

Death Magic 171

Chapter 171: Shadow

Following the passionate kiss; time had come to depart. Staxius stood outside the castle, the moon barely lit the town, the citizens were at home. The streets deserted, a few lamps here and there powered by mana transferred using a conduit from the University.

“Over here majesty,” Skokdrag stood with six others; expert builders from their outfits. The king nodded; the team waited.

“Guess its time to leave,” he smiled, Xula tightly embraced her lover.

“Here,” a whisper, her hands reached inside the jacket, “-see you later,” she winked.

‘Interesting,’ he thought and climbed down the stairs. *Snap,* a blue portal materialized, “let’s go Skokdrag,” he entered first.

“MASTER,” a voice yelled from the other side.

“What is it?” he stood in the shop with dwarves coming one after the other.

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“It’s Axis,” tis was Avon who panicked, “-he screamed as if having lost a family member.” Confused, with haste, the uncle teleported to the hotel.

“Ay dere lad, we have come under the order of his majesty,” Skokdrag promptly introduced the crew and the nature of the visit. Avon could not but welcome the gentlemen with a smile. Rather than notes and healing scrolls on the table, pick-axes, and building tools were placed. The shop was to remain shut for the next few days; the main room turned into a makeshift bedchamber for the workers.

“Auic,” the voice sharp and stance serious, Staxius arrived at the hotel. “O-over here,” she pointed at the floor, where Lizzie desperately tried to cheer the little boy up. The lad was surrounded by Undrar, Achilles, and the rest whomst stood in awe. Deadeyes remained outside with a face that begged for sleep.

“Shouldn’t you have used a sleeping spell already?” he walked in, the rest quickly changed their attention from the boy.

“We tried,” Viola spoke, “-but he somewhat rejected the mana,” her face perplexed.

“UNCLE,” he yelled and dashed over, “-i-its mom, I-I c-can’t sense her aura,” the tone felt serious and truthful.

“She’s all the way in Kreston, care to explain how you can sense her mana?” Now sat on the floor with legs crossed, Staxius engaged in conversation.

“I dunno, mother says it’s a skill named: Spirit-Sense,” he smiled, snot drooled over the mouth.

“Spirit-sense you say,” gently, he wiped the boy’s face and properly dressed the crumbled-up shirt and pants.

"Y-yes, mom said that it was rare and special," the now plumped reddened cheeks seemed better, the tears were wiped off.

"Don't worry," he combed Axius's hair, "-I'll make sure to find her. But I want a promise," the right hand curled into a fist leaving only the pinky in a lock-shape. "A pinky promise that you will be a good boy and listen to what these lovely ladies have to say from now on," he smiled.

"If that's the case," the voice felt somewhat intelligent, "-I want you to swear that you'll bring back mother no matter what," despite his age, both men entered a contract.

"Deal," Staxius agreed, both pinkies intertwined with one another, "here forth, both Axius Haggard and Staxius Haggard are contracted to follow each other's promises," it might have seemed childish but vowed over a pinky promise was a great honor.

"He-he, good luck, uncle," with haste, the boy ran towards the bedroom.

"Well then, that's the situation handled," he stood, the face changed from friendly to blank.

"You sure are good with kids," Achilles said with an impressed tone.

"I'm pretty sure that phrasing could send off the wrong idea," the eyes closed, the head shook in disappointment.

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"Either way, you best get to work; it's a pinky promise, leave the little boy to us," Viola spoke reassuringly.

"Good night everyone," the door closed behind, "Deadeyes, you best head to sleep," Staxius patted the tired marksman's shoulder.

"As you wish, master," with a gun strapped on his back, the man returned to his room.

Snap, the dwarves stood outside and stared at the shop's infrastructure. "Avon," from inside, Staxius looked outside.

"Coming," footsteps scurried from the backroom, "-did you manage to calm Axius?"

"He shan't trouble no longer, have the workers settled in?" sleeping bags were scattered around the floor.

"I think so, they seemed pretty angry after checking out the walls."

"Well it's probably time for you to head to the hotel, Auic is waiting," with a wink, the door opened. Avon walked off to the hotel.

"What do you think?" they stood on the other side of the street.

"Not that impressed, looks poorly made," the hands gently stroked the white beard, the others remained silent. "What do you wanna do to that place?" from the building, the gaze shifted to Staxius.

"I need the place ready in less than five days, do whatever is needed. Extend it or break it, I care not, just make the place large enough to fit a table the size of that car over there," he pointed at Void.

“Five days, majesty, that is improbable,” he fired back, the voice shocked.

“You said improbable but not impossible,” the voice seemed excited, “-use magic or any means necessary, I’ll open a temporary portal to Arda – use it to bring as many workers needed. Use anyone and everyone, I’ll give full authority, this property is mine; make two or three floors. The only requirement is a room secluded from the rest, maybe on a separate floor for I to work, tis about it,” the arms crossed, he waited for a response.

“Consider it built,” he proclaimed, “we’ll show his majesty the true beauty of dwarven architecture,” the rest was just as excited. Being able to build something in Rosepire, a place so far from home. A new territory, a place to showcase their craft.

“Here,” a heavy pouch was handed into Skokdrag’s hand, “-there are about fifty gold and a few silver pieces in there. Use them however you wish, seek me out if the money is lacking.”

“T-thanks your majesty,” they bowed and ran inside. A blue portal was opened in the back room.

The builders planned and designed how the building was to be constructed. The interior was still filled with furniture that proved to be cumbersome when moving around. With the goal now on sorting out everything before leaving for Kreston – Staxius headed towards a familiar place.

“If it’s not my favorite customer,” the walk down the street felt weirdly soothing. The place empty and noise reduced to a minimum, hoodlums walked around, they knew not to mess with the ponytailed man.

“Hello Timothy,” he walked into the bar; the place filled with smoke from cigars and littered with swear and insults – the visitors were rowdy.

“How can I serve ya?” he asked with an accent similar to the gang members.

“I need to use the toilet,” a phrase that immediately changed Tim’s face.

“As you wish,” the secret doorway opened, Staxius headed into the Twin Jellyfish bar.

Music and moans came from within, the place never really changed. Dimly lit with a hue of red and pink, the alchemist walked in. “You there,” the bartender gestured for the visitor to sit.

“No more bloodshed,” he voiced.

“Not my fault if they piss me off,” he fired back casually and sat.

“Welcome back, Staxius,” the bartender smiled.

“Thanks for the warm welcome, Jason,” the voice monotonous. Just as he said that; a drunken hitman stumbled over and accidentally scratched Staxius’s face.

“W-who da h-hell are y-you?” barely able to stand, the drunk man thought that he who sat was the one responsible.

“Who the hell am I?” the hands reached inside the vest.

“Hold up there,” before the fingers wrapped around the handle, Jason held his arm. “-can’t you see he’s drunk, and I said no more BLOODSHED,” having to clean up was a pain.

“Fine, no more bloodshed,” he turned around and decided to ignore what happened.

“Y-you am n-not finished, d-don’t l-look away,” he tightly grabbed onto the shoulder. *BANG,* a bullet flew by the hitman’s face.

“What did you say about bloodshed again?” Staxius added in jest, the one who fired was Jason.

“I do agree that it’s hard to keep calm when people are fucking idiots all the time,” the revolver went back under the counter, the hitman passed out. “You’re here to meet Karlson, I presume?” he guessed right, a glass sat on the table with ice-cubes inside.

“Where can I find him?” Staxius asked whilst sipping on whiskey.

“He’s probably balls deep into someone,” no filter, no tact, the language here was more than one could desire.

“Balls deep you say,” the head shot-back and he drank. “-do I look like I care?” the empty glass stood on the table, Jason could not but point to the right – the private rooms.

“CRY MORE, COME ON, IT’S YOUR JOB,” Karlson’s voice could be heard on the other side of the door. ‘Talk about privacy, it was all laid out for imagination to go wild.’

Click, “WHO STANDS THERE, THE FUCK OUTTA HERE,” the voice came from farther down the room.

“Come on old man, is that a way to greet a friend?” the light turned on exposing Karlson and the rather passionate display of affection.

“Don’t you have any shame?” the tattooed man stopped and sat; the lady quickly hid under a blanket.

“Shame, you must be joking,” the voice serious, he leaned on the frame of the doorway. The mouth held a cigar, the index finger conjured flames, Staxius wanted to try smoking for once.

“What do you want?” the way he leaned and smoked felt menacing, paired with the red-eye that glowed despite being dim, Karlson could not but shudder.

“Nothing much,” smoke blew out, “-I need a truck and a few men to help move some furniture,” despite being the first time, he smoked as if having done it for ages.

“Come on now lad, this ain’t no moving business,” butt-naked, Karlson tried to act tough.

“I don’t care,” from leaned, the footsteps approached, *phoo,* smoke blew on the leader’s face, “-get me a truck and some man right now or I’ll turn this whole building into the next Red Seal’s hideout.”

“F-fine, go meet Jason, there’s someone of interest currently at the bar. She might come in handy; the lass is quite feisty and controls around forty men – her gang is called, Sprinkles.” Intrigued, Staxius stepped back and waited. “-don’t go thinking that with a name like Sprinkles it gives you the right to underestimate the lady. That could be far from the truth, she works for the assassination sect of the organization, but you didn’t hear this from me. Also, use Shadow from here on as your nickname. Using the real name might jeopardize your identity in the real world. No need to worry about hiding the face,

we have an iron rule that members of our organization are to never interfere with one another in the outside world. Tis how we keep everything secret and tidy, there are spies and eyes everywhere; the dark-guild isn't the only underground society. There are others, ones more merciless than the other," he took a pause and lit a cigar in turn. "With that being said, welcome to the dark-guild, Shadow – Renaud personally recommended you and said to greet thee with open arms."

"Glad to be here, I guess," another puff, the cigar was extinguished without getting much work done, the conversation came to a close.

"Contact Jason for future questions and job request, you may be powerful and intimidating but still a novice in the ranking. Deal with me directly after having gained some fame and repute, there's a ranking system – more like titles assigned to individuals. More on that later, for now – use Jason however you like," he went back into the lovemaking, Staxius stepped out.

'Climb the ladder of the dark-guild – ruling others from behind the curtains isn't such a bad thing.' A smirk could be seen, a plausible and more fitting organization had been found. One who thrived in violence and death joined the elusive Dark-guilds.

"What did he say?" Jason asked whilst making another drink.

"I'm now a member of the organization under the name of Shadow – not that interesting nor is it cool," he sat and drank, the background grew subtle.

"Shadow, that nickname was given to the prior elite assassin; tis more an honor. Karlson has more faith in you than he does his own man," the hands worked subconsciously.

"Well, who cares, I'm looking for the leader of Sprinkles – I need a favor from them."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN!?" shocked, a glass nearly dropped.

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Chapter 172: Blackjack

"You heard me," nonchalant, Staxius stared Jason with confidence.

"Sprinkles," bothered for an instant, the bartender gathered back the lost composure. Sprinkles was a well-known group, one of many talented individuals who obeyed the most gifted strategist to ever work for the Dark guild. Her name and real identity were never disclosed, people knew her from a cupcake tattoo on her neck. Merciless, cold and ruthless, anyone without exception who ticked her off was killed without a say. Daily, where ever she may be, five top guards would remain behind – their gaze ever so piercing and fingers ready to fire.

"Did Karlson speak to you about that group?" from shaken to now pouring drinks, Jason masterfully handled the customers.

"Let's just say I was tipped off by a bird," he was bound to secrecy – revealing from where the information was obtained could only bring misfortune.

"Well, tis thy call," the face attended a boorish looking man whilst the finger pointed behind. A clue, a hint; to which Staxius followed. "-cupcake," a faint whisper later, Jason attended the rest.

'I see,' Staxius now faced a table hidden thanks to the dim light, one in the farthest corner to the left of a hallway. 'Will it be wise to ask a so-called top gang of assassins to help in moving furniture?' the concept felt foolish on its own. Despite that, no care was given – the drink finished; he walked over.

"Here comes the bloodshed," Jason sighed.

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Stood with the eyes portraying death, he waited for a response. Though dim, visibility got better, a lady dressed in black with a cupcake on her neck played cards. Five guards lounged around the couches whilst she went against a man. One who wore glasses but bound by rope.

"Show," the dealer, one of the bodyguards spoke. Royal flush for the lady and a low-pair for the man.

"Guess that's your cue," she sat with her legs crossed then altered the posture.

"P-please," the man lost, panic set in, the survival instant of fight or flight, the forehead moist from sweat and heat. It reflected what little bit of light emanated from the room itself.

"A deal is a deal," she leaned forward and rested her right elbow on her legs. The thumb and index held her chin, it looked as if she thought but the stance meant something else. It meant that there was no going back. "Guard," she leaned and regained the prior position, a gun was pulled out by the dealer.

Bang, not wanting to see a head blown off, she looked away.

