

## Death Magic 141

### Chapter 141: Dead eyes

"I've reached the capital, finally," time was nearly noon, the sun reached its peak. A young adult stood before the entrance, the castle could be spotted off into the distance. "Never did I think this place could be so massive," hidden behind a mask, with a rifle strapped onto the back – Dead eyes made it all the way from Riverwood. On that fateful night, when the duo from Kniq departed, he followed suit – not belonging in any guild made it easy. With a rank of Steel – being accepted was simple; however, the skill and marksmanship unique to him made it easier. Sadly, even with a reputable skill like that, the personality he had put many off guard and uncomfortable.

Never did he speak, none knew what he thought, the eyes bled after every shot – something that grossed even the toughest men out. "Excuse me, could I have directions to the central guild?" he asked, the eyes hidden thanks to sunglasses. "Sure thing, just pay the one-time fee and head on inside," a platoon of guards waited.

"..." the eyes turned perplexed. A number of people walked in from behind, from the gear and weapons – adventurers. "Can't believe someone got to that quest before us," murmurs echoed around the streets. "I know, we didn't even make it half-way through the journey and Gritt was slain. I guess the quest really was easy – I don't get all the hype and caution the guild put us through. "Poor lower guilds, I guess it was to be expected for Porcelain ranks to get slaughtered, what a waste of time." Many were unimpressed, this slowly got to Dead eyes.

'Seriously, they know not how difficult it was to see people die. Can't do anything but hold my frustrations inside, bloody ignoramuses – try and spout nonsense after you've personally encountered that elemental," the hands clutched into a fist, the mouth gritted. Even if speaking out seemed to be the good thing to do, the blueish necklace around their necks – Sapphire; a rank above Steel could not be ignored. A wall between ranks is one unsurmountable; trying to ascend beyond Porcelain is a task many take months and even years. It didn't stop there, years and years to reach Silver can be expected. Though, an obvious shortcut exists – to get a high rank from the get-go, somewhere around Emerald was sought after. A comfortable place, a wall where many newcomers could never hope to reach.

'Hierarchy never dies, divisions will always reign supreme. I can't even try and imagine the strength people with Bronze and higher rank have – imagine being Platinum – you'd have to be a god or something.' Said thought remained in the mind, the marksman followed the returning adventurers and eventually ended at the central guild.

Time was afternoon, most people claiming rewards were seen at the counter. Some enjoyed a relaxing snack in the café, Melisa had returned from break. "Good afternoon," she greeted seeing the clueless Dead eyes staring off into the distance. "Good afternoon," he replied with a calm and subtle tone. "I've never seen you here before, a traveler?" she asked to which he replied with, "I'm actually looking for someone," after staring at every possible detail around the massive hall, the gaze turned to face the shorter Melisa.

"If it's an adventurer, we can help," she walked to her counter, he followed behind. "May I have the name or appearance?" the tone felt tired. "Hmm..." the mind wandered around through memories till, "Ahh, Staxius Haggard is the name," the reply fast and firm. "Staxius Ha- what?" her demeanor changed;

it went from tired to concerned. "Are you sure about that?" she sought confirmation – a name she didn't expect to hear. "Yes, I met up with a band of adventurers going by the name Knig a few days back. I asked if I could join and they told me to come here if I was serious," the voice indeed showed determination.

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"You're funeral," she whispered. "Did you say something?" he didn't catch the underhanded remark, "no, just follow these directions and you'll arrive at the shop. It's nameless at the moment, but it should stand out, there's a young boy working as a shopkeeper." She knew this for a secret visit was taken the day before. "Thank you," a smile of gratification later, the man ventured out.

Back in Arda, a few hours had gone by, Xula sat beside Staxius who played around with the newfound power. "I still can't believe the oldest vampire, the biggest snob – and with reason, to have bestowed the All-seeing eye onto a human."

"I'm not human," he added without much thought, the experience of seeing what others could; fascinated him. "Disgusting," both eyes opened, "I just saw something I didn't mean too, the bonding of person from the same gender – quite a rare sight," he laughed.

"Staxius, please," her tone felt worrisome, "-please don't take the curse of Nox so lightly," she held his hands tightly. "What has gotten you so worried?" he asked out of concern. "I know not how to explain. You were given a fraction of vampire blood that dates back a few millenniums ago and even further. No one can tell what is to become of ones who have the blood of such potency; I'm surprised you haven't turned yet," her eyes had a glimpse of pity.

"Don't tell me," he removed his hand, "-is that pity I see in thine eyes?" he stood and crouched before her. "I-I'm sorry, i-in no way am I looking down upon you," she quickly rectified her actions. "Why are you so worried," rather than being angry as she expected, a reassuring smile was seen, "who am I? that should answer all the qualms," he stood and pulled her closer, the face rested onto the stomach.

"You never have to worry about me, though it's thy duty as my wife – just don't focus where the attention isn't needed. A still ever-growing kingdom is far worth the attention compared to a single person. The lives of many rests on thy shoulder, never want I to add to said burden. Instead, I'd much prefer to bear some of that burden – if you'd allow me too." She pulled away and looked up, "you're already doing what is needed to ensure that, dearest husband, I love you."

\*Knock, knock,\* a butler interrupted the touching moment. "What is it?" she asked. "Some council members seek an audience – it's about something to do about the growing monster infestations." To that, her face changed. "Guess it's time for us to part yet again, it's not fair to say this shall be our goodbye for now?" the voice now relieved. "Yes, just for now. I've got a question," he asked, she stopped near the door. "What is it?"

"Remember the fox-eared girl?" he asked to which a nod of confirmation was given. "Good, you said you didn't know what to do about her. I'd like to ask for permission and see if she wants to head to the capital with me. I'll need an assistant to help with a new shop I opened," the tone now formal. "Why are you asking me for permission, do what is needed, I trust you – King of Arda," she winked and left; no

ulterior emotions were sensed. \*Click,\* the door closed, as he thought; her majesty didn't care and only wished for him to do what was needed.

The day would come to an end in a few hours, there still needed things to be done. Without much time wasted, using the teleportation spell – Staxius jumped from places to places to greet the inhabitants and speak. From taverns to taverns he drank and socialized, this was a way to relieve some stress and bond with the people. Everyone knew he was king but ignored it – for using his own mouth, Staxius said to treat him like everyone else. A down to earth guy who people admired.

With the same energy, on the second floor, he headed for the orphanage. “Quite bigger than I expected,” he walked inside, a gate separated the large courtyard from the outside road. The journey felt long for a school complex, the building was three stories high that stretched on and on. “How may we be of service?” one of the teachers stepped outside, the king had come for a visit. “Sorry to interrupt, but I'd like to speak with a child named Yaegar Aebalar,” the voice polite and caring.

“Please head this way, the boy is currently playing soccer,” the instructor led the way. “GOALLL,” the kids cheered, “Impressive for someone so little,” Staxius spoke and stood near the big sister. “Yes, that's my little brother,” she replied without knowing who spoke. “How was the reunion?” he asked to which she turned and shuddered. “King Staxius,” subconsciously, courtesy took over and she bowed. “Raise your head, I'm here as a friend,” the voice reassuring.

“Yaegar has been happier from what the instructors have told me. Thanks for everything you've done,” Klaern appreciated everything from the bottom of her heart. “Keep the thanks, my only request is for that little boy to grow up into a respectable and responsible man his mother would be proud of.” it wasn't so much guilt than pity, not having a mother figure to stand by was tough. An experience he knew all too well. “I'll get going,” he had enough, the time had come to head back. “Please wait, don't you want to have a little chat with Yaegar?”

“It's not that I don't want too, I just can't. Every time I look at him – he reminds me of how I was before everything changed. I don't want anyone to go through that whole ordeal again,” it referred to the time before the first war began – the war that shaped him into the man now. “Here,” a golden pocket watch with the crest of a dragon. The watch he got back on the day Eira was found. “-the crest was normally a leaf, but I had it changed. A small parting gift – something to remind him that there's someone out there watching over.” With the signature wave, he teleported.

‘Arda, what a place – I love it,’ he stood before a red-colored door. \*Knock, knock,\* “enter,” a shy reply came through. “Hello,” the door opened. “Greetings your majesty,” the fox bowed. “Raise your head,” every single time, people would just bow their heads and wait for the permission to speak. “I've got an offer to make,” the tone direct, “-I'd like to hire you to work as a shop assistant back in Rosespire.”

“D-don't t-they h-hate ddemi-humans?” that was her only worry, prejudice. “Listen, there are only two options here. Either you wait till her majesty decides of what to become of thy fate or come with me and make thy own destiny. You have about three minutes to decide,” he leaned against the door frame with arms crossed.

“B-but,” her mind went blank, “Avon will be there,” Staxius added. Hearing the spirit's name, her face brightened. “Ok,” she gave. “Great,” he sighed, the voice monotonous. “Meet me at the entrance in five minutes, gather up what you need, we shall leave using teleportation,” a blue mist replaced the former

figure. 'I love this spell,' the joy could not be contained. A trip to the garage, then armory; some few words with the sage – a goodbye with the other nobles.

"You're two minutes late," Staxius stood; footsteps ran down the stairs and into the yard outside the castle. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "We wish you luck and fortune back to the capital, King Staxius," Ruslan added. "All hail his majesty," Niroz, the general, cheered to which many soldiers saluted.

"Always over the top," he mumbled with a faint smile. With a nod, both vanished.

Dusk slowly crept in; Avon stood in a heated debate. "I've been telling you this for hours now, Staxius Haggard is not here. Can't you get a clue and leave if you're not here to buy potions?"

"But the blond lady and the guild lady both said to come here if I wanted to join up with the adventuring group known as Kniq." Dead eyes stood inside the shop and argued. "Listen, I don't know who gave the idea that we were recruiting but our guild isn't even formed yet," Avon sighed; a blue light caught their attention from the outside.

#### Chapter 142: Nox's Curse

"What's that?" the voice slow – Dead eyes stared through the window. "You wanted Staxius Haggard, well better get prepared, our leader is here," Avon replied and headed into the back room.

"We're back," the door to the car opened. First, a portal was taken back to Dorchester's noble district. From there on, teleportation was used to return – mana capacity was about a third gone. "I should not try that again," the first step taken, Staxius stumbled. "Watch it," out of character, the girl grabbed his hand. "Thanks for the help," he smiled and headed inside; the posture regained its usual firmness.

"Avon," he called out, an unfamiliar face stood inside. "How rude, I apologize for shouting in thy ears," the tone now polite – he nonchalantly walked back behind the counter and waited. "Welcome back, master," Avon returned. "Thanks, have you asked what this gentleman here wants?" the leader inquired to Dead eyes' presence.

"Not a customer, he says he wants to join up with Kniq," the reason laid bare naked. "Yes," the boy bowed, "-I'd like to join up with your adventuring crew and help in whatever way I can," the voice now felt as if begging. "Raise your head," the voice serious, Staxius spoke, "-there's no need to grovel," the sight was unbecoming of anyone. "Time is rather late, can you please come back tomorrow?" a request to which the man could not refuse.

Thus, the day ended – it came as a shock to see the fox-eared girl, the one who still hadn't told her name to anyone. Whilst chatting, it was decided that Staxius would make the shop his permanent bedroom – the girl was free to take the room back at the hotel. "Avon, I know I brought her here," she stood in the main room whilst they spoke in the back. "However, I'd like you to take charge. Another girl would just be troublesome – Achilles and Undrar are already catastrophes on their own," he spoke in jest. Avon knew the underlying reasoning and accepted, it also helped that said girl trusted him.

\*Click,\* having given away the pocket watch, knowing what time it grew to be impossible. A mild and fairly inaccurate guess would have done him no good. 'Well,' he sat with the worktable in front, the small bed rested behind. On the left side, a shelf with numerous glass apparatuses, and in the top right corner, piles and piles of books and scrolls. Next to it, carton with empty flasks and experimental scrolls.

'If I don't know the time, then there's only one option,' the left eye closed. A mild pulse ran from the right eye towards the right arms and legs. 'Headache, what a joke,' he chuckled. At this stage, the skill was at its infancy, Staxius could not control who's eyes he saw through, it was random though changing from animal to person could be manageable. For a few minutes, the sight cycled from every living creature in the vicinity, from the bars to the shady hotels – all laid before him. In the end, time was revealed to be nine-thirty.

