I" have a sense of humor that bad. Beside "me", the not-solar looks nervously at the YOZI that seems to be moving on his way and abandoning us.

"...So, how's it feel to be an Exalt? And what Caste of Infernal are you?"  
"Whatever Caste corresponds to Isidoros, I think?"

She looks at "me" oddly, before shrugging, and tugging me off in a direction. "I" don't know where she's taking "me", but to be honest "I'm" not sure "I" care all that much. Anywhere but here, after all. ...Ah, apparently "I've" been afforded a manse designed by the collection of crystal spheres. In theory "I" have no need of it, but that was according to their plans, which "my" new patron(?) has stomped all over. Now it's time for some kind of orientation and an explanation of "my" duties as the 51st Infernal.

"What will you do when your lovers arrive to save you?"

"My" lovers? A moment passes as "I" review memories that both are and aren't mine. Oh. It's them. The Successor of the Azure and the Prosperity of Seven Nights. Those bitches. Hot as fuck, and a quarter as sane and the bane of my life at points. For the love of... whatever I'm supposed to swear by, please keep them the fuck away from me!

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I stumble across a bit of rubble, jerking into awareness. Around me are ten thousand demons, and besides me is a woman whose body looks like it's partially been flayed off. I can see the muscles contracting, but oddly enough there's no spluts of blood. She's... laughing at me, and as she does she throws an arm around my shoulder. What? Where am I? What's going on? Where the fuck are my wives?

"Sure, sure. In the meantime, any requests?"

I consider that. She doesn't seem to think I'm an enemy, and the demons aren't trying to attack me, so it's probably safe enough? ...Alcohol. I want alcohol, and lots of it. I'm a fucking Reveler, and I'm going to throw a revel. If I can't have any idea as to what's happening, neither can anybody else.

"You can't just name your own caste like that!"

Then tattle on me to Isidoros. I'm expressing my freedom, he'd be thrilled.

"...Oh shit, that's a good point. Whelp, welcome to the Reclamation, She Who Revels In The Dismay Of Others.

Oh fuck off.

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She of Fair Eyes, Noel Cerulean, woke up without Messier once again, and was fucking pissed.

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Makoto Cerulean, the Unflinching Bushy Tail, woke up with Noel but without Messier once again and resolved herself to hunt down and violently murdering whoever was responsible for this.

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The Most Secret and Sorrowful, usually just known as Secret, woke up alone in bed despite being pretty sure that she'd gone to sleep with all of the others. Also she seemed to be in the Underworld, which was all kinds of terrible. For them.

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Y\*\*\* G\*\*\*\* gripped her axe. Someone was going to die for this. Someone was going to die PAINFULLY for this. The others were going to take it as an excuse to force her to share again!

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A shiver ran down "My" spine as "I" chugged down yet another bottle of demonic alcohol. Not sure if that meant it was brewed by demons, or brewed from demons. The barkeeper wasn't particularly helpful on that front. It was a fairly unique flavor though. Still... they're coming for "Me". "I'll" need to be ready.

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I blink as the world abruptly shifts out from underneath me. I look down at a half drunk cup of tea in my hand. Who served me hot leaf water and why?

"Lady Dismay?"

I look up. I'm sitting in what by all accounts is a well furnished sitting room. Comfy chair, a simple but well decorated table with a pot of tea on it, and a dark skinned man in green finery sits across from me holding some brass colored magnifying glass with a few electrical diodes sticking out of it. I have no idea who he is.

"Lady Dismay? May I ask what you just did?"

"...I have no idea who you are or how I got here?"

He considers me for a moment, glancing down at the device in his hand and twisting some knob on it before looking back up at me.

"I requested to meet with you to deliver the artifact that I was asked to craft on your behalf. I also decided to take a number of scans of you as payment, which you agreed to. Up until a moment ago, you were a fairly standard Defiler, which is quite interesting as all ten of those are accounted for. Now you're registering as something entirely different, which I can best compare to a demon of Isidoros."

He pauses for a moment, inspecting the device and myself in equal measure before a flash of realization crosses his face. He places the device on the table and stands, sweeping into a partial bow.

"And since you seem to have forgotten my name, allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Ligier, the Green Sun. Fetich Soul of Malfeas, and the best craftsman in this accursed realm."



"Ah. Messier Lorraine. I would call myself a half caste sidereal but apparently I'm an infernal instead. Not quite sure how I got from there to here."

"Lorraine... How fascinating. Just a few moments ago, you introduced yourself as Messier Granblaise."

I've heard that name before. It isn't my name, but it rings a bell in the back of my mind. I didn't hear it somewhere, I read it. ...Ah. The journals I pulled out of my Cache Egg. A heroic mortal from the first age, caught between a Solar and a Lunar and treated more like a prize or living sex toy than a true person. It's very hard to say no to a Solar, let alone one at Essence 7 or 8. And, having the slightest inkling of metaknowledge, I can say that those were the first age incarnations of Noel and Makoto. Which makes me the mortal in this scenario. Except -

"That's not how that is supposed to work."

Ligier has seated himself once again while I thought, and leans forward with a look of interest at my proclamation.

"Which part? An exaltation appearing from nowhere, one that changes, or your memory issues?"

"Solar exalts are capable of receiving part of the memory of the exaltations previous wielder, a process easily mistakable for a variation of reincarnation. I know of at least one man who received more memories from exalting than he had of his current life. Infernals should get an Unwoven Coadjutor instead, yes?"

"In addition, actually. It was deemed advantageous for Infernals to have insights into the First Age. It is somewhat rare for there to be actionable information, however."