"Come on people," a hand caught the projectile, "-this isn't the place to cause a mess," an uncommon voice spoke, the victim lived.

"WHO STANDS THERE," the dealer changed targets.

"No need to get riled up," the bullet placed on the table, the guards quickly gathered around their leader. Her eyes slowly stared at the man who made quite an impression.

"Who might you be," she said in a voice worthy of a leader, it had power.

"No one worth noting," he replied monotonously.

"T-thanks for saving me," the tied man smiled, the lives saved and threat gone, he looked up to take a peek at the visage of the savior. Eyes cold and emotionless, *crack,* a stomach-turning sound echoed gently.

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"Peculiar, may I inquire as to why that man had to die after getting saved?" she remained confident, the room hid Staxius's face partly.

"Jason said he didn't want bloodshed, therefore, killing the man without causing a mess would have been easier than firing a bullet," the body slouched, it lost all strength. With a little push, it fell on the ground. As imposing as ever, Staxius sat at the table and rested both legs on the dead body. No respect for the dead, he didn't care – an image and a strong impression was key.

“Calm down men,” she sighed – the guards sat. “-may I ask to why one such as you decided to intrude in our business?” underneath, frustration from someone disturbing the talk slowly took bites off her composed demeanor.

“I have a favor to ask, Jason over there said Sprinkles might be of help,” a lie which piqued her interest. The conversation continued; a game of blackjack was set-up by the dealer.

“Depends on the job,” cards were distributed.

“It’s quite an easy task,” he checked, king of clubs and king of diamonds. The goal of that game was to get twenty-one, the face cards were worth ten points, which made the total twenty.

“Is it killing someone?” she asked and tapped twice on the table, the dealer gave her another card.

“Not really, I need people to help move some stuff out,” he tapped – most people would have decided to stick with twenty, the dealer gave a card.

“Are you serious?” she felt insulted, the men were ready to fire.

“Show,” the dealer remained level headed,

“Twenty,” she proclaimed with a smirk, this game which seemed foreign to the conversation had a deeper meaning. A power struggle; the battle between her and Staxius.

“Nineteen,” the dealer said, both waited for Staxius. Not wanting to spoil the game just yet, he flipped over one facedown card; the king of clubs.

“Let’s make a deal,” he asked, the face changed from neutral to someone trying to keep his fear hidden. A face subtly lit with nervousness; emotional control at its finest.

“What kind of deal?” she picked up on the fear slowly oozing, ‘I’ve won,’ in her heart, it was set in stone.

“If I win this game, you’ll listen to my demands without question. I won’t pay anything; you’ll provide the stuff I need,” he asked in a less confident tone – it seemed as if trying to act tough. ‘I’ve really done it this time,’ he sighed; the gaze lowered at the floor.

“And if I win?” her tone coy and face neutral.

“You’ve witnessed what I can do – I’ll join the Sprinkles and do anything you ask from me. Also, I must mention that, if I win; the demands will be permanent. It’s basically a game-deciding who wins over the other.” From inside the shirt, he pulled the various badges, “-an alchemist, a silver-ranked adventurer, and a powerful individual; all of my talents will be a phone call away.” The way Staxius spoke and mannerisms were subtle, not overly obvious – it felt natural.

‘All that over a game of blackjack,’ she thought, “-I’ll consider your offer if you reveal another card,” the voice serious, she held the advantage of the game and atmosphere, a crowd gathered around.

“O-ok,” the voice cracked, behind, since the game began, Karlson and Jason watched over very intently. They witnessed everything that transpired, a smart and talent strategist against the man named Shadow, this game quickly became the talk of the bar.

“Staxius lost,” Karlson whispered, the opinion spread around the crowd swiftly.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked since the leader was well-versed in the ways of gambling.

“He did a good job trying to deceive her, trying to act tough and confident. Sadly, he doesn’t know that she can read human emotions as if a book. Even I can tell that he’s lost, look at the subtle mannerism and tone, it’s one of a man putting everything on the line. A desperate attempt to escape – the fabled fight or flight.

“On one condition,” he looked over at Karlson, “-I want the boss to acknowledge and formally bind us both in a contract and serve as the witness.” It seemed normal, either party could back out, with the influence of someone powerful behind, all had to obey.

“Flip over that card and I’ll decide,” she remained adamant – her eyes remained fixed on Staxius’s which faintly tried looking away from the cards. A subtle motion that signified that one wasn’t happy with the results.

“S-sure,” the cheeks move defiantly, her eyes remained on the target and analyzed every single detail.

“The king of diamonds,” the dealer said, he flipped over two cards, “-the total is twenty,” the game was as well as gone.

There laid seven cards in total on the table. The ace of diamonds and the nine of clubs for the lady making the total twenty.

The ace of clubs and eight of diamond for the dealer making the total nineteen.

‘The game is won then,’ she thought, Staxius felt on edge.

“I’ll act as a witness to this game if both parties agree to the aforementioned conditions,” Karlson spoke out and stepped closer, he looked at Staxius with disappointment. *Tsk,* he looked away defiantly. All those movements were subtle and invisible to most naked eyes.

After a few seconds, ‘I’ve considered all the possibilities; the outcome is in my favor no matter how you look at it. The man might be powerful but a fool, others might have been deceived but not I, I’m the strategist who went from zero to famous in a week. Gambling is my bread and butter, no one will ever defeat me.’

“I agree to Staxius’s term if he wins the man controls Sprinkles, and if I win, I control him and get access to all he owns,” her stance felt relieved, a gamble with the odds in her favor.

“Alright, both parties have agreed,” the deal was in, everyone gathered around that table. The murmurs and whispers helped to sway emotions; all were dead-set on her being the winner.

“Please show your card,” the dealer asked with pride, he knew that Staxius lost.

‘People are so easy to manipulate,’ he smiled, the aura changed. The card flipped and revealed the Ace of Spade.

“IMPOSSIBLE,” she could not believe it,” her eyes glued to the card, the others were thunderstruck by bafflement. The king of clubs, the king of diamonds and the ace of spades – it totaled twenty-one. The probability of that happening was slim, there were only four cards worth one point in a deck of fifty-two cards. With two others playing, said probability was reduced even further, from the scared little sheep,

he changed into a wolf. The game had been in his hands from the beginning, dark-arts wasn't used to influence the other's emotions – rather it was used on himself.

“BUT HOW CAN YOU WIN, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE,” she wanted answers and so did the others.

“It's simple,” the legs now rested atop the table, “-I manipulated you from the beginning. Having beaten the man at poker, you had confidence that all your calls would be accurate. Paired that with my subtle movement that felt sluggish and novice like, you fooled yourself into thinking that I was oblivious. Authority over the table had been yours. Demanding for I to flip over the second card gave you an edge in the negotiations. Not to mention the cards on the table itself, the probability of me being bust was all too much,” a cigar lit, one-handed over by Jason, “-this is where the crowd comes in. You people thought that I had lost; it's a thing called groupthink; you were influenced and blinded by the people around us. Any opening I had were covered up, and frankly, there were some inconsistencies in my actions but the groupthink phenomenon cleared me of any doubt. Therefore, dearest gifted strategist – you were beaten by yourself and the people surrounding us,” he smiled, no one could believe their eyes.

“As the witness of the duel, I proclaim Staxius the winner, leader of Sprinkles you are to become his underling starting now,” Karlson could not believe it, unknowingly – he played a massive part. The rumor of Staxius losing stemmed from the boss himself, the groupthink originated and spread throughout.

“WE REFUSED TO HAVE OUR LEADER BE DEFILED BY YOU,” the guards picked up arms and fired.

Death Element: Absolute Barrier, the projectiles stopped, “-normally I'd have killed for that act of indiscretion.” The bullets fell, “Tonight is an exception, thou art mine own commodities henceforth,” he replied coldly, they were being treated as objects.

The lady sat with the eyes of a dead person, “stand-down everyone, a contract is a contract,” she sighed, the posture slouched – a defeat that gutted the confidence fully. The crowd slowly dissipated, “-come by Jimmy's Stuff at daybreak tomorrow. Bring some trucks and get a warehouse ready, the details will be given then and there,” he stood and walked.

“Finish the rest,” the cigar was handed to Jason on the way out.

“No bloodshed, thanks for not making a mess,” the bartender yelled, the figure vanished into the night. ‘The queen of gambling dethroned over a single hand of blackjack, welcome to the organization,’ he smiled and dried wine glasses.

Chapter 173: Titles

The heavy night ended, from finding Claudia's location to beating a queen at a game of blackjack. The walk back felt soothing; lamps flicked on and off, people puked, some fought innocently. Windows and door shut; this part of the city was unique. A place fitting for him, a place to which a connection was felt.

‘Jimmy's stuff,’ he wondered and watched through the window. The shop, his shop, was filled with dwarves sleeping on the floor. Many could have returned to Arda through the portal but decided to stay behind. ‘I better not disturb then,’ Void rested close by, the body wet from occasional mild-showers.

A moment's peace, at last, the seat rocked back, Staxius laid and slept. Exhaustion rushed as a broken water tube; the pain from the All-seeing eye made the right-side numb. The face ached from the

vampiric changes, the skin color – usually, a light brown turned paler with each passing day. Adete had remained quiet during the whole ordeal – the bat-girl remained within the front pocket. Despite her attitude, the sole reason he could rest peacefully was that she took on the pain. All the nightmares and terrors associated with the vampiric blood transferred over; her duty was to serve and protect.

Beep, beep, sun rose as if an instant went by. Morning arrived faster than usual; the sleep felt lacking. A truck parked itself next to the shop, a bunch of people dressed in working uniform knocked on the door furiously. A lady stood opposite the street with a cigar in mouth.

“Good morning,” Adete awoke,

“Morning to you too,” he stepped out the car.

“Alright people,” before the workers could be further riled up, he caught their attention. Each turned and glared, their eyes spoke volume – anger, and hate. “All the furniture is inside the shop,” time was around seven; most now waked. The posture straight, the voice menacing and aura cold; the would-be anger died out swiftly. Reluctantly, the men walked in and worked – the shop got emptied with the help from the dwarves as well.

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“Pleasant morning isn’t it?” with orders given, Staxius crossed over to check on Sprinkle’s leader.

“It would have been one if not for you,” she snarled; frustration from last night remained.

“A contract is a contract,” he stood beside and watched.

“I still can’t believe having lost my authority and power over a game of blackjack,” she chuckled, “-I’m angry but the mind games played were unbelievable.” Being belligerent would only ruin the relationship – people didn’t dub her the strategist without reason.

“People, in general, are easy to manipulate, emotions are the key to anything one desires,” he added without much thought, her head turned.

“Care to elaborate?” smoke from the cigar blended with the fog.

“Not really, it’s something rather complicated to explain and I assume that said knowledge is already known to a well-versed gambler,” the mornings cold and daunting; it could not be helped, the void-flame was conjured to keep him warm. A fire-ball hovered above the right hand. “Anyways Cake,” he turned and stared down, “-you don’t mind me calling you Cake?” he asked.

“You’re in charge, do as wished,” the reply quick and simple.

“About that, Cake, I’d like for Sprinkles to remain under your grasp and authority. Do whatever is needed – I’m but a Shadow, my place is in the background,” he added in a monotonous tone.

“A contract is a contract, I can’t possibly act as if nothing has changed – you’re the leader,” she didn’t want to back down.

"I understand," he paused and thought, "-consider this, imagine one day you had to reign over a ragtag group of people who mistrust you. The smartest move would be to befriend the leader of said group and let that person rule over the rest," the idea became clearer.

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"I see, basically, I control the guards and you control me?" right on the money, the idea didn't seem that bad.

"Yes, I'd rather relegate tasks that don't require my attention to others," she quickly understood what he meant. "-I know it must be hard to change from the one who rules to being ruled overnight but tis the deal."

Her shoulder felt heavy, Staxius rested his hand reassuringly, "-Cake, I know that trust can't be gain overnight. Therefore, I won't ask anything. I may be your leader but rest assured that I shall never impose any restriction on thy autonomy and freedom. Consider me an ally more than a leader – I'll leave the underground to you; seek me out if ever things get wild," the hand lifted, he walked over to check on the workers.

'I can't say I'm happy with those words but that man named Shadow is sure a mystery,' she smoked, the shop stood empty.

"That's everything loaded, good job," the truck drove away.

"Here," Cake handed over something and drove off on a motorcycle.

'How quaint, a phone,' it went inside the pocket where a small piece of metal rested. A ring with the Ardanian crest, Xula had left it there.

"Let's go, I'm HUNGRY," not wanting to intrude earlier, Adete lashed out.

"Wait for a second," he voiced adamantly and called over Skokdrag.

"Ya summoned me?" he scurried outside.

"Construction can now begin, I'll leave and come to check up on the progression in two or three days."

