

Death Magic 1081

Chapter 1081: "Dear Boss" [Finale] [4]

"You are amazing," Dania muffled against the shower's glass pane. She fell on her knees, her legs slowly spread whilst she trembled. Her flushed visage was tell-tell of the passionate few minutes spent in the showers. 'Pressed her against the glass and... right,' he looked at the showerhead with a satisfied smile. Water gushed, it split on the glabella and rolled over the eyebrows, down his nose, and down the chin.

"Can you stay up?"

"No," she gasped, "-don't think I'll be able..."

"Should I get some help?"

"NO!"

"Fair," he stepped out, "-anything else?"

"No, I'll just get in the bath. Cruse, you're something else, I swear. Didn't imagine my first time to be so, how can I say, salacious." He simply smiled, left the showers, reached for towels, cleaned himself then exited onto the upper floor. The piano played soothingly, 'she's good,' he stopped and stared from an inner terrace. Her long hair swayed; her pluck of the notes added to the outside rain.

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Thunder roared, "-the weather's getting worse," he said holding two mugs.

"What is that?"

"Warm tea," he smiled, "-it cleanses the soul."

Sunta looked him up and down, "-how was she?"

"What do you mean?"

Her flow crescendo, "-what do you think I mean?" she strongly grabbed the drink and narrowed, "-I'm not dumb. Even if I'm a little younger, I know much."

"Are you angry?"

"Not really, why would I be?" she sipped, "-this is good," her face glowed, "-Dania has her ways with men. She gets what she wants... between us, she's the pure one. I-"

"I understand," he echoed and sat beside her, "-you don't have to tell me."

"What do you know?" They exchanged stares meaningfully, "-tell me, what do you know about me?"

"Not about you," he sipped, "-I've heard similar stories... might I guess?"

"..."

"I'll take the silence as yes," he inhaled, "-you were abused." The mug hit the piano loudly, a break in her beautiful expression matched the outside thunder. She looked at him longingly. Before he'd

realized, she'd grabbed his hands and looked over the piano, "-how do you clean a dirty mug," she looked at theirs for convenience, "-without throwing its content?"

He paused at the question, she reservedly watched, "-I see," he sighed, "-you can't."

A look of disappointment built, "..."

"Unless," he cut the tension, "-the cup is filled with cleaner contents. The bad will pour and the clean will stay. Memory works in the same way, I doubt the mind handles trauma well. We all have our demons, don't we." She flipped his shoulder, "-Cruse," and grabbed both hands and locked fingers, "-you get it," she leaned, he gave no opposite signs, and they shared a passionate kiss. The light dimmed, and the holographic fireplace ambered. Like Dania, he shared a few moments with Sunta. Her hair was awry over the piano, in fact, she leaned on the piano with her head facing the windows, "-thank y-you," she moaned, "-t-t-thank you." The clock struck 20:45, "-my god," he fell onto the piano seat and laughed, "-Sunta, you're amazing."

She looked up and smiled, "-so are you," her expression was more of relief than satisfaction. The look, '-looks like a heavy burden has been lifted. Did she know all along?'

"I need to freshen up, it'll be a moment," she hurried for the other bathroom. A content Cruse fixed another drink and sat facing the storm, '-hopefully, our bond builds rapport. Made my alibi,' he sipped, '-and I'm sure they'll vouch for when they're forced into work. Lovely ladies,' he exhaled, '-are one of the many pleasures this world has to offer. The more I live,' he caught his reflection, '-the more I feel like I belong. Am I changing from curse to human? Who knows...' he gulped; '-only time will tell. In a way, time might not be favorable,' he focused on a distant blimp, '-whatever happens, tonight will dictate the future.'

Dania and Sunta exited at the same time. They seemed prettier than before, radiating even. "Cruse," and shared a commonality beyond friendliness, "-how do we look?"

"Ravishing," he winked, "-time's nigh."

Thud, thud, the door boomed, "-we're late..."

"No need to worry," he casually headed for the door, the thuds amplified, "-open!" they shouted.

Click, he unlocked and glared, "-would you shut it?"

"My," a tall man returned Cruse's attitude, "-who the hell are you?"

"I haven't ordered room service. Considering my previous experience at this hotel, I guess the staff is pretty much apes when courtesy is of the essence."

"Quit your whapping," fired the tall, bald man, "-don't have time for a rich kid's lecture. Where are they?" he leaned to a sudden stop, "-don't," Cruse narrowed with a single finger pressed against the man, "-one more step and I won't be so understanding."

'The more I press,' the man pushed, '-the less I feel my strength. Who is this guy?'

Suited men cut and broke the conflict, "-that will be enough, from the both of you."

Cruse lowered his fingers nonchalantly, "-and you must be?"

“Lord Demi from the Demtas Dynasty.”

“Cruse,” he returned, “-Demi from the Demtas Dynasty. I’ve heard your family name far in Alpha and Yian-Dho. Must be troubling, yes, considering the war’s outcome?”

“Not really,” Demi beamed, “-I had the foresight of moving well beyond the coming of war. The new continent, as they say, is a place of dreams. A good business opportunity if you’d like. Through lord Duquant, the Demtas is now most prominent,” he scanned Cruse, “-and you, my friend, are?”

“I’m not one to brag,” he returned, “-the name’s Cruse and I’m from foreign nobility.”

“An intriguing man,” added the smartly dressed noble. He fashioned himself in period clothing; tailcoat and waistcoat in navy blue, a white-linen shirt, white pantaloons, a neckcloth made of narrow strips of silk wrapped several times around the neck and tied in front, a hat, lastly, navy-colored boots to complete the man’s attire. In many ways, the outfit spoke of the old nobility, something Cruse was accustomed to, “-tell me, my good sir,” the tone changed for Demi unwillingly noticed Cruse’s noble crest hanging around his neck, “-do you perhaps know where these ladies are?” he pulled a tablet and swiped – a mismatch of technology and fashion, such as the running thought in Cruse’s mind.

“And who is asking?”

“I am,” Demi said cordially, “-we’re gentlemen, let us resolve the issue.”

“Dania and Sunta, yes?”

“My, so you do know them?”

“Yes,” Cruse opened and widened the door, “-they’re inside.”

“Very good,” he smiled, “-could I meet with them?”

“They’re getting ready for the soiree,” Cruse added rather softly, “-tell me, my dear Demi, the soiree, is it reserved?”

“Depends,” he inched closer and asked the guard, the bald tall man, to step away, “-everything has a price nowadays, Cruse.”

“What of the sanctity of nobility and all fuss about class and system?”

“My, for someone of foreign nobility, you sure don’t blink when speaking ill of the very same class that’s granted thee power, yes?”

“And for someone of your caliber, you sure do speak a lot.”

“My, Cruse, you’re one wonderful young man. It’s refreshing. As for the class system, it doesn’t matter. You reside in the presidential suite – there’s not much I can contest to your legitimacy. A good word and it’ll be simple.”

“Networking,” he smiled, “-may I count on you, lord Demi,” he grabbed the latter’s shoulder, “-as a fellow gentleman to another. Wouldn’t it be nice for us to be at the banquet simultaneously?”

"It would make the bland event, eventful. You should experience what the noble here get up to," Dania and Sunta came into frame, "-there you are," Demi exhaled, "-I have been searching the hotel. Please tell me you're, okay?"

"We're, sir, we are," they lowered their heads.

"Excellent," they stepped into the corridor, threw thankful stares at Cruse, and walked under the tall-bald man's leadership. Demi, for one reason or another, kept his calm and waited for the corridor to clear, "-young man," he echoed at Cruse, "-you and I, perhaps?"

"You play for the other team?"

"Pardon?"

"Do not play dumb with me," he grabbed Demi's silk neckcloth and pulled, the door locked. The soiree began, time went from 21:00 to 21:30.

Rain rattled the bedroom window. Cruse looked at the ceiling, "-Demi, I didn't know you were a lady?"

"Well, my flat-chestedness and the loss of people during the war made me the head of the family. You know how this place is inherently misogynistic... I didn't think you'd accept my advances."

"Man or woman, we all have our needs to be satisfied."

"This remains between us," she fitted her outfit.

"Damsel to Demi, I like the change," he leaned on his side and watched, "-you make an excellent gentleman, Demi. You are by all meaning of the word, a gentleman."

"Good," he tightened the neckcloth, "-I rather be a man than a woman. You going to get ready?"

"For what?"

"The soiree."

"I haven't paid."

"You have," he winked, "-and adequately I must add. Come on, ready yourself, I will wait for you downstairs. Meet me at the reception. Tonight's a night you won't forget," Demi's prominent aura faded. Cruse was left to watch the ceiling emptily, "-three times in more or less an hour. I need a break... so much for a gentleman, she was tight and rough. How the hell can... whatever," he grabbed the nearest bottle and gulped, "-back to the plan," the focus returned, '-time to end the Mayor.'

"You're late," the reception clock read, 21:54.

"Had trouble waking."

Demi caught the suggestive comment, shook his head, and smiled, "-it's the drinking, Cruse, it's the drinking," he looked at the receptionist, "-have Cruse be put on the guest list. The party should start at 22:00."

"My lord, are you sure?"

“Did I stutter?”

“My apologies,” the receptionist shrieked, “-pardon my infraction, my lord.”

“Someone sure is prominent,” Cruse commented. Demi took the compliment and walked into a different section of the hotel. The hallway instantly enlarged, and they arrived at a massive open space, a waiting room for the elite, built with architectural marvels and artistic design in mind. The walls were made of marble, intricately carved pillars that arched into multiple domes in the ceiling lined with even greater works of art. Luxuriously dressed men waited. Many had an entourage of pretty ladies, the fatter held more, and the thinner, deemed a sign of poverty, were lucky to have one or two women. There were also women, and contrary to how men flaunted their wealth, the dames made their servants, handsome men, carry much of their hassle.

“Welcome to show-and-tell,” Demi sighed, “-soiree is but a name to cover the true purpose. Tis an orgy organized to celebrate Lord Duquant’s departure. He’s a well-known debaucher and has made a name for said sin. He said, and I quote, ‘-to fully understand sin, one must partake in its evil, for only when understanding of evil is reached, one might find the light.’

“A religious man?”

“To the extent of what lines his pockets,” they moved from the waiting hall into the reception hall, one tall and massive. An orchestra played, drinks were served and food was placed on tables set to the side. Various clicks were formed and placed according to one’s social standing. The closer to the orchestra, the better and more affluent.

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“Like the seating arrangement at the palace.”

“Spot on,” he smiled, “-Cruse, I said I’d bring you here, I never said anything about networking. You’re on your own, I’m sure a noble shouldn’t feel pressured?”

“Demi, you are a sly little one,” he smiled, “-I appreciate the help. Please do not worry after me, I have my ways of getting attention.”

“Don’t stand out, not in a bad way. It’ll reflect poorly on me.”

“Too bad,” he winked, “-for this give and take, my dear Demi.”

“You’re impossible.”

The music roared, ‘-I’m here,’ support beams provided a place of respite for those of lower class. Shadows gloomily enveloped the side of the hall, and many of the lower stations hid from the shame, ‘-where’s Duquant?’ he hailed a maid, picked up a drink, and smiled, “-please keep the drinks coming my way when you’re able.”

“Sorry?” she shyly replied, “-my lord, are you sure...”

“Don’t worry,” he sipped, “-I see talking to servants is taboo. I don’t care,” he winked, “-you’re human, just like me. Keep ’em coming, yes?”

"Will do," she bowed.

A stack of bills dropped onto her platter, "-for your troubles."

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"O-okay?" the maid was hailed by others.

"You're new," hailed a softer voice, Cruse looked at the corner and winced.

"My god," he echoed, "-what happened to you?"

A young man waited with a gash on his forehead, "-just chilling," he said amiably.

"Sorry to bring up the subject," he inched closer, "-you're bleeding?"

"Comes with the work," he sighed, "-see those ladies there," he walked into the light, "-they kinda hit me."

"What did you do?" they made for the shadow of the side. Like the center stage, where showoffs laughed, the side, the shadows, were filled with want-do-be bodies. Envy, want lust. The trifactor of a teenager's world, "-I might have asked them for the naughty stuff."

"Don't you feel pain?"

"Not really."

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"Tell me, why did you approach me?"

The young man strode to the walls and scanned, "-because you stand out and are not of this soiree. Look," he slyly motioned, "-many dames have horned their wants onto you. If only you were known, they'd approach without so much a word said. You must be foreign, yes?"

"Yeah, but my time here is short. I'm a passing guest."

The tension pulled forward. The orchestra's muse halted. Two taps gently braced the scattered speakers, "-ladies and gentlemen, might I have a round of applause for our guest of honor, the mayor of Istra, Thaos Duquant," applauded, and the fabled man took the spotlight. Gray hair, facial traits of an Iqeavean; sharp nose, sharp jaw, and a haunting glare. The circles under his eyes were dark and piercing, the forehead seemed a block of nerves, the brows furrowed and the posture imposed upon the onlooking crowd. "Thank you," he paused, silence zipped, "-I'm grateful for your presence, my fellow guests. As you know, tonight is a night of celebration, tonight is when we shall pledge ourselves to our god," an excitement grew, the middle gleamed whilst the side shuddered – the brighter they lit(expression wise) the gloomier became the not-so-famous, "-may the night be vibrant and full of passion." *Cheers*

"What's that about?"

"It begins," the young boy gulped, "-man, you need to leave."

“Why?” the question needn’t be answered. A swarm of elite exploded onto the sides. From old to young, the rich scoured the lines as if picking merchandise. They’d simply take the hand of whoever they were interested in and pulled them into their arms.