'Might take a few more hours to get the hang of the curse of Nox.' He sighed; the hand held a pen. 'God's ale,' a bottle stood right beside, the one the old man had sent over. With that, the process of studying how the substance worked began, alchemy grew to be integral – from composition to how much magic was involved; an overall description was made clear. The process was long and tedious for it lasted a whole six hours, Staxius got no sleep. Midnight came by, the trance for the quest for knowledge – the path led further and further inside.

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Another six hours went by, from a small investigation to a full-on examination – the man pulled an all-nighter. Mana ran low, the effects only now manifested. "I'm beat," he exclaimed, the task had been accomplished – the ingredients used were revealed. "So simple yet effective, it's the mana that changes everything." With that said, the chair toppled over backward, said momentum was used to jump in bed. The noise echoed, it rested on the floor whilst Staxius sunk into the world of dreams.

"It was nice of master to give such a nice room to me," the girl spoke, the window opened, Avon stood right beside. "Well, I'm sure the shop feels more at home than this hotel. To always be on guard and ready for any attack – must be hard to remain in that mindset even in sleep," the spirit spoke fondly.

"We're back," the door to said room swung open. "Welcome back," he turned to see a tired Undrar carrying Achilles. "Where have you been?" he dashed seeking answers. "Who knew that trying to kill goblins and looking for a runaway cat could be so hard. We really should not have taken quests after drinking so much," the situation was explained quickly.

"A guy name Dead eyes came seeking for a place in Kniq, ring any bells?" the spirit stared intently. "Yeah, I told him to come seek out master, but now, I just want to sleep," without fail, both companions slept. The girls had grown fond of one another, something that would eventually translate into battle.

Inside the central guild, Melisa and Diane organized paper and quest logs. The day had just begun, the guild opened already but quests weren't ready to be put on the board. "Over here, these are the quest that needs to be put up today," Melisa screamed with pieces of papers in hand. "Calm down, the world isn't ending anytime soon," the radio played – Aceline's angelic voice soothed the soul. "Who would have known that a radio host would turn out to become a girl admired by the whole kingdom," Diane added. The duo now compiled the necessary paperwork. "The pride of Hidros, that title sure is an understatement," Melisa added in jest. "That's the power of evolution for you," eventually, returning adventurers entered.

Amidst the cacophony of boasting warriors, the sound of a phone ringing broke Diane's stern posture. "Central Guild, how may I be of help?" she answered. Far in the south-east, a snobbish voice spoke, "I'd like to put in a request," it asked. "Go ahead, I'll see what is possible," she stood and waited for details.

"My name is Scott, I'm the manager for lady Aceline. As you've probably known from all the news – she's going on tour to the main continent soon. However, the emperor has yet to give any details about security which only tells us that we are to organize it ourselves," he paused. "I'm assuming the request is for adventurers to take in said job and act as security," she guessed right. "-I've got a list of groups, if necessary – we can ask Blades End for help. However, asking the top guild will require some exhaustion when coming to the monetary prospect." It didn't show through the phone, but Diane was ecstatic – she secretly adored the idol.

"I understand," he replied, "-though the lady has personally asked for a man named Staxius Haggard." \*Cough,\* "Are you sure?" she asked seeking confirmation. "Yes, do notify said person; we are to arrive in the capital in a few days' time. At most, in five days, I'll send the details by mail," the phone hung.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Melisa pointed out the paler than normal face. "...Aceline has requested Staxius Haggard to be hired as her bodyguard." She mumbled, despite the animosity, it could not be helped. "That's good news, someone like him can definitely do some damage – not to mention all the attention the guild might get. The pride of Hidros being protected by the people of Hidros. Doesn't that have a poetic feel to it?" she smiled.

The power of the Nox clan, especially the curse. It didn't seem apparent at first, but what the elder said earlier came to reality. \*A curse, one of torment and pain. One that shall take away the restful night of sleep.\* The innocent nap Staxius took was anything but that. The right eye pulsed, normally when one closed both eyes- it would turn pitch black but not here. When the eyes closed, it didn't show black, but it showed what others were seeing. Shutting the eyes activated the power and it was the only way to sleep and recover mana. A predicament of which Staxius knew not how to get out of.

The fight against sleep could not be won, but the All-seeing eye refused to give and falter. "Don't underestimate me," Staxius sighed, he stood. The right hand slowly placed onto the cursed eye, "tell me thy secrets," he mumbled. As it was magic, subconsciously the body had been taking apart the power and reconstructing it to fit the host. The various writings on the body began to light up, "I need to change the way this power activates," the tone calm – things happened beyond human comprehension. Just like any magical scroll, Staxius examined the power from within until, \*bam,\* he fell onto the bed. Unwillingly, the consciousness entered Clarity, the focus was too great it could not be stopped.

'Welcome back, prodigy,' whispers, murmurs, the feeling of weightlessness. "do you wish for more power?" a demonic voice spoke, it appeared as a shape of a black hand. "How pleasant, the curse that Millicent was troubled by," with a flick of the wrist, the hand grew far apart, "I need not weaklings," \*Snap,\* it vanished.

"How interesting, you even dispel demons as if they were children," a pentagram that overflowed with blood faced him directly. "You must be the curse of Nox," Staxius spoke. "Indeed we are," echoes of giggles overwhelmed the blank space. Without warning, \*slash,\* the right-hand pierced right through said symbol; blood sprayed out. "Do you think such a weak curse can suffice to harm me?" a smirk later, \*crack,\* it broke down. "In no way are you powerful enough to stand against me, the curse of Nox.

Either you comply and reveal thy secrets or get crushed to oblivion," the voice menacing, a robed entity manifested itself behind him, it wielded a scythe. "What is the verdict?"

"We yield," \*poof\* the symbol shattered and took on the shape of a small human. It had batwings, "from today forth, us the curse of Nox shall forever serve Staxius as our master," it bowed. "The right eye shall be in thy control – all our powers shall become yours. However, closing thine eyes is obligatory for the spell to activate – therefore, we shall manifest ourselves in the real world to act as a conduit." Without realizing, from Clarity to now the realm of dreams – Staxius slept. This sort of thing was common, dealing with curses in such a manner was a force of habit. Each curse has its own personality, its own will and thought process. The hand that was vanquished earlier was but something weak and feeble. One which latched onto dark emotions to survive.

The reason for the refusal to be called a hero was due to this fact. Heroes were blessed by gods and goddesses; their power came from righteousness and light. Staxius stood on the opposite end of the spectrum, he drew power from curses and dark emotions – a place where no one would ever survive alone. A place he had changed and made into a home – nothing bothered the inner peace found.

Time said noon, Staxius woke fully rested. "Greetings master," a childish tone spoke, "not another one," he sighed. No attention was paid to said voice, rather, he forcefully looked away and focused on the notes about god's ale. "We are Nox's curse," it added. "Good for you," the chair got put back in place, work resumed. "We're here to act and serve as thy conduit," it proclaimed. "Congratulations," the voice monotonous, Staxius didn't care.

"Pay attention to us for one second," it sounded angry but adorable. A small figure, as big as the notebook stood with hands on its hips. "We are Nox's curse," it yelled, "and I'm Staxius Haggard," he pinched the small figure's face. "T-this i-is d-degrading," It mumbled, he wiggled the face back and forth. "So, what are you anyways."

"We're Nox's curse," it could barely stand still, vertigo from being shaken around force the poor figure onto the table. "From what I've seen, there's only one of you." Without care, he lifted it using the head only, "so, you're a girl," he raised the body up and looked to see its hidden secrets. "STOP IT," it tried to fight back, "fine, fine, enough teasing." The tiny lady was put down. The real identity was the embodiment of the blood running in the Nox's clan of which it was female. This was because the first-ever vampire wasn't a man, it was a lady whomst gave birth to Balthazar.

#### Chapter 143: Blaine Riverty

\*Knock, knock,\* at around one, the door to the closed shop began making noise. It went on for a solid thirty minutes, the perpetrator was revealed as Dead eyes. He came back for the possibility to join Knig. Little did the young man know that Staxius was present, but lost – lost in the world of dreams. Mana used whilst teleporting void recharged itself quickly. In a span of one hour, it had already filled halfway – though another two hours remained.

This regeneration would have taken around thirty minutes for any average skilled mage. Reason being that the mana they wielded and could store was minute and looked like a dust particle next to Staxius's.

"Why are you being so noisy?" a boy approached. "Mind your business kid," Dead eyes fired back. "Don't you dare use that tone with me," the kid answered. "Isn't your mommy searching for ya? Go on

scram – you’re ruining my sight,” the response adamant and unfaltering. “Sure,” with two steps, the boy dashed in a went for a punch. Not much effort was required – a simple flick of the wrist stopped the attack. “Not good to go around punching people,” Dead eyes added, for a Silver Ranked adventurer – as opposed to normal humans; the strength he possessed could easily kill if not careful. “fine,” the boy stepped back, “-is this where a man named Staxius can be found?” he asked. “Yes,” the marksman replied, both found an even ground to stand on. A common task that linked them together.

Not so far away, in a place so gigantic it housed its own district, footsteps were heard. Not one, not two, but dozens upon dozens, the large hallways echoed with each step. Chaos ensued, amidst said cacophony, a young butler ran towards a room many dreaded to visit. “Princess, princess,” the voice called out from whence he came. “No need to shout so loud,” before the butler arrived, the door opened – she sensed the disarray. “i-it’s h-his majesty,” hands rested atop the knee, the boy crouched and panted. “Damn it,” without time wasting, she ran as opposed to walking.

“what happened?” Theodore came out of the shadows, her highness vanished into the crowd of maids and butlers. “t-the king is tethering on the verge of death – nothing can be done. The doctors personally requested for someone to inform her highness,” he explained with the face now red from exhaustion. “What about the queen?” the boy’s teacher inquired further, “her majesty is already beside the king’s side,” the announcement concluded.

Somewhere not so far away, Piers stood in the garden. The news about the king arrived with haste, many of the influential people who stayed at the castle hurried to his majesties side. The door remained shut, the doctors asked many to wait patiently. In the fray, Gallienne, Theodore, Piers, and Raulf Serlo – the queen had been by her betrothed side since before the health condition grew worse.

\*Click,\* the giant door opened, it revealed a bed of red and gold color. A portrait of the royal family when Gallienne was but a child hung. For the most part, the room seemed empty, but this was due to its enormous size. To the right, a balcony that overlooked the town remained closed by heavy curtains on which the royal crest was embroidered.

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“Father,” she rushed to his side, the rest remain at the foot of the bed. “C-calm d-down,’ the voice was weakened beyond recognition. Shortness of breath limited the ability to speak, though he forced and choked many times. Tears flow down the girl’s cheek – judging by her demeanor as a conniving individual; one would assume it were crocodile tears. But this time, the tears were genuine and the pain real. The heart sunk, a feeling of pins and needles whelmed the throat.

“I-I’ve lived a fruitful life – I was happy to marry Sely, oh – after so long; thy beauty hasn’t diminished whatsoever,” a quick pause was needed, strength in the arm began to lessen. “A will has been written which states who is to get what, I don’t want to care about politics. My family, us whomst have been separated for long – I wish our time never came to an end. Gallienne, my precious daughter; I know that many of the people know me as the gullible king. Don’t worry about that image, I trusted you to help in the ruling of this kingdom, and still do to this day,” another pause, the breathing grew erratic.



“I’ve but one regret, to not have seen or held a grandchild. I wish I could have stopped you from abandoning that child so long ago, the girl who resembled an angel, white hair and rosy cheeks and with eyes. The embodiment of both the queen and the princess, I’m sure she would have made a wonderful person with beauty surpassing each of us. Even so, I have hope that she lives somewhere in this very kingdom. I’ve but a small request, if even she is found, give her this necklace,” the hand placed a jewel and fell, he breathed the last breath. Tears could not be held back, Blaine Mcleod Riverty; was in no way a perfect king. Though the people adored the man with all their heart.

The royal council was notified, the family mourned the death. The maids and butlers all were given the day off. Despite this, many chose to stay beside their masters – a heavy mist whelmed the castle.

“Father, why did you have to leave so early.” Gallienne stood atop a watchtower and stared towards Totrya, “-it wasn’t supposed to be this way,” her fist clenched. “I failed as your daughter, the joys of becoming a grandfather must have been weighed heavily. Tis was my foolishness and not so envious personality that pushed my husband away. How was I to make a child alone – not to forget I abandoned my firstborn sixteen years ago.” It didn’t stand out at first, but a small letter rested in the other fist.