"Too long, come later in the evening," the voice filled with confidence, "-us dwarves are fast builders, that small shop will be as good as new in two days maximum. More manpower will be brought in," a bold statement.

Far away, "keeping thy mouth shut shan't bring about salvation," kept underground, away from prying eyes, away from civilization. A small chapel that stood on the outskirts of Kreston, hidden amidst vegetation and greenery, the inquisitors went to work. Four powerful staff on each cardinal point erected to form a barrier, one that kept mana from escaping.

"Heh," tied to a table with scars and dried blood on the face and body, the mage from Whisper breathed. The inquisitors armed by red-hot rods burnt symbols over her arms and legs, the mark of a heathen. Others held blunt knives whilst others held wires, the inquisitors were famed torturers. The Pope had expressly given orders to gather as much information possible without killing.

It had been more than a day since the transfer to the chapel. No information no nothing, the mouth remained sealed shut, her eyes burnt vividly with the will to survive. Deep down, the lady had hope, a strange feeling for one stranded away from civilization.

“Today’s the day,” sat around a circular table, all the companions had breakfast except for Axius who slept soundly.

“Yes, today’s the day I set out for Kreston,” Staxius replied whilst cleaning both Adete and his mouth.

“What about back-up?” Viola had been the one speaking for all this time.

“Not much I can do there; Kreston is a land of fanatics – who knows what will happen.”

“Master,” Avon spoke, “-I’m sorry for not being able to stay by thy side,” everyone felt guilty to leave him alone. Since the day he departed for Iqavea, they all learned to manage without thanks to Undrar’s tutelage.

“Ha-ha,” he laughed, all looked at him strangely, “-you needn’t worry. By how things are doing now – it’s better this way.” The relegation of work, Cake was in charge of the underground whilst Undrar was in charge of the party. “Even so, if things are troubling, feel free to reach out; I’m always here to help,” he stood. “You better study hard, Lizzie,” with a smile a blue mist materialized.

“You heard the man,” Viola took charge; Kniq headed to the adventuring guild. Avon remained at the hotel and took care of Auic who still dealt with the dark-past. Lizzie, on the other hand, had found a nice place at one of the schools. For one who was brought up in poverty, Viola helped the studies at night, the companions were free to do whatever.

Everything fell into place, rather than porting attention to each individual, that responsibility was given to Undrar and Cake. Staxius had hands in many things, connection with people was made, the quest to forming Arda’s guild moved slowly. Kniq’s reputation grew thanks to Achilles, a hero worthy of a poem. Their exploits caught the eyes of many mid-tier adventuring guilds. Many offers to join came but were rejected one by one.

“You’re playing a difficult game,” Adete voiced, the city felt small. The duo stood atop a clocktower, the wind blew, it felt harsh and unforgiving.

“I’m not hiding anything from anyone,” he replied nonchalantly; preparation for teleporting to Kreston began. The left eye closed, the search for Claudia resumed; the general location was discovered – time now was for a closer inspection.

“If you say so, King of Arda, Shadow from the Dark-guilds. Staxius, leader of Kniq as well as an alchemist. What’s the point of having so many personas and titles – aren’t you afraid that if found out, everything might crumble away?” she raised a good question, why would anyone have so many facades.

“It’s simple really, all those connections are the groundwork for anything that may arise in the future. Even if people find out I belong to the dark-guild, what could they do? Hidros doesn’t have a law system, adventurers are the ones keeping the peace. As far as the citizens are concerned, tis but a myth. Leaders of Kniq and Alchemist are titles that are necessary for the opening of a guild in Arda. I’m King, and a king is as strong as the people he surrounds himself with, therefore, the more people I know, the stronger I get. Even if the truth comes to light, who is foolish enough to oppose me?” the reply firm.

"I didn't say it was a bad thing, all I asked was out of concern, too much can often lead to self-destruction."

"You needn't worry," he patted her head, the location was found. "None knows what the future holds, get powerful is what Lord Death sought and tis what I shall do."

Ancient Magic: Teleportation, the blue mist turned into a purplish color.

"Pope, there's an intruder in our territory," the angel materialized, a strange aura was felt.

"Ignore it, we've more things to do," he replied harshly, the attention focused on growing the army known as Razer.

"Your call," Hamael replied and returned to help out the mana transfer.

Stood inside a forest, he walked towards the strange-looking building. "Is that a barrier?" with eyes closed – a dome shape was picked-up. 'I see,' a closer look later, '-this is why Axius thought his mother died,' sneakily, he teleported inside without much trouble.

Muffled screams came from within the walls; air-ducts led into the dungeon. 'We've found the place,' a large room with benches on either side with a hieroglyph of their god at the front, Staxius walked slowly. All the auras were sensed as clear as day underground.

Crouched with the palm on the floor, the mind focused, 'Six with one restricted,' not wanting to teleport directly, he followed the mana conduits through the floor and walls. All converged behind the hieroglyph – a secret passage. Without much effort, the mechanism triggered and said doorway was cracked. *Click,* it opened; a spiral staircase led downstairs. The already feeble aura was erased; a true shadow.

"Why are you here, have you come to spy on his holiness or were thou sent by the fake-apostle?" nails were chipped, melted iron dripped on her already injured arms as if raindrops.

Cloaked in a white and blue hood, the inquisitors went to work.

"Go to hell," she fired back without care. Her attitude grew too much for the torturers, all wanted to see her die.

"Start by cutting off a few toes – if the lady shan't talk then we shall enlighten her to the ways of our God." With only a rag covering her flesh, a blunt knife would be the one responsible for said task. "Cut off my toe," they poured boiling water over her chest, "cut off my leg, cut off my head, I'll never give out information. YOU ARE ONLY BUT PAWNS IN THIS GAME OF CHESS," she screamed.

Brown hair, honey-colored eyes, a face resembling his long-lost mother, the lady truly was the sister. He watched intently, he watched till the tortures took actions in slicing off the toe.

'Claudia Haggard...'

Chapter 174: Claudia

"Bad idea..." a voice echoed around the secluded room. Confused, the guards looked around to no avail, the noise had come from seemingly nowhere.

“What are you waiting for, get to it,” they urged on, saliva drooled, the one responsible turned ecstatic at the sight of blood and suffering. The knife dowsed in saltwater made contact.

Bang, he fell, blood splattered around the table. It partially hit the injured leg, Claudia watched in awe – her mind went numb; a reaction to keep what little sanity remained.

“WHO’S THERE!” on guard, the inquisitors looked at one another, “-what’s happening?” questions went around till four shots ended the cacophony.

‘Tharis is awesome, no longer is there a need to get the hands bloodied,’ from the shadows, a figure walked. Blood flowed from the barred room into the hallway, all was dark and dim.

“Who’s there?” partly awake, Claudia gathered what little strength remained and tucked on her chains. She wanted to get away, five people were killed without a second thought. Survival instinct took over, the killer was after her as well.

Clop, clop, the footsteps turned from audible to smothered, he who killed walked on the victim’s blood. The splashes were heard without interference for the room had none present. The iron door screeched opened, in no way was the room fully secluded. A small opening with iron bars preventing escape was where he shot.

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“Have you come to kill?” she said in a defiant tone, the will to live remained. Flash images of Axius kept her alive, she needed to be somewhere close to one as precious as her life.

“Yes,” the voice monotonous and cold, the figure walked in. The face was hidden by shadow until a faint ray of light revealed the identity. Like a ray of hope, the light at the end of the tunnel, he walked in with the eyes blank and devoid of emotions.

“I-it c-can’t be,” her pointless struggle to be freed lessened, her wrist bled from friction and sharp edges of the shackles. The gun aimed at her head, her eyes closed, death had come to visit.

Bang, multiple gunshots later, the lady was unbound. “I knew it,” she sighed, her eyes looked relieved, “-you’re Staxius, aren’t you?” neither could she speak properly nor could she sit upright. All the fatigue and excruciating pain rushed; the limbs turned lifeless.

Rare Scroll: Healing Magic, her eyes shut, Staxius didn’t care. The attention focused on treating the wounds. Most of the severe injuries were healed, though the treatment didn’t stop – he moved to healing potions, which restored the rest pretty nicely. A few bruises were left here and there, but it was to be expected. ‘The possibilities of healing magic is endless.’ Never had he combined both healing scroll and potion together, it was a sort of experiment. ‘Treating a severely wounded individual into one only bruised – more research is what awaits,’ stood and waiting for her to wake, a feeling of uneasiness set in.

‘My red-eye is throbbing, all the curses and markings grows warm, this presence.’ Someone or something from a higher plain had entered the vicinity.

“It’s t-the angel,” she coughed, “-you need to g-getaway,” the voice seemed in a hurry.

“Too late for that now,” he replied coldly, the being was here. Peering through the opening that led outside atop the cell, blue eyes stared down. Impervious to the surrounding, the figure floated inside without care for walls or bars.

“Welcome to the holy land,” stood in the hall, the angel hovered with light emanating from the wings and halo.

“Am I to say thank you?” Staxius fired back with an unbothered tone, Claudia leaned on the wall behind. She tried to get away before Hamael could enter.

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“Unbothered by an angel, you’re quite interesting,” he vanished.

“That’s not all of it, I’m quite fascinated actually,” without much effort, Staxius grabbed the angel’s hand. The latter wanted to make a line straight for Claudia for she was the target.

That slight touch, both locked eyes and waited, “-just who are you?” Hamael asked, a mere human matched his speed and managed to hold him back.

“No one particular, just a friend of that lady there,” the reply unimpressed, Hamael could not but returned to the prior location.

“Honestly, I care not for a fight,” he sighed, “-let us continue this another time,” the wings flapped, the enormous presence vanished into the ceiling.

“Let’s go,” without time wasted he dashed backward, *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* Claudia in arms, they arrived safe and sound at Rosespire. ‘That fight would have ended badly; that so-called angel isn’t a being worth challenging. I don’t know why the man backed out,’ they stood atop a clocktower. Held like a princess, she hung over the edge, Staxius was lost in thought. ‘-for the first time since the Paladin, I sensed the same feeling of dread – the warning of death approaching.’ Precognition to being defeated, the symbols throbbed.

“staxius...Staxius...STAXIUS,” the mind came back. “I’m sorry,” he said casually. Her face teared up, the only thing separating her from falling was the princess carry. Subconsciously, he teleported into the commercial district. People stared at the duo, they watched intently, “why are they looking at us?” still holding onto Claudia, he asked.

“Maybe because I’m nearly naked,” she fired back with a hint of coyness.

“Ohh, I see,” they teleported again to the hotel, “-we’re hom...” using an extensive amount of mana at once triggered a safety mechanism. One of the curses activated, Staxius fell to the floor shortly after arriving; he fell into Avon’s arms. The curse was one of limitation, a rare one that activated when the host grew too tired to continue – a safety switch.

“Should have expected as much,” Avon voiced loudly, Auic laid in the other room with Axis.

“Excuse me, but where are we?” barely able to stand, Claudia asked with her body knelt.

“Rest assured, this place is free of danger,” he smiled, the tone manlier than normal. “-I presume you’re Claudia Haggard?” the spirit carried the master to the closest bed.

“Yes,” she replied, her eyes struggling to stay awake.

“It’s best to not fight sleep,” he said casually and helped her onto where Staxius laid. Both siblings slept on the rather large bed, a throwback to the olden days.

“MOTHER,” the door opened, the boy sensed her from a mile away, “-don’t disturb them,” Auic tried to slow him to no avail. He jumped in bed and tightly held onto the mother to which both slept peacefully.

“Let them rest, it’s the real Haggard family,” Avon smiled and left.

The recovery went on without complication, the mana once depleted filled rapidly. The dreams plagued by nightmares and death; Staxius felt at home. Each time he died in that imaginary plain meant getting stronger. Whether fake or true – death is a death, though not as effective as dying in real. Memories from Daemonum Gladio continued to play – the blade Staxius could not wield yet. The true weapon for the wielders of the death element, that blade could rival any being. Immortal or not, at full-power, the sword could slice through anything. A life for a life, a death for a death, to kill immortal one, a life had to be paid. Conditions that were vague at most, conditions that came as figments of dreams – deep-down, Staxius knew that summoning said weapon wasn’t possible. It hadn’t accepted the master yet, weapons choose their wielder and not vice-versa, an unwritten rule that seemed to hail from fairytales.

It took a few hours, three in the evening came by – Kniq and the rest sat in the living room. They discussed how much money was made, how the progression of level went underway. Strategies about defeating a monster, anything that could make the battle easier. From hunting goblins, they now moved to wolves that were given a tier 9-8 ranking. Viola expressed adamantly that being strong individually wasn’t the goal – Kniq had to become a team. A bond between Achilles, Undrar, Avon, and Deadeyes. A team that remained incomplete for Staxius never really paid attention to doing quests. The focus turned to research and seeking more about the underground, a piece of knowledge the guys didn’t know.

Click, the door opened, “-hello everyone,” he yawned.