Older women flocked to Cruse, “-you there, boy, be my plaything.”

“No, you’re mine,” argued another.

“I have much I can give, you only need ask, little boy.”

“My apologies,” Cruse interjected, “-you seem to misunderstand. I’m not one of Istra, I hail from foreign nobility,” he stepped into the light, “-as such, your little games do not apply to me, yes?”

“How dare you!”

A supervisor, or what it seemed, jumped into where they stood, “-enough,” he exhaled, “-this man is not from the usual crowd. We have been asked to excuse him for tonight’s festivities. Ladies, if you would, please find others for your satisfaction.”

‘Timing is a little too perfect,’ he noticed a familiar face in the distant crowd, ‘-Demi. Look at him with that smug smile,’ and so, the music rose to cover the cacophony of solicitation.

‘Maybe standing out wasn’t such a good idea,’ Cruse escaped to the waiting hall. A few elites waited under works of art or around statues. One most prominent was the body of an elder god dressed with but a leaf over his crotch. A stranger-looking fellow; one of undisguisable male/female features, pondered at the piece. Cruse shook his head and headed for somewhere noticeable. Couples left the ballroom. The older gentlemen drooled over their coming feast. ‘Where’s Duquant,’ he watched and watched, but none came. The maid of before returned time after time with drinks. Cruse’s intriguing nature soon went out the window – naked dancers were thrust into the middle for the enjoyment of all.

“You’re having fun.”

“Demi,” he exhaled, “-it’s just you.”

“What do you mean just me?” he elbowed Cruse jokingly, “-expecting someone?”

“Not really,” he sipped, “-I’m just watching. I thought the party would be funnier, you know, something along the lines of the Mile-high-club, you know, the elite gathering of hungry mongrels. Nothing of the sort here. It’s pathetic,” he sipped, “-just old men flaunting cash and women. Even the cougars... I’m rather partial to older women, this...” he swallowed hard, “-is a display of plastic surgery and tons of makeup. How do you even partake?”

“You’ve had too much to drink.”

“I guess you’re right,” he grabbed Demi’s shoulder, “-could help me to my room. I think I’ve had enough.”

“Yeah.”

Thunder, she toggled the light and threw Cruse onto the bed, “-I’ll lock the door. Don’t overdo it. See you tomorrow?”

"Yeah, I'll see you, Demi. Thanks for the help," he dove into the pillow and was sound asleep. '-Good, I've scouted the area,' he sat upright when the distant lock clicked, '-Duquant's staying in a private room nearest to the dance hall,' he took out a tablet and wore contacts, '-SSY, Detailed security information,' the hotel's layout and security protocol was shown. '-To make the strike. The weather's looming, so shutting off the generators might buy the necessary time. Dania and Sunta's trackers, let's see,' a separate window opened with a transcript feed of a conversation.

"Lord Duquant, these are the girls who you requested."

"Dania Elmster and Sunta Haol."

"Good, you may leave."

"Lord Duquant."

"Lord Duquant."

"Let's cut to the chase, Dania Elster. Your family has waned in popularity. Your father was gracious enough to send his daughter my way. He implicitly said you were pure. From the look of things, you're not so pure. I have eyes around the hotel. People know who and what I represent. A deal is a deal, you were daft to break the sanctity of a contract. Tell me, Dania, what would you do if you were in my shoe?"

"I can't say."

"I didn't give you permission to speak. Silence woman. Speak only when I say."

"..."

"I know how you can make it up to me. When produce is rotten, the simplest answer is often the best. A few of my comrades are interested in your supple beauty. Satisfy them. Only when they give their approval that you are to go free. Understand?"

"LET ME GO!"

"Shut up."

"..." *Distant crash.*

"Now you, Sunta Haol. I hear you are very good in bed. I heard much from your father himself. I suppose the man did have a few screws loose. Your family sure is handy with their women. I could never see myself lay a finger on my own daughter... he's a weird one. Too bad he's going to be killed soon. Even in death, he condemns you for your suffering. How tragic. Since you're innocent, I'll make it quick. Join me and my mistress in bed. You'll do as she says. Understand?" the transcript went on subtly. A tracker beeped. Dania was forced into a separate room, somewhere off the actual map. 'A secret passage...' with SSY a blink away, he exited the room with the security footage in the hallway played on a loop. 'Why does it have to be me?' he sighed and shrunk. His ethereal self slithered.

Beyond the waiting hall, just before the main hall where ladies danced, split a path. On first look, it seemed to head outside, and outside it did go. However, before outside, it cut into yet another sharp corner, this time – a private area reserved for staff. The doors are heavy and security tight. Cruse

slithered, regardless of the door being locked or unlocked, he simply shrunk further. ‘-There’s the beep,’ he snuck into one of the many symmetrically built doorways.

The smell of sweat hit. Frantic moans and the feeling of urgency hit upon entry, “-I-I-I-leave m-m-m-me,” a chubby old fellow had his nasty grip on Dania. He’d forced her onto the bed, the bald head and drool; an insignia on the arm revealed; “-Aroe Dynasty.” Cruse casually bit the man’s ankle, unlocked the door using SSY, and whispered, “-get out, Dania.”

Thud, he collapsed, she ran.

‘Onto the main course,’ he slithered down the ever-growing corridor. Eventually, a nasty sensation clogged his vision, ‘-strong mana, are they doing a ritual?’ he passed through and was faced with a dark circular room. The smell of blood, distant hymns, and chants to the Celestial bodies. *The shackles of the ruthless god hail from below. The lock is but a facade of mortality, the command over life and soul comes from the blessed. Pray to Yigner, the Vindictive God, for reverence. With the blood of the innocent, we give thee thy feast,* cloaked men circled a ritualistic symbol.

‘Thoas Duquant. He’s partaking in the ritual,’ the mayor knelt in the middle. Blood from unknown providence lathered his bare chest. His mistress, a lady with demonic features, long sharp nails, dark hair, darker colored lips, and pointy ears and protruding horns. She hissed and growled in a beast-like manner. ‘-The crest,’ Cruse narrowed, ‘-she’s one of Artanos’ followers. The church, the town, it’s interlocked,’ a gagged lady got kicked into the middle. ‘-Sunta.’

“Satisfy me!” the mistress growled, “-SATISFY ME!” she lashed onto Sunta’s reserved expression, “-SCREAM, BEG, AND CRY, SATISFY ME!” followers joined, “-Satisfy, satisfy, satisfy.”

‘I can’t kill him. If he dies here, it won’t have the same appeal as I would like for it to have. Wait...’ a connection established with Odgar, “-hello?” he texted.

“I have news, Odgar. We might have the perfect scene for the resolution of the DBK scene. Thoas’ is involved with a Cult. If I kill him, what will it take for you to bring the investigation there?”

“I don’t know, I’ll need evidence?”

“How does a witness sound?”

“Yeah, I’ll be able to mobilize the ECA if I have a proper concern.”

“Good, I’ll send someone to this location. Have you connected the drive?”

“Yeah, I’m on my way.”

“Understood, this is the perfect ending, Odgar, get your stuff ready.” Cruse teleported into the yard and grabbed Dania’s wrist, “-wait!” he shouted, her feet locked, she stumbled then fell, taking Cruse with her into a puddle, “-my head,” he winced, “-god damn it,” thunder roared.

“What a-a-a-are y-y-y-you-”

“Dania, I don’t have time to explain. I know what happened. I know what they tried to do. I want you to go to this address and look for this man. He’s Odgar, an investigator and a friend of mine. Sunta’s in

danger. He will notify the ECA, those people are under imperial command, and they can't be corrupted. Do you understand?"

"..."

"Dania, Sunta' is in danger, are you going to help or not?"

"Yes, yes," she clambered, "-I will help, I will help."

"Cruse, is that you, my lord?"

"Marvin," the old man strolled, "-I'm glad to see you."

"My lord, you're going to catch a cold. The weather's getting worse."

"Marvin, you got a bike I can borrow?"

"Yeah, I got my scooter, why?"

"Can I have it?"

"Sure, I'm about to get off my shift. I can drop you."

"Not me, drop her at this address."

"Oh, the Ital Pub. It's on my way home," he hung an umbrella over the duo, "-she's seen the worse side of Istra. I'm sorry, kid," he patted her head, "-I've seen young women try to escape. None of them got very far."

"Changes today," Cruse firmed and disappeared.

"Foreign nobility," Marvin chuckled, '-is that what master's son calls himself?' the old man's sharpened teeth gleamed under the night, "-shall we?"

Sunta's pain doubled, "-SATISFY!" they cried, each passed around partners. Faces were covered to protect anonymity – an imminent stench rose. Cruse sunk into the fold and went for the mistress, "-you," she locked and growled, "-don't step any closer..."

Cruse looked at her seductively, "-I choose you," he bravely pointed, "-I can satisfy you."

"And if you don't?" her speed alone made the room shift, "-what do I get in return?" her fingers went down his stomach, "-tell me, boy."

"My soul," he turned, grabbed the back of her head, and pulled her into an intoxicating kiss, she bit, and he made no effort. Her eyes widened in anticipation; pleasure turned to shock, "-what have you done?"

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"A love bite," he winked.

'Curse,' darkness whelmed, she buckled – the candle of life snuffed, Cruse blew the flame. *BANG,* a distant roar thrashed the whole building – dust and pebble fell, and the hidden area shook. Despair

settled, “-RUN!” one screamed, “-THE DEVIL’S AMONG US!” panic, hysteria, no matter the name – participants were on their heels pelting towards the exit. Damp floor, they slipped. Some bashed their heads – blood. It was a scene from anything he’d seen.

“What is happe-”

“Thoas Duquant,” Cruse’ whispered, a death-like chill froze the mayor, “-thou hath beckoned vindication. Alas, vindication is but a fa?ade,” he deeply exhaled, “-for thee have summoned thine own death,” a warm sensation ran up the skin. He looked down, warm liquid ran down the back and onto the floor, “-may you rest in hell.” A protrusion, the sudden tingling feeling, ‘-no,’ Thoas gulped, “-THIS CAN’T BE,” he turned, Cruse mercilessly slashed at his visage. He leaped and cowered. Cruse approached with a murderous mien, “-you can neither run nor hide,” he smirked, “-good riddance,” Thoas Duquant’s reign ended. A flash of lightning illuminated Umi’s flat. News traveled.

“Umi Duquant,” echoed Vengeance.

“What’s the matter, doctor?”

“Your husband’s reigns come to an end. All was said remains,” he pierced Svipe, Umi, and Uri, “-otherwise, the hangman’s noose might cordially wrap itself around one of the precious necks.”

All said and done, the events ran at relative speeds. Dania’s account reached Luso of the ECA, the man, fixed upon exposing the scammers, was forced to look into a deeper and darker secret. Such were the reports over the Arcanum.

The bell tower flashed against the muddied floor. Rain was at its all-time high. An aura of doom and urgency had grabbed the church. Igna’s meandering shadow washed over the intricately carved stones. Chants and pure mana exited.

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‘Here we are,’ he arrived, a familiar visage waited at the altar. Long black hair overlapped a white-ritualistic robe. Gophy’s somber gaze fell at the altar’s foot.

“Igna,” she called without turning, “-stop standing in the doorway.”

“Gophy,” he entered, “-what are you up to?”

“Nothing,” her hands brimmed with energy, “-only getting ready for a harvest.”

“Orin is not to be trifled with,” he narrowed, “-Artanos and I shared an agreement. The fighting will be done in Draebala.”

“You believed him?” she turned, “-how very foolish, IGNA!” projectile summoned and instantly crashed at his feet, blasting smoke around his vision *Barrier,* he summoned at the last second where another pierced through said smoke, “-fast,” he chopped, the projectile deflected upward, ‘-she’s coming,’ he dipped below a curved sword she’d swung from the back, ‘-side-step he moved, her blade came down hard, *SNAP,* a burst of energy pushed, taking floor and debris along, *Hear me, weapon forged in the death of my enemy, relish the thought of slaughter, enjoy the joy of sufferance, raise from thy slumber, Orenmir, COME!* the cursed blade screamed a chilling cry. The haunted spiraled, Igna’s demonic features manifested further, “-Gophy,” he breathed, “-do you dare challenge me?”

"Igna," she swung and sheathed her sword, "-why do you fight anyway?"

"Because I must," he growled.

"Don't you see, Igna, you're not needed in this world. Your existence disturbs the very nature of things. I realized it before the whole creation of the Shadow Realm. What you're doing will bring about the end to everything. Thus, I must ensure you're left incapacitated."

"Gophy, you're a fool," he pointed Orenmir, "-a fool."

"I'm the fool?" she laughed, "-let's find out," she dashed and did he, they met in the middle, her raw strength went past his defenses, a lance materialized from below aiming for his head. '-Dodge,' he moved a little too late, the spear made contact, blood splattered, without a second's respite; darker orbs of pure chaos exploded, blinding his senses, "-master," claws slashed, breaking Gophy's relentless attacks, "-fucker," she jumped back, "-a cat, seriously?"

Igna's vision returned, "-don't diss my cat," the grey feline purred from above his shoulder, "-Gophy, you won't win," the wound she gave him healed, "-as for you," he pointed at her right arm, "-I made a little scratch. The more the fight continues, the graver grows the curse. I'm fighting without the might of the Shadows, my authority as a Watcher trumps your authority as a goddess. Gophy, drop the nonsense," a moment's breath – the prior exchanges ended so hastily that the damage sustained by the church could only be noticed after the proverbial dust settled. Tore the roof, and one side was completely destroyed from the first deflection. The ground, a canvas painted with fissures, broken tiles, and exposed ground, was a reflection of the duo's capacity.

