

Death Magic 641

Chapter 641: A Relatively Bloodless conquest

Metal into a cushion, the unknown stared unbothered by the hammer. The lashes flickered to a traumatizing gaze, the heroes, having witnessed Thor's power, remained baffled. The weapon fell and cracked the floor, "-Son of Odin. I spoke the truth when I said death had come," a simple gesture enveloped the throne room in a mystic coat of nothingness. "To watch the fall of a kingdom, what a pleasant sight," he said ominously. The frigid walls of stones glazed with a comforting white hue. A hemisphere kept out from in and vice-versa.

"Who are you?" fired Thor.

"The king of monsters," he replied, "-Mjolnir a damned weapon," the tip of his feet held the metal-head, "-go on, try to call thy weapon."

"How dare you," lines flowed from the forehead outward, the normal blue color swapped for one glanced in a yellow sea. Electricity flickered, the air cackled, "-MJOLNIR," he thundered and held out a hand. The handle reacted by a violent struggle. He clenched to no avail; the weapon remained stationary despite the pull.

"How very unfortunate," said Igna, "-this feeble a thing must only be used to hammer nails," he reached and grabbed the beast, lightning of unworthiness exploded.

"You foolish," said Thor, "-Mjolnir knows only one master, and tis I. Any who wishes to steal its power must face the wrath of the thunder god."

"And the thunder god is you?" said a voice through the deluge of mini-explosions.

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"What are you made off..." escaped from the heroes.

"Skin and bones," he clenched the handle as if to strangle, the reaction matched one of the people being choked, the fierceness dwindled, "-How very precious," he smirked, the smoke cleared, "-a thunder spirit hidden inside a weapon."

"How dare you..." exclaimed he, "-MJOLNIR," a forceful tug and it escaped. "What's your purpose here?"

"I came for a visit," glancing the demon general, and monster corpses, "-good work on killing the fiends. The latter are very much resilient o' things. They learn, adapt, and outgrow the potential of fighters. Thus," he sat on the stairs to the throne, "-the reason to evoke powers from another world. This dimension doesn't have enough mana to allow for greater power, martial arts and weapons are the only bastions. Elemental spirits are stray and rare, granted, if one masters its power, they'll be akin to a demi-god."

"Doesn't answer my question," thundered he, "-I admit, deflecting my attack was impressive. Still, I cannot falter when the people need my help, tis my duty as guardian of this mortal realm."

"The demons have long preyed on our kind," fired hero, "-we won't stand by and watch. Look at the hostages," he pointed, "-maimed and tortured, how can people stand by and allow for it to happen."

"The ever-confusing question of good and bad raises," said he, "-from my point of view, you humans have tortured and killed my fellow compatriots," he nudged to the monster, "-I say the monsters showed mercy in letting the pest live," turned to the general, "-were they good enough as breeding grounds?"

"No," returned a woeful response.

"Breeding grounds?" gasped a hero, "-where they used as..."

"Yes," said Igna, "-a matter of fact," he smugly approached the hostages and gave his back to the enemy, "-they're in rather bad shape," he pulled on one's chin, "-pitiful creature. A horrid contraption of man and monster," the hostage but silently ignored his gaze. Prior pain and suffering spoke volumes.

Woosh, arrows lunged for the neck, '-how easy for them to fall for the trap.' Nails sharpened, he spun, took the head of five clean off their shoulders, *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* a downward gestured split the arrow vertically and parted along his cheeks.

"How sad," he said, the lifeless remains fell, "-if only you had chosen to stand thy ground, the ladies here would have been healed and released. Hostages were taken by my people ultimately become my people. As a servant to their king, they paid the ultimate price to serve as my muse."

Words fail to recount the pain they felt, the single motion in which the heads were cut, the emotionless response, 'devil,' they thought and charged. Thor watched and stared, the chosen heroes, compelled by a strong will for justice moved before even thinking. The mages and support stayed to provide enhancement, The four knights leaped, '-we'll win, we have the priestess of Olson guarding our backs.'

"QUICK, SHIELD THEM!" screamed Thor.

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"I c-can't..." her face paled.

"Word of advice," whispered Igna, "-don't bother fighting if you'll lose," *click,* the gentle sound of bells masked the slashes. Armor or not, vivid glances dulled to a stop.

Cough, "-don't underestimate us," said one, a revival potion snap, "-wit always wins against raw power."

"That it does," he sidestepped and gave the last stroke, "-only if your opponent is daft," the sword sheathed. "-Remaining heroes, I'd strongly advise against taking arms. The foolishness to realize weakness is one I abhor."

"DON'T TAKE US LIGHTLY," Thor teleported into his blind spot, a lightning-charged Mjolnir backed by tremendous brute strength made contact, "-it's over... vile demon." The expression spoke of hope, the evil was bested by a god.

"Try again," the heroes turned in horror, "-look at who he killed." Rosy-colored cheeks ghastly paled, "-the priestess of Olson."

'Impossible,' he trembled, the blood-soaked hammer fell before the gruesome aftermath of cracked bones, 'I killed one of the heroes...'

"Now, now," said Igna, "-the battle has yet to start," *clap,* the fluid atmosphere sunk into his fingers, "-what thee saw was but a glance at a potential future." Those killed were revived, the shattered Thor watched enviously.

"Heroes of other worlds, heed my words closely. I will kill every single soldier on this island and take back what the monsters reigned over. The king's ring conjured countless portals inside the throne room, "-go my minions," he proclaimed, "-fight to thy heart's content, your king watches dearly." Minotaur, hobgoblins, wolves, demon-spawns, insects, and countless others flocked outside. The war screams of victory marred by the sound of slaughter. Distant as it was, the screeching screams of dying men resounded physically and emotionally.

"What say you," he turned to the heroes, most of which were teenagers, "-how did it feel to be almighty in your world, being the only ones who could use magic. How did it feel to be praised and graced by a greater power, did it feel good?" Fear slit their tongues; the visages folded by the sound outside. "I bet it did," he patiently turned to Thor, "-a demi-god of brawns, I've heard thy exploits, and I dare say, you'd make a great opponent if thy life was on the line. Alas," he patronizingly held his shoulders, "-you're weak. My companions are far stronger than me. Trust when I say, them using their powers would break the dimension."

"Who are you?" whispered the priestess.

"King of Monster, inheritor to Death, Origin, and Godslayer's will, Igna Haggard."

"How did you get so strong?"

"By suffering," he said woefully, "-unlike you children, my stories started as a magicless boy working as a mercenary in a cruel war of magic. No matter," wings of a fallen-angel sprouted, "-an attack on me deserves a reply in full."

A flap bristled the interior, "-what's going to happen..."

"Are we going to die?"

"I think we are," they gulped, "-Thor, please, tell us what to do..."

"He can't speak," said the Demon general, "-the trauma of failing as guardian has shut him silent. If I were to guess, my lord has flown to meet the leaders of the allied nations."

"HA-HA-HA-HA," laughed a Knight, "-he won't stand a chance against the Templar Knights. I swear, the moment he steps closer to the royal palace, the movable statue of Glace will give divine retribution." Imagination and hope were naught but figments to what he wished to happen. A parade of goodwill sparkled the land of humans, a city surrounded by a cream-colored wall hid a magnificently advanced castle of countless peaks. Celebrations spanned the streets across, 'the vintage architecture sure brings memories of the good old days,' few flaps locked onto the imperial procession.

Blue carpet layered with gold-hosted knights of talent hoisting their swords. The opened roof-square arena accommodated nobles from the empire over. The pretentiously dressed imperial family

promenaded under the cheers of the people. The emperor chosen by the gods was akin to an angel in human form.

Woosh, a whirlwind spooked the ceremony. “-WHO GOES THERE,” fired the general, a line of knights wedged into a wall.

“A humble visitor,” the dust cleared to a sparkling young man of noble expression and attire. “-Do pardon the intrusion,” he glanced to the Imperial family, “-I’ve come to audience with the rulers of the alliance against the monsters.”

“Why?” thundered the guard, “-if thee wishes audience, do with the required procedures, we can have you executed for lack of courtesy.”

Bravado of the brave knight scored points with the ladies in wait. Impressed chatter from the stands had the man broaden the shoulders, other knights smiled under their helmets, and allowed the young recruit to have his time. “You heard the man,” fired the general, “-take your leave or face our wrath,” he pointed his sword.

“Impudent insects,” the eyes rolled defiantly.

“Excuse you?” interjected the general, “-mind repeating what you said, brat?” the wowing crowd spawn confidence, ‘-the limelight.’

“Yes, I said, impudent insects,” an emotionless scan of the area divided the crowd. “-I care not for weakling’s sense of hierarchy. Tell me, general, are your knights worthy of my sword?”

“OUTRAGEOUS,” cried the nobles, “-EXECUTE THE MAN FOR INSOLENT.”

“My, young boy, you have the talk, can it be backed?”

“How about a duel,” he smirked, “-if you can scratch my body, I’ll concede the fight. How about this, I won’t use magic and fight using my body and natural abilities.”

“It would be insulting for a general to fight a commoner,” he glanced to the recruit, “-he shall be a perfect candidate. I see no reason to sully my hands.”

“Pardon me,” interjected Igna, “-the duel is issued for every knight to fight against me.”

“THAT’S IT!” he spun and dashed, “-SAY YOUR PRAYERS!”

‘I knew it,’ the man ran in slow-motion; ‘-lack of mana forces the body to be weak. They’re barely fit to join as adventurers, is this truly this world’s natural ability. No wonder heroes had to be called.’ He thrust for the neck. A duck and an uppercut shattered the blade to the hilt, “-slow and weak,” he commented. The obnoxious crowd shut; the knights were taken aback. “I’ll formally reintroduce myself,” *smack,* a palm to the chest sent the general into the opposite wall, “-Igna Haggard, the King of Monsters, else known as the Demon King.”

“THE DEMON KING!” yelled the crowd, “-EMPEROR, PLEASE, GET AWAY.”

“SILENCE!” thundered the emperor, “-Igna Haggard,” he climbed down the stairs, “-have you come to kill us?”

“No,” said he, “-I came to evaluate your people’s strength,” they met in the middle, “-and I say, they’re not worth the effort.”

“What happened to Thor and the heroes,” the confidence blatantly showed in his expression.

“Defeated,” he smirked, “-I made sure to leave a damning message. I doubt them to ever try and attack us again.”

“Imperial Majesty,” cried the captain, “-please allow us knights to dispose of this miscreant.”

“Emperor,” he muffled, “-I’m not in the mood to slaughter weaklings. The strongest have been defeated without using magic. Tell me, should I destroy the empire to prove my strength?”

“Show me thy strength,” he fired.

“Very well,” *Mana-Control: Five Fingers Variant- Rainbow,” air, water, fire, metal, and earth hovered above each finger.

“Our world doesn’t have enough mana, how can?”

“I draw my strength from my domain,” he smirked, “-no matter the world, dimension, or universe, I’ll remain the same.”

“What do you want?”

“A deal,” said he, “-do not ever invade the isle of monsters. My people will keep spawning across the world as tis a good training place. In return, I promise the monsters to be equal to thy people. Beat us in might and skill, and I might reconsider and take leave from this realm.”

“What’s in it for us??”

“Items and money. Each monster defeated gives experience, in turn, the people will get strong. If they lose, tis death.”

“I see,” the brows pressed, “-I understand, you have a deal.”

Chapter 642: Natural Selection

Meanwhile, dusk loomed onto the red-light district. The newly refurbished motel stole the attention of many. Back and forth of visitors escalated into a slideshow of similar profiled figures. “Asmo,” whispered Kul, “-we’re being watched,” she peeped through narrowed curtains, “-I have doubts about the launch tonight,” she said. The mob boss waited with one leg over the other.

“Should we be wary?” he asked without much concern. The wooden floor before was filled with seductively dressed demons. All bore figures and facial features of actresses; the dissimilarities were added per the client’s request. Leches of carnal pleasures knew the art of enticement. Stairs clogged to the side and halted at the door.

“Come in,” the guest stopped short of knocking.

"You sensed me already?" exhaled a nicely dressed éclair. Top hat, a fitted suit, a lavishly carved cane, and a comfy overcoat, "-are preparations in order?" dark shadows hid the eyes socket, the casted gloom iced the guests with a single glance.

"Yeah, the aura's pretty intense for a spirit," the parted curtains shut.

"What about the uninvited guests?" narrowed Asmo, "-éclair, mind scanning them?"

"Goons from Alice's nightmare," he sighed, "-nothing that important. I mean, Kul can wipe them out pretty easily." The spoken tone set the feel for the whole room. Asmo's harem salivated at the prospect of potential prey. Demons weren't the only excited ones, the moment the clocks struck nine, traffic deeper in the district flourished. News of the gambling house spread using whispers. Ladies of the night sprinkled the bait of a place where easy money could be made. Preparations for tonight were throughout. Money talks, and so, the humble opening attracted attention.

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Roulettes and poker tables were filled, the stench of cigar and alcohol permeated. Ruffians were most abundant. éclair and Asmo partook in a friendly game of poker, they dominated the table. The drunks kept on buying in and losing. Once in a while, the luck of the draw would have the guests win. A mist of gambling and addiction spanned the floor.

'Here they are, the bait,' thought Asmo, '-I sent an invitation to Evalo,' the clock showed 22:30, '-for the first day, I say it went pretty well.' Blacked-out vans screeched before the entrance, armed men rushed, "-HANDS UP!" cried the masked men.

"We've been betrayed," whispered éclair.

"Heya," said Evalo, "-I heard you handled the crew of brothers." In behind approached men in baggy trousers, "-wrong move," said they.

"Evalo," glanced éclair, "-how much did they pay?"

