

Death Magic 721

Chapter 721: True Demonlord [52]

'Weird, I thought I sensed a familiar aura.'

"Master," whispered Mammon, "-a large magical circle has been activated, we're the target."

"Also, the thing about the familia, Vermillion, Saku, and Yonak have allied under the same banner. Look yonder," Asmo pointed with a flick of the brow.

"Greetings, Igna Haggard," said a lady bearing the well-trained physique of a warrior and the face of an angel. Latter being an accurate description of which was, fair unblemished skin, light blond hair, blue eyes, and veiled by a white and blue outfit, "-you might not know who I am," she inched closer, "-but I know who you are."

"Might I have the honor of knowing thy name?"

"Haruna Conla, a beautiful maiden hailing from the noble family of Conla, close acquaintance to the imperial family of Iqavea, and the niece to Amsey, my uncle is a very nice person, I've never thought ill nor ever thought this pitiful continent to play him such trouble. Since we're both in the same boat, I'll give a word of advice; the three families aren't ruled by the godfather, no, rather, I hold the reins, for now, there's no telling what could happen."

"The Magical circle," he interjected, "-you're doing?"

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"No, I'm a harbinger of the shadows. Let's continue the conversation later," she smiled and left.

'Mannerism, composure, a strong personality, she's cut from the same cloth. One who's grown up with power, and knows how to make the world go her way, she's going to be trouble. Holding the leash to the mob,' before more questions formulated, éclair sent files on her, '-Duke in the Iqevian hierarchy, her stories like mine, in a weird way. An ancestor rose from peasant to lord, earn fame in the battle of mages, and inducted their blood to be pure and noble. She went off from the family, fought in proxy wars, earned a reputation, returned home, and became a successful businesswoman; leader of a Mercenary band; Enox.'

"Master," a curt elbow returned consciousness to reality, "-guests..."

"I apologize for spacing out," he smiled, "-Lady Jula, Odgar Codd, glad you could make it."

"Obviously we had to come," said she shining in her formal wear, "-the invitation came from one of my trusted comrades. Congratulations and may God bestow great fortune."

"Likewise," added Codd, "-let's go," said he to Jula, "-the line of guests has grown big, we shouldn't waste time."

'Did the representative of the mobsters arrive or leave?'

"Master," said a whisper, "-guards to the east have detected strange activities. Shall I send a team to investigate?"

"Yes," he firmed whilst greeting guests, "-capture any acting suspiciously. Have someone investigate the magical circle; my gut's screaming scheme. Find out who is responsible."

"Understood," nodded Kul, "-I'll get right on it."

'We've covered the land, there's no easy way to sneak in. Even if they were disguised as guests; my detection spell should have activated. Unless we're against an entity with greater dominion, there's nothing to worry about.'

The Imperial family, hidden underneath a concealment spell, parked to the side and ambled up, "-Igna," said Eira brazenly, "-I missed you," an exchange of kisses ended in a soft embrace.

"I missed you too," he nodded, "-welcome to my new endeavor."

"The place's rather impressive," added the Emperor.

"I appreciate the thought, emperor."

"Drop the title, similar to Eira, I'm also family, please use brother or a familiar nickname, formality is good and all, still, family mustn't be foreign."

"Very well," he nodded, "-brother-in-law?"

"Sounds formal still, there are no arguments I suppose," and exhale displayed a glint of joy. The couple moved on inside, "-Good to see my son smile," said lady Kirr Sultria.

"Pardon me, my lady?"

"No worry, son. I suppose you wouldn't know anything about Loftha's sudden change in persona, would you?"

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"I apologize, I don't understand the question?"

"Worry not," her suspicious gaze turned grin, "-the rambling of an older woman."

"I beg to differ, my lady, you look and have the charm of a younger woman, I ought to tip my head towards thee who art most becoming of the feminine gender."

"Little silver tongue," she chuckled, "-the complements the most outrageous I've heard in a while, a little hint of sarcasm thrown in the mix, I like it, well done."

"Worked the charm on our mother?" said Amber.

"Sister Amber, I never thought you'd come."

"Well, here I am," her arms crossed, "-the amount of people is very telling of thy status. I've spotted a few nobles and politicians as well. A gathering of such proportion is going to be either a huge success or a disaster."

"Hey, Igna," hailed the brothers, "-don't take big sister's word to heart, she's worried about you and the event. Kind of reflects onto us, the abundance of luxury is sure to speak of thy prestige."

“Xyra, Hyde, enjoy yourselves.”

“Will do.”

“Master, I’ve sent a replacement to greet the other guests. Those of influence have already arrived and are inside, leave the pleasantries, there’s a particular matter I wish to discuss.”

‘What’s happened now?’ the task was left to Asmodeus and Mammon, ‘-the magical circle, what’s become of it?’

“Welcome back,” said the butler panted inside a dark surveillance room, “-we’re in big trouble,” a camera panned onto a large circle, “-it wasn’t noticeable before, the magical circle is for Arga, the spell of total destruction.”

“Why isn’t it activated,” the crystal white pupils shone, “-I understand, the spell requires a catalyst, the trigger’s either a living being or an object. I doubt tis the latter; someone must have used it when they arrived. Speaking of guests, have the Vermillion, Saku, or Yonak made any appearances?”

“Yes,” replied éclair, “-you greeted them passionately,” footage of a few minutes’ prior played, “-see, representatives of the families. Afterward came the lady, what’s the matter, master?”

“A talented spellcaster’s infiltrated the party and passed through my barriers. This is a great plot for a thrilling story, here,” dropped into the seat, “-the barrier’s set to activate, what’s the catalyst? Most likely the death of someone. However, the way it’s constructed, said spell is made to activate at 19:00 sharp, they used concealment to rewrite part of the circle, hiding the true intent in plain sight.”

“How can you be so brazen?”

“Shut up and listen. I’m explaining the ploy at hand. If the caster isn’t found, someone will be assassinated, and the whole building will explode – without anyone left to blame, the Empire falls into total anarchy, the imperial family is ruined and significant people eradicated. The culprit is among the guests.”

“We’re doomed if we can’t find the caster...”

“Why worry when I’m here. The spell has already been altered to set off fireworks instead of destroying the building. The user doesn’t know of the development, using magic to fight me is a bad idea; very bad. Don’t let your guard down, if they could alter my senses to sneak inside, there’s no telling what could befall. Increase the guard detail, have the mage squad ready to move. I’ll tend to our guests,” the steps distantly reverberated around the surveillance room, “-master, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Today was meant to be a private gathering of friends thee made. Turns out, the party has become a hassle as opposed to a place of enjoyment, I’ve failed. My master should be enjoying his last day in Alpha in wine, not playing detective...”

“Whatever,” he winked, “-this is perfect, couldn’t have asked for a better game. The stakes are high – the fun’s only begun, finding the culprit is going to be fun.”

During the conversation, Lady Shino Gaso of the Gaso group arrived in the company of Lord Dorino and Rowley Aldis Patek. In addition, were famous movie stars, noble lords, and workers for Stiol.

The clock struck 18:00, many gathered on the ground floor, drinks and snacks went to and fro, the guests took to gambling instantly. "Might I have your attention," thundered from where the orchestra played, the lovely figures in suit and dresses turn with a drink in hand, "-my lord wishes to say a few words," said Midne bearing a lovely braided hair, an outfit to make one's heart shudder. He walked and grabbed the microphone, "-good evening, everyone, my name's Igna Haggard, Viscount of Glenda, and son of the Duchess of Rotherham. Tonight's party is to celebrate the reopening of Von. Aside from the drinks and games, an auction will be hosted later into the night. Jean Frank, Calious Bagard, and Julia Dahli have sent their pieces to be auctioned," mention of the names held the crowd in excitement, "-honestly speaking, tonight was supposed to be a small gathering," the remark returned favorable chuckles, "-please enjoy my humble hospitality, the restaurant on the second floor will be working the whole night. Enough talk, please enjoy yourselves," applaude soon drowned into the sound of music.

"Good speech," said Midne.

"Well thank you," down to the floor, "-here come's the horde of opportunists."

"Excuse me, what you say?" without a word, many figures swarmed the man for conversation.

"Done," sweat on the brow, blood on the hands, "-I've handled my quota," went across the channel.

"Good job, Kul. Asmodeus, Mammon, what about your end?"

"Weaklings," returned they, "-did they really thing such weak weapons would work against us, demons?"

"Don't let up," gritted éclair, "-the barrier's picked up an object to the north, can you reach it, Kul?"

"NO!"

Hand to the ceiling, "-lord Igna, why art thou holding up thy arm?" *Death Element: Qilver,* a black pentagram materialized from which the bodiless screech of a banshee darted to destroy the projectile.

"-my apologies," he said, "-my arm's grown rather numb. Needed to stretch a little."

'I used my element, why's no one reacting. Where are you, spellcaster, I've laid the bait, you going to take it or not?'

Poof, "-cough, cough, cough,"

"KUL, YOU OK?"

"Don't yell," nose into her elbow shielded the smoke, "-the projectile's been destroyed."

"How?" fired Mammon.

"Master," she exhaled, "-he used magic to counter the spell without even looking. I tell you, the more time we spend, the stronger he gets, I can't even."

“Should be enough for the time being. Return and change, attend the party for a while, I’ll take control of the guard units.”

“Understood,” the trio gathered on the roof.

“Bloody,” she complained, “-my dress’s ruined, I’m sad.”

“You don’t look it,” added Asmodeus.

“She’s correct, the blood and sweat isn’t a nice feeling when tis flung onto an expensive suit.”

“We had to; the mercenaries were blatantly trying to storm the area. We showed ’em who’s boss.”

Forty-five minutes blinked, the various tables were filled with players – a steady stream of liquor had many of the stars and nobles plastered. “Someone’s having a rough night.”

“Hondo?” sat on the bar, “-what are you doing here?”

“Came on Vermillion’s orders, the new alliance has me by the balls.”

“Coming from an angel, the words don’t match the persona.”

“Oh shut it,” he downed a drink, “-that is that, and this is this, I’m a hitman, don’t forget. Anyway, nice party,” he shuffled closer, “-the guard detail’s very strong, the presence is overwhelming. The night is young, keep an eye out, and don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten the promise. Take care,” he stood and left.

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‘What a weirdo,’ spun to the game area, ‘-Mammon and Asmodeus are playing them like kids,’ he sipped, ‘-all the money, wasted... we might make back what was spent.’

“Seems the opportunists have left.”

“Runo,” a gesture to the barkeeper, “-have a seat, walking around in those heels must be tiring.”

“Sore feet are part of the job,” she sat, “-not even an hour has passed and everyone’s dropped their guard. So many high-ranking figures; the perfect time to make connections,” back to the counter, “-thank you,” said she to the barkeeper.

“What of the superstar, Romeo?”

“The lecherous creep,” her shoulder rose in disgust, “-with the other A-list celebrities, they’ve hogged the private lounge. Drugs and women, the damned police chief is here, and they don’t even care.”

“Let them,” he grinned, “-Runo, if thy agency grows hard to bear, give me a call, my cousin’s in charge of Apexi, we might not be as famous – the priority is always, idols first, business second.”

“Thank you for the offer,” returned a genuine smile, “-I’ll consider it, goodbye,” she leaned in, gave a quick peck on the cheeks, then scurried into the crowd.

‘Strange lass,’ a cigar lit.

Chapter 722: True Demonlord [53]

'Must have dozed off,' a thin line of smoke flurried from a lit cigar, '-where am I?' a scan around held tell-tell signs of the prior surveillance room. Time on the clock showed 18:55, '-did they call me up here for some reason?' the cigar flicked into a table side bin, '-the auction is about to start.' The climb downstairs was very tranquil, the cacophony of enjoyment didn't climb to the upper floors. Said peacefulness would soon be disrupted, a wall of confused figures waited at the mouth of the stairway. Hurry filled the steps, '-did something happen?' time showed 18:58, each tick of the second hand had the heart in fear, '-this feeling of doom...' the outskirts of the crowd faced upwards and shuffled along, ignoring his presence, '-are the drinks too potent?'

Stood on the firm ground floor, the prior dissipation emptied the open area. '-What was the staring about?' he moved closer to the bar, whereby drinks were made at ease, '-something doesn't feel right,' bafflement truly had the mind at wit's end, *tick, tick, tick, tick.*

"AHHHHH,"

'A scream?' the body reflectively twitched towards the sound; a harrowing heavy aura of darkness slithered along the carpeted stair. The first floor's mouth else presided by strong guards, held greater darkness – one enough to suffocate and swipe the energy from under his feet. 19:00, curtains rose, the crucial art piece of tonight laid smothered in blood, the fallen corpse of the emperor laid on the stage, disemboweled, ears cut off, eyes pulled from the socket, and the word Despair written on the painting. 'See with thy mind and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn't pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we're present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends.'

Gasp, "-welcome to the world of the living."

"Sorry?" palms to the bright lights, '-was I dreaming?'

"You fell asleep," said the silhouette cloaked black from the overhead lamps.

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"I apologize for borrowing thy lap," sat up straight, "-lady Haruna," he smiled and so did she. Her light brown hair tied in a beautifully adorned bun, a hairpin bejeweled by a dark-brown gem matched her eye color, "-the pleasure was mine," she softly pushed a stray lock behind her ear, "-the night's still young, is the viscount perhaps a little drowsy from the drinks?"