"Igna, I must tell you something," she looked up, the rain and thunder paused, the cloud parted and a divine light shone upon the church, "-Artanos anticipated your visit someday. We always planned on dispatching of you here," debris levitated, "-I don't need my powers of a goddess to fight," she smiled, "-I just need to open the gateway to the Shadows."

The look on Igna's face changed, "-GOPHY!"

"I'm sorry, Igna, but the Shadow Realm isn't one to be used by you alone. I also have my ways of getting what I wish."

"YOU FOOL!" he laughed, her burst of bravado halted, '-I can't access my powers... what's happening?'

"Vesper my dear," said Igna, "-I was kind, I did what I must. I've preached of the Shadows' liberty. Goes double for you, ex-guardian. I said you were free to leave, and so you did. I wasn't angry, only disappointed as you sought after Artanos."

"As a Guardian, I should have my powers..."

"Gophy, don't you remember? I was the one who brought you from Zeus' despair. Since then, you're a servant of my soul. As such, my word is your decree. I've long since release said bond, tis not I, for tis thine own soul who refuses."

"Good speech," a glowing figure descended from the heaven's glow, "-sadly, it doesn't matter if you win or lose," another figure followed, "-I should have heeded my servant's advice. Well, who cares,"

complex magical symbols engulfed the church, a domain of powers exceeding imagination swallowed them.

The sheer pressure knocked Igna to his feet, “-Zeus and Artanos...”

“No, no. We’re Zeus and Artanos’ representations.”

“Zeus and Artanos... you’ve allied. You’ve formed a pact, haven’t you?”

Gophy stepped in the middle of the duo, “-yes they have,” she wrapped her arms around their waist and winked, “-you don’t need to worry about them,” they disappeared into small orbs, “-they have better things to do that to waste time on you,” she swallowed the orbs, her hair lightened in color, her right eye was swallowed into yellow surrounded by black, “-one last surprise,” she clapped, a capsule appeared, “-my symbol,” she reached into the semi-translucent cocoon, it looked to be soft on touch, and pulled out an unconscious lady.

‘No,’ his heart sank, “-GOPHY!”

“What?” she cackled; “-I have the right to back what is mine. Besides, she’s not going to care. I suppose Lilith might get angry; I wonder if she’s doing well in hell? No matter,” she held Vanesa by the hair, “-she’s not needed, *by the guardian, by the watchers, under the oath of the predecessors, the conjuration of protection lives not to be fulfilled, it thrives for desolation. In where the world crashes, in where domains merge, such thrives the land of the forsaken, such is the place of the rejection, the place of the unworthy and the destitute. Gather, form at my hand-*

‘-This incantation... nullification of precedence. Come on, I have to counter her spell.’

“Igna...”

“Who’s this?”

“You know who I am, you know who we are.”

“What do you want?”

“We offer thee salvation. We offer thee a chance at retribution. Allow the prophecy’s truth to be revealed. We share the soul and we share powers; let us be one, let us join – we know the end, and the end knows you. Time’s nigh, Igna, enough playing around, we must bring an end to Artanos and get rid of the very essence of godhood and divinity. You’ve seen it, you know it – heed my call, Igna, I’m neither Staxius nor Alfred, I’m he who thee graciously allowed to live. I’m the start and the end, I am Origin.”

“Origin, you’ve returned?”

“I have – my strength wanes. Igna, what will it be, friend,” reality deformed, Gophy and Vanesa, her hostage, disappeared. A spacious white landscape rose; entities blandly waited, and the world turned various shades of gray, “-such is the land,” said an equally featureless humanoid shape, “-will you accept my knowledge and fully implement Mantia?”

“What will I surrender?”

“We know not.”

“Fair,” he extended his hand, “-Origin, Time, Death,” he stared blankly, “-Nothing,” a low-booming thud shook the realm, *-and lay siege the unworthy: Arkeo!* wisps of light tore from Vanesa, her powers drained in slow increment, her soul and life-essence, the Symbol of Chaos, “-it is here,” she gleamed, “-my powers have returned,” the light-colored hair dawned midnight, Vanesa hit the ground without resistance. *Order of Chaos: Disruption!* the mana gathered exceeded reality’s limit, “DIE!”

Igna rose from his own despair, ‘-break the shackles, no more holding back,’ the sound of chains haunted the rain and thunder.

‘Too bad, Igna, you walked into his trap... just like Zeus said you would. I’m sorry Vanesa, you were an unlucky victim in the process,’ Chaos-energy twirled, “-you were an unlucky bystander, Vanesa, I hope Lilith forgives me.”

“No time for forgiveness,” a distorted growled deadened the area, “-Gophy,” footsteps clopped from her spell, “-I appreciate the present,” he launched her spell, but she barely reacted and took the brunt; crash landing in the altar with shattered bones and coughs of blood, “-Igna...”

An almighty entity loomed from the shadows. Igna’s physical appearance changed. The half-demonic features solidified, he walked and pulsed exuberant amount of energy, and a new symbol joined his arsenal; Oriantia – the mark of the Adjudicator. “I guess it had to come to this,” the demonic features cycled, the sharp canines remained, and the wings vanished, leaving only a laurel wreath; “-the three in one has awakened,” she gasped, “-it wasn’t you, Alfred and Staxius, how could we have been so stupid... you’re... you’re the Adjudicator, the true host of DIVINITY!”

“Silence,” he waved, her jaws locked, “-return to your lover,” he reached, went through her body, and peeled her symbol, “-The Mark of Chaos,” he opened his left palm, the symbol of Nothing expanded, “-will return where it belongs,” it gobbled her powers, *Oriantia; Hall of Justice – Expansion,* a glow of light swallowed her combined domain, she couldn’t make sense of what was there – the start, the end? ‘-where am I, who am I?’

“Such the place of my predecessors,” he sat on a circular platform perched above an idyllic, virtuous landscape. Wind blew, and he sat at the first most throne, Gophy’s mind was stuck in limbo. “-The birth of the three in one,” Igna crossed his legs and stared at the other empty seats, “-this place brings back memories, Oriantia.”

“Adjudicator, sentence the foul mortals to extinction,” said distant flashbacks.

“Adjudicator, decide the fate of these foolish gods.”

“Adjudicator, sentence them to nothing.”

“Adjudicator, we beg you leave, we beg you leave this realm, we beg you grant us freedom,” he pinched his forehead and gasped, “-memories of another... what is this?”

“I see you’re coming too,” Origin smiled, “-you have returned to your rightful place, Igna.”

“My rightful place, wasn’t I the son of Grostian?”

“A reincarnation,” he stretched, “-Igna, you had dreams of the end, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“The split between, Creation, Death, and Time is necessary for the stability of the current reality. You see, beyond everything, overall what consists of the very fabric of reality, and I mean the very dots of existence, expand a smaller more potent world. This is said world, it is at times all-encompassing and at others, tiny. The Prophecy is right. When the three in one merge; tis the start of the End of Time. Igna, you’re the Adjudicator, the one who ends everything, in other words, you’re the destroyer and creator – time has come to cleanse this era, like the many eras prior. Your true calling begins here, Igna, for you’re the three in one, the Adjudicator. The seats of power, you must choose and recruit those able to carry the burden.”

“How so?”

“The gods have ruined reality – Draebala and Orin, the realms impure.”

“Orientia is scarily like the Shadow Realm.”

“That’s because it is,” he pointed up, the world turned upside down, “-we exist in a pocket dimension supported by the Shadows. You have awakened as the Adjudicator and now must return the world to what it ought to be. Igna, believe me, you must forsake the notion of comradeship or empathy; the gods and demons know about your awakening. Expect war,” he smiled, “-you, my friend, are reality’s enemy. Brace for what is ahead, Adjudicator.”

‘I need to end everything with my own hands?’ he exhaled, ‘-I’m reality’s enemy. I guess I had it coming; it is what I believed in the beginning. So be it,’ he looked at Origin, “-I will reset the state of things to match my ideal. Do not interfere. Understand, Origin?”

“Your word is a decree, Igna, do as you please.”

“Very well,” he clapped, “-I ought to start with Gophy I suppose?”

Chapter 1084 The Adjudicator.

‘The end of times. I have long waited for this day. Who am I, and what do I represent? Simple, to encompass everything, one must know how it all starts and stops. I am Origin. I pin this passage to anyone who may come across this writing. I grew the habit at the first calamity, it’s become a habit. I should start from the beginning, just what is the beginning? To the amazement of some, there is no such thing as the beginning. Reality was made in one day, rather, it was a long process of action and reaction. Nothing exists as tis the foundation of much of all. Think of it like invisible threads holding the expanse of what is reality. Its nature is unimportant as it’s volatile. Let us focus on the real truth, my involvement. You see, as the End of this Era approaches, I must reveal my part in bringing forth the current downfall. Is it evil, is it cruel? You be the judge.’

‘Creation, Death, Time, and symbols of Power; are the pillars of change. On parting from the one in three, the dimension expanded – gods and demons were born, titans being the first incarnation of all-mighty beings. The growth was harmless, to me, I saw it as sending rabbits into the wild; harmless. They gathered power and rose to powerful status, it didn’t matter long as the nature of things was unchanged. However, one of the gods couldn’t refuse his lust for power – they went and developed the process of Domains. To expand an area beyond Reality’s command and distance from Creation, Destruction, and Flow. I saw no harm, they were experimenting. War broke out, irreparable damage was done. The name Alfred sparked fear in the hearts of deities foolish to go against his power. Before

Alfred, there had been skirmishes, but nothing in this scale. The then Wielder of Death sought foresight – he was led astray by a scheming deity. A false prophecy was fed, such, was willingly walked into signing a world-ending contract. The God who said so, I confess, was an ally of mine. Alfred's soul exists beyond limitation, and I instantly knew, he wasn't of this reality. Allow me to turn the clock, we go beyond the birth of the known era – there exists another world before this one, similar in many ways and different in even more. Think of it like a chain, every start and end are linked to the previous and form a loop. In that reality, which I refer to as Ashna, is one of many realities. The problem then was a lack of life, there was virtually nothing, and evolution was hampered by the filter of life. Only from the intervention of the Judges, was their life. Even still, after hundreds and thousands of years, the growing greed of the living made hell. They schemed for the dethroning of the Adjudicator. The nameless man struck the living like a giant squashing ant – he set about destroying the very fabric of reality. If we were to turn back before Ashna, we would get another similar scene, the arrival of the Adjudicator – the true harbinger of the end.'

'Who are the Adjudicators you may ask? I can't tell you. The nature of how they come together is unknown. One common factor is Death and Time. I suspect Zeus knows, it's without surprise that he looked for the book of past, present, and future to find information. Sadly, for the supreme god, what he seeks exists beyond the limits of reality and has since stopped to exist. To ensure conformity, I sought after the truth. If reality ends, how then do I remember? I can't say. I only know I was there when it all started. And since then, I've been able to travel from across those realms and watch as the start and end set about. Before I continue, there's a distinction to be made. Reality can have multiple starts and ends – however, when the Adjudicator is awakened, tis the end of said reality, and thus, everything associated within. Look at it as a container, when squeezed, its contents get reduced to nothing. And so, a clean sheet for the start of another reality. I think it makes sense; it sure does make sense to me. In my experience of running after the truth, I realized there needed to be a soul like mine, someone to exist beyond everything. We're tied, we're common and we're familiar. Alfred's rise, how he was chastised the moment he came into being – it looked like his true nature was prominent to the subconscious fight for survival. He was prominent and in more ways than one a malady. Misfortunes but a given title for the adverse effect realize imposes on him. He's the end, and nature knows he's no good for the world and survival. Death's offer to turn Alfred into the inheritor, was, by all means, the secondary nature of cleansing's reaction against the war and damage done to the world.'

'The Adjudicator is the origin point of the three in one, Creation, Death, and Time, without him, there is nothing to stand upon and flourish. At the start of every new reality, the Adjudicator's power is split into three symbols, which come to be known as the trifactor of Order and given to chosen souls. They then begin the process of evolution whilst the weakened soul is left to slumber. The Adjudicator decides if he wishes to partake in reality, and as I witnessed from Ashna; wasn't hard to see why the Adjudicator would want to stay from worldly affairs.'

'I schemed for his awakening. When his soul awakened, I sensed a familiar calling. I was drawn to him and there, I watched as Alfred turned into his incarnations until the time came for us to meet. I accepted his offer, joined his soul, and there, established my doubts. Alfred, Staxius, and Igna – they are the three in one, the soul of he who decides. I'm their aid, the chronicler if you'd like. Reality's been tainted. I don't see the purpose in allowing life to continue, affinity of magical properties has but increased the potency of gods and demons. They give a direct line of control in matters which shouldn't be made available to their kind. They've desecrated the freedom we of the Council have granted. I forgot to

mention. The Council is a collection of the strongest beings in any given realm. For the Adjudicator to thrive, he must have his army, as more often than not, the whole of everything turns against him. It's a lonely place and a harsh fight... despite this, if placed alone, he would have no trouble dispatching any number of enemies, granted that he has the powers of Creation, Death, and Time. In Igna's case, he needs not the power of Creation, he has me and my symbol, granted by the previous Adjudicator's incarnation – the Symbol of Origin. I schemed for his awakening, I schemed to see the world end. Igna, I'll apologize one day – you've worked hard to make the world what it is, and now, I'll have to ask for its destruction. We might have the hardest fight yet. Someway or another, a fragment of the previous Reality, Ashna, escaped into the current Reality, Destha. It has spoken to the gods and has prophesized of the coming end, I know not its identity, I but sense him, the one who will counter our objectives.'

"Is this all?"

"Igna?"

"Yeah," the note turned to ash, Origin sat in the open air, pondering over the untainted landscape of Oriantia, "-have you looked at the records?"