"10 million," he said, "-ain't nobody stupid enough to refuse that amount of money!"

"You sold us out," puffed Asmo. The dealer shuffled cards without much of a concern. Petrified gasps escaped the few guests.

"Everyone, get out," said Evalo, "-we're taking over the building. Asmo, you better hand over the paper and not make trouble," the gambling rooms emptied.

"Evalo," cold stare befell the intruders, "-the property belongs to me legally. I paid the agreed amount. We decimated the 50 blood brothers' gang, what can twenty men do?"

"A lot," he smirked, "-grenades should suffice to destroy the investment."

"Grenades?"

"Stop talking," said the gang representative, "-we're taking over this place. Clear out people or we'll bury in the back garden."

“Foolish humans,” sighed Asmo, “-Listen here,” he teleported, “-I don’t care what you think, this establishment is rightfully the Raven’s. Trust when I say, make a move on this place, and I’ll be sure to treat the Vermillion family to an explosion.”

“Good try,” he chuckled.

“Oh, I doubt that,” a tablet flipped to display the damning locations.

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“You know the address, now what?”

“Oh, simple,” the screen flipped to an aerial view of a drone, “-this baby is equipped to fire rockets by a simple press. Care to experience destruction first hand?”

The bravado soon muddled, “-you’re not going to get cold feet now, are you, Esvalo?” frowned the gang member.

“See,” proclaimed Asmo, “-traitors and unfortunate profiteers will fall sooner or later. You betrayed us and allied to the gangs. The tables have turned, and we hold the advantage, quite the predicament. How does the two-faced leader escape this mess.”

“No, he’s fine,” fired the hoodlum, “-Alice’s nightmare is backing this traitor here. Raven is weak and unknown, I say, rot in hell, we don’t care.”

Other armed men swarmed the front, the vans neatly blocked the view to the public. Curious bystanders were welcomed by a gun or a foul-mouthed shout.

“Rot in hell you say?” a gust shook the entrance, “-I say think again.” Heels clopped menacingly until the entry, “-Esvalo,” greeted Kul, “-how nice to bring companions.” Warm droplets splattered the wall red, “-gang or not,” her blood-soaked palms wiped on his shirt. A feeling of doom buckled his knees, ‘-this is bad,’ went across the mind. The gaze slowly drifted to the side, *gulp,* any presence of life vanished. A pile of dismembered corpses laid on the floor, blood spread and followed the mildly inclined tiles.

“Why?” he said.

“Because you’re Asmo’s poker friend,” she glanced past and to the bar, “-have your men clean up the mess. Betray us and it’s thy head.”

A startling start reigned havoc. Schemes planned by the gangs were foiled one after the other. No matter the date and time, spies gawked vehemently. Kull took notice and cleanly disposed of the bodies.

A few days elapsed, Igna showed no sign of return, “-where’s pops at?” inquired an infuriated Saniata.

“On a trip,” replied Gophy, “-he should be back soon.”

By trip, she innocently referred to an idyllic retreat at a beach house. Her words couldn’t have been any wrong. The frozen tip of the monster isle cackled by the sound of thunder. Countless ships stride to the spawn of death, “-FIGHT MEN!” screamed the captains, “-the emperor has decreed humanity to revolt against the MONSTERS!”

'Brainless fools.' A chilly breeze perturbed the crimson-stained white hair, '-pride didn't allow for our agreement to be digested.' Flashback to the day of retribution, precisely at the time when Igna proposed the mutual understanding, "-I refute thy kindness," rudely said the emperor. "-A lowly demon shan't dare shake hands to an exalted being such as myself. Give us one month, and we'll face thee in a frontal attack. Will the all-powerful demon king cower before the might of our race?"

"Cower?" he spat into the wrinkles-ridden face, "-the way I see it," a spark of ire lunged for the emperor's neck, "-I could kill you right here and now!"

"EMPEROR!" cried the knights.

Mana Control: Ice Variant – Niflheim, ice froze to conjure sharpened spears, "-take a step and I'll kill everyone in attendance," *Mana Control: Void Flame Variant -Abyssal Wrath,* a giant ball of white and black eclipsed the sun, "-tell me, emperor, what is in it for me if I wait?"

"Salvation!" he coughed.

"Pitiful old man," the grip eased, "-see you in hell," *Dispel.*

The memories fuzzed to the present, "-Kaleem, Cora, and Yuria."

"Yes majesty," three shadows materialized, "-how may we be of service?"

"Go exterminate the humans. Today is when we strike the final blow. Kaleem, Cora, heroes led astray by the foolish gods, Yuria, fallen priestess of a weak god, you're the chosen three of the fifteen who perished. Natural selection has deemed thee worthy of inheriting the blood of demons. I see the horns are growing rather fast."

"As you wish, majesty," clouds of black puffed. 'They survived the grueling process of demonification. The world turned its backs for having failed. After my visit, they were teleported to the royal capital. Three days later, they returned to the island with two dead bodies and one severely scarred.'

"Demon-king, please," the snot-filled begging began onshore, "-help us!"

"Why?"

"Because we were betrayed, the humans rejected us for having failed. The emperor sentenced us to death, if not for magic, we'd have been hung."

"How can worthless shells serve my purpose?" he mercilessly ignored the fallen, "-the weak must perish; the strong will strive. Survive two weeks and I promise to grant an audience," the cold man flapped away, a horde of monsters rampaged their crash site.

'I never thought they'd survive. The horde was ordered to kill but was butchered instead. Cora showed signs of cunning. Bodies used as bait, he doused himself in the scent of the dead. Yuria used her abilities to create a tunnel towards an underwater reservoir. Kaleem, perhaps the most promising, singlehandedly stood his ground and fought day in and day out to protect the hideout. The more days passed, the harder it grew. The weak fell, some mauled, others drowned, and a few choosing suicides. The plummet from hero to zero broke spirits, shattered souls can never be reforged. Two weeks later, three battered heroes clawed their way inside. A single look sufficed, acceptance of their fate and alteration of their morals.'

"Hear us!" trembled Cora, "-we survived two weeks, please, allow us to join your ranks," a draft carried the stench of death.

"Impudent fools!" thundered the general, "-no hero can transition to chaos."

"General," coughed Yuria, "-I was rejected by my god. Nothing else matters in this world, I want to see it be destroyed, I want my revenge on those who wronged us."

"You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the devil," gritted Kaleem, "-accept us, master."

"On one condition," *snap,* chained hostages thrown at his feet, "-kill them," he said.

"Kill?"

"Yes, they're humans and also," familiar faces cowered alongside the crowd, "-the dead heroes have been revived. Slay them all, and I'll consider your allegiance."

The rest was a merciless slaughter of friend and foe alike. They didn't care, the mind and body wanted but one thing, revenge, and blood. Humanity gathered an army of 300,000 strong to march against the monsters. Man, woman, children, none mattered, the people were forced into war. To face the army, Igna chose three, the rejected and the powerless. A drop of demon blood transmuted the humans into half-demons. With it came the power to harness part of the Shadow Realm's power.

"Won't you join the battle?" said a whisper atop the tallest tower.

"Vesper, why the sudden visit?"

"Kul and the prince of lust are asking for thy return."

"Tell them I won't be long... no, forget it. Stay here and watch the conquest of a lower dimension." Sea of the dark had ships of various sizes making for his location.

"Isn't this unfair?" shrugged Vesper, "-those three are weak half-demons. If they push, they'll die."

"Wait and watch," he said, "-wait and watch."

Floating clouds flew across the island, "-Kaleem takes the left, Yuria, take the right. They're on ships. I'll use the water spirit to conjure the wrath of the sea."

"Understood, I'll bombard the right."

"Typhoon warning," said Yuria.

'Here's the moment of truth,' halted Cora, '-we were granted temporary access to the power from the Shadow Realm. The King of Monsters is truly strong, I doubt we can ever match his prowess," glances exchanged, "-regardless," a heavy upward motion rose the sea into a massive wave, "-revenge is a cold dish," he thrust, a tide of at least ten-meters crashed onto the center formation. Explosions rattled the right, the ships crumbled, the left had people and boats being flung across the sea.

"ARE YOU READY!" cried Cora.

"HELL YEAH!"

The auras linked, *Wrath of the sea, the wrath of the wind, and wrath of fire. Fan our burning ire, douse and drown those who've shunned us, and bury the lives we've taken. Combination spell – Three elemental Dragons.* Three giant entities crashed to utterly annihilate the unified army.

Clouds vanished, '-out of mana,' they fell, a vortex swallowed the remains of humanity's last attempt, '-in the end,' the bodies plummeted, '-we were used and cast aside by everyone.'

Poof, poof, poof, "-we're alive?" coughed Cora.

"Obviously," said Igna, "-didn't I say, the strong must win?" invisible palms cupped the trio, "-welcome to my family, fallen heroes."

Chapter 643: Fallen Heroes

Sun rose over the supposed land of dreams, the continent across the sea, a place of life in relative peace and comfort. Alas, as the morning's ray befell the isle of monsters, what stood wasn't a smoking castle, but a wreck of wooden ship parts. Binoculars were strapped outward the port, a nameless area without much consequence, as they'd leave soon. Four prominent figures gracefully landed on the harbor, waves crashed to sparkle as if gems, the droplets carried rainbow hues. The sea breeze hit; the coats flew; a single man led the charge with a grin.

"THEY ARE HERE!" cried a worker, "-NOTIFY THE GUARDS," he tripped whilst in motion to run, "-mercy," he rolled and begged. Yuria met his gaze with disgust and firmed the front.

'Amazing,' she thought, '-being in his shadow feels so natural. I don't want this moment to end,' a mutual line of thought carried into the other two, '-the respect I had as a priestess is but gone, I find myself standing as a true half-demon,' her slim horns were beautiful and elegant, the facial features and part of the teeth sharpened.

'Gratifying, the elation is greater than the good of humanity,' thought Cora, '-I want to follow this man to the end of the earth.'

'Fallen-heroes,' thought Kaleem, '-the title inspires confidence and a sense of purpose. What else can a man want,' they crossed into the harbor and made for a strangely lit portal. Bystanders watched in agony; a pain resemblant to an aching tooth.

"The fun is yet to come," said Igna, "-initiations will be conducted by my closest confidants. Shouldn't be much hassle as I've already given my approval." The air around the blurry portal pulled, and seamlessly, Igna allowed his body to float.

Radiant white, brown, cream, many comforting colors exploded into sight. The tile floor made for a greater work of art. Statues, works of art, and precious memories from the previous rulers.

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"Who stands there!"

"Death and his harbinger," said Igna, the shoes clopped out the shadows. The Emperor watched from his high stature, besides were his heir, two men, and a young maiden.

"Demon-king," he scowled, "-did our attack not work?" the footsteps were joined by three others.

"No it didn't," he stood defiantly, the heroes joined in a line.

"HEROES!" the princess darted down the stairs, "-what is the meaning of this?" her vulnerable pupils begged for answers. "-Cora, tell me, please, I want to know, why... why... why... we cared for-"

"Demon-king," said the first son, "-what is the meaning of such insolence, I thought we disposed of the heroes for their failures."

"No brother," said the second son, "-they escaped using the priestess's blessing." Noble-blood of in-bred, their limbs were rather unsightly. The princess, a bastard to her father, was spared the grueling ritual of 'keeping the bloodline pure'.

"Worthless," fired the first son.

"Silence," thundered Igna, "-my audience is with the ruling monarch, not small fries," the grieving princess marred his voice, her cries were louder than death howls, "-princess," he side-glared, "-it would befit thee to be silent. Else," a spark flickered above the index.

"I understand," she bowed to the corner.

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The emperor switched posture and waited; servants were soon ordered to leave the area. A messenger arrived with the news, humanity's last army was defeated mercilessly, none reached the island. Dragons of unimaginable proportions unleashed their fury, said the report. Humbled by the defeat, "-what is it?"

"The hard-headed emperor has finally seen the light," he stepped forward.

"Take another step," swords crossed, "-and tis thy head."

"PROSTRATE THYSELF!" screamed Cora, a tremendous aura hammered the guards to kneel, "-don't dare look at our ruler, weakling's art but ants, bow and be crushed."

Inconvenience out the way, he skipped up the stairs, "-last time we were this close, I nearly choked you out," leaned obnoxiously close to his face, "-Hey, I've won." *snap,*

"Princes and princess," he blinked back to where he stood, "-here we are, at the end of the war. The monsters have won, what remains of humanity is naught but farmworkers and nobles. The other countries were smart to keep casualties to a minimum. I'm afraid your father is the worst ruler a country could have. Not to waste time, these three here are fallen heroes, chosen ones you rejected and ousted. Despite our first bout, I made my point clear, I don't want the world to end, I just need my people to fight and grow strong. Humans fight against one another, does that ever strike as wrong? no, of course, it does not. Sadly, add a stronger foe into the mix, and human's frail sense of pride is tipped, thus where we are. What I offered were the monster isles to be recognized as their own kingdom. Yes, humans will kill monsters, and vice-versa, the experience is needed for both. Ultimately, the chance at revenge was swapped, the defeated had to be accounted for, the nobles and families needed answers, and the heroes were an easy target. Wipe hands and forget those who gave their home and lives to serve this damned country. I pity your people," the head shook, rage flamed in the trio. Flash-backs to those memories infuriated their very core. "-Mark my surprise with the fifteen washed ashore. These three wanted revenge, then and there, I gave the ultimate choice, death. Survival of the fittest, they outwitted

and outfought the other heroes, a dampened spirit is worthless. See, emperor, I rejected their advances, true, I won't deny so. Instead, what I granted was a way forward, a simple and clear goal. Survive for two weeks and meet me, thus, the three fallen heroes emerged from below the sea of corpses. Three I'm glad to have by my side, they'll be great assets. If only you knew how to train and motivate your fighters. One thing is for sure, the 300,000 were no match for my 3," on that, he tapped their shoulders and stepped back, "-go on, don't be afraid, speak your mind, I'll wait."