“Hello master,” all were present and sat around a table littered with papers and books. Books about fighting and tactics about war, Kniq studied hard to not get left behind.

“It feels like ages since I’ve spoken to you Achilles,” he sat at the head of the table, “-how’s the world so far, is it to your liking?”

“It’s fun, Viola and I have become inseparable,” she replied with bliss in her tone. “I’m glad to hear it,” he smiled.

“What about you, Avon?” having left for a week – Staxius felt compel to personally speak to the members. In no way was the atmosphere tense nor awkward; it felt natural and all held a smile.

“Better than ever,” the peace sign and sparkles on the eyes, a ball of joy.

“Lizzie,” he called out. “PRESENT SIR,” lost in the device, Lizzie stood as if at a school. Everyone laughed, Auic was the same, both were glued to the screen for hours on end. “How’s school been,” as if a father, he asked casually.

“Pretty fun, I get to learn a lot of stuff and have something to work towards, thanks for giving me a roof and all these facilities, I promise to make you proud,” from one who hailed from poverty, she greatly appreciated the things provided.

“There’s no need to be formal, I’m but a friend,” he smiled, her eyes gleamed but went back to the screen.

“What about you, Auic, have you gotten over the fear of people?”

“Y-yes y-your majesty,” she replied, her eyes closed out of embarrassment.

“Now then,” the voice took a sinister tone, “-what about you, Deadeyes?” the man sat with a book about guns opened.

“One shot, one kill,” he proclaimed, “-sorry, I’ve been fine, the new gun is amazing,” the crew settled in nicely.

“UNCLE,” the door opened yet again, Axius ran and jumped into his arms. “I held my side of the contract,” Staxius spoke.

“Yes, you did,” he smiled, Claudia followed.

“Staxius, you’ve forgotten about me,” Viola pouted.

“Come on there’s no need to be coy, sister,” he fired back, both laughed. “It’s getting rather late,” Staxius stood, Claudia couldn’t speak. “Get ready, we’re headed out for dinner, Viola, could you please get her some clothes – I’ll take care of Axius,” orders were given, each one headed out into their respective rooms.

“T-thanks for everything,” the voice shy and awkward, Undrar stood with Claudia.

“I know Staxius might have come off cold earlier, but he just doesn’t know how to act around you,” Viola helped in getting ready. Casual clothes that seemed stylish enough.

“I can’t help but think about how you were referred to as sister earlier?” the voice curious without any malicious intent, Claudia got to know Viola.

“It’s nothing major, I’ve been by Staxius’s side since the beginning. We’re family, people come and go but we never parted ways,” she stopped, “-well we did part ways, stuff happened that was out of our control,” a reassuring smile, she referred to the god-slayer incident. “Don’t worry, the dinner is a pretext for you both to get along, Staxius isn’t the little boy you might have remembered him by; bare that in mind before making a judgment,” a wise piece of advice; a reunion after so long felt awkward at best. Both had questions, Staxius in particular, he wanted to know about what happened to his mother and the reason for her parting.

Right next door, Avon, Axius, and Staxius got ready. The little nephew was given a great deal of attention. He felt as if the boy was Eira, the sixteen years each remained apart could not be filled so easily. “Master,” Avon called, “-it’s time to leave.”

“Let’s go eat,” Adete laid on his head, the little lady had been unconscious for a long time.

Chapter 175: The past

“Edward and Gurdan, cover the flank,” a large explosion rattled the ground around. Somewhere far from Rosepire, in the territory of Plaustan, five adventurers of which the highest rank was Tier-7 Sapphire fought. An army of goblins was seen making way for one of the villages. By sheer chance, it just so happened that those adventurers came back from an expedition. One of transporting goods and equipment to the front lines. All around the continent, these small fights, and siege by monsters were stopped by the brave warriors. No fame nor glory, the protection of civilians came first, this was the mindset of the high-tier guilds. The untouchables, the invincible; hidden by the overwhelming shadow and expectation by the people, the mid-tier guilds were left to wait and survive off whatever quest was given. Low-tier guilds had the worse, disparities between rankings, popularity, and repute, made many refused to work those low-tiered warriors. The fight to the top was a crude and cruel one, one that only a few managed.

The central guild proposed to assign a ranking to each guild. Similar to the current ranking but for those organizations. A proposal that remained on the table for the guild leader had to decide and figure out what would be best. Since Gallienne was crowned queen, many noble factions came to visit her majesty. This made the workload infinitely more difficult, fancy dinners, balls, and much more. Flattery to inflate her ego, gifts to get on her good side, all were out to get a connection with the new queen.

With a new queen came a new order, she had the right to reorganize and choose who would work by her side without care for birth and fame. Since all was still shaken, an overhaul would only prove to destabilize the provinces. The war between noble factions was a prominent problem. Behind the lies and fake promises laid the true terror of greed and hypocrisy. It came with the territory, with grit and sheer will, the young queen pulled through and dealt with the many conspiracies.

“Here we are,” Undrar voiced, they stood before a quiet little restaurant in the commercial district. One close to the town-square, lit by lamps and buildings, the place looked peaceful. Couples walked hand in hand, kids ran around. News about the masked-murderers said that he was gone, vanished without a trace for nobody had been found in the past few days.

One by one, all entered, dressed semi-formally, they walked and climbed up to the first floor. A small room, private and reserved for special occasions, one that Achilles had booked earlier in the day. The reasons to why remained unknown. A large table capable of seating everyone and a small balcony with two seats, waiters arrived to take orders. A few minutes went by, the food arrived, and it took another hour before all finished. Rather than focusing on the food, everyone conversed, many had questions about how Iqavea was. They pestered without end, Staxius could not but answer. He did so with a smile, a smile genuine and pleasant, Undrar had her plate full dealing with Claudia’s questions.

Mid-way, as expected, alcohol was brought in courtesy of Achilles who thirsted for a drink. Avon’s sparkly eyes changed to one of a vicious beast, he wanted to get blackout drunk; drink and drink, the atmosphere changed. Music played, Avon, Achilles, and Deadeyes locked arms and did some folk dance from the eastern province.

A gust of fresh wind took many by surprise, Staxius went outside and sat. The others were engaged with bonding, each did their own thing. Axius played and got along with Auic and Lizzie. Reluctantly, Claudia followed the man outside, ‘Good luck,’ Undrar thought and joined the others.

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Fresh air blew from the right, the moon semi-hidden by clouds, the murmurs from the crowd and the barely visible starry night. A night unlike any other for it had someone special, the long-lost sister.

“They sure are lively,” sat with a glass of whiskey, Staxius spoke with a casual tone.

“They sure are,” she replied hesitantly and took a seat. “T-thanks for rescuing me,” she added with a hint of embarrassment.

“Honestly,” the voice cold and unimpressed, “-should we get right to the thing at hand,” he turned to face her, Adete stood with arms crossed on his shoulder. “I’ll be frank, are you my sister yes or no?” direct and not cutting corners, dealing with awkwardness with a stern approach.

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“Yes,” she sighed; the hesitance felt faded.

“Good, I won’t ask for proof,” he faced away and stargazed, “-would you mind telling me what happened after I ran away?” the voice friendly and approachable, her mind was set at ease.

“Sure,” she replied faintly, “-the memories from back then are a little vague,” a quick pause to gather her thoughts later, the story began. “After you left to help dad, mother and I decided to leave Hidros for a while. War had grown out of control, Dorchester was turned to ruin, the capital wasn’t safe, mages everywhere and so were corpses. I know not how, but mother managed to acquire tickets to depart from the continent. I never really asked question so I never knew why the war was fought. Our life began anew in Iqeavea, the city advanced rapidly, technology had merged with magic. Mother had a lot of power and influence; she quickly got a job in the Order. On the other hand, I studied hard at their academy – graduation came quickly. Our family never really had a tough upbringing, money was abundant, I had a lot of friends and mother was popular. Then after a few years, on the day I turned twenty, I got a job offer from the Order to become a member; a spy for the organization. I then joined Whisper, years went on and on for god knows how long. I got married, bore a child, had a family, kept up the identity of a normal housewife but work as an agent. The first few years were tough, mother shut herself off, her mind was solely engrossed into work. Since I had a family to manage, we grew apart. I never really remembered that I had a father nor a brother, mother made sure that I’d never remembered. Sadly, one day, a letter came, anonymous but real, it contained pictures of our past – the joyous ones with you and me and dad. It also had another picture,” placed on the table, the photo of Staxius during the fight against Sophie – the combat training. Being taped by the nobles all over the continent, it was leaked.

“It also had a letter, one that describes our childhood and the past I had forgotten. The name Axius came as a suggestion from mother, I never knew what it meant until now. Long story short, that letter was the thing that forced us to reestablish ourselves in Hidros. We arrived here two to three years ago, the search was long and painful. Then, one day, whilst taking Axius to school – I came across a flyer that showed the two-verses-two tournament, call it fate or whatever, but we met. The day you became an adventurer, my other comrade visited you and from what I got told, you were inches away from killing someone,” she stopped and drank, “-that’s the whole story, details might be missing here and there but

that's what I remember." She faced away from the stars; the eyes laid upon Staxius who's face remained stoic.

"Thanks for answering my question," they locked eyes,"-Guess it's my turn, ask away," the eyes blank but the lips smiled.

"First of all, how old are you now?" the conversation changed from deep and convoluted to normal and easy to swallow.

"Officially I'm thirty-six I think, and unofficially I'm twenty," the answer vague at best.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

'Should I tell her my past or no,' Staxius thought long and hard, in the end, Sense-personality was used. He checked thoroughly the information obtained, with no inconsistencies, the lady was his sister.

"I'm waiting for an answer..." she urged.

"Fine, around sixteen years ago I was cursed to an imprisonment spell. My body froze in crystal, I basically died until the day the holy-crusade ended. Since then, my life has gotten rather hectic," he smiled.

"Yes, I know, King of Arda," she whispered.

"Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"I know mostly everything about the current state of things, I'm a spy after all," she bragged, "-I want to know about the past, what happened to dad, what happened in the war."

"..." Silence, the countless years that chipped away at his sanity, the years that forged him into the cold-blooded killer. "I'm sorry, I don't want to go into details, but I'll give you a vague summary since you've been indulgent to my questions," any essential information was blocked, only a faint outline was laid out, the past was something to never awaken again.

"When I ran away to dad, he welcomed me with open arms. For the next few years, my scrawny little body was trained into one worthy of a mage. Thereon, I was taught the art of magic, I never awaken any special elements. Rather than using magic myself, my father taught how to slay a mage. How to kill any sorcerer with a single needle; all the blood and suffering, the countless nights without food nor shelter. Always on the run from the opposition, the fight with me and father side by side. Everything was good till I got mortally injured, my body was altered and made better – the changes have long been forgotten. What I remember is that I had a magical element of my own, one that could be used to make fighting easier. In no way was dad mean or harsh, we always fought with a smile. Trained in the way of the sword as well as other martial arts, I was taught with a good upbringing. Tempest Haggard was and still is my hero, the true warrior I admire. Then the war ended, a year later, dad died. All the knowledge acquired by him was transferred over, I inherited his legacy as a combat-mage. Shortly after came Claireville Academy, to which I presume you know the rest," the story ended, vague but sufficient.

"I was brought up in a lavish environment whilst my brother was brought up on a battle-field," the voice felt ashamed.

“The past is the past, I’m grateful I chose that path. Without it, well just look inside,” he pointed backward. People laughed and smiled, they drank without care and had fun. “Without it, I’d have never been able to meet such lovely people.”

“You’re right,” she said in a relieved tone, “-there still rest the question about Eira Haggard,” she stated firmly.

“Oh, my daughter, she’s currently studying under Director Josiah’s tutelage.”

“I see, I’d love to meet my niece sometime.”

“One day, Claudia, one day,” the voice mysterious, he stood, the siblings caught up on the years that had gone by.

“We should probably go inside, I can hear Axius crying,” to which the night ended. Not wanting to impose on her brother, Claudia walked to her home in front of the castle. Shoulder to shoulder, he carried both Achilles and Deadeyes to the hotel, both were out.

“How was the reunion,” snores filled the rooms rapidly.

“Awkward at best, but normal I guess,” the reply unimpressed, “-you better take care of them,” he patted her head and left. Undrar watched in awe, Staxius truly changed.

“Impressive,” teleportation was used, he stood in front of what used to be the shop. The whole building demolished, frames were already in place. The dwarves worked through the night, each took shifts, the construction went on without interruption.

“Thanks, your majesty,” Skokdrag stood as the overwatch.

“I’ll be at the magical guild, if something comes up, contact me there.”

‘Better continue researching those scrolls, the title of Alchemist should be enough to procure me a working quarter for the next two days.’