"I know not," he chuckled, "-pretell, how did I end up here?"

"My, you don't remember?" her fingers reached for snacks, "-we agreed to talk, and here we are. When we arrived, his lordship fell onto the couch, I thought to call on the assistant – alas, the sight of thy innocently resting face sort of made me want to care and wait. A pretty face is a very nice thing nowadays, consciously or not, people are always envious, said emotion brings either the good or bad. Come, take a seat, we have much to discuss."

"I'm sorry," he stood, "-I have a few things to attend," he bowed, "-lady Haruna, may we continue this later in the night?"

"Very well," she smiled softly, Igna made for the door, "-go on, time is ticking," muffled under her breath.

'Time is ticking,' he caught her words, the door slide shut; current area, private lounges on an elevated level still in remained in the domain of the ground floor, when they spoke of the height, exaggeration didn't match the sheer tallness, a stairway nonchalantly wrapped around the northeast corner to seamlessly split into two paths, one for the game area and the other to the washroom. Considering the area here is more for rest and parle, the overhanging floor added a speck of flare.

'Haruna's the prime suspect?' arms crossed and finger to his chin, '-can't draw a conclusion. Time's 18:30, the dream must have been a dream. I can't ignore the fact about dreams and premonition if one thing has been constant throughout the previous life and this, death in the world of rest doesn't inspire confidence.' The body nonchalantly ambled to the northern side of the floor, here, the height difference was more of a passing fancy, '-everyone's having fun.'

"Igna?"

"Lady Amber," he turned bemused at her presence.

"Did I startle you so much" handkerchief in hand, "-the complexion's turned grimmer than before, why has the vampire turned so ghastly pale."

"Do I look so pale?" he backed to the edge balustrade(of which was a meter above the game area and glued to the northern side) and faced the washroom, "-lack of blood."

"Lack of blood, sure, sure," she inched closer, "-nothing's amiss, is there?"

"Not really," the visage recomposed, "-I'm fine, honestly, just had a bad dream. Do you know where the emperor's gone?"

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"Last I saw he was enjoying poker in the company of some new chaps," her fierce gaze turned to the side and immediately locked, "-there, closest to the center under the chandelier."

"Sharp sight to discern his imperial majesty through the masses."

"Nothing which need be praised," her lips kept in an unmeaning frown, "-us Sultrians are easy to pick out from the crowd," Loftha stepped out, they exchanged glances, nothing came of it, Amber took notice and left in company of her sister.

'She's crossed,' he pulled back the sleeves, '-18:40. I'm certain the magical spell is altered to not cause harm. Just in case,' he joined the table, "-master," said Asmodeus, "-have thee come to play?"

"My, lord Igna, never expected thee to join us," said the emperor.

"By the expression on the gentlemen's faces, Asmodeus and Mammon have been bullying the table," sat next to the emperor, "-the chip stack sure speaks for their skill."

“Those three are devils,” complained a noble in good faith, “-they know how to play.’

“My lord,” said Mammon, “-the emperor has tremendous skill.”

“Oh please,” he smiled with flushed cheeks, “-I’m not that great a player.”

“We shall see,” said Igna. An intense game of poker resumed, round after round, the trio kept on dominating the table, ‘-Asmodeus is the prince of gambling,’ the heart tensed in anticipation, the last card was about to flop, ‘-time’s nearing 19:58, I went all in.’

“Ace of Spade,” said the dealer.

“I WON!” cried the emperor, “-three of a kind,” he laughed.

“Good game,” he stood, ‘-he’s very good.’

“Lord Igna, tis was a game well played, might we have a drink?”

“Sure,” thus they moved to the bar, Asmodeus and Mammon kept on their antics; money drew into the pot, unlike anything he’d seen before. A guest list of such repute held significance betting potential, ‘-they’re playing ten thousand to a hundred thousand without flinching.’

“Tonight’s been absolutely amazing.”

“I’m glad the enjoyments to your liking.”

“I’m serious,” downing a drink, “-tis the first time in Alphian history I dare say, nobles, politicians, and even members of the underworld have joined under the same roof to play. I heard from my sources about the Gaso Group and Lord Dorino’s scheme against the Haggard dynasty, they swept from under and reclaimed the company. Even Aldis Patek’s in attendance, the five conglomerate has us, the imperial family in contempt. I despise them, nothing would make me happier than to see their downfall.”

“Politicians are in the conglomerate’s pockets whilst the imperial family has backing from the noble families, then again, the latter doesn’t seem much of an advantage to thee. The earlier mess about involving the army’s worrying too.”

“I know, which is why the event today has me perplexed. Everyone’s getting along, their thoughts might not reflect the actions – I believe the fake peace is the correct path to a stable future.”

AHHHHHH, the clock struck 19:00, “MURDER, THERE’S BEEN A MURDER!”

‘Murder?’ the pleasant game area froze, the words murder turned the peace into outright anarchy, “-DAMNED POLITICIANS!”

“IT’S THE DAMNED NOBLE’S FAULT, YOU’RE RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH A TRAGEDY!”

‘They haven’t seen the body and this...’ *crack,* glass broke, hands brushed against his back, ‘-what’s the matter?’

“I-I-I-IGNA, p-prot-tec-”

“Markus, stay with me, I’ll heal...”

"THE EMPEROR'S BEEN ASSASSINATED!" thundered across, "-THE VISCOUNT'S AN ACCOMPLICE!"

'Forget them, he was shot from the elevated floor,' a hooded figure dipped into one of the chambers, '-who else's been murdered,' *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* Athena's painting laid covered in blood, the same pattern, a different victim, Sophie Mirabelle. 'What's happening?' letters wrote themselves in blood, D E S P A I R.

'See with thy mind and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn't pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we're present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends.'

Gasp, "-welcome to the world of the living," said the same voice. Bright lights shone overhead, palms to the lights, "-was I out for long?"

"You fell asleep the moment we walked in. The grim expression sure has a lot to say," she reached for a wine-glass, "-is the night's trouble getting harder to bear?"

"I'm sorry," he stood, "-lady Haruna, may we resume the conversation later."

"Sure," she reached for the snack, "-you know where to find me," the door slid shut.

'-What's happening...' the lavatory arrived in due haste, '-I swear,' he gulped, sweat poured from the forehead, '-what sorcery is at play here...' the mirror stared back, the visage at display wasn't of pain nor hate, rather, a playful smirk, the excitement of being backed into a corner, '-compose thyself,' water streamed profusely, '-there's a reason to everything, I need to find the cause. Who uses despair as a sign of battle, the emperor dies and the painting is smothered in blood, what's the trigger and what's the solution.' The watch showed 18:35. '-The game area seems unbothered, who would have thought the facade of acceptance to be so grand,' hands on the balustrade, '-there,' the two figures exited the washroom, "-master, is something the matter?" inquired Kul.

"You seem perplexed," added Sophie, "-must be tenseness from the auction, tell me, lord Igna, might I trouble thee?"

"Sure, let's go," returned a softer toned voice, "-ought to set up the auction, right?"

'It's been reset, Markus isn't at the poker table, he's playing blackjack instead. Asmodeus and Mammon are at the bar, Amber's playing with the slot machines and Loftha doesn't seem to be here.'

"Master, you seem out of it," commented Kul, "-perhaps I could be of service?"

"Worry not, tis but the worries of a growing old man."

"How rude," interjected Sophie, "-growing old for a young adult isn't much to be worried about, look at me, I'm nearing my forties. There was once a time where my beauty was admired by commoners and nobles alike."

"For one who says she's growing old, the figure's well-maintained, thee look in thy early thirties if I may add boldly."

“Ever the charmer. Igna, you remind of your uncle, it feels familiar, can’t explain it very well.”

“What about my uncle?”

“Oh, nothing, just the passing thought of an aging woman,” she winked.

“I understand.”

The watch showed 18:45, backstage rattled by the sound of various ornaments being moved onto pedestals, the centerpiece – one from the personal collection, La Mort, painted by Athena, the depicted scene is an oxymoron to the title, which meant death, here, it showed the scene of Jerian’s birth – the first hero born from the union of a god and a mortal, ‘-why did she make two of these?’ he wondered, ‘-the second hypothesis.’

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‘Jerian, a demi-god made devil by circumstance. Old folk tales speak of he who brought the elements to the mortal plane during a place where fire didn’t burn, wind didn’t blow, and water didn’t flow. The truth of the story is ill-conceived. And in truth, there’s much to be said, the painting reflects the first moments a man is born, the first experience being enthralled in a world of pure chaos.’

“Alright everyone,” hailed from the backstage, “-we’re moving the paintings onto the stage,” time read 18:58. Igna waited amongst the empty seats, few of the guests climbed to the following event, ‘-if what I’ve hypothesized happen, the redo won’t toggle. Time’s being manipulated without the need for Kronos’s sickle, tis the first I’ve heard of it. What now, what then, is there a catch. If someone makes a move for the painting, blood-arts should suffice.’

AHHHHH, thundered from downstairs, those midways up, hurried downstairs, *ASSASSINATION!*

‘Damn,’ he threw a glance backward, the tongue clicked, ‘-focus on the painting,’ turned to the stage, a veil of black flurried by his side and onto the stage. It knocked Sophie onto her knees and held her by the long ponytail, *-DESPAIR* the neck slit; blood washed the tableau – the aura of dread permeated.

Ancient Magic: Teleportation, ‘-he’s been shot,’ down at the bar, ‘-this confirms it.’

‘See with thy mind and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn’t pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we’re present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends.’

Gasp, “-welcome to the world of the living,” said lady Haruna peering over the unconscious figure.

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“Thank you,” he sat upright, “-lady Haruna, I must say, up close, you look even prettier.”

“Cut the flattery,” she giggled and made for the snacks, “-why do you look pale?”

“No reason, lack of blood,” he inched closer, “-my lady, might I ask a favor,” warm breaths blew on the side of her neck.

“What kind of favor?” she gulped, the eyelids fluttered impatiently, her legs tightened in anticipation.

“The kind which involves me sucking.”

“Sucking?” her breathing deepened, “-sucking on what?”

“Sucking thy blood.”

“H-Huh?” midway through looking back, *Bite,* a moan escaped, her fist clenched, the cheeks reddened, “-s-s-stop.”

‘In every instance, the painting is smothered in blood and the emperor is killed. When was the magic of such potency utilized, the trigger is present, I need to find the culprit before 19:00, leaves 30 minutes. Someone will die no matter what I do, the painting will always have blood, there’s the cloaked figure and gunman who fired at the bar.’

“I-Igna?”

“My,” blood down the lips, “-lady Haruna, the flavor in thy blood is indescribable. I very much enjoyed the gift,” from the neck, a quick peck on her cheeks led to a nonchalant grin, “-I’ll get going,” he bowed, “-may we continue this later on tonight, perhaps in a more intimate way?” a coy wink had her flustered beyond belief.

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“STOP IT,” a pillow flew at the shutting door.

‘Everything’s reset,’ moved to the washroom, ‘-my magic’s being affected. I can barely use teleportation; there’s one option and tis realm expansion. Run back the events, we learned of an erected magical circle; afterward, I changed the nature of the spell from deadly to a show of fireworks. What if the spell activated the moment I altered it – everyone resets. The logical part of me says to bring the emperor upstairs and stop the tableau from being smothered.’

Click, “-Igna?”

“Yes?” he turned, “-my, lady Shiro Pierre Gaso, the outfit truly befits the draconian leader of the Gaso Group.”

“What are you implying?” an adorned hand-fan covered her mouth, “-speak thy mind, boy.”

“I find it interesting two leaders of the five greats decided to visit this lowly casino. I acknowledge the invitation was granted by word of mouth; the Gaso Group and the Haggards don’t have a stable relationship. The traitorous Dorino’s at it again,” he shrugged to the right, “-leering at the younger demographic, the man needs to be put behind bars.”

“Someone’s very vocal about his feelings.”

“Unlike those who keep their cards to their chest, I rather show mine and play. It’s more enjoyable. There’s no point in idle chitchat my lady, mind coming clean to why thou art here?”

“To enjoy the opening of a new casino, what else could there possibly be.”

“Lady Gaso,” he exhaled, “-I do appreciate Leina to send their stars, the night’s grown nicer as a result. Forgive my prior rude tone, I was in a bind, you know, humans aren’t perfect, mistakes are bound to happen.”

“All is forgiven, the star of tonight must have his own worry. I’ll say this, the five greats are now the four greats, Amsey’s out of the picture – before long, Patek and Gaso will hold the dominion over the town. We yearned for the opportunity to move in on Lumian O’da’s holdings and assets. Time is nigh, strike while the iron’s hot. Doubt the viscount of Glenda to have sufficient assets to retain Lum’s investments. Purchasing the late count’s affairs had a toll, no matter; you have my word, the conglomerates have no interest in ruining the night. Word of advice, the godfathers are vexed; the casino was built from their bloodied money.”

“I appreciate the advice, lady Gaso.”

“You’re welcome, Viscount. Don’t disappoint me, I have high hopes.”

‘Peculiar,’ he watched as she climbed down, ‘a lot of information granted seamlessly. Can I trust her, tis the question, if the greats aren’t involved – the links point to a single place,’ *AHHHHHH,* ‘-right, I spent the whole time talking to her.’

“Master, there’s been a murder upstairs,” reported Asmodeus, “-Mammon managed to apprehend the killer.”

