

I'm dreaming... the same dream... the same... nightmare...

It's like watching a movie on a broken screen, with that scratchy silvery-gray noise blurring the corners of my sight.

I could see... someone. Two someones. In a room.

One was a guy with tan-brown skin, floating in the air, hovering just above the ground, hands in his pockets. He had black, stringy hair shot through with a blood-crimson color. A single large strand in the front was the only thing that really stood out about him. It glowed with a soft silvery luminescence. He had a pure white mask hanging from the side of his head, held up as if by magic. The creepy thing had two slits for eyes and a wicked expression for the mouth. Overall he was a pretty chilling person to look at.

Evanescent. He muttered.

The other figure, a businessman-like figure dressed in an uber-formal getup stood beside him. He looked like one of those master pianists going to play at a recital somewhere.

I saw his mouth move, but no words came out.

The screen got scratchy again, the noise in the picture messing with the image.

"The demon king is here. Can we beat him? Alone? A creature older and greater than even I?"

The picture cleared suddenly, a huge image coming into focus... but that didn't make it any less confusing.

It was a giant circle inside an even bigger circle inside an even bigger circle. There were ancient rune carvings, marks, letters, numbers, mystic symbols, and even some English words floating around in there. In the center circle was a golden 6 point star lain over a hoary 5 point star. In two opposite corners of my dream, two swords were driven like pikes into the ground. I didn't know what they truly were, but they sure did look like swords to me.

The weapons were slowly disappearing, disintegrating into mist and swirling like a miniature tornado, funneled right into the epicenter of the event in my dream.

Hovering slightly above the triple circles was a smaller double circle, complete with its own colors and light show. The dust was being funneled into it like water down a drain.

Whatever was emerging was hungry. Very hungry.

When I stared at it, even in my dreams, it felt like... like... death. The smell was unbearable. My eyes began to burn from the sight. There was a loud ringing going through my ears nonstop, as if my very mind's eye was being unmade. Whatever was coming through that circle had no right to exist, not even in my imagination... not even in my dreams.

That's when a single claw slowly emerged from the small circle. It was mostly bone, as if it were still searching for a solid form. The visible patches of skin were blackened, with tinges of red here and there. The funnel of particles was solidifying around the claw, elevating it, giving it flesh, supplying whatever it was with the sustenance it would need to survive.

I could smell the overwhelming stink of asphalt and ozone in the air, even if I wasn't there.

The tightly dressed figure stepped back a bit, clutching his arm as if he had been attacked. He slowly turned towards the hovering man.

The screen went cloudy again.

"Just being in the presence of this thing is killing me. Me!"

...

...

...

"Can you beat him? Can you beat the demon king, Airmaster?"

The one with the mask had a gun in his hand, which was pointed at the demon's claw. The gun was wicked looking, resembling a dark gray and white Desert Eagle with a slightly larger muzzle. The white handle and trigger contrasted greatly against the shadowy grayness of the rest of the gun. It was like the two colors were fighting one another for supremacy over the weapon...

The silver text on the side of the gun was tiny and unreadable; however, by force of will, it suddenly came into a stunning and crystal-clear resolution.

*® Desert Eagle .50AE Pistol
LT Military Industries*

The weapon had two long slender silky streamers floating in the air around it, as if suspended by magic. One of the lavishly decorated banners was a pure, unblemished pearly white color, while the other was a dark, sinister black. Both tapestries both had the word 'Mius' engraved on them in a stunning font.

The figure holding the gun looked like he wanted to pull the trigger — his hand was shaking — but he ultimately decided against it.

"No. I can't. Not like this."

...

His gun and its decorations evaporated into thin air.

"But, for the sake of Lower Town and Surface World... it has to be done."

A noise pierced my ears, worse than before. Even in my dreams, it hurt. Ah... it really hurt...

The figure referred to as "Airmaster" grabbed a hold of that disgusting hand that found its way to the surface. That blackened claw that just wasn't supposed to exist...

"Demon king." The 'Airmaster' announced. "I. Banish. Thee."

Everything went red. The screen I was viewing the events through fractured. It was beginning to fall apart. I screamed.

It hurt.

My brain felt like it was being torn apart. Screams surrounded me everywhere. I was on fire. I was dying.

... Airmaster...

...

Everything I was... my whole being... was unraveling at the seams...

... Air...

"Hey! Hey! Wake up! Wake up! Eli! Eli! Wake the hell up!"

By the time Eli stopped screaming and thrashing against his bed, she had shaken him roughly twenty times.

It was a few seconds before Eli came to his senses. "Air..."

"No." Lucia whispered in his ear. Eli stopped speaking, totally entranced by her voice, his eyes going wide with wonder. It was like all the greatest symphonies and orchestras of all history concentrated into one sound. You can't blame him for drooling. "I am Lucia. Lucia di Lammermoor. I have 14 years of age. You are Eli. Elijah Lammermoor. You have 12 years of age. We are nothing more. Nothing less. Got it?" It was more of a command than a question. After a moment's pause, she wiped the drool from his mouth with her pajama sleeve. "You're so silly, Eli." She giggled.

That broke him from his little trance. Either that or the sound of the door crashing open.

"What's wrong!" the lady who burst into the room shouted.

She had a semi auto-magic weapon in her hand. The thing was a pretty nice find, indeed. Semi auto-magic weapons like that; usually referred to as "Casters," float around in the world like garbage, true. They're literally everywhere. Anyone can pick one up, even on the Surface.

However, the trouble with auto-magic weapons is the ammunition. You need *Caster Shells* to be able to unleash the "magic" in an auto-magic weapon. Normal human ammunition (which 99% of auto-magic users use) works perfectly in auto-magic weapons, but it reduces them to the worth of a regular handgun.

A shame, really.

Lucia eyed the gun with open admiration. This woman knew what she was doing. She had the thing stock full of *Caster Shells*.

Only three or four people know how to make caster shells in the entire world. Minus the Major Players Wynter and the Musician, that leaves two others. Two people out of a few billion. She was one of them.

"Nothing's wrong, mistress Harah." Lucia purred, giving an eloquent bow. "But I see you're as ready as ever to..." She eyed her munitions. "... *kick something's ass*."

Harah smirked. "You don't get to be 32 years old in this world without some *fiya powa*."

You've got to be a damn good Soundmaster or Magimaster to create caster shells, let alone a #16.

Lucia returned the look smirk for smirk, still bowing.

"You know," Harah's grin widened slowly, "only guys *bow* all deep like that, Lucia. Gals *curtsy*."

Lucia tried to let that one go, without much success.

"I'll curtsy *when I'm dead*." She sounded serious, but she ruined it by giggling. "Anyways, might I ask what shells you're using this time, my dear Harah?"

Her smile was replaced by her thinking face. "Hmm. Well... I have this baby loaded with one #5, two #7's, a #14, a #16, and... three #20's."

Lucia gasped.

A caster shell is basically a container, holding a premade instant cast magic attack or sound blast or, if the creator is good enough, a mix of the two opposing forces. There are 20 kinds of shells. The number doesn't designate the power. A #16 is the most powerful shell in circulation, with #14 running a close second.

Harah, however, has been rumored to make custom shells, surpassing the number 20. Impressive.

"A #14 *ex Attica* and a #16 *ex Evera*? Are you serious?!" It's not every day you find shells capable of harming a Major Player. "How long did it take you to make those things?!" Lucia was indeed impressed.

Harah smiled fondly at Lucia before turning her gaze back to Eli. "Are you ok to sleep, honey?"

The kid was staring out the window, lost in a day dream... in the middle of the night.

After a while, he finally nodded. "Yeah. I'm okay. Thanks." He whispered. She barely heard it, but nodded in affirmation. Eli pulled the covers up to his face, turned over, and promptly fell back to sleep.

"So much for traumatic nightmare. He can fall back to sleep as if it never happened." Lucia scoffed.

Harah walked out into the hallway, with Lucia hot on her heels. She made sure to close the bedroom door softly.

They walked in silence, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

"It's alright if I make like a hundred sandwiches, using up all your bread, right?" Lucia cooed.

"Save half of it, I plan on cooking some toast in a few hours, thank you very much." Harah replied with some hint of gravity to her voice.