"Emperor, you're the worst person I've ever met," said Cora, "-goes for the whole nobility. I wanted to use my station as a hero to help the poor, help establish a place where warriors of the common station would train and join the army. I never fulfilled the goal; noble sons blocked the project from ever moving forth. Don't get me started on Clia and Mpeh, they were killed almost immediately after our return. If not for Set blocking the way, we'd have been doused in acid. I truly despise this kingdom," he glared to the princess, "-you too, highness, crocodile tears do thee no good. I went along your advances – the hatred for being shunned as a bastard fueled the scheming personality. I'm glad Yuria stopped me, else, I'd have been your puppet."

"Don't strain too much," added Yuria, "-Cora speaks for all of us, this country deserves to be burnt and destroyed. I don't care about the people; tainted land must be cleansed."

"I personally don't care," fired Kaleem, "-die, rot, or be saved, who gives a crap. I always hated how righteous we had to be, setting examples whilst the real leaders do what they wanted. If I was ever granted a single wish, I'd ask for heroes to never be summoned from other realms again."

"How very poetic," chuckled the first son, "-a demon-king and fallen heroes. What now, will you leave after wreaking havoc. I see the heroes are as two-faced as us nobles are. Running to the man who caused this ordeal in the first place, what does it say about the loyalty. I'm sure the demon-king thinks the same; those who turned their backs once can never be loyal again."

"Don't try it," glared Cora, "-the first prince, say what you wish about us, I'll never allow my master's name to be soiled by the likes of you.

"What's so great about a demon?" interjected the second-prince, "-they're ugly, always wanting to kill, and in general, are pests. The mere sight repulses me."

"Cora, Cora, Cora, Cora," her attitude shifted, "-why, why, why... I always loved you, and always will, why can't you accept my love, why don't you accept it. I'll do what you say, kill who you want, and be subjected to any hardships... love me, love me, love me," she crawled to his feet, "-please, I don't want to be rejected," her hair untied, "-if I can't have you, then we'll die together," the smile turned murderous, "-LET'S DIE!"

Smack, her head bobbed, the knife fell, "-how daft can a lady be?" sighed Igna, "-girl, tell me, is the dagger meant for the hero or yourself."

"Myself," down on all fours, "-I wanted the demons to win for the longest time. None suspected me, none... until you showed up. The sight of Cora being turned demon made me so happy I couldn't hold my tears."

"By the might of Thor," exclaimed Yuria, "-this girl is twisted to her core..."

"What now?" glared the emperor, "-the demon-king has won the war, what is the fate for our people?"

"Forgiveness. Don't misinterpret, the monsters will rule over the empire from today forth. The Imperial family is to become a puppet for our cause. If not acceptable, I can always conjure a world-ending spell."

"What about their revenge?" cried the first son, "-what happened to the elated quest to find oneself."

"Oh," he bit his thumb, "-it starts now, actually," *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* a dark-shaped crimson crystal punctured their hearts, "-to conquer a kingdom by force, one must either take the nobility or end the current bloodline. I choose the latter. The fate of the empire relies on the empress," a lovely vested lady escaped from the shadows.

"Why are you here!" cried the emperor, "-I said you to never step foot in the throne room."

"My, my," her seductive tone had the men gasp, "-our sons have collapsed and there's no shed of worry."

"Empress?" inquired the princess clung on to Igna's trousers.

"Yes," said Igna, "-or to give her real name, Heine, an elder class demoness."

"Did Vesper give my secret?"

"Oh yes she did," he clapped, "-mind turning the princes into demons?"

"Sure, replacing their personality and soul seems fitting," she climbed, her face and body altered, "-good to see you, darling," she caressed his cheeks and slit his throat.

'I was played for a fool...' the room fell silent; confusion hummed the melody of silence.

"Gather round people," ordered Igna, "-you too, princess."

A shrug led to the throne, where Heine sat seductively. "-Here's the truth," said Igna by her side, "-Heine here is a shape-shifter demoness, her ability to shape-shift elapses any short-comings. The real empress was killed and skinned for the disguise. The first plan was a coup. Intervention from the princes nullified any advances. My stewardess, Vesper, told me as I watched the slaughter, of her presence. Tis then I formulated the plan, we'd end the imperial bloodline and use demons to impersonate the rulers. Therefore, I proclaim this world to be truly conquered. State affairs will be left to-" a portal summoned, "-to my discretion," said the ever-watchful Vesper.

"What about me," sniffled the princess.

"Up to Cora," said Igna, "-the fallen-heroes have the last say in thy fate."

"No," she dashed for his feet, "-I want to serve you, please, please, please, please!"

"Cora, what say you, shall we spare her life or end it right here?" the nails sharpened, "-no matter the choice, it's yours."

They gulped, "-let her live..."

"Wrong choice," a swipe beheaded the princess, "-don't spare her life, use it instead."

Come forth, Box of Soul, the aura darkened, the lid opened to swallow the soul.

Box of Alche, a pool of crystallized dust built a heartless figure.

Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo of the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Transmigration. One moment death clenched her neck, the next, she stood clueless before her dead body.

“What’s this?”

“You’re no use to me as a weakling,” said Igna, “-I’ve transmigrated thy soul into the body of a homunculus, as of this moment, you choose who thee wishes to be. Fighter, trader, spellcaster, tis a new start, choose well and make thy demands, the body will answer thy plea, however, no reproductive organs will be assigned.”

“I’d like to keep my prior appearance,” she smiled, “-this is going to be awesome

Chapter 644: Combination of Symbols

‘I want to be a strategist, person of great wit and foresight into politics,’ wished the princess, ‘-I want my face and hair to stay the same. As for my gender, it doesn’t matter, man or woman, I don’t care. The loss of said useless organs doesn’t mean anything to me. I want my abilities to be stronger than the average human.’ Brightly shaped flower petals enshrouded the face-less figure, the bud closed to blossom into a man/lady of a high degree of class.

“Alright people, let’s head on home,” commanded Igna.

“Awesome you say?” a vortex headed by an annoyed-faced Miira swallowed the fallen heroes and the princess,”-return to your world, Saniata and Draconis have made a mess of the place.” A relatively weak domain claimed as his own, the king of demons returned to the world of Totrya. Purple marred with a soft orange blaze had glazed the horizon. “-What’s this?” he inquired, the always opened window blew refreshing gusts.

“Totrya is absorbing the conquered world,” said she, “-once the curse reaches correct conditions, we assimilate the realm and bypass the ruling god’s authority. Currently, we stand at a three count, that’s the fourth. Each conquest brings us souls and freshly ripened dead.”

“So nonchalant with the explanation,” said Igna, “-what about the people?”

“They live unbeknownst to what lays outside where they stand. Of course, the stronger of said people rejoin the elemental guardians of Totrya. The lightning humanoid of prior was a chosen hero from another dimension, he died without achieving much. Fate brought him to us, we kindled his talents to a behemoth of a fighter.”

“I suppose we’re reaching an end to this tale of gods and humans?”

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“Not really,” she sighed, “-as we stand now, regardless of the king’s strength, the moment we fall, it’s over. Our grounds stand on weak pillars. Totrya doesn’t stand a chance if either god or demons attack.”

“The idea of hiding in our dimension was Kronos’s idea?”

“Yeah, he’s made us invisible for quite a while. I had hoped our founder to acquire the symbol of power and create an alternate world, similar like you’ve created. The Shadow realm’s undeniably a work of art. Kronos’s sickle and Nike’s wings serve as power and catalyst. I dare say, regardless of a greater being’s power, the barriers of the guardians are one unbreachable. Why wait till you were killed to act out?”

“Doubt, confusion, and self-pity,” he said, “-I was plagued by the voices of people I allowed to die. My family, my friends, they all parted one after the other. I managed to move on with this new life, not forget my past, but embrace who I was and the gifts I was given. Taking on curses for my own was a way to justify the limitless flow of energy, a way to break myself, to give a reason to complain. In a way, I was weak, I played someone who I wasn’t.”

“What about now?” she asked.

“After Leko and Alicia’s death, I know for certain, my heart still aches deeply. A pain and suffering I can put towards another goal. Our world is far from ideal, the place is a wasteland of the darkest emotions humanly conjurable, a place I call home.”

“My lord,” said Vesper, “-allow me to say one thing. The death element is stronger than ever.”

“No, I refuse to think so,” he caressed the symbol, “-no way, I don’t believe it.”

“Reason why,” she gave a friendly smile, “-the excess power and double-strength after death are being used to fortify the Shadow Realm. A powerful element isn’t enough to be a strong deity, the latter needs a stronger dimension/realm to call home. A storage place for the abilities to grow and evolve. As a result, all painstaking spells with feedback had none to face apart from thineself. They tore you apart. Wielders of the Death element are never meant to have their own dominion, the second strongest entity is there for a reason, to keep the order of things. However, the Shadow Realm has changed the order of things, the element is free to evolve without ever disrupting the elder worlds. The Sickle of Time and Wings of Fortune are the best combination of symbols to harness, protect, and boost the Reaper’s scythe. I wonder if Lord death had a similar idea?”

“My mentor,” he chuckled, “-the tea-loving gentleman. I never knew he had such a plan envisioned. Then again, I never asked why he bestowed the symbols.”

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“And here, I’ll leave thee with this, the Nevermore gate has evolved to a higher level. The Death gate was elapsed by one unnamed and unknown, it will be present in due time. Farewell, for now, my king,” she bowed and a circle swallowed him tenderly.

“Till next time,” the scenery swapped for the same ceiling.

‘I’m home,’ he thought, ‘-the brightly lit sky, the date shows 29th of September. I was gone for quite a while,’ off the bed and into white-slippers, ‘-a higher-ranked gate, I know what she meant, it’s the full release of the Shadow realm. I didn’t pay attention before, my death always resulted in being twice as strong, the backlash perhaps made me weary. If what she said is true, the symbols of power are fueling my world, a place of relative tranquility. Wait until I claim Totrya as part of my realm.’

Knock, knock, “-I told you,’ Small feet chopped against the wooden floor, “-pops ain’t going to be there,” said Draconis with hands around his head, “-the old geezer ran off to another woman.”

“No, pops isn’t like that,” said Saniata, “-he’s a good man.”

“Shut up,” gasped Vanesa from the hallway, “-I hate walking...” her head horizontally peeped into the suite as did her hair in 90 degrees to the floor, “-food and rest, I need them...”

“Shut up sloth,” fired they simultaneously *Woosh,* the balcony slid, a flash of dirty green locks slapped their visages.

“POOOPS!” her pale complexion and dark-circled eyes glowed midair into a hug, “-welcome back,” said she in a quick slither on his shoulder, “-I missed you.”

“Good morning, Vanesa,” he reached and picked her by the shoulders, “-I missed you too,” he kindly caressed her gloomy cheeks, “-the leap from across the room is very impressive.”

“Oh,” she bashfully gave the ‘-shush’ with her tiny index, “-I used up my energy to greet pops.”

“How admirable of you,” focused on her, thought of the other two narrowly escaped his mind, “-POOOPS!” they speared him through the balcony, “-NICE TO SEE YOU,” screamed Draconis.

“Yahoo!” exclaimed Saniata straddling his chest, “-WE’RE ON A MAGIC CARPET.”

“I’m not showing you the world,” he murmured, *Blood-Arts: Partial Transformation -Fallen wings.* “A mid-air reunion seems fitting, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” said Saniata, “-where have you been?”

“On a long trip,” he said, ‘-is that?’ the outline of a chopper appeared out the corner, ‘-the damned Gaso Group,’ *flap,* he bolted inside.

“Everyone, run,” *snap,* a portal swallowed the children to the Shadow Realm, “-we’ll go shopping later, stay put for now,” feeble hands stretched for help to no avail, ‘-here’s how we die,’ coughed Draconis dramatically, ‘-rest in peace us.’

The stairs trembled, “-Aceline,” he slid to the kitchen’s entrance.

“Welcome back,” said she in a skimpy outfit covered by a white apron, “-I’ve readied dinner, would you like some?”

“What are you?” he facepalmed, “-cosplaying a wife?”

“Shut it!” she glared, “-tis what éclair recommended.”

He worriedly threw across, “-where’s he right now?”

“At the red-light district,” said she.

“God damn it,” he sighed, “-whatever, go get dressed.” The chops grew annoyingly close, “-someone from the Gaso Group has come to visit. Let’s not dilly-dally,” the initial frenzy calmed, the crystalized white-pupils bled to a reddened glow, ‘-time to play politics,’ he dawned the lenses. The chopper landed without much of a hassle, the rotors stopped and the door slid. A lady dressed in an old customary

styled outfit exited with the help of a bodyguard. Her blackish-grey hair was tied and supported by pins, the makeup was heavy and indicative of her heritage, the flower-crest spoke volumes, 'the Gaso group is here. What happened in four days?'

The feline-like glare befell one of a devil. He made no moves, not even a simple nod or smile. A hand-fan blossomed to cover her expression. Bodyguards led her to walk to the lift, "-Good morning," said she.

"I'd kindly refute the good about the morning," said he rather coldly, "-madam, tis customary to send news before visiting a stranger."

"Is that so," her fetching glance murderously turned to the side and watched, "-I was told to come without an invitation. Perhaps Lord Amsey is a bit preoccupied with the festival."