‘A great development,’ they dashed up to see Romeo drowning in his blood, the painting was untouched by the blood, emperor Markus, first in the climbing crowd, arrived in heavy pants, “-What’s the matter?” he breathed heavily.

“Someone’s been murdered,” reported Igna, “-where’s the culprit?”

“There.” A cloaked figure restrained by a magical barrier, ‘-the same presence I felt,’ then and there, a link clicked, “-let her go.”

“But master...” the order had the demons in shock, “-you can’t be serious...”

“Yes, I am,” he smirked, ‘-I’ve cracked the mystery.’

“No, we won’t accept!” screamed Kul, “-it killed a person in cold blood, not to mention, during thy party. A tortuous death awaits the damned culprit, they who dared harm my master’s repute will suffer,” orbs of dark intensity summoned.

Death-Element: Mana Cancellation, the cage broke, it zoomed, stabbed the emperor and smothered painting with blood, the latter reacted in a high pitch, Despair spelled across. ‘See with thy mind and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn’t pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we’re present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends.’

Gasp, “-welcome to the world of the living,” said lady Haruna running her fingers through his hair.

“Lady Haruna,” he looked upward, “-you look splendid up close,” he caressed her fiery hot cheeks, her pupils widened.

“What a-are y-you saying?” her smile couldn’t be faked.

“Action reveal more than words,” he pushed her onto the couch and presided on all-four, “-I’m sure everyone’s said this before, you look absolutely amazing,” the fingers ran along her neck and towards her chest, “-lady Haruna,” moved to the side of her neck, “-I promised we’d get intimate,” the teeth sharpened.

“D-don’t!” the sharp canine had her roll away, “-d-don’t, I c-c-can’t t-take it, if you do it again, I might lose my control,” her legs tightened whilst her face had lust written in bold red.

“Whatever do you mean?” he smiled, “-lady Haruna, far as I remember, I only sucked the blood from the prior loop, not this one,” *Blood-Arts: Extria,* her body flung and locked her on the couch, “-this game has gone on for far too long,” leaned to the couch’s side, *Mana Control: Ice Element Variant: Waterfall,* her face doused in ice-cold water, she practically begged for air, “-did I cool you down?”

“What’s the meaning of this,” she fought to no avail, “-Igna, what’s the meaning of games?”

“Lady Haruna,” the watch showed 18:49, “-a large scale realm has expanded over the casino. In it, conditions were made for the emperor to be killed and chaos to ensue. The deaths of those in attendance. There are two factors involving the realm, first, the magical barrier which said at 19:00, an explosion destroys the casino, and the second, the trigger for the spell whomst turned out to be a pawn’s pawn. You have orchestrated the assassination of the emperor – however, another party wanted the painting of Jerian to be smothered in blood. See, it’s very unique, two unknown parties got in each other’s way and unknowingly transferred the burden of pillar onto you. The spell will always lead to someone’s death and the painting’s bloody bath. I also had a subconscious intervention; I altered the large-scale spell to create fireworks as opposed to an explosion, the commands must have transposed and merged into a loop the moment the realm expanded. Should I take a break?” the arms crossed.

“How about letting me go,” she pouted, “-I don’t know why, but I remember everything, the many deaths and the chaos which follows. I promise not to cause harm, can I please be freed, I need to scratch my nose.”

“Sure,” *snap,* “-here’s the deal, everyone influenced our current predicament. The one who cast the realm is Loftha Sultria, the signs were there, she changed the moment I showed her my memory, her mind became easy to control, and I’m sure someone of an otherworldly origin has the reins on her actions,” he moved to a corner, “-the gunman,” a sack flew onto the table, “-you killed the emperor time and time again. In other words, to dispel the realm, certain conditions must be met.”

“Why should I care, my orders are to kill the emperor, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Sure there’s more to the orders, I might not look it, I do love torturing the tightlipped. Look at the time,” he sat, “-how about a bet.”

“What kind?”

“Without our intervention, the painting will be smothered in blood and the emperor will die.”

“No, not possible, if I don’t kill him, there’s no point.”

“Thus, our bet, if I’m right, you’ll do as I say, and if tis wrong, I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Overly confident, aren’t you?”

“A man has to trust his gut.”

“Okay, a bet, deal, should we shake on it?”

“As you pleased,” the clock struck 19:00, ‘See with thy mind, and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn’t pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we’re present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends.’

Gasp.

Chapter 724: True Demonlord [55]

“Look at the watch,” he rose from her lap, “-we’ve been reset. Time’s 18:30.”

“Explain the term pillar?”

“I suppose I didn’t. Here’s the thing, for the restart to implement, the barrier has to memorize a checkpoint – thy location, mindset, and physical state. The lounge is the only entity who hasn’t been affected. Meanwhile, the whole of the casino area is of effect; people are swapped around, their mindset remained unchanged from their arrival. There I come to my conclusion; we are the only ones unaffected, the rest will keep on restarting after certain criteria have been met.”

“The emperor dies and the painting is smothered in blood, right?”

“Certainly,” the door slid, “-I’m going to face Loftha, stay here. Who is to say what reaction would befall if the pillar decided to wander around. There’s enough food and beverage to last half an hour.”

“Take care,” she waved, “-I’ll sit idly and pout,” her shoulder rose, the arms locked, “-no more harassment, please.”

“Sure.” *Click,* ‘-now then,’ down the stairs, ‘-the condition isn’t two, but one. The painting is smothered, the emperor doesn’t have to die. She was easily fooled under the vampire allure. Humans are easy targets,’ hands in the pockets, ‘-I’ll have to examine the circle from an outside perspective. Once a potent realm has been expanded, a lesser domain can’t deploy. Unless I use Rantiam, no, don’t even think about it. The Shadow Realm has to remain a secret, never again – only use Mantia, nothing more and nothing less. Affecting reality at this point will be cacophonous. Magic’s out the question,’ the fist clenched, ‘-can’t exactly summon either. What a predicament,’ he looked about, ‘-there’s the melancholic princess,’ sights firmed onto Loftha who wandered about the entrance. Strangely enough, the back and forth didn’t once make it to the outside, there seemed to be a dense air that

subconsciously strayed unwanted attention. Under the cover of tables filled with cheers and others of uninterrupted woe, Igna agilely made progress. 'She looks perplexed, I'd guess confusion over the constant retrial, can't be true – dismissing the possibility would be foolish.' Over the carpeted inside the marble-tiled hallway, "-Fia."

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She turned with a certain reluctance, "-yes?"

"Good," he breathed a scattered laugh, "-I've been looking everywhere. Sorry about what happened earlier, I shouldn't have left so quickly," he grasped her palms, "-let's start again, I'm ready to take responsibility. You said you'd do anything to make me fall, and I reply with, there's no need, I'm already head over heels."

"Have we met?" she pulled her hands, "-I don't think I know you?"

"Loftha, it's me, your lover," he pushed closer, "-stop playing these games, have I not sufficiently yearned enough..."

"Getaway," she leaped backward, "-I'll say it again, I don't know you..."

"That's it, huh?" face to the ground, "-ignore me till I suffer..."

"Sorry, but I honestly have no idea who you are," she turned and walked away, "-blame the lady for the changed demeanor," said a whisper.

'There,' he smirked, '-caught it, she's being controlled by another entity, time to lay on the pressure.'

"La Mort."

"Pardon?" she pulled her steps, "-what did you say?"

"La Mort," he returned, "-the painting I placed on auction for tonight's festivities. There's something very special in it, tis a gift from a goddess herself, the lady of Arts and Craft. I honestly thought it would be nice to share her work around, evidently, I'm having second thoughts. There are plenty of works to go around," he turned on his heels and made for the stairs.

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"Wait, wait," she rushed to block the path, "-don't pull it from the display," a glee twinkled in her eyes, "-the piece is..." the rush of courage diluted into second guesses, "..."

"Don't waste my time," he shoved her aside, "-I don't think I know you?"

"WAIT!" No answer came, the suited man soon vanished in the upstairs area, "-don't leave yet," she followed to be halted by the guards.

"If thee wishes to see the painting, try again in another decade."

"Tssk," a hefty scowl shot at either guard, "-I'll get it later, don't worry," heels ambled out hearing distance.

'Time's 18:45, I know she isn't Loftha and there's a great deal of importance to the painting. I mentioned a goddess painting the picture – normal response would have been a question or a certain look of suspicion, I felt nothing from her. She knows the true origin. Judging by scowl and undertone of disgust, she's not affiliated with the gods.'

"Lord Igna," hailed Sophie, "-have thee come to pay a visit?" she stood before a life of neatly dressed art pieces and paintings, "-here's the arsenal for tonight's auction. The value of each item falls into the six to seven digits, we from the auctioning company are very excited to deliver an event to be spoken of for ages to come."

"Precisely the reason I called on thee." The overall atmosphere was excitement over tenseness. Petty conversations led to his piece, '-La Mort,' bent over narrowed-eyed, '-the epicenter of tonight's game is this.' Bicolored pupils washed in a sudden white blaze, mana-lines, the very fabric of reality dismantled, '-the sight of he who watches from outside the box,' lines turned symbols and letters. A ball of yarn spun freakishly to spew threads in multiple directions, '-the center breaks and reassembles the property of the circle depending on the people's actions downstairs. A very intricately constructed layer of protection, after it comes to a high tier barrier then the composition of the expanded realm. Condition to the painting's activation, where is it,' he looked about in closer details.

AHHHHH, the watch showed 19:00, *slash,* blood smothered, '-not enough time...'

'See with thy mind, and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn't pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we're present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends.'

Gasp,

"Someone's looking paler than before."

"Lady Haruna," rose from her lap, "-my, we're in an eternal prison."

"Can't you break out of this?"

"At the moment, the percentage of success is 10, the more I look into the situation, the worse it gets. Condition for the rupture is dreams and whims art be acted upon. Basically, unless everyone participates, there's no escape."

"-And?"

"The gravity isn't reflected, allow me to put into perspective; for the condition to be met, the emperor would have to die, the painting would be destroyed, the guest's downstairs would fall into anarchy, nobles against politicians, and vice-versa, the conglomerate and whatever scheme was concocted for tonight, everything would have to culminate into a singular line of thought, then would the spell break," hands behind the head, "-the solution is nonviable."

"Therefore, we surrender?" she thrust into a firm stance, "-wake up, Igna, have thee not a plan of action?"

“At the moment, no,” cigar lit, the relaxed posture tipped forward into a tenser stare, ‘-brute force isn’t going to work, who is Loftha, and what’s the true purpose of La Mort. Examining the ever-flowing conditions is foolish. Origin’s sight hasn’t done much to give an answer. I dare say, the realm is the anti-me, thirty-minute seems enough, though it’s not, time isn’t a constant. The conversation I had seemed to last longer regardless of the words being exchanged. Closer we are to the painting, faster time moves, it jumped from 18:49 to 19:00 in mere seconds, the conditions keep on stacking.’

“Where are you going?”

“To play blackjack, want to come with?”

“Why, what about earlier?”

“When a problem is too big to tackle, the smartest move is to admit defeat and shuffle along. Forcing the hand won’t do much – come on, Lady Haruna, mind granting my humble request?”

“Sure,” she giggled, “-thou drive a harsh bargain,” said a wink. The brightness of the interior gave a sense of relief, a table accommodated Empress Eira, Emperor Markus, lady Amber, Asmodeus, Mammon, Kul, Igna, and lastly, Haruna. Time elapsed slowly, drinks arrived in a silver platter, neighboring tables joined in the spectacle – nobles sided with the emperor whilst politicians sided with lord Patek who shortly after joined in place of Kul. Asmodeus’ gambling lust and Mammon’s greed swallowed the entirety of the room, the factions laughed and played – Romeo, who’d hogged the upper lounges, ran downstairs in the company of the stars.

“Three, two, one, GO!” drums exploded into action, JIO took the stage and sang, the orchestra’s softer sound merged and evolved in a mix of explosion and deepness. Drinks came without stop, “-Hit,” said Igna.

“-Hit,” firmed lord Patek.

“I’ll stay,” winked Asmo.

“Show,” said the dealer, “-23, 19, 20, 24, 25, 6, 30, 6, 21, winner’s lady Haruna!”

“THE LASS DID IT!” laughter spread throughout the casino.

‘Why aren’t they at each other’s throats?’

“Mind if we join in?” winked chief Jula in the company of Odgar, the auctioneers and collectors from Stiol.

“The more the merrier,” proclaimed Igna, next, hefty tables merged to form a giant curve, Asmodeus took on the place of dealer – the capacity increased exponentially; glasses filled and money to the stakes, the night’s status-quo of pleasantries divulged into true enjoyment. Genuine smiles filled the faces, the crowd grew, the people laughed and the music played.

“ROMEO,” fired Odgar, “-too bad gambling isn’t your Juliette,” screamed across clearly, the music stopped before a drop, the faces turned, a shot of embarrassment went down his body, *crrk,* the poker faces broke, *BWAHAHAHAHA,* thundered across, the guitar slid into a fast rhythm, the entire table cried in laughter.

The self-assured hubris, unpleasantly sensible, shattered amidst the hysteria, “-whatever, none has the right to be happy unless I am happy. I’ll slay another and destroyed the painting, blood on La Mort is a perfect catalyst to destroy the building. I’ll kill everyone,” grunts clambered upstairs, “-if none is around to kill, I’ll slay myself,” stood on stage, “-farewell to this despicable vessel, I wish to return to my demon king,” it thrust, *click,* the blade chipped at the grip.