The things that were kept hidden due to circumstances were now told, “Dear Gallienne,” the letter read. “I hope this letter finds you well. By the time it reaches thine eyes, I must have already passed into the afterlife. It’s the circle of life, people die and people live. There is more I want to say, but time is rather short. First and foremost, never ever doubt and blame yourself. I was the one who decided to turn gullible in my later years. Your mother has worked quite hard to solve and not let each of your schemes blow out of proportion. I’m fully aware of that conniving nature of yours, but deep inside – I know it’s for the good of Hidros. There was always a goal than I never manage to complete, the politics and power struggles made it impossible. I wanted to see Hidros become free from the main continent, away from the grasp of the Emperor. We live on a continent that is just booming with minerals and precious stones, and not to mention the vastness of our land. Hidros is almost like a paradise – a paradise that is now in thine hands, Queen Gallienne. The provinces have separated into practically different kingdoms – in no way are you to invade their land without permission. War in this already monster-infested era will only bring about chaos. Despite this, I want you to seek a unification using other means. Since Arda grew independent, they’re a neighboring nation of people who’ve been oppressed for far too long. With our technology and their use in magic – words can’t describe the endless possibilities. Either way, it’s in thine hands – the people await someone who is ready to change her ways. Not a shady queen, but one of virtue and integrity; it’s hard to stay honest where darkness has every opportunity to kick you whilst one is down. But fight on, my dear daughter, fight on. I shall support you from the afterlife – I happily await your evolution into the queen you were meant to be.”

The letter ended, she wept. What the old man said stood true, he had her figured out since the very beginning. Gallienne thought she could outsmart her parents but they fixed and ruled from the shadows. The realization hit hard, Blain and Sely weren’t as inept as they were made out to be. “I see, father,” she stood and took a breath of fresh air. “-If the kingdom requires me to change into a better person, then so be it. A unified continent does seem nice,” she smiled – the heart felt clear and kind. Since that meteor entered and crashed into Hidros, the subtly changing princess was given a major shock. All and all, the arrival of that young butler, a husband who seems to not care but rushes to her aid at any time – parents who ruled from the shadows. It shaped her into someone who at best could be described as the female embodiment of heir to the god of death.

\*At two-forty-five, we from the royal family with grieve and sadness announce that his majesty Blaine Mcleod Riverty has passed on into the afterlife.\* a special broadcast shot in every television and radio, the news spread rapidly. The one who announced said news was none other than Piers Riverty, no further words were spoken. Additional information was given through the hosts. "As many have heard from Prince Consort Piers Riverty, his majesty Blaine Mcleod Riverty has sadly died. The funeral will take place tomorrow at nine-thirty, the casket will drive around the town for many to catch a glimpse before getting buried at the royal tomb," the transmission ended.

The first hour became the worst of it all, every single building including the central guild closed. People were sent home; many mourned the death of a once caring king. Access from the outside was cut off, in no way were people allowed in Rosespire. It didn't matter if one was a wealthy trader or not, this was necessary to reduce the risk of restlessness.

Many didn't talk about the subject, for the king just died. Preparation for the princess's ascension to the position of Queen was readied. Queen Sely now held another title, it changed to Queen Mother. Piers remained prince consort – Gallienne was to lead the continent as the new monarch.

Time went on, the body got preserved using ice. Prayers were said, many deposited flowers near the castle. "Staxius," the door knocked once more, this time harder and rougher – he could not but wake. "What is it?" half-asleep, the door opened slowly. "These two have been standing for god knows how long," Undrar walked in. "I apologize," he yawned and wiped the eyes. It wasn't apparent, but the boy noticed it first.

"Mister, is it me or did your eye change color?" he pointed at Staxius. "Whatever do you mean?" Undrar rushed and grabbed Staxius's cheek. "Let me go, I'm not a child," the monster grip loosened, both visitors stepped inside. "So, what's the reason for this visit?" the still sleepy master leaned on the edge of the shop window. "Have you not heard the news, the king has died," she gave the news without much consideration. "The old man kicked the bucket, can't say I'll moan him personally, but," he took a look outside, "-the people sure are respectful of him," the streets were empty. She headed in the backroom.

"What about you two, do we have a business?" he asked; then remembered. "Dead eyes was it?" to which a nod of confirmation was given. "You want to be a part of Kniq," he stood and stretched. "Well what about you little one, have you gathered the guts to live or did you come begging for I to end thy life?" the eyes showed no remorse. It came as natural as walking, taking a life became seamless.

"I'm confident that I can be of use, please, give me a chance," Dead eyes spoke first, the talk about killing that child wasn't any of his business.

"I've made a decision as well," the boy spoke, "-I've had enough stealing and getting ripped off, I'm done," he took out a knife, "please, end my suffering."

The atmosphere changed, the room grew dark and vile. A sigh later, he picked up the knife, \*SLASH,\* blood dripped. "STAXIUS," Undrar yelled. "Don't worry," he added casually, the boy fell to his knee. "You aren't destined to die yet," he mumbled, the boy who had the face partly covered by a cap shuddered. The knife got covered with blood, the blood of Staxius, he sliced his hand to give the illusion of having slain the poor boy.

“And as for you, Deadeyes,” the eyes moved rapidly. Staring the marksman down, the eyes of a demon – one red and one dark brown; paired with the symbol on the face and dragon on the neck. Staxius could easily get by as one of the leaders for the dark guilds. “-Consider yourself accepted. Though the guild isn’t officially recognized at the moment, you’re welcome to join Viola in her quests.” To that, the man bowed and smiled, he had a chance to prove his worth.

“Short stuff,” the voice loud and imposing, he jumped. “-you can stop trying to pass by as a boy. I’ve known you were a girl since the start. Either way, from today, that worthless life of yours is mine. Decide, a chance has presented itself, walk out now, or stay here and work for me.” Nothing more needed to be said, the little boy who turned out to be a girl stayed back. More members were added to the now growing adventuring band known as Kniq.

#### Chapter 144: A New Queen

“Staxius,” Undrar asked, both the girl and Deadeyes waited patiently. “What is it?” he replied, she held a small figure in her hand. “Let me go,” the small creature adorably tried to get away, it wailed around to no end. “That’s...” he took a good look then decided to ignore the tiny bat-winged girl. “Don’t act as if you don’t know me,” she demanded, it looked like she screamed however the voice was as fragile as glass.

“Whatever,” obliged, he snatched the little girl and placed her inside the shirt’s pocket. A perfect fit to which she rested the arms along the edge. “Anyways,” the confusion calmed, “-seeing as his majesty just passed away, many are to grieve and the town is going to be lonesome and quiet. Take this opportunity to go around and make the roads and streets familiar – this applies to Deadeyes only.” Hearing the order, the newcomer nodded.

“Before you ask, short stack, you are to stay here with me. I’ll teach you some craftsmanship,” the rest departed with their own task in mind.

“Batgirl, and you as well, don’t you guys have a name?” he asked, no name was inconvenient. “I’m Lizzie,” the girl spoke first. “And I’m Adete,” the batgirl added. “Pleased to meet you both, I’m Staxius Haggard, from today forth, both of you can refer to me either as master or Staxius – I care not for titles nor honors. Whatever feels right, I would not mind a nickname either, just make yourself comfortable,” still exhausted, he scratched his head and headed into the backroom.

Adete’s complexion was tan, her hair brown and eyes red – nothing else stood out apart from the batwings. Lizzie, on the other hand, looked like a tomboy, her clothes made her boyish. The cap was removed, at last, her complexion was light brown, the hair cut short with a blondish color. Her body remained covered by long clothes, no wonder none could figure out her gender.

“First of all, Lizzie, you are to head out with Viola,” he ordered. Undrar stood outside – despite leaving earlier, Staxius asked using telepathy. “-she’s going to get you cleaned and ready for work. In the meantime, I’ll figure out a job for you to do,” with a wave, she joined up with the dragon. “What about me?” Adete asked. “You are to stay put,” from the pocket, she was placed onto the table. “I’m not that useless you know,” her voice sad but filled with attitude. “I know, but stay put, there isn’t a need for you and your unknown skillset.”

Thus, the party spent the day, Staxius remained in the shop and continued research into God's ale, relic class scrolls and potions – three tasks done simultaneously. Deadeyes walked around the capital as ordered, the place grew to be familiar. Spots that were favorable for long-range sniping were sought after. Undrar took care of Lizzie whomst change into other boyish clothes. None cared, whatever made one comfortable was better. Achilles slept, for the most part, exhaustion from a few quests caught up. Avon and the fox-eared lady whose name got revealed as Auic remained at the hotel. He taught her the ways of how people lived and ways to hide her identity as a demi-human. In total, three rooms right next to one another were rented for the whole month. One for Achilles and Undrar, one for Avon and Deadeyes, and one for Lizzie and Auic.

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A cost that wasn't that much when the free food came into play. There no longer was a need to worry about shelter – the focus changed to amassing cash fast, the adventuring party now needed to become a guild as soon as possible.

The rest of the day went by quickly, not a single soul was spotted outside. The inhabitants remained indoors and watched television; it showed the history of how the king came to be the ruler of Hidros.

"Already six," he mumbled, a pile of notes laid to rest on the table. Adete was used as a paperweight, in the end, her petite body napped. Not much information about her visit to the real world got given. \*A conduit,\* he remembered, thanks to her – the ability to sleep was restored. It didn't stop the nightmares, for they were integral in Nox's curse.

Without much effort, night came; the work continued. Hours became minutes and minutes turn to seconds, said night went by in a flash. The party apart from Staxius remained at the hotel and bonded. Undrar took charge and explained many questions that Deadeyes had. Achilles joined the fray, a well-mannered conversation that turned into a drunken mess. Avon and Lizzie didn't partake – the former had bad memories from the previous nights while the latter didn't care – her only concern was sleep.

"Your highness," back in the castle, many nobles had arrived. Gallienne stood next to the empty throne and welcomed many; her face held a smile but the eyes screamed of pain and grief. The heartlessness of how power could influence a person became apparent, though she grieved, it didn't stop the nobles from getting in her good side – from flattering compliments to obnoxious promises about military strength, the mouths ran throughout the evening.

"You should probably get some sleep," unwillingly, Piers stood a few meters away and spoke. The arriving nobles left; her face had turned blue. "T-thanks," she replied. "WATCH IT," he yelled, she tripped but was caught. "Leave it to me," he mumbled, her highness was carried off to the room. "I'm sorry for being a worthless wife," she whispered along the way. "No need to apologize, I hate your guts and personality," the answer firm. "But I'm still bound to you by marriage. I care not about the abuse you've dished out over the years – its water under the bridge. The pain of losing someone special can cut even diamonds. Leave the nobles to me, I'm a prince after all," he tucked her in bed and left. With a childish smile, the pain of losing a father was forgotten for a few instants.

'How many people have I wronged in this way,' her eyes remained open, the brain reflected on the past actions. 'First, it was my daughter who I abandoned. Then that mage mother told me to be wary of. My own family, my husband – the list goes on and on,' everything turned dark – she slept and a new day rose.

\*Knock, Knock,\* the door violently yelled, unwilling to wake, Staxius headed over to the door. "It's not a punching bag," he mumbled, every day began the same way. "Get ready, we are heading out to pay respect to the king – it's the least we can do," Undrar stood with the whole gang behind. "As you wish," with haste, he dashed inside and picked Adete.

The streets were empty, no car nothing, the pavement filled with people dressed in black. Each held flowers that were thrown on the slow-moving car. A black vehicle, the royal family rode behind in another car. The local news reported on said incident, "All hail King Blaine Mcleod Riverty," the crowd cheered. Tears shed, especially the middle-aged and elder, they knew how great of a king that man was. A King worthy of the title of Savior; the first hero. Long before, when Hidros was first acquired, he took it upon himself and made this savage continent work. Aided by the Order and a few companions, the land newly discovered united under the same banner – the same goal to become prosperous. Alone, using wit in trading; he managed to gather wealth beyond human comprehension. As time went by, the man turned slow-witted and began to rely on others whomst wanted only for the downfall of Hidros.

Thus, the six provinces and the council of nobles got put in place, to limit the power of the king. He knew about the plot but didn't have the strength or energy needed to fight back the downfall of what he built. Each province took on a different personality and Hidros came to how it was today. To what end, many asked – the proof of how that man could change a country was shown in Rosespire. The only province under the royal families' rule was the most prosperous and technologically advanced. A testament to the clever and good relations he made.

Nothing of that sort mattered anymore, a king dies, another born – this time, Gallienne was to take charge. The car went around the capital, Kniq decided to follow it till the tomb, a place where only a few people were allowed inside. A tomb located inside the castle from whence it came.