"None the matter," he courteously allowed her in, the gesture subconsciously triggered the guards to lunge forward, "-no," interjected Igna, "-my home is a place of quiet, I have children. Guns and humps of muscles aren't invited. If you are concerned with her safety, perhaps we may take a stroll across the roof and watch as the wind ruins the lady's well-catered hair." Her face spoke loudly of the discomfort, the fan did immediately hid the unbecoming expression, "-it should be fine," said she, "-wait here, we'll be just a moment."

And so, they descended to the lobby directly after the entrance, "-I'm quite intrigued why Lady Shino Pierre Gaso would make the trip to my humble abode." Leather couches made strong impressions.

"Humble is an understatement," said she, "-a lone-manor atop the peak of the town's most sought-after land. My sincerest condolences for lady Alicia's untimely departure, her fate sadly interlocked to her best friend."

"I wouldn't worry much, her death will be avenged, that much I've promised myself."

"I see," she suspiciously scanned his demeanor, "-about my visit," the fan snap shut, "-it's about the festival," he nodded for the continuation, "-the hype has been extraordinary. Ansoft and Apexi have joined to bring the event to an all-time success; world-renowned names have landed, everyone's excited. I tell you; the announcement drew people from all around the continent," the excitement was true, that much he sensed, "-your butler, éclair, recently sent my secretary a letter for a potential modeling deal, I know, I should have sent my secretary to do the negotiations... I'm honestly curious about Aceline and Kinless starting a band," she smirked, "-would you entertain the idea of joining my agency, Leina?"

"And where did?"

"On the Arcanum," she scrolled to show a video, "-Aceline's return, featuring Kinless." The video had over a million hits, "-everyone's talking about the Idols return. Tis the perfect time for a grand entrance, the fans want it more than anything," the idol entered with a tray of drinks, "-lady Gaso," she said.

"Long time no see," she replied.

"The decision is in her hands," said Igna, "-the band is centered around Aceline, her death was a ploy to seal her away from the corrupt land of Alpha. A native of Hidros and bearer of the Vampiric blood..."

"I understand," she kindly took the teacup, "-an immortal idol is unfair in its own way."

“Lady Gaso, as leader of our band, I’ll kindly refuse the offer to join your agency. Lord Amsey has already asked for our assistance.”

“-No way we’ll betray a close comrade,” interjected Igna. “-Meldorino sure has an interesting history with my uncle,” the brows accusingly layered on the stuffed expression, “-watchmaking went wrong.”

“Definitely his nephew,” she stood, “-I’ve discussed what was needed.”

A few minutes later, the helicopter escaped into the blue sky, “-why was she here?” wondered the idol.

“To put pressure,” he smirked, “-something must have happened when I was away. Tis the only reason I can think of; the offer was a spur-of-the-moment decision. No papers and no contract, not even a notice, very unprofessional.”

‘We ought to stand on edge. What plan does she have, Apexi’s in danger, the aura didn’t inspire confidence.’

Chapter 645: Fuel the Fire

“Wrap it up,” time displayed five in the morning, the chilly streets livened to the sound of early birds. The first-floor tremored by stumbles, many guests(of which some were passed out drunk) were escorted to the town square, a few meters in front, whereupon, the demons mercilessly dropped them into the cold floor. Consciousness would return sooner or later, waking beside the statue would best waking naked and mugged in some random alley. The gate shut, the locks tightened, and the sound of cash trickled down the hall.

“Job well done,” said Asmo, “-the days have been very profitable,” he puffed smoke. Various portals were summoned; the room emptied save for three.

“How much did we earn?” inquired Kul still weary of the spies.

“The gambling den made around a million, most of the profit came from this,” a packet of white dust attached to a string drifted off his index finger,”-the bartender did an awesome job sneaking the drug in their drinks. They’re hooked, and want more,” a half-smile later, “-let’s return home, master’s return. The place will be run by my right-hand man,” another demon materialized, “-he’ll do a fine job.” Surely enough, he cupped long wrinkled hands and hunched to say, ‘-the pleasure is mine.’

Life at the manor, was, let say, a bit hectic. After being forced into the Shadow Realm, the three wanted compensation. Thus, began a two-hour trip into town – they enjoyed part of what the town had to offer. A new gaming system, another instrument for Saniata, and a neck-pillow for Vanesa.

“Satisfied?” they slid inside the car.

“Very much,” returned the three, “-best day ever,” said Draconis.

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“Yes, yes, best day ever,” the car roared, ‘-envious gaze from the moderate. The majority of families and people live in abject poverty, not homeless level, but modest. Struggling artists and actors, shifty nightclubs, reclusive parts of town, the growing industry of adult entertainment. Past Stanley’s homage and towards home, the street life for unnamed hoodlums was rough.

Out here, in the harsh world of unnamed mobsters, the cruelty knew no bounds. A few people went missing in the course of two weeks, many of which were crucial figures for the entertainment world, more so for Ansoft than the other. Hereon began the struggle of a reject. Metal bat smothered in blood, a tied and gagged person on the chair, a single low-intensity lamp, ‘-my hands,’ it trembled.

“Good job,” said a short but plump man, “-he’s out cold.” After much effort, the man reached on before his overlapping belly to pick a broken tooth, “-a full-powered swing to the face, very cruel from you, rookie. Stay here and wait.”

The entrance shut; the bat echoed onto the cold floor. No response came from the prisoner, he watched in silence, ‘-why did I think the mafia would be a great place to start...’

Skip forward, the same man waltz in, “-no good,” he said snatching meat off a chicken leg,”-Amsey’s secretary says no, they aren’t paying the ransom. Kill him,” he ordered and clocked a pistol, “-press it against the forehead and pull.” The nights shrouded darkness hid the recruit’s perspiration. He gulped, ‘-oh god, please help me.’ Moonlight flooded the inside, *Hero-Arts: A thousand Sword of Retribution.* Windows shattered, “-dinner is on me people,” said Aki, the trigger pulled and death.

‘I’m dead...’ a bullet hit the stomach, ‘-the mafia is a hard life,’ another blasted the head.

“Messy,” grappled Camilia down the roof, “-no one around,” she reported.

“Understood,” echoed the leader’s voice, “-douse the man in potion and retreat. Aki, keep watch, shoot anyone on sight.”

“No need to tell me twice,” he leaned into the scope and fired, “-the mafia isn’t strong without proper training.”

“Stop messing around,” fired Tensy.

“Evac’s here!” tires screech to a stop, the elevated city skyline to the northwest brightly continued. Guns were shot, people were dropped, and the van darted onto the circular freeway.

“Don’t kill us, Ulia,” begged Kion.

“I won’t,” she slammed onto the pedal.

“Not to worry anyone,” they overtook plenty of cars, “-there are cars after us.” Whiteish outlines menacingly pelted in their direction, “-cause a crash or not?” inquired Aki.

“No now!” returned Odgar, ‘-if they take the next left, the red-light district will be close.’ No time wasted, “-Hello, éclair, my team’s being chased, can they stop by the motel?”

The sudden call arrived at the perfect time, “-What are you waiting for?” complained Asmo, “-we’ll leave without you...” they impatiently sat in a modest car. ‘Narrow streets,’ complained Ulia. Direction – the Red-Light district. A cacophonous yelp of the engine; gasps, swears from the bystanders, and warning shots.

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“Get out the car,” inquired éclair politely, a map drew on the phone, ‘-arrival in two minutes.’

“Why?” begged the exasperated Asmodeus, “-I want to sleep...”

“Just do it,” no wasn’t an answer. Hence, the duo compromised under an arched tree.

“Yes, Odgar, éclair speaking,” the dots approached, “-come right by, we’ll take care of the rest.”

The hung foliage danced per the morning’s breeze tunes, “-again...” her eyes rolled, “-I want to go home and sleep, the cold isn’t doing much for me.”

“No, this will be beneficial,” said éclair, “-a van’s going to fly by us. Kill anyone who’s in their pursuit,” shortly enough, a block of white aired off a ramp. Ulia’s sadistic expression had Kul in awe.

“NOW!”

Orbs of black dropped onto the chasers, no matter the speed and weight, the instant her fingers dropped, they glued to the street. 05:45, an action-packed 30th of September rose. Fast-forward a few hours later, and we reach the ‘food-train,’ of Igna’s manor. The dining hall easily accommodated the Odgar agency, Aceline, and the rescued hostage. éclair opted to care for the injured man.

‘Quite an ensemble of people,’ he thought and waited, food was carried over by an attending maid from the Shadow Realm. ‘The past four days have been hectic in the real world. Ansoft flew to Hidros to beg for Julius’s support. The latter accepted after signing a six-figure agreement. The idols would be paid according to their popularity and station. Publicity campaigns brought plenty of visitors to Ogdawoan. Amsey got into Phantom’s good graces. It makes sense, the kidnapping, Ansoft’s dropped in popularity, and the increased interest from the Gaso group. I sense a deeper scheme; a culmination of the events will lead to the concert.’ Lum’s helicopter rudely landed, Amsey allowed himself in and took a seat at the dinner table.

“Master Igna, I do hope my inviting our client wasn’t too much,” said Odgar.

“No worries,” he kindly enjoyed the bread, “-do as is needed, the manor is a commute for all.” For once, breakfast passed in a more or less silent environment. The true meaning of the visit would be cleared after dishes were sent.

“Succulent,” said Amsey facing the high-ceiling, “-my, Alchemist, are the food served here regularly delicious?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Suppose I should speak the truth. The conglomerates and I aren’t on friendly terms. The Gaso Group’s involvement in the entertainment world has made life a living hell for my brands. Ansoft, our flagship, has taken a lot of hits. The concert is the only way we can make a comeback, profits have been low. Let me say one thing when money is a dry, conglomerate or not, one’s doomed to fail.”

“What about the kidnapping?”

“Unrelated, or so I thought. The man’s one of my lawyers. They wanted to disrupt and add pressure for the coming event.”

“What then, Odgar’s brought the man home, what about the particular visit here?”

“To invite Aceline and Kinless to perform in the company of Julius and Xius. A gathering of great talents, the main event.”

“Let’s do it,” rose Aceline, “-I want to face the crowd again.”

Helicopters were immediately made for the newly erected festival grounds. The massive yard accommodated the stage and stalls with ease. The look from up above didn’t even see crowded. Adjacent hotels and sky-rise were oppressive in a good way(as in it were presiding guardians) don’t be mistaken by the time-limit of five days, the product was a city within a city.

“Looks amazing,” said Ulia.

“What happened to Inesa?”

“She’s taking a break for now,” replied Kion, “-the whole incident before cause quite the shock for us.”

The metal bird touched down at a neighboring skyscraper, “-where are we?” wondered Aki.

“My office,” said Amsey, “-the whole park is my Lum’s property,” he winked, “-why else would I host such a grand event.”

“Y-yes,” narrowed Aki, “-the adjacent buildings are rather inconspicuous.”

‘I heard that,’ turned Igna, ‘-the mention of buildings,’ he scanned the area, ‘-surely not... if I was trying to ruin an event of such a scale, how would I do it? Conditions are to cause damage without pinning the blame on my associates or me.’

“Something the matter?” said éclair.

“No, no,” they headed for the lift. Vanesa slept and so did the other two, ‘-it makes sense,’ they arrived at a studio, ‘-if I were the Gaso Group, I’d hire terrorists to reign down death from above. The distance and drop are almost perfect at key-location, hotels don’t have much security, add a few strays 1-3 stars hotels, and the game is set. I know their next move,’ Odgar and his team continued towards the festival grounds as did éclair, Asmodeus, and Kul.

“Igna, are you alright?” voiced Amsey, “-the face is paler than usual.”

“Mother Nature calls,” he smiled, Aceline’s frown didn’t impress. Xius and key performers were spotted in the background, “-I’ll be back,” he escaped.

The door locked, ‘-I need to confirm my hunch,’ *Dialing éclair.*

“Hello, boss, something the matter?”

“éclair, scan every surrounding building and infiltrate their surveillance system. I want each room to be combed.”

“Alright,” a few minutes later, “-nothing usual so far.”

“A bit too vague...”

“Boss, just tell me what you need.”

"I have the sinking sensation of a massacre.'

"Say no more," the details were forwarded, "-I'll be done in fifteen minutes."

'If what I think is right, then, Lum's going to fall further, Ansoft will take another major hit then crumble. I could stop the incident from happening, save Ansoft and restore the conglomerate's strength... or, I could ignite and flame the fire of revolt. Break Lum away from the five greats, ally them to Phantom and Elon's agreement and make a three versus four. Better odds, not to mention, the boost of Ansoft with Phantom might give rise to Hidros's market. All it would take is a massacre.'

"Master, the hunch was correct. A suspicious man has hauled in large bags ever since the announcement of the festival's location. What shall we do?"

"Let it happen and keep the damage to a minimum. If the victim count goes in the hundreds, exterminate the terrorist. Have Kul and Asmodeus care for the performing stars, not so much a scratch must befall them, have I made myself clear?"

"Yes."

Bang, bang, "-cousin, get out already, you've been in the toilet for twenty minutes."

"Julius," he flushed, "-how rude to perturb a man during a strenuous time."

"Defecation isn't an excuse..."

"Whatever," they locked for a friendly embrace, "-how've you been?"

"Alright, I guess," the face showed gloominess, "-what about you?" the few glances were subjectively generous.

"If it's about Alicia's death, don't worry, I'm doing better." Vorn and Xius waited in the corridor, '-what are they about?'

"Good to see you," said Emi, "-we're going to perform today."

"I heard," he chuckled, "-Vorn will join us on stage too," he nodded at Enna, the pianist. The entourage gathered to an amiable exchange, stories of times spent apart had everyone in laughter. The mouth talked and spoke of random words, '-tonight will change the very face of the entertainment district. How many lives will be lost?'