"Aww," Lucia complained, "you're no fun."

They both had a good laugh at that.

When Lucia was finished with her sandwiches (she added barbeque sauce, of course), she sat down across from Harah at the table and began chowing down — very much like a wolf.

"When I saw you back then... fourteen years ago..." Harah started slowly, whispering more to herself than Lucia, who froze mid-chew. Harah was staring at her hands, twiddling her thumbs.

"Musician," Harah began again. "Back then, I... I adored you so much... and I still do, don't get me wrong, but... I could swear you died..."

Lucia put down her sandwich.

"You said your death curse was a resurrection... right?"

Lucia nodded tentatively, as if she knew the questions before they were asked.

"Unlike our Skyking, my reincarnation process is messy. I'm not powerful enough to do it any other way. Things that could go wrong did, and I was reborn as a female. Thankfully, the resurrection process restored to me a bulk of my powers. Within another decade or so, I believe my Landlords will be back to their old selves."

Harah chuckled. "Being a girl is going back to your normal self, 'eh?"

Lucia smiled. "Having boobs will be an adventure, I'm sure. Not to mention the *other* stuff I hear so much about. But I can manage... hopefully."

They both laughed a good thirty seconds before quieting down.

"Is he still having the same dream?" Harah whispered, as if she feared she'd be overheard.

Lucia nodded. "Yeah. Hopefully this means his memories are restoring themselves. Lower Town has gone to hell in a hand basket without the Skyking to keep peace among the Major Players. They're all fighting for power, people believe me to be a traitor, Talus and Aurora want me roasted over an open flame, and someone's trying to summon an n^{th} level demon..." Lucia raised her palm to her face, taking a moment to think. "Or."

Harah looked up at her. “Or?”

“Or,” she continued, looking Harah in the eyes, “his Landlord is trying to dominate him.”

Harah thought about that for a second, going over everything knew about Landlords — *the source of our powers*.

‘Officially,’ all children born in Lower Town have a special connection to this world, a unique perspective on ‘reality’ that separates them from the mortals walking the Surface. This ‘understanding’ grants them access to a pool of special abilities — *to power*.

A Landlord is the mental representation of that ‘power,’ that ‘perspective’ that exists solely in the user’s psyche. That’s why it’s called a ‘Landlord.’ The innermost power is the ‘Land,’ and *it* is the ‘Lord.’

“Players use their Landlords as conduits to connect with their inner reserves — an adventure I know you’ve experienced firsthand.” Lucia started, staring at Harah again.

“Like plugging a computer into a wall socket.” Harah muttered the rhyme she’d learned a while back. “If you tried rigging your computer into the power lines hanging up outside, the huge amounts of energy would blow it up.”

Harah shivered. *Same goes for Players*. The human mind is not equipped to deal with “power” — or *energy* — in its most basic form, and attempting to connect directly to it would literally fry a person’s mind. Landlords act as the ‘middleman,’ delivering power in a steady and manageable flow.

Lucia stomped her foot. “Still, Players can skim some ‘energy’ off their reserves without the use of a Landlord, although it’d be weak as hell and virtually useless...”

Which is, Harah thought, the difference between low-tier and high-tier Players. Low-tiers do not have a Landlord and thus don’t have full access to their inner power. All they can do is take a little off the top and pray.

“If Eli really was being controlled,” she continued, “he’d have slipped by now. Not even a Landlord like *that* could control itself this well.” Lucia turned away from Harah, looking at the floor. “If only Mius had made more than one Landlord, I might be able to do more than just... sit around here and complain.”

“Oh yeah. That’s right.” Harah blinked a few times. “Lucky Players can attain multiple Landlords — like most of you Major Players.”

“Exactly. And I could’ve easily used my Main, Sanctimacchius, to interact with Mius’s alts.”

“Alts?” Harah asked.

“The Landlords other than the Main.”

“Oh. *Those*.”

Harah thought about that. *I guess it makes sense. The more Landlords you have, the more energy you can acquire from your reserve at once, right?*

They paused for a moment, each brooding on how much their respective lives sucked at the moment.

"I've got a question," Harah was whispering more to herself than to Lucia. "What if his Landlord really is trying stuff? Testing its bound boundaries. What if it breaks free? Gains control?" Harah paused, hand to her chin. "Well, I guess you could use your *dual manifestation* to take him ou—"

Lucia slammed her fist on the table, causing Harah to bite her tongue.

"I'd never raise a dual manifestation against Mius, no matter the odds!" She almost yelled.

The Major Players each have 'dual manifestations' — a type of 'second form' for their main Landlord, doubling or even tripling its power. They're pretty rare outside of the Major Players' little circle.

Harah didn't respond. She just stared intently at the Musician, who was busy gazing at her own hands, trying to come to an acceptable conclusion.

Landlords strive for equality within the minds of their users, a perfect 50/50 balance of everything. Trouble is: even if it doesn't apply to things like race or gender, a Landlord usually manifests as the opposite of its user to meet this equilibrium. If a shy person creates a Landlord, it will be forthright and aggressive, always speaking its mind and giving its opinion to its user. If the person is sad all the time, the Landlord will be unusually cheery and happy, attempting to cheer its user up to the appropriate levels. By the same logic, if a kind and generous person creates a Landlord, the Landlord will be bitter and *evil*, and vice-versa.

It was a while before either of them spoke again, and they both knew why.

The Skyking was... no — *is* — a benevolent, generous person at heart, even if at most times he did not give the impression. That means his Landlord, that voice in his head, was just as *evil* as he was *good*.

His Landlord wanted to take control. To use Eli to commit acts of great sin. *If the Landlord did gain control...* Lucia shook the thoughts from her head. She'd made up her mind.

"I'll be able to stop it. Stop him." A fiery determination appeared in her eyes.

"Even if you have to ki—"

"*No matter what.*" Her words were final.

Harah closed her mouth and, after a moment, nodded solemnly. Broaching the subject of the Skyking was like treading on sacred forbidden ground. To be avoided at all costs.

"Musician." Harah inquired after some time. "That boy is the legendary Airmaster? The Skyking himself? For real? Are you sure?"

Lucia nodded her affirmation.

Harah's expression took a mystified turn. "The great Skyking... wow. And he doesn't show any signs of his former self?"

Lucia sighed. "Nope. Nothing. Not even when he gets bullied at school. The air doesn't stir in the slightest, which surprises me. I wonder what his Landlord is plotting."

Harah gasped at that. "You let groups of people gang up on the Skyking?! That's totally unfair."

Lucia laughed. "Yeah. *For them*. If he even released a fraction of a percent *of a fraction* of his power on those pathetic mortals, they'd be obliterated in an instant. Instead, he fought *manually*. He's a pretty competent fighter, even without his powers. I know. I was watching."

"Hmph." Harah agreed. She had raised the boy from near-birth, so she would know. Their conversation halted once more, Lucia taking small bites from her various sandwiches.

Harah broke the silence yet again with another important question. "We're living on the edge of the Surface World, right on top of the L.A. entrance to Lower Town. Even with my husband's recent ascension into the higher-tier Players, he won't be able to protect us from the *Major* Players, once they catch a whiff of you... or Airmaster, for that matter. How long do you think it'll be until they find us?"

Lucia finished her sandwiches off quickly. Harah was amazed.

With a quick jump, Lucia got up from her chair, her back to Harah. "You're a Player too, Harah. I'm hiding my power as much as I can, even behind this uber-Limiter Alex made for me..." She ran her fingertips along the silver bracelet on her wrist. It was a very loose fitting trinket; baggy enough to slip right off her hand — but it never did, even if she held her whole arm totally vertical. In an archaic font on the trinket was a number that would fluctuate between 2 and 4 in green text. "...but you can still feel it, can't you? The gentle murmur of my power. Of *Soundmaster*."

Harah didn't respond.

"Even though it's indicating that letting out *at most* only about 4% of my power..." Lucia sighed. "And I've set it to limit me at ten..."

"Have you ever released those restraints?" Harah asked.

"Me?" Lucia asked, pointing at herself, "No. *Not once*. And neither has Elijah — I have him limited at only 5%, but the counter never even gets past *zero*."