"Thank you all for coming this far, words can't describe the appreciation and happiness I feel. My father truly was a king worthy to be named a Hero," out of the blue, the princess took charge and spoke, her tone felt sincere. "Someone has had a change of heart," Staxius added, dark-arts got used – the aura around her felt somewhat pure.

"Whatever do you mean?" Avon asked. "No need to worry, I think we might be witnessing the birth of a ruler that could change the fate of this whole kingdom," the sentence cryptic and mysterious. "Would you stop with the riddles?" Achilles sighed. "Let's head back, there's nothing more to do," to that, they left.

Hidden from prying eyes, the king's coffin was lowered into the royal tomb. One build especially for occasions like these – a place for their family to rest. It remained empty till now – the king was placed in the center. "Everyone," a priest from the church of Kreston spoke, the hands held a staff with the holy symbol. "Please say the final goodbyes, the tomb is to be locked for none is to disturb the dead," many prayed, Gallienne watched – tears reluctantly flowed. For the first time in years, her mother stood and

cried alongside, both embraced – each shared the pain. In death, Blaine managed to do the unthinkable; the unification of the royal family.

\*May thy soul rest in peace,\* the tomb closed, the door locked by spells and other means. “Your highness,” a butler came, “-I’ve got news from the Order. It’s about the ascension to the rightful title of Queen,” he spoke, the voice scared from her wrath. “Lead the way,” she replied in a calm tone.

An audience was called with the representative from the main continent. The Emperor sent a heartfelt letter – though it was probably written by someone else. On the same day, from fear of unforeseeable scenarios, the title of Queen was bestowed onto Gallienne. Normally, the Emperor would have to be present, but it didn’t matter. The continent of Hidros didn’t interest the least. A blood pact was formed yet again with the royal crest, it finalized the ceremony. The latter of which none were invited too – it was kept hidden from the nobles themselves.

“The kingdom is now in thine hands, Queen Gallienne,” Sely spoke, she placed a crown atop the princess’s head. Graciously, the title and responsibilities were accepted. At this point, cheers and applause should have resounded across the throne room – however, the only noise was a single butler, namely Theodore, clapping.

\*Bang,\* gunshots echoed down the street. “Nice shooting, now try this one,” an empty flask shot up in the sky, \*bang,\* another one broke, Staxius applauded. “I see the marksmanship you brag about isn’t for show,” he smiled. The only response from the shooter was a nod. “Could you not waste any more potion vials, aren’t they important?” Undrar asked – her tone confused. “These ones are broken and not important, don’t worry about it – we’ve got more in stock,” a gentle smile portraited on the always emotionless face.

The air felt calm and blissful, the new companions he made were outside standing in the warmth of the sun. Many things happened along the way, and many were to come. From being destroyed by a demon who remained dormant, to courting and eventually marrying the Queen of Arda. Staxius’s personality changed slightly – he valued relations more than before – all these thanks to the person who he trusted in for the first time.

“Why does the name Axius feel so familiar.”

## Chapter 145: Hoodlums

The King’s passing came as a shock to many. It took a few days for the news to reach each corner of Hidros. Flowers were left as a tribute near the castle, the guards accepted any and all gifts. The day after Gallienne was crowned as the Queen – meetings with nobles, important traders, and companies that made Rosepire the thriving capital for commerce and such were organized.

Many were taken by surprise – her personality changed quite drastically. More often than not when triggered, rather than resort to violence – her demeanor would be calm and understanding. Many saw that side as even scarier. In addition, the Queen Mother grew to be friendlier towards her child. The Royal family now compromised of Gallienne, Sely, and Piers. Since the death of the father, the animosity faded. They grew to be one so that the pain of losing someone special could be borne.

A few days had gone by, almost a week. Daily life steadily became the norm. Staxius stayed inside the shop for the entire duration. An order to not disturb was issued to all the party members. To that,

Undrar took charge and guided the others. From quests to daily activities, her times spent with the Silver Guardians came as a boon. Instantly, any problem that could surface was dealt with. Keeping the guys together turned from a task to something natural – they loved her charisma. Two faces of the same coin, Undrar was the good and honest, while Staxius the crude and shady leader. However, it didn't bother anyone – Adete remained at the shop. Lizzie learned the ways of craftsmanship. Rather than turning into a fighter, she chose to try and make things that could turn useful for others. Auic and Avon grew inseparable, the girl took a liking to the spirit. Achilles' reputation increased massively, her days working for the guild and saving people out on the street grew more frequent. Many recognized her outside the guild as a true warrior with Deadeyes helping with the quests here and there.

"Finally," the room dark with a red light as the only means for sight; a flask fell and broke. "Keep it down," a quiet voice yelled. "Don't you dare stand up, Adete," Staxius fired back, he used her as a paperweight yet again. The number of notes on the table reached the ceiling, most of which were pointless and rough thesis.

After days of research, the fabrication of God's ale became a possibility. Though, rather than turning the consumer into a slave – it only gave the feeling of never-ending pleasures till the effect wore out. There were side effects such as headaches and addiction, but no care was given. The worst component had been removed – no longer was it needed for one to become an empty shell. Even with that removed, there still didn't have a cure to revert back the effect – that would take months and years to even research. Once it entered the human body, Staxius didn't know what could happen then, interaction with the organs to changing its properties – a mystery that was saved for another time. On top of that, research on Relic class scrolls was half-way done and the process of making potions turn autonomous, with the highest purity being Uncommon.

'The potions can be made into quality higher than Uncommon. But that would make the scroll expendable, I want that item to retain its value. If one wants something of higher quality – then the scroll should be enough,' the mind worked.

\*Pssst,\* a whistle from the apparatus signaled its completion. "And that is the last one," the last flask was placed into a carton with the Uncommon label. \*click,\* the light turned on, piles and piles of carton were laid to rest on the left wall. Each box held 30 potions each separated by rarity. Common and Uncommon were the only two available.

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"As your first task, you are to try and solve this quandary about turning Mana from an Ethereal substance to one Physical." [Difficulty: SS-Ranked]

A memory came into mind, days before – Clarise came by the shop to deliver a task from the Master Alchemist. A job that the rather limited amount of Alchemist had to do. Their objective still remained the advancement of technology and to unearth different possibilities. 'Turning mana from a spiritual form and into physical. The makers of God's ale have already been doing that – I must say it came as a surprise to learn that the Alchemy division knew not of this.' With a sigh – the problem solved itself.

From researching the substance – the ways of turning mana into something usable also became reality. A process that was tedious to set up but easy to execute. ‘Judging by the difficulty, if I turn this paper to Clarise; I can expect them to lay off my back for a while.’ Not wanting to have the little girl coming into his shop uninvited – Staxius decided to give the Alchemist what they wanted. “Adete, get up,” he spoke. “No,” she fired back, the tone filled with attitude. “As you wish,” yet again, without any care – Staxius pinched her by the head and placed the girl inside his shirt pocket. “STOP GRABBING MY HEAD, I’M NOT SOME DOLL YOU CAN PLAY AROUND WITH,” the voice piercing as she stood closer to the ears. “Fine, I’ll stop,” with the index finger, he patted her head. \*Snap,\* a blueish light shone.

“Good morning Isorin,” Staxius spoke, a dazzling light sent the wizard in shock. “Calm down,” he spoke seeing the sage leaning back too much, the chair gave way and broke. “MY BACK,” he screamed. “My bad,” nonchalantly, Staxius opened a flask and dowsed the injured scholar.

“I can’t believe you’ve learned teleportation. What’s the reason for this visit?” he stood and spoke. “I’d like to find Clarise,” Staxius replied. Both stood inside Isorin’s bedroom. “I know not where she is, maybe inside the Alchemy lab?” he dusted off the now dirtied robe. “No worries, thanks for the help,” the door opened, a large empty corridor stood.

“Adete, I’m going to use the All-seeing eyes, get ready,” the tone quiet so that none could hear. “There’s no need to tell me when the ability will be used, the moment it activates, I’ll be able to help,” she replied sternly. Deep breath in, the left eyes closed. A faint pulsing was felt, the eyes burnt with a scarlet color. ‘I’m in,’ he could now see what people were up to. From the guild assistant to Isorin, he switched through their sights effortlessly. ‘The alchemy lab,’ he saw through the master’s eyes. ‘There’s Clarise,’ a smirk later, Staxius vanished.

“Now put those drops into the flask and then heat it,” Clarise taught the new-upcoming scholars. “Bow down before thine master,” Staxius spoke in jest. “What brings you here?” they didn’t notice him teleporting. “I’ve brought back the papers you asked me to complete,” the tone monotonous.

“You weren’t able to finish it I presume?” her face remained fixed on the demonstration. The students were perplexed about how the little girl could hold a conversation and work at the same time. “Well, unlike you miss prodigy, I’ve got more time than is necessary – the quandary has been solved,” he added smugly. \*Poof,\* a violet vapor came out the test-tube, a mistake was made.

“You did what?” she lifted her goggles and took a better look at the paper. “Impossible, t-this method, h-how in the world?” her face sunk, “well that’s up for your grandfather to decide,” in a single flick, the paper was taken back. He walked away, “-also, add some of that yellow substance into the test-tube – the whole experiment should revert back to the norm,” the door closed.

The meeting with the grandfather didn’t last that long. Staxius wasn’t keen on revealing the means for said research. The task had been accomplished and the reward given was ten-gold coins. ‘Spare change,’ he sighed and teleported back into the shop.

“Welcome back,” a figure stood inside. “What are you doing here?” Staxius asked the hand rested above the concealed sword. “No need to fret,” the figure came out of the shadows. “I’ve come to collect the God’s ale,” the man looked imposing, tattoos ran from the neck downwards. “How did you know?” Staxius asked; he hadn’t told anyone about the experiments. “The Dark Guild has more reach than you know, Staxius Haggard,” animosity grew – killing intent was felt. ‘Should I kill him?’ he thought, the left



eyes closed. Seeing through the eyes of people he physically saw – became a possibility. At that moment, he saw through the eyes of the strange figure.

Without much thought, Staxius faced away exposing his blindside. “Don’t you dare look away from me,” the man added with rage in the voice. “Make me,” he answered. The figure took out a gun and fired. \*Bang, bang, bang,\* Staxius knew where he aimed, the first two shots aimed for the head whilst the last one at the right legs. All that was needed to be done was to seamlessly evade. ‘Why did I even do that?’ he asked, a blueish mist later, the door broke open.

\*Splash,\* blood splattered across the building facing the shop. “I hate how messy killing someone is,” the voice monotonous. “OPEN FIRE,” a dozen thugs stood outside – they wore black suits with top hats. “Seriously, Karlson,” both eyes closed. Gunfire opened, Staxius vanished, one after the other, using a dagger that laid on the ground, necks were sliced. It looked like fountains till he reached the leader - “Alright, take me to Karlson or else you’d end up like these guys,” \*stab,\* the dagger got embedded inside the leader’s right arm. “F-fine, d-don’t kill me,” he begged – twelve-man just died in a second, anyone who witnessed such a massacre could not but obey.

Instead of going to the Twin Jellyfish Bar, the man walked deeper into the heart of the dark guild’s district. The sight of hoodlums grew frequent, they all were armed to the teeth. Staxius looked even scarier than most – appearance mattered. After a few buildings, a shady apartment came in view. They climbed up; the lights barely worked. Despite being day time, it felt as if it were evening. Moans and screams grew commonplace, graffiti on the walls, they reached the top floor. “Karlson is inside that room,” he pointed forward, a room guarded by two mercenaries.

“Ay, who stands there,” one of the guards asked, “someone who wants to do business,” Staxius fired back. “the boss said ain’t nobody doing buidness today,” the same guy replied. “Tough shit,” \*Bang, bang,\* two shots straight in the head. The guards fell, he used the gun from the guide. Once inside, the hostage was thrown on the couch. “Excuse me, you can’t go inside,” a female voice asked to which Staxius glared – her head unwillingly lowered.

\*BAM,\* the door broke open, the room filled with girls and Karlson in the middle. “WHO THE FUCK IS THAT,” he asked whilst reaching for a gun. \*Ancient Magic: Teleportation,\* a cold piece of metal rested on the head. “Looks like fun.”

“Is that you Staxius?” the voice felt familiar. “Don’t you fucking move,” a headlock with a gun at the back of the head, “-right now, tell me why was there a platoon of thugs waiting to ambush me,” the tone cold but deadly. “I’m sorry, but orders came from the top. I had to give a report to whomst I sold God’s ale to, and so your name got brought up,”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” \*BANG, BANG,\* the girls who stood ran out as soon as the gunfire was heard. “Calm down,” Karlson asked with fear in the voice. “Calm down, he says,” the gun pressed even further. He gritted with pain, “fine, what do you want?” the voice close to breaking down.