"I suppose," he summoned a cigarette from nothing, "-I suspected my powers growing. It makes sense, my words have power, and when I ordered from those of the mortal realm, they could but obey. I didn't see this coming, not from a mile away. Here I thought being Alfred was fun, but I come to find out the mantle of the Devil actually holds weight. In many ways, I am a destroyer."

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"Does it bother you?"

"Of course, it does," he exhaled, "-aside from love towards my kingdom -Hidros, I have nothing bad to say about Orin. It's a strange world with many fun things. I scoured memories of previous realities, let me say, they sucked. You, Origin, have been there from the start," the regard tightened, "-you schemed for me to awaken."

"Yeah."

"Origin," he crossed his arms, "-if I were to say no, what then, could you fight against me? If reality drives itself to nothing, would there be a need for I to exist?"

"Is this about, resetting the state of things to match your ideal?"

"Yes. I want to know how involved you are in the world. Are you an observer or a manipulator? You've brought me to power, and have done so knowing the dangers it may pose. Still, you're adamant about ending what has flourished."

"Are you crossed?"

"No."

"Then there's no issue. Igna, you do as you please. Oriantia is proof enough the End is near. You subconsciously gathered allies and built a world far beyond the limits of what could be deemed ordinary. You destroyed and absorbed other worlds – then, dare to question my allegiance? Excuse me."

“Put that way, it sort of make sense. Don’t take it the wrong way, Origin, I mean no disrespect. Oriantia is the start of the end, you’re right.”

“Igna,” he rose a sincere gaze, “-you’re scared about leaving Orin, aren’t you?”

“...”

“Yes, I feel it,” he smiled, “-we share the same mind and soul, Igna. Your true feeling isn’t lost on me, despite the whole turning emotionless phase, sure broke that spell easily.”

“Come on,” he puffed, “-the merciless killer arc was nice. I love to torture, watching as my victims take their last breath. The question I ought to ask is,” sternness grasped his visage, “-what about Undrar?”

“She’s the god of death and will remain so until time ends. You’ve already awakened. As such, don’t need to gather symbols. Don’t change the topic. Igna, are you scared?”

“About leaving Orin?” he paused, “-not so much scared, I’m more along the lines of regretful. I mean, it is my home – suppose tis like a child leaving their mother’s house. Don’t be so sentimental,” he shook his head and went up to the end of the platform, “-Oriantia is our castle. We will gather our forces here and lead battles as they come to our doorstep. Strategically speaking, taking the battle to them is a sound idea. I, however, doubt we’ll have much chance going against Zeus and Artanos. The best bet is the Aapith nation. I have Lilith and her kids – if I gather the prince/princesses of Hell, we might have a good chance.”

“We have the Shadow Realm, why not use them? someone did say they would be their Shadow Army.”

“I don’t want to end the fight too quickly,” he laughed, “-shall we go back?”

“I’ll stay here, Igna. Oriantia needs to be readied for what’s to come. Remember, your powers have returned – therefore, tis best you don’t use them, not until tis necessary. Know how to hold back. A wisemen knows how to hide his cards, yes?”

“Don’t twist my own ideals against me,” he snuffed the cigarette, and the realm disappeared into the thunderous raging Toria hurricane. ‘-Artanos’ send his servants,’

Oriantia; Hall of Justice – Release, he closed into a fist, and the realm shattered into tiny pieces.

Bring forth an army of Clockwork Soldiers, giant portals surrounded the ruined church.

“So much for that,” Gophy laughed, “-your strong and can’t even help your child. What’s the point of being powerful, ay, Igna, what’s the point?” she smirked, he stepped and grabbed her neck, raising her over the broken altar, “-look me in the eye, Gophy, you made your choice and must now pay,” a fraction of a second, a trident went straight through him and shattered the spine, skewing the innards organs, “-what the-” he fell on his knees and locked into place. The crashing rain gathered as walls, *Realm Expansion: Atlantis, the Sunken City.*

“About time,” she gasped, “-how long were you going to take, Poseidon?”

“My bad,” he stretched and flaunted his muscular build, “-I was out having fun. The women of Istra don’t compare to the women in Dawn.”

"You and your love for pleasure," she limped and stumbled onto one knee, "I'm hurt bad," she coughed, "he took my symbol. Poseidon, release the realm, let's leave."

Ire-filled gaze, "he hurt you," he extended his palm, the spear shot back, "he hurt you, Gophy, I can't let him live."

"Poseidon, it's fine, we need to go," she swallowed hard, "or do you want me to die..."

'I can't move,' he barely turned towards Poseidon, "d-d-drop..." a mass of volatile energy fell and ate the ground.

"LEAVE, NOW!" Gophy screamed.

"H-H-HEAL!" he barely pronounced, a chilling fear crawled Poseidon, *Gates of the Forgotten City, OPEN!*

Chapter 1085 The Fool

The oval-shaped portal widened at the mercy of Poseidon's fear. Gophy quivered. The thunderous atmosphere wailed and roared, there was no one to hear the cries of the fallen. Bright lights ambered, and the gateway Poseidon opened cracked – like a pebble thrown against a window, flakes of white ran throughout the glow.

Igna rose his open palm at the sky, *Forced Realm Retraction,* then clenched. The sea-like epiphany of Atlantis disrupted, the shine the realm brought and the elation it granted Poseidon tumbled, 'what is happening?' Gophy's eyes widened, and her heart sank. 'My symbol of power...' she gasped, "GET US OUT!"

"Too bad," Igna clapped – rain droplets halted, an outward white aura froze the grounds, "you were bound to face the truth, isn't that so, Goddess Gophy." The footsteps rose, he forced open the doorway and smirked, "Poseidon and Gophy, what a lovely pair. Too bad you can't speak," he passed them and stood with focus outwardly into the city, "and too bad I have lost interest. Gophy," he reached for Poseidon and slammed his face into the cold ground, *Entria's Hold,* a bird-like cage enveloped, leaving Gophy in ponderance.

"Gophy, the doors to my heart have closed. You must realize I won't stand by for what's to come. Take my words to Artanos and the gods who've allied. The End of Times has come upon this reality. I have awakened as the Adjudicator, you know what this means," he leaned and pinched her chin, "it is over. I wish we were a team, I truly thought we were family. The term has grown in meaning, and I'm confused about its use. I have lived many lives and have seen many things. Gophy, as a sign of my respect for all you did for me in the past," he waved, the restraints released, "you're free, so is Poseidon with a minor condition," the bird-cage disappeared and the god of the seas fell, the curvy haired heart-throb was a shadow, a bald-headed skinny man. No muscles, no defining traits, the symbol of the Sea had scratch marks – the loss of energy within the man's vision, the lack of life, the lack of anything, Igna turned at Gophy and placed a hand onto her shoulder, "have a good life, Gophy," *snap,* time resumed by a crack of thunder.

CLOCKWORK ARMY! countless yellow portals widened, "GO!" soldiers of angel-ranked and higher threw themselves at Igna. He openly drew Orenmir and fought, the more he killed the bigger rose the

number. Poseidon's last strain of will had him grab and pull a speechless Gophy. The broken church roof drew rain, the wind exhaled from the side, he pulled and pulled, the soldiers flocked the altar, and Igna's attacks left tears and ruptures, in reality, he laughed, a cackle so loud it matched the thunder.

Gophy saw just one thing, 'my feet, my hands,' Poseidon pulled her by the collar, 'Igna's awakened, he's powerful, he's the reality's enemy. What have I done...' the battlefield soon shut by a slam, and Poseidon fell, "we're outside," he gasped, "and barely made it..."

They knelt outside where the wind thrashed most of the vegetation. "I knew it would have come to this," a feminine figure skipped, it seemed to float, "Gophy, my foolish sister."

"Ophelia?"

"Yes, dearest," she smiled, her light-brown hair and innocent visage were much to be desired, "I knew you and Artanos had a falling out, didn't look this bad in the mirror."

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"Ophelia," Gophy's voice lowered, "I'm sorry..."

"There's nothing to apologize for," came another voice, "Gophy, Poseidon, we're leaving Orin."

Ophelia threw discontent regard, "Lixbin."

"Ophelia," he calmly matched her demeanor, "we don't have time to entertain your boredom. We were forced into using Artanos' troops," he swiped, a veil swallowed the confusion, "we'll speak later," they disappeared except for Ophelia, she calmly back-handed Lixbin's teleportation, "are you serious?" he fired.

"Yes, I am," she returned adamantly, "something is interesting I need to see for myself. Leave, Lixbin, it's not like I'm needed either by you, my sister, or even him," her cheeks reddened, "Artanos..."

"Your funeral," the portal closed, and the clockwork soldiers fell one at a time. Igna danced the ballad of death, slices, thrusts, side-steps, and individual battles ending in seconds, "my word, this is perfect," he jumped and dodged blades coming up and down, "I haven't fought this hard in ages," an arrow snapped, he mildly turned the blade to the arrow's demise. *Spewed from Mothra's granular mouth, bitten and seething from her perpetual hatred – lives and cries the begging of her child, thus rages the flame of Mother, one of many faces but one mouth, the whispers from her lips, the whispers of folly and misdirection, whispers of demise, Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Crando.* a ring of fire wove above, it sparked – mere touches sufficed for the unlucky to melt, if lucky, or vaporize, "Time of reckoning is upon thee, foolish puppets," he jumped, the ring condensed into an orb, Orenmir impaled the latter and hit the floor with an audible and sensorial boom. Nothing was left in its wake, nothing. An outward, diffusion of charred remains expanded circularly. Igna casually waited in the middle.

"Impressive."

"Impressive?" he looked at one of the broken walls "neither man nor woman. You have the smell of someone not of this world. Neither god nor demon, what are you?"

"Very rude to speak such words to a flower," the figure made a heart shape with her hands and lovingly tilted her head.

"No thank you," he threw an open palm, "-I have plenty of weirdoes in my life. I don't need more."

"And who said I wanted to be part of the circus," she leaped inside and walked with her hands behind her back, "-this place is supposed to be holy, then what the hell is this?"

"A holy place."

"A conversationalist."

"A stray."

They stared at each other, "-honestly, what are you?" she narrowed, "-you don't smell normal either."

"That would be the blood," he smiled, "-and charred remains of Artanos' soldiers," Igna's sharp focus noticed a mild twist in the expression, "-he's one of my banes. I would rather have him die or better yet, suffer."

"Artanos' soldiers?" she leaned at one of the more 'preserved,' bodies, "-I see, it's his army."

"Who are you?"

"The name's Ophelia. A pleasure to meet you, Igna Haggard."

"Someone's well-informed. I wouldn't say it's a pleasure, but hey, you're quite a character."

"Thank you, I do love sarcasm in compliments. Let's cut to the chase," she skipped over and stared blankly, "-you and I will take down Artanos."

"No thank you."

"WHAT?"

"I said no thank you," he turned, "-I'm not interested."

"Why not, you have a pretty girl coming to you for help, why won't you answer my demands?"

"Ah," he laughed, "-you think me a hero," he glanced over his shoulder, "-too bad," an expression of disgust fell on her palmed hands, "-I'm not one to entertain," and slowly made for the side-entrance.

"I'm GOPHY'S SISTER!" she shouted.

"And I'm the son Grostian," he waved, stepping outside facing the commoner's chapel. '-Gophy's sister, Ophelia... let's see if I have information,' he dug and scoured history, "-nothing," he paused. A chilling sensation grabbed his neck, "-Igna, you know, you were right on when you said I was neither man nor woman, neither god nor demon. You see," she whispered, "-I'm not of this world, nor this dimension. I am beyond the reach of divinity."

"The manifestation of a world?"

"Correct," she winked, "-figured me out so easily?"

"Well, it was strange how Gophy didn't have a realm of her own. Perhaps she did but never mentioned it. Please do not praise common sense. You're a world?"

“Yes, I’m a dimension. Long story short, a big boom and Gophy’s domain imploded, I was born.”

“Are there others like you?”

“No, I’m the only one. My birth was a lucky turn of events. Besides,” she lowered her hands, “-I choose this appearance because I thought I’d be attractive to men, especially him, oh man, I want to feel his touch.”

“Men,” he side-glanced, “-a lustful dimension. I never thought I’d ever say those words.”

“Good thing come in pairs,” she winked, “-and I have two amazing pairs right here,” she squeezed her chest to which Igna exhaled a confused but pleasant laughter. He spun and stared at the church – the weather was yet to subside, drained overflowed as did Cub’s channel.

“Man the weather sucks.”

“Stand away.”

“Okay, don’t mind if I do,” she hurried into the chapel’s modest shelter, ‘-what is he up to?’

Mana concentration dropped, Igna’s heart boomed, and the Death Element generated power from within, ‘-looks like it’s back to normal,’ he felt his heart by touching his chest, ‘-the Death Element I lost so many years ago. It’s back as a part of my new form. Combined with Time and Origin, it’s fair to say I’ve taken the last step towards absolution,’ a broken remnant of the church hissed – it seemed to cuss at the incurred damage, ‘-don’t,’ he open his palm, *Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world’s reality, unknown to the world’s knowledge, have lived in utter solemnity for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality’s what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion, Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam,* a heavy cloud dropped as did Ophelia’s casual demeanor.

‘I’m going to hurl,’ she held her mouth, ‘-what is this disgusting feeling, I can’t,’ she leaned against the wall and cringed, ‘-this nauseating feeling, the mana’s corrupt, what’s going on?’ *By the power bestowed upon me by the Supreme god Kronos, I, the inheritor of the sickle, order for the realm to go by mine pace: Time Control – Pause.* a hemisphere swallowed the church, he passed through the barrier and crossed his arms, the transparent sphere darkened. *Present and never changing, present and never yielding. All who wait for break and all made are subjected to thine will. I, God of Death, the humble inheritor of thy power; call upon thee to have mine will answered: Time Control – Reversal.* her battle scars, it healed, broken rubbles levitated into place, a movie playing in reverse.