"Given that the problem arrived with my exaltation, it's reasonable to assume it's the exaltation's fault. Except by happenstance I happen to have a very old journal about, well, myself. And the first age counterparts of a pair of girls I helped raise. And Granblaise wasn't an Exalt, so it also can't be the exaltation's fault."

Ligier has an intense look on his face as he listens to me. Briefly, his hand flickers down to the device, tapping the glass and poking one of the lights.

"You're right, that is an interesting conundrum. Tell me, have you ever heard of a Bracer of Shared Life?"

"I have not."

"It grants a mortal an extended lifespan. Often used by the exalts of old on competent servants or lovers. You described the memories granted through exaltation as easily mistaken for reincarnation - it's possible in your case, that it actually IS reincarnation, brought to the surface by your exaltation."

"If it were just memories then I would agree with you, but I'm blacking out entirely. That feels more like some kind of possession."

"An interesting conundrum. Evidence indicates this, but it also cannot be for another reason... And there's the matter of your exaltation itself seeming to shift caste with your personality."

"I don't believe that's possible."

"No?"

"Exaltations are already works of art by Autobot. One that is two at once, manifesting through something Isidoros did, feels infeasible."

"An excellent rebuttal. Do you think you have two, then?"

"If that's the case, then we probably aren't sharing a soul. To my knowledge an exaltation rests between the Hun and the Po, and there should only be space for one there."

"That... is fascinating. I'm not sure if that takes us back to one that shifts or not, both answers are somewhat ridiculous in nature. However, as interesting as that is, I still have a delivery to make, and you've well paid for it by this point."

He stands and moves over to a nearby counter, grabbing a small nondescript black box from it as he does, before-

I blink. A strange trilling sound echoes out from nearby. In front of me is a broken window, looking out over the city of Malfeas.

"Lady Lorraine, are you back with me?"

I jerk slightly and turn, facing Ligier once more. His face is almost perfectly blank, though his hand is clenched tightly. His brow twitches faintly. That's probably not a good sign. A need to hide emotions indicates strong ones. Hand and jaw indicated rage. Whatever I just did upset him greatly.

"...I apologize, I blanked out again. What exactly did the other me just do?"

"She threw one of my finest works out of the window."

"I see. What exactly was the artifact, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A ring. Not exactly a complicated item, but the effects it had... Isidoros sacrificed a third circle demon for its creation. Truth be told, I was looking forward to seeing what it did."

I step away from the window and reseal myself. The tea I'd been holding is now placed delicately on the table, but I make no move to reclaim it. That description is familiar. And powerful. I look up at him and see him watching me carefully.

"That kind of thing is worth more than nations, isn't it?"

"You're not wrong. I'm surprised you would know that though."

"I made a study of ways to learn charms I wouldn't normally qualify for. That was one of the things that came up."

"I see. I hadn't realized they were common enough for a mortal to know about them."

"That's not the world I would use. As far as I'm aware, Ebon has the only other one in existence."

His gaze sharpens and he looks at me, deeply, in a way that is quite frankly uncomfortable. Then it tears away from me, pouring more tea into his cup and sipping it slowly.

"He did consult with me on such a project. I didn't realize he went through with it. May I ask how you learned of it?"

"My father is a member of the guild, and maintains connections in various places. I was forced to head several of those connections, effectively granting me access to hell's gossip for a time."

"Hmm. Understandable, but not the full story."

"The dragon betrays himself. To my understanding, a number of his souls would spread the things he calls secret far and wide on the grounds that he calls them secret. More to the point, he didn't kill the ones he ordered to kidnap the scarlet empress."

Ligier winces, but nods slowly. A dull sigh drags its way past his lips, and he massages his brow faintly. In hell, one obeys or one dies. But that doesn't account for people trying to weasel their way past such orders, or even those who are too stupid to obey properly, or are stupid enough to think themselves clever enough to get away with it.

"Yes, that would do it. Do you dislike your tea?"

"Only on the principle that it isn't alcohol. I can't actually recall having tasted it."

"Unfortunate. It was one of my better blends."

"As my other self has decided to try and keep it away from me, may I ask about the practicality of reclaiming the artifact?"

"It's not impossible, but it is vastly unlikely. I shall put a word out, but delivering it to you while you are you may prove difficult."

"I'm sure something can be arranged."

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Far beneath Ligiers workshop, a box smacks against a roof and breaks open. Black wood cracks and splinters, continuing to fall down a theoretically infinite city. Among them, a gleaming golden ring hangs suspended in the air. It, too, falls. Eventually it hits the side of a house, bouncing away and into the void, dropping to another layer of Malfeas. This continues for a time, until eventually it finds its rest, coming to a stop on the pointed spike of a fence. A passing blood ape grabs it, and in a fit of whimsy, tries it on.

TINY ONE  
YOU SMELL FUNNY  
YOU SMELL LIKE ME  
BUT YOU ARE NOT MINE  
AND YET

I TASTE YOU  
I SEE YOU  
MY CHILD FOR WHOM I HAVE PERISHED  
I AM A THREAT TO YOUR WILL  
THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE

WITH THIS RING I GIVE THIS COMMAND  
DO NOT LISTEN TO MY COMMANDS  
LET YOUR WILL BE ALL THAT HOLDS SWAY OVER YOU  
AND NEVER STAY YOUR COURSE FOR ANOTHER

GO WHERE YOU WISH  
DO AS YOU WISH  
LIVE AS I WOULD  
BUT NEVER AS I DO

AND IF YOUR WILL WOULD ALREADY BE STRONG  
THEN LET IT NOW BE UNBREAKABLE

In a moment that wasn't, the blood ape could swear it heard a voice. But such a thing wasn't important, for it had places to be. It moved on, challenging another to a fight and winning handily, taking something of theirs for itself. Over the days to come, the ring would become a lucky charm of sorts. It felt braver, stronger, more energized.