éclair stared on from the festival grounds, '-master, is this really the path forward?' he paused at the office.

"If the master says so," added Asmodeus, "-then tis as we must."

"Who cares," shrugged Kul, "-humans are despicable."

Chapter 646: Anti-Magic

Welcome to Ansoft' Music festival, fireworks radiated the skyscape in hues of red, blue, green, and more. The stage came with the explosive sound of drums. No order nor rules, people could follow the

stage from the 'stall area'. The production quality was worth its weight. Airships hovered to display the feed of the stage.

'Amazing,' planes trailed past with smoke, 'they're ready for the event.'

"My name's Misty, and I'll be your host for tonight," the cameras bombarded her face, she but smile and kept cool, "-its awesome to see so many agencies join and perform, I'm very excited. Without wasting time, the day will follow as such," she gave introductions to each artist and skid backstage. The small crowd gained mass, from stage downward, a view of the entire area sent shivers, dots came, came, and came to join as one.

"Good introduction," she slid down the handrail.

"The crowd is massive," said she parting her hair, "-Lord Amsey, I never expected the event to pull in so many spectators."

"It's free after all," he said, "-can't let the second awakening be wasted."

Further along, after the swarm of handymen and screaming managers, stood a rest area for the artists. In there, a curtain away from the changing room sat Vorn, Xius, S-Kiss, Aceline, and Igna. The conversation calmed by the pressure, they would perform later tonight.

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"I'm going to get a drink," voiced Suga, "-come on Emi."

"Guess it's our queue to get ready," winked the singer, "-catch you on stage, Kinless."

"Later Igna," waved Dei, the curtains parted to gasps from starstruck workers and relatively unknown idols.

"How is everyone doing?" wondered Amsey in the company of Julius.

"Good," added the melancholic singer, Yuna. Her black and white straight long hair marred and swept the attention from her attire towards her face, "-feels weird to be back," she said.

"I know," answered Amsey, "-you girls were supposed to be the stars to Ansoft someday," despairing over what-ifs held no merit, "-I'll content with what's remained."

"Sorry about leaving," said Enna, "-Ansoft took a deep plunge after our departure..."

"Don't be guilty," he held a hand, "-let's leave it behind us," her brown hair swayed to a stop, "-thank you." Misunderstanding cleared, Igna left the crowd for a quieter place. The overdriven sound of guitar scratched the very core of the cloudy afternoon. He walked, unbothered by the surrounding, 'I have flashbacks. I met Dei in a similar situation, a broken lady who couldn't play to save her life,' the grassy ground was churned into mud by heavy tires. 'I nearly forgot this is a park,' the leveled plain abruptly ended at the start of a long dulled tree line. He continued to a solemnly parked truck. Caravans were scattered along the premises. 'No paint nor branding?' The sound of heavy music split by a single note, 'what was that?' the eyes opened fearfully, 'a violin?' he inched close to the back. Workers unloaded instruments for the artists, the moment they saw Igna, an adverse reaction of fear pushed their glances

away. Whispers carried inside, “-keep the violi-” Igna stared up to a man and a younger man bearing features from Iqavea.

“I’m so sorry,” apologized the retainer.

‘No matter,’ said Igna by a simple gesture. The trancelike violinist, regardless of the overpowering music outside, slipped complementary notes to the current song. The subtle nuances of the pitch greatly altered the general feel. ‘This guy is something else,’ in the distance laid his guitar. Quick to plug the instrument, the handymen were bemused at the acceptance. The expression wrote the story clearly, insulted artists lashed on to the workers for allowing a stray to touch their instruments. Paying no heed, he leaned against a metal box and dialed the preferred setting. Few notes trickled onto the enigmatic player; the style was unorthodox. Igna’s shot broke the trance “-I’m sorry,” he said.

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“Don’t be,” returned he, “-pick up the violin and play. Let’s jam.”

“I wish I could,” the slightly woeful stare befell the retainer, who, in turn, shook his head at the ground, “-it’s hard to play...”

“Play what you want,” said Igna, “-I’ll wait.”

Pressure from the relatively unknown guitarist stacked, “-fine, fine,” he gave, “-don’t complain if it sounds bad.” To his surprise, the boy began to play erratically, the prior addition to the bigger picture shrunk to one of a nervous kid.

“Listen here,” strummed Igna, “-follow my lead,” said he in sound. The chords progressed one after the other, the pressure faded, long and grimy screeches swapped to plucks of melody. A tipsy Xius stumbled onto the now-empty truck.

“Igna...” yawned Suga, “-come on, let’s jam,” a few shakes of the head dispersed the high, “-Dei, get on bass, Emi, get on drums,” he pointed to a small electric set. An impromptu practice session mildly defused into the oppressive performance. However, without warning, members of Vorn escaped and made for the truck. From two, it grew to over seven. Lack of instrument meant most had to wait outside. Emi swapped for Sheiwai, her hair tied into a ponytail, the instruments stopped. Four clicks set a fast tempo, *smash,* the truck exploded in sheer grit. Playing together wasn’t an easily achieved feat. The impromptu session would prove helpful later in the night.

Thirty minutes later, the handymen arrived to carry the instruments back. Contact information was exchanged with the prudish boy.

‘Already two,’ the surrounding path led into the ‘stall area’. Business boomed, shirts, accessories, and countless games were played and enjoyed. ‘Is that?’ a strange man’s outline caught his eye, ‘-a member of the Vermillion Familia,’ he paused, ‘-what are they up too?’ the man vehemently stared over the crowd towards an upper area. ‘-Where is he?’ following the lead, “-I see, he’s a relay for the shooters,” the pinpoint location, a room at the Revirea on the 50th floor. Direct sight from the west onto the crowd.

A few hours later, the performances stopped for the entertainment of the crowd. Artists needed a break as did the countless participants. Thus, eating, guitar, and many more activities were organized. Winners went home with signed instruments, cash, or whatever was wished, depending on the request.

“A well-needed break,” said the last performers, “-the crowd is amazing,” they laughed.

After the games, another hour-long break served to calm and refocus. The main event would unfold, the crowd grew to greater lengths. ‘Time to perform,’ thought Igna, ‘-also about the time the terrorist make their move.’

“Gather around everyone,” hailed Julius, “-we’ll play for 2-3 hours. Everyone’s going to play, no spotlights, nothing, singers, take the show, Aceline, Yuna, and Emi, lead us to greater lengths. Guitarists; Kinless, Suga, and Nola, I’m expecting the greatest rifts humanly possible. Bassists; Morgaria D’hern Dei and drummer, Sheiwai, the groove is yours. Last but not least, Enna Vornia and Nerilina, you two will be our conductors. Tis an ensemble of Apexi’s greatest talents, let’s give them hell!”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be singing,” he stepped to tear off the jacket, “-don’t forget,” he winked, “-I’m a renowned singer.” Dusk loomed, the stage darkened, night arrived faster than expected. Differing clicks formed, ‘-look at them,’ wondered Igna at the back, ‘-excited and joyful for the performance. Do I really belong here,’ the guitar seemed to think otherwise. Short pink hair abruptly perturbed the thoughts, “-wake up,” she snapped.

“Come on man,” elbowed Suga, “-now’s the time to show the world what Kinless is made off.” The others climbed the stage in relative darkness, “-let’s have fun and enjoy. This is for us, for Apexi, let’s make Hidros proud,” the matured stare faced Aceline, “-for her sake,” he said, “-the Pride of Hidros must be revived.”

Time for the main event! screamed Misty, the lights flicked to a loud crash. Sheiwai saw blood. Yuna took the lead, she began soft and mellow, the piano and violin greatly accented her voice, four clicks followed to brisk nods, “-BEGIN!” the crowd jumped; the guitars and bass blew off. Dressed in a white shirt, black tie, and black pants, Kinless took on the classic look of an office worker. Midway across, Nola took a place in the rhythm section, Suga and Kinless locked into a shred contest. The rivalry spawned an alternate version of the same song; Emi supported Suga. Aceline supported Igna – Yuna ruled the upper echelon of the vocal range.

Song after song, the feeling changed, depending on what tone, the musicians would swap around for a better sound. Live broadcasts gathered in the hundreds of thousands of views. Nola and Kinless played back-to-back, pink hair fluttered beside white. Aceline and Suga interlocked, rivals of old were reunited. *Crash,* silence stole the breaths away.

“Viper’s Lair,” screamed Sheiwai, “-let’s play it.”

“Are you sure?” returned Dei.

“Try us,” refuted a confident Enna, “-let’s do it.”

“As you wish,” the tie loosened, “-come on Suga,” they leaped atop a speaker.

*VIPER'S LAIR!" screamed Emi.

"GO!" the tempo went beyond the original.

'Crazy chick,' gulped Suga, "-better match her!"

Time, 19:56, "-pop's performing," said an excited Saniata.

"He knows how to play," returned Vanesa, "-éclair, are we going home soon?"

"Yes, very soon," he said, '-they're on the move,' rifles were aimed at the crowd.

'Here they come,' the song reached the grueling lead, '-Ansoft's end.' *BANG, BANG,* gunfire disrupted the melody, *Bang Bang,* confusion set ablaze. The shooters went full-automatic, *Mana Control: Wind Variant – Feathered Wall,* screamed Igna over the microphone, "-EVERYONE, GET DOWN!" Magic didn't work, the bullet straightly cut through, '-they were fully prepared for mages.'

"What's happening?" turned the confused performers, the mass of people shuddered.

"We're being shot at," said Igna, "-get backstage."

Panic overtook any sense of reason, people dropped, blood-soaked wounded begged to be ignored. Each their own, a heavy mass of terror swung left and right, and ultimately made easier targets. The projectile also made for the stage, '-anti-magic,' snarled Igna, "-we need to run," a stray slowed inches from Aceline's head, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* the bullet split, he bled profusely from the thumb, "-too far," he glared and leaped into the pit, *Spatial Arts: Wormhole.* The frightened onlookers watched the dirtied white shirt conjure spells, "-calm down everyone," said Aceline, "-if there are any shooters out there, please, aim at me instead of the people," her hands pressed in prayer, "-please, take my life in exchange for theirs." A portal reopened atop the stage from which Igna dropped, "-contact the officials," the lights darkened. Guards rushed into the scene; gunfire remained constant. An injured Igna was hurled to the changing room, the vestment was lined with holes and blood, "éclair," he gasped.

"What do we do..." cried Nola, "-people are being killed... are we going to die?"

'Anti-magic,' coughed he, '-damn it, this is some high-level curse.'

"Take Igna to the hospital, we're evacuating," the worried plea faded, '-I underestimated the scale of the attack. They're intent on wiping the arena.'

"We can't move him," fired a manager, "-the traffic is jammed, we can't reach the hospital in time."

"I'll be fine," he stood, "-contact the heroes, the enemies using anti-magic." Vorn and the likes were silent, waves of confused workers ran out the back, "-leave this to us." Lodged bullets fell, the injuries healed, '-I died and reawaken stronger. The element is truly fueling the shadow realm.'

"Everyone," panted a security officer, "-the heroes have detected a large mass coming towards the park. They can't intercept it in time."

"Such foolishness," the aura dropped, "-Julius, keep the artists in check." To which he took charge of the evacuation, Igna's white shirt disappeared in two steps.

'Enough damage has been caused, you're not winning this fight,' teleported on a nearby hotel's roof.
Come forth, fallen heroes, black smoke conjured the three.

"How may we be of service?" the gust smacked harshly.

"Destroy the projectile," vaguely pointing at the missile, "-show them the Shadow Realm's strength."

"As you wish," they echoed. *Combined Spell: Three Dragon Whirlwind,* a ring formed to strangle the jarring object, *-be vanquished.*

Chapter 647: Hostages

Concurrently, inside a darkened room, surrounded by darkened screens, with the muffled darkened tone, spoke a council of unjust figures. None knew their name, none knew their face, the only link; the rich and powerful.

"How goes the trouble in the stadium?"

"People have been killed. My team says the heroes will not be able to catch the missile."

"Was it wise to plot such a genocide?"

"It is necessary, the council must decide the fate of the stray conglomerate. Any who dares to ally and join forces with outsiders must be punished. Alpha isn't a place to join hands and skip down pleasant playgrounds."

"Depending on the outcome, we might have to pull our weight and buy out Lum."

"Time will tell, followers, time will tell."

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The darkness of the room swapped for the dimness of the night. Three shooting-staresque figures fluttered to the unknown projectile. Gunfire kept the crowd in check, reporting officers raided the hotel one by one. The attack was well planned, traffic at such a time would prevent movement, the terrorists could escape with relative ease. Three heads of dragons spiraled to a bright flash; the blinding light forced the eyes shut. *Vanquish,* nothing remained, the night sky continued as was due.

"My lord," the winged angels fluttered to the edge, "-we've disposed of the nuisance."

"Very well," he said, "-I'll handle the aftermath. I do hope my companions haven't given thee a hard time..."

"No," added Kaleem, "-they're very welcoming. We get to fight all the time, color me impressed, the Shadow Realm is far better than our previous worlds." A unanimous nod cleared any doubt of forcefulness.

'Time to head to the Revirea,' he leaped from the opposing ledge. Panic followed to the roads, cars were briskly parked, ambulances, firefighters, and law enforcement rushed to the scene. The walk till the hotel was around fifteen minutes, heroes of great stature leaped from building to building. Bystanders paused to peer towards the area, billboards swapped for the news flash. *Reporting live from the concert,* helicopters circled, "-a wild shooters have..." and so she went on to describe the events.