“-And done,” he stood at the altar and held Vanesa in a princess carry, “-I reconstructed the church. Vanesa,” he watched affectionately, “-I’m sorry about what happened, I’m very sorry you had to suffer. It was never my intention, I was never my-” he paused, “-stop it. Why am I apologizing, I expected them to use her, I expected them to take a hostage. Why couldn’t I react, I had the power, I had the strength... I had emotion, I had regrets – I should have done something. I was a fool, I am a fool,” he laid her onto the altar and opened his palm, *-Book of Rue, on the first day of the devil’s awakening – the ancient art of creation falls, for the conjurer is a priest sworn to the gods but led astray by evil. The anti-god, the devourer of angels, the embodiment of evil, cursed King Alfred, reaches the heavens and swallows Creation’s heir, gaining the powers of Creation. Fashion into life a perfect replica, grant the symbol of

Creation; Yeve,* a secondary form of Vanesa manifested, “-don’t worry,” he smiled, *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes perspective, watcher watches, the creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht,*

‘There, her soul,’ he reached, *Come forth, Box of Soul!* the chest openly swallowed the orb, he exhaled and *Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.*

By authority of the one and only Adjudicator, come into life symbol of Chaos, Gophy’s symbol manifested, *-fashion thyself into her heart,* it hovered from Igna’s hand and merged into Vanesa’s heart, contact threw a low-ended echo, “-awaken.”

Chapter 1086 “-nothing can hold a Haggard down.”

“Asmodeus.”

“Mother?”

A well-ordered dinner table carried supper. Few at the table were strangers, guardians sent by other parties to watch over the famed Queen of Demons. Her beauty was one to be revered. Who wouldn’t have lusted after her, a lady, as beautiful as much of the hated goddesses and equally fouled-mouthed sailors. Her collarbone accentuated her chest, the dress, of black and stripes – prominently gothic and of demonic nature. Her cleavage, one drooled by the sat guests, wasn’t left untouched for it was highly prominent due to her corset and curvature of the top. Asmodeus waited at her side, the table was joined by Mammon, Beelzebub, and Sathanas. Each obeyed their whim.

“Asmodeus,” she threw a harsh regard toward him, the older sibling.

“What is it, mother?” he narrowed and in the corner of his eye, Sathanas rose with a slam of the table, “-EVERYONE, GET OUT!”

“...” took a few to understand what had happened. And so, with another glacial scan, the dining hall dwindled into only Lilith and her children. The giant gated door beckoned a deafening metallic echo.

“Finally,” she dropped into her seat, “-some peace and quiet. Mother, brother,” she scanned, “-there’s something you ought to tell us?”

Her observant nature, relatively untouched by her temperate nature, overshadowed the wit behind her thoughts. And thus, caught with their preverbal pants down, Lilith and Asmodeus were stumped. The affirmation perked the ears of the other siblings.

“Sathanas...” added Asmodeus with a silent sigh, “-well, we’re in quite the predicament.”

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“Tell me about it,” Lilith interjected, “-I’ve done what I can to hold back the Kings demands. If we don’t do something soon, the castle will be sieged. Leviathan’s as competitive as he is ruthless – if he sees any of the other kings make a move, I’m sure he’ll leap into my room.

"Well, there has been a fight between the four kings."

"Care to elaborate, Mammon?"

"I heard it from servants," he slowly ate, "-they come to me for advice and I give them what they want in exchange for information. We can always depend on the demon race to not give a shit about the rules," he yawned, "-ambassadors of the seven sins. How very boring."

"Asmodeus," Lilith strangled the room, "-what happened to Igna coming after us?"

"I don't know," he gulped, "-I thought he'd be here by now."

"Well, you thought wrong," she lowered her head and mildly swayed disappointedly, "-I guess we need to find a plan on our own."

"I can take care of father," Sathanas rose her hands, "-Satan is my father. He might want to listen to his daughter."

"Belial... we don't know where he is."

"Lucifer's a no-go."

"Well, how pleasant," she sarcastically clapped, "-if only my children were strong enough to kill the kings."

"Please mother," Asmodeus flashed a stern side-eye, "-do not speak of violence, especially since Beelzebub is not of age. Did staying in the Shadow Realm or Orin for that matter not teach us anything?" he scanned the table, "-Mammon, Sathanas," he smiled, "-we know our way around the shadows. We've led many campaigns in which life and death of countries were decided. What's the Hell in comparison, we have the home advantage," he looked at Lilith, "-mother, I understand the hardship. I won't dare say I understand how much it's waning on thee. I ask this, please give us a chance, we're your children. Let us show you, our potential."

"..." despite her beauty, as per other mothers, her arsenal needn't be violent or extensive, her regard, the mother's stare of death – froze his request. "Mother?" her sanguine stare, the way in which the air around conformed to her, was hauntingly terrifying. She lowered her fork, tapped her mouth with a handkerchief, and breathed. Their focus horned on her every move, "-look here," she sipped, "-I never said you were forced to stay at the castle. I only mentioned it because tis the only place I have power over. Hell is governed by the Kings and their courts. We're in my estate, and as Queen of Demons, the demon-kind awarded me the castle in the lake. Whether a castle or a prison, it's up to interpretation. I guarantee our safety within these walls. Now, if you were to adventure, I can't say much about the outcome. I can't even say if it'll be possible to negotiate safety in case of capture. Do as you wish," she gulped, "-I won't impose further. As you said," she stood, "-I'll heed my children's whim this time. Do not disappoint."

Her seductively noble attire merged into an adjacent corridor. A palpable collective sigh of relief resounded. Sathanas sank into her chair, Mammon dropped his head onto the table, and Beelzebub curiously cycled his gaze across the siblings. Asmodeus bit and swallowed the last morsel, "-mother's stern."

"Tell me about it."

"Mammon, what are your thoughts?"

"Brother, I can't tell you. Hell is a fickle place."

Sathanas stood, "-I should leave," she said affirmingly, "-brother, you should know, mother left with that look on her face. She might do something stupid. Beelzebub," she looked at him, "-I entrust you with mom's safety."

"Okay!"

"Sathanas."

"Brother?" his callout halted her steps.

"Are you sure?"

"No," she echoed, "-obviously I'm not. However, I must."

"Why?"

"To help mother," she threw her arms, "-what else?"

"I understand that but why Satan? I know your relationship with him isn't that great. You ran away... rather, were kidnapped?"

"I'm my father's daughter," she smiled, "-nothing can hold a Haggard down," she boldly exited the dining hall.

'Nothing can hold a Haggard down,' he leaned into the chair with a massive grin, '-little sister, you deserve our respect. Facing the problem head-on and without a plan, that's such a Haggard thing to do.'

"Look at that," Mammon commented, "-she accepted Igna as her father."

"Right, I'd never thought that day would come."

Out the dining hall, along the main corridor which crossed the throne and went up to a vexing set of spiraling stairs – the slow clops of Lilith's heels wallowed onto a secluded tower. The highest in the castle, her bedroom. A rudimentary key opened and undid its lock, she smoothly entered and locked, her vanity table littered with pearls and jewelry. The bed, a cacophony of the dress. A full-sized mirror shy of a tall bookcase beside which rested one of two windows giving outside. She fell on a rocking chair and unfastened her dress, '-mind games, pain,' her window tapped, '-must be him again,' she slowly got up and moved to the window, not before allowing other taps.

"What do you want?"

"Lady Lilith, please consider. Leviathan wishes nothing more than to have a child like his brothers. Like Satan has a daughter and lucifer an academy. Please reconsider," pled a pig-like flying creature, "-I wish you would answer my lord's desire. He's but a hopeless romantic."

"Yes, a hopeless person indeed. Come tomorrow, I have much to think about."

"Does this mean?" it sparked, "-are you considering my lord?"

"Who knows," she closed the windows and dropped on her bed. '-We've been stuck in Hell for what seems like decades. I don't know if I can last. I want to feel the touch of another, I want to feel love and affection. I need to be at peace. My mind can't help it. The Shadows were fun, I had Gophy, Intherna, and Miira, we were the guardians," good memories flooded, "-we had our own factions and did as we wished. Freedom... is a privilege. I feel so hopeless... like a princess stuck in a tower. This is not me; it is not. I need to get out, anyone, please, I need an out, I can't take it.'

Cross the dimensional boundaries, Igna found himself in the shelter of the thunderous cackles. *Realm Retraction,* blood slowly contoured his chin. Vanesa sat upright over the altar, her calm demeanor and confused blinks set a tone of relief within Igna. She threw her legs sideways and sat facing Igna, "-pops?"

"Vanesa, welcome back."

"So I died?" she stared at her hands, "-did you revive me?"

"Yeah, sort of," flashes illuminated the church, "-how do you feel, anything out of the ordinary?"

"No, I don't think so," she looked around, "-I'm good, I guess. Pops," she pointed, "-why is the Reaper of Souls here?"

"Excuse me?" he followed her fingers, '-Undrar?' the helmed Bringer of Death unstraddled the skeletal horse, "-Igna," she grabbed his collar and shook violently, "-tell me, who are you?" He calmly stared through her helm.

"Take off your helmet. I rather talk to you face to face."

She undid her grip, to which, Igna swiftly took advantage, grabbed her wrist, and pulled it behind her back, locking her in a tense grip, "-I don't take kindly to unprovoked attacks. Tell me, Undrar, what's the matter?"

"If you're going to restrain me, at least put some effort into it," she swiped his feet and pushed, throwing him over her shoulder, "-my," he gracefully landed, "-that could have been bad. What is wrong with you, Undrar, someone's angry."

"Me, angry?" she removed her helm and stormed into his face, "-look at this," she showed her cheeks, "-can you see it, the bruise?"

"Bruise?"

"Yeah," she dropped her shoulders, "-Igna, are you or are you not my ally."

"Depends on what side you take."

A tenuous silence settled between, "-Igna, face me in stride. I'm telling you, if the matter isn't resolved now... people will get hurt."

'Undrar doesn't get angry for no reason. Something must have happened. A bruise, someone ranking high must have put hands. Who is it, who's stupid enough to... wait, Artanos and Zeus, they've formed

an alliance. This unites the whole of the heavenly realm... if I'm right, they're looking to make connections, what better way than to have her, the second most powerful entity since Creation.'

Undrar's breathing heightened, her flush expression bordered woe, "-Undrar did Zeus try-"

"Stop," she grabbed his shoulder, "-Igna, look at me. Are you my friend or not?"

He stared at her nonchalantly, "-you know the answer, why ask now?"

"Igna," she lowered her head, "-it's that, your brazenness, that's the reason we're here. I don't care about the rest, you just had to say you needed help... Miira, Lilith, they're trapped. Gophy, she nearly died, are you going to throw away everything?"

He sandwiched her palm, "-Undrar, I'm not an ally to reality. I'm the Adjudicator."

She pulled and held her mouth, a moment's terror flashed as did the loudest thunder crack, "-the Adjudicator... the end of tim-"

"Yes, the End of Times," he lowered his hands, "-Undrar... I won't apologize. It has come to this. I will end Reality as we know it, and I will make certain the world restarts with a better prospect. They've long ruined reality, she's becoming undone, and her powers are not insufficient to control the passage of time. People manipulate mana like it's nothing, and the gods, the damned gods, don't care about the result. Undrar, what will you do?"

"What will I do?" she looked at him squarely, "-if you're hell-bent on destroying the world... I'll do everything I can to save it. Adjudicator, enemy to reality. The true meaning of three in one. Igna, I say this as a friend, the path you walk isn't your own. You're being manipulated... you so easily cast aside what the world has done and recklessly rush toward the end. What about family?"

"Family?" he snickered, "-you were supposed to be my family, look where we are. Undrar, it's best that you leave," he held a ball of condensed mana, "-join Artanos and Zeus, they approached and infected your mind. It doesn't matter, I'll carry the burden as I've always done. Alfred was rejected, Staxius was lonely..." he exhaled, "-leave, Undrar, before my affection grows into hate... please leave."

"Igna," she shook her head in disappointment, "-you're right, you're always right. Artanos approached us, and I suppose we'll join forces. I'm not staying around to see what Staxius created go to waste. We're done, goodbye."

Chapter 1087 Lord Death's wisewords?

'Why, Igna, why...' she silently straddled the skeletal steed, a portal of black infused with purple widened, she threw no regards back, no signs of retreat from her position, '-why did you...' the helm hid her warm tears. Perhaps the weather or the typhoon brewing within her chest, the answer remained a stone-throw away. Deathly Aura faded. The Hall of Rebirth worked in full swing, she took off her helm and ran for the bedchambers. There, under the always-lit ceiling, her earth-bought charms swayed at the purr of a rather modern ventilation system. 'Remorse, regret... I didn't think I'd feel those emotions again. Why did he have to awaken, what was the purpose of creating a home for himself? I won't let it go to waste... I'm sure it's Origin, he's controlling Igna, he's forcing the pain upon him, and I won't let reality end. If I have to fight Igna to safeguard what Staxius created, I will do it without-'

The door pushed, a rare visage juxtaposed between the ajar frame and creamish walls sipped, “-the place sure has changed,” it pushed with its shoulder, stepping into the chambers nonchalantly, “-why is my Dragon looking so down.”

“Lord Death?”

“Undrar,” he smiled, “-the tea sure is great. Why do you look so gloomy?”