“Looks like I’ve won,” *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* a pull flung the painting into his hands.

“What do you mean, won?” Time read 19:01, “-the magic circle will activate and ruin thy land, fake demonkind, thou art be put to the sword!”

“Drop the antics,” *-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing; Realm Expansion,* a snap conjured an orb to swallow the vicinity, books twirled above his palm.

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

VIth Act of the book of Sinuye. Scripture Xth, life is but the reflection of a higher being. Nothing needs to make sense, wish it and reality is thine. Arise, rebuilt, restore, all harmed shall be restored, all restored shall perish, tis the payment, tis the fate.

Book of Dahalo, from whence Earth was birthed, naught is to defy the ancient laws. Laws set and set laws, the cycle is it or not will thee think. Real is fake, fake is pure, pure is fantasy, fantasy is fake. Ache, stake, fate.

Mantia -Book of Predula, on the day Jynar rose to the titans, hierarchy amidst the upper crumbled, mortal against the heavens, devils against the mortals, heavens against the heavens, true is wrong, wrongness is truth. Lay lines disrupted through time and space, index to the painting, *-merge into a singular form,* light blinded the spectator.

Mantia – Grimoire of Sceilta, XIth passage, IIInd verse, under the convergence of the Ukrol’s star, I order nature to take precedence, may this land be cleansed from magic – Sileo.

Chapter 725: True Demonlord [56]

“Must I explain?”

“What have you done?”

“The lack of mana in the air must be constraining since a demon needs the constant flow to keep possessing the psyche of a tenuous lady.”

“Pointless drivel,” it laughed, swapping her voice for a deeper cruder cackle, “-you’ve won at what, taking away the mana won’t do much. The painting, I’ll kill and activat-”

“Enough,” he thundered, “-look around, foolish demon, the very fabric of this room has been altered. Meanwhile we speak, everyone gets to live and enjoy the soiree. I would be impressed if the expansion was done subtly.”

“My realm, tis negated...” it glared forward, “-what are you scheming?”

“Scheming, I say schemed, the latter’s completed. The little mystery’s been solved, and the prison released.”

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“Whatever you say,” it smirked, “-I still have this body as a hostage; her memories speak of a fond relation. What would a dagger to her heart do, I wonder?”

“Try,” said he nonchalantly, “-I dare you to kill her.”

“Don’t play games with me boy,” resounded akin to an earthquake, “-I’ll end this host without a moment’s regret.”

“Please,” he moved closer, “-such posturing for the simple task of dowsing this painting in blood,” it hovered atop the palm, “-is the birth really so special?” an amber flame lit on the other hand, “-La Mort, painted by Athena; you have a hostage and so do I, rather, I’d say my hand’s better. Your threats would work on one who’s emotional,” he grinned brazenly, “-alas, foolish demon, the opponent who stands before thee has lost more than most would consider livable. I’ve gone through worse pains before,” a somber aura enveloped his presence, the shadow cast from the fire grew, “-tell me, demon, have thee felt the pain of knowing your daughter was tortured, abused, then killed for the sake of money. Have you felt the pain of losing your family, the whole heritage, on a precious day, have you felt the agony of hopelessness, unable to stand whilst the world crumbles around. Do you have what it takes to start again no matter the consequence, do you have the will to stand, knowing thy prior life has been stained by the blood of the innocent and still endeavor to live normally. Pain,” the fire dowsed to suddenly lock around her neck, “-I don’t care about human life, if they’re worthless, I ought to have them killed,” a tinge of red flickered across the white pupils, “-feel it,” the oppressive aura flowed along the arms and into the grip, “-share it, share my pain, share the regret, taste, my dear comrade, tis the feeling you would have me feel. Does it not salivate thy mouth, the despair of another’s death, the never extinguished flame of hatred, and most of all, the joy of watching the life drain from the suffocation. Try me again,” the grip tightened, Loftha’s struggle nulled to a surrender, “-how’s the hostage holding out for you?”

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“-M-M-Monster,” a shadow leaped from her to a semi-transparent figure, “-I don’t care who you are,” it said with arms to the ceiling, “-sucking out the mana is a double-edged sword. The girl’s been heavily wounded; I called the bluff,” similar entities surged from the stairway into a greater demon. The half-beast, half-human persona stood loudly, “-no mana means I’m weak magically, not physically,” it pulled a giant battle-ax from the back, “-she can only be healed using magic, the monster curse isn’t one to be trifled with. I say, boy, I’ve won.”

“Oh please,” he shuffled along to the immense pressure and ignored her bleeding stomach, “-when I said I’ve won, I meant it wholeheartedly.”

“Foolish pest,” it lifted and dropped, *chip,* the blade shattered, “-what have thee done?”

"Here," he moved to the stage and sat along the edge, "-I recommend using a weaker form. Moving around in such a heavy body isn't worth the trouble."

"We're enemies," it yelled, "-why act nonchalant towards us, doth thee not fear death?"

"Death?" he side-glanced, an echo of Death's mark carried in a tinge of red amidst the white stare, "-I say, death and I are cut from the same cloth. Take a seat, tonight's a night of celebration. Tell me, you work for Hades, don't you?"

"Should I answer?" it took on the form of a little kid, braided hair, freckled cheeks, and overly obnoxious glasses.

"I certainly would," *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration.*

"So, you did have to heal her," shrugged the demon.

"Goes without saying, an incident tonight would jeopardize the progress. Look at the time, 19:15, the fireworks outside sure is splendid, the sound alone with paints the picture."

"My name's Kurtio Inns, a high-tier demon serving Demon God Hades' faction."

"My name's Igna Haggard," he lit a cigar, "-let me guess, Kurtio, you were sent here not on orders per Hades' but Lucifer. Tonight's the perfect occasion to take control of the vice-town of Alpha, nothing speaks of liquor, pleasure, and narcotics like Odgawoan, perfect breeding grounds to build an empire. Lucifer's headed to the Empire after destroying Arda. I'm safe to assume, you, Kurtio, are only a pawn in a bigger game. Testing the waters so they say, lady Haruna," he grinned, "-she's the true mastermind, isn't that right, fallen archangel Ashia, the seductress."

Clap, clap, clap, clap, heels coyly entered from the right, "-I'm impressed, Viscount Haggard. Shames me to admit, the game's over, and we've lost," her form shifted through various gender and races till settling on the prior form, "-how's it going, Kurtio."

"Lady Ashia, my lord asked I to look for thee."

"Which, Lucifer or the pesky son of Hades?"

"Both my lady."

"I thought you gave up," she looked onto Igna's puffed smoke, the stage's darker background matched his aura.

"The nature of the game," he exhaled.

"I'm intrigued, how did you figure it out?"

"Looking back, I should have taken notice. The realm's foundation expanded the moment you and I crossed paths, I knew I felt something strange and chose to ignore, afterwards came the representatives of the familias. What thee said,' the three families aren't ruled by the godfather, no, rather, I hold the reins, for now, there's no telling what could happen,' and the favorable introduction as Amsey's niece – considering the Empire and their dubious nature, I thought to dismay the motif of revenge, why would fallen angel act upon human vices, why, is the question," a puff greatened the suspense, "-simple, if the

angel was human at first, the explanation would be convenient wouldn't it. Alas, the god of Kreston isn't very friendly, the prior life might have been as an angel; death comes for even the purest of beings, I draw my conclusion from the various observations made earlier tonight. The biggest cues were my advances, my claim to get intimate left a suspicious taste. There, I worked the possible motive of revenge into the picture again," he turned to her, "-am I, or am I not, correct?"

"Yes, it vexes me, but yes, you're right. Me falling from grace was a trial to judge my worth to serve the Lord. No matter the effort I put, a human remains a human, I amassed powers until reaching the rank of Apostle, there, I found a way to accumulate strength from a borrowed realm. At first, I wanted power to prove my worth – after I learned the truth about the trial, the human emotions washed my thoughts asunder. There, my parents sent me to live and study under my uncle, Lord Amsey. He's a great man, far greater than anything I came to witness in Iqavea, the sterile-like environment of always praying pulled from out under. My father, lord Conla, isn't one for religion, he and uncle Amsey share the same mindset. Imagine the backlash if the word got out. Mother, being the religious lady she was, left father to a life of sisterhood at one of the churches. I wanted to leave that house. Enough about my past, long story short, my purpose for today was to take revenge on those who dared harm my uncle. The four greats of Arda, the underworld family, and most of all, the emperor, a leader who did nothing but sit by as others stole his authority."

"Kill the emperor, satisfy the short-term revenge, and have Kurtio kill everyone else. Plans didn't go smoothly, the foundation suffered alterations from when I interacted with the magical circle. Kurtio, being a servant of the demons, knew about the catalytic properties of a goddess's making – he changed sides, wanting to test and steal the piece. More often, the simplest of ploys have the darkest reach. I toyed, tested my theories, and framed the whole ordeal onto Loftha – making Haruna my ally. After shooting the emperor, you realized the realm locked into a Time loop."

"I know, skip the details about playing me for a fool, I've heard enough. How did you meet the conditions, the emperor has to die, and the painting..."

"Realized it, haven't we?" another puff, "-I lied, dear Haruna, I lied. For the restart, the painting has to come in contact with blood; being the only clear activation condition carried from the magical circle, the one I tampered with. If not for me, at 19:00, when Kurtio is to draw blood, the spell would activate. Somewhere, the catalyst became the switch – ultimately creating an unescapable situation. Here's the fun part, to break the realm, everyone in attendance needed to join together and match their wishes. When I offered to play blackjack, the rules were clear – money and alcohol bind comrades and foe alike, the staple of Odgawoan saved the night."

"We were played for fools," added Kurtio, "-never once crossed my mind I was activating a large spell."

'What a fearsome man,' she narrowed, '-the switches in personality, the agony, the sense of accomplishment, the familiarity we built, he orchestrated a drama and turned the mastermind into an actor in her own play.'

"Haruna, Kurtio, the night's started. There's no need to sulk, everything has returned to normal.' *Realm Expansion – Release,* "-the fight for revenge is yet to end, Haruna. Fighting tonight won't benefit either party. Your uncle's working hard making allies to rival the four greats, what would an easy death do to

the man's wounded pride. Let him struggle and claw up the ladder, as a niece, support him. Kurtio, return to thy master, you were only a pawn, forget what happened and move on. "

"Word of advice," said the greater demon, "-Demon God Hades is here to take what was once his. Believe me, in saying so, he will not return without the possession, take heed heir to death, matters have yet to escalate," *poof* smoke called for his disappearance.

"I'll head downstairs," said Haruna, "-if my uncle's fighting, I'll do my best to support. Becoming a greater being won't accomplish much," she stood, "-about the offer to get intimate, here's my number – differences aside, I'm not opposed to starting over," chipper giggles headed below.

'A blatant reference to the ordeal,' the cigar extinguished, '-See with thy mind, and thou art to miss what is felt by the heart. Hear with thy ear, and one shall forget the touch, sense with thy skin, and the breeze shall guide the way, in many ways than one, despair follows, the curse of misfortune never left, the curse of restarting always remained, and now, before the lifeless corpse, the truth to the Haggards shall be exposed. The world isn't pretty nor are the enemies, heed this from thy foe, we're present, we know who you are, and trust me, the day of retribution is upon thee. The clock strikes, blood is spilled, the world ends, more specifically, your world ends. Whenever it activated, those same words would play – Amsey's downfall was partly on my account. Was she purely acting on her own or is there another entity pulling the strings? Hard to imagine coincidence to spawn a time-loop prison, anything related to chronology is only known to the god of time. The cynical side of me never wavers, I'd be lost without. Time's 19:45, I should check on the guests.'

Chapter 726: True Demonlord [57]

'Festivities are on the constant; the mutual love for alcohol and gambling seems to have quelled prior misgivings. The soiree is on the right path, let's say,' a quick look around, '-a few drinks will do me well,' returned to the bar meant facing the brunt of JIO's hyperactive songs. A respectful gesture to a waitress brought a familiar face, "-might I be of service?"

"Midne, join in the fun, tonight's a treat on my behalf, why work yourself?"

"I enjoy it, the pleasures of helping are very constant. Master, should I bring a drink?"

"Please do," he sat away from the gambling tables(shielded behind slot machines), back rolled fully onto the seat and face to the glamorously adorned ceiling. '-The time loop brought a sense of danger, I don't have the body of a god nor do I possess the boons inherit to a divine being. If not for Mantia, Blood-Arts, and the mana control, I'd have been lost without respace. The world's being charged by visits from either side of the higher realm's spectrum. Stronger foes will appear, the era's switched into a one where magic is mainly used in the field of technology. Combat mages have no use, the golden age where SSS ranked mages were Dukes is far gone. Depending on the continent, priorities are diverse – I wonder what Iqavea thinks of the matter. Alpha focuses, or strives to be a good environment for poor and rich alike, nobles, politicians, the abundance of monetary gains is sufficient to be a target. Compared to Hidros, they've got us beat in everything. éclair's report says private military companies are on the rise – the Cobalt Unit and Phantom are at the top in weapon research. We've conquered the air, and they've conquered the land and sea. The Empire's nothing to scoff at, the long war between Elendor and King Juvey's made the latter wiser to the potential of stratagems over head-on assaults. The military might behind his kingdom is a pillar holding Iqavea as the world's first most dominant rulership.'