Fear nestled the neighboring businesses, many closed in fear of a large-scale attack. The newly reinstated AHA held their weight. Soon, yellow tape barred the hotel, the shooters took the building hostage. Countless police vehicles, including a surveillance truck, were parked at strategic locations. The negotiations from the head officers pulled in crowds of curious onlookers. 'Situation's taken a turn for the worse,' he stood at the edge of the crowd, "éclair, what's the status of the evacuation?"

"Hello, master, most of the singers and artists have fled the area. Kul and Asmodeus are providing escorts. What shall I do in the meantime?"

"Where's Draconis and the others?"

"I've sent them to the Shadow Realm."

"What about Aceline?"

"She's in the company of Kul, they'll make for the manor after reaching the drop-off point." Behind him rose an audible cacophony of distress. The fatally injured were left without help, shorter statured were pushed and shoved, none cared. "I must say," he faced the area, "-the heroes are doing good work. The shield's keeping the bullets astray. Rescue operations are underway."

"I know, I know," replied Igna, "-the attackers have shifted to survival. The hotel's held hostage. Quite the dramatic scene."

"Are we to get involved?" inquired éclair.

"No idea at the moment," he said so nonchalantly, "-regroup with Julius, have the jet make for Hidros immediately. Apexi's top players are in danger, use the AFR to kill anyone bearing a sliver of murderous intent. I'll take care of the rest."

"As is wished, master," the lens toggled to infiltration mode, "-I'll assist thee remotely," without delay, "-I'll infiltrate the coms first." Transcripts of private and broadcasted conversations displayed for him to pick and choose. The outline of a group hued in a bright green. A few chained side-steps led to the middle of the road, whereby, the crowd lessened, and held a clearer view of the surveillance truck.

"Hey," he waved, "-Odgar."

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"Master?" he paused and stared.

"Sorry detective, you know that man?" inquired a younger officer.

"Yes," he said, "-he's the owner of our agency," without much ado, an officer gave entry into the forbidden area.

"What's the status?" the team gathered next to the white and blue vehicle.

"Detective, I'll be inside, do make the parole quick," he scowled and left, the negotiations to the right grew dire, words of comfort turned wreck.

"Master, what are you doing here?" he inquired rather silently. Ulia and Kion made closer to the hotel, the moment it went loud, they were tasked to exterminate the assailants, of course, an easier said than

done task. Aki and Tensy were at the concert, combat experience was very much needed. Thus, Odgar and Camila regrouped per the call for help.

"I was performing," he said, "-forget it, I've handled the matter of stray projectile. You need but worry about the building."

"Odgar," a gloomy voice turned the corner, "-come inside darling, we have people to save," greyish hair swayed to Igna, "-come along, Kinless," her chair rolled away.

Hardworking intelligence officers fixed the multiple screens, "-inspector Jula, we can't access the enemies coms. The infrastructure speaks of elder tongue."

"Magic's involved?" she bit her nails, "-do a search using the magical library. If magic, I suspect Iqavea or Hidros," to which her accusing stare befell Igna, "-speaking of magic, aren't you a noble from Hidros?"

"Yes, Viscount of Glenda, also dubbed the Devil of Glenda," he returned confidently.

"Uh-huh," her face seemed unimpressed, "-whatever," back to the screens, "-try to infiltrate the hotel's surveillance."

"Snowflake reported," flickered a flat-screen, "-the roof's been closed. Signals are being delayed."

"Tech guy here," added another, "-my AI's detected a jamming device, we can't make a move unless it's removed."

"Tech guy?" chuckled Igna, "-is that your hero name?"

"Excuse me?" frowned the inspector, "-are people's death funny?"

"Oh excuse me," he slammed the wall, "-the blame lies in the hands of the corrupt police force. Don't preach good and evil when you yourself," a quick search showed, "-have been accused of fraud and money laundering. The news was swept pretty quickly, tis the case of bodies at Carter Lake... now then, Jula Neol, anything else to add?"

"You right," she leaned back, "-we're corrupt. What of it?"

"Tell me why you're helping?" the atmosphere intensified.

"For a chance at promotion," she said, "-once I get assigned to Odgawoan, things will be easy," her shrewd gaze resembled those he'd very often enjoy the company of.

"I like you. Remember my name, Igna Haggard, after the promotion. I'll help in rescuing the hostages, inspector Jula, future hero of Odgawoan."

"You're too confident," said she, "-what can a mere artist do?"

"Plenty," he said, '-go on éclair, do your magic.' The intercoms merged into a single channel. "Attention heroes, I'll take over the rescue operation. The inspector's given full authority. Henceforth, I want people with the ability to scale walls to head for the 50th floor, make sure to approach from where they shot," he leaned to a novice, "-tell the officer to start making threats. Don't worry about the hostages."

"Are you stupid?" fired the inspector, "-you'll get the hostages killed."

“Not really,” he snapped at the hotel, *Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia -Library of the all-knowing; Realm Expansion.*

“Hello, Kion, be a darling and slash the building in half.”

“Excuse you?” coughed he.

“Use the hero arts and slice the building...”

“Very well,” the hesitant hero postured for the assault.

“What plan are you concocting...” narrowed Odgar, “-I can’t see the end goal...”

“Well, that’s because,” the eyes shut, ‘-Vanesa, Saniata, and Draconis, come forth my children,’ a shot of nausea summoned to disrupt the flow.

“Hello pops,” said Draconis.

“How pleasant,” snarled Saniata, “-does pops require our assistance?”

“Sorry, sorry,” he gave a comforting embrace, “-I’ll get presents. For now,” he skipped into the road, “-watch and learn, Odgar.”

Traitors, stop cowering and face us like men, thundered the officer, *-my fighters are getting ready to storm the building.* Blood-stained shirt crossed his path to where Kion stood, Vanesa kept calm in the comfortable piggyback.

“Igna,” said the startled Kion, “-what now?” they stared at the enormous building.

“Can you cleanly slash the building in two?” the eyes narrowed in doubt.

“Yes, if I go all-out, I won’t be useful afterward...”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” the fingers curled for a fist bump, “-got to show them what the Devil of Glenda and his companions can do.” Switched to the coms, “-alright heroes, the operation will happen almost instantly. The moment the building splits, rush in, take the criminals, and rush out, we’ll leave the hostages.”

“What about us?” Inquired Saniata and Draconis.

“Use the Griffin and clear the first floors,” the lens outlined red-figures, *beep,* each was assigned a specific target.

“Don’t we risk them shooting back?” inquired another.

“No worries,” he smirked and gently shrugged, “-Vanesa, care to put them to sleep?”

Ancient Demon-arts... I’ve forgotten, whatever, Paralysis, her gloomy hair jolted up. Electricity dispersed throughout the building, “-Alright, DO IT NOW.”

By the blessing of the holy light, sharpened my blade so I can slice through matter and time itself, break my body, burn my skin, tear my soul, a hero stands no matter the outcome for my heart is eternal, Ultimate Martial-Arts: Infinity Slash, a crescent-moon shaped projectile split the hotel vertically in half.

“ATTACK NOW!” screamed he, the stationed heroes ran in, took the attackers, and leaped out the other side. The broken behemoth crumbled, a large slab of concrete fell to the front and fired particle to the bystanders, *clap,* the destruction stopped, *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes prospective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.* Before the curiosity of countless onlookers, a skyscraping behemoth split and reattached instantaneously. *Realm Expansion – Release.*

Beside laid pinned terrorists, Kion buckled, “-I got you,” said Igna. The duo returned with arms around the shoulder, “-How does it feel,” said Igna, “-Inspector Jula?” a frightening griffin landed and roared, the children slide and waited. The revered legendary monster shrunk to match the children’s size, and perch on his shoulders. In the distance, a jet departed for Hidros, ‘-they’ve evacuated.’

“How does it feel?” she coughed, “-you’re insane... splitting the building just to capture the criminals...”

“Do be flustered,” said he, “-the hotel was never in any danger. I could have killed them instantly,” he looked to Draconis and Saniata, “-what’s the fun in that?” he shrugged. ‘How’s the message,’ he side-glanced an invisible watcher, ‘-don’t try anything, else, you’re next,’ wrote across the murderous expression.

“Well then, I ought to say thanks...?”

“No,” he leaned to her ears, “-consider it a favor, future commander of the Odgawoan forces,” not another word said, with Kion in tow, an unmanned limousine arrived, “-come on in,” said Tensy and Aki, “-oh it feels great to work with Igna.” The door shut and off they bolted.

The heroes, mainly Tech guy, a man dressed in an office uniform, and snowflake, a man bearing the features of a cold princess, were bombarded by attention from the onlooking press, other minor characters were given their spotlight. One side topples, the other benefits. The scale of Ansoft’s failure and the Hero’s triumph would have a greater impact later on.

‘Lady Gaso,’ he watched on outside, ‘-she dares blatantly show maliciousness. She and her damned council...’ the thumbs furiously typed, “-start buying shares from Ansoft and Lumian O’da, use the money from the ring to invest. Restrict access for anyone else. Amsey needs to reimburse.” As predicted, the conglomerate did so, Ansoft’s shares dropped in price, in the span of two hours, Igna owned 60%. ‘Another day, another scheme,’ streetlights blinked across the tainted windows, the guests knocked back many o’ drinks, as for the children, fatigue reigned supreme.

Chapter 648: Memorial

The debauchery of which many families succumbed brought upon adverse concern on the organization of future events. Media helped in fueling the public outrage, mainly, the Apira news station, a very notorious group known for biased and unjust points of view. The whole continent shifted to a campaign of ‘Boycott Ansoft.’ Thus were the first few days after the event, sales stopped, idols quit, and broke contracts without much repercussion. In the end, the agency stood on the edge of heartbreak, many o’ fans were sad and afraid. Once a mob takes hold of a subject, no matter who’s right or wrong, they’ll follow until the bitter end. Amsey stood before a crumbling empire, the life’s work flushed down from a single attack.

To further the fall, the other conglomerates, mainly, the Gaso Group, organized hostile takeovers of hangar space at the harbor. Ruffians ran in, destroyed consumables, and left; the falling economy forced the company in liquidating many assets. Without support, not person to hear him out, at the break of dawn on the 5th of October, a heavily saddened Amsey climbed the treacherous hill to Igna's estate.

The bell must have rung a few dozen times, the black outline of the trees had a few sparks of amber. The sun rose softly, the misty cool air gave perspective.

'What am I supposed to do?' cold on the buzzer, he leaned against the wall and fell, '-I've lost everything. The company had to give out money to so many people; we had to pay the performers and staff triple the agreed amount. Our reputation was dragged into the mud, the Gaso Group took advantage and established her agency as a place of righteousness. My most prominent stars, William and Windy... I told them to scout a new agency, a better place, I can't afford to limit their talents. It would be selfish and unfair, performers must be on stage, making music and bettering the world we have.'

Despair brought its due, the demon of misfortune overshadowed the curled-up shell of a man. '-I should have died and retired... the gift of youth, I was played for a fool, complacency, how stupid could I have been...'

"Come on in," said a distant voice, "-Amsey..." the gates to the vampiric lair parted, "-I was waiting."

"Igna?" he turned and wiped the teary eyes, "-I'm sorry," he bowed, "-I'll leave, being here fills me with guilt, I created the mess, I should clean it up..."

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"Stop being melodramatic," he caught Amsey's tender arms, '-has he lost weight?' Shoving said thought aside, "-come on, let's go in and have a drink," offered he, "-We're friends after all."

"Thank you," he grinned wholeheartedly, "-I'm grateful to have you on my side." The remainder of energy served to ignite Amsey's walk, the latter felt better after the encounter. Igna followed, '-the man's broken to the point of no return. Manipulation is a scary game. He sadly has no idea I could have undone the severe treatment. No matter," the porch stood crowded by éclair and a few maids of whom took care of the slump Amsey.

"My lord," the background swapped for the very high-tech study, "-Amsey's taking a bath. Vanesa and Draconis were summoned by Lady Lilith. Beelzebub's love of filth has created mud monsters of relative strongness."

"Vanesa's taking a nap?" he narrowed.

"Yes, the lady very much enjoys the new duvet and mattress."

"Very much is an understatement, she adores them." In with a snap clicked the lock, "-shall we discuss business?"

"Yes," a giant hologram covered the room, "-Ansoft's at an all-time low, Lum is barely making a profit. There are a few ways we can turn the situation around, turn the hate into admiration," the images

linked to a certain individual, “-and tis lady Aceline and Kinless, the heroes who saved the concert. The public is very much in favor of thy return. I have an idea, risky one, but perhaps, a novel endeavor?”

“To resume the concert, however, make it a commemoration to the fallen. We sing and plea for the health of the wounded. We won’t use much production and limit the performance to Aceline, whilst I stay on the acoustic. It’s a perfect way to sway public opinion,” returned Igna.

“You’ve planned ahead?” smirked éclair.

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“Obviously,” he flicked the pen, “-about the matters of money,” the pupils side-glance the basement where Angel Dust production went in full swing.

“Still need to launder the money first,” said éclair, “-focus on one task at a time,” the doors knocked.

“-Enter,” shouted Igna, the lock unclicked.

“Pardon the intrusion,” just as he entered, the butler left after a courteous bow. Paying no heed, the beautifully inlaid wooden barrier shut, “-I’m here,” he said.

“I see that,” they closed the distance and had a serious tête-à-tête.

Meanwhile, at the other side of town, the business didn’t take long to boom. The gambling house stayed opened during the day under the preface of an eatery. Sure enough, the silent came to eat or be fed.

“Kul,” yawned Asmodeus, “-here,” he threw a heavy black bag, “-bury that too,” dense foliage hid the backyard.

“Who is it this time,” she wiped her sweaty forehead.

“A fellow comrade,” he lit a cigar, “-the boy tried to sell our products to a riveling manufacturer.”