“A lot has happened, lord Death. I should ask the same question, were you defeated?”

“Oh no, I’ve been taking a vacation. You know how we retired gods have a domain of our own, well, courtesy of Creation. He did do some wizardly to gain the necessary mana. I’m sure it was mentioned somewhere. No matter, I was feeling home-sick...”

“Really?”

“No, I was bored,” he sipped and sat cross-legged on a suspended crescent-shape swing, “-very comfortable,” he complimented and focused on the matter at hand, tea. “Thought I’d check in on my heir.”

“You know, don’t you?” she side-glanced.

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“Know what?”

“The Adjudicator... the three in one?”

“Right, he’s awakened?”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“I suppose so,” he sipped, “-tell me, Undrar, are you surprised?”

“No, I’m angry.”

“Doesn’t look so. You seem defeated, carrying the long-awaited regret of a girl unable to show her affection to a boy she likes.”

“Could you not phrase it like I’m in kindergarten?”

“To me, you’re always the little blond-haired hot-tempered babe I’ve cared for and raised. Undrar, will you fight him?”

“Yes, without a doubt.”

“So, declare war against his faction?”

“Yes.”

“For what reason?”

“Reason?”

"Yes, the reason," he took a big pause and tasted the brewed leaves, "-you going to war against a friend sounds, well, sounds like a you thing to do."

"Pardon?"

"You're bad with hiding your feelings, Undrar. What do they say, let me think," he pondered, "-right, they call it a tsundere from where Scifer hails."

"Am I now?" she relaxed her shoulders and exhaled, "-Lord Death, what am I supposed to do?"

"Do what you want," he smiled, "-the title of God of Death is yours," he pointed at her symbol, "-you've grown into the ideal reaper of soul. I say this by counting Staxius in the ranking. Far as I'm concerned, you're well suited for the position and the death element seems not to have the attached curse of misfortune. I guess it's his handy work, to clean the element and lay out a foundation for the future."

"Lay out a foundation?"

"Yes, may it be Alfred, Staxius, or Igna, there's a common link binding their eccentric natures, foundation. They plan for future generations and think much before acting. Well maybe not so much with Igna, he fundamentally has a few screws loose. What I'm saying, Undrar, and not to say your feelings are wrong or misplaced, what I point to is this, empathy."

"Empathy."

"Tell me honestly, have you thought about what he's trying to do?"

"No..."

"Then, it's fine. You don't need to figure out his intention or grand plan, hell, don't bother talking to him. Trust your ideals and meet him square on. The greater ideal will perceive, and who knows, despite the end of Reality, there may yet rise a realm far better than what we have," he extended his hand, "-see?" the pinky was shown in an unpleasant light – distorted and a tad bit painful to stare.

"What?"

"Distortion of mana," he returned, "-there's so much you can do before the very strongest of the foundation is at its limits. Who am I to say so anyways, I've remained aloof since the very beginning. Not like my intervention at this stage will bring an end to the conflict," he finished the drink and went up to Undrar, "-you were always a little awkward," he patted her hair, "-and he's ignored you when you lived in the mortal realm. Only coming to the rescue when he needed something. The man's unnaturally selfish, he uses people and throws them aside. You knew that, didn't you?" he smiled, "-Undrar, protect what is precious to you, fight for it, and only then when the storms settle, do you exhale. Until then, bite and grin, endure."

"Am I in the wrong?"

"No," he caressed her cheeks, "-no one is wrong. Such concept doesn't apply to you, people of higher rank," he winked, "-such the precise reason why I can't stand what's become of the heavens. They've tainted the tapestry for the simple reason of gaining power. What a joke, a very saddening joke. No matter, long as I have tea and a place to rest my eternal trouble, I'll be fine. My heir, you carry a hefty

burden, don't let the weight crush your intention – you children must fight and figure out what's best for everyone. That is your curse,' and so, lord Death disappeared – leaving only the teacup on her desk.

Whistle, a common melody snuck into the chambers, “-Undrar?” Jessica stopped suddenly, “-where's Lord Death?”

“He disappeared,” she threw a pleasant smile, “-the same melody Staxius hummed when we first approached the village.”

Her expression seemed a little disappointed, “-I brew more... what a waste.”

“Don't say that,” she gestured, “-come, let's have a drink instead.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, Jessica, are we not friends?”

“Right, friends,” she pulled out her tongue and sat for a friendly chat.

The open friendly environment didn't once match the woeful weather. The night was long, very long. Igna stared deeply into the ceiling, a few seconds passed since Undrar left, ‘-this pressure,’ he closed his eyes, ‘-can I carry it forward?’

“Pops, you good?” warm fingers grabbed his cold hands, “-you look troubled.”

“I am,” returned an anxious response, “-well, it is what it is,” he sighed, ‘-I must face forward. Can't be bothered with fragments of my past. I need to strive towards our goal.’

They opened the side entrance to a cross-armed Ophelia, “-about time,” she tapped her fingers.

“Pops, who's that?”

“I don't know,” he shrugged, “-Gophy's sister?”

“Aunt Gophy's sister?” she looked forward. And so, the night eventually reached its end. Igna found himself planning for departure. Vengeance and Cruse's combined efforts allowed Raven to set their influence in Istra, thus gaining a foothold.

A new morning rose a week or so later, the date displayed 15th of September. Light from the bright blue sky shakily shone through swayed curtains, they landed warmly on his visage. ‘-Another morning,’ he sat upright, stretched his shoulders, and reached for his counter, there, taking the cigarette and lighter, set about ambling towards the door. A newspaper was slid under, the headline read halfly, “-Dear Boss Kill-”

‘I forgot about the whole killer thing,’ he grabbed the paper, threw it onto the bed, and headed for the bathroom for the morning routine. The custom-made suit waited patiently on his bed, ironed and ready to be worn. Purrs escaped, “-master, the suits' ready.”

“Always here to help,” he dawned the outfit, “-come,” he extended his hand, she swapped forms and disappeared into his shadow. He toddled, a newspaper under the arm and cigarette in hand. Lunch was served, and many workers waited for their turn.

“How's it going, doc?” hailed a few.

“Good,” he answered, “-how’s the recovery?”

“Hurricane did a lot of damage. Still, a lot of work remaining. Getting there though.”

“Hey doc, thanks for healing my daughter. She’s feeling much better.”

“Don’t mention it,” he exited the cottage, its sign torn from the prior gusts. Long the intriguing allies, the sound of death permeated. Gang activity was yet present. “-GIVE US YOUR MONEY!” cried a distant howl. He paid no heed and continued.

Hospice was in view at last. The line of patients grew over the days. With money accumulated from the locals and donated by gangs, the hospice expanded two houses down. The wounded were no longer forced outside. A team of masked medics tended to all of their wounds – puppets of the Shadows healing the living.

“Hey, doc!”

“Hey Tommy, off to work?”

“Yeah, we got a new boss coming in today.”

“Good, have fun,” the little boy ran off into the distance. The lock clicked, and he climbed to the first floor, ‘-my office’s open?’ he pushed and saw familiar faces, “-Mirai and Nikki. How did you get in?”

“I had a spare key,” added Nikki.

“Right,” Igna casually laid the newspaper and sat, “-Nikki, how do you fair?”

“Good,” she nodded, “-I feel okay.”

“Mirai, about your father...”

“It’s fine,” he lowered his head, “-father wasn’t a good person. I’m glad things are changing. Feels like I’m free, I don’t know how to voice my excitement.”

“Good, what about you, Nikki, how do you feel?”

“I’m sorry,” she bowed, “-I’ve caused you a lot of trouble, Doc. I know I’m not worth the effort, then again, I have to say thank you.”

“Good seems like you two are closer than ever.”

“Yes,” they smiled, “-we plan on living in together. I took a job with Raven, I hope they treat us well”

“So did I,” added Nikki, “-they seem like good people. I think Istra will be a better place from now,” they checked the clock, “-we should leave, it’s getting late. Don’t want to cause more problems. Thank you, doc, thank you for everything.”

Silence. He held the paper, “-Dear Boss Killer, Solved?”

“Thoas Duquant found dead and as the head of a cult. Per testimonials from Dania and Sunta, the folies of Thoas Duquant have been shown to light. The mayor has irrefutable ties to the Cult of Yigner, an infamous name uttered to the demise of a few reporters. Alongside the exposure of Thaos’ involvement

with the cult, fingers have been pointed at the public office. Many corruptions have since come to light. It is undeniable the disparity between the town and the slums has risen crime. To what extent did the ECA help in the matter or what became of the man who found the crime, Odgar Codd, and why did he refuse any interviews on the subject? Such matters remain a clouded mystery to the public. The advent of a serial killer must have frightened the population, so one would correctly assume; however, in an unprecedented case, the DBK is viewed by some as a hero. A man who brought light using darkness on the terrors spread by Thoas Duquant. It is safe to say the DBK will forever remain a mystery tied to Istra's growth," he laid the paper and puffed, 'the mystery comes to a close. My job in Istra is done. Time to return home, there's something I need to do before leaving Orin. It might be the last time I spend here – the last time I see so many familiar faces. My family, my mother, my cousins... they'll all disappear, all because of gods trying to attain powers beyond their capabilities.'

Knock, knock, "-Enter."

"Master," an out-of-breath Kul gasped, "-we need to leave, now."

"Excuse me?"

"Master, it's about the Duquant... the lady's dead."

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"Excuse you?" he shot up, "-let's go," he opened the window and leaped, "-how did it happen?"

"I don't know," they arrived at her estate to be hit by a burst of godly mana, "-we were scheduled for a meeting, seems like someone else beat us to the punch."

'This mana,' he gritted, "-Lucifer."

Chapter 1088 Lucifer?

"Coincidentally, Kul, I should ask, why are you here?"

"Master, we haven't time to idle."

"Fair."

Panic wasn't set, not yet. The news diffused slowly. The streets were barred, a normal occurrence within the town, thus, no alarms rang for the citizens. Soon as they entered the estate, a feeling of dread paired with unrelenting bravado swallowed them, it seeped into one's heart. Igna shot a look at his fingers, they trembled erratically.

"Kul, stay outside," a barrier held the door headed deep, "-keep the noise to a minimum. Her death is no issue; have Phantom start procedures for outbidding the Duquant family. This was the plan, was it not?" he smirked, one understood by Kul.

'He knows,' she slowed her motion and watched as the smirk faded, '-he knows we used him as a puppet. I doubt he'll accept the matter kindly... that smirk, I know it, it's not healthy.'

'A realm expansion,' he ambled, the hallway drew darker, and further he approached the balustrade giving onto the lower floors, a sort of watching area or inner balcony, the air deepened. 'Kul said the

lady is dead,' he scanned, '-this place isn't normal,' *Eye of Truth,* the piercing gaze lit the crimson-colored pupils, '-the core of a kindling realm. This must be Lucifer's new expansion,' he opened his palm and displayed the latter's wings, '-I forgot about this. Talk about getting old,' with a pointless jest in mind, he continued until a doorknob covered by red-hand print a few rooms apart. The carpet folded strangely, '-dragged?' he observed what seemed to be a body being taken. '-No, is it?' the marks didn't quite add, '-if dragged, the curve would be sharper, well, there's no trace of force on the fabric, considering the daily use, I doubt this information will be of much help.' Without a moment's doubt, Igna reached and entered – a blast of energy pushed outward. It took his suits by force, tearing at pressure points – waist and shoulders, the energy died out quickly, '-suspended mana between world, just like shaking open a can of soda.' The room's looming nature aired – the darkness of concentrated mana settled, making forms and shapes out of furniture, the same as throwing sheets over a chair, the erroneous forms were correct enough for conjecture.

'The inside, the mana's corrosive,' even so, he strode and clapped, "-Mana Control: Spatial-Arts – Dispersion," the waves diminished, *Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona,* a purifying light glowed, '-I get it, this is the reason why I was chosen,' lashes of energy snapped and crashed, tearing not only a building but every essence of the natural circuitry of nature, '-it's destroying the blocks of life, the natural resonance involved in stability between dimensions. There are two points of contact, one behind me,' he glanced, '-an incomplete expansion of a new realm and this, the fissure in reality. Without my eye,' he covered the red pupil, '-what's shown to outsiders without affinity for sense is nothing. Just a plain old room.' Splits in form and wave-like representation of what was there, images distorted, '-I released the energy by pure luck – the handprints was a warning. The dragging mark is fake, this is a setup. The conductor underestimated the powers of reality distortion... it's no power, tis a curse,' he sighed and walked forward, the outward push slowed, it pulled. 'Expulsion followed by suction.'

Mana Control: Waves, a layer of strings gauged the orb, mana swallowed at an astounding pace, '-closure,' he reached out his hand, blood splits, the orb took the fingertips and pulled, ripping clothes and skin, *-Order of Naught,* he gestured a circle, *-genesis, the first walk by man echoes through the forest with cries and hate. Envy of the crawlers and woe of the swimmers, under the watchful gaze of the flyers, comes into the world a power unseen by man, unseen by realms, the creator shuddered for men seeks retribution,* he snapped, *-echo the bequest of men's first walk, fluttered the world's end, and return the abnormal to solace,* a white form grabbed and twirled, the energy skyrocketed, dispersing across the ceiling, *-Adjudicator's Call: Gyan,* the orb froze, *By the power bestowed upon me by the Supreme god Kronos, I, inheritor of the sickle, order for the realm to go by mine pace: Time Control – Pause.*

.....

'-and done,' he gasped, '-I pinpointed the fissure and slowed its advance. It should remain as long as it has the proper sustenance. Shouldn't be an issue. This is the problem with rupture, they can never be fully restored,' he spun, the room's aura lightened – no furniture nor wall paint was injured despite the scale of disorder witnessed.