“Here master,” interjected Midne, “-a drink.”

“Thank you, and do take a break, tis an order.”

“As is wished,” she looked to the side, “-lady Kul’s waiting. See you at the auction, my lord.”

.....

“Take care,” he watched as the duo diffused into the horde of laughs, ‘-we never won against Kreston, might have recaptured the province from their religious hands, they but returned to the starting block. A constant battle between Kreston and I, we fight all the time, they ruined Arda and left without consequence. Neighboring independent lands might be wary, still, the control the church hold is scary. Calling a crusade against a hedonistic land under the guise of cleansing the mind is morally correct and has been proven time and time again. World leaders can’t do anything – the emperor of Alphaia’s a pawn, the face of Hidros, Queen Gallienne’s fallen complacent. The birth of her child made her heart warmer and welcoming – the Federation is in talking state again. Can we really sit by and watch the Wracia Empire allied to the new continent, allied they say, I’m sure they’ve invaded with arms at the ready. The landmass of the new land is greater, ripped with natural resources and natives. The huge distance between us and them isn’t easily conquerable, a plane might make the trip – without a landing stripe or any stable footing, tis worthless. The sea is the safest and best option. They’d be shot down – Arda was a front, I’ve known it for a long time, the invasion was a ploy to take attention away. Should I get involved in the politics again?’ a cigar lit, ‘-what’s holding me back, the fear of ending like Staxius? A single man can’t take on the world alone – well, he could if he were my prior self. I felt it earlier, the bloodlust, the aura of death is closer than I’d think. My face and eyes are gradually returning to how it was; I know I’m Staxius Haggard who’s but changed his name into Igna Haggard, I remember everything, the hatred and fear’s gone, the pain – locked away unless I draw blood and wish for one to die. Reflecting on what’s happened is a nice way to mark the progress. The mission given by lady mother and aunt Elvira to start a rival company at the heart of the enemy’s land, them being the four greats, is complete. Raven’s taken various blunt in trades, the businesses look down upon a small company – look who’s laughing now, Ravens are often linked to ill-omen and misery, the bird is very cunning, and so are we. The true objective’s been accomplished, the Gustalian Cartel is ours, manufacturing and distribution of narcotics have been claimed. A good word with Haruna might make the later transaction easier. Expand the influence, take over Odgawoan from the inside, and expand outwards. The true puppet masters, Cimier, are waiting to strike – they’ve struck already, the Gaso Group’s blatant invasion in the town.’

“Master,” a short breath broke the line of thoughts.

“Who is it?” blurred vision fell onto Asmodeus and Mammon, “-you two,” a big yawn later, “-where are the others?”

“Check the time, my lord,” said Asmo, “-tis 20:30, the auction’s about the start.’

“Oh, I forgot,” he stood and stretched, “-lead the way.”

“Master,” whispered Asmo, Mammon’s pace increased, “-something troubling you?”

“No, nothing of worth. Just a little tired is all.” Sophie called onto Asmo from the stage, “-excuse me,” he nodded and left.

“Free seats here,” said lady Haruna.

“I appreciate it,” he sat farther down the line – the smell of booze and smoke mellowed into the humble freshness of the mountain’s air.

“Most of them are hammered,” she observed.

“Igna,” came from the corner, “-over here,” white hair stood out against the crowd.

“Lady Haruna seems as if my big sister wishes to parle. I’ll join thee in a bit, for now, enjoy the auction.”

“Take your time, viscount.”

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The swim across the incoming lines was tedious, some way or another, he slipped through without getting the suit crinkled, “-big sister Eira,” he sat, ‘-they’ve segregated without even knowing. Nobles to the right and politicians to the left, the tension’s gone, everyone’s feeling bliss.’ Few names of spenders lit in bold, ‘-Thomas’ brought out the big gun, a lot of money will be spent. What’s this?’ a trail of vice exuded from behind the curtains, ‘-Mammon’s spreading his influence, what a diligent man.’

“Hey,” said a whisper, “-why are you getting all chummy-chummy with Haruna, isn’t she related to the underworld?”

“Not so frank,” he elbowed her stomach, “-making connections is a rare treat.”

“Igna,” a brisk shuffle caught his attention, “-I’m drunk!” complained a flustered Jula.

“Dear me,” he stood and caught the unsteady footing, ‘-honestly,” a side-glance showed a confidently standing Odgar, “-hey?” on closer look, the man was drunk too, ‘-these two.’

“Might I be of service?”

“éclair, perfect timing,” he exhaled, “-care to escort these two to the hotel, have them cleaned, and put to bed. I doubt the high is going to ease.”

“Understood.”

“Someone’s busy,” remarked she.

“Don’t play harsh, I’m performing my duties.”

“Have you seen Loftha?” she wondered with narrowed eyes.

“She’s in the lounge resting,” reseated, “-where’s the emperor?”

“Babysitting Xyra and Hyde. Big sister Amber’s having dinner with mother, we’re leaving after the auction, the night’s taken most of our strengths.”

“Where are you staying?”

“We’ll book a hotel...”

“No, not on my watch. After the auction, I’ll have an escort readied. I have a mansion not far from the casino, it should prove well-equipped.”

“I’ll take the offer,” she smiled.

“Might I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen,” thundered from the stage, “-my name’s Candice, and I’ll be the auctioneer for tonight’s private event. The collection we harbor is quite exquisite – please scan the code for more details on our inventory.”

Beep, “-get on stage right now,” read a heated text.

“Something the matter?” her head tipped.

Ancient-Magic: Teleportation, “-what happened?”

Gasp, a wave of shock rattled the somewhat crowded backstage, “-don’t startle us like that,” panted lady Sophie, “-you’re up, the host needs to say a few words before the proceedings.”

“Where are Asmodeus and the rest?”

“In the crowd,” said she, “-leave the auction to us, we know how to earn the favors of the spenders.”

‘Y-yeah.’ Candice kept on talking gently, the words seemed to excite the guests.

“-Please, I’d like to welcome the host of tonight’s event,” a lovely welcome sparked a volley of claps.

“I’m grateful for the warm welcome. I do hope Candice’s done a great job so far,” the comment gave a few laughs, an insider joke to the spenders, “-I’ll skip the pleasantries, these kinds of speeches have been overdone. In celebrations of tonight’s success, I’ve put a painting by the renowned Athena, named La Mort, on the pedestal. History surrounding goddess Athena and her works are rare and collectible. Money alone can’t possibly dictate its value; the only five pieces known to the world are in museums, never meant for sale. Here I present a once’s in a lifetime opportunity to own a piece from the literal goddess of arts and craft. Proof of authentication is in the signature; the certification was kindly provided by the respected Thomas Edson. I’ll stake my reputation and heritage on the deal. What about it, collectors, how’s my offer,” he grinned, “-in addition to Athena, we have pieces from Jean Frank, Calious Bagard, and Julia Dahli. I’ll leave the rest in Candice’s hand,” stepped away from the podium, “-go have fun.”

“Thank you, Viscount,” the event began almost instantly.

“Thomas, you look distraught,” the wooden floor stretched into the haven of the inconspicuous backstage.

“Obviously,” he gulped, “-who would have known you had a work from Athena...”

“Elementary my dear,” hands-on the man’s stiff shoulders, “-La Mort is only one of many I own. Perhaps one day I’ll make a gallery to showcase the beauties I’ve kept for my own sights. Take it from here.”

‘No cause for concern,’ read across the lens, ‘-Jula and Odgar were escorted without incidents, the guard details have nothing to report. All’s well from here,’ hopped off the back and circled to the window, “-I don’t get this art business,” said a drunkard tone breathing the harsh wind from the ajar frame.

“Romeo?” he paused and stared, “-Runo, is the man alright?”

“No, not in the least,” she exhaled in desperation, “-I hate this man, I swear,” her face clenched, “-here I wanted to watch the auction and I’m stuck babysitting this idiot.”

“Runo, I want more Angel’s dust, fetch some, I’ll snort it off the supple skin of a wel-”

“Shut up,” she covered his mouth, “-sorry about this, he’s ruined everything, we were supposed to enjoy a nice soiree to celebrate the opening of Von, not this...”

“I see,” he moved to hold Romeo’s shoulder, “-go enjoy the show.”

“You sure?”

“The nights on me, go have fun.”

“Man, tonight’s amazing,” escaped a grunt, “-the beer’s made my stomach into a self-talking machine,” the lazy sight looked onto Igna, “-you know man, the closer I look, the prettier you seem for a dude. Sorry about the whole thing, I was being an asshole; to be honest, I’m an asshole, I can’t help it. Runo’s the best girl I’ve ever met, she doesn’t mince words and always has my back even if I screw up, I want to become someone better, someone like you, man, someone who’s powerful and seems to have a handle on everything. I envy you, Igna Haggard, we met and there was nothing to you, now, you’re the big shot owning his own casino. Way to excel expectation, I want to sleep,” the head dropped.

‘-Passed out drunk,’ he observed and looked onto the stripe, ‘-Romeo’s a good guy at heart, just bad at expressing the emotions. Guess we all have our flaws,” dipped lower for a better grip, ‘-let’s go.’

“Master,” interjected Asmodeus, “-may we be of assistance?”

“Sure, mind escorting him to the hotel?”

“Understood,” they nodded, “-the safety and comfort of the guests are on thee – we won’t fail to honor our master’s name.”

“Asmodeus, Kul, Mammon, éclair, Starix, and the newly added Midne, I’m grateful for the time and dedication – we wouldn’t be in this position without thy support. Thank you,” he bowed sincerely.

“Master,” they locked in a group embrace, “-we’re glad to serve.”

Chapter 727: True Demonlord [58]

“La Mort, final bid 750 million exa.” Time read 21:30, Igna watched in total bafflement, a mutual feeling amidst the collectors. Who had the clout and power to spend so haphazardly on a painting – the bidder in question, the same acquaintance made at the prior auction. The event concluded with an amazing performance from JIO – those famished climbed to the restaurant; the sweet aroma of expensive delicacies filled the atmosphere.

“We’ve met before, have we not?” inquired Igna tête-à-tête to the bidder.

“I’m afraid not, the one you met was my little brother, my name is Bartholomew Jshosio, an investor working for Stiol,” a business card slid across the lowered glass table. Despite the amount spend, the chosen location for additional payment turned to be the lounges – the very same enthralled in the

'time-loop' incident. Stocky frame, Van Dyke styled facial hair, most often known by the 'roguish lover,' (popularized by the famed story of Inspector Cosnav, a man of many lovers, inhumane levels of charisma and forefather of investigative journalism in the olden era, a private reserved man whose work was subject to scrutiny from the oppressive influence of nobles) light brown hair, sharp jaws, and easy on the eyes.

"Bartholomew."

"Jsho for short."

"Jsho, pleasure doing business. Might I ask who in their right mind would drop a third of a billion on a painting, I did say the piece couldn't be priced; this has far exceeded normal levels of expenditure."

"My lord Igna," he smirked, "-fret not," the fingers reached for the chin and pulled, the mask unglued without a moment's reluctance, "-long time no see."

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"Goddess Syhton, I'd never guess..."

"The disguise got old quickly. The paintings worth every bit the money, how could I pass on the chance of obtaining such a piece made by the goddess herself."

"You could ask for the goddess to paint one?" he suggested, "-there's no law saying goddesses couldn't interact."

"Wrong my child, the very idea is heresy. I don't exist, my very nature could perturb the already shaky balance. What little life force remains is owed to my devotees, their power of belief has kept this body alive for years. I had to ascertain the legitimacy first."

"Hold a moment," he paused, "-Goddess Syhton, you wouldn't have orchestrated a massive play for thy pleasures, would you?"

"What are you even talking about?" returned she firmly, "-being blasphemous is..."

"Is?" he hung on the 's', "-what about blasphemy. My lady, the only reason the expanded realm could have such power is for the intervention of another being. You cast the spell, used the greater demon, and pulled the strings on Haruna, am I correct?"

"Well, I guess I'm found out. It's true, the expanded realm was in fact mine, I possess the grimoire of Laktos, the book of restart. How did you figure?"

"I didn't," said he cold-faced, "-the possibilities clicked; no way to prove my theory else for thine lips. I lied, my lady, I lied."

"You lied to a goddess; how very brave."

"Not lie, tis more of a payback. You used me as a pawn to test the worth of the piece."

"Calm yourself, my child. Would be wise to keep good relations with me. I've spent a lot of time studying and being played for a fool, I know my way around schemes. Go on, speak thy mind."

“Don’t misunderstand, my lady, my intentions weren’t in the least bit malicious. I’m confused that’s all, everyone’s at the mercy of another. I’m glad to have been of use in thy scheme, goddess.”

“The tone sure changed hastily, tell me, child, did you see the error in your ways?”

“I guess I did,” he smiled, “-ordeal aside, about the painting?”

“Yes, yes,” a few taps on the phone, “-the money should be transferred right away.”

750,000,000 received, read the phone, “-what about the fee for the auction company?”

“I’ve already handled the matter,” she rose, “-best get back to my fa?ade,” the manly face reappeared, “-remember this face, the man’s a close ally of mine. Be well, viscount; word of warning, be on guard.”

Thus, the night shuffled along – dinner was served, pleasantries exchanged. The mentally impaired under the influence were taken to the hotel. Through the cacophonous night, Igna made plenty of connections, most being of the noble nature.