“Tell me who’s responsible, I’ve got business to discuss,” the voice firm. “I-I c-can’t, if I tell you the name, then it’s my head they’ll be after,” he refused. “Well either you tell me, or the next thing on this bed will be that lifeless body of yours,” having come this far, Staxius wasn’t going to back away without answers.

## Chapter 146: The Red Seals

The street filled with blood and corpses, Achilles and Undrar decided to pay the shop a visit. Staxius had been gone for a while now; also, they needed to inform him about a high paying job offer. "The smell of iron," Undrar mumbled. "All too familiar," Achilles added – they both walked with caution.

A head practically exploded itself on the building across the shop. The brain matter was spread across the wall – it looked disgusting. Scattered from spot to spots, the headless bodies, and top hats laid about. A trail of blood led into the back alley where it then disappeared.

"Why has no one even mentioned this to the guild?" a question worth raising – Achilles stared at Viola in hopes of getting answers. "I don't know," the voice felt perplexed. Without much thought, Achilles dashed and decided to pile up the bodies. Only dark red-stains were spotted, the bodies were put outback. "Probably hoodlums and extortionists," Undrar figured a guess. "Still, a proper burial should be given," to which both began to work.

"Fine, fine," the voice erratic, Karlson gave, Staxius's aura grew to be dark and murderous. Anything at this point would cause him to pull the trigger, the eyes burnt with hate – hate that the name Staxius was used without reason. A harmless purchase that the dark guild figured not worthy. "Speak then!" the headlock tightened. "-It-it's the s-same gang that attacked the tailor's shop," at that point, he began to choke, the grip grew too much to speak. \*Cough,\* it lessened, "-are you sure it's them?" he let go.

"Yes, it's probably the on-going thirst for power. Those people were once influential when it came to doing business with god's ale. However, supplies have been running low for a while. There must have been a leak in the information. The amount you pay far exceeded the price of the drug – a single bottle costs about 5 gold, but you paid 100. They must have thought you purchased a stock for reselling," the posture now fatigued and scared.

\*Bing,\* the sound of something metallic hitting the floor echoed around the now silent room. Staxius dropped the gun and thought. "Where do you tie in, the guy outside is someone from your crew isn't it?" the voice still murderous but calm. "Let me check," Karlson walked over and peeped. "Oh, is that the cause," he smirked, "that's a previous member from the one group you encountered at Claireville Academy. Probably a spy of some sort. I've told you most of the information I know, please – let this fight stop here," eyes lit with fear.

"I beg your pardon," \*Woosh,\* a pin flew across the room. A muffled yelp later, the door opened. "Spies," he spoke out loud, "-I hate when people try and invade the place I call home. I never asked to be involved with the dark guilds – but today it's about to change." He stood in the now opened doorway, "Is that supposed gang an enemy of yours?" he leaned against the frame, the dead body of the former spy laid on the couch.

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"They're not so much an enemy as opposed to a nuisance. The structure of this whole underground organization is filled with confusion, lies, and deception. None knows who they're dealing with apart from a chosen few. However, those guys who call themselves as The Red Seals are a bane to us people who want to try to keep all this in the shadows."

“Consider me an ally but don’t you ever think for a second that you’ll have an advantage over me,”  
\*Snap,\* he vanished into a blueish mist.

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“An ally,” Karlson laughed, “-with pleasure, Staxius – you demon, even I the one who rules over the export of God’s ale had to bow down. You made one of the underground bosses tremble and cower with fear,” the now relaxed boss rested.

‘Where are the bodies,’ he materialized in front of the shop. “Master,” Achilles called out from behind the alley. “What are you guys doing?” he walked to check out what happened. “Cleaning out the mess you made?” Undrar fired back. “No time for regrets, it was merely self-defense,” he spoke in jest. “In what world is self-defense this brutal and deadly,” the bodies were put in bags to be cremated. Digging grave now would be detrimental, instead – Viola proposed to use fire magic and laid their souls to rest.

“There’s something that requires my attention,” he turned around. “You’ve got a job offer back in the main guild – there’s a lot of gold involved,” Undrar added to which teleportation was used.

Sat in a room, Avon and Auic spoke with leisure. “Sorry to interrupt,” without a second wasted, Staxius teleported inside – took the spirit, and left. “No need to ask questions,” they stood atop the shop – “I want you to teleport me to the hideout,” Staxius demanded. \*Snap,\* both vanished yet again; a giant cliff stood in front.

“Thanks for traveling with Avon express,” he chuckled and winked. “Head back – I’ve got things here, your lady awaits,” Staxius teased.

The forest felt calm and peaceful, the trees gently swayed with the fresh breeze. The sun atop provided just the right amount of heat – birds chirped. ‘What an idyllic scenery,’ he thought and breathed. The left eye closed, the Nox’s curse activated – the All-seeing eyes got used. From gang member to gang member, a mental map was drawn. The underground hideout compromised of five layers, each one stacked with members and entertainment. The last floor was where the main players remained, all heavily armed – especially the leader.

‘Here I come,’ \*Ancient Magic: Teleportation.\* The first floor, without much effort, the recruits were killed with only a dagger found on a table, none could react fast enough. Bodies dropped on after the other like dominos.

The time came for the second floor; they were much more skilled than before. Still, this time the cursed steel sword came out. Some managed to call for help, but none could hear – this place now was under Staxius’s control; a chamber where death reigned supreme.

The third floor arrived, Unleash Aura was used – a few runaway mages and adventurers filled the ranks. The alarm rang at last; all were now on guard. Many asked questions about his identity but no reply ever came. They gave a good enough work out – the fight lasted a few minutes.

It now came time for the fourth floor, they were mercenaries of the highest grade. People that could pass as Bronze rank when it came to combat. As opposed to the previous levels – each one had skills and magical abilities. Enhancement spells, physical augmentation – body transformation – these guys had it all. With that being said, Unleash Aura lowered their overall strength by a good margin – the dense aura

limited any acts of recklessness. The mistake became harder to exploit, though it didn't matter. As an homage to Adelana, he took the lightning strike stance – the shadow variant. The entire base trembled, bodies simply vanished – a faint trace of the Void Flame burnt.

“Who stands there,” he teleported into the last floor. “Death,” Staxius mumbled. Gunshots, arrows, spells, everything were used – the warriors here could well enough give the silver guardians a run for their money. The time came to go all out – it had been a long time since all the skills acquired over the ages could be used. Not out of necessity, but to see how he stacked up against strong opponents.

The eyes closed, at last, the outline of people made the focus heightened. No unnecessary information was being transmitted, a target and a sword. Gunfire proved to be a challenge, \*Death Element: Absolute Barrier,\* everything got held in place. \*Snap,\* it returned to the sender. None died from said attack, the armor held its own. \*Slash,\* behind the bullets, another force went twice as fast. A second; all that was needed – none could come close to matching that speed.

“Now then,” he stared at the leader, “-I’ve got a big present for you.” Blood sprayed; the body beheaded. “You monster.” \*Bang,\* someone out back yelled, without much thought, using Absolute Barrier; the bullet got sent back inside the head of the would-be assaulter. Eyes filled with death lifted, Staxius sat on the leader’s chair. “I should have probably asked questions before killing god knows how many people.”

Out of curiosity, he walked around and explored quite a bit before getting tired. An inventory of weapons, god’s ale, and coins were found. “Don’t mind If I do,” the face held a smirk. Using teleportation, a portal from here to the shop got opened. One by one, the stuff got carried from one place to another. A vault with god knows how many gold coins remained as the masterpiece. “You sure are ruthless,” Adete whispered.

This whole operation took about thirty minutes at most. All the loot got taken back to base. Staxius now stood atop the hideout, \*Death Element: Fireball,\* on each floor, a fireball the size of a house got conjured. Having no place to go, it exploded and turned everything to dust. “That should keep Claireville Academy safe.”

A few hours went by, Staxius now rested. A fair bit of mana was used or rather wasted. The fight could have been more efficient if he went all out from the beginning. It completely slipped his mind till the door knocked. “We’re coming in,” Undrar announced herself. “Over here,” Staxius called and sat – the clothes covered with bloodstains.

“What is it?” a familiar figure walked in first. “...” her eyes stared unknowing how to react. “If it isn’t Aceline, the one who chose music as her weapon.” Staxius stood nonchalantly, “-I do apologize for my rather repulsive attire,” the tone formal and calm.

“Lady Aceline, we should probably get away; that man only screams of trouble,” Scott added with the snobbish accent. “Why are you covered in blood, you left thirty minutes ago,” Undrar asked, her face filled with embarrassment. “I said I had a job to take care of which coincidentally involved killing a few people,” the way it was said implied that taking a life or two was nothing.

“That doesn’t matter,” Aceline spoke, the glasses got put away. “I’ve come here to request for your assistance,’ the tone polite. “A job I assume?” the arms crossed. Reluctantly, Scott took charge and explained the task and how long it would take.

“I am to act as lady Aceline’s bodyguard for the duration of the concert in the main continent?” he summarized all the information. “That is correct,” she added. “Sure,” weighting in the advantages of working for someone as popular as her would have hidden perks. More people might seek out help from Staxius – it meant more money. “I’ve but one question before we proceed,” the tone mysterious.

“What is it?” Scott asked. “In case of an attack, how do you wish for me to handle the situation. The death of the perpetrator might not suit the image of our idol here,” he understood the implication of what death could mean for someone else. “Yes, the preferred way would be nonlethal, though if her life is at risk – I care not if bodies are left behind.” Scott and Staxius were on the same page.

“Please don’t resort to senseless killing, I’ve made it a point to value all life equally. People should learn to be harmonious – like music,” she added. “Whatever you say,” Staxius bid them farewell. “Alright,” he turned around to face Undrar and Achilles. The idol and her manager left.

“You’ve heard the details. Things will be in Viola’s hand for a week. Nothing major, I do have some new toys in the back as well as a lot of gold coins. If you would, please take it to the bank and keep it safe, that money will be used for establishing a guild.” That being said, he headed back into the mini-laboratory.

The official quest would be placed tomorrow at the guild, a task only he could accept. As the day went on, teleportation was used heavily, traveling from places to places in hopes of settling everything before leaving. The potions and scrolls were taken back to Arda using a portal – it required less mana and worked better. This included the research papers and God’s ale. It also gave the opportunity to get changed, gather weapons and get prepared – not to mention meeting the lovely Xula.

#### Chapter 147: Departure

“Princess Gallienne, today is the day Lady Aceline is headed to the empire’s capital,” Theodore spoke, he stood in the doorway. The now new Queen of Hidros was constantly surrounded by maids and guards – the fear of those shady individuals remained. The one who invited themselves into the castle on the King’s birthday.

With a nod of confirmation, the butler left to help with training the prodigy, Rose’s child. ‘Aceline, the pride of Hidros – due to the circumstances; I wish I could personally bid thee farewell. Sadly, the kingdom’s duties bind me to this castle – do us proud and make the continent gleam with happiness.’ Not many people knew about this, but her majesty and the young idol were friends. An interview for the radio lit the spark of friendship – a relationship that would later become important to both.

“I can’t believe we missed the king’s procession,” sat before a mirror located inside the multimedia complex for Rosespire, Aceline got ready. Scott sat in the next room with countless phone ringing; time for the departure approached steadily. “Miss Diane, could you please get a hold of Staxius, the plane is to leave in about two hours,” a new day had risen, the man in question stayed up all night getting things ready. “As soon as possible,” Diane replied and hung. “Melisa, have you seen anyone from Kniq today?”

with time closing in for the daily announcement of quests – the loud guild hall boomed with anticipation. “Yes, I saw Deadeyes a few seconds ago,” she pointed at the café where he sat with Auic.

“I’ll get right on it,” he replied with a firm voice, Deadeyes left looking for his master. To which they headed to the shop.

\*Knock, knock,\* the door opened. The media complex named the Memento, where Aceline worked grew popular over the months. From radio to broadcasting shows and news across the continent – money stopped being an issue. Emphasis was put on quality – thus getting expanded into a large complex, one with studios, arenas and many more. All these changes happened behind the scene; technology had advanced by a rather large margin overseas. It’s only in the past few months that the influence began to affect the daily lives. More importantly, smartphones were imported. At first, it was only available to prosperous families – but as parts and the ways of manufacturing grew common. The rivalry between companies made said device cheaper and better.