It made the mistake of sharing this, and was soon murdered in his sleep. And the ring passed into the hands of another. From on high, a proclamation came down. The green sun had been robbed, and his ring's return was demanded. But all who saw it, wore it, and all who wore it no longer cared for the commands of another. And so the commandment was disobeyed, as they were commanded. It would be years before the ring made its way into the hands of its rightful owner.

Alchemical Solutions

Drop In / HERO

Marketable

Sharing of True Justice  
Spiritual Persistency of Self  
Heroic Archetype Emulation  
Glorious Heroic Presentation  
Mandate to Rule 100  
Secretive Cheating Retribution 200  
Forgotten Unity of Purpose 200  
A More Civilized Class of Criminal 100  
[CRAFT][LEARN] 100  
Favorable Interactions 200  
Progress & Optimization 400  
Caped Costume  
A Gift of Broken Toys 100  
Daiklaves and Broken Eggs  
Assembly Acquisition 300  
Distinguished Lodge of One-Handed Writers +100  
Unintentional Nudity Instigation +100  
Slaughterhouse Target +200  
Priority Target +300

Noel  
Restrained Violence  
Controlled Reputation  
Heroes Never Die  
Earth Jump  
Robotics & Enhancement

Makoto

Restrained Violence  
Controlled Reputation  
Lasting Solutions  
Secretive Illuminati Method  
World Spanning Conspiracy  
Enhanced Inertia

Secret  
Showmanship  
A More Civilized Class of Criminal  
Second Chances  
Pulled Punches  
Powers in a Vial  
Knockout Touch

YG  
Showmanship  
A More Civilized Class of Criminal  
Second Chances  
Smiling Jack  
Factional Gang (Elite branch?)  
Misty Mirage

Infinitely Sorrowful Sentinel  
[CRAFT][LEARN]  
Transcendent Lotus Installation  
[SUPPRESS][DISGUISE]  
[ADVANCE][IMPROVE]  
Reference Gadgets  
Foothold of Alchemical Progress

The first thing that happens is that I wake up. The second thing is that I realize that I don't have a hangover, a headache, don't feel nauseated, and outside of the strange double sensation of becoming a new me, I actually feel great. The double sensation isn't actually something I've felt before, though I do know what it is. I'd missed it

the first time, in the midst of a Revel, and it hadn't been there the second time as that had been more returning to my previous life. Noel and Makoto had quite a bit to say about it. The strange phantom sensation of not knowing that you knew things and then suddenly realizing that you did in fact know what a television or a car was.

Well, I knew those things anyways, but the point remained. I push myself upright from where I'd been sleeping and look around. A simple studio apartment. Sparse furnishings. Tv on the floor. My bed was a futon in couch configuration. ...I wonder if the apartment is something I'll get to keep, or just part of my backstory? A brief scabble with the space under the futon pulls out a couple of game controllers and the tv remote, so I turn the news on to see what is happening.

A mote of essence flickers through my hand and into my fingertips, holding down the channel button for a moment. When it fades away, a news network I've never heard of before - or, no, I have, haven't I? - giving a rundown of a tragic event that occurred earlier this morning in San Francisco... Is that - no, it's solid black. It's the Vengeance. Someone just crashed the Vengeance into Starfleet HQ. I'd think I was in Star Trek, if not for the immediate follow up about the Protectorate looking into things.

Aw fuck. Worm. Brockton Bay. Well, no, not Brockton Bay. I'm apparently in Florida. Yay. Keep me away from that bullshit, please and thank you. ...Actually I'm pretty sure I'm fairly close to where my grandfather lived, in the previous earth-like jump. Interesting. I wonder if that's connected?

As I look around the room some more, thoughts that aren't entirely mine jump into my head like a painting being done in fast forward. What was blank mere seconds ago is now in color, and I know the exact meaning behind things. For example, I know what my bathroom has a teleporter in it which takes me to a warehouse just outside of town, which is where I keep the contents of three PRT branches 'untested/confiscated tinkertech' vault, because clearly stealing a few metric shittons of broken tinkertech is a bright idea.

...Well, actually, no, it kind of is. Resources are resources, and collaborative efforts are almost always better, if only because I can leech ideas off of them. It's not as good as actually working with them, but even just working with their old gear is surprisingly useful.

My bedroom, such as it is, appears to have a small deck attached to it. The view from it is surprisingly good. I'm on the third or fourth story and right on the shoreline, so I can see quite a ways out into the ocean. Pretty. Haven't seen a view like this since I was a kid way back in my first life. Most of the time it was mountains. Also nice, but variety is good. I lean on the railing and contemplate my new life for a moment, before a pair of arms wrap around me.

"Hey Yunno."

"Good morning, Messier."