23:00 displayed – the nightlife intensified. Plenty o’ guests took their leave, he found himself at the entrance bidding the visitors a safe trip home. In the end, at 23:45, only the imperial family remained at Von, the once filled parking lot stood empty.

Water sprinkled atop the innocently resting Loftha, “-wake up.”

“Using water to wake another,” clambered to an upright posture, “-where am I?” her legs crossed.

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“At the casino,” replied Igna, “-Hyde and Xyra are passed out drunk,” he pointed to a separate couch, “-they sure can’t hold their liquor.”

“What happened tonight?” her brows furrowed in pain; “-I don’t remember anything...”

“Nothing of importance,” he replied and tapped her back, “-one thing is for sure, tonight was a success.”

Heavy thumps caught her ear, giggles and chatter snuck underneath the door, *-click,* “-Igna,” exhaled the sweaty empress, “-finally, help me take my lightweight husband home.”

“Can’t you use magic?”

“Oh no, I’m well gone at this point, the worlds spinning. Igna,” she buckled from Markus’ body weight, “-take care of us...”

‘These people.’

“Igna?” approached Loftha, “-I think I missed out on a lot...”

“More importantly, wake Hyde and Xyra, lady Amber is already at my estate in the company of her mother. The washroom’s just around the corner, freshen up – I’ll be back.”

‘I’m so confused,’ she slipped out of the lounge and peered over the chaotic mess of a game area. Retainers were hard at work cleaning the mess, heavy-looking tables hovered into place, strongly dressed guards watched with crossed arms. ‘-the night must have been wild.’

“Over here, master,” hailed éclair, “-transport’s ready to head home,” Asmodeus and Mammon sat at the front, “-the imperial family don’t look so imperial after a few drinks,” chuckled Mammon.

“Yeah sure,” added Igna sarcastically, “-take them home, I’ll be there in a few.”

“With pleasure,” nodded Asmo; the drunks were thrown in nonchalantly, Loftha held a face of, ‘I don’t even care anymore.’ They skid onto the road and bolted for the stripe.

“Where’s Kul and Midne?”

“At the estate,” replied éclair, “-Starix said he’s sorry for not being present tonight. A battle broke loose at Stanley’s homage.”

“Have arrangements been readied for tomorrow?”

“Yes, my lord, the jet is on the way,” they moved inside on account of the cold wind.

“éclair, be honest,” they sat on the stairs leading to the lounge, “-was the trip to Alpha worth the effort, what I mean to ask is...”

“The mission’s complete, I’m sure lady Courtney and Elvira will be satisfied. Asmodeus, Mammon, Kul, and Starix have decided to stay in Alpha. The situation here needs to be monitored closely, by this point, the heavy liftings are done. One more thing, a member of Asmodeus circle wanted an audience, said her name to be Medusa.”

“Medusa, I’ll meet her when the time arrives,” focused on the area around the bar, “-they sure cleaned up fast.”

“Master, we should head home.”

“What about you, éclair? The others are staying, what will you do?”

“Is it even a question to ask,” he stood and held out a hand, “-where ever my master goes, I shall follow.”

“Understood,” the grips firmed.

The next morning arrived under the suppleness of a very well-crafted ceiling. Melodic water splashes disrupted the sleep, the curtains swayed listlessly, the quiet surrounding gave for a very warm wake-up call. Face to the pillows, ‘I slept like a baby,’ slithered to the bed’s edge, sunlight reflected off the tiles leading onto the terrace, “-morning Igna.”

“Good morning, big sister,” he replied in only shorts, “-quite early for a swim, don’t you think?”

“Oh please,” she swamed gracefully, “-there’s no way I’d miss out on this, the pool is amazing,” pulled to the edge, “-I’m disappointed.”

“Why?” he hung crossed armed on the balustrade.

“No compliments on my swimsuit?”

“Not going to happen,” he spun on his heels, “-courtesy or not, I don’t care for it.”

Downstairs came a large room opened wide to the pool covered by a few cleaned curtains, Xyra and Hyde slumped on the couches.

"Never drinking again," complained Hyde holding an icicle.

"I agree," added Xyra, "-no more drinks, I'm wasted," he held a sports drink.

"What about drinking?" commented Igna.

"It's you," groaned Hyde, "-my heads already spinning, don't make it worse."

"Sure it is," he gave a playful flick to the forehead, "-be careful next time."

"Mother and big sister Amber left early," added Xyra, "-don't bother looking for them."

"I was searching for the emperor."

"Still in bed," said Eira wrapped in a bath towel

"-should I get breakfast started master?" inquired éclair.

"Breakfast?" he glanced at the clock, "-already 08:30, éclair, we don't have time to eat, what of the jet!"

"Master, there's no need to throw a tantrum. Midne's on her way with the luggage, we'll leave in thirty-minute, there's enough time for a meal."

"Very well," the breathing eased, "-please do."

"You headed somewhere?" inquired Eira.

"Returning to Hidros," a juice box flew across, "-thank you, éclair."

"Hidros?"

"Yes, don't tell me," he sipped, "-big sister, Julius's getting married; Alpha's drained my mind and body; I need a break."

"I forgot," she facepalmed, "-I can't make it anytime soon; tell him I'll be there on the wedding day."

"What about marriage?" wondered Loftha rocking a very wild bed hairstyle, mascara from the prior night added a tinge of dark motif to the already decrepit expression.

"Morning."

.....

"Morning."

"Morning, Loftha, we were talking about Igna's return to Hidros. My younger brother's getting married, time sure flies"

"You only got married recently," returned Igna.

"Shut up, anyway, he'll be off to the airfield in thirty-minute. Guess the breakfast is the last we'll see each other."

“You and the bad omen,” food carried over to the open room, “-talk as if the plane’s going to crash.”

“You’re leaving,” mumbled under the breath, “...”

Midne arrived precisely at 09:00, her entourage consisted of Kul and Starix, the duo would be in charge of managing the manors. A brief exchange of goodbyes led to the airfield, ‘-I’m going home,’ they boarded.

Meanwhile in Hidros, to be specific, Rosespire – Julius woke to a notification from éclair, “-the master is on his way. We should be there at 14:00.”

“Why are you so rough with the sheets,” complained medium lengthen pink hair, “-it’s early, let me sleep.”

“MALLEY, my cousins headed back,” he leaped out of bed, “-he’s been gone for so long, I have to tell Aceline and the others. Pardon me love,” a quick peck on her forehead, “-I’ll catch you soon.” The message forwarded to many friends, a chipper grin on his face and an energetic hop in his step, Julius skipped out the hotel and into his car, ‘-I knew my marriage would bring him back.’

Minutes turned into hours, the plane landed at 15:30, the scenery, dried lands, remnants of an arduous battle, and a castle-town in the distance. The trip on foot lasted little more over thirty-minute, guards allowed entry without question, ‘-the church,’ he stood before the rebuilt building, ‘-I should have come earlier,’ bag on his back, he entered the immense hall adorned in the sculptures of lady Syhton.

“Can I be of help, child?” approached a priest.

“I’ve come to pay respects to my comrades, they were the noble rulers of castle Garsley, the Garnet family.”

“The noble family who saved our castle town, please, their graves are to the right.”

“Thank you, priest,” a nod faded into memory, the place changed, a memorial stood proudly amidst a lovely garden of flowers. Gravestones lined symmetrically, each cleaned and cared for, ‘-I’m back,’ dropped onto his knees, ‘-sorry I couldn’t pay a visit sooner. What kind of a friend forgets his family,’ a genuine smile reflected onto the metal plate, ‘-so much has happened – I wished you were here to witness what a lovely place castle Garsley has become.”

Chapter 728: True Demonlord [59]

A shared room of various holographical displays read, no reception. A dimmer hue escaped into the brighter shine of the rare Rosespire sun, “-Queen Galienne.”

“We’re off the air,” returned a softer gaze, “-drop the formalities, Courtney.”

“Is it over?” her pure white hair rose above the somewhat tall desk.

“Yeah, and no thanks to you.”

“Come on, there’s no need for animosity. I very much despise worthless talks, and this meeting is the embodiment of petty.”

“Calm it,” returned the queen, “-the Federation’s finally on way to the top, we must keep in regular contact.”

“Sure, if babysitting Easel Run Gard and running my men thin in war efforts at Elendor appeases the members, I suppose the Haggard needs to take the brunt of the backlash whilst they reap the profits.”

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“Hidros and Arda are the leaders, we must show our power to inspire the lower masses.”

“We’re martyrs in the conflict of global supremacy. The Cobalt Unit’s joined sides with king Juvey. Phantom’s forces have managed to slow their assault, same can’t be said for Elendor’s army, they’ve taken huge casualties. Who would have imagined they’d go underwater, developments on submarines far outreach ours. Phantom alone cannot carry the war effort; lady Elendor doesn’t wish to acknowledge our situation.”

“The frustration’s well-grounded and I totally agree. We can’t do much in the wake of it all – war’s the surest way to advance technology, and well, a lot of money can be made. Phantom’s reaping the profits, don’t pretend it doesn’t benefit the company.”

“Don’t misunderstand, Gallienne – the money made is sucked into the black hole of aid to the fighters. We’ve granted Easel Run Gard a lot of capital to restart their economy, I don’t want to admit, the situation has left us exposed to uncertainty.”

“The nature of war is so; Rotherham and Arda seem to be making good progress. Condition of living has improved.”

“Rosespire’s shines brighter. I’m afraid the empire and Federation are at a deadlock. Phantom back the federation, Cobalt Unit backs the Empire, our biggest buyer has switched to purchasing weapons from the Cobalt Unit instead. There goes a big chunk of the income. I’m afraid the Haggard’s will have to bow out the fight sooner or later, when the day comes, Elendor will fall. The collapse can’t be avoided,” a conniving air went about the room, “-if we can’t win, let’s stage the downfall of her kingdom.”

“Did you really just say what I thought?” Gallienne’s coldness shot at the maliciously enticing idea, “-will it not be obvious?”

“No it wouldn’t,” she smiled, “-when the tide is against us, a gust needs be summoned the change the flow. Just so it happens, my son’s returned to Hidros.”

“About him,” paused with a thoughtful expression, “-what did he exactly accomplish in Alpha?”

“Oh, worry not,” her face kept still, “-more information will be made available when I meet the boy.” A thud halted at the entrance and swiftly gave a tap.

“Enter,” returned they.

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“I apologize for the intrusion,” bright blond hair entered, “-my lady aunt, I have to escort thee to Rotherham, I was informed the meeting concluded?”

“You heard correctly,” kisses exchanged between the queens, “-what we discussed is a tall order, it will require intellect, and most of all, a strong heart and nonchalantness in the face of death,” the entrance soon after closed, not after setting on the Queen’s joyous expression. The walk to the car was short and uninteresting.

“-You seem rather pleased,” commented lady Courtney.

“Why would I not be?” he chuckled, “-my lady, my cousin’s returned home. Granted he’s yet to show his face in Rotherham, I don’t doubt there are things he must attend. In the meantime, about Malley and I’s marriage, I trust we have thy blessing?”

“Yes, you do,” she smiled, “-without a shadow of a doubt my dear nephew. Malley’s a great girl, good in spirit and body, I only wish the best for the union.”

20th of December, the day Igna landed, would also be one to forever warp the foreseeable future. The time read 16:43, Julius held light-hearted chats in the company of lady Courtney. The drive outside Rosespire towards Rotherham was very often scenic on accounts of forestry, expansive landscape, and the seamless union of the railway into the wild. Midway through the drive, an explosion rattled the land, a crater remained in place of where the car used to be.

Alarms cried, the ears rang, ‘-what happened?’ wondered Julius hung upside down, ‘-where’s aunt Courtney?’ it took effort to claw out the jumbled mess. There, upon pulling himself up from the toppled car that the situation grew apparent. High pitch buzzing eased, the vision cleared albeit hampered by the wreckage.

“We’ve found you!” explained mysterious robed figures, “-wife of Hades. Our master has searched the dimensions to find thy location; is it not a fortune to have such a caring husband?” said one at the forefront, black robes and a staff made of feathers atop which rested a pair of wings.

“What are you doing here?” returned loudly, blood flowed from the temples, “-I don’t belong to the man anymore, I was killed by lord Death, isn’t it apparent?”

“Not killed,” returned the black-robed one, “-simply kidnapped. We stumbled onto the land on pure luck, such a decrepit world doesn’t fancy the demon god. Tell me, will thee follow on peace or must we take, let’s say violent actions?”

“Aunt?” said heavy pants, “-I’ve called help, who are these people?”

“Julius, listen to me closely,” a fragment of the Death Reaper’s sword manifested, “-I’m sorry. Take this message to Igna, live a great life for both of us, mother has to take care of old matters. She’ll figure a way out of the situation, enjoy the life which is to come, I consider my days spent here to be worth every bit. Remember, I’ll always love you,” the sword slid, an unseen palm shoved Julius aside, he but stared, a hemisphere manifested and imploded, land and lady. A perfectly symmetrical remnant laid in the middle of the forest, ‘-what happened?’ the distant sound of a helicopter sent the mind awry.

“See, there was no reason to fight, was there?” said a snickering tone, “-mother, how are you?” the realm swapped.