In spite of this, people loved the books and the overall atmosphere Hidros had. Not too advanced – a perfect balance between the older generation and new; the growth got limited due to monsters. None really paid heed, but many facilities were made public – most notability in Rosespire. The sole province that was on par with the empire in terms of said advancements.

“What is it?” Aceline asked, her hands moved gently without shaking – surgery level concentration whilst putting on makeup. “All the arrangements have been made; a jet shall be waiting for us at the airfield,” all the necessary details were told. “Thank you, we’ll leave as soon as we get word from the Guild,” her lips didn’t move as much when pronouncing.

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“Lady Viola,” on the way to the shop – Deadeyes came across the dragon who did some window shopping. “Yes?” the reply calm and dignified. “Diane from the guild has asked for master,” nothing more needed to be said – she understood and reassured that everything would be taken care of.

“STAXIUS,” telepathy was used. Face buried deep into a fluffy pillow, he reluctantly answered. “What is it,” he asked, to which Undrar explained her call. “On it,” he awoke. ‘Must have dozed off whilst getting ready,’ he thought, Xula laid beside – her legs wrapped around his hips. Gently, he rose and teleported to the garage; not before giving her a quick peck on the forehead.

“Staxius,” a voice called out. “Yes master,” he turned to see a case with a golden crest in the sage’s hand. “The weapon you ordered was finished within the delay – though the engineers had to work without sleep.”

It got placed atop a table, the room felt empty without Void. “Remarkable, they worked so hard just for me – the people of Arda sure are considerate,” impressed – the case opened. “Beautiful,” the eyes could not but stare in awe. A silver revolver with edges of gold and the handle crafted with a flowery design – an homage to the Queen. “As specified, this gun doesn’t require bullets. You’re the King of Arda, using something mechanical would not suit the image – the bullets that are to be fired will consume mana. The intensity can be varied with how much mana is inputted. From nonlethal to an object of mass destruction, it’s all in thy hands,” the sage finished.

This was what Staxius did that whole night – making a plan for a perfect ally. Taking out a sword in public would not be that elegant when it came to protecting someone. Especially when said weapon was cursed beyond belief. The inspiration came due to how quickly people died without much blood spilled. It had aspects that matched Void in terms of mana and the Absolute Barrier spell.

\*Bang, bang,\* as a test – he took aim at some paint cans that disintegrated when contact was made. “Let’s try this,” \*Void Flame aspect,\* another gunshot; this time it burnt with a black-flame. “So, the bullets can have different properties depending on the mana – basically a staff. Arda sure is a haven for mages.”

The newfound weapon was named Tharis, as in the goddess of judgment. The outfit changed from a simple shirt to a suit, grey with golden edges, brown shoes, a purple vest, a blueish shirt, and a black-tie. Tharis was strapped on the inside whilst the sword remained hidden on the hip. The crest and guild necklace was hidden underneath the purple shirt. The suit was enhanced quite a bit by the craftsmen. From clothes to weapons – everything came from Arda. Being King had more perks than one could imagine.

“Alright master, I’ll head off.” Healing scrolls, potions, just a few of them got packed. ‘Tharis feels amazing, not to mention it can only respond to my mana. Can someone be any more prepared,’ a snap later – Void stood in front. “God damn, I’ve neglected you,” the hand ran from the hood and up to the door. Rather than teleporting, using the very expensive car – Staxius drove to the guild.

“Finally,” Diane sighed; adventurers now left in a hurry to complete quests. “I apologize for preparing,” the voice sarcastic – Staxius walked in. Many looked at how well dressed he was – a noble by all rights, a scary one with the scarlet eye being the culprit. “So, the job request, I’m here to fill the papers.” A phone call later, Scott asked for him to head to the airport directly. “Good luck, and bring back a souvenir or something – cheapskate,” a stamp from Diane confirmed the job. “Sure, I’ll bring back a noose,” mocking Diane became a force of habit. “Yes, I’ll try it on you first,” she fired back, the face always stoic.

“Hello master,” Achilles stood with the rest of Knig. Even the fox-girl and Lizzie were present. “Good morning everyone,” he stopped and took a good look. Undrar, Achilles, Deadeyes, Avon, Lizzie, Auic and Adete stood in line. “Just look at you, can a party get any cooler than this,” the arms crossed, the face portrait a smile. “I’m sure Viola has told everyone about the job I found. Everything will be in her hands; any question or query please ask her,” he reached inside the car and took out seven pouches. “Here, a gift from yours truly.” It contained gold coins, ten of them for each person – quite a lot of money for a gift. “But master,” Achilles tried to protest. “No need to fret, I have the right to spoil my companions whenever is needed. It’s thanks for all the hard work you’ve all been doing.” An act of generosity that took their breaths away. “Thank you, Master,” in tandem – everyone bowed with smiles. “Anyways, Adete, you’re coming with me.” She flew and took a seat on the shoulders. “I’d ask Avon to come as well, but there’s someone else who needs thy assistance more than I,” he referred to the fox-girl. “Anyways,” the door opened, “-stay out of trouble and make safety the top priority. None of you are to die before I bring back gifts from the empire,” with a wink – the car drove off.

“Viola,” Deadeyes asked, the face baffled but hidden behind glasses, “-just how rich is the man I call master?” he wondered – from the pristine suit to the luxurious car and giving out gold as if spare change – it was bound to raise questions. “I forgot to say this, but Staxius Haggard is actually married to the

Queen of Arda. A King is obliged to look the part, now doesn't he?" she chuckled. "Today is a day off, go out and have fun. We'll start adventuring tomorrow. Avon and Auic will manage the shop – there's a dozen of potions that needs selling. Achilles and Lizzie will stay with me. Deadeyes you're to train, the rank of Steel isn't going to increase whilst lounging around." To that, all set off to do their own thing.

"The nerve on that man," Scott walked around impatiently. "Calm down, we got here a few minutes early – don't blame the guy," Aceline spoke, she sat on the jet's staircase. "Please get off there – it doesn't really suit the image of an idol." It had been the tenth time, but the words came in one ear and left out the other.

Rosespire housed two airfields: one for airships and one for planes. The latter was used for transport between the main continent and Hidros whilst the former for journeys to local provinces. The one Aceline waited in was located to the south, on a piece of land secluded and out of Rosespire. It stood on the way to Claireville Academy, remote and usually quiet unless people came to visit.

A thunderous roar echoed; a black car approached at neck-breaking speed. The realization that the speed at which he drove would make it impossible to stop next to the plane, Staxius hit the break hard and spun. It turned, the tires screamed for mercy, but the car stopped. Smoke rose, he stepped out. "Why are you early, isn't the star supposed to arrive late?" no apology was given, he approached. "About time," Scott growled. "Good to have you," Aceline stood – the father who she saw in action remained as impressive as ever. "Are you really just a nobody?" the manager asked, it showed yet again, the car and vestment – the amount of gold spent could not be quantified. "Depends, but that isn't the issue. I've been hired to protect our continent's pride, therefore; I'm but a bodyguard for this journey," the answer logical.

"What about the car," she pointed, it rested empty with no way of getting back. "Oh, don't worry," he turned and spoke, "Avon, you can take her back home," it roared as if acknowledging the voice and left. "Amazing," she stared in awe.

"Let's go," Scott called. They entered the plane, the seats made of leather and the interior rather boastful. The Emperor's ship screamed of wealth. "Overdoing it a bit, aren't we?" Staxius added whilst taking a seat at the back. "As if you have room to speak," Scott added in jest which made Aceline laugh. The engines turned on; the journey to the Empire began. The excitement was hidden, but Staxius could not contain the joy of venturing into a foreign land.

"Why don't we all have a little chat," Scott spun his seat along with Aceline. "Can't we do this later? I'm sleepy," Staxius stared out into the blueish sky. "No, this is important – your job begins the moment we step off the plane."

#### Chapter 148: Iqavea

The stares felt envious, both the manager and the singer wanted to know more. More about a subject that Staxius had no clue about. In turn, he looked outside and admired the clouds and scenery. In the end, their gaze felt discomforting.

"What do you wish to discuss," from staring outside, he faced forward and crossed the arms. The aura around him changed from neutral to serious, it made them shudder a little.



“It’s about the nature of the assignment we’ve hired you to perform.” Scott took charge, the voice as snobbish as ever – each word that rolled off the tongue had a dignified accent to it. Aceline sat and watched; tis was a conversation the lady had no part in.

“Do tell, if there’s anything more apart from protecting the lady; then I’m all ears. But I must make it clear you haven’t hired a butler, no chores nor other tasks will be covered by me,” with haste, the condition was laid out. Anything that concerned cleaning and going out on errands was out of the picture.

“No need to worry about that, we’ve got assistants for that very purpose,” he coughed. “I shall ask a few questions,” with a nod from Staxius, the manager began. “First of all, the choice of weapons. If by chance you’ve come unarmed, then we’ll be happy to lend anything which matches your liking.” No weapons nor bag had been brought over by Staxius – to which he assumed that the man was unprepared.

Waiting for an answer, Scott watched. Unwillingly, Tharis was pulled out as well as the cursed steel sword. The concealment spell broke, both weapons were placed on the empty seat. “If this isn’t enough,” a levitating fireball hovered over the right hand. “Scott, I assure you that I’ve not come unprepared. If tis the issue about killing someone then a single pin is sufficient,” the fireball vanished.

“I apologize, it was foolish to think that you would portraint yourself as someone mighty. We did specify that someone inconspicuous would be the perfect match,” a big exhaled lowered his back, the face raised again into a big smile. “Now the nature of the job. You are to protect Aceline even if your life is at risk. A lot of money has been placed into hiring you, the guild extremely cared about the contract. Quite a hefty price tag for hiring a silver ranked adventurer.” more than explaining the assignment – it turned into a rant.

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“If money was that much of an issue, should have sought me out directly. I’d have still taken the job without care for how much you would have paid. More importantly, care to get into the finer details?” he grew annoyed – sleep loomed overhead.

“Sure,” Scott’s trance broke, “-apart from protecting lady Aceline. You’ll stay by her side on a twenty-four-hour basis. It means constantly watching over her; even at night. No breaks will be allowed – I hope you understand how much her life is worth to us.” The message loud and clear, he acknowledged and fell asleep.

“Emperor Paradus,” a man dressed in a formal suit called out. “What is it?” sat behind the table onto which notes and papers were placed accompanied by other devices, the emperor asked. “We’ve received news that Aceline from Hidros has boarded our plane and is set to arrive tomorrow,” the message quick, he bowed.

“Excellent, do inform my son – this whole charade was put in place because of that boy,” with a gesture signaling the assistant to leave; Paradus went back to work. As opposed to Hidros where the royal family lived inside a castle – the Empire differed. The Emperor worked in the capital whilst he stayed on the outskirts of said city – though a five-hour drive was necessary to reach back home. To which, on said

building, a helipad waited patiently. The office overlooked the prosperous city of Vlaiwia; the major capital of Iqavea. This may come as a surprise to many, but the emperor had a change of heart; the name of the main continent was altered. The reason being that he simply forgot; this name fitted the overall atmosphere better.

From the office, a peak outside revealed how advanced the continent actually was. Despite being on the top floor of a rather high building, it failed compared to others that dotted themselves across at regular intervals. They lit of different colors, advertisements, many big-name companies made their headquarters here. A strategical location – all trade routes, major airports, essential railway lines and roads led into here. No wall separated the outside from the inside, the only border that exists prevented people from the other kingdom to sneak into the empire. In total, five other kingdoms surrounded the land ruled by the Emperor – except the south, the place was barren for it was the only point of access to the sea.

The continent was divided into three countries under the rule of Paradus. Life was far better than out in Hidros. Not to mention monsters hadn't fully appeared there, it only ran rampant out in the desolate continent. The imperial capital was located near the other borders into the two-remaining province.

From waging war to now trading amongst one another – trying to solve conflict using military strength wasn't deemed human any longer. The other kingdom hated conflict to which the alliance of Wracia came to life. A treaty that prevented war and encouraged trade and democratic discussion instead. Though there were other kingdoms farther away, those that refused to deal with Wracia. In order to not be ever defeated, resources from each kingdom merged into one, it brought wealth to one another. Side by side, technology advanced quicker than alone.

"Imperial Prince Ernis," the message about Aceline's departure from Hidros traveled. A quick phone call from the capital; the personal butler got notified. "What is it?" sat outside and basking in the warm sunlight – a young adult aged twenty. He held a book named, \*My Life on Ice, by Neuburg.\* the eyes ever so warm and tender, he read with passion. "We've got news that Aceline has left Hidros." Hearing the message, the eyes raised and stared at the garden in front. "You're dismissed," the butler left.