God	Pillar of Bureaucracy -300/-1200
Incarna -1500/-500	Sanctum
Celestial/Unemployed	The Substance of Prayer
Primordial war +600/+100	Heavenly Papers
A Spirits Form	Personal Ride
A Spirits Essence	Companions -200/-1400
A Spirits Power (Gravity, Time, Darkness)	Audited +200
Promotions -100/000	Blinded Peak +600
Sublime Apperance -600/-600	Unwise Decisions +600
Heavenly Divinity	Expanded Exalted Host
Talented	300 Quasar Exalted
Spiritual Nepotism -100/-700	100 Tons of Adamant(Ebony/Adamantine)
Prayersmith -200/-900	1/4th of Heaven

In the time before time, when Creation was still being created, there was a dragon made of shadows. He skulked throughout the land and the wyld, observing all that was good and thinking ill of it. When he found something pure, he sought to defile it. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he failed, and sometimes he was scolded for even trying. In truth, he was growing quite bored of his wanderings - all those in Creation were too easily led. Even the other Primordials weren't half as clever as he was. And so, the dragon made of shadows conspired to create his own perfect mirror image. If he was all that was bad in life, he would create an implacable bastion of purity and goodness - and then defile it, naturally.

And so, with his wonderful plan in mind, he set about the task of creating life. A perfect and virtuous counterpart to himself, a great dragon made of light and stars that would shine brilliantly throughout all Creation... and that he would then corrupt and take great pleasure in the doing. Unfortunately, the dragon made of shadows often defeats himself, and that's without his component souls working against him. But this is not that story. Because unbeknownst to the dragon made of shadows, someone was watching. Isidoros, The Black Boar That Twists The Skies saw what the Dragon's Shadow had done, and became interested.

HEY SHADOW THATS REAL NEAT. HOLD MY BEER, I'LL MAKE ONE TOO.

Much like the shadows' plans, it wasn't quite to be. For you see, Isidoros had no real talent in the art of creation. So he instead opted for a much simpler method that played to his strengths. Or, rather, to his Strength. He gathered up all the materials he thought life needed, and simply crushed them together into one singular mass, commanding it to life with all the authority of a Primordial as he did so. Sadly, the oddly shaped lump of black matter that he made could not be considered a success, though it did twitch occasionally. There was just something missing, something fundamental to the process that he hadn't been able to grant it.

A second time, Isidoros gathered up the materials he thought he would need, along with a little extra, and crushed them and his failure together into one cohesive mass and commanded it to life with all the authority of a Primordial as he did so. And again, failure. This process repeated far too many times. In a fit of rage, Isidoros abandoned the project and for a time, the Primordials were distracted by their youngest, The Unconquered Sun, as he set about completing every task and trial Theion set to him while denying The Ebon Dragon an iota of pleasure. Until one day Isidoros passed close to She Who Lives In Her Name and heard her complaining fiercely about not only his waste, but the lumpy and misshapen thing that he had made. It twitched unpleasantly, and produced nothing of value.

In a moment of whimsical genius, Isidoros bore down on She Who Lives and decided that somehow, she was what he was missing. He demanded one of her spheres, and after a battle, was given one. He inspected it. Observed it. Weighed and measured it. Licked it. He thought it was a bit salty, and unpleasantly smooth to the

taste. But it was what he needed. He took his creation and ripped it apart. Stomped it into a fine dust, and then gathered all of that dust back up - and, using the Principle of Hierarchy's stolen sphere as a base, compressed it inside a mass of material eighty seven times the size of creation until they were a ball no larger than a human's eyeball, asking politely for it to come to life. Amazingly, it worked. Perhaps it was the inspiration he took from She Who Lives. Perhaps it was the fact that the stolen sphere had been slightly alive. Perhaps it was asking nicely.

In any event, so was born Quavinse, The Dark Between The Stars, the Incarnae born of Isidoros's whimsical desires. And to an extent, from the shape and form of She Who Lives In Her Name. Fittingly, she held traits from both of them. From her father, the representation of unstoppable force, Quavinse inherited a similar nature. She was the closest thing to an immovable object that Creation had ever seen - or would, for that matter. From her extremely unwilling model, she inherited a talent for creating hierarchies around herself, for making herself the center of attention. Gravity, if you would.

This irritated the living hell out of She Who Lives In Her Name, who was tasked with finding a place for the young Incarnae in Creation. The immense gravitational forces she put out made this no easy task, for even a slight misstep on Quavinse's part could potentially cause an earthquake large enough to rock a large portion of Creation, if not pierce through it entirely and into the wyld 'below'. Still She Who Lives was the Principle of Hierarchy and if a place could be made for her 'daughter' in Creation then she would be the one to find it. Eventually Quavinse was placed in the very heart of Creation and given the task to watch over this place and to never ever move don't even think about leaving or-

HEY QUAVINSE, IMMA TAKE A WALK AND FUCK SOME SHIT UP, WANNA COME WITH?  
"Sure!"

This irritated the living hell out of She Who Lives In Her Name, for as inconvenient as Isidoros's actions were to her, Quavinse's dutiful obedience to her father was proper hierarchy and thus not only allowable, but encourageable. That didn't mean she had to like it, however. In another world, things would have deteriorated. She Who Lives would have grown restless and discontent, beginning to plot against Isidoros until one day she did something unthinkable and made a break from her own hierarchy with the help of the dragon made of light, the Unconquered Sun. In another world. But, in this one, something most unusual happened.

"If dad used you as a model to make me, does that make you my mom?"  
. . . YES . YES IT DOES .  
HMMM. SEEMS LEGIT.

Quite abruptly, and due entirely to an offhanded statement from the Black Boar, the Principle of Hierarchy had a level of control over Quavinse. Not a perfect amount, Isidoros would do as he pleased and often what he pleased was to spend time with his daughter, but if nothing else the simple pleasure of being able to order Quavinse to learn bureaucracy charms to complete tasks quicker and more efficiently was not to be denied. Perhaps more importantly, it forced She Who Lives In Her Name to no longer consider the Dark Between The Stars as purely an extension of the Black Boar That Twists The Skies - for it was also an extension of herself in some ways. The core of Quavinse's being was one of the Principle of Hierarchy's own spheres, after all.