The branches on the enormous tree outside of their home shifted and blew in the wind.

Harah snorted. Lucia's face slumped into an expression of grief.

"If he doesn't regain his powers soon... we'll be found out. I'll be executed... and Miu— er, Elijah... he'll probably be hauled off... his latent talents abused by the highest bidder. Just some toy for some asshole to use to summon demons and lord it over Lower Town. If his parents were still alive, I'd—"

Harah suddenly smiled. "Maybe we could bring him to Lower Town. I'm sure he'd regain his powers in such a familiar territory." She sounded serious.

Lucia let loose a warm and genuine smile, sorrow evaporating. "Heh. Maybe throw him off a building... hmm..."

Harah gasped — a worried expression on her face. "Lucia!"

She stuck out her tongue. "Just kidding, Harah."

They both burst out laughing.

**

Elsewhere.

"I desire more servants. If you spot any little ones, apt for servitude, take them. Rob the rest of them. Kill them all."

"But Aki... — Airmaster... that's *all* the way on the *Surface*, past the boundaries of Lower Town!"

"Why would we rob the homes of mere mortals? Where's the fun in that?"

"We have many mortal servants already. Another escapade on the surface would be unnecessary."

"Yeah, I agree with them too! Plus, we have that tournament thing comin' up... and what if the Major Players—"

"The King of Il commands you: Silence." This new voice shocked the crowd into obedience. "He is the Airmaster. He is the Skyking. You will obey him, or you will die. Got it?"

"Yes. My *King*!" They shouted in chorus.

"And just so we're clear... *leave none of them alive.*" The 'Skyking' announced.

“YES! MY KING!”

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“Eli! Get up you idiot! We’re gonna be late for school *again!*”

Elijah turned over in his bed a few times before going back to sleep.

“Oh no you don’t...” Lucia grunted, taking a seat at the piano that rested against the wall. It was a gift from Harah. With reckless abandon, Lucia began tapping frantically on the keyboard, a jaunt of complete and utter randomness... and yet, it had a mysterious order to it. A type of beauty you could only respect as it ravaged your ears.

With a shout, Eli jumped out of his bed. “Alright! Alright! I’m up! No more music! Please!”

Lucia just smiled wickedly at him before throwing him a backpack.

It was another 30 minutes before they were ready to go.

“Be safe!” Harah shouted after them. Eli was the one who turned back and waved.

Lucia sighed. “What am I gonna do with you, Mius...”

Today was the last day of school. Eli was shaking with excitement.

The school they went to was bland and average. Average building size, average student body, average teachers, bland school, bleak outlook, et cetera.

Lucia sighed. She didn’t even really care. Everything they taught she was *present for* when it actually *happened*, so she slept through each class and aced every test.

Especially the history class. She’d been around to witness the birth and death of their critically acclaimed “Jesus Christ,” the death of 300 Spartans, the advent of the American and French Revolutions, the Industrial Revolution, and a few other Revolutions the history books *didn’t* talk about. A funny thing she noticed about the Surface World’s history books: *they were all horribly misrepresenting the events of the past*. Lucia couldn’t believe they taught their young this... *crap*.

She had fought alongside Mius’s mother and father as The Musician during the slave raids on Africa’s various Lower Towns, ensuring anyone who had come to Lower Town for haven against those Surface barbarian scum were duly protected. That wasn’t noted in the history books either.

So this little mortal school was *child’s play* to her.

Literally.

Near the end of the day, everyone was shuffled into the school's average sized auditorium. Those who had chosen to stay behind were all teary eyed and blubbery with their goodbyes and all that crap. Eli was somewhere in the mix of people while Lucia was leaning against the wall — coolly, of course — with her only friend, Verydia, a student of Japanese descent and the only one able to catch and hold on to Lucia's interest for more than a few minutes. There was a strange vibe she felt from Verydia. Although she never revealed it, Lucia felt the subtle pulse of power the girl would give off every now and then. She was obviously a past-resident of Lower Town. Lucia, however, never brought it up.

They were watching the throng of students, pointing out funny faces and other stupid looking things and laughing at them. Lucia kept a special eye out for Elijah. She didn't want to lose track of him.

"Lucy," Verydia started.

"Lucia," she corrected.

"Lucy!" Verydia insisted, pronouncing it *Looooo-seeeeeee*! She started giggling to herself softly. It wasn't long before Lucia joined in.

Lucia was so wrapped up in herself that she didn't notice someone approaching. When she did, it was already too late.

The crowd went silent, watching her. Mortals always loved to gawk and stare in huge gatherings at anything if it varied from their typical routine. Verydia tapped her shoulder, interrupting her inner monologue. "Lucia. To your left." She whispered.

Lucia slowly turned her head. Facing her was some boy of whom she had never met. He was damn tall, with black hair that fell over his eyes. Lucia turned her head back to Verydia, uninterested. "Who is this bozo and why is he staring at me?"

Verydia sighed sourly. "Baka! That's Roberto! Roberto Ramos! The most popular boy in school! And he's so cute! Look at those dimples! And he—"

Verydia had more to say, but Lucia turned back to Roberto, annoyed, and with the whole school's attention on her, including Elijah. She remembered Roberto now. One of the older boys that went to this mortal school, maybe 15 or 16 years old. He was always fighting someone, trying to prove his dominance. The self proclaimed king of the school. Lucia gave a bark of laughter. She was the same way. Always fighting someone. Unlike this kid, however, all Lucia wanted was a momentary reprieve from her boredom — and beating up mortals was a great self-esteem booster, too.

Roberto cleared his throat. "Sup."

Lucia frowned, but he continued. "You're cute. Wanna be my GF for the summer?" He had a thick Spanish accent.

The girls in the audience didn't say anything, but Lucia could feel their hate of her. A quick glance in their general direction wiped the looks from their faces. There was a shuffling in the crowd, and a few whispers of protest. Eli had stepped up to the head of the crowd, a front row seat.

Lucia's frown deepened. She turned back to Verydia. "What the hell is a 'gee eff'?"

Verydia almost screamed in frustration. "He's *asking you out*! To be his girl! Say yes! We'll be supa popular!"

Lucia nodded a few times, as if considering the notion. *Asking me out? How old am I again? 10? 12? 14? Surely not old enough to mate. What the hell is wrong with mortal children now days? Oh well.* She turned back to Roberto, with a warm smile on her face.

He smiled back at her.

They stayed like that for a few seconds, until Lucia's smile abruptly went south. "No."

The crowd made an overdramatic gasp. Verydia sighed sullenly.

Roberto laughed it off. "You can't say no to me girly. Nice try though. Come on. Be my GF."

That's when Eli appeared suddenly, in-between Lucia and Roberto, facing the latter. She had barely seen him approaching, and it showed all over her face. He was about three-fourths her height, which was about a head or two lower than Roberto. She looked down at him with surprised, questioning eyes. The look was comical.

"Uh..." She didn't know what to say.

He gave Roberto a hard look. "Da girl said no, Roberto." His voice was that of a child, no authority or power to back it up. That struck a chord deep within *the Musician*. "No. As in *not happening*. Feel free to *fuck off* now." He sounded oddly polite with that last one. Kinda like Mius. Despite herself, Lucia leered.

Roberto was stunned by this new development... at least until the crowd behind him burst out in laughter. It spread quickly. Soon everyone was laughing.

Roberto literally growled, body shaking with fury. He had been humiliated in his own kingdom, a feeling completely foreign to him.

"Who's this loser kid?! Huh?! Your little boyfriend?" He was livid, his face red with rage.

Lucia sighed, determined to set him straight. "Did I make you mad, kid?" She made a fake crying face with her hands next to her eyes. "Awwwww."

The crowd gasped, and even Verydia took an uncertain step backwards. "You're picking another fight already?!" She hissed.

Lucia ignored Verydia's words, her lip twitching in anger, thoughts racing.

Pathetic mortals had no right to approach someone like *me*, The Musician, *Soundmaster of Lower Town*, with such disrespect, let alone the Skyking *himself*!! Disgusting wor—

“Bitch!” Roberto shouted, throwing a punch. Verydia screamed. The crowd held their breath in a loud fashion, taken aback.