“You could have let him live...” she frowned, “-whatever, throw him in here.” A deep rectangle kept the reserves of many unknown faces, *snap,* a fiery lance dipped and scorch the bodies into dust.

Meters from the yard, the red-light district’s workers had their weekly check. A small infirmary beside the motel crowded in waves of ten. At the helm stood each leader of the brothel. “Next,” said a rather gloomy nurse, her notepad had seen better days.

“Have you heard of Kinl’s disappearance?” gossiped the ladies.

“A client of mine said he had an unfortunate accident...”

“Life is rough for unmade novices. They either spend their life working the street, trying to make money, or try to garner our support. Last week, I heard Jeo ran away with her lover, the master wasn’t pleased, the next day, their bodies were found severely mutilated in some random field.”

“Still,” added another, “-our lives are better, the families have deep respect for us maidens of the night. All expect that brat...” her eyes narrowed as did the others. “The egotistical maniac from that conglomerate”

“No more gossip,” fired a brute.

“No more, yes, no more.”

Dring, dring, “-Kul speaking.”

“Hello, yeah, it’s Esvalo. I need another batch, swing by the main office, the boss’s here,” the phone cut, ‘-where’s Asmo now?’ she exhaled and scanned, ‘-upstairs?’ the shovel flung onto an unmaintained flowerbed. Moans soon crinkled her forehead, *-clap, clap, clap,* a kick barged open the door, “-No time for bonding,” she glared and spotted a seductress pulling back the now gagged Asmo. *Hmm, hmm,* the grip eased, “-it’s not what you think,” he stood unable to move from the handcuffs, “-she wanted to try out being a dominatrix.”

“Whatever prince of lust,” her eyes glazed in disgust, “-I got a call from Esvalo, he wanted more produce,” facing the corridor, “-at least outgrow the cartoonish undergarments, doesn’t befit a demon.”

“SHUT UP, GEN-10 IS A GOD, HE CAN CHANGE USING A WATC-” the door slammed, “-but...” *Whip,* “-AHH, IT FUCKING HURTS!”

Time flowed unbothered by the many events around the world. Hidros joined to express their sympathies to the heart-breaking shooting. Iqavea remained its cold self and chose to ignore the event. Being part of Lum, any link would export the backlash in due force.

“The situation is dire,” firmed Amsey, “-cooking won’t do anything.”

“We need to sway public opinion. I have a plan, and it will take a major decision from you,” the hologram displayed Phantom, “-I can make arrangements for Lum to join hands with Elon’s Dynasty and Phantom, the birth of a new conglomerate. What say you?”

“How big a loss am I looking at?”

“I don’t know, perhaps the merging of many companies into the Dynasty, it really depends. You know as well as I do, the debt will only grow. I propose selling off the other companies and brands, allow another more financially grounded organization to take the helm. They deal with the loss... tis the best move.”

“What about me?”

“I’ve bought and owned 75% of Ansoft’s shares. If you accept, I’ll sell them at the same price ought it, consider it a loan. Work back up to owning an agency, then slowly expand. Let’s be honest, the agency is nothing, and will perhaps remain so... I’m sorry.”

“Time waits for no one,” he stood, “-everyone’s left me, they’ve opted for a better future. If survival means to sell myself, I’ll gladly do so.” A firm handshake marked the start of a new path. Not long after, éclair took the jet to Hidros, Amsey would spend the next weeks and even months negotiating for his future.

Astra roared to life, ‘-time to sway public opinion,’ they made to the memorial of a thousand candles, names of the dead were carved in a granite plate. Those in mourning spent the day and night at said spot, the pain of letting go felt too great. *Calling Aunt Elvira.*

“Good morning Igna.”

“Good morning aunt,” the voice kept a grudge, “-I hope Phantom is doing better. Here’s the deal, the leader of Lum’s headed to Hidros. He’s willing to sell most of his companies to survive; I don’t have to explain what this means. Either it’s us or the other fours, though, the truth of who organized the assault seemed hard to swallow.”

“What sort of deal have you promised?”

“Up for debate. Elon’s Dynasty, Phantom, and now, a disgruntled Lumian O’dla. Imagine the brand picks up in popularity and rises to the top once again. We’ll have a firm footing in Alpha and allow easy entry for our brands. Opportunities to rightfully claim media companies and expand. Currently, the under and overworld are ruled by other parties. I’ve already started my conquest. Will my aunt help or stick to the belief that I should do it all on my own... considering Leko and Alicia’s death, I ought to believe the second.”

“How long will are you going to bring up that story?”

“Until I see them fall,” he gritted, “-tell lady mother I said hi. I bare no ill-will towards Phantom, nor towards you, aunty. A grand opportunity comes thy way, make the best of it.” The call ended, she leaned into her chair and faced the ceiling, ‘-Iгна’s amazing... did he organize the fall of Lumian O’dla or does fate just love him?’

“Hey, I’ve brought a snack,” said Courtney, “-why the long face?”

“Your son,” she said, “-he broke through Alpha’s rigid barrier. We can earnestly invade their continent as a force of our own. The leaders on his way here. We’ll make for Elendor, tis a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Guitar in case, flower in hand, the duo of Aceline and Kinless shuffled along with the gathering of people. Many were angry at security; videos of the rescue operation had the entire continent in awe. A moment of solemn silence brought attention. It wasn’t easy to forget Aceline’s face and presence. The scattered bunched, Aceline turn and swept the crowd. No words need be said, he took the guitar and strummed, she closed her eyes and listened. The notes struck deep within, a precious moment of what they thought matched what was heard. She flowed into prayer, the matured voice sang melodically, the lyrics wished the fallen grace and blessings. Candles and flowers stacked at the memorial.

‘Aceline and Kinless play in remembrance of the departed,’ read a life-feed. The masses regrouped. There hadn’t been any ceremony, the offerings felt empty and null. Circumstances brought on fear, yet, as her vivid stance during the shooting hammered their memory, the same lady stood sternly and poured her heart. Most dropped to their knees and grieved, a reason to move on presented itself, “-rest in peace, my fellow companions.”

Chapter 649: Rate

A solemn promise to appease the tragedy carried into the people’s hearts. No matter the obstacle ahead, the drive to carry on their memories outweighed the bitter truth.

Time passes to an awkward drive to Konlda, where many of the buildings stood at equal height. Most shops were closed to honor the deceased, or so was the portrayal, the truth, none wanted to be stuck in the firing line, especially the small businesses.

Kul and Asmodeus headed on to where Esvalo called, the glances were rather awkward and uncertain. The mental image of the prince of lust being dominated couldn't be washed either with bleach or acid. The traumatic experience etched itself into her heart.

Soon, the driver pulled to an elevated pavement. A hail from Kul signaled them to continue forth. Behind, the prince stumbled to dust off his clothes, the mind and body trembled by the subsequent 'enjoyment' of before. To their shoulder, people in trench coats walked briskly, some accidentally hit and begged pardons to hurry along.

'Peculiar,' pondered Kul. Most kept their heads down before the rather blocky building ahead. An estimate showed around six floors excluding the ground level. White frames protruded out the building, the architecture was a simple rectangle on which had boulder frames.

"Come along," said Asmo, "-we ought to meet an old comrade," they climbed the rather dirtied stairs to a stuffy inside. Cold and free to hot and smokey, the wood kept the stench of spilled liquor and tobacco. To the left side after an arrangement of maps, laid seats bolted to the walls. A deeper scan inside revealed scratches and dents across the wall paint.

"Gets rather eventful at night, doesn't it," commented the sneaky Asmo.

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"How do you come to that conclusion?" they paused, a known suited man nodded down the hall, 'I'll fetch Esvalo,' said the expression.

"Because," the arms crossed, "-bolted chairs and empty shelves. A violent drunken stupor, don't you smell the alcohol. It's pretty self-explanatory..."

"Oh yeah, pretty easy," she glared.

To and fro of concerned figures crossed the open-ended room, childish remarks proved the entourage as daft and sexist.

"How goes it," gestured Esvalo, "-you guys came at the perfect time," the hefty arms drowned the bystander's view, "-let's go for a smoke," he whispered. "Tell the boss I'll be back," he chuckled with a fake sense of control and left.

"Holy hell," he panted, "-that man has presence if I've seen one," quick on his step, "-follow me," they walked at a father pace to the closest intersection. The stoplight interval between green, yellow, and red. Pedestrians were confident to cross no matter what the little man said.

Back again to a drippy wall, "-sorry about that," the fingers trembled to light a cigarette.

"Here," offered Asmodeus, "-how ruffled are you?"

"Very," *cough,* "-you don't understand the Yanok's reach." Kul watched straight-faced and unimpressed.

"Don't give me that look," he coughed, "-the Yanok and Vermillion are on bad terms. I came here as a mediator for both families. The Yanok was money, and the Vermillion wants brute strength, I'm stuck as the middle man."

"Karma," said Asmodeus, "-you two-faced fat-drum. Stop with the burgers and be loyal for once. The packages at the normal location. Send the money to the same account, 10000 Exa for 1 Kg."

"Too expensive, come on," he shouted, "-the going price is 1 kg for 8,500."

"Too bad," he smirked, "-the other suppliers have run in a bit of trouble since the terrorist attacks. The shipyards were attacked, and guess what..."

"You greedy bastard," gritted Esvalo.

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"Mind your tongue, big boy," threatened Kul, "-supply and demand. Control the former and the latter is easy pickings."

"Ay, Esvalo," approached a heavily accented man, "-the boss wants to see you."

"Damn it," he snarled, "-negotiate to the boss directly then," he smirked. 'I'm not taking the blame alone.'

Thereon, the setting changed to a stuffier blacked-out room. A broken desk held the leader's authoritative elbows, "-what's this?" he squinted.

"They're Raven," said Esvalo.

"I'll introduce us," interjected Asmo, "-my name's Asmodeus, and here's my right-hand man, Kul. We're from the newly established motel in the red-light district, and the ones who exterminated the 50-Blood Brothers gang."

SMACK, he pounded the table, "-IT WAS YOU," as weird as it was, the eyes clenched,"-YOU SLAUGHTERED MY MEN-"

"Don't blow your load," remarked Kul, "-the blame is on the two-face Esvalo. We had a contract and fulfilled it. We kept our promise."

"-Here I thought the underworld to be based around Loyalty and family," completed Asmodeus, "-numbers or weapons don't scare us," a cheeky half-smile neutralized the onlooking watchmen.

"Weapons down boys," said the boss, "-the sheer hatred and will to kill, I see the Raven's are fearsome," leaned into his chair, "-Sorry about the outburst, I wanted to judge what characters you are. When someone's faced with death, the true self comes out. Esvalo here turned to be a great asset, given the opportunity, he turned coat and became a Yanok."

"Please," a distant voice stumbled through the door, "-I don't want to anymore," begged a lady in but a dressing gown.

"WHY YOU!" an unzipped, peculiarly dressed man crossed the door, "-shit," escaped the lips, "-sorry boss, the lass ran away... it was my turn too."

"N-no m-more," she begged, "-I've repaid my debt already, please, let me go," she clawed to Esvalo's feet, "-please, I wanted to be an idol... Ansoft's done, I can't find anything else, please, I bear your child... ESVALO!"

“Shut up woman,” *kick,* the head knocked back, the weeping continued, guards and boss alike watched with a certain disdain. “-Sorry boss, the girl got a bit too carried away,” he grasped her hair, “-I’ll teach her a lesson, don’t you worry.”

“Let her go,” fired Kul.

“Hey, this is common here,” reassured the boss, “-they’ll treat her fine.”

‘-oh yes we will,’ said the growing shadows, the doorway brimmed with countless faces of demons, her heart and mind shuddered, “-no... no... no... no.”

“Leave her,” said Asmo, “-I’m only interested in money.”

“P-please,” her bloodied cheeks clawed to Asmo’s feet, “-if I could, I’d make a contract with the devil and vanquish all this suffering...”

“Shut up lady,” fired Esvalo, “-else we’ll kill you,” pistols clocked.

“Please,” she stared into his eyes.

“Lady,” he held out a hand, “-doth thou wish for death?”

“Y-yes.”

“Will thee sell thy soul?” he narrowed.

“Whatever the price to escape this hell...”

“Deal,” she grasped his palm, “-I’ll take this lass as compensation. You don’t mind, do you?” he asked, Kul cracked her knuckles menacingly.

“Esvalo, your chick, your word, decide...” said the raspy beaten voice of the boss.

“Take her,” he replied, “-don’t need a drug addict cramming my group.” The little distraction led to the lass being cared for by Kul. First aid and a few healing potions were administered.

“You selling Angel’s dust?”

“Yeah, 1 kg for 15,000 Exa.”

“WHAT!” exclaimed Esvalo, “-boss the rate is too much.”

“No, no,” he gestured to quiet down, “-if the stuff is refined and high quality, it can go triple the amount. Besides, we had a terrorist attack, most of the produce was dropped in the ocean. Whoever did it must have planned the downfall.”

“Here’s a sample,” a small packet flung onto the table. The negotiation continued until the boss agreed on a rate of 17,000 Exa for 1 kg. The drive to the motel felt more or less normal, they made a grand total of 170,000 Exa. The quality was the best the continent had witnessed so far. The creator added precautionary measures to prevent needless deaths, feature customers appreciated.