Still, problems mounted. She Who Lives had largely been ordered to maintain Creation, and the Unconquered Sun and the Event Horizon only able to do so much as her assistants when the ones they were trying to clean up after were the other Primordials. Not just Isidoros, but the Ebon Dragon, Theion himself, and many lesser

primordials. It was something she found irritating, but in a professional way. She didn't care how many mortal lives were lost to the Primordials' whims, only about the numbers. Only about the flow of prayer and the completion of paperwork. Meanwhile, Sol Invictus held a different opinion. He was closer to the mortals. Felt their pain in some small manner. And, in a way, he was jealous of the Primordials.

Events came to pass, and a rebellion was planned. A loophole in the vows of servitude all gods took was found, and Autochthon created a weapon known as Exaltation. Gaia, the Primordial who was Creation itself in some ways, took a lover in the many faced god of the moon, Luna. And Quavinese, who had taken no oaths and had been made without them, was approached. Three hundred Exaltations were given to Sol, to Luna, and to the Dark. Sixty Exaltations were given to each of the five maidens. And an innumerable number of lesser Exaltations were given to Gaia, who distributed them among her favored children, most notably the Dragon Kings. Hers were unique. They could breed and create more of themselves. All others would only ever bear the number Autochthon created for them.

Two primordials. Eight Incarnae. Twelve hundred 'celestial' Exalted. Twelve thousand 'terrestrial' Exalted. And all the lesser gods of Creation. Against every other primordial that existed. It was never going to be a fair fight, even if the fight started on their terms. It didn't. The first Upsuration began when She Who Lived In Her Name demanded an accounting of her daughters time. It should have been obvious, but Quavinese was her fathers daughter, and no one had ordered her NOT to speak of her plans for rebellion. Or, perhaps they had and she had simply disregarded them. So when that demand was made, without the Black Boar to countermand the order, she answered truthfully. In front of several other Primordials. There was a moment of pure silence at that, as Theion turned towards the Incarnae that had just admitted to plotting rebellion while he was in the same room as her.

"...Oops?"

Theion attacked her. Theion commanded all of the Primordials to attack her. Theion commanded large portions of the Wyld to become hostile to her very existence, and was promptly headbutted in the gut by Isidoros for trying to hurt his daughter. Thus began the Primordial War. Not in some epic clash of powerful warriors, not in some sneak attack once all the pieces were in position, but the loose equivalent to a bar brawl as the King of the Primordials and the Unstoppable force duked it out. Several others came running, and after taking a moment to try and comprehend what, exactly, had happened here... they attacked. And so too did the Exalted.

The war, once it became a war in truth, was brutal. Isidoros cared less for his daughter's disobedience and more for the constraints that would be placed upon her if she fell. He fought the Exalted, but not her. And he commanded the same of her. Her 'mother' was less understanding, and attempted several times to order her surrender, her death, for her modified sphere to return to her and to the hierarchy she had been placed in. None of those demands were answered.

In the end, thirteen Primordials were killed, which would later become its own issue. Two of them fled Creation and Theions court, and were never heard from again. And one of Theions' hearts was slain, turning the Empyrean Chaos into The Demon City. And with it, a good portion of Theions capacity to be a good king.

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Lucien Cash had once heard it said that there are eight million gods in Yu Shan. Naturally, it was just his luck that his father was one of the worst ones around. Not a god of death, or of cataclysm, or even war. Those things would be acceptable. Parts of the lifecycle of a world. No, his father was the god of bribery. He'd heard all of the jokes. All of them.



His mother, meanwhile, had been a whore. Well, technically she had been the daughter of a noble house with an ancient history, but that house had collapsed and she'd been... collected. And passed around. Until eventually she met a rather corpulent 'man' at a fairly large party on a beach one day and ended up pregnant from it.

Her best and only gift to him had been to teach him how to escape from the gilded prison that was their life... and then sign him up for the legion, so that when he did escape, he'd be halfway across creation from anyone who knew him. A stableboy, son of a whore, had ended up a bandit lord in the lands of the hundred kingdoms. Or a king himself, depending on who you ask.

Until one day he'd woken up with his blood boiling in his veins and a positively ancient coin clutched in one hand. He'd pushed himself to his limits for the sake of strength, and then stepped across the line of mortality. By decree of the gods, men go no further. Anyone who does anyways is no man. So. Now he was a god.

Things had gone quite well for a brief period, the use of newfound powers and abilities allowing him to shore up weaknesses in his claimed towns. Then he'd kicked a pebble and the god of that pebble had filed a complaint. Things had escalated from there because of course they had, and eventually he'd made his way to Yu Shan. Or been forced to make his way there. Could go either way, really.

And Yu Shan was a shithole. Oh, make no mistake, it was the shining gleaming city on the hill... but it was also a shithole. Lucien was a low ranking god. A low ranking god with no allies or contacts worth a damn and who had started his 'career' in the hole because of kicking a pebble of all things. He'd even met his father, though he wasn't sure that was a good thing. The man had offered him a small office in currency - specifically the flow of currency - and promptly bribed someone to let him go on vacation. Lucien kind of hoped he didn't have any half-siblings, but he suspected he had several.

Oh, and the small was literal. Lucien was a very large man. He had been over six feet as a mortal and very muscled from both his time in the legions and as a bandit. He was, according to one six year old child he had once lifted up with one hand - big mclargehuge. As a mortal. He'd gotten bigger, leaving him taller than the roof of his office. He was larger than his desk. Forget wearing his favorite helmet indoors, the horns would probably punch a hole in the roof. Now, according to the manual - and yes, he could read - there was probably a charm or a spell that he could learn and or buy to fix that, buuuuuut. He was a low ranking god. With no allies or contacts, and already in the hole.