Lucia had gently nudged Eli out of the way and took his punch on in full. His attack was solid, and it connected, smashing Lucia right in the middle of the face. The force behind it was enough to shatter someone’s nose.

A hairline strand of blood trickled down Lucia’s cheek, dripping off her chin. Eli’s eyes grew wide in utter horror. One student cried out. Another few went running to gathering of teachers at the far side of the room, who, interestingly enough, took no notice of the squabble. The others sat there, stunned at what they saw. Roberto’s group flinched.

There was a screech.

Lucia hadn’t moved. Hadn’t even barked. Roberto was the one blaring. He was shouting in pain, holding his fist with his other hand. It was bruised and bloody, as if he had tried punching a brick wall with all his might.

Lucia wiped his blood off her face with her sleeve, all the while laughing maniacally. “Foolish child.”

When the school staff “broke up the fight,” as they put it, Lucia gave them her “innocent girl” act. The others willingly played along. Roberto and friends were unceremoniously toted out of the room, with students pointing and snickering the whole time. Some even whispered “Roberto got beat up by a girl!”

Eventually, everyone started talking again, the past 5 minutes a long forgotten memory.

“Lucy! That was so cool! Was that like karate or something?” Verydia was beaming.

Lucia chuckled. “No. What I did is something no one around here would ever understand.” She spared Eli a glance. “Well... maybe not *everyone*.”

“Aww Lucy, dats not fair! Tell me! Pweeze!”

“Lucia.” She corrected, but her heart wasn’t in it. With Roberto gone and no one else to provoke, she became bored.

There sound of heavy feet came from behind her.

Lucia, eyes filling with the light of excitement, ever ready for more, turned to face the person standing behind her. Verydia noticed her too.

“Aww Yaki, what do you want?!” Verydia whined.

“My name isn’t *Yaki*.” She snapped. “It’s *Collin*.”

With a disappointed sigh, Lucia returned to leaning against the wall.

Verydia's eyes took on a worried look for a second. "Crap. Oh yeah. Sorry 'bout that, Collin. Oh, Lucia. This is my sister —"

"Friend" Collin corrected. "I'm her friend."

"—... friend... Collin... say hi, Collin!"

Lucia looked Collin up and down. She did the same. Her eyes had a strange ferocity to them, an icy determination that would not fade. *The pride of Lower Town*. Lucia got that same strange vibe from her as she did from Verydia. *Interesting*.

Breaking the stare down, Collin turned her attention towards Verydia. "I don't like her. Stay away from her, okay?"

"What?"

Collin looked back at Lucia, who made sure to return her most menacing smile.

"Just trust me, okay?" Collin sounded desperate.

Instead, Verydia shook her head. "Nope. I've known her since like two years ago, Collin. I'm not just gonna break that just cause yer all mad."

Collin sighed. "Whatever." Without another word, she curtly turned, disappearing in the crowd.

"Ignore my sister, kay! She don't know nothin' anyway."

Their laughter was bubbly and spontaneous.

It was some time before the little end of the year party was over, but when it finished, Lucia was overcome with joy.

When people began leaving the school, Lucia raced towards Eli — who was making poses in front of his friends — grabbed him by the hand, and sped off towards the exit.

She didn't slow down until they were a block or so away from the school. Eli was strangely silent during the little adventure.

Lucia let go of his hand, walking now at a normal pace.

It was about noon, and a really *really* hot day. The merciless sun beat down on them without restraint, the back of her shirt becoming disturbingly sticky with sweat. She *hated* that feeling. That *mortal* feeling of having a problem with which there is no *proper* solution.

God. Turn on the AC damnit!

Eli was still silent as they walked, looking up towards the sky. His hands twitched involuntarily. Only someone who was watching very closely would notice.

The school wasn't really all that far from their home, where they lived with Harah and her husband. They were already approaching the huge empty lot that stood adjacent to the house. Lucia could see the heat waves rising from the asphalt and made a face.

They got close enough to Harah's home to see their gie-normous super tree. It towered higher than anything else in the neighborhood. There were children playing under it. Lucia sighed contently while in its general presence. Just the notion of the tree still being there through all the crap that happened in the past ten or so years gave her a warm feeling. A solid static figure in an ever changing world. Something convulsed inside her. Something tiny and hardly noticeable... but there nonetheless.

Welcome back, Musician. Is that Airmaster again? That kid? That's still all that's left of the Skyking? Poor guy. I wonder if he'll ever wake up.

Lucia, still walking alongside Eli, closed her eyes, attempting to silence the deep, light-hearted inner-voice that was her Landlord.

Landlord...

She stole a glance at Eli, who was still looking up at the sky. She couldn't help but agree. Still... he's Airmaster. The Skyking! The proud big-headed arrogant egotistical bastard that ruled over Lower Town... and one of my greatest and most powerful friends! Reduced to... to... this!

Every time Lucia saw him, she wanted tell him the truth, to remind him of his past glory, to reclaim their spots in the hierarchy of the world. To become the Major Players of old, and protect Lower Town *and* the Surface!

But you won't.

He was right. Not only would that put Eli's Landlord at an advantage, but the Eli she knew now would most likely disappear.

Lucia had to swerve to avoid a pothole a few feet in front of her, ruining her train of thought. They were approaching the middle of the lot.

What does he matter?

Because he can change. Change Mius's bleak attitude towards the world.

I thought you liked the proud big-headed arrogant egotistical bastard that ruled over Lower Town.

We're good friends, kay? And it'd be for his own damn good. Not only could it reshape his mega-Landlord, but he'd come out of it a better person. I want Elijah to stay Elijah for as long as possible. To be able to be free of his past, of Lower Town, free of the fetters of a Major Player, the trouble and guilt of

war, of fighting, of carnage. I want him to stay a child for as long as he can, okay? Free. He'll be better-off that way — happier — and refreshed when he finally takes his spot among the Major Players once again.

I can see you, Musician. The ~~real~~/you. I am your Landlord. What you meant to say was: he'd come out of it as a person more easily influenced by The Musician, right?

Lucia didn't respond.

Even when you die and come back, you're still an evil little being. Good thing I'm here to balance you, 'eh Musician.

Lucia folded her arms. "Whatever," she accidentally muttered in real life.

Or maybe... you are sincere... for once.

There was a pause.

Let the kid have his fun huh. His voice was full of contempt. You'll get him killed, Musician. Keeping his powers a secret from him is like trying to keep the sun a secret from a plant. Keep it in the shade for too long... and it'll die.

Good luck with that.

Lucia shook her head, hair flying chaotically. She didn't want to hear his voice anymore.

That's when she noticed Eli looking up at her, but when she attempted to return his gaze, he purposely avoided hers, looking down at his feet instead as they walked.

Eventually, she couldn't help but ask.

"Something wrong?"

He kept looking forward, not meeting her eyes. "You beat up Roberto Ramos on the last day of school."

She'd actually forgotten about that.

"Oh, *that*. So what? Was that a bad thing?"

They were weaving through parked cars, barely a half-block away from Harah's house.

Eli didn't respond. He looked down at his feet again, nibbling his thumb nail, cheeks going a dark shade of red.

Lucia stopped, turning on her heel to face him. She had forgotten how much she herself had grown, and was quite a bit taller than him. She tried looking into his eyes, but he kept staring at down his feet.

She wanted Mius/Eli to stay innocent for as long as he could, true, but sometimes, in brief moments of tedium, Lucia would slip.

She tenderly placed her fingers under his chin — the contact stirred old memories of past events out of the depths of her memory — and gently tilted his head backwards, forcing him to look into her eyes. He squirmed under the attention, but there was no force behind his motions.

And then she told him what she always told him when she slipped.

Lucia grinned hard. “Hold your head up little man, *you’re a king!*”

Something familiar flashed in his eyes, and disappeared as fast as it had come. Lucia didn’t know whether he understood the deep meaning behind her words or — most likely — didn’t recognize what she was talking about at all. She didn’t care.

Eli mumbled something.

“What was that?” Lucia chuckled softly, wrapping her arm around his neck and playfully pulling him close.

“Hey! Stop that!”

She laughed in short bursts. “You’re so silly Eli, ya know that.”

