

Death Magic 181

Chapter 181: Behind the emotionless eyes

“Did you sense that?” sat around a good meal, Millicent spoke; the ground shook. Castle Garsley which was now the capital of Dorchester moved.

“Are we under attack?” said vibrations could be from a high-tier monster only; tis was what Adelana thought. The silver guardians, the Garnet siblings, Fenrir and Milicent sat in the throne-room. A feeling of dread slowly seeped into their core. The feeling of a monster approaching.

“I know not the reason,” Julius voiced, “-either way, we need to focus on protecting the town by any means,” the duke stood and rushed outside. The destination, the outer walls.

“Anything to report?” it took a few minutes but Julius arrived at the guard’s headquarters.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, sir,” with a salute, the soldiers spoke.

“Brother,” Autumn called out. “Not now,” he replied trying to think about what had happened.

“Look to the left,” she pointed above the wall – a faint but visible tunnel of wind that sucked and made the grey-clouds seem in a spiral.

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“That’s Krigi of Old isn’t it?” Adelana asked seeking confirmation from her sisters.

“Yes,” with half the face covered by a mask, Ayleth answered.

“A natural disaster is the last thing we need,” Alyson complained, a quick look around revealed new scaffolding and frames for yet to be built houses.

“Julius, what’s the verdict?” Millicent stood right beside; her face remained the same from all those years ago. Her age was never apparent, though now over thirty-five, she looked identical to when the lady was aged twenty.

“We should prioritize the safety of the people. Buildings can be rebuilt but people are not immortal – ask the tavern to be ready for a feast. Send news all around the capital, we can’t have people panicking for no reason. Knowing the folks, they’ll rush for the occasion. To make it more special, make the reason for such festivities as one of the Geua sister’s days of birth,” decision made, orders taken, all rushed to help in said deception.

“Fenrir and Autumn will stand guard over the wall and report if anything changes,” thus, the brewing crisis in the horizon was handled. With no guarantee that this scheme would work, Julius placed his faith on the wall the Ardanian’s built.

As expected, the people jumped on the bandwagon, all came to celebrate Lady Ayleth’s fake birthday.

“Thanks for playing the part,” sat in the study, Julius worked and got paperwork’s ready for any disasters that might come.

“No worries, my birthday is a week away, what’s the harm of not celebrating,” half a smile seen for the other was hidden.

Below, the tavern boomed with activity, the inn went in full gear, ale and food served without restraint. A few talented chefs were hired, this raised moral higher than before. The residents of this small town were blissful, a place devoid of sadness for the people ruling knew pain.

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“They sure are lively today,” the sisters sat and waited for people to come in. Millicent remained outside to welcome those who missed the news. From traveling merchants to visitors, all were permitted to join the celebrations.

“Any thoughts on that thing?” Autumn asked; both stared out towards Krigi of old.

“It’s unnatural, my instincts are telling me to run away,” she pointed upwards, “-look at the birds, all are flying this way,” from upwards, she pointed at her tail and ears, “-my body is reacting despite how far that place is.” The hairs stood, a sign of looming danger.

“I agree, that thing over there isn’t normal, we might be in a lot of trouble,” the next few minutes were stressful.

“Look,” Autumn called out, the spiral vanished, the tunnel subsided; whatever was brewing got canceled.

“Don’t get careless,” Fenrir howled out of instinct, “-sorry about that,” it took the others by shock.

“Whatever caused that tunnel can well be on its way here, we must not relax,” the eyes sharpened, the nose sniffed – Fenrir’s senses heightened.

Far, far away from the capital, stuck inside the rain, Staxius walked, the wind blew, the clothes torn, he walked. “Why don’t you teleport already?” Adete asked a good question.

“I can’t,” he sighed, “-the death-element is still recovering. Didn’t you say that getting a new body would mean changes, well magic is off the table for the next few minutes, I hope. Either way, I need to get to Rosepire as soon as possible. Kniq was defeated badly, there’s something powerful out there,” the destination now was the noble-district.

“Yes, it’s very peculiar, a demi-goddess and a hero from another world both left helpless in front of a foe we haven’t the clue to who they are,” rather than stand-still, Adete hovered around whilst speaking.

“Still, I can’t believe that magical elements and blood had their own will,” he laughed, “-I shan’t ask what would have happened if they rejected my consciousness,” unknowingly, the pure-white hair changed, the ends grew into a crimson color, one of blood and destruction. Hidden by the pouring rain, this change was one that signified the connection between the Death-element and the vampiric blood. A three-quarter of the long white and one-quarter red – in the middle it faded, the colors were rare but it looked natural.