The realm deactivated, and the hemisphere over the central open hall sank. Blond hair and blue eyes stared up, Igna looked down, "-Lucifer."

"Igna."

"You here for a fight?" narrowed the fallen angel.

"Depends on your intent," he leaped and floated down, "-did you use her life energy?"

"Yeah, I had to," he gulped, "-can't do much when my wings were stolen. Was this lady important to you?" just the thought brought a connivingly satisfied grin. Thus, with a forceful motion, Lucifer dug into lady Duquant's chest and pulled her heart, "-not heart-shaped," he laughed and threw the organ at Igna's feet.

"..."

"Silent?"

"Lucifer," he echoed, "-tell me, King of Hell, how is your alliance with Zeus."

He crinkled his brows, "-don't tell m-"

"I know," Igna leaned and grabbed Duquant's heart, "-how sad it must be," he walked past Lucifer and held Uri's body, "-the sole satisfaction to thy name is Staxius Haggard's death. Then again, you schemed much to cause trouble in Orin. Too bad your faction has lessened considerably; I hear Alpha's is well on its way through another revolution. The Empire's out of your control and the church – it has lessened to be one of four major religions – beaten by Syhton, Tharis, and the cult of Dea. I pity you," *Present and never changing, present and never yielding. All who wait break and all made are subjected to thine will. I, the humble inheritor of thy power; call upon thee to have mine will answered: Time Control – Reversal.* her wounds regenerated, the heart flew into her chest and her body was restored, "-Lucifer, representation of Pride, you have lost ever-since Staxius' death. I do wonder how much it affects your pride, considering tis the only thing they own."

Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, Sixteenth passage, for the wounded's assured restoration, the hardships ought be cleansed. Such flowed the whisper of the healer: Imenia,

Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes perspective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.

"-return," Uri levitated, a jolt of lightning struck, her pupils widened – "-LYOKO!" and leaped into his arms with an affirming embrace, "-I've missed you, how have you been, my dear Lyoko."

"Uri," tapped her forehead, "-go to sleep."

Lucifer silently watched. Igna casually went onto her bedchambers, laid her to rest, and returned to the angel yet to move. He rejoined the conversation with a cigarette in hand, "-Lucifer, my dear ol' Lucifer. Shall we have a chat?"

"Chat?"

"Yeah," he puffed, "-and who knows, sway my mind and you might have the wings returned."

Lucifer's eyes lit momentarily, he quickly turned aside, "-lead the way."

Duquant Estate's private lounge – fixed in the basement, a place where vices are one's only credit. Remnants of Narcotics, a storage area built like a butcher's freezer had meet hanging off hooks. To close a look and one might see the frozen remains of a dancer or a guest who went over the top. Said area was hidden behind the bar or would have been if not for the exposed entrance. With dexterity unlike anything in this world, Igna fixed him and Lucifer a drink, "-bartending skills come in handy when one wishes but to enjoy the pleasures of a little buzz."

"I don't get it," Lucifer sipped, "-why are you being neutral?"

"Pardon?"

"I don't get it. Igna, are we not enemies?"

"Are we not?"

"Yeah, I'd think so. I've been behind most of the scandals faced by Orin. I was the one who forced Staxius's hand and nearly obliterated the Haggards. Then again, you proved resilient enough to fight off my attacks – it grows old."

"Not fun when you're being targeted, is it?"

"..."

"Lucifer, I know about Zeus and Artanos, the heavens have decided to burn your alliance and form one with a greater entity, a god. The Aapith nation has no say in the matter. Last I checked on Draebala's affairs – the alliance has pushed back the demonic regions."

"Doesn't look good for your faction either. The Shadows are being targeted. The agreement Formle made with the Eipea Empire's come back to bite his ass."

"Well, I don't much care for it," he offered a cigarette, "-this place should be nice with music and performers."

"Yeah," Lucifer sighed, "-a vacant gentlemen's club screams of loneliness," he looked at Igna, "-come to think of it, this is the first time we've spoken – you're a handsome man."

"Coming from an angel, I'll gladly take the compliment. And yes, we're speaking cordially. I can't say this about you but, I'm not the same as I was before. Back then, Staxius and I even had so much to protect and so much to save. Now, I don't have the same priorities as I once had. Don't get me wrong, you and I sympathize with this, we love the people closest to us. Alas, what comes goes, such is the cycle of life."

"I lost everything," Lucifer exhaled, "-honestly, coming here was a suicide mission. I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. Hell is beyond my reach; I barely have the powers to conjure a portal to my academy. Satan, Belial, and Leviathan have absolute control. My influence wanes. You awakened as the three-in-one, have you not?"

"You knew?"

"Yeah, the disruption of reality, only one has the ability and authority to counteract the very essence of our existence – the Adjudicator, else, the destroyer, or creator, depending on how you see the glass."

"Half empty, half full."

"Yeah," Lucifer gulped, Igna prepared another drink, "-Igna, I-," he sighed, "-never mind."

"Say it."

"I was going to ask for my wings... the thought of returning and claiming all of my lands and subjugating... it pains me. I rather not do that again. Immortality is the mother of boredom. Everything repeats. I can guarantee that out there, a hero's born and trained to fight you – must have crossed the thought, right?"

"Yeah," they sipped, "-like Harvey Dent said, you either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

"Such a reference," he laughed, "-isn't that from?"

"Yeah, I know," they sipped, a comforting silence presided between breaks.

'Igna Haggard, a very peculiar man. What's his story, I wonder how he reached this point. '

'Lucifer Morningstar, my enemy? Or so I thought, I guess I needed someone to push my anger towards – he was the perfect mark. Looking at it from a neutral perspective, Lucifer Morningstar's actually an interesting person.'

"So tell me, how was the Empress in bed?"

"What the fu-" he coughed, "-excuse me?"

"Don't be shy," he winked, "-you must have some word of wisdom, oh great emperor Lucifer."

"Don't tease me," he shook his head, "-it was a means to an end. Besides, your lover is quite the heartthrob. You went out and got yourself a goddess who's supposed to be chaste, Syhton out of all the names. How did you even?"

"I don't know," they looked at each other, "-I must say, alcohol sure is a good way to save off resentment."

"Right," they drank, "-shall we drink until we pass?"

"Well," Igna summoned a vase, "-for gods to be drunk, the ale humans drink won't be enough, thus, I present the vase of Espa, the God of Entertainment and Liquor."

"HOW!"

"He's a resident of the Shadows. Shall we?"

"LETS!"

Chapter 1089 '-you're the Reaper, take us to the end.'

Drinks on drinks. Rather, jug after jug if it were to be within the heavenly realm. Igna and Lucifer drank till the stock bordered its limits. There was a breeze of fresh air, the air-conditioning system. The dance

floor remained silently save its light – part of him thought it was motion control, a theory with no merit to test. ‘Now that I sit here with him, just who is Lucifer anyway?’

“Did you say something?” the fallen angel turned, “-you have a strange look about you,” he uttered with a visible alcoholic stench, “-your face asking me to tell my secrets,” he lit a cigarette then sighed, “-I wonder man, what is wrong with me or you. We sit here as if nothing happened. Suppose things do end up this way when you are faced with the haunting reality of never dying. Immortality is not something to play around with, well, it’s depressing at best and saddening at worst.”

“Isn’t it the same thing?”

“Ah,” he rose his finger, “-you’re astute,” returned sarcastically, “-Igna, want to hear part of my story?”

“Your story?”

“Yeah,” he paused. The moment of silence brought a sense of euphoria. Nothing mattered, or so it seemed – class, name, rank, prestige, who cared? Igna certainly never paid attention, but here, faced with Lucifer, there was a palpable distance, an unseen border between the two. ‘We’re from different places, totally opposite realms. He and I, we’re like oil and water. Still, we share a drink like old comrades.’

“You get a sense for your enemy,” he added, “-it evolved from animosity to admiration. A strong rival,” he blinked and stared, “-you, Igna, are someone I admire very much. I hated Staxius, the previous incarnation, he was too powerful and aloof, blasé, reckless. He killed and won without so much showing expression. There was no satisfaction... then again, it doesn’t matter. I grew to like the tenacity, the hardship, and eventually, my loss. I’m relieved,” he smiled openly, “-freed, thanks to you.”

“Took the words out of my mouth,” Igna returned, “-you, Lucifer, as big of a pain as you were, are someone who I could expect to bring the worse out of me or my family. Always a thorn in my path, it did make things interesting albeit at the expense of my sanity.”

Lucifer slipped into another few seconds’ respace. He puffed and sipped, taking both his elbows over the bar counter and leaning his head back so that he stared at the ceiling. The latter changed with a snap of his fingers, the uninteresting ceiling turned a lighter color, specks of white flickered followed by ambers of differing hues. “-the stars,” he exhaled, “-it’s not that bad if I end everything here,” a solemn expression echoed onto Igna. Chills rushed up his back, ‘-this feeling,’ he gulped with a sensation of prinks within his nose and throat, ‘-Lucifer’s done. He’s made his peace, this is the same feeling I sensed with people who fulfilled their last wishes... he’s going to die, no question...’

.....

A casual, ‘-heh,’ escaped, “-I see it, Igna, you see it, don’t you, my end?”

“...”

“Well, if I go, I go. Igna, will you do me a favor?”

“Depends.”

“Will you take care of my children?”

“Children?”

“Yes, my children. The Aapith nation which I will also refer to as Hell, consider them the same, might interchange the terms but they’ll be the same here. It’s a foul place as you can imagine. The stereotype of humans being punished and burnt goes way back. Before Lucifer, I went by the Samael, an angel serving our father, the great god. Truth be told, I never met the great god, he was no god, I never saw him and only heard about his power and was shown the devastation he could impose if angered. I wanted to see him, I wanted to get answers to why I felt different. I never bothered with feelings, I thought about what could do best for the realm. In a way, I wanted to get as close to my father as I could, he was the reason I grew impatient. In the end, my needs betrayed my reasoning, I staged a revolt so that I could see him once and for all. He’d only speak in riddles, give signs, and remain silent. What kind of father could do such a thing, tell me... I felt betrayed. Before I realized it... my wings darkened and I found myself falling into the lower dominions. It angered me, oh it very much did. I grew fiercer and filled with thoughts of revenge. Father never cared and I wasn’t one to falter from my beliefs. So, it was told in stories, ‘upon the fall of Samael, the cruelty of Pride and its blindness to openness grasped the hearts of humankind. The prince of Darkness found the throne within the lowest part of hell, the deepest region wherein the demented screeched and the fallen pleaded,’ the hums were right, I embodied evil. I lost myself in my schemes, I set about ruining the heavenly realm, and I destroyed my father’s influence bit by bit. I became god in his stead, he was always present in the human mind, and my brothers and sisters died – I killed them. I buried my father’s legacy with my own hands. I changed the world and became the one and only god – Lucifer, and so, it was the birth of the Wracian Empire’s state religion. We ruled and I grew powerful – the power of belief, the prayers, the worship, my heart, and beliefs strengthened. I got my revenge,” he smiled, “-I reached my goal, I was happy, the brief moment of elation – seeing my home, the old heaven, crash and burn, to see the demons lay siege and overwhelm its gates. I loved every moment of it, my mother’s death, my father’s inability to act, and my brothers and sister’s helpless cries. Yes,” he squarely stared Igna, “-I’m evil, there’s no questioning that. With that, my seat as Pride, one of the Kings of Hell was assured. I had help from Satan, Belial, and Leviathan, fellow kings ruling domains of their own making. One day, it changed. All the power and influence were boring, I set about taking a trip in the mortal realm, you know, to see how the people were doing. I saw unspeakable things – offerings given to me with the intent of calling my favor, virgin blood, the sacrificed remains of young men... it, it repulsed me... a word with the archbishop sufficed, the practice dulled thought was practiced in secrecy by extremists. I returned like any other day – lowered to Hell and saw the hatred and pain of the sacrificed manifest in the newborn demons. Brothers killed mothers and daughters – the demons killed their own, and unfiltered violence and abuse was permeating throughout Hell. The kings knew no answer, and instead of resolving the trouble, chose to partake in the very violence that threatened the safety of demon-kin. Bear in mind, the realms held differing periods... I sought an answer but nothing came of it, nothing until I heard of an entity feared by the newer gods. The Cursed King Alfred. I staged his defeat, spreading rumors across the heavens and orchestrating his downfall. It was a must. I needed his realm and his power, the Aapith Nation, a country of new demon-kin, stronger and resolved. To save Hell, the place last inherited from my father, I needed to save them... so, it came to war, we captured the Aapith Nation and Alfred was never heard from since, it was a long battle, God knows how long it lasted. With the kings, we forged a contract. We merged the Aapith Nation into Hell and expanded the domain. A stable foundation – stronger demons, and strong leadership. The council of Demons was born. Ranking officialized and an agreement for Kings to not interfere with the Council or other kings. And so, that was how Hell in its

current state was formed. Naturally, this separation wasn't good – the ranking slowly brought the very human emotion of class and ego into hell... I couldn't see my people being tainted. I finalized my domain, choosing to break from Hell and its regions. You see, the scenery's not one to be admired. There, I created a single continent and established the Dedric Academy or Lucifer's Academy. A place for the young to train and learn the dangers of what the outside world held. Like flying from Hidros to Iqavea or Alpha, the same applies to Hell. The tormenting place for forsaken souls is reserved for a secluded party fixed below the plane. Well, the volcanic landscape and ever-gloomy heat is our identity... anyway, Igna, that is how the academy came to pass and why I had to destroy Alfred. He, like Staxius, was powerful on his lonesome. Alfred created a foundation for the future, I guess he knew he wasn't bound for the world... Staxius followed his footsteps, and I suppose so did you?"