Lucia kept her grin as they began weaving through cars once more, nodding slightly to herself. *As long as he knows he was better than all these mere mortals he’s been surrounded by.*

Her Landlord chuckled.

Shut up.

They were a few houses down from their destination. Lucia was relieved. The closer she got to Harah’s house and *the tree*, the better she felt. Besides, Lucia hated walking.

She still had her arm around Eli’s shoulder, pressing him slightly against her side. He didn’t seem to mind, and Lucia was enjoying the mobile arm rest.

Harah was waiting for them at her second-story balcony, waving with both arms. Lucia waved back, smiling. It was kinda hard to see her behind the huge ass tree.

But something was wrong. Harah *kept* waving. *Frantically*. When they got a bit closer, Lucia saw the look on her face. She was moving her mouth, as if shouting as hard as she could... but *she didn’t make any noise*.

Bad Musician. You should know best of all that Magic cancels Sound. Her Landlord purred.

She’s trying to warn us!

It was because The Musician let down her guard. She felt too safe around Harah, and around Eli. It was a mistake.

There was a cool blast of wind, causing her hair to get in her way. They came out of nowhere, so swiftly that even Lucia did a double take, taking her arm from around Elijah to push back her hair.

Her next mistake.

She sensed them a split second before they attacked, and shouted out to Eli, grabbing for him, but it was too late.

Gone.

They grabbed the boy and launched off into the city. A blur of black and white. Lucia could hear him cry out in fear as he got further and further away.

Two more broke into Harah's house.

A few others broke into the surrounding houses, the screams of surprised neighbors and terrified children filled her ears as they were being spirited away.

"Shit." She uttered, gathering power at her fingertips, looking around frantically. "I have to go after Eli!"

There had been reports of multiple invasions of this neighborhood and the many others that fall within proximity of Lower Towns all around the world. Even so, Lucia hadn't taken the proper precautions. Instead, she pulled a mortal *hope for the best*. Now she was paying for it.

Stupid! Idiot! Idiota! Idioot! Gaaah! Baka! Timang! Idiootti! Blöd! Avónτος! Es nevaru uzskatīt šo sūdi!

Just how many languages do you know, Musician?

That was when two cloaked figures jumped out at her as well; attempting to drag her off much like they did Eli.

They looked like trained assassins, with the intent to kill. They were dressed in pitch black overcoats that ended slightly above the waist and split at the back to allow for fast movement. The inside of their coats were laced with intricate symbols, protective wards forged by an experienced Magimaster.

By the looks of their gear, they were members of one of the various roving gangs in Lower Town.
Probably low-tier Players.

The sound of Elijah crying pissed off an already irritated Musician. *What right do these lower-tier scum have to put their hands on the Skyking?!* Her face was defined by its new sharp and quite *harsh* angles — hair blowing dramatically in the wind, like a great warrior-angel preparing to do battle.

It would be the last mistake they ever made.

“Do you *fucks* know who I *am*?” She hissed, taking a stance.

Right before their eyes, Lucia disappeared.

“Wha—?!”

In the next instant, she was behind them. Lucia gently placed her palms on top of their heads.

There was an ear-splitting *boom*, the windows on Harah’s upper floors disintegrating. Startled, Lucia looked towards Harah’s house, before smirking.

“Sounds like Harah got her kills.” She turned her head slowly to the perps in front of her, eyes sparkling with *crazy*. “And I can’t let her top me, now can I?”

It gave her *prey* time to utter a few last words.

“Mercy! A Player?! Here?! On the Surface?! Mercy! You—” They didn’t get a chance to finish their sentences. She silenced them with a flick of her wrists.

Their heads exploded in a mass of red and pink ooze, which bounced around on the pavement a few times. Lucia slowly licked her index finger, tasting the blood of her enemies. A viciously evil smile crept up her face.

“Sorry.” She muttered. “Ran out of mercy a few centuries ago.”

The trinket on her wrist bore the number 5 in bright yellow for a second before fluctuating back down to the green 2 and 3.

Harah ran back into her bedroom and picked up her wicked looking long barreled revolver-like weapon. *The Caster*. It was dangerous to keep caster shells loaded in the gun for longer than required, so she had to fumble around her drawer for some of her readymade ones.

One of the assailants, with the number 77 printed on his uniform, appeared at her door right as she loaded the second shell. He jumped to the ceiling, and then onto the wall, bouncing in and out of Harah’s crosshairs.

Too slow. It didn’t work.

She followed his movements with perfect precision. When he got close enough...

Harah pulled the trigger.

She spoke slowly. “Shell Number Five: *Adeus ex Macima*.”

Time seemed to slow, as the perp made his final launch.

The caster seemed to glow. Gears on the outside of the weapon began to turn, emitting a strange white light.

The resulting blast shattered windows and rocked the house to its foundation.

The attack hit the guy dead on.

But before Harah could shout in triumph, the smoke cleared.

The second assailant, his uniform had the number 10 on it, stood in front of the first, *shielding* him. This one was different than the others. He had on a marble white mask, with two eye slits and a red clown-like smile. The other side of the mask had been partially broken off by her attack, allowing Harah to see one of the man's deep brown eyes.

Harah stumbled over *her own* feet, nearly falling backwards. In front of the second assailant was a *magic-antimagic shield*. They were extremely hard to create, and even harder to maintain. Only a high-tier Player would even fathom the creation of one, let alone put it to practice.

Cheap no-good cheaters... A #14 would blow that shield to pieces like superman through wet tissue! She thought, as she fumbled around in her pockets for the #14 shell.

"Oh no, little lady. We won't let you do that." The guy behind the shield spoke with menacing overtones. "Be a good little girl... and DIE!"

Harah screamed her defiance.

"I don't have time for this." Lucia groaned, kicking the last two enemies straight in the face. Added to the other perps she laid out, that made 6 all together. "I can't let any of them escape. Not with mortal hostages..."

Things had indeed gone to hell. The old Major Players would never allow something like this to happen on the Surface! If the Major Players weren't enforcing the rules around Lower Town anymore...

Lucia clenched her fists.

She had had enough.

Finally.

“All of you...” She placed her hands out in front of her. “... pitiable insects...” Something appeared. A solid block of luminosity. “... let me show you... the *true* power...” The number on the bracelet was slowly rising. *Yellow 6... Orange 7... Orange 8... Red 9... Red 10... 9... 10... 9... 10...* “of a *Major Player*.”

When she took a hold of the object, radiance exploded in all directions. The light dimmed slowly. In her hands she held a black and red 1961 Gibson EB-0 guitar with a semi-triangular base — the rest of the assailants stopped dead in their tracks.

“Mu... Mus.. Musici—!!?”

“Sanctimacchius!!!” She bellowed at the top of her lungs, swinging the guitar like a bat, smashing it into the ground. When it made contact, it produced an explosive guitar-chord echo that reverberated all throughout the city. There was an earsplitting sound, like a never-ending *beep* that grated against your senses until you went insane. To an experienced musician, however, it would sound like a novice guitarist hitting all the wrong chords.

**

Wynter bolted upright, fluffing her wings and scaring the hell out of some random Servant. “You there. Slave girl. Did you just hear that?”

The girl, who was startled into dropping a bowl of some liquid onto the ground, shook her head slowly, shaking slightly.

**

Harah finished her call to battle, popping number 77’s eardrums with a concentrated burst of sound and simultaneously loading her Caster. The enemy lost his balance and tripped over his coat. *Real professional*, Harah thought, bringing her weapon to bear. *Poor small time players are just too far outta their league!*

But number 10 walked towards her as if she didn’t have a gun pointed at his face. That unnerved her enough to cause hesitation. He sensed it too, and leaped at her.

Shit!

Before Harah could fire off that round, a wave of sound washed over the room. Number 77 dropped dead instantly, while number 10 took a little longer before he was knocked unconscious. Harah kneeled,

covering her ears as best as she could. If the attack was directed at *her* instead of the invaders, she probably wouldn't have survived it.

When the sound wave finally passed, one attacker lay dead at her feet, the other out cold. Harah wasted no time, firing off another caster shell at the back of his head.