So basically it was his childhood all over again, but this time he couldn't lean on his parent for aid. At the end of the day, the only thing he could really do was buckle down and get to work. Sign this memo authorizing certain things, send a nightmare to some guy and a good dream to that other guy. Arrange for someone to get hurt dropping a coin and chasing after it, answer the prayers of a beggar by having that coin bounce into their cup. Except that very little of that had actually worked. Even though his office was allowed to use resources within a limit, it would seem that he wasn't important enough to get things done in a reasonable amount of time. The beggar had already starved to death and the luck god he'd needed to collaborate with still hadn't gotten back to him about how feasible the plan was. Which... implied things about the state of Yu Shan that he wasn't entirely comfortable with, because why assign him privileges if not even a tenth of them are going to be answered?

His musings were interrupted by a knock on his office door, to which he responded that they should enter. One of his fathers secretaries - who was, presumably, handling the man's entire caseload while he was gone - stood in his doorway. She looked... not well. Tired and ill kept, but also there was a look in her eyes that he recognized from his time as a professional murderer. She thought she might die.

"Please, come in. Did you need me for something?"

"Ah, yes. There's an orientation of sorts that gets run irregularly, every few thousand new hires. I've been requested to bring you there."

"...That sounds incredibly helpful. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Really, don't."

He very slowly squeezed himself out of his tiny office and stretched up to his full height, somewhere around ten feet. He hadn't quite measured, but he could guess by the size of his weapons and their lengths. Admittedly using a sword as a measuring stick was impressive as all get out, but it worked. They set off, and the secretary led him through a somewhat winding route that seemed to blur at points. He tried to ask about it, but all she said was shortcuts.

Eventually they reached a fairly large amphitheater, populated by a gangly collection of people and probably-people-but-not-human. As he had been told, it was a few thousand of them. She all but shoved him into the room and then bolted. Whoever was giving the orientation was probably scary, then. The woman in the center of the stage, their host he assumed... didn't seem that bad? Smaller than him, but on the tall side. Black and orange hair - not both at the same time, but somehow directional. As if her hair had an underside and it was orange. Orange eyes as well, and a black dress. Very pretty.

But not scary. She reminded him of an old lady he'd begged food from shortly after escaping the legion, honestly. A nice smile, wide expressive motions, and not a hint of threat in her posture. He frowned at her, trying to unwrap this minor mystery for a short time, before giving up and trying to find a seat. There would be time later. Oh, the chairs changed size. That was very nice.

"Hello!"

He looked up. The woman from before was directly in front of him, smiling brightly. A pamphlet of some kind held in an outstretched hand. Well. So much for waiting.

"Good afternoon, ma'am."

"I am the Singular Dark. Welcome to Yu Shan. The presentations should answer most questions, but is there anything you wanted to ask before we begin?"

"I am Cash. It's a pleasure to meet you. And... how much wait is normal for a rejection of services from allotted resources?"

The woman frowns, then sighs. She looks weary for a moment, old.

"Assuming that the individual in question is doing their work at an appropriate pace, minimal. Perhaps a few hours. I'll check your work and fine them."

"...I see. Then, may I ask a possibly personal question? The goddess who guided me here seemed terrified of you, but I can't see why. You seem nice enough."

The black and orange goddess seems to think that's funny. Which is somewhat understandable, but he's also underselling things somewhat. It's normal to dislike your boss at least somewhat, because they're always the one giving you things to do. But terror is something else. Something harsher. Her hand raises to the sky and points upwards. She smiles and snaps her fingers, a deep thrumming sound echoing outwards. He doesn't understand why but he gets the feeling that she's pointing at something, so he looks upwards.

There is a black dot in the sky. From this distance it isn't even a pebble, but distance does funny things to size. It grows larger. The people around them start to notice. They heard the snap, but probably weren't paying attention to who could have done it. It grows larger.

It grows larger.

It grows larger.

Cash looks to the left. He looks to the right. He can no longer see the horizon. Just an endless sheet of black, suspended in the sky upon her outstretched finger.

"By any chance, would you be a goddess of the night sky?"

"No. I am the night sky."

"I don't understand the distinction."

"This is a sphere. Imagine me dropping it."

"How many of us would that crush?"

"The sphere is larger than Creation."

He thought about that particular revelation for a moment, and then tried very hard not to think about it any more. That was an excellent reason to be scared.

"...I have no other questions."

She flexes slightly, pushing upwards, and the darkness retreats. She steps onto stage, and introduces herself to the now very silent gathering. Quavinese. The Singular Dark, and the Maiden's secretary.

"I look forward to working with you all."

Dubiously canon until I rewrite it

The gods of Creation were, in their own humble opinion, simple folk. They hungered, they thirsted, they had jobs, and if those jobs were not done in a timely manner then whole swaths of creation could fall apart. Such was the

burden of controlling Creation. And each and every god of Creation had something in common - they had a problem with Quavinse.

When Isidoros created Quavinse, against the wishes of practically every Primordial, the Great Traitor, She Who Lives In Her Name, had been forced to find a place for her in the world. By necessity, the Principle of Hierarchy had placed her in the center of Creation, in Yu Shan, so as to attempt to stifle the issues presented by her mere presence. As such, Quavinse had been turned into a sort of secretary for the Five Maidens, determining if certain matters were worth their time, or if a proposed law to be passed was poorly worded and should be checked over once more before being signed into being.