"Who can say," he exhaled, "-Alfred and Staxius created a place for generations to live and grow. My purpose is to ruin said effort – and along those lines, I'm to ruin the battle you fought to win, the academy."

"You visited already," he smiled, "-Igna, before my time ends, I want a simple favor."

"Tell me."

"Take over the Academy as Director. It will give you a foothold in Hell, you can expand from there. Us Demon folks are understanding, we're more human than some may believe. Slaves to our desires and emotions, like humans. I know about the princes of hell, you're their father – Sathanas, Mammon, Asmodeus, Beelzebub, four out of the seven, well, three out of seven. Sathanas' wrath doesn't compare to the original, Satan, a king. How you fight is your decision, I won't interfere. Just make sure Lilith is safe. I had her endure hardships..."

"The Queen of Demon, Lilith, is she, not your mother?"

"No, not my actual mother, but I see her as a mother figure. Without her, demons would have died long ago. Well, Igna," he exhaled, "-this is the end of my story. Would you do the honors?"

Igna knew what he meant. Lucifer leaned restfully, a half-smoked cigarette and a half-filled glass. He took one last swig, placed it on the counter then looked death in his face, "-come, Igna, will you take on my burden and lead the demons to where you're headed?"

The request came off strangely, "-Adjudicator, you're headed to a place of no return. The people you've killed, their souls, they stay by you. The voices of the dead, you hear them, don't you? A secret kept from even the closest of your family. Lead us to that place – to the end. You're the Reaper, tis thy duty to lead the fallen. Take us with you, to the end."

"To lead the dead," he smiled, "-I never thought of it that way," he took out Tharis and raised his arm, "-Samael," Lucifer's expression changed, "-you have done your job. You've fought hard and created a world for future generations. You fought until the end," he cocked the pistol, "-and so, Samael, I wish you peace. Hold on to my hand when you part – I will lead you and the people you carry. The burden is mine."

A thankful smile broadened. Tears fell from the king's fair skin, "-thank you." *BANG.*

Tharis lowered, the starry ceiling faded, Igna hung his head back, and a tear went down his cheeks, ‘-why,’ he looked at Lucifer, ‘-why am I shedding a tear for him?’ he gripped Tharis’ handle, Lucifer’s words echoed, ‘-you’re the Reaper, take us to the end.’

Smack, “-Master, are you okay?”

“Kul,” he returned a woeful regard, “-I’m fine.”

She scanned the wounded, golden fragments turned to ash, and the body burnt, “-what happened?”

“Lucifer is dead,” he coldly answered.

‘Why’s master not happy... he killed his enemy...’ she rose her gaze, “-why are you sad?”

“Losing a rival is sometimes more painful than losing a family member,” he holstered Tharis, “-we’re done here,” he ambled forward, ‘-so long, Lucifer,’ the body vanished, an ethereal hand grabbed him, ‘-let’s go,’ he looked at the golden-orb, “-onward to the end.”

Chapter 1090 Venera’s Tome

“Esteemed Bringer of Death, Current Death Reaper, we welcome you to the Eipea Empire,” an orchestra roared amidst the golden sparkle of a richly decorated reception hall. Gods and goddesses, yellow gaze swallowed by darkness; Zeus and his entourage busied themselves.

“A welcome from the lord of Darkness?”

“Please do no fret,” added a very lavishly dressed Lixbin, “-we have no intentions of foul-play. Today’s the day of the reunion, the bound of Zeus and Artanos,” he held his glass high and drank wholly. Last events played. The memories of the final battle, not of life or death, but the battle for agreement. A fight between the current and last incarnation. Lixbin broke from Undrar and headed towards finely picked flowers. The palace regained much of its vigor. Zeus and Artanos pleased themselves, the duo hogged spotlights. The scene came from a fairytale, or so it seemed. A gala, whereupon the princess finds her prince charming.

‘Boring,’ Undrar sipped, her attention floated circle to circle, ‘-again, the same discrepancies of low-to-high-tier gods. The class system never ceases to amaze,’ she ambled to a tranquil corner, one hidden behind a pillar made to be a woman holding an upper terrace. ‘Poseidon?’

“Ladies and ladies, please pay no heed to my frame,” he smiled, “-I still bear the crest of the seas,” the palace flowers laughed at the jovial bald man. It didn’t take long for his chest to bulk, considering the battle was a few days past, ‘-he’s regained part of his power. Where’s she,’ the caution landed on Gophy, who was a little crossed. Her period breaks of staring into the distance – she’d roll her eyes at the mere sight of Zeus. Artanos admonished by a tightening of his brow and straightening of the lips. They spoke a few heated words – an observation, ‘-closed movements and rigid body language,’ Undrar gathered, “-the lovebirds are fighting,’ a certain part within felt satisfaction, ‘-such a lovely sight.’ Gophy darted her fierce gaze and left the main entourage. Wasn’t a big a loss as another goddess came and took her place beside Artanos. The latter rose his arms a little too late, Gophy left, he lowered slowly and faced Zeus with a brighter smile.

The goddess of Chaos slithered through the sea of gods; her lowered pressed lips randomly turned, there, 'blond hair?' she slowed, '-Undrar...'

"She noticed..." a sip followed, "-why is she coming here?"

"Undrar."

"Gophy."

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"Long time no see?"

"Why do you say it like it's a question."

"Pardon."

"We met recently, during the battle."

Gophy paused, "-I suppose we did," her shoulders dropped, the posture yarned backward, it yarned to be at Artanos' side.

"Aphrodite has made her move."

"Aphrodite?" she glanced over her shoulder, "-that little cur-"

"Don't bother," Undrar sighed, "-I doubt Artanos' the kind of man who'll forsake your relationship for mere carnal pleasure. Besides, didn't you choose him over Igna, there must be a reason why, yes?"

She breathed. "-Why bring up his name?"

"Gophy," Undrar sternly narrowed, "-we need to talk, you and I."

"I d-"

"A toast to the powerful Bringer of Death, the Death Reaper, Undrar!" came from center stage, an unwelcomed surprise as told by Undrar's sudden bite of the lips. "Please join us," Zeus rose his glass as did Artanos. The numerous deities pleasantly clapped.

"Join them," said Gophy, "-I'm not needed at the moment. Go, they have things to discuss."

"Still can't stand Zeus," she whispered, "-go outside, near the foundation, tis a good place for rest. There's little to no guard detail there."

Actions mean more than words, 'did she notice?' Gophy watched Undrar's strong frame walk to the stage, 'she looks absolutely ravishing. Placed against Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, Undrar holds her charm. Was I wrong when I thought I could compete?' she followed Undrar's direction, '-I left for love. I left because of companionship... years have gone,' she reflected under the starry night, '-I love Artanos, he's the one and only man for me. He understands me, he catches on to my quirks, and doesn't push hard... why, why then did I feel so relieved when I saw Igna. I corrupt with ire... when he showed up at the church... I was beyond myself. Why, why then, why did I feel a sense of joy when he came, why do I feel this way...' a gentle breeze tussled her curly hair, '-I don't doubt my affection for Artanos. I had to leave the church, I had to find myself after I felt that way... I found resolve and returned to do battle

with Artanos by my side...' her gaze lowered, '-why then, why did I feel joy when we spoke. Why was I secretly hoping for his win... I could have ended the battle, I could have killed his precious daughter... I couldn't. I took back my symbol and didn't follow the deeper connection. I'm pathetic, I hate feeling this way, I don't want to be left behind... it's like the Shadow Realm again, Artanos will leave, he will leave me... just like Igna, he will leave to make a better future. I'm not great, I don't deserve to be here. These people, them,' flashback of the stage where Zeus, Artanos, and Undrar hammered the feeling deep, '-they're running after a greater goal. In a way, they're running after Igna... they still run after him despite his lack of attention. He's ahead, no matter how much I sprint, I will never reach his side... Artanos too, we walked at the same pace, I had an equal, that I thought, but now... it's not, it's not the same. He's found an ally and they're moving forward... I'm left behind, again,' her lashes fluttered, '-I'm hopeless...'

"Lady Aphrodite and lord Artanos sure do get along."

"We do look good as one," added a jestful Aphrodite, "-I'll take my leave for now. Let's resume our talk later, yes, Artanos dear."

"Later."

The trio retreated to a separate room, "-shall we discuss the matter at hand?"

"Which is?"

"The founding of a new faction," firmed Zeus, "-we're fighting against the birth of the Three in One."

"Why this all of a sudden?"

"It seems," Artanos widened his gaze, "-Lucifer has been killed."

"This is news to me," added Undrar.

"Well, it's not confirmed yet," Zeus meandered, "-only evidence is the lack of resistance in Lucifer's ruled land within Draebala. It might be a ploy, we should proceed cautiously."

"I have confirmed the disappearance of Lucifer's constellation. When a god perishes, the associated star is snuffed. Which brings the matter to us," he locked onto Undrar, "-I hear you sought Zeus and I's help?"

"Incorrect," she crossed her arms, "-I requested your help, Artanos. You see," she looked at Zeus, "-the supreme god and I don't stand on good terms. We've never been one to talk casually to one another. Creation, Death, and Time were but objects for the Supreme one's taking. You thirst for power, Zeus, well, you once did. I sense maturity, you don't seem to care about the trinity, would you explain?"

"I don't need those powers anymore," he smiled, "-I have the means to do what I want when I want. Such is the power of knowledge, and together with Artanos, I have reached my goal. We may not be one as individuals, however, I believe we want the same thing. You want to protect what Staxius has created. You wear your feelings on your sleeve, lady Undrar. The awakening of the Adjudicator means but one thing," he slowed, "-annihilation."

"Reality is threatened," Artanos followed, "-there's yet hope. The Adjudicator can be stopped, he's not all-powerful, and there's a limit to the man's ability. Since the symbols have returned to their true form

– nothing, he will require a lot of mana to satiate the ever-growing hunger. Such the weakness of the three in one.”

“Any proof, or are those baseless assumptions?”

“There’s a reason why the three in one is separated upon the birth of a new reality. The energy and mental fortitude required to handle the power are far beyond what we may guess or foolishly explain. Hence the reason why it separates. I’m sure he’ll feel the drawbacks soon. The Adjudicator will want to sprint into the fold. I’ve made certain he’s slowed, and so, he self-destructs. This is where we need your abilities, Death Reaper. As one of equal fortitude and might, I want you to fight Igna.”

“I refuse.”

It came suddenly, “-but why not, aren’t you fighting to protect what your friend built?”

“I am,” she nodded, “-however, I will not lead a battle of attrition for the sake of leading said battle. Do as you please, send your men to death...”

“You misunderstand,” Zeus interjected, “-we don’t need you to fight,” Artanos rose his arm, but Zeus defiantly ignored the caution, to which, Artanos pressed his forehead, “-you and I are of the same thought, we prefer frankness. Sugarcoating is a waste of time and effort. I know my ally, Artanos, is a master at deception – we were wrong to try deceit on you, lady Undrar. We seek immunity for our soldiers.”

“Magnum Immortalitatem?”

“Precisely,” he firmed.

Undrar hardened her gaze, ‘-Magnum Immortalitatem, the ability for the cycle of immortality to be shorted and allow the dead the reawaken in their old vessel.’

“The vicious cycle of self-destruction. Artanos, you understand why souls must go through the hall of rebirth before their reincarnation or judgment, yes?”

“Yeah, I know,” he lowered his gaze, “-to fight him, we will need the forsaken scroll. Undrar, please, grant us the powers, I beg you.”

“You don’t have to beg,” she stood, “-Magnum Immortalitatem is sealed for a reason. The wearer doesn’t know of the harm done to his soul. Just like crack glass can never be the same, so goes the soul of the dead. I can grant your wish. It will be a sword that’ll slowly drain the wearer’s life. When a certain limit is reached, I tell you, there won’t be redone. My job is to guide the fallen, and those who fight bravely will be led the Valhalla, and those who curse their death perish and fade.”

“We understand,” Artanos nodded, “-and we accept the repercussion that comes with the power.”

“In the end, you needed my power, not me?” she smiled, “-I suppose tis how to world works.”

Under Oath of Death, unseal the Archaic Records and make tangible the scroll of Venera, the last to descend from the throne of Rebirth into the depths of the never-ending stairway to Detriment. Come forth, Magnum Immortalitatem, a heavy tome dropped onto the table, the cover held a skull made of black iron, its socket burnt a white-putrid flame, “-here’s the tome. ‘-I beckon thee, Venera, for I, then

your name, forsake rebirth,' have the wearer speak those words whilst touching the tome. You must never, under any circumstance, open it. The chains are made to kill anyone who tries to force open the seal. It will return if there are signs of malpractice. Do I make myself clear?"

"Venera," Artanos pressed his hands, "-one of the Death Reapers who ventured deep and found much of how Death's power is portrayed as untouchable. She walked the steps to the preverbal hell of the Reapers, forsaking her future to find a greater understanding. She's my idol," he kindly looked at Undrar, "-the Tome of Venera is her diary. Filled with mystic writings and curses she discovered on her journey down. Her legacy would have been forgotten if not for the rediscovery of the tome."

"Yeah, if not for that book, she'd have been forgotten," Undrar sighed, "-with this, I've fulfilled my duty. Zeus, and Artanos, I wish you both success in battle. The war will decide the fate of reality. It pains me to say this... I'm on your side. I won't stand and watch reality fade."

"Thank you," Zeus lowered his head as did Artanos, "-Undrar, we wish for you to join our faction as a general."

"Fine," she smiled, "-on conditions that I do things my way."

"Understood."