There was a tiny explosion, and a fountain of blood. He wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

Taking a handful of her most powerful shells and drenched in the enemy's blood, Harah jumped straight through her second story window, landing safely on the front lawn. When her toes hit the floor, she vaulted over to where Lucia lay, crouched on all fours, holding a guitar in her hand.

"Random raid... I was able to kill all of them.... only one escaped... and with... Eli..." She'd pause after every declaration, taking deep breaths.

"Are you ok, Musician?" Harah inquired softly.

"Yes." Lucia straightened herself up. "I'm just a little tired after that outburst." She sighed. "My powers... it took a lot to call out my Landlord..." The guitar in her hand quivered a bit and then *poofed* into thin air. "... and I couldn't even play him right..."

"That guitar!" Harah sounded like onea those announcer guys broadcasting the winner of a play-offs match. "It's the legendary enforcer of The Musician! The Sanctimacchius. What an honor it was to see it!" Harah was grinning like a madman.

Lucia smiled for a second before frowning, as if coming out of a trance. "Wait! Eli! They took Eli!—"

"Um... Hi?" Came Eli's voice from behind them.

Lucia turned on a dime.

It was indeed Eli. Trouble was, an odd figure held him hostage. A tall, slender man dressed almost exactly the same as the other goons before him... except... his coat was a pure white color, shot through with black stripes and symbols. A near exact photonegative of his accomplices. Unlike the defensive designs on the inside of their outfits, however, the symbols on the *outside* of this one's coat were for pure *offense*. Harah could feel their pull, their need for chaos and destruction. Her Caster gave off the same aura.

A weird thought crept into her mind. *The suit... it's alive!?*

Harah took a step forward. He had on a mask that was almost exactly the same as the one who bore the number of 10, except this enemy's mask had a few extra designs. *I've met this man before...*

The "number" on the front of his uniform was scratched out.

It didn't take Lucia any more than a second to appear behind the guy's back. She reached out her hand to deliver the final blow... which the man grabbed with *his* free hand, still holding onto Eli with his other.

Damn he's fast.

Lucia let a burst of sound go from her hand. Normally, it would have shredded anything in its path — even a Player — but this person received it as if it were nothing.

Both Lucia and her Landlord hissed. “*Magic!*”

The man laughed behind the mask. “Magic trumps sound!”

Lucia showed a grin no girl should ever have on her face. “Yet *greater* sound trumps any magic!!”

Instantly, she withdrew her hand, arching her body backwards, hands to the ground, before launching a devastating kick with her opposite foot. It was a graceful maneuver, to say the least. The man was forced to take his hand from Eli and join it with the other to block this new attack.

His magic defense did not, however, prove sufficient enough to withstand her assault this time. Accompanied by a sound much like that of a glass plate shattering mixed in with a chorus of offbeat violins, both the man and Eli were launched backwards several feet.

“Hey!” Eli shouted. “Watch where you’re kicking!” The front of his shirt was shredded, and the straps to his backpack had received similar damage. Lucia made a mental note to hold back, less she unintentionally harm the Skyking.

But the man grinned, dropping his fighting stance. “Good day, Musician.” He bowed gracefully, moving Eli to the side.

“Glad that you know who I am, little *Player*. Now release the boy, or I’ll end you right here and *now*.” Her words had a kind of finality to them.

He withdrew his hand... and released Eli.

“Wha...” Lucia was ready to fight. The surrender kind of struck her as a disappointment.

That’s when Harah noticed the tattoo on the man’s neck. It was an artistic representation of the number 3.

The man removed his mask, which evaporated into nothing on the spot.

“Alex?” Hara sounded shocked. “Is that you? It has to be you. *It is you!* Ha!” She ran up and hugged him.

“What are you doing back here? On the Surface? Dressed like this?!”

“Well, I—”

Lucia cut him off. “How did you get a hold of the boy?”

“Don’t call me ‘*the boy*’ stupid Lucia.” Eli whispered. His anger from being kidnapped hadn’t had a chance to evaporate yet. Thankfully, she didn’t hear him.

The man, this Alex, threw his hands up in the universal symbol of surrender. “I was on my way here when I saw some masked guy carrying some screaming kid. It was child’s play to disable the enemy and reclaim the boy, who I later realized was our little Elijah. I was on my way here anyway, so I thought I’d drop by with the little gift for me wife—”

“HEY!” Eli interjected, everyone turning to look at him. “I’m not some object! Stop calling me ‘*the boy*’ and ‘*reclaim*’ and... and... I’m not a *gift*. You people are... are... all stupid!”

They all started laughing.

“Hey! I’m serious! What’s so funny!?”

By the time they were done laughing, Eli was sitting on the floor, crossed legs and crossed arms, pouting. Alex and Harah continued their conversation.

“So what are you doing on the Surface dressed like... *that*, Alex? I thought you had a few more weeks down in Lower Town.”

Alex sighed, scratching his neck clumsily, slyly avoiding the subject of his outfit. “Yeah... see... they’re having this *tournament* — yeah, I know right? *Another one* — right outside this one really good topless bar—”

Both Lucia and Harah smacked Alex upside the head, taking this moment to facepalm with their other hands.

“What was that fo—?” Alex started, until Eli interrupted him.

“Why would someone make a bar with no top?”

The record skipped.

They all stared at Eli.

“What?” He asked, offended. “I was just asking.”

Lucia sighed, looking towards Alex. “See what you do?”

He laughed out loud. “My bad. Anyways. It’s a small-time, localized event. It’s special, because fighters from both Lower Town and the Surface are gonna participate this time.”

Tournaments are a fact of Lower Town. There are at least thousand ‘huge tournaments,’ or whatever the host calls the event, every day. On the other hand, the number of medium to small events (or even single ‘one versus one’ challenges) is too many to count.

Still...

“Cool!” Eli exclaimed.

"I still don't see why you had to come back to soon." Harah continued.

"I came across some information you guys might find... interesting about this tournament. Let's just say *it's special.*"

"Oh really?"

"Yep." He pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "You'll love this."

He unfolded the paper and showed it to Harah and Lucia. Eli didn't get up (still pouting), but grabbed at it a few times. "Lemmi see! Lemmi see!"

"Oh my God." Lucia gasped, bringing her hands to her mouth. "The fools..."

The paper was actually an advertisement for the tournament.

WELCOME TO THE 6TH ANNUAL PLAYER CRUSH TOURNAMENT!

THIS YEAR'S PRIZE: *THE MAIN WEAPON OF THE SKYKING HIMSELF!*

"The idiots!" Lucia shouted at the paper, as if it could convey her anger to the tournament staff themselves. "Everyone knows the Sky— ... *his* weapon isn't tangible unless he makes it so." Lucia threw a glance at Eli. "And it's *obvious* the Sky—" She caught herself again. "It's obvious that *that person* isn't around to do that. This fake offer will attract Players from *everywhere*. Maybe even the Major Players themselves! This is horrible! What if they decided to join in *just for fun*? Do you have any idea how many would die?! DO YOU?!"

"Hey," Alex put his hands up again. "Don't shout at me. *I'm just the messenger.*"

Lucia calmed herself quickly.

"Oh, but it gets better. Keep reading." He urged.

They did.

**THE CHAMPAION OF THE GAME WILL BE REWARDED WITH THE OPORTUNITY TO FACE OFF AGAINST
THE RESSURECTION OF SKYKING MIUS HIMSELF! IN A 1vs1 BATTLE TO THE FINISH!**

Both Lucia and Harah did a mental back flip.

Both their eyebrows were raised and twitching.

Lucia started it off. "Are..."

Harah continued it. "You..."

They both finished it. "SERIOUS?!"

Elijah gave them all his most quizzical glance. "Can I see it? Please Lucia?!"

They ignored him.

“What should we do about this, Alex?” Harah asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m going to participate, though. You should too Harah. You haven’t been in *the game* for a long time.” He responded, smirking.

Lucia stamped her foot. “Of course, I’ll be joining in on this little tournament as well.”

“Can I see the paper? Please?” Eli tried to interject, but he was ignored again.

“WHAT?” Both Alex and Harah choked at the same time. “Isn’t that a little... dangerous?”

“Lucia...” Eli tried again. Ignored.