“Finally,” Adete yelled after a few minutes of walking.

“What is it now?” he asked; her tone and eyes had the same feel to when there was something important to be revealed.

“Now that you’ve become a vampire, not necessarily pure-blood, but one that has the noble blood inside – body-transformation can be used without mana. Nightwalkers draw power from the host’s blood and not mana; this means that both powers are connected yet independent. It all means that you can use the power without magic – handy isn’t it?” she proclaimed smugly.

‘Alright, should not be that hard to figure out,’ the walking stopped, the eyes closed, focus heightened. “Got it,” wings sprouted from the back, one that resembled those of a fallen-angel, dark in color and intimidating. “Aren’t they supposed to become bat-wings like yours?” it differed from Adete.

“Not really, being a vampire doesn’t mean one has to have a resemblance to a bat. The wings are just for show, it can take on any appearance the host wants – usually. It’s a direct reflection on the subconscious. Vampires normally don’t sprout wings and fly around – it’s impractical and useless. However, some rumors say long ago, the size and appearance of a nightwalker’s wing could determine how powerful he was. In your case,” she looked, the wings went from above the shoulder down the knee. “-it’s unnecessarily big, well who cares, JUST FLY,” Adete grew tired of all the explanations.

“Fine, whatever – who cares, there are things more important than appearances,” it flapped, the force generated cracked the ground beneath – he shot up as if a bullet being fired. “Holy...” a single flap sufficed, for he now glided across the province at inhuman speeds.

“You better slow down,” a few minutes went by, Adete stood nonchalantly on his shoulder, “-do you really wish to enter the town looking like a demon?” they flew over the noble-district.

‘That’s a point well made,’ he stopped, a shockwave dispersed all across him. ‘This new body is twice if not thrice as powerful as the old one,’ they lowered mid-way between the castle and the noble-district. ‘Anyways, the promise I made with dad, the promise to never show anyone my weakness and the incompetent side will never be broken. The image of Staxius Haggard being the amazingly strong guy can never fail. The trip to Krigi of old was well worth it, the boy who cried is forever lost in the void. I’ve grown as a person and so did my body, there’s no better way to start again and tie up any loose ends.’ They landed, a secret, the past that was never told to anyone – the secret he hid from anyone and everyone. Staxius wasn’t the strong guy all thought he was, the man was nonchalant and cavalier, an act that fooled even himself – but now, it all changed. The eyes lit with the vigor of a newborn, the will to live, the will to learn and the will to adapt.

‘No-one is strong in this world. Everyone has their shortcomings, their weaknesses, and their faults, all are bound by something, tis is how manipulation comes into play. Strong people are the ones who embrace said shortcomings – a faction of individuals that now includes me,’ the eyes soon returned to neutral and relaxed.

“Autumn,” Fenrir’s ears faced towards the ground, her senses locked onto someone suspicious.

“What is it?” she rushed over, both stared down. A figure approached, said person’s hair swayed in the wind. The face hidden, a body built perfectly for battle, muscles well-toned, not too big nor too small, the ideal weight and strength.

“That guy smells like trouble,” Fenrir whispered, her cheeks twitched. The body was readied to pounce at any time.

“Calm down,” Autumn patted her back, “-for all we know, that figure might just be a lost adventurer. They didn’t notice how imposing the man looked yet, the one who walked was but a blur in the distance.

“That figure came from the Krigi of old, do you think it’s mere coincidence?” Fenrir’s suspicious nature overwhelmed Autumn’s rational thinking. “Go get Julius and Adelana, tell her to bring out the blade just in case – my instincts yell, this is bad.”

‘Castle Garsley sure is impressive,’ Staxius walked and changed path, he turned and headed for the main gate. ‘Even from this distance that wall looks unbreakable,’ a smile of relief, ‘-Dorchester’s capital, I came back earlier than expected,’ a quick chuckle later, he slowly approached the front gates.

Meanwhile, Autumn rushed inside and called forth Julius and Adelana, two of the strongest people here in the capital. The words relayed exactly as Fenrir told, never had the legendary wolf spoken in such a way about a single figure.

“Where’s that thing you warned us about?” without time-wasting, Julius used magic to rush over. Adelana followed behind with Flash-step. The gates closed behind; three people stood outside.