"Time has come for us to meet, the pride of Hidros; Miss Aceline," a gentle smile could not be hidden any longer. "The amount of pressure I had to put on the father for this opportunity is unbelievable. I promise that once you come here, there is no going back – you will bow down before me like all the previous up and coming stars in this industry," the book slammed shut. Hidden behind those innocent eyes laid one of a man who had an obsession with things that were pretty.

The flight took longer than expected; a new day rose. Out in Vlaiwia, preparation was made to welcome the idol with open hands. "Just look at that," Staxius awoke a few hours ago. A magazine laid around; it enabled a few peeks into the foreign land. "Amazing, isn't it?" Scott was born and raised in the main continent, but a job offer from Hidros could not be passed over. "Is this where we are to spend the next week?" her voice filled with excitement. Almost subconsciously, she began to get ready; from makeup to her hair, it was done all over again. Appearance mattered in her line of profession.

"Staxius," the manager whispered, "-we're about to land. I'll say one thing, people aren't what they seem here; be on guard. I've spent my childhood in this supposed paradise, be wary and protect Aceline

– she’s the only reason I was able to change my ways,” a subtle fear could be sensed. “No need to worry, if it comes to a fight; I can guarantee that me losing isn’t going to happen,” he leaned back.

“I must ask, who the hell is that miniature girl on your shoulder? I thought I’d been hallucinating but it’s really there,” the finger pointed at the bat-girl. “This is Adete,” he took a look and decided to ignore her. “IS THAT ALL YOU HAVE TO SAY?” she yelled but sounded adorable. “Mister with glasses, I’m Adete, this big jerk’s assistant,” her arms crossed, she stood trying to be imposing. “Well with monsters being a reality, I guess things like her should be expected. Nice to meet you,” he turned around and waited.

In turn, she flew closer to Staxius’s face. “Don’t act as if you don’t care about me,” her hands on her hips. “Calm down, I’m just messing around,” he whispered then blew, it made her fall back. “Screw you,” she pulled out her tongue and landed on his head. Rather than sitting, she laid on her stomach and bobbed left and right.

The jet began its descent, ‘here we go,’ it landed. “Alright,” Staxius stood, it slowly headed inside a hangar. “From here on out, I’ll take charge.” All the weapons reequipped themselves. As a preliminary check, both eyes closed – he saw through the plane and looked around. The auras didn’t seem keen on slaughter, but a single soul was spotted atop a building. It felt weird considering the building was empty. \*All-seeing eye,\* the right eye opened; he saw through the suspicious man. Turned out that the man held a camera; probably a news reporter.

Back in the plane, the duo watched as Staxius stared at the walls. “Hello?” Aceline’s voice snapped him out of the concentration. “Excuse me,” he faced her, the right eye brightly red; it felt as if it moved – a fire burnt, Aceline’s face changed. “Your r-right eye,” she tried to speak. “Don’t worry, it’s the perks of being an adventurer,” he lied; the plane came to a stop.

The door opened, “Aceline, you go first, I’ll remain at the back. If anything happens; I’ll be there faster than you think – no need to be scared, I’ll protect thee without restraint.” The words felt reassuring, she stepped off.

Staxius expected a crowd of fans but saw a few people in suit and a car waiting. It worked better; the face remained neutral; he watched each person with care. None could escape the hawk eyes.

“Lady Aceline,” a rather large man with a mustache approached. The intent was a hug but soon changed into a handshake. “Scott, personal contact permitted yeah? I don’t want to cause a problem where it’s not due.”

“For the most part, shaking hands and hugs comes with the territory. There isn’t a need to be alert – well most of the time anyway,” the whispers ended. Inconspicuously, Staxius walked shoulder to shoulder with the manager, being too close to Aceline would create problems.

“Hello Akhter,” the man was in charge of many up and coming stars out in Iqavea. “It’s a pleasure to have the pride of Hidros visit our quaint little continent. The stuff you’ve brought over will be sent to the hotel – please take a seat in that car; it’s headed straight to the place you’re to stay in the coming week.” With a bow, she walked over and entered. Scott followed and sat in the backseat whilst Staxius took the front seat. The driver and passenger were cut off, none could see what the other did. That applied to normal people, the now bodyguard could see just fine with the eyes closed.

“Is the hotel that far away?” the question took the driver by surprise. “Not really, about a forty-five to one-hour drive,” he answered, the voice trembled. Nothing much was said, the car drove – it took the main road out. The streets filled with cars, a complete opposite of Hidros. The buildings reached on high, the place looked sophisticated and clean, not to mention the people walking – all well-dressed. ‘So, this is the famed Iqavea,’ he wondered. ‘I guess exporting God’s ale here does have its perks. People seem well-off,’ sadly the guards in charge of law patrolled around. Some in vehicles and some on foot, though many accepted their presence with a smile.

#### Chapter 149: A Picture

“Boss, boss,” a man dressed in a suit rushed inside the quiet bar. “What is it,” a man replied whilst sipping on whiskey. “It’s the higher-ups,” the man panted.

“What about them?” the one who sat turned around to face the messenger. “I was told to inform all the gang leaders that The Red Seals have been exterminated. Apparently, on a weekly check – their hideout was found destroyed with not a single soul left alive,” the face red from exhaustion, the message ended. \*Bang,\* a gunshot echoed. “Please no more killing, refurbishing cost a lot,” the bartender spoke out in anguish.

“Sorry about that,” Karlson stood. The man who ran inside wasn’t killed – rather, the bullet went pass so close that he ran away. The death of a messenger had no merit, especially if he came from the higher-ups.

“Staxius Haggard exterminated the Red Seal?” Jason figured an intelligent guess. “I presume,” he sat back down and continued to drink.

“Are you sure taking credit for his actions isn’t the best thing? Do you really wish for that man to enter the undergrounds,” the tone felt scared. “-I’m saying this out of concern. Imagine a boy that powerful in dealing with people that are way out his reach. A single word can suffice to sent him off track, and the strength he wields can be used to wipe out factions. He did just end that gang of two-hundred members all alone,” the hands worked on cleaning glasses whilst the mouth speculated about things to come.

“No need to worry, I’ll just say that he works under me. That should calm down the leaders, we’ve got better things to worry about. People who are dead should remain dead and not spoken of,” he paused and checked behind – empty without a soul. “Right, let’s get to business,” the tattooed man whispered, secrecy became a priority.

“Sure,” Jason leaned closer. “We’ve got a plane ready for exporting God’s ale, it’s set to leave in two hours,” Karlson paused and looked around again, “-has the merchandise been loaded to capacity?”

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“Yes, all is ready,” Jason stood straight, “-the nobleman who owns the private mini-airfield has given the greenlight. Apparently, for the upcoming days – guards have lowered their patrol. More emphasis is being put on Aceline’s security and protection,” he finished both in speech and chores.

“Here,” a bag of coins got placed on the counter, “-I appreciate your help with setting up all the transactions. I can’t help but think what our thriving little business would have become if Jason the Strategist hadn’t joined our gang,” he kicked back and had another shot.

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“Please don’t use that archaic nickname – tis rather embarrassing,” the bar remained quiet – on said night, the illicit drink would be shipped out to the main continent. On the outskirts of Vlaiwia were a wealthy no-named noble lived.

“A few turns here and we are close to the hotel,” the driver spoke, the voice changed from cautious to friendly. Staxius used Dark-Arts to influence his emotions – no good information came out. A friend was made in the process to which he counted as a success. Someone familiar with a foreign land could be more useful than one could think.

“Lady Aceline, the show is set in seven days. The days before will be dedicated to advertisements, interviews, meetings with respectable people and a small audience with the Imperial Prince,” Scott gave a short summary – she took it with a grain of salt for the schedule was memorized by heart.

“Here we are,” the car stopped. Staxius stepped out into an unknown world. The place in which they stayed could not be described, buildings that reached the heavens were scattered all around. The smaller shops were made beautifully, the pavements clean and devoid of trash. The people walked with a smile, kids ran around playfully, teens used phones and had earphones. Some carried musical instruments, other sports equipment. They stayed in the middle of the residential district – one made especially for people of wealth and fame.

Many cars as luxurious as it could get were frequent – inside which many of the singers and actors sat. One who he saw whilst reading the magazines on the plane. ‘This is the land of people with renown and fame. A place that I’d never want to get involved with – imagine having people aimlessly run to take my photograph and ask for autographs.’ As he thought hypothetically, the same thing happened to Aceline, fans recognized her and ran for an autograph.

‘Not on my watch,’ Staxius appeared suddenly. Aceline’s heart raced at the thought of dealing with so many people. Scott stood right beside her, “Staxius, make sure none can reach her,” he whispered.

“On it,” the reply firm. As compared to other stars, the crowd wasn’t that big but it sure had its fair share of intensity. A quick count revealed about twenty people of which teenagers were most common. “Miss Aceline, can I have a picture,” they yelled. “Can I have an autograph,” some others asked.

The stairway leading into the hotel came in view, Staxius stopped and turned around. “What are you doing,” Scott asked. With disgust in his eyes, Staxius took Aceline by hand and pulled her out of the crowd. “What are you doing,” she asked, it grew confusing. “Alright everyone,” Staxius spoke, the fans stopped for the handsome looking man caught their attention.

“If it’s a picture you want, please come in order – we’ll all take one; a group picture. Something everyone can cherish – the autographs I’m afraid won’t be possible for she just arrived and is quite tired. “Awesome,” they cheered. One by one, the energy died down – they all stood with Aceline in the middle. She struck a pose that reminded him of Avon, her hands pulled out the peace sign. “Everyone, say cheese,” big smiles everywhere, they cheered and a picture was taken; the moment forever immortalized.

“Thanks for being such good sports, Staxius spoke and handed over the expensive looking camera to the owner. “Thanks for allowing us such a privilege,” the fans shook her hands and rushed over to Staxius

who smiled. "Alright, calm down," they began to ask questions, it felt as if he was the star here. "Look at him go," Scott mumbled, "-never would I have thought of taking a group picture. Quite an effective bodyguard we've hired," he smiled – the money paid proved to be worth the cost.

"Yes, I feel like having a friend like that around would only bring good things. Though I don't think he wants to have anything to do with me. The man is married after all, I so wish I could meet the wife," exhausted Aceline replied. Scott checked into the hotel.

"Thanks for the picture," the crowd came out of a shop which dealt in the ways of photography. He held two frames: one with Aceline and her fans and one with him and the same people. The latter proved to be a better picture for everyone pulled out silly faces with Staxius joining the mix – a bundle of joy.

"No thank you, Staxius," the crowd smile and shook hands, "it was a pleasure meeting you all," Staxius smiled and everyone left to their own devices.

'If these are the kind of people who live in Vlaiwia – then my job is made far easy. I do wonder what Scott warned me about, I used Dark-Art on every single soul that approached her today; most were pure-hearted teenagers.' Without much thought, he dashed into the hotel. "Sorry for the delay," a voice came from inside the elevator.

"AHH," Aceline screamed, Scott threw a punch out of reflex. "Nice form," Staxius complimented the manager to which he sighed, "please don't scare us like that," the man's heartbeat went through the roof.

\*Ding,\* it reached the fiftieth floor, it opened to a hall with red-carpet and elegant wallpaper design. It had a monarchic feel to it as if they were from the royal family. The corridor carried a fair bit before an enormous window showcased how amazing the capital was. As for rooms, only two were available, one larger than the other. "Here," Scott threw a card, "the room opposite will be ours, whilst this one," \*beep,\* the larger one opened, "-will be the lady's room." The trio opened to be awestruck, from a golden chandelier to breathtaking interior design, Aceline's face blushed. She blushed by how beautiful a room could be, "-that's the perks of being a famous singer," Staxius mumbled whilst watching every corner.

Bags were already delivered inside the rooms, "I do wonder who in the right mind would offer to pay such a thing," Staxius sat on a piano stool. The instrument was of a white and gold color, "-this thing is bloody beautiful," the hand ran across the keys. The main reason for that seat was for the landscape behind, it was closest to the window – low and large ones.

"I bet this place looks even better at night," Scott walked over with two cups of water. "Thanks," he leaned on the instrument; both drank and admired the outside.

"Don't you think it's a bit rude to leave me out of the conversation," Aceline spoke – they forgot she was present. "I'm deeply sorry my lady," Scott apologized profusely, to which she jokingly teased.