Lucia gave them her best little girl smile, grabbing the piece of paper and giving it a quick once-over.

“The Musician isn’t the only Soundmaster in Lower Town. Of course, I won’t be summoning my main, Sancti—”

The air swirled all around them at hurricane speeds... and then evaporated into nothing. All in the same second.

Elijah was standing a few feet away from them, his back turned. Wind was swirling around him, causing the loose ends of his clothes to bob up and down. In his hands he held the piece of paper. He started at it, studying it.

For a while, no one said anything.

Harah and Alex looked at Lucia. She gave them an equally blank stare.

Then they looked back at where Eli used to be sitting. Then to where he was now, three feet away from them, on the opposite side of them.

Lucia looked at her hands, where the paper used to be. Then at Eli’s hands, where the paper was now.

The wind swirling around Eli died out, as if it had never existed.

“Eli...” Lucia whispered.

Eli, oblivious to what he had just done, turned around, smirking wildly. “If Lucia is fighting, then I want to fight here *too*. In this tournament.” He flashed them a smile.

Lucia sighed. She was half disappointed, half happy. Disappointed because, looking into his eyes, the Skyking was still dormant. But equally happy, for this was the first time *Eli ever used Elemaster powers*.

So he didn’t lose his powers in the resurrection.

Eli glanced at them all. “What’s wrong? Why is everyone so quiet?”

Lucia, Alex, and Harah huddled up football style, muttering.

“What the hell are we gonna do now?!” Harah hissed.

“Let him fight.” Lucia muttered.

“What?!”

“She may be right, Harah.” Alex looked back at Eli. “He *is* a Major Player...”

Lucia finished it. “And you don’t *deny* a Major Player — a virtual god — something it wants.”

“So we’re gonna let some 11 year old kid whose never even been to Lower Town before *fight* against trained professionals?”

“She may have a point there, Musician...”

Lucia sighed. “You just saw what happened right? His Landlord must still be *alive* for him to pull that off. That means he still has power. And if he still has power, we need to draw it out ASAP and get Lower Town back under control! *And what better way for Eli to tap into his new found powers and become Mius again then in a tournament?!*”

“But—”

“Bottom line is: he’s still a Major Player. You can’t treat an existence like that as if he were some mere *child* forever. He. Is. The. *Skyking*.”

They continued debating for a while before finally coming to a conclusion.

Harah sighed.

Alex smirked, chuckling.

“So when’s this tournament?” Lucia asked, as if the previous 5 minutes had never happened.

“Actually, signup has already started. It’ll close in a few hours, so we’d better hurry if we wanna sign up. The actual tourney starts tomorrow.” He answered, flicking his nose with his thumb, glancing at Eli every now and then.

Harah smiled, giving Eli’s ragged outfit a pained look. “Come on, kiddo. If you want to... *participate*... in the tournament, you’re gonna have to put on some better clothes than that.”

Eli looked down at his ripped and tattered clothes. “What’s wrong with this?” he motioned to his current outfit.

Harah burst out laughing. “Good one, sweetie.” She grabbed his hand. “Let’s go get you changed...” Harah turned to stare at her house. It was completely and utterly ruined. Shattered beyond recognition. Anger flashed across her face, until Alex put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

"We can fix that easy. Don't worry babe."

That seemed to calm her enough. She nodded slowly before walking off with Eli in tow.

Alex looked down at Lucia. "Aren't you going to change out of that school uniform too?"

Lucia looked down at her uniform, then back up at Alex. "Watch this."

She snapped her fingers. A rhythmic hymn seemed to swirl around Lucia, dampening any other sounds that attempted to be heard. A few seconds later, Lucia snapped her fingers again.

Her outfit was totally different. Baggy pants with straps hanging down off the back and sides. Her shirt was small and tight. On her hands she wore the type of gloves rock star guitarists put on right before the show.

"How's that?" She did a little pose.

Alex smirked, laughing quietly.

Harah admired the kid's style. He had on some baggy blue parachute pants and a long checkered tee-shirt with a hoodie thrown over it. His shoes had the word "Air" inscribed on them, next to the Nike symbol.

The irony of my life. Harah thought, distracting herself from the wreckage all around her.

It was the boy that broke her out of her daydream.

"Harah?" He asked, while tying his shoe.

"Hmm?" She was sitting on the couch, eyeing her shattered windows.

"Do you love Alex?"

Harah almost choked on her own tongue, sitting at attention. "*What?*"

He looked over towards where she was sitting. "Do you love Alex? Like... really... *really* love him. *A lot?*"

Harah sighed, closing her eyes and slouching back on the couch.

"Yeah, kiddo. I love the guy. With all my heart and soul, I love him."

Alex sneezed.

"What's up with you? You seem chilled." Lucia mentioned as a side note, sitting on a bench, playing a symphony with her fingers, waiting for Eli and Harah. It was a beautiful symphony.

Alex sneezed again, sniffing. "I dunno. Maybe some pretty lady is say'n my name." He stuck out his tongue.

Lucia laughed, shoving her hands in to her pockets and ending the music.

"Why do you ask" Harah continued.

Eli blushed, looking away.

"Does he love you?" He whispered.

Harah smirked. "He better. Or I'd kill 'da bastard."

Alex tripped and fell on his face.

"No really. What the hell is the matter with you?" Lucia grunted. Her eyes were focused on the screen of her PSP, tapping away at the keys.

He got up, rubbing his nose. "I feel really scared all of a sudden."

Lucia stopped tapping on the PSP, looked around, instantly alert. "Preemptive attack from the enemy or something?"

Alex shook his head, sitting up. "Nah, it passed."

The "GAME OVER" sound played on the PSP.

If looks could kill, the stare Lucia threw him would've murdered him, if it lasted for any longer than a few seconds, since it was replaced almost immediately with a look of surprise mixed with suspicion.

"Alex..." She started.

He gave her a look. "Sup?"

"That outfit..."

Eli blushed even more.

“How did he... like...” It took him a moment to get his thoughts in order. “How did he tell you he... *loved... you?*”

“What’cha mean?”

“Like. Did he give you a ring or something? Or a teddy bear? Or a dress? Or a car?”

Harah chuckled. “Nah. Nothing that boring.”

Eli finished his last shoe and turned to look at her, a puzzled expression on his face. “Then what’d he do?”

Harah raised her head to look back at him. “We became enemies for a while, fighting each other and the other Players. Eventually, we both approached the cusp of becoming High-tier Players, and we fought each other as bitter rivals. That was the greatest fight of my life, I’ll tell ya. I had my dual casters on and...” She batted an eye at Eli, who was paying as best attention as he could, but, despite his best efforts, his focus was wavering. “And... Anyways,” she continued, “when it was about over, we were evenly matched. But I knew, and he knew, that he had a trump card up his sleeve. Instead of attacking me and advancing on to fight against Glacis, he...” Harah sighed. “He walked up to me and... just came out with it and said ‘I love you,’ and then he... he... *kissed* me in front of *everyone*.” She blushed, holding her hands to her cheeks. Eli snickered at her impersonation of Alex’s voice. “I was so embarrassed... but I’ve got to admit. It was the happiest day of my entire life.” Harah sat up, giving Eli a once over, her moment of vulnerability over. “That answer ya question, ‘eh?’”

A ferocious determination appeared in the boy’s eyes.

Harah flinched. *Airmaster?* That determination disappeared, replaced instead with his usual look of innocence. She sighed.

Eli jumped up off the floor, stamping his feet a bit, breaking in the shoes. “Thanks, auntie Harah!” he shouted, before flying (metaphorically, of course) out the room.

“Good kid.” Hara whispered to herself joyfully, throwing one last longing glance at her shattered windows before walking out the door.

“You sure it’s a good idea to allow that kid to participate in a tournament like this... *out of the blue?*”

If Lucia heard him, she didn't act like it.

Alex tried again. His tone took on a stern ring, as if speaking with a child. "Musician. You can't honestly let that kid fight against all of these seasoned Players. He'll get *massacred*!"

Just tell him straight up: you want to get his powers back ASAP; you hate the fact that his Landlord is toying with you.

She didn't respond to either voice, focusing on her game, ignoring his most pressing of questions.