“Don’t address me so casually,” fired across, “-a son wouldn’t dare treat her mother as a prisoner,” hands and feet were chained to a singular boulder on a floating isle. Molten lava flowed akin to stream,

imagine an idyllic place of refuge – a crystal clear waterfall smoothly washes down, the resultant lake boasts a piece of land where the water is calm. The border's surrounded in grass and lusciously vivid green; how it would be nice. Replace the water in the waterfall with lava, the lake, made of magma, the surrounding, turn it into pitch-black rocks – as for the isle, make it a dull platform. Forget the peaceful breeze, here each gust seemed to be the exhale of a fire dragon. No visible sky, the very top held a floating castle, further up, rocks. Reddish creatures hovered to and fro. The chirping of birds turned screams of the tormented, the middle-sat lady Courtney dressed in rags, stripped of her weapons, and hair cut without care.

"Who will come to the rescue?" chuckled the presumptuous figure riding a headless steed, "-mother, lord death's gone, none is powerful enough to enter the realm, let alone fight my minions. The strongest demon god is and always will be Hades. Don't bother escaping, sword or not, being shackled to the chain that held Fenrir must be a big inconvenience. No harsh feelings, mother, I hope father has the stomach to see thee again."

'Brat,' she laid face up, '-captured once again. I knew deep down this moment would arrive. Hades' shadow can't be escaped so easily. Lord Death rescued and forged my soul into part of his weapon. I wish I could have seen Igna once more. I'll live out the rest of my life in the underworld, the strong decide, and the weak obey.' Outside, commotion grew – media arrived to cover the accident. Prince Julius was spotted wrapped in a white cloth and taken to the hospital, no more information was made known. Within the next hour, an armed escort barged into the hospice and made straight for his room.

"Julius!" the door slammed, Elvira's restless expression laid on his, "-tell me what happened."

"My lady, should we?"

"Shut up, lock the door, guard the outside. Have Rotherham put on maximum security. Identify anyone and everyone, close the border, this is an order."

"Understood, ma'am."

Her slightly shorter stature lowered onto a bedside stood, her fingers ran up and locked with his, the warmth added color to the pale demeanor, "-lady Elvira."

"Tell me, what happened?"

"We were ambushed."

"By who?"

"Lady Elvira," he stared her sincerely, "-knowledge about my sister, Eira, being a goddess is known to you, right?"

"Yes, what of it?"

"Here's the situation," he gulped, "-I know who's responsible, we can't fight them, no matter the weapon or method, tis a loss cause."

"I don't care," she persisted, "-tell me who's responsible."

“The Demon God, one of the three supreme gods, Hades, the ruler of the underworld. Lady Courtney is wife to Hades, long ago, and I speak in terms of thousands of years ago, Lord Death invaded Hades’ realm and kidnapped her. The outcome resulted in a brief war between the two gods, many lives were lost, and in the end, the ruler of the underworld had significant powers taken.”

“The situation’s dire,” she reached for her phone, “-we need to council with Eira then, if she’s a god, we can make use of her clout.”

“No,” he pressed her phone to the bed, “-by goddess, she’s only just reached the rank, nothing’s set in stone. Her body and mind will change in due time, the only boon granted as of yet is immortality. By going against a supreme god, one needs to be equal, if not, stronger than said being.”

“How about you, you knew of her true identity and name, isn’t there anything?”

“No, I only have the power to create, not destroy, and certainly, not the powers to fight. We’re talking about fighting against an entity that’s at the peak of existence, words aren’t enough to describe their status. They control entire universes, dominions over multiple worlds and the idea of us, mere nobodies residing on the plane they guard, to stand up against them, no way.”

“There’s one person,” her eyes rose to the ajar window, “-or was one, recently reincarnated. The Blood-King, Staxius Haggard.”

“...” his hands pressed in frustration, the chin burrowed into his chest, the eyelids shut in complete despair, ‘I watched her be abducted, how can I show my face to cousin, I’ve lost the right to stand at his side.’

“-Lady Elvira,” he grabbed her arms, “-she’s probably dead. They must have separated her soul from the weapon, once done, she’ll forever be bound to whatever they see fit. The battle’s lost before even starting.”

“The battle’s yet to start,” a nauseating sensation wrapped at the bed’s foot, “-trust me,” the hair levitated in white and red, “-I won’t forgive anyone who dares move against my family. Cousin Julius, please rest.”

“How did you know?” asked Elvira.

“éclair reported the incident,” he explained, “-the news over social media, Julius had an accident.”

“Heir to death, inheritor of Origin and Time’s will, you understand what’s at stake. The vessel of which thee bear won’t survive an hour in the underworld. Immortality from the death element’s restricted – as for the vampire blood, what will it serve against higher-realm beings.”

“And, should I yield?”

“COUSIN!” fired an outburst, “-Aunt Courtney accepted her fate, she knows more than we do. Here, ‘live a great life for the both of us, mother has to take care of old matters. She’ll figure a way out of the situation, enjoy the life which is to come, I consider my days spent here to be worth every bit. Remember, I’ll always love you,’ don’t you see what she means?”

"I'm not conceited," the arms lowered, the shoulders dropped, "-I know my weakness, most of all, I know what's important to me. Without her, I wouldn't stand here; she rescued me, tis time I repay the favor. I'll be back shortly – I promise, we'll celebrate thy union together."

Chapter 729: True Demonlord [60] [Finale: Part 1]

"You realize the trip could be a one-way ticket to a land of no return?" wandered around his memory, a magical circle lit in an expansively empty apartment. 'Here we go,' the thumbs slit, blood doused the lines – a weak lighted portal opened, '-Vesper's worries were well-grounded. Servants of Hades' tried desperately tried to invade in search of mother.'

The recanting of magical words, the layout of the circle, the underlying emotion of ire sufficed to alter the Shadow Realm's weather. Clear streets of Rosespire washed in a sudden downpour, the four generals watched gravely through the castle's various windows. 'Igna's undertaking an impossible challenge.'

Clash, halted at the door.

"-good to see you, Intherna, how can I help?"

"Gophy," fiery hair, tangled and curled around her visage, shot up in distress, "-Igna's in trouble. Miira says he has no chance of returning alive."

"Yeah, I doubt he'll last in the Underworld," her longing stare switched outside, "-I watched the play unfold. This is most likely a ploy to lure him, there's no way Hades cares for his wife. Miira, Lilith, and I have concluded the following, Igna will surely die."

"Then?"

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"We can't intervene. Trust me," the fingers curled, "-I'm powerless at the moment, I'll make sure he wins, no matter the consequence," she leaped to the entrance, "-relay this message to the Generals, be ready for battle and don't act alone," her black and white figure disappeared in the castle's hallow hallways, '-Igna, we've watched thee fight, the struggle and powerlessness. Every death is painful and traumatic, still, the strength boasters the realm. To the effort, the Shadow Realm expands and perfectly recreates the Overworld. I'll finish my task,' she grinned, '-our mark was always to overcome odds.'

A whirlpool of cries shifted the large room into a cave; lanterns lit the path periodically, '-must be the walkway into the underworld,' he inched carefully across a thin bridge, either side boasted an endless drop. The darkness didn't once flinch upon looking down, closer inspection showed the lanterns to hover about.

"Igna Haggard," bells twinkled, a boat swam into viewing distance, the prior bridge turned wooden; lengthened into a humble pier, "-welcome to the Abysmal tunnel."

Stepped onto the edge, "-Charon the boatman?" he inquired suspiciously.

"I won't fight," replied the boatman pulling to the pier, "-boy, you're foolish to visit the Underworld in a mortal vessel. My duty is to guard the entry and give safe passage to those who've made it thus far. Heed my warning, return or enter, I respect the choice no matter the consequence."

"No fighting," he exhaled, "-I thought you'd be the first to draw blood."

"No, wrong, I only engage in battle when the situation dictates. I see no reason to partake in childish games. Igna Haggard, lady Persephone, now named Courtney, was a good friend of mine. Her escape was foreseeable, the son didn't take lightly to the betrayal. Hop onboard, Igna, the journey is short, I'd advise being at the ready, the moment we arrive, an army will wait."

"Thank you, Charon."

"Worry not," he whistled, "-a boatman needs but a few gold pieces to be convinced."

"I forgot," a sack summoned and dropped, "-here we are."

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"Good," he smiled, "-the fee's been respected. I, Charon, Guardian of the Abysmal Tunnel, grant Igna Haggard passage into the underworld."

Hot to the skin and warm to the face, a blink left him speechless. Charon's back was spotted floating away from where he stood, '-this is the Underworld,' the sheer drop underneath his feet made skyscrapers in the overworld seem childish. Floating isles held forests, volcanos, and armies of small creatures. A gargantuan castle hovered over yonder, no sun save the brightly lit ceiling, the hue of yellow, red, and black, consisted primary colors.

'No time like the present,' *Death-Element: Unleash Aura,* a cloak of black, signifying his powers – would certainly grow rampant in the overworld, here, the aura looked little more than a thin layer atop the skin, '-I've bitten off more than I can chew,' the skin crackled under the heat, '-lower a human fall in the underworld, the harsher is the oppressive power. I'm on the first level.'

"Igna Haggard," hooves halted in a neigh, upon glancing back, the headless horse gave much to think in terms of where the sound originated, "-tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance. I heard about the exploits from Cimi, the dimension sure is a nice place. Luckily for you, the entire realm is under the protection of Death and Creation, meaning, my father wishes not to enter or act maliciously to the inhabitants."

Fingers made for Orenmir, "-don't bother," returned sharply, "-drawing the blade will only accelerate thy death," *slash,* a dagger ran through the back and into the front, "-I can kill you anytime I want," returned to the prior spot, "-a human tries to fight with such a weak aura. The oppressiveness of the underworld, feel it?" both arms stretched to the ceiling, "-tis the domain of Hades, an accumulation and reflection of his strengths. As his son, I'm in line to control the powers," *clap,* they teleported.

"Here, the jarring landscape need not bother us. This tower is the stairway to the lowest level conveniently named the Demented Floor. You've come to save the bitch you call mother, right?" he smirked, "-earn the right to face me, face us. I'll give a word of warning, there are a hundred floors, the lower you get, the stronger are the monsters and the fiercer the oppression. In comparison, an angel tried to steal the Tear of Sohna on floor 30, he was discovered shrunken and dead from the aura alone. I'll be off," he jumped, "-the tower holds part of my army; the time limit is thy surrender. See you soon.'

'How courteous of him,' the choked breathing ease, '-a dungeon, very convenient. Guess it's time to fight,' *Blood-Arts: Enlian,* the physical abilities heightened, '-the mana is scarce, summoning Mantia or

the realm is out of the question, my inner supplies will only last so long. Nevermore will unleash the reserves, a battle of attrition begins.' Howls of the undead rose in tandem, craters sprouted disfigured beasts, *Woosh,* '-the numbers are a problem. I don't see any gates leading down,' he ran and swung, '-the level has to be cleared before advancement,' skid to a stop, the figures lined conveniently, a leap and heads fell into smoke, '-first level down, ninety-nine to go.'

"Why are you here," *spat,* "-Zagreus."

"Persephone, never mind, Courtney, I'm happy to report your son is on his way here. Too bad he thinks he can conquer the tower of Daie, every five floors, a floor guardian waits, the more he wins, the harder it will get. Even if he makes it down here, the rest of my army will kill him before thine eyes. I can't hope of a better way to make you suffer."

"..."

"No answer, sure enough."

'Why are you here? I said to leave me behind, damn idiot.'

Huff, puff, '-floor guardian of level five,' blood coughed, the left-arm laid in a puddle of famished beasts, '-if this is the level, I'm a lost cause,' *Come Forth, Vengeance.* '-huh?' no response, '-I can't use Mantia even if I wanted. The Underworld is basically Hades' domain, summoned another is virtually impossible lest stronger, damn,' Tharis unholstered, '-I'm not giving up,' *bang, bang,* the boss fell, stairway below opened. *AHHHH,* "-MY HEAD."

The arm reattached, '-five levels in and I'm already at my limit, the monsters aren't strong, tis the actual aura of the underworld, the pressure makes it worse, '-forget using my left arm, reattached and useless,' Blood-Arts aided in sowing the limb tight to the torso.

Floor 10, *Stab,* rapiers impaled him to the wall, *bang,* the boss deflected the attack and delivered the last strike, the sword arm grew limp, the knightly guardian, slim in the frame and quick on the feet, showed the back and walked, '-death and I are the same,' a burst of black had the knight shudder. The rapiers fell, Igna's demeanor altered to a state of mindlessness, '-kill everything,' two steps forth, the hands senselessly made for the knight's neck. Haste on the reaction, countered by striking at the open palm, the blade hit bone and thrust out the other side, "heh," he laughed and pushed through, digging his wound and grasping the neck, "-life is naught but destine for death," the grip crushed the knight's neck. Blood poured, the hair, white and red in color, bleached to pure white, the pupils turned red; the symbol of power activated.

'Forgo thy humanity and embrace the pits of darkness.'

'Forgo my humanity?'

'Yes, Igna Haggard, remember, we are the same, the past, feel the blood lust, feel the ire, embrace thy inner self. To fight a monster, one must become a monster, to fight a demon, one needs to be the devil himself. Ignore thy bodily pain, forget the small details and focus on one word, kill, let the body move – tis the surest path to thy goal.'

'Who are you?'

'Me? No one special, no one who needs to be called upon. We're the same, body and spirit, take a deeper look inside, the powers are yet to be unleashed, heed my warning, delve into the abyss of curses and there's no guarantee of thy return.'