Chapter 176: Surprise

The day soon rose, Staxius’s late-night visit earlier had proven to be quite a quandary. The man walked in demanding a place to sleep, tis was done for he had the right to do so. An alchemist, though novice who helped in a task deemed impossible made many watchful. To that, he slept peacefully next to Isorin’s room. One larger with more access to books and such for it had a mini-library inside. A makeshift bedroom used for late-night research, one vaguely similar to the shop but with more facilities. It fit what he had in mind perfectly, research on relic-class scroll resumed.

Meanwhile in Claireville academy, far away from her father, Eira awoke. The past week had been the last before vacation. Josiah grew sick, the condition worsened overnight – the practical training had to be put off. Sophie was set to arrive the next day, the flight had been delayed due to a storm.

“Eira...” a gentle voice called out, one familiar and soothing.

“Morning,” she mumbled and drooled, the ice-princess was a child by heart. Venerable when close to ones she trusted.

“Come on, today’s the last day of school,” Ysmay urged her to move, she gently shook the bed. As a last resort, the curtains were drawn, thus letting sunlight inside. A sure-fire way to wake anyone.

“Five minutes,” she let out innocently, her friend could not but give in to her antics. The morning began the same way for both girls. The class would last half a day and vacation would be one month. Many of the kids had resorts and voyages booked overseas. It included Ysmay. Eira’s mind played around with the idea of staying back – she didn’t want to be a nuisance to her family.

“We should get going,” a reversal in persona, from childish to stern and serious – Eira and Ysmay headed to class. Time passed quickly; all the lectures ended. A farewell party was hosted inside the gymnasium, one well organized and one opened to all. No plans at hand since the Director was at home resting, Eira partook in socializing with her classmates. An activity rare and that came with a lot of respect. The girls adored her whilst the boys could only but fantasize.

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Cheers and smiles all round, the event continued without fail.

“Staxius,” mid-way through finishing a paper, he who had awoken a few minutes ago was taken by surprise. The ink nearly fell, the paper crumbled, the shock of telepathy caught him off guard.

“Don’t shout,” he replied, the intonation nor intent could not be transferred via their mental link.

“That isn’t the matter – today Eira’s vacation begins. The longest of the year for it’s nearly December. It might not be apparent but winter has rolled in. It’s going to last a month; I heard that Adelana tried to get her back to castle Garsley for vacation but no luck. She was adamant about staying back.”

“What’s wrong about that, she maybe wants to train?” with no clue on the situation, he figured a guess.

“Thing is, Josiah is sick. I may not look like it but I’ve got contacts all over the continent. The hospital had informed me about the development earlier this week. Since you were away, I could not deliver the news. Anyways, you better do something, Eira is your daughter – the alone time you so wished for might come true.”

“Listen, I’ve got my plate full,” the deadline for god’s ale delivery approached, the shop was under construction and the scrolls were being researched. Not to mention, a call from the dark-guild could come at any time.

“Staxius... don’t be an idiot. You’ve grown more responsible; I’ve seen thy eyes. Nevertheless, I don’t care; decide what matters most. Is it the inconsequential things such as your work or is it the daughter you abandoned for sixteen years?”

“Undrar,” the pen slipped and fell, “-thy mouth is as sharp as a blade.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” out on a quest, she smiled – Kniq could not but wonder what went on inside her mind. *Bang,* laid inside a bush, Deadeyes shot, bullets flew all around. Supportive fire, a kill quest that included hob-goblins and a pack of wolves. The message delivered, she took charge and directed as if a conductor, she guided the rest. A well-tuned orchestra of death and slaughter.

It took a few minutes, time now was noon, Staxius finished the basic outline and shapes of what consisted of a relic-class item. It would only get advance from here forth, a job that required the utmost

care and precision. Skipping both Epic and Legendary classes was a choice made out of necessity. By cracking the code for the Relic class, making any other quality would grow easier as opposed to gradually improving.

"Isorin," Staxius called and rushed down the flight of stairs.

"Over here," he replied, the voice came from inside the library.

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"-I'm going on vacation," the voice serious, "-notify the alchemist sect. If there are any urgent jobs, give notice to the guild," hastily, he stepped out and teleported straight into Void. 'Here I come,' the car roared to life. The wizard sat with no clue to what just happened.

"Goodbye," Eira spoke with a casual smile, many of the students left. Cars of different make and brand all parked, dressed in suits and formal attire, the parents waited patiently.

"-My father's here," Ysmay spoke softly, both stood near the entrance of the main building. Cars took turns going around the fountain and picking up whoever was required. Some left on foot; all the smiles could not be described. At the end of a long and tough school year, the students had time to rest and practice alone.

'I wish dad would have at least called,' the posture slouched, the yard grew emptier by the second. The wind blew, the sun shone, the air cold but bearable, Eira sat underneath a tree. The same tree Julius stood under so many years ago, one that had grown immensely over the years. 'Wishful thinking, Father is a busy man – I can't be needy. Who knows how many strings he had to pull before getting me admitted here,' a responsible girl on the outside but a child who yearned for affection on the inside.

'This is going to suck,' a black mist jumped over the cliff. A screeching stop later, covered by dust, a black-car stood in the middle. The headlights shone mildly amidst the small smokescreen, it looked like eyes eying down all who dared.

Click, the door opened, out of the mist, a man dressed in uniform walked. The students present were mystified. The various nobles and high-ranking individuals gossiped; the car had been parked menacingly in the middle of the yard. It paid no heed to etiquette nor rules.

"Long time no see," the voice gentle and calm, Staxius walked.

"I can't believe it," from leaned, Eira nearly fell. Seeing her dad was the last thing in mind. How could someone as busy as him have time?

"Good afternoon, Eira," he smiled.

"Why are you here?" rather than smile, confusion loomed.

"Is it not vacations? The answer is quite simple," he knelt, "-I've come to pick-up my daughter," the smile remained. Her scarlet eyes looked up at her father, the man had changed.

"The symbol," her hands casually caressed his face, "-your eyes and not to mention," she lifted his lip jokingly, "-your teeth," the eyes narrowed. "Are you really my dad?" she asked in jest.

“Oh, come on,” a quick pull, he got her to stand – we’re going on a vacation. I might not be there all the time,” he headed back to the car,” -despite that, we’ll spend as much time as we have,” the grip strong, Eira could not but give in. From whence they came, the car drove off into the distance.

“Where are we headed?” Eira asked, the face lit with excitement.

“Someplace where we can do what we want,” the car went into overdrive, they went past the capital.

“Are we headed to Dorchester?” she asked for said road led to Savaview bridge.

“Nope, someplace even better,” *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* from a road, the car went through a portal.

Greenery, the clear sky, vintage-styled buildings, a massive castle on the left. Void came to a stop, butlers and maids stood in line and waited.

“Where are we?” confused, she mumbled and watched carefully.

“Welcome back your majesty,” the door opened by the attending butler.

‘Your majesty?’ she thought and got out in turn, a castle and her father being treated as if royalty. One option remained – they were in Arda.

“If you please,” a maid escorted Eira to his side. The car vanished into thin air; it was teleported inside the garage.

“Father...” she tucked on his shirt; they were being escorted by butlers.

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied reassuringly, all were demi-humans. They all watched closely, another human inside Arda, one unknown but with his majesty. A concubine? some jested and perished said thought.

First, a trip to the portal room. There, the Overseer added Eira to the whitelist. Her aura and mana were different and unknown. To avoid confusion, this measure had to be taken.

“Who might she be?” the girl behind the desk asked with a strict tone.

“This is Eira Haggard, my daughter,” he replied without faltering and without hesitation.

“I’m sorry majesty, but surely you jest, the lady is but a few years younger than you,” a weird sense of humor known to Staxius only.

“Don’t worry about the details,” he smiled, the lady gave a nod.

“Eira Haggard,” before entering a portal, the overseer spoke, “-you sure are pretty,” the strict voice vanished, rather the lady smiled.

“I told you, don’t worry – the people of Arda are good-natured individuals by heart. Being on edge is the norm, the place is constantly under attack by monsters – it’s to be expected,” a vague explanation, the throne room came in view – empty with only two people on the throne.

“I apologize for the short notice,” the tone polite, Staxius bowed, Eira followed.

“Honestly,” Shanna stood, “-drop the formality,” the tone warm and beautiful, “-you’re only stressing her out,” she stepped off the podium.

‘What does she mean, stressing her out,’ the eyes quickly glanced over to Staxius who pulled out his tongue, this was all a joke. The initial impression he gave of Xula was of a serious queen.

“Excuse me?” Eira asked in a monotonous tone.

“The same tone as her father,” the queen dashed over and embraced the white-haired girl.

“Sorry, but I’m confused,” the question directed to Staxius. Xula’s embrace was followed by the queen pinching the girl’s cheeks affectionately.

“That’s enough,” Staxius spoke, changed side, and stood beside Shanna.

“Eira Haggard,” he called in a serious tone, “-welcome home,” both Xula and him said simultaneously in a warm voice.

“T-thanks,” overwhelmed she dashed and embraced Staxius tightly.

“That’s not fair,” Shanna pouted, “-I may be queen, but I’m still your mother,” the pout changed into a smile.

“Sorry, b-but it’s a bit a-awkward,” she voiced, not knowing how to act around a mother figure, Eira remain by Staxius’s side.

“It’s fine,” he patted her head reassuringly, “-you guys will get along faster than one might believe.”

The trip continued with a visit of the whole castle. From facilities to rooms and library, the trio walked down the endless hallways. The distance between the mother and daughter quickly dropped. Each had a different but overlapping interest. Eira’s school year ended with a massive surprise. To have the chance to experience winter with her father and mother.

On that particular day, before Staxius reached the academy. He teleported back to Arda using the portal at the broken-down shop. Thereon, the king informed that his daughter would come to visit for the following month. Shanna was ecstatic to heard said news for both had met previously. Having the chance to meet the first person to ever change her husband’s heart – she could but agree. Ever since the vampiric transformation began, the complexion slowly grew to match Eira, the one-sided crimson-colored eyes had a clear connection to her as-well. Though vague, both father and daughter had similarities, not to mention the same monotonous tone and blank-expressions.

Sadly, with all this happening, Staxius could not get something out of his mind. The fear of the Death Reaper’s curse. He despised it, no longer did he want to lose and start over. If that day ever came – a true demon would awaken.

Chapter 177: Impact

Sat inside the garage with Void behind, ‘-better get the framework ready,’ the mind focused on the Relic-scroll. Earlier, Eira asked to be alone and given rights to wander around. As long as she didn’t leave the castle, Xula allowed it. The citizens knew not of her identity which could prove to be dangerous. Humans were still despised by the larger number.

Factions from all around the continent moved. Kreston worked secretly on Razer. The Pope spear-headed the operation. Duke Hawkins was left out of the loop for war wasn't a pleasant thing. Angel Hamael flew and monitored said province. People praised and bowed each time he walked – the threat of the fallen-ones was no longer an issue. The monster didn't bother attacking their holy-land. One by one, the members were picked and made to work locally.

Plaustan's stability and peace were never perturbed, the lovely beaches and hotels made it popular for anyone of repute visiting Hidros. This was apparent only near the beaches. Far into the province, monster activity was tightly watched, a band of unnamed fighters always ran around at night and killed all who threatened to enter the province. Hidden by helmets with a thunder-insignia; the covert protectors safeguarded the peace. Adventurers flocked over to Swanview – traders, blacksmiths, and craftsmen alike set-up shop. Lairs all near Totrya were infinite mines for fighting off the demons. The amount of Qaisar dropped was tantalizing enough.

Sadly, later that night, an event would forever change how people approached said place. The starry sky changed into a raging inferno, from black to crimson-red, all who had camps shuddered.

"What is happening..." a few kilometers from the adventuring camp near Totrya's border, a few adventurers who rested in the opened were left speechless.

"HEADS-UP," panic ran rampant, pots with stew toppled over. Equipment scattered, a raging fire-ball landed without notice. Engulfed by the flames, all was wiped without a trace. The adventuring camp was no longer present, many nameless adventurers disappeared, the explosion impact sent tremors across the continent. An earthquake from what many told – tis was the night all changed yet again.

Reality can be whatever I want, Absolute control: World break.

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Hovered above the scene, three figures, their capes flowed with the wind.

"Kanad and Kylsha," white hair and blue-eyes, "-this world has been conquered," the voice cold and powerful, "-the people are fools who'd rather kill one another. I care not for them, and I care not for this realm – henceforth, I, Scifer Rethem, heir to Kronos, bestow upon thee both the title of Demon King and Demon Queen. Go out and wreak havoc, do what is necessary, what you please, rule this world as you wish." A purplish flame evolved both demons, their horns grew, their power increased.

'This place has always been a gateway to Draebala – my quest to return home is yet to be complete,' a green aura distorted the very fabric of reality, he who controlled time had control overall, with a snap, he disappeared to never be seen again. A feeling of dread burnt within every living being's heart; a fear embedded itself deep inside.