As the afternoon grew close, Aceline and Kinless left from the memorial. Videos of their solidarity reinforced their station. “-I know everyone’s outraged at the shooting. There was no excuse for security

to allow such a travesty to happen. I'll speak loudly and openly, the hate-filled Arcanum writers are to be shamed, as well as the new stations. I stand firmly with Ansoft. If not for our intervention, and I'm sure the videos made news, the death count would have reached hundreds. No matter how wrong and bad one thinks of the agency, the treatment is biased. What about the hotel that carelessly allowed the shooters into their room, the root of the problem could have been stopped with proper precaution. To prove my point, here's an example," a giant hologram displayed a statement from another hotel, "-Aslio(another hotel) halted and captured a would-be criminal from the terrorist group before they could bring weapons. Goes to show, if hotels were even inclined to provide safety, it would have never happened. Ansoft went bankrupt, and is in a dire situation, the leader, Amsey, paid triple the amount and handsomely allocated money to the victims. Giving money isn't an easy way out, the point is, he acknowledged, repented, and vowed to do something to appease the harm that was done. Call me selfish, call me whatever, I'll stand by my friend forever and always. He tried his best to handle the issue; our concern must be placed on seeking solutions and prevention of such events. Not aimlessly channeling the unjust anger to a singular party. What about the AHA, what about law enforcement. In what world is a few guards sufficient to guard such a mass of people, the responsibility is on us all, I take the blame, Aceline stands truth on said point. Don't get me started on the Gaso Group's opportunistic attempt and making her agency grand and pure. In a moment of sadness, the conglomerate thinks of money, what does that say about the state of this country. Then again, I'm just an artist and noble from another continent, I have no say in the matter, my voice isn't strong, tis the people who decide what is to be done. In a way, I envy and abhor the current rulership. Those deaths could have been easily avoided if only the conglomerates banded as one to make the event a success, if only unity was present, if only the public service accepted and help to make the night safer and better... the if's will never end, and for that, I'm truly appalled. Ogdawoan is far from the land of dream, tis a nightmare," he clenched Aceline's hands, "-Alpha tried to take my companions away from me, they've taken people who mattered, and for that, I have but one thought, forgiveness begets a backstab. The honest never strive, underhanded tricks prevail... I'm angry, furious at how all of this could have been stopped," a pause shook the crowd, "-let's pray for their safe passage into heaven." The speech made waves around the Arcanum, few rejected his idea, and most embraced it, public opinion swayed massively in Ansoft's favor. The bandwagon of 'boycott Ansoft' halted in its track, questions and the underlying doubt and insinuation of the Gaso Group having caused such a tragedy sparked another revolt. Anger, true and legitimate, flamed their social media and customer support.

"Quite the show of words," said Aceline.

"I had to," he explained at greater length. 15:00 showed the clock, the manor rose in the distance.

"I'll get back to work," said Aceline, "-we have music to make," her mood cleared from the prior events.

"Alright," grinned Igna. *We need you.*

A sharp pull spirited the body into a land of relative familiarity. 'The Shadow realm?' he sat in a crowd of thousands, an open-roofed arena gave to fireworks and cheers.

"Welcome back," said Miira, "-I thought you'd want to see the final trial of the fallen heroes."

"Hey there master," waved the homunculus from below.

"What's she doing in the stands?" he faced Gophy.

"We accepted her right away," she replied sternly.

"Don't worry," elbows pressed against his shoulder, "-every crucial member has to undertake Gophy's test," Intherna leaned and peered over his head.

"Over here," screamed a very elegantly dressed lady, "-it's me, Athena!"

"What is she doing here..."

"Came for a visit," said a voice a seat after Gophy, "-she's my best friend after all."

"Goddess Nike," he bowed, "-I'm pleasantly surprised of the corporal form."

"Hey, the shadow realm is awesome," she winked.

Chapter 650: "Aren't you afraid I'll betray you?"

"Here we face the battle to one's might, the battle to test the worthiness of the heroes, a battle/glance into their future. Who will come out on top, Gophy's minions or the might of the heroes... Join us after the break."

"Break already?" the tongue clicked; "-I'd like to know why I was transported unexpectedly."

"Follow me to the castle," *Snap,* beautifully inlaid structures and works of art stood against a lonesome pillar. "-Look at that," complained Gophy, her side-glance towards Athena, who also followed the group, "-she's decided to make the Shadow Realm her storage place."

"Well then," back to his feet, "-the whim couldn't have been at a greater time," closer inspection of the paintings tugged on the heartstrings, no matter one's knowledge of art, the pieces were beautiful and attracted attention from the start."

Two deities approached from the back, the first, a lady bearing a golden chest plate layered by white clothes of which reached her feet. Perhaps ornamental or perhaps real, an owl of symbolic value perched atop her plated shoulders, a rounded shield nicely fitted her back. Aside from war and wisdom, her hobby of arts and craft stapled her station in the world of the upper beings. The facial features were very foreign, long hair of which curled at the tips was allowed freedom along with the shield, the slightly tanned complexion and menacing yet gentle stare would either make or break a person's trust. Most of her accessories were gold, a color befitting her station and grace.

Next to her, the rather inconspicuous Nike, a goddess many know as having fallen for Zeus's whims. Compared to her friend, her robes were short above the knees and simple. Most of her definition hailed from medium-sized white wings, a golden laurel and symbol of a torch displayed her identity. The goddess of speed, strength, and victory. Them both as pair would ruin any chance of winning a peaceful contest or otherwise. Her hair parted and curled into a tangle at the back. The emotions, akin to rock, were hard to grasp.

"Good to see you, pops," said a vibrant voice.

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Footsteps scattered to a leap, “-long time no see,” he replied to catch the energetic brat. Saniata followed in at a normal pace accompanied by her griffin. The gathering of companions was one to admire.

“I ought to supervise the tournament,” said Gophy, “-come on Miira, Intherna, let Lilith handle things here,” and so, as her meaningful look scattered beyond giant doors, Igna heavily inhaled. ‘Where’s Lilith?’

“Up here,” came a whisper, “-I’m trying out new spells,” a swing and she landed, “-I know Gophy told me to watch over...” her eyes narrowed, “-I’ve sort of misplaced Beelzebub...” in a single motion, Draconis and Saniata followed her lead. The tension built, the guests were unknown and unjudged.

“Finally,” said Athena, “-the room’s cleared a bit,” the golden shield hued periodically as she stretched or had major movements, “-Igna Haggard, the reincarnation of Staxius Haggard. Your daughter, the Librarian of Nexsolium has been very generous in recounting the countless adventures. The record is very impressive, and I see the Shadow Realm is nothing to laugh at either. A mere amber in a sea of flames, and amber fueled by strange powers. I also know about the betrayal; I know how my father allied to the demons in order to steal the symbols of power. My dearest friend, Nike, seems to have taken a great liking to you,” in when those words echoed, the goddess in question, inched to stand behind Igna, “-she’s picked her side. I understand her actions fully, a betrayal by father, he who she lovely cared and stood by, suddenly slew her for speaking to Death.”

“Quit with the baseless words already,” sighed Igna, “-are you friend or foe, no scrap that, how did you enter?”

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“By asking Lixbin,” she shrugged, “-that god is a shrewd piece of work. I know not his allegiance or motives – I but had to ask nicely and a temporal pathway opened to the realm. The immensity of the power has fueled Nike’s soul to be reborn, goes to show, anything is possible with the right about of power.”

‘My other self,’ the eyes shut, ‘-my body chills at her words, the aura and way of speech are familiar, I can’t help but be impressed. Please, come forth and take the reign, I wish to rest, and think of precautionary measures.’ *thud,* crimson bleached to crystal white, “-greetings Athena,” said he smugly, “-what business has the two-faced dog of Zeus wish with me?”

“Origin...” her brows rose, “-father as beckoned thy aid so many times, and thee chose that thing as the successor?”

“Yes, and please,” the face boldly said to keep quiet, “-don’t insult me or my companions. He everything to embrace my whim, a wish I’ll never forget. So, does the two-faced mutt have a scheme in mind?”

“Not really, I came on a whim. Father’s gone insane at the moment; he’s relapsing from having slain demons. The supreme realm waits till he reawakens. Without orders or entertainment, I sought out to find Death or his heir. Even if I want to cause chaos, the dominion is under four high-tier being’s control. One is enough, but four, tis jest for surely, no great being would stoop low as to serve you.”

"In the greater world," voiced Origin, "-nothing matters. Gods have no sense of right or wrong, their actions are selfish and truly meant to satisfy their needs. Reverence is a reason enough. The human heart has the power to manifest their greatest desires, a weapon god or demon can never understand."

"And what does it pertain to me?" she paused.

"What I mean to say is, gods have no concept of reality, they're too busy wandering the skies above and passing judgment on the weak. The four who've willingly given Igna their support have lived and embraced the mortal realm. They can live as gods, extradite their powers as deity, granted tis the Shadow Realm alone, and visit the mortal realm for a home visit or plain ol' harassment. Goddess Nike's sure to join our family, we bear no allegiance to gods or demons, our sole purpose is the safeguard of our family. Hurt one of us, and face the wrath of us, and everyone in the Shadow Realm. This, obviously, includes the realm of monsters."

Gasp, her face froze, "-r-realm of m-monsters?"

"Yes, the world the God-slayer has worked thick and thin to safeguard and evolve. Guess what, the inheritor of Scifer's will is none other than Igna himself."

"Spanner in the works," she mildly stepped back, "-he bares the will of Time, Death, and Origin...." her hand moved erratically, "-I want answers on how a man can garner such clout."

"I can't answer that," he chuckled, "-perhaps it's being written by a higher being, someone who controls the very fate of this world or just plain coincidence. As a watcher, I can say but one thing, events happen for a reason, and those reasons are either good or bad. How about the conversation moves along, I don't want this to last forever."

"Fine, fine," she paused, "-bring out Igna."

Bled to red, "-you asked for me?"

"Yes, I did," she stepped forth, "-Origin must have a recount of my countless betrayal and vindictive personality. I admit, when war is up for debate, I'll do anything to win the battle, patricide, homicide, nothing matters, all to bring the victory home. In a perfect world, Nike stands by my side. Alas, tis far from perfect, she's in thy entourage."

"Can't we cut the mellowness," he sighed, "-Goddess Athena, I don't mind the company. I don't expect much nor do I care what you do and think. If Goddess Nike wishes to share thy company without external interference, then, who am I to interject. Friends must never be torn apart by differing factions. From where I stand, Goddess Athena hasn't acted maliciously towards us. Zeus's in deep slumber and the divine realm is at a standstill. Why not spend the time of peace in our company, I won't promise trust, but I can promise entertainment."

"Aren't you afraid I'll betray you?" *Snap,* a sharp gust blasted their faces, the battleground stood below, spells and weapons were fired without limits.

"I was already betrayed by Cleopatra," he said so decrepitly, "-things are different now. I've made peace with who I am and what I have to do. The ultimate goal has yet to show itself – there isn't an end of the world scenario. Life isn't hyped, the description of great talents and strength of bonds doesn't feel the same when applied to our realm. The world scurries along regardless of what happens. Gods are the

same in a way, empty craters, dormant volcanoes waiting to explode. I don't ask much," he matched her stare sincerely, "-no need to switch sides or do anything that'd make you uncomfortable. Instead, follow me to the mortal realm. The art pieces are boundless and without limit, come and experience what the world has to offer. What's the godly realm, a place of happiness and fluttering angels? Come experience the woe and deception, the struggle and pain of failure. The Shadow Realm is a secrete domain; as a watcher, I must exile potential threats. Daughter to Zeus, thou art a menace."

"Heh," she facepalmed, "-so much for the speech of never separating friends."

"Oh, you have it wrong, lady Nike will follow us. Ogdawoan has plenty of space, do as thee wishes, I won't interfere. Consider me thy landlord and the manor to be the apartment. From there, the sky is the limit or heaven since thou art a god."

THREE DRAGON ROAR an eruption of energy blasted out the roof, the brightness burnt, the smell of roasted hair solicited a gag, "-what say you," inquired Igna nonchalantly ambling to the pillar, "-want to know what it's like to be a human?" he plunged his arms and clenched, the energy dispersed with a 'poof'.

"COME ON! cried Kaleem, "-MASTER, OUR ULTIMATE FINISH...."

"Shut up," fired he, "-the chaos ghouls are dead anyway," what stared down was a man with arms on his hip, in a way, he seemed like the overly protective mother. Thus, came to pass the trial of Gophy. Three fallen heroes were assigned to guard and protect the Shadow Realm. An arrangement they agreed to inside the throne room. Four seats held the four greats, Gophy, Intherna, Miira, and Lilith. Chaos, else order, Fire, else strength, Time, else wisdom, and Joker else wildcard. They each represented a faction under which the growing population would join. Atop them stood Igna, else, the watcher – he who rules and waits. The fallen heroes were each assigned to a faction, Cora to Gophy, Kaleem to Intherna, and Yuria to Miira. Lilith had the homunculus, else renamed as Starix.

One knee to the ground and face to their leaders, the ceremony ended with much applause and welcome.

Each arrival of fighters garnered a festival in the soon-to-be populated capital. "Asmodeus has brought in many ladies from the other worlds," commented Adete.

"Hey there first progenitor," smiled Igna, "-how are the people's morale, do they enjoy the life?"

"The crowning of four great generals as ruler was a masterful idea. I heard from Lilith, Beelzebub has taken refuge in Dorchester, the desert befits him nicely. The boy enjoys making monsters of which serve to train the army."

On said note, after a brief meeting, Igna left for the real world. Draconis, Saniata, Athena, and Nike would follow. In a sudden twist, Athena changed her name and appearance to that of a young man, Thena, who is what he called himself. Nike followed suit, the visage remained identical, as for the hair, it shortened.

"We're finally home," leaped Draconis, "-come on Saniata," she flung the griffin and darted to the skies, "-pops, we're going to kill monsters..."

"Return before night."

“ALRIGHT!” the new addition stood bemused at the strange manor, ‘-interesting craftsmanship figured
Thena.