"Nothing is guaranteed in the world," he smirked, two senses of self, both bearing the same smile, merged into a singular entity, '-power of the curses,' consciousness reawakened on the tenth floor, the guardian laid at his feet, '-the curses I've accumulated in my prior life,' ancient marking bore themselves into the legs and arms, symbols went from the feet to the neck, '-here I come, Zagreus,' the wounded left arm healed, gaping hole in the palms shut, *Deep slumber, deep rest, awaken for the chance at retribution. Gate of which stands before mine way, open for thy master has come: Nevermore – Hell's Gate.*

"Zagreus."

"Huh?" returned a disgusted glare, "-what is it, Persephone?"

"Word of advice, never push a man to his limits. Time inside the tower Daie moves on faster than the outside."

"And?"

"I felt the wave of someone very powerful, he's reawakened."

"Shut up, woman, I don't care for thy words."

Floor 15, each stroke, each swing, every move was reckless, any mortal wound healed instantly; constant pressure from the realm burnt the skin of which regenerated.

Sharped claws dug into the chest and pulled,(crashing the heart in a firm grasp) the life drained from Igna's eyes, '-not yet,' *slash,* a downward stroke chopped the guardian's head.

The deeper he got, the more the mind gave to the pleasures of killing. No magic used nor calls made to allies, consciousness faded into the very definition of death, legs and arms moved inhumanly, two deep crimson glares permeated across the battlefield, '-death...' progress was slow, neither did he overpower the opponent nor did he use wit; death after death, burnt, frozen, crushed, impaled, the method didn't matter, eventually, the monsters would run out stamina, there the true terror veered its face, '-I'll kill you.'

"The Shadow Realm's growing stronger by the second," rang across the throne room, "-Where's Gophy?"

"No idea," replied Lilith.

"Call on her right now," fired Miira.

"I'm here," she teleported, "-what's the matter?"

"The realm, we've transcended limits imposed on reality – the core keeps on strengthening, there's no end to the evolution. The world's an exact copy of the overworld, building and all. Other words are being birthed as we speak, the shadow realm's about to reach its peak, once we cross the boundaries, we'll be able to use our abilities without worry."

Thud, “-there, it’s doubled again.”

“Should we not be celebrating?” observed Lilith, “-the stronger the core, the more power the master can summon from the Shadow Realm.”

“I get it,” added Intherna, “-we’ve lost contact, he’s inside someone else’s domain. The stronger the core gets means the master’s died.”

“The ultimate sacrifice, the instant the mana runs out...” voiced Miira

“He’ll die,” added Gophy.

‘Kill, kill, kill,’ level fifteen, a greater demon, ‘-kill,’ he smirked, ‘-I’ll kill you.’

Chapter 730: True Demonlord [61] [Finale: Part 2]

Combine half a dog and a goat’s head, the body bore a buffed torso, four arms, legs parted evenly into eight limbs, each exhale brought greenish fumes over the already decrepit singular landscape. Floor one till floor fifteen, the scape never once changed, barren land kept inside a humongous huge area, tall ceiling and longer crusted ground.

“Human,” escaped from the beast’s mouth, or what would be called its mouth, on closer look, the latter was naught but a slit in the tangled mess of an evolution, “-why persist. The battle is lost,” an army of similarly shaped ghouls broke through the walls and ground, the pressure increased ten-fold.

The man in question shot a discerning glare forward, a mixture of hatred and hot boiling anger stood against the mess of a physical form. Extremities of the fingers were nulled, pale skin burnt, unable to regenerate, displaying a sight akin to molten magma, albeit, redder in the constitution. No words escaped his mouth for it to be used in heavy pants, uttering word seemed battle itself. Burnt fingers soon clenched the blade, ‘-kill,’ mumbled.

“Attack,” said the beast, pointing, “-tear him to bits.”

Perception over reality could be farther from the truth. The bellowing mindlessness of inside, showed heftily on the inability to properly stand nor talk, gleamed from the freehand, a tiny speck of white diffused to encircle his position.

Groans leaped, famished and deprave, onto death. The scarlet gems briefly flashed forward, slashing the impatient. Kill-zone went into effect, the body subconsciously adjusted.

“What’s a few attacks,” cackled from the side, “-death will come,” the beast faced upward. An enormous mass, boulder in appearance, bearing smooth edges, impacted the ground instantly. Tremors permeated, vestiges of the smaller beasts blazed into ash, smoke rose to encompass the area. Scattered footsteps rhythmically traversed the now fog fill wasteland. *Cough, cough,* ‘-kill, I must kill.’

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“Still alive?” thundered the greater demon, “-human, your strong-willed,” one of its legs rose, “-no matter,” needle-like resemblance gleaned, “-death to the weak,” it dropped like a guillotine, short to

stop at Igna's eyeball. Lower half of his body was crushed, the intensity of the fire tore remainder of the upper half, skin turned through to bones, flesh only existing in a darkened state around his face, of which being a hallowed display. "A painful death awaits, pitiable human," the pin slowly touched and impaled into the very face, "I relish in the dread of another," hastily pulling out, the assault volleyed incessantly. "suffer, suffer, suffer."

'Death, I'm dead, too weak to continue. Leaving the reins to my anger was a bad idea. I can't save mother, I can't save anyone, who was I kidding,' the sharpened needle kept assaulting, he watched, unable to blink, till the light faded into darkness. 'No feeling my legs, my hands are done, my body's at its limit. An object of war, how fucking childish, did I really think giving to my urges would suffice to fight in another's realm. Pathetic, even by my own standards, I've fallen low. My powers are to kill, not protect, and definitely not assaulting a supreme being, how conceited can someone be. Mantia, expanded domains, shadow realms, who gave me the right to think I will be on equal standing to them. This is pointless,' life drained, the internal mana reserves exhausted, *-Nevermore – Release,* nothing, the pressure of the realm pressed with Igna in the middle, the body dropped, the assault stopped, "foolish human, dying in such a place. Suppose the trip to the underworld hastened. Stay here a while," it faced to the center, "the boulder shall mark thy grave. Making way to my floor without adequate protection is commendable, rest for the afterlife will be most restless."

"Oh, there we have it," snickered Zagreus perched atop the skeletal remains of a tree, "Igna Haggard's dead."

"No," she fired, "he's immortal, there's no way to kill!"

"Wrong, Persephone, do you think we daft, for the love of what's right, take a look around, the realm is under our control. Since Lord Death's assault, off guard, as we were, countless years have gone into the construction of the realm, the anti-god tower. Mana's stiffened, the aura's akin diving, it increases infinitely until the attacker implodes. He had no chance," he said proudly, "he thought he could rescue you," they locked eyes, he spat in disgust, "father would have been better off never meeting you. Why," he emphasized, "WHY," the glare scanned up and down, "why did he fall for something so ungracious and ugly."

'The connection is ruptured,' she exhaled, 'Lord death,' helplessly bound to the chains, her messy short hair stared vaguely to the tower, 'I failed too, your heir's death, unable to reach forth, unable to act. Perhaps it's time for me to bid my farewells,' her melancholic eyelashes fluttered to her right arm, 'if I separate my soul from the weapon, it should return to Igna to then truly activate his powers.'

"Not going to happen," returned Zagreus, "lord Death, conniving as he is eccentric, forgot to mention, the weapon Daemonum Gladio is little more of a shell. The Death Reaper's lost its scythe long ago, the curse of misfortune, always forced to face death and chaos, fake. Convoluted lies to hide the truth, the price he paid was the very sanity and welfare of the future death reapers. I've seen it time and time again, wielders of death magic are foolish creatures – some able to use their minds, others manifesting the true might of the element – the truest embodiment of death. Alas, the shell which is Igna Haggard?" the head shot back mockingly, "worthless."

"Is he here?" a portal manifested. Preciously cared for in appearance landed in a burst of light. Feathers and dandelions periodically manifested to then fade.

“Lord Lucifer, I welcome thee to the Underworld. Hell and us must bear many o’ things common.”

“Zagreus,” a gentle smile fired towards Courtney, “-a job well done, Zeus wasn’t informed of our deal, was he?”

“No, no,” returned a confident laugh, “-my word is more important than anything. The current heir to death lays trapped in the tower. I had a look, the symbols of power have merged into a singular entity, one bound to him alone, the only way to extract is to either steal the soul or merge with him. I recommend the former, the boy is repulsive, to say the least.”

He walked to Persephone, “-how entertaining,” the back hunched in deeper observation, “-if the death element is unable to be transferred, there’s no point in following my plan. I honestly don’t care,” he grabbed her chin and pressed, “-other paths opened to acquire greater strength. Do with them what thee may, the man’s no threat, death is no threat. Second most powerful entity, how laughable. Zagreus, our deal ends here, do what thee wishes, I’ll fulfill the part of our agreement,” an army of marked angels hovered into sight wearing rags and chained by a black orb, “-offsprings of goddesses we impregnated. Most of ’em turned to be boys; therefore, I won’t take the blame. They are easy on the eyes, no difference save what’s under the rags. The powers are my guarantee. Off I go, take care.”

“Hahahahaha,” head into his palms, “-I’ve done it,” a dozen childlike characters knelt on Courtney’s platform, “-the holy power of the angel’s mine to control. Look at them, WATCH PERSEPHONE, tis true power!”

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, making a deal with the devil?”

“Disgusting,” the laughter died the moment her voice carried into his head, “-the deal’s out the picture, I’ve gained what I wanted. Hear me, slaves, for today forth, I shall be thy true ruler, obey my every word, else, I’ll slit and deflower thy angelic purity. A fallen angel is often very strong,” the statement sent shivers, “-I’ll have other, let say, adventurous companions who’d want to experiment. Persephone, I sentence thee to a life of misery in the depths of the underworld,” *snap,* four muscular figures summoned, “-don’t worry,” the singular pillar swapped into a rectangle, “-I’ve summoned the best torturers we have. The pain will be constant,” her hands and legs were bound and spread across, “-suffer and despair, the lady who wronged my father, may light never shine upon thee,” a neigh echoed into standard screams. The captured angels watched woefully, any attempts to speak triggered a shot of mind-breaking pain.

“Don’t speak,” she mumbled, the torturers began to test the equipment, *tsst,* boiling hot mark burnt onto her chest, she gritted, “-close y-your e-eyes. I-I-I’ll be f-fine,” the hooded silhouettes bent atop, giggles escaped, ‘-Igna, I’m sorry.’ *AHHHHHHHHH!* machine churned, lava flowed to her ‘bed’. They stabbed, poured mercury into her ears, and focused on a human’s most sensitive parts and skins. Excruciating pain shot in waves; her torture began under the innocent angels’ gaze.

“Enough rest,” spoke from within, “-Igna, wake up, my other-self. I apologize for letting the emotions run wild, I wanted to assess the current state of mind, in conclusion, you’re still the only one who I’d trust. Wake up, there’s much ground to cover,” the face regenerated first, arms, bones coated in ligaments, clambered from the pillar, a reddish goo channeled to the remainder of the bottom half, ‘-while thee regenerate, I’ll recount the story of why Death abandoned his weapon for the sake of another. War of gods and demons had a short but lasting peace. In those times, the gods had a world

they called their own, similar to the one you live in. Their life occurred in the blandness of ways, they found love, made children, and basked in the sun's gentle heat. Trust terror rose when a certain being, a product of a god and demon, rose to prominence. Conflicts were commonplace, the same children were sent to fight for the greater good, and in those harsh days, the one you call, Master, the current Lord of Death, reincarnated as the vessel. He single-handedly won wars before the reincarnation, the latter being forced upon him by Creation for the strength elapsed and had forced balance of power. Tis not of importance, nor will it ever be, what you need to know is lord Death was reincarnated and was the reason for the war's resumption. Demons led by the titan demon god, Extronious, attacked and laid waste to the heavenly realm, killing his loved ones in the process. Around said time, Persephone was also born, and became close to lord Death, a brother, sister relation grew. Years of peace, we speak in centuries, laid on the verge of collapse – the death of he who he loved swallowed the world whole and killed everyone and everything. Most survived, the war resumed tenfold. The reputation of World Breaker shunned his stature before the gods. In the end, unable to get revenge, the man vanished into the multiverse, training, studying, and growing to be strong. Around said time, a wandering kindling of a demon, named Lucifer, barely escaped from the holy army and fell onto the hermit's home. The hermit, obvious as it is being Lord Death. One by one, Lucifer's siblings were natured and cared for till Extronious reappeared in another domain. Aided by the titan god, Kronos, they fought and eradicated the titan demon god, efficiently dealing a massive blow to the titans. Sometime in the century of battle, Persephone was abducted by Hades to halt the godly army, there, Lord Death singlehandedly invaded the Underworld, yielded his weapon to save the only family left. The tale of Lord Death is one I can't chronically recount, neither will it make sense nor does it affect the current state. The woven tapestry of fate will always loosen and weave into an altered image. When Lord Death returned to a shared domain, he found himself surrounded and helpless – to protect the seven-demon child and Persephone; a forbidden spell, requiring his death, was utilized to wipe the memories of his existence from the lower masses. Destiny altered – Persephone transmuted into Daemonum Gladio and spend her life in relative peace. The man you call mentor is a hero through and through, the reputation of world ender and a merciless killer is true, the pain drove him to ruthlessness, and here, Igna Haggard, my other self, stands a crossway of similar proportions. What will you do?

'Simple,' clambered to a stand, '-do what my whims dictate.'