The origin of what happened that night would remain a mystery for the following month. The place was barred, an invisible barrier erected, one that turned any who dared step inside to dust.

'This feeling of nostalgia,' head focused onto the paper before him, Staxius's eyes turned blank. The same sensation on the day the meteor flew over Dorchester.

"Father," the door opened swiftly.

“What is it?” he asked, Eira stood with a red-dress.

“Save me from mother,” she ran inside. Outside, footsteps menacingly marched forth.

“Eira, where are you?” Xula asked in a jingle, one slow and eerie, “-found you,” the head turned, the eyes looked possessed.

“S-she’s o-obsessed w-with me t-trying on clothes,” her voice filled with panic, the eyes on the verge of crying, Eira crouched behind Void.

“Just teleport already,” he chuckled and went back to work.

“A-are you g-going to a-abandoned me, your daughter?” the footsteps approached.

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“You bet I will,” he winked, Xula pounced and disappeared in a greenish light.

‘Morals are high, I’m glad they’re getting along,’ the feeling subsided.

Before he knew it, three days went by, “-your majesty,” from repeating the same things every day – all went unnoticed. Work, eat, sleep, and spend time with the family. “Skokdrag and his companions have returned,” black long hair, red-eyes, pale skin, and a tall but slender figure, one had come to give a message.

“Long time no see, Aurora,” he looked up, both laid eyes.

“Indeed, your majesty,” she replied formally and bowed.

“Drop the formalities,” he stood and walked over, “-aren’t we acquainted,” he held out his hands as a sign of friendship.

“T-thank you,” she smiled, both walked down the hallway – the direction was the castle gates.

“I must ask,” the walk long, “-where have you been all this time?” it gave time for a short conversation.

“I was busy training recruits on her majesty’s orders,” the reply quick, they arrived.

“Ya majesty,” tired and barely able to stand, the workers returned with a smile.

“Welcome back,” Staxius rushed over to help Skokdrag walk.

“Thanks, the job has been done,” they all cheered victoriously, the task at hand had been done.

“I see,” *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* not wanting to have the dwarves get any more tired, Staxius teleported the whole crew inside the portal room.

“Overseer, make sure they receive a good bath and some booze,” the order plain and simple, the king left. All ended without complication, the building in Rosespire was complete, the dwarves headed back home – separate portals leading to each individual’s abode got conjured. A privilege that not many could experience for it was seen as an honor by many.

“FATHER,” stood with arms crossed, Eira yelled. The voice echoed down one of the many hallways; this particular-one led towards the castle gate.

“What is it?” he turned around to see the girl dressed exquisitely.

“Oh...” the gaze turned downwards, Xula had an obsession with dressing her daughter. Anything she wore looked sublime, Eira’s cheeks remained red with embarrassment. These kinds of dresses, ones that lowered mobility a whole lot could not but make him chuckle.

“Did you just snicker at me?” she asked, the marble floor caved in; Shadow-step was used.

“Come on,” the voice nonchalant, without much concern, he held out both hands and caught her before she could attack. “You seriously trying to fight because of a dress,” he patted her head, the girl looked too adorable to be angry towards.

“Let’s go have lunch,” the duo made way for the dining hall. In this manner, all went on without interruption. Rather than sitting inside the castle, this time lunch was out in the garden. Sat around a circular table, the king, the queen, and Eira.

“How’s the stay so far?” Shanna began a conversation, though rude to speak during a meal – none cared.

“It’s fine, apart from all the dresses you make me wear, I like it,” Eira was in denial. Secretly, she enjoyed dressing up and looking pretty.

“You two have grown close,” the tone neutral, Staxius spoke.

“...” no response, only smiles, the prediction was true, in no time, Eira and Shanna got along.

“I’m glad,” the voice shifted to one serious.

“What’s the matter, Staxius?” the queen sensed it.

“I’ll be gone for a few days, now that the shop is built and all preparation is complete. I’ll have to move to the capital and stay there for a while.”

“Is that so,” both lady’s eyes lowered, “-good luck,” they smiled. Being away from Staxius grew to be a habit, both were used to it.

“Thank you both,” he stood and rushed over.

“No need to get emotional,” Shanna asked with a tear forming. “It’s fine, dad,” Eira hugged tighter, they all embraced. A scene forever etched into his heart, the smiling faces of two of the people he cared most. The queen’s schedule was lessened – Staxius proposed a day out into the capital to which she agreed.

From the magical academy to the training grounds, Eira was shown all the wonders of Arda. The people were oblivious to their identity; the trio strolled around town nonchalantly. From the lower-level to the top, they walked and visited all that fancied Eira’s attention. Gifts, mini-games, they did everything possible. Entertainment wasn’t anywhere on par with Vlaiwia, but he didn’t care.

The day ended on a high note. “Here,” Staxius handed over the sword he got back in the capital, “-may this serve you in battle,” he smiled.

“It’s beautiful,” she admired the blade and all its beauty, it felt alive as if it had a voice. Refine, elegant, and sharp, the perfect weapon for the ice-princess. “Thanks, father,” they hugged. A few changes were made, Staxius personally enchanted the blade, it was twice as strong if not stronger.

‘Time has come to depart,’ Staxius sat inside Void. The windows rolled, “-I’ll be back in two to three days, make sure to not cause your mother any trouble, Princess Eira,” the car drove straight into a solid wall.

“What did he mean by Princess?” Eira turned for she sought answers.

“You heard your father, Eira, have you not realized it?” the tone shocked but affectionate. The Royal Ardanian blood-line began with Shanna. Since she was a fairy, the normal blood relation didn’t matter. Staxius was first-in-line. If by chance the royal couple bore a child – the little fellow would have become the second-in-line, since both parties had no family. In Staxius’s case, it didn’t matter for the sister was married to someone else. Axius had no claim to the throne, neither did his mother nor grandmother. This all made Eira involuntarily the princess. Each kingdom had its own way of seeing who would ascend to the throne. Being relatively new, Arda didn’t have any of those formalities readied yet. A single fact remained that anyone relating to Shanna Islegust would have a right to the throne. Since the family line consisted of only Staxius and Eira, no other heir from either side would interfere.

“Do you mean to say I’m an heir to the Ardanian throne?” she asked, the eyes filled with doubt and confusion.

“There’s no need to worry, in case of Staxius and I die, you’ll be the heir. But let’s be honest, who is powerful enough to defeat your father or me,” the voice filled with confidence, she could not but laugh at the idea. “Either way, you’re the Princess of Arda,” they held hands.

“Is my life going to change?” the eyes shuddered, Eira wasn’t willing to be bound by something she didn’t want.

“Not really, life will go on as normal. The populous isn’t aware of the title yet. It shall stay that way until further notice. We had that talk earlier on, Staxius decided that it would be best for you to not be included with the throne’s affair.”

A sense of relief set her mind at ease, “-thank you both for being considerate.”

‘Now then,’ the moment Void reappeared in Oxshield, the phone given by Cake vibrated. ‘-what’s all this,’ confused, he checked to see a lot of miscalls and call for help. Messages vaguely described an assault. The date and time indicated yesterday. ‘So much for being an ally,’ in a moment of need, Staxius was out in Arda relaxing whilst Sprinkles were fighting. No further information was given, only a location – one in the slums at the western side of the capital.

“We’ve got trouble,” the day prior, Cake got a call. A deal had turned sour, the man on the phone panted erratically. “-It w-was a s-set-up,” gunshots, cries, and yells.

“God damn it,” sat in an office surrounded by gun-powder and weapons, she yelled. The phone furiously tried to get a hold of Staxius, not out of powerlessness but out of necessity. She needed to inform what was going on, immediate action had to be taken.

Without any response nor reply, she took charge. Back-up was sent without care, she remained at the office trying to figure out what had happened. Back-up that was sent never returned, out of the forty-men, ten died and five went missing. "GOD FUCKING DAMN IT,"

Chapter 178: Upset

"What's this all about," drenched with the blood of her fallen comrade, hidden behind a wall, Cake asked. Dotted around the building, one that held three-stories despite being in the slums, her men – some injured whilst others-focused. The incident had lasted two days, the escape had been destroyed by a suicidal attempt to stop the deal. Sprinkles were notorious for not caring about their lives.

On the second day, Cake rushed in with the remainder of the gang. The fight continued, gun-fire, magic, all that was accessible. Ammo was out, no hope of escape for the attackers, the situation was brought under control. Opposite her, behind the same wall, the ones who began the fight.

"You ain't getting no answer," *Bang,* the second the door clicked, gun-fire raged from the inside. Their ammo wasn't low, Sprinkles had the worst of it. Ten-man remained living and breathing, the others were either dead or injured.

"Calm down," she whispered. A bit of information before going all out wasn't such a bad idea. They who held their guns sighed in hopes of calming down.

"Who are you guys?" she asked, the fight came to a standstill. None wanted to make the first move.

"A rival gang," the only clear response received. An oval-shaped object got thrown from out to the ajar door.

"GET IN COVER," she screamed, tis was a grenade; it had been too long.

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BANG, it blew through the entire hallway, rather than exploding in a circle, it followed the wall and ended on either side of the building. The windows flew off, bodies fell on the floor – a grenade imbued with fire-magic.

"Damn it," a black car arrived in time to witness the building get destroyed. 'I'm too late,' without care, he climbed onto the roof of the moving vehicle. *Death Element: Absolute-Barrier,* bodies were caught in mid-air. At the same time, a helicopter hovered above the roof, a ladder was dropped.

"Cake, are you ok?" Void stopped, the few who survived the explosion were placed onto the ground. 'No time to waste,' potions given, their injuries healed.

"Shadow," she recovered quickly, "-stop them at all cost, 90% of Sprinkles has been wiped out. You're the leader, avenge my fallen men," people gathered around. Five including Cake were left to rest on the sidewalk.

"Oh, don't worry," partially his fault, Staxius had to take responsibility. 'A helicopter so far into the city,' they who climbed seemed in a hurry. The face hidden by masks, there was no way in knowing who they were. 'Either I destroy the thing altogether and risk the lives of inconsequential people which will bring attention to the dark-guild, or we let them go,' a choice had to be made, risk their identity being revealed or suffer the loss without anything to show.

“There’s no way I’m compromising,” both eyes closed, Shadow-step manifested in a blackish-mist, in a blink, he dashed inside.

“Get on already, we’re wasting time,” he who controlled the ladder urged. The rest stood on the roof. The hands worked tirelessly to load weapons that were to be used in business. “Why such a hurry, we’ve wiped out one of the dark guild’s team – this call for celebration.” Laughter and pride all around, the remaining three were ready to evacuate.

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“Yes, celebration,” a voice spoke from behind.

“Get-down,” Support gunfire opened without a second thought. The remainder ran straight for the ladder, the chopper grew more active.

‘We’ll call today a loss,’ Staxius sighed, ‘-but there’s no way I’m leaving without something,’ blood dripped, no spell, nothing was used to stop the attack. The attention was focused on capturing a single individual, there was nothing more that could have been done. Firing a shot from Tharis might have done damage but that would also result in unnecessary attention being drawn.

“Wait for me,” the ladder slowly distanced itself, a single man remained. “HERE I COME,” he leaped.

“Not so fast,” a strong grip on the ankle stopped the escape, the getaway vehicle flew off into the distance, there was nothing they could do.

“How the hell are you alive?” struggling to get away, the man kicked relentlessly. He hung vertically down the building, Staxius laid atop, blood loosened the grip.

“You better brace,” a single pull, the body got thrown onto the wall. An instant knock-out.

“How shameful,” Adete hovered, “-were you really that powerless or did you act?” she asked, the voice intrigued.

“I don’t know if I made the right decision,” the sun shone, he stared up, the body recovered, “-there wasn’t enough information to perfectly calculate outcomes – a judgment call,” the body sat upright, bullets fell, the holes healed. “Besides, this isn’t the first time we’ll see those guys,” he stood, the clothes were torn and a hostage in tow, he walked.

“Here’s what I manage to get,” the man dropped beside Cake who leaned against a broken-down wall.

“Is that so,” her mind wandered in and out of consciousness, “-listen,” the voice serious. “All that talk about you being an ally was just a joke, wasn’t it. I explicitly gave you that phone so we could reach out if anything happened. Neither will I be a hypocrite nor stupid, I’m also responsible for not thoroughly checking the location and deal. We both bare the blame for this incident – Sprinkles is more or less over,” she pointed at the survivors. “They’re hurt beyond recovery; magic isn’t going to do much now. This is how my hard-earned battle-hardened soldiers die – all because I dared to rely on someone other than myself,” her take on the situation was over. The day Sprinkles was wiped by a foreign gang, one unknown but powerful.