"Musician! You're going to kill a kid just for a little fun?! How can you—"

She snapped. "DON'T SPEAK TO ME AS IF YOU COULD POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND! I AM NOT SOME CHILD TO BE TALKED DOWN TO BY YOU." The *Game Over* sound played in the background. "What the *hell* do you mean *massacred*?! That's the *Skyking* we're talking about! THE SKYKING!" She didn't meet his eyes. "And besides..." Her voice took its normal tone, her moment of anger long passed. She began playing her game again. "His Landlord is playing games with me. *Me!* It's annoying as *shit*. Mius in danger will force *it* to make a move. And *anything* is better than continuing this normal, mediocre, boring little life on the *Surface*." She continued without skipping a beat. "Did you know that Eli's Landlord almost freaked out today? Huh?! His Landlord is growing restless! It's a danger to everyone!"

With every sentence, Alex looked more and more abashed. After a few seconds of silence, and without commenting on Lucia's use of the too-mortal phrase "*at school today*," he asked the ex-Major Player for forgiveness.

"My apologies, Musician. I didn't understand... but I do now."

She made an all-too-adult grunt of acceptance.

He stared at her for a few more seconds before posing his next question. "And how much does the kid know about the existence of Lower Town... in general?"

"He knows enough." That was her answer, and she wasn't gonna say any more about it.

With a sigh, Alex bent down, blowing away leaves, dirt, and other rubbish, clearing a medium-sized patch of ground.

"Fine. I guess I'll begin preparations, then."

It wasn't too much longer before Eli showed up, with Harah marching at his side. She was alert, monitoring her surroundings.

They all were on edge, watching, and waiting. Everyone except *Elijah*, that is.

"Took you long enough." Lucia complained. "I could have made my way to mortal school and back by now. Why does it take you women so long to change? *Gawd*."

"I wasn't changing." Harah stated triumphantly. "Blame him." She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder, referencing Eli.

"Pfft."

"Ladies. Ladies. Enough." Alex declared. "I won't be able to connect to the MagNet unless you give me some *peace* and *quiet*."

Lucia looked up from her game, still vigorously tapping the keys with her thumb while holding the device in the same hand. "I've been out of the game for a while, sir Alex. Explain this 'MagNet' please."

Alex grunted with effort. "One sec."

Eli was busy staring over her shoulder, watching her play her game. "Whatcha' doin?!"

Lucia stuck out her tongue in pure concentration.

"Playing ITG."

He mulled that over for a few seconds before asking "What's ITG?"

Lucia smirked, looking up from her game and focusing on Elijah. Their faces were close, and he filched back, blushing.

She grinned hard, now holding the PSP in one hand and tapping on the arrow keys energetically — *without even looking on the screen*.

"Here's some important history for you, so listen up. 'ITG' is a rework of a game called 'DDR' — a 4-pad dancing game originally created by some shitty Japanese company in the 90's. DDR started getting popular in America sometime around the year 2000. That really shitty company died — hint: *they were murdered* — and DDR was taken up by a company called *Roxxor*. One day, Roxxor had a brilliant idea: 'Hey everybody, let's make another DDR, but not so girly! And also HARDER!' This glorious day was the day 'ITG' — or, *In The Groove* — was born. In terms of difficulty, ITG is like..." She tapped a few more keys. "...way way way way *waaaaay* above DDR. Remember that."

She had fit all that into the space of about 10 seconds. All Eli could do was nod tactlessly... but she wasn't done yet.

"For all intents and purposes, this step I'm playing *right now* is the hardest in *existence*... although; any idiot *could* code a step file that has like 9001 steps in like 1 minute of play." She paused, concentrating for a second. A bunch of arrows flew across the PSP screen in one big blur, but she caught them all. *Perfect, Perfect, Perfect, Perfect, Perfect, Perfect*... It was a while before she continued. "It's called 'Dash Hopes 3,' a joke file created for the sole purpose of *never being passed ever* — which means, for me, not being able to get a 100 percent perfect score."

She wiped some drool from her mouth, looking back at her screen. The game *dinged*. With an audacious smile, Lucia put the PSP right in front of Eli's face.

“What’s the score say, hmm?” She commanded.

“Uh... one... hundred percent?” He guessed.

She nodded. “Yep. Cause I’m a beast.” She lowered her tone for dramatic effect. “No one else could do this step *one handed*. Right now, you’re in the presence of a God. Bow!”

Eli laughed.

Alex finished with one half of his circle and moved around to the other side, drawing extra symbols. “MagNet,” he randomly began, “is a system of magical connections that link all the Magimasters in the world together.” He pricked his finger, blood dripping down his hand. Stepping into the middle of the circle, he drew more symbols. “It’s kind of like the *internet*, except a hundred times faster — not counting drawing the symbols — ... and with *magic*. We can transfer items at light speed from one Magimaster to another or from one Magimaster to a node — such as this one I’ve just completed — et cetera.”

Lucia nodded, tapping the keys even more vigorously. “So something’s coming *here*?”

Alex laughed. “Of course not. Using my blood, this node will hook into MagNet and send anything within this circle here (he pointed his foot at it) directly to the MagNet node that exists at the tournament entrance.

Lucia nodded, pondering this new development. “This must be *extremely* new. Something like this is... well... it’s... *awesome. Amazing!* Who thought it up?”

It was Harah’s turn this time. “It was Alex himself that originally designed the system of transportation, communications, and teleportation for MagNet, and, once the idea gained some weight and became popular, many others built on top of it until it became the marvel it is today.”

Alex coughed a few times, polishing his nails on his shirt. “My best work so far, but I could do better.” He smirked, making a quick swivel on his left heel, turning to face the others. “Guys. Are you sure you want to join this tournament?” His smirk deepened. “I won’t laugh if you back out and just want to watch... well... not *much*, that is.”

Harah touched Alex’s cheek fondly. “You may have beaten me once, but if we meet again in this tournament, I’ll show you *my very own* little trump card, babe.”

Alex gave a vicious smirk before kissing her deeply. Lucia made choking noises. Eli watched intently. Alex broke the kiss. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, *babe*.”

Lucia shoved the PSP back in her pocket, flicking her hair. “As if I’d back down.”

Eli stood up straight. “Then I’m in too!” He pumped his fist. Both husband and wife gave him a worried glance.

Lucia sighed. “So where’s this tournament located? Back in Chicago’s Lower Town?”

“Not this time Musician.” Alex grinned.

Lucia noted that he never once called her “Lucia.”

“We’re in New York’s Lower Town this time.” He finished.

“Eh...” Lucia rolled her eyes. “Great. What an annoying place to hold an event.”

Lower Town is that part of town that seems empty and lifeless to normal mortal bystanders. They fail to see the city-like activity that goes on within its confines. The people who live in Lower Town know the place to be much different than the mortal view of it. Though it takes up a few blocks here or there in every city or two, once you cross the street into Lower Town, the place goes on for *leagues*, connecting to other small patches of Lower Towns all around the world in one huge loop.

Foolish mortals who risk walking into this part of town usually get lost, thinking the place to be only a block or so in length, and end up wandering Lower Town for hours or even days. If they manage to survive, though, they usually get back to where they belong with only a few missing limbs.

Back when Lucia was The Musician, New York featured *the most* unkempt, dirtiest, lawless Lower Town of them all. It was all the Major Players could do to prevent that place from going up in flames — until the emergence of the Skyking.

With the Major Players in the state they’re in now, that old New York Lower Town is probably the most dangerous place in the world at the moment.

“It’ll be fun!” Harah promised. It took some time, but after some serious thought, and a sidelong glance at Eli, Lucia nodded reluctantly. “To Lower Town.”

Alex grinned maniacally. “Then if you’d make your way into the circle, we’ll be able to take off. Oh, and thank you all for choosing to fly Air *Alex*. We know there’re a lot’a choices out there. We’re so glad you chose us.” He grinned even more, if that’s even possible. “*We’ll try and keep you comfortable during your flight.*”

Lucia gave him a look, and then gazed at the circle.

It does look a little flimsy, doesn’t it?

She turned towards Harah, and with a serious face asked: “is it normal for first time MagNet users to *fear for their lives?*”