"Can you play the piano?" she asked whilst sitting on a chair Scott brought over. "I don't think I've ever tried playing any instruments – let alone listening to music before. I never really had the time," the reply almost pitiful; Scott sat down next to him. "Well, here's what you missed for god knows how many years," the first note played. He felt at ease, the manager played the instrument as if an extension of the body, Aceline sang alone; Staxius aprecated the song.

\*Claps,\* the song ended, he smiled and complimented both. “Nicely played Scott, and you too Aceline; that was beautiful. Though my remarks when it comes to music is rather lacking.”

“I’ll go get some more water,” Scott stood. “Why don’t you try playing?” Aceline wanted to see the always emotionless faced Staxius play. “Here’s the water,” Scott came back just as Staxius tried to play.

It began off bad and disharmonious, ‘that’s expected for a beginner,’ the cup got handed to the lady. “I see,” Staxius spoke, the rhythm slowed down, “it’s not that hard,” simple melodies began to play. “When it comes down to it, a song is made of notes and chores If I assume correctly,” a piece of knowledge acquired in one of the many books read. “Which means that, just like a sentence, I can probably use said notes to spell out words that make no sense in our vocabulary,” the fingers moved rapidly, “but make sense to our ears,” he began to play as if a long-time musician. They both watched, the cup of water nearly dropped, the last note played.

“Pretty fun,” he turned around and admired the sky. “Are you sure you haven’t played music in thy entire life?” Scott asked, the man impressed by how quickly it went from a beginner to someone who could play with ease.

“Yes, but there’s nothing that impressive about it. I’ve spent most of my time learning and researching. I once wanted to be a sorcerer, to that end I learned anything and everything. It didn’t suffice. In the end, I had to sacrifice more than I would have wanted,” the tone sad, it referred to not raising Eira.

“Eventually, I learned that any skill could be mastered. Nothing is out of the picture – only a good foundation is needed. One that could act as a springboard, the better the base, the stronger the skill,” he paused and stared at Scott, “-technique is good and all but the feel of the note is something that takes years to learn. I might look impressive, but the sound produced is monotonous. If we were to play the same thing, I can say without restraint that I’d fail in comparison.”

#### Chapter 150: Hotel Villareal

“Even so,” Scott spoke, “-the technique doesn’t come easy. For a complete beginner, that is a whole other thing – you played one note and after a few seconds poured thy heart out into the keys. It’s admirable,” the water cup now empty.

“Anyways, we should leave Aceline to rest,” Staxius stood, time was about two in the afternoon. “I agree,” Scott walked and placed the cups in the sink.

“Thanks for everything,” the door opened, Aceline watched as the other two entered the opposite room. “My lady, you better rest, tomorrow will be a tiring day,” the manager spoke the last sentence.

“This is just as impressive as the one she has,” Staxius walked in, the rooms practically identical apart from the size. “I guess so,” hidden from his lady, the manager felt free. As soon as the couch came into view, clothes were thrown. “Quite bold,” Staxius sat on the opposing seat.

“Well, trying to be all well-mannered and polite on a daily basis can really put a man down,” the snobbish accent remained, just more liberated. “Can’t say I’ve got the same feeling,” Staxius stared to the left, a screen hung on the wall. “Mind turning it on?” he asked, to which Scott graciously accepted. ‘Hotel Villareal, can’t help but think that the name is familiar.’ The screen cycled through channels and for the next few hours till dinner, neither one from the trio would leave the hotel.

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of the capital, a young adult stood inside a garage. "I wonder which one fancies my attention," he walked, the vehicle ranged from luxurious to ones made for speed. "Your highness," a butler entered. "What is it?" the prince continued to admire the collection.

"We've got news that the idol Aceline has just landed and is now currently at Hotel Villareal," the head always faced downwards. "You're dismissed," not much thought was given, a simple gesture and the man left.

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'I can't stand the feeling of boredom, I care not if she's tired,' the thought half-way complete, the man stepped inside one of the cars built for speed. The drive slowed till a massive gate stood, it led outside into a private road.

"Prince Ernis," a woman in her early thirties called out. Her hair black and straight, the eyes shaped like an almond and voice sharp. "What is it?" the car grudgingly stopped. She came over and leaned, her outfit: a checkered skirt with a tucked-in buttoned-up shirt

"Do I have to repeat myself all the time, the Emperor has hired me to act as your bodyguard," purple flashes went around her arms, "-you know full well that fighting isn't meant to be for the Imperial prince. What would happen if something were to happen and that face your so attached too is scratched?" her tone unusually strict but casual; the boy's eyes turned blank. "Anything but my face," he mumbled.

"Let me inside then," she smiled, a few mind games. Manipulation through speech, though it worked on only some people. A skill she experienced first hand whilst learning.

The door opened, she sat; the car drove. "Where are we headed?" she asked in a nonchalant tone. "To the capital," he replied, the road leading up was empty. "Isn't that going to be a five-hour drive?" she assumed correctly; the mansion was located far away from civilization. Secluded to ensure privacy and security. "Using normal vehicles, it's five hours," the car sped up further, "-using this beast, the journey can be cut down to three hours minimum."

The asphalt creaked, on the road were a few trucks carried merchandise to traders and houses. Another wealthy man lived close to the imperial mansion. The man in question had a private airfield, both houses were separated by forest left wild and untouched. It added to the esthetic of peace and quiet. Unlike the fabled capital, the city of chaos.

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Time went on, dusk arrived without most noticing. "I can see myself sitting back and watching shows all day long," Staxius added in jest. "I agree," Scott replied, both stood and stretched. All of this happened due to hunger, the stomachs had conversations with one another. Both men laughed and grew to be closer – Scott wasn't such a snob.

"Let's go check on the lady," the manager took charge. "I forgot to give her this," Staxius held out a picture. "Sure," the door opened. From one room and into another, both entered as if privacy was but an option.



“At least have the decency to knock,” she added with a touch of anger. “Sure,” Scott replied sarcastically, the relaxed attitude remained. “Watch it,” Staxius quickly elbowed him in the guts, it brought the manager into reality. Everything changed, from relaxed to now strict and dignified, “thank you,” he whispered.

The frame got placed on the table, the lady ran inside her room to get changed. It was decided that dinner was to be eaten out; at some famous restaurant, one of the staff recommended earlier.

“We’ve arrived,” a sigh later, the prince and his bodyguard got out. “Lady Villareal,” the employees recognized the long black hair. She bowed and all returned to their duties. “I still can’t believe someone like you has to guard me. You’ve got hotels dotted around and have made quite a fortune – yet thou insist on following the ways of the mage,” the prince spoke true, the lady had made a name for herself as a successful hotelier.

“None of that matters, tis but a side business. The Order is where I truly belong – my goal of being accepted into their ranks of sorcerers has yet to come true. This job came as a recommendation; protecting a celebrity such as yourself must be worth the effort,” they entered, the conversation continued.

“Are we here to meet the singer his highness admires so much?” the tone mischievous – she teased him. “I should have never asked for this favor,” he sighed and left out a smile. “Either way, let’s go check on our guest,” she led the way.

Concurrently, on the top floor, Aceline was just about ready to go out. “Ta-dah,” she stepped out the bedroom, a comfy looking jacket and a pair of jeans with a beanie. “Should we cheer?” Staxius asked in a sarcastic way. Scott, on the other hand, clapped furiously.

“Thank you, manager, at least someone has the heart to praise one as great as my own self,” obviously, all were joking at this point. The atmosphere became friendlier with each passing minute.

“Dinner isn’t going to eat itself,” from leaning on the counter, Staxius took charge. “Let’s go,” Scott followed behind. The elevator was used by someone else; it indicated the top floor.

“I sense someone powerful,” the lady stood in front of the door, her body protected the prince. “What is happening?” Ernis remained clueless.

“Hold on a second,” Staxius stopped, he warned the guys to not move an inch. ‘Adete,’ the moment the name got called out, All-seeing eye activated. He saw through the one in question’s eyes, her hand wielded lightning magic; a threat.

“What’s going on?” Scott asked for the way the behavior changed raised red flags. Aceline crept up behind her manager and peeped out into the hallway, the elevator reached its destination.

Staxius vanished and leaned against the wall, the hand ready to unholster Tharis. \*Bing,\* the door opened.

\*Lightning Element: Flash-Step,\* the lady dashed out, she faced Staxius with Lightning Spears ready to fire. A slight movement from Staxius triggered her instinct, the spell was set off almost immediately.

\*BAM,\* not much damage, but the sound echoed around, the man had disappeared. She looked around desperately, \*Dark-Arts: Mana Cancellation Aspect,\* bullets were loaded.

“Who the hell are you,” Staxius whispered. Without realizing it, something grabbed her neck. Her head pulled backward, his left arm was wrapped around, the gun ready to fire at any time. “Let me go,” she mumbled, \*Water Element: Mirage,\* her body felt as if it melted through his arm. The grip loosened, she escaped and conjured a combination of Lightning and Water magic, he dodged – the spell headed straight for Scott.

“I’m done,” he sighed, \*Death Element: Absolute Barrier,\* the spell stopped, the gun fired. It hit the lady whomst fell, her mana depleted – no longer could she wield magic.

“Staxius,” Aceline yelled.

“Lucy,” Ernis shouted.

Both voices were simultaneous, “please stop,” they begged. Staxius stood before the lady, her body laid on the floor, the gun pointed at her head.

“STOP,” the prince ran out and stood in front of the injured mage. “IT’S OVER,” Aceline pulled on his arm; none wanted to see death.

“Fine,” he sighed, the guard lowered for a millisecond, “-DIE,” from below, another gunshot. The lady fired a pistol, one kept hidden underneath her dress, it traveled in slow motion – the trajectory straight for the idol’s head.

‘Not again,’ time slowed to a complete stop, ‘-this is just like the time when Eira got injured,’ the symbol lit, the left eye changed into pure white color. “ENOUGH,” a low sounding explosion reverberated, \*pang,\* the bullet ended inside the floor, millimeters away from Villareal’s head.

Not even a second went by in the other’s eyes – Staxius vanished, “I swear to god,” he gritted, the lady’s face pushed into the floor. He knelt atop her back, the pressure gradually increasing. “Do you realize what you could have done,” the tone filled anger, Aceline ran to stop her bodyguard but hesitated. “- That little stunt could have gotten her killed. What would you have done if the Pride of Hidros died from the hand of a mage,” the hold relaxed, the left eye returned to the normal brown color.

“I think that’s enough, Staxius,” Scott walked. The lady coughed, he got up, both Aceline and Ernis were shocked. “D-did you j-just say S-Staxius?” she managed to sit; her face bruised. “What about it?” Scott stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

“S-Staxius H-Haggard,” the legs feebly tried to stand up. It piqued his interest, “do I know you?” the eyes now watched more carefully. “H-have you already forgotten?” she mumbled; the hands wore red-nail polish. “Let me h-help you r-remember,” the hair got tied in a ponytail.

‘Nail polish, ponytail, Lucy Villareal,’ a spark – memories from Claireville Academy rushed into mind. “It can’t be,” Staxius rushed over to the still struggling Lucy, her arms wrapped around his shoulder. “Lucy Villareal,” he laughed.

“Do you guys know each other?” Ernis asked. He stood close to Aceline who remained just as shocked. “I guess so,” she chuckled. “Long time no see,” Staxius helped her inside the smaller room, none knew what was happening.

“Aceline, Scott, this is one of my old classmates. Though I only spend a week at the Academy – this lady here was the first to challenge me,” they both sat, the other three surrounded the duo and remained silent.

“I can’t b-believe it,” a tear ran down her cheeks. “I thought you died; I even reached out to Julius at graduation. There, he confirmed that you died. The number of things that would have changed, the way the class felt – you could have changed it all,” the tears stopped, a smile was seen instead.

“Let the past remain as the past,” the hands reached inside the suit. A healing scroll got used, “-I’m still hungry,” the face turned to Scott.

“I apologize,” Lucy spoke, her body healed. “Prince Ernis,” she stood and walked over, “-that man right there is the reason why I still pursue the dream of being in the Order.”

“Lucy, please,” he stopped her sentence, “-you guys speak as if being friends. However, Staxius is definitely younger, I’d figure about twenty years old,” Ernis ended.

“Now that I think about it, aren’t you supposed to be older than me?” she asked to which he replied with, “-there are things that aren’t meant to be answered. This is just one of them – let us all go have dinner. Lady Aceline, Scott and Prince Ernis are all confused beyond belief. A short summary around a nice dinner should serve to settle said inquietudes.”