“I agree,” he sat beside her, “-I won’t say I’m innocent. Some things should have been done,” the head turned, “-I won’t say that those who died left an impression. This is my nature, I care not for people

other than me," the voice monotonous, he had no remorse for letting the gang die. "However," the head faced upwards, "-that doesn't mean I'll wash my hands with those who died and leave. Tis the job of a leader to protect the subordinates – in that respect I failed," the wind blew, a guttural defeat, a taste of reality. "If I'd have been a few minutes earlier, all this would have never happened. I may be strong, I may be merciless, but I'm not all-mighty," from monotonous to angry, the voice's tone altered gradually. "Henceforth, Cake – tis what it all comes down to. Trust in me or wash your hand with the dark-guild, someone like you should be able to find a place quickly. You're the strategist if I remember correctly, there are probably options laid opened in case this situation ever happened."

"As long as my men are avenged, I don't care what you do. Throw me to the wolves, the world isn't a nice place, and neither is the underground. Expect for mercy and pity here and it's all lost," she held out her hand.

"I'm glad we can agree," they shook hands. In that conversation, each knew where the other stood, Cake went from not fully-trusting Staxius to having faith in him. From rescuing her and capturing one of the oppositions, a far better outcome than she could have gotten on her own. Staxius, on the other hand, gained a trustworthy ally.

"Now what," Staxius asked, people gathered around, Void which rested in front became the main piece of attraction. Having such luxury here, in the part of the capital none wanted to venture out too, was a rare sight.

"I've called Jason, someone should be arriving in pick-up and clean whatever mess we made," her response simple, both now waited.

"Cake and Shadow," two black vans stopped a few minutes later, "-we're here for the clean-up." She stood and spoke, orders were given, the injured were kept inside.

"We'll take care of everything here, you guys can go home," dressed in normal clothes, the cleaning crew arrived.

"See you later, I'll text the location," she drove off on her bike.

"What a good start to the day," he mumbled sarcastically, Void turned on.

"You could have used teleportation to get inside the helicopter and stop everything," Adete said in a curious tone, she spoke the truth.

"You're right, I could have," he breathed slowly, "-sadly, the all-seeing eye didn't permit me to gaze inside the chopper. I could have done a lot of this but it would have resulted in a dead-end. Don't be fooled, I'm not that strong as you think – intimidation and mind-games is still my forte. Most of the people I fight are done through those subtle games. Today was a defeat – there's no arguing," the car made way to the shop. "The Underground isn't going to be as easy as I thought."

"You can say that twice," she smiled, "-nothing is that easy. What does it mean to be strong, does one have to get more powerful for his sake or the sake of others. At the end of the day, an ant can take out an elephant, the higher you are, the harder you fall; being strong isn't always a good thing."

"Since when have you turned into a philosopher," the voice smug, he replied without ulterior motives.

“Well, since you got completely destroyed by a few hoodlums,” a reply that seemed truthful, “-I had to speak up.”

“You’re right; there are more things to learn and do – labeling someone as strong isn’t worth the effort. I’m not strong, I’m Staxius, tis the line of thinking I agree with.” Mistakes were made, things happened, nothing always fell into place – he suffered a great loss. The stride that would have been made in the underground came to a stand-still. All went back to the drawing board, rather than focusing on what was unchangeable, it focused on another problem. One that loomed in the air; two days were left till the deadline. God’s ale had to become a priority.

“God damn,” the car came to a halt. A magnificent building stood, one with two stories and a slated roof. One that had the feel of a vampiric manor. In no way was it intimidating, it felt welcoming for it also had the feel of a magical shop. Elegant and breathtaking, a sign written in calligraphy read, *magic-shop.*

“The dwarves sure have a sense of humor,”

“What do you mean?” Staxius asked; Adete’s observation piqued his attention a little.

“Can’t you figure it out? A vampire working inside a Victorian styled shop,” she chuckled, “-having a coffin rather than a bed would make this even more hilarious.”

Click, the door opened, a bell rung, the interior – a large room with armor-stands, weapons-stands and a lot of display cases for potions and anything magic related. The size of said room was increased, half of the old-back room was used to expand space.

In the back, a narrow staircase with shelves for storage on the back wall. The top-floor was all Staxius hoped for, a giant room filled with empty-bookshelves, various apparatuses that would help in alchemy and a vacant rectangle in the middle. One that matched the size of Void, the builders were smart to leave out space for easy movement. A ladder was spotted in the corner, it led to the attic were a bed, a table, and a circular window rested. Back in the research-lab, a single window at the front provided sunlight. The inside looked as pretty as the outside, Skokdrag and his team had outdone themselves. The place was way better than what he dreamt of.

“No coffin,” he pointed out, both stood near the window.

“Yeah, sure, you win,” she pouted.

“This place sure is amazing; work is going to be more of a privilege than effort. I can’t wait to transfer back all the stuff from Arda – tis time to become a scholar worth the knowledge taught by so many people.” A portal was built, one that linked the already existing portal in a garage back at Arda.

Without fail, all the stuff was transferred – a few potions made were put on display. Common scrolls, uncommon scrolls and Rare scrolls laid in separate levels in a single massive cabinet. One laced with a red-colored fabric to soak up moisture and anything that could damage the commodities. The furniture was hand-crafted, there was no need to bring back all the furniture stored. What remained was to decide the shop’s name, something he didn’t want to do just yet.

Chapter 179: Break-down

'Time to teleport the worktable,' a few seconds without anyone noticing, Staxius dropped in and out of Arda. The white rectangle stood in the middle of the room. All the preparation to start another phase in his life were complete. From an element-less trainee battle-mage to now, Staxius's journey was filled with loads of emotions. A long trip that had reached a turning point. No time wasted; production of God's ale commenced. As predicted, the device was efficient, he could use mana to directly influence the brewing process. Using his feet as the conduit, mana was controlled subconsciously whilst the mind worked tirelessly on cracking the outer symbol for the relic-class scroll. It didn't take long before he seeped into Clarity – the consciousness wandered, questions answered, knowledge found and mysteries resolved.

"Welcome back Kniq," covered with burnt marks and injuries, the adventuring party returned. A long and tough battle that lasted a few days, one that Undrar led. One that concerned a lot of people, the hobgoblins had evolved. An ogre of Emerald tier-six appeared. Out of the five low to mid-tier party dispatched, only two returned. Kniq and a relatively new guild that went by the name of Swift, the emblem assign was of a figure running.

Rather than smiles and cheers, the welcoming party consisted of only Diane and Melisa. They watched carefully; battered and nearly defeated, the seven-remainder returned.

"We made it back," Deadeyes mumbled, the body gravely injured, healing magic didn't work.

"Yes, we're home," Achilles who had carried the man the entire way dropped to her knee.

"Keep it together," behind, hands lit with different hues, Undrar used enhancement magic to keep the injured healthy.

"Quick, get a hold of the magical-guild," in a panic, Diane threw out orders randomly, "-we need healers, like right now," she urged, Melisa froze out of fear.

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"Let me do it," light-brown hair, a small girl rushed to the scene – her hands held a phone, "-Hello, Isorin, I came to the guild but there's a problem. Can you get a hold of any healers and send them through?" the request placed, she quickly rushed to aid Deadeye's leg.

"Bring me some bandages and medical supplies," the half of the leg had been slashed open. The artery was hit, tis was a miracle he didn't bleed out. A quick inspection later, the wound revealed a blueish barrier, one that kept him from bleeding out. The one responsible was just as injured as the rest, her hands worked, her mind focused, she shouldered the weight of the people here's life.

As well as healers, doctors of which many were alchemists were sent, it didn't take long for each guild stood a few meters apart. "We'll take it from here," the doctors came in. "Lady Clarise, what should we do?" they asked, the eyes filled with doubt and hesitance. This was a first, many of the alchemists who stood were doctors but never practiced. A bad gamble, life could be lost in a second. Carrying them to Claireville academy wasn't plausible, the only one who could help was the famed doctor Jona.

"The hospital is too far away," Clarise pointed out, for the one in the capital rested on the southern edge, "-we'll take them to the magical-guild," the orders were given, members of Swift, as well as Kniq, were transferred using stretchers.

“What happened to the rest?” Melisa asked, her face pale from fear.

“They were killed, we were ambushed,” Undrar was the last to leave. Those were the last word she said before vanishing through the doors.

“How could that have happened,” she fell to her feet, “-three of our promising and upcoming guilds were annihilated,” tears shed.

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“Keep it together,” Diane shook her shoulders violently, “-our job is to figure out what happened. But given the situation, there’s not much we can do. The survival of Swift and Kniq lays in the hand of the Alchemists,” she sighed, “-come to think of it, isn’t Staxius the leader of Kniq?”

“Yes, he is,” a ray of hope gleamed in Melisa’s eyes.

“M-master,” semi-transparent, a spirit spoke.

‘Who’s disturbing my work,’ barely conscious, Staxius chose to ignore the outside.

“Please, h-help us,” the voice begged to which he ignored.

“WAKE UP VAMPIRE,” teeth sunk deep inside his neck, the consciousness pulled out of Clarity by force.

“Avon,” eyes wide open, he stood, “-what happened to you?” the heart throbbed, nervousness and anxiety took command.

“Y-you n-need to save t-the rest, A-Achilles was c-cursed, D-Deadeyes nearly died and U-Undrar has b-been m-mortally w-wounded,” the last word muttered, the spirit disappeared.

‘This can’t be happening,’ he stood, the eyes turned blank, ‘-why now,’ he thought, ‘-why... is the curse active?’ the stance faltered to which the hand grabbed onto a chair for support. Adete stood by and watched, her eyes narrowed; curiousness whelmed her mind.

‘I don’t care,’ the left eye closed, ‘-there’s no way I can afford to lose Kniq,’ the smiles and confidence from days ago shone brightly, the memories flooded. In no way was he backing-down, the all-seeing eyes activated. “ADETE, CUT THE LIMITER,” he yelled.

“Finally,” the small lady smiled, without warning, she flew inside his eyes and vanished. A reddish aura enveloped his body, the teeth grew, the nails sharpened, the skin paler, both eyes crimson-red, a horn and wings. He unleashed the limiter that slowed the conversion to a vampire. The surge in power ripped part of the body off, to which the Death-element kicked in and healed. A battle against himself, the merging of both powers wasn’t ready yet, however, he didn’t care.

On the day Adete appeared, they made a promise. One that said if ever the time came for the pure-blood to be unleashed, Adete would not put a fight; whatever the reason, she would comply and obey his command.

“I see,” the voice monotonous and dignified, the hair untied itself, from a pony-tail, it went down to the neck. The color changed from dark-brown to silvery. ‘It hurts,’ each time one body-part failed, he sensed

the pain ten-time as much. A walking bomb, too much strength; immortal yet mortal, the one who could kill Staxius was none other than himself.

Focus heightened, the pain raged, but he fought. The eye sensed and locked onto Kniq's aura. Rather than seeing through the eyes of others, the sight extended to one above the vicinity; Dark-arts kicked in, three elements interfered with one another. Sense-personality triggered, each person he stared had their thoughts and information transferred. With a glance, the pure-blood vampire could read anyone's mind instantly. This didn't come without a price – each time it happened; part of the mana-flow broke. Like veins that carried blood throughout the body, there were known lines at specific points that carried a person's lifeforce. The moment one of those broke, the damage reflected in the individual's soul.

"We need more help," Clarise spoke to the head-chemist, "-call Claireville academy or any doctor of repute. We need someone to help out these guys, there're curses at work. This is the first I've seen this kind of injury; time is wasting." A sterilized room had been built for human experiments long ago, it now turned into a place where normal surgical practices could be done.

"Undrar... Deadeyes...Achilles...and the people who survived," tears flowed, tears of blood, "-it's the job of the leader to protect his subordinates." Teleportation activated, no incantation, nothing.

Sat in her office with a patient's file, Jona worked without paying heed. "Doctor," a charismatic voice came from behind.

"Please wait," she turned curious about who had come in.

"I need your help," someone unrecognizable stood, one scary but weirdly charming.

"W-who a-are you?" she asked, her eyes shuddered. "No time to explain," he grabbed her by the arm and teleported inside the magical guild.

"CLARISE," in the hall, the voice echoed, the girl who ran stopped.

"I'm busy," she turned.

"It's me Staxius, there's no time to explain. I've brought Doctor Jona," she stood behind, "-where are the people who have been cursed, I'll take care of it," the chemist insignia proved enough to convince her, quickly all went to work.

"What happened to you?" the little girl asked, Staxius stood outside with Jona inside working on the patients.

"Do I look hideous?" he asked, the head lowered, the body changed farther, droplets of blood fell onto the floor then changed to steam. The eyes closed, the sensitivity to aura's increased, with a single flick of the wrist, he grabbed onto their magical circuits. Filled with a black substance rather than one gold and pure, he pulled all the curses inflicted into his own self.

"..." Clarise was left speechless for the man who had an attitude she hated was in pain. One that could not be described, one that only a few had experienced, the heart throbbed.