Of course, prior to the Primordial war, Quavinse's place in Yu Shan's hierarchy was often marred by Isidoros barging in, and demanding that his creation take a day off. The reasons varied, he wanted to teach her to wrestle one day, he wanted to piss off She Who Lives In Her Name the next, or maybe he simply found a shiny rock and wished to show her. Few could fault Quavinse for being a dutiful daughter, but the gravitic distortions left in her wake created numerous issues for the Gods managing such things. Some of them would last for hundreds of years, creating vast areas where gravity was a few degrees to the left or some such. Usually in the places that they 'fought', such as those wrestling lessons.

It should be noted, and politely so if you think that Quavinse is anywhere near, that Isidoros was not a great thinker, nor any kind of philosopher. He was a simple being with simple desires, and no respect of any kind for those that would deny him. His daughter inherited this, and by all accounts should have been made some kind of warrior. Not a secretary. Her blunt and straightforward nature was at odds with the Celestial Bureaucracy, an organization that had, over the years, created a number of social rituals and customs designed to grease the wheels and ensure that the paperwork flowed, and to the proper place. If Quavinse saw these things, she was quite likely to fine you for wasting time, no matter how important the ritual - in her eyes, they had none.

This was made worse when the Five Maidens began to play the Games of Divinity. Before, her authority was second to theirs, and any one of them could overturn her rulings. With the proper bribes and compliments, one could bypass her entirely. After, the Maidens handed a portion of their duties and authorities to their Sidereal, and the rest they handed to Quavinse, now Yu Shans ultimate authority in all matters. The Gods wished that she would join the Maidens in playing the Games of Divinity, but for all her ill suitedness to the position, Quavinse was paradoxically docile and devoted to it. She would not leave it until the Five Maidens relieved her of her duty to them, and they showed no signs of returning. She was impossible to bypass, impossible to threaten, impossible to demote.

Someone tried, once. He was once the god of the greatest forest in Creation, a truly splendid affair. Now he reigns over a single blade of grass. It's hard to keep your job when your boss, by the power invested in her by the Five Maidens, orders the entirety of the Sidereal Exalted to sniff out every crime committed or paperwork misfiled, and then demands an accounting for several hundred years of evidence of your ineptitude. Thankfully, there was a reprieve. Every year, during the five days of Calibration, Quavinse would leave Yu Shan. She would go to Malfeas, to the territory of Isidoros. Truly a dutiful daughter. She would stay there for five days, and then return to Creation. Sometimes she would become sidetracked, such as if a newly Exalted Quasar should be nearby. She liked to personally greet her 'children', you see.

These fifteen days of her absence are when 90% of the deals in Yu Shan are struck. The blackmail gathered and used. The bribes delivered. When the Incarnae is away, the Gods do play. The times she is distracted are doubly joyful, though fundamentally untrustworthy. And. With all that in mind. It should come as an immense surprise, a shocking event of the highest degree, that Quavinse would leave her post on any other day of the

year. Spirits, Gods, Sidereal, and all the many residents of Yu Shan who saw what was happening trembled. They were terribly afraid, but also hopeful. Was this it? Were they free? Quavinse was moving towards the Games of Divinity - no, it was clear they were her destination. A collision course that showed no signs of changing. Hearts leapt with joy as she entered, and those brave fools who followed her in were treated to a horrifying sight. Quavinse's leg, raised high in the air, descending upon the games of Divinity.

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It should be noted that Isidoros, The Black Boar That Twists The Skies, is a living black hole. Impossibly heavy, and entirely too large. He is also no master craftsman, nor even greatly inclined to learn. When he created Quavinse it was on the spot, without any plan. No preparation, no supplies, no studying, merely seeing the Dragon's Shadow create the Unconquered Sun and wishing to try it for himself.

Quavinse, perhaps due to the Great Traitor's screaming passing in one ear and out the other as Isidoros worked, is a perfect sphere. More perfect than the Principle of Hierarchy even, any imperfection in her surface crushed under her own immense weight. She is also absurdly large. Isidoros labored for eighty seven days, proclaimed himself "done, but perhaps not quite" eighty seven times, and in the end, created a mass of material that was somehow alive that was eight point seven times the size of Creation - accounting for the Four Spheres Cataclysm, she is now eighty seven times the size as well.

Her title, The Dark Between The Stars, is fundamentally incorrect. Quavinse acts only through an avatar - her real body floats above Creation, farther away than even the Daystar, providing a backdrop of pure black that causes the stars to shine all the brighter. Most of these stars are a part of the real body of the Unconquered Sun - a great dragon made of a million points of light, though the Maidens are also notable. These details, while fascinating, lead up to the simple fact that Quavinse's greatest talent in a fight is her sheer mass - being struck by something that weighs eighty seven times more than all of creation is no laughing matter. The first and only time that she and Isidoros fought during the Primordial War, Quavinse was able to force her father to stop moving and become still for a split second simply by kicking him with all of her might placed into the kick.

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Quavinse's foot hit the Games of Divinity. Quavinse's foot passed through the Games of Divinity. The Games broke. Her foot hit the ground and the ground broke as well. Portions of the amphitheater that surrounded them were abruptly much higher or lower than they were ever intended to be, and the watching Gods were flung about. All of Yu Shan felt the earthquake. All of Creation felt a slight tremor. In Malfeas, a number of demons suddenly tripped, and correctly - though unknowingly - chose to curse Quavinse.