"It's time to leave, the time has nearly run out, LEAVE OR YOU RISK INFECTING EVERYONE HERE," Adete's consciousness spoke. A release of mana later, he vanished – all the curses departed. Twelve

Rare Healing potions were handed to the little girl, ones to be used after all the wounds had been properly treated – insurance.

Huff, Puff, stood in the middle of nowhere, a place familiar, a place where he grew. Krigi of old, he stood amidst the ruins and rubble. The dust kicked up by the breeze and somber sky made it hard to see. The atmosphere was one deserted and one devoid of hope, he stood, a trip down memory lane. The broken-down streets came back to life, an illusion of the paths. The building rebuilt, the people came back, merchants talked, the people laughed, Staxius stood – reality and fantasy intertwined.

“Time has run out,” all stopped, stuck somewhere inside Clarity, Staxius watched from behind a window. One that showed his slumped body standing mindlessly inside Krigi of Old.

‘What is this,’ he punched, ‘come on WAKE UP,’ no reply. Trapped, there was nothing to be done, the hopeless punches tired out to which he fell to his knee.

A dozen black-figures with only red-eyes in which Lord Death’s pentagram burnt – appeared. He witnessed it all, “stop...” they pounced as if hungry beast, each one cannibalized his body. From legs to arms, they ripped and devoured what remained. It didn’t stop, once the body vanished – they locked eyes onto his memories, most importantly, the people he loved. First, Eira, they devoured, then Xula, hopeless and begging for life, they devoured. From there on, the mists dispersed across the continent, anyone who he remotely had affection towards was tortured and killed without a second thought.

“S-stop,” he watched, Eira and Xula fell to their knee, they hugged each other out of fear, the figures walked. The process didn’t stop, it repeated over and over again, “STOP IT,” he lashed out, scratches and punches, he did all he could to try and break out. Xula and Eira sobbed, “Staxius... Father,” they begged to no avail. Heartless and unforgiving, the mists continued on the path of destruction. One after the other, they killed without mercy.

“S-stop it,” he mumbled, tears flowed, “-don’t kill them,” the initial attempts at getting free ended in naught. ‘It’s all my fault, I should have never tried to get close to anyone,’ the mind broke, ‘-alone is how I’ll save the people I care about, there’s nothing else that can be done. Xula... Eira... everyone, I’m sorry for being weak,’ something snapped, ‘the times we’ve spent together will never be a regret,’ from woeful to emotionless, this triggered the heir’s ire.

“Don’t forget who I am,” in that instant, all which came to a stop, moved, “I’m Staxius Haggard,” whispers came from behind the walls where all his fears were played endlessly. “-the next god of death, the second most powerful entity since creation itself,” filled with determination, he gritted. A mist in the form of a skull appeared behind, “DIEEEEE,” he screamed so hard the vocal cords ripped – all the anguish released.

May the ones before I turn to dust. May they all end in ruin, may they all die without mercy. Anyone who dares go against me shall pay for I am the sole ruler of death and destruction. I command thy seal to be broken, rain down death and destroy all: Quietus.

Left in his wake, Silence...

Chapter 180: The Boy who Cried

The subtle atmosphere changed; the weather altered. From somber, the clouds intensified in color, lightning and thunder followed. The winds rattled the broken windows, everything around Krigi of old shifted – a loud resonating pulse went throughout the continent. Though barely present, the vibration continued for a few minutes. Animals all-round sensed the looming danger to which instinct took over and all in the vicinity ran.

In the middle of all the brewing chaos, the will of a single man. One who witnessed the death and torture of the one he loved: a premonition, a dream, an illusion, none was the wiser. All around, dense mana, enough to put anyone into a coma, surrounded him. 'IT BURNS,' screams and yelled, the pain in his voice – a demon unleashed. Curses and powers conflicted with one another, 'is this the day I've dreaded for so long,' agony and pain, all shot back and forth. The ears turned red then exploded, the finger-tips opened with blood gushing out.

'DAMN YOU, DEATH REAPER'S CURSE, DAMN YOU,' the eyes now bloodshot burnt, darkness, the five primary senses dulled. History repeated itself, on the day he fought with Sophie; the god-slayer was the one responsible. This time, involuntarily, the moment Staxius absorbed the other's curse, the process began again. No mana-link, nothing was there to stop it, one by one, as if adding cement onto a coffin – the harder it grew to get loose. By the second, the grave got deeper and deeper, the consciousness began to fail.

"Quietus," a single spell came to mind – one unknown, one that he dreamed long ago, one that the Death Reaper used. The spell that had the possibility to wipe out an entire planet. Trapped behind the same window, Staxius cast said spell. The wall never broke, instead, all the power focused inwards. As if a mirror, all the attempts were fired back towards his soul.

'This can't be real,' part of the face both in the real and fantasy world burnt. A reflection, Staxius stood before himself. The real one went into a self-destructing rampage, the ground around shattered, the rubbles and buildings broke. It all formed around as if a tornado, Staxius became the eye. Nothing could be done; consciousness and reality were locked. 'How did this happen,' flash images of Eira and Shanna dying ailed the mind, he had enough.

"Suppose someone who was born weak but turned strong. Suppose someone who never really cared about people grew emotions and eventually fell in love. Suppose someone who never had any clear goal nor dedication towards a craft became passionate. Suppose that someone got it all given without much effort and much help. What would happen if all that was on the verge of being taken away, all the hours of bliss, all the hours of having fun? Suppose all that was an illusion, what would happen then. Revoking all that was given; the return back to norm and boredom- how would that someone react?" a voice spoke, it went back and forth. The conscience traveled into a white room. Trapped inside a glass-cage, a voice spoke.

Unable to respond, Staxius watched close as said voice went back and forth.

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"How would you feel," no chance to react, the figure slammed itself onto the glass, "-tell me, how would you feel?" it watched, the eyes devoid of emotions. All he got was silence, "-don't be shy," it urged, "what would you do?" the eyes locked, at that moment, everything became clear.

"You're me..." Staxius spoke, the one outside continued to bang onto said prison.

"WRONG," it laughed and jumped around, "-I'm not a weakling," the tone suddenly cold and menacing. *Snap,* a mirror conjured, "-take a look," he stood behind and peaked above the frame, only the eye was visible, he acted shy.

"That's not me," he fell back, "-that can't be..." what laid in the reflection was a child. A boy with nothing in his eyes, a boy that hated everything in life. A boy who wanted to see people suffer and die; one hopeless and weak. "-I'm n-not that child a-anymore," the back hit the wall, no longer could the feet permit him from running away.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha," the figure laughed, both had the same eyes, "-you are that child. Even now, you hold back, why don't you unleash thy inner-thought. Why do we always have to act cold and stern, why do we always have to keep up appearances," the voice distorted and separated into twelve different black figures. "WHY DO WE HAVE TO BE MISERABLE," they spoke in tandem, the same ones who killed and tortured his family.

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"C-CAN'T Y-YOU LET US FREE?" the emotions varied, one sobbed while the other laughed, the figures asked, the noise was deafening.

"J-JUST WHO A-ARE YOU PEOPLE?" tears formed, the voice now of a child, the body transformed into one of a kid, Staxius stared up, "-WHY ME," he screamed and curled into a ball.

"Why do we have to suffer," the same question repeated.

"Go away..."

"Why do we have to suffer," they banged on the wall. "Just leave me alone..." the eyes closed but the cries and questions never left.

'What is happening to me, I did nothing wrong. I don't know the reason; I don't know why... I'm tired.' The extent of the damage outside grew, the tornado intensified, all were lifted in his wake, thunder and lightning set fires which were extinguished by a downpour.

"Hey vampire," a voice whispered, "-are you still alive?"

Nothing, complete silence, the boy hid, '-the outside is scary, I want to curl up and hide for all eternity. I was never strong, along the way, my mind changed – foolishness overthrew reality. Every time the real battle counted, I lost, I'm no heir to the god of death, I'm still that kid who ran away from his mother because of his shortcomings. A talented sister who always excelled at everything, I ran because I hated being near her. Everything I ever did was surpassed in less than a day by her. Talentless and normal, that's who I truly am, a weakling who hides behind a fa?ade of being competent. I'm not worthy of all the things I was bestowed with, there must have been a mistake. I'm still that same old pathetic kid, nothing ever changes...'

"WAKE UP," teeth sunk deep.

"OUCH," from curled he jumped out of anger.

“Stop with the self-pity, we don’t have time to sort out your feelings. Look outside, look through the people before you, try and see what is real. I’m Adete, the manifestation of the vampire clan’s power – the initiation has now commenced. Unleash everything at once – Staxius, you have a long battle to fight. The world outside is being destroyed, if something isn’t done, Dorchester will become a piece of memory in the next few hours. But don’t worry, if it ever becomes dangerous, I’ll erase your consciousness, the body will stay alive but you will die. Fight or give, the choice is now, earn the powers given, earn the curses, EARN AND MAKE ALL YOUR OWN.”

Sniff, “thanks Adete,” the boy who cried changed, “-I’m no longer that kid.”

“Someone has grown guts,” the figures stood menacingly, “nevertheless, you’ll never be the chosen one. Fake heir of the god of death, this power belongs the Scifer and not YOU.”

“I know,” a smile portrayed itself, “-there was a reason I ran. There was a reason I did all those things,” the childish body began to grow, “-it’s because I’m WEAK,” a black and white light dazzled the whole area.

“Fight as hard as you want, you’ll never defeat the true HEIR,” they threatened. In his palm, a sword, it slashed through everything. The glass wall cracked; the white room vanished. An army of beasts stood around in the endless nothingness, swing after swing, with a smile on the face, Staxius fought relentlessly – curses after curses, all that was unknown became known, all that was weak and feeble, destroyed. Only those worthy of being part of the vessel were allowed to remain.

The tornado grew immense, the tunnel could be seen from miles on end. They who stared towards Dorchester saw it that day, they saw what the end of the world would be like.

“The last barrier,” the wall cracked, consciousness returned to the rampaging body. “CALM DOWN,” the hands struggled to move, using what remaining strength it had, *Mana cancellation,* a single clap followed by a bolt of black-lightning. The energy charged up inside the tornado. A white light later, the threat that loomed subsided.

‘I did it,’ he fell, ‘-I fought off my insecurities and fear,’ with the face burnt and skull exposed – though it didn’t show, he smiled. The death-element kicked in, the eyes opened to see him holding onto a sword for dear life. “Daemonum Gladio,” he whispered, the blade turned to dust. ‘Thank you,’ he laid on the muddy and wet ground. The unforgiving weather turned to light and innocent showers.

“A job well done,” Adete hovered, Staxius’s body healed.

“Why does everything look so weird,” what he saw was far beyond normal.

“Congratulations,” the girl cheered and applauded.

‘Why is she so happy?’ confused, he looked around till amidst the debris, a broken mirror. The hands reached out, “who’s that?” the mirror fell and shattered.

“Don’t look at me,” Adete refused to take responsibility. What he saw through that mirror was a fading reflection of a new man. White hair, pale skin, both eyes red, symbols all over the body, “-my body changed...” A new body formed out of necessity, the death-element and all-seeing eyes combined at last. The previous body was too weak to handle all the changes, thus the outburst and self-destruction.

It had grown out of control, everything toppled-over; the body fought against the consciousness. The powers fought against its master; the reasons for what acted as the catalyst remained unknown.

'I feel lighter and stronger, there's no heavy burden on my body. Carrying all those curses before made it difficult to focus at times,' the hands clenched from open palm to fist a bit before he focused the attention onto his feet.

"I don't feel as skinny as before,' the shirt lifted revealing an eight-pack, muscles all around the body had materialized out of nowhere. From being skinny to now well-muscled, Staxius could not but smile.

"Before you fall into the realm of narcissism," Adete interrupted, "-there something you need to know." His eyes focused on her, "listen," she spoke in a serious voice, "- as you can see, the body has evolved into one more reliable than the previous vessel. This is the work of your powers becoming one, the dream you had was a test. One that the will of the death element and the all-seeing eyes performed. It might sound cheesy, but they did test the one who would inherit all the stuff that is to come. Don't get me wrong, the world is ever-changing; with this new body comes more pain than before. Those muscles aren't just for show, they are there to shoulder the weight of the future. In no way does it make you invincible, no my friend, there are still monsters who can do anything you can but better. As usual, there's no good nor wrong. Become what you want to become, make use of the power for they've accepted thee."

"Thank you Adete," the voice casual, he held out a hand to which she landed, "-if it wasn't for you back there, I'd have given up," not knowing what to do, he kissed her on the head.

"No worries, but do be careful next time, I won't always be around," she smiled.

"Well, even if you disappear, the memories I have will never vanish, it's a promise," she sat on his shoulder.

The rain felt like gentle dew onto his skin and body, with each passing second, the mud and filth of the uncertain past were washed. On that day, in the place where he grew up as if by fate, Staxius transformed and managed to let off the feeble boy who resided within the heart.

"The boy who cried..."