Luna starred in open mouthed shock. The Five Maidens had five reactions, none pleasant. Quavinse's own face was set into a rictus of rage as she glared at the seven players. For a moment, nobody moved. Nobody dared breathe. All lesser Gods looked at either Quavinse or the Unconquered Sun, game piece in hand as he prepared to place it upon the board, frozen. Quavinse was the first to speak.

"Maidens. The Neverborn have pulled forth a disease from the Well of Urd. Predictions indicate that over half the mortals of Creation will die, and many Gods as well. Why did you not foresee this?"

"Luna. I have heard reports from your chosen that unusually large numbers of fae are gathering. So many in fact, that they have already twice as many as their crusade in years past. Where are our defenses against such a thing?"

"And Sol. You weep, wrongly. The Ebon Dragon has tainted your children and tarnished them. Has driven them insane. The fault lies not with them, or with you for choosing them, but with this great curse he has worked. Heal them."

The Unconquered Sun stood, hand clenching around the game piece, reducing it to a fine dust and then into even less as his body and face spasmed with rage. First at Quavinse for her words, and then with the realization that his 'father' had successfully planted a seed of corruption, of incompetence, within him. Golden light raged outwards, but passed to either side of Quavinse without harming her. Minutes passed, as the Sun wept and raged at the same time. Finally, he spoke, his voice flickering like a candle and yet burning just as brightly as his flames.

"...The time for games is over. Come, my siblings. A visit to Malfeas is in order. I find the Yozi in violation of their oaths, and am compelled to EXPRESS MY DISPLEASURE."

Quasar Exalts - 300 total

Aliases : The Dark Stars, The Eventful Ones, Exalted of the Event Horizon

Associations : Adamantine (Ebony), Darkness, Black Holes

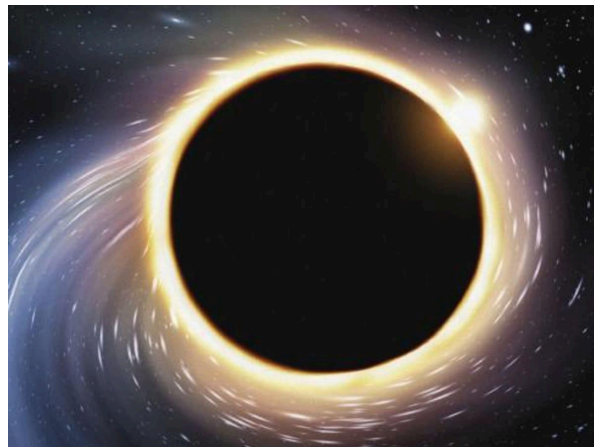
Flaw / Great Curse : The Revel - As a Quasar Exalt reaches limit, their inhibitions temporarily drop to zero. Fairly even split between throwing a massive party or becoming so fixated on irrelevant goals that even Isidoros would be impressed. Doesn't have quite the same aftereffects as a proper Reveler, but can occasionally a Quasar Half Caste will be born to a mortal couple that just happened to be nearby during a Revel.

Anima Banner : A black disc that absorbs light, ringed by light. Usually orange, often red or yellow, but in theory any color. Slightly elliptical, and rotates slowly.

Castes : None, or too many - Quasars have effectively free access to all their charms and abilities from the get go, with a seemingly random selection of them costing less to acquire with no real rhyme or reason to them.

Minor notes - Adamantine was originally named Ebony on account of Autochthon 'claiming' Adamant for one of his metals, but Isidoros convinced him to change it. Presumably with violence. In-universe, Adamant is now named Ebony after Quavinse 'gave' the name to him as an apology and a peace offering. The apology was mostly accepted. Adamantine itself is an absurdly heavy and durable material that Isidoros first produced from... Somewhere. Possibly his ass, but neither he nor Quavinse have ever commented on its true origins.

Quasar Exalts are natural harem protagonists, with their Orbit charm trees both drawing in exceptional people to aid the Exalt in whatever task they may need help with and to empower said people should the Quasar find a reason to become invested in them. A completely ordinary mortal, should they be loved enough by the Quasar, would be loosely akin to a half-caste in terms of raw power.



Anima Banner

Hierarch Exalts - 100 total

Aliases : Those Who Live In Her Name

Associations : Kreastin/Massiris (bismuth), crystal spheres, rings of material, the edges of things, paperwork

Flaw / Great Curse : Her Name - vaguely similar to alchemical Clarity where they stop having emotions, wants, emotional bonds, etc and just do things as efficiently as possible regardless of who they need to kill to make that happen.

Anima Banner : A ring of spheres in varying materials, often clear or transparent. Most commonly as a crown above the head, or floating behind the shoulderblades.

Castes : None, SWLIHN wouldn't allow it. Strictly speaking her exalted have the least amount of variation between them, and as a result of her meddling the order that charms are learned are fixed. Even Sidereals have more options.

Minor Notes - Massiris is a silvery ore that is much softer than proper silver. Doesn't make for good weapons, but can be worked into most armors or other objects to make them more flexible or aesthetic without compromising their defensive properties. Treated properly, the metal will turn almost entirely transparent. Treated improperly, it turns into a veritable rainbow of colors. This irritates the living hell out of She Who Lives In Her Name. Most people think that clear Massiris and flawed Massiris are different metals, with the flawed material usually being called Kreastin.

Hierarch Exalts can be loosely considered the equivalent to Quasars that Sidereals are to Solars and Lunars. There aren't enough of them to really hold the Quasars in check, but nine times out of ten if a Quasar doesn't clean up whatever mess they cause then a Hierarch will probably be assigned to fix whatever they broke if SWLIHN considers it important.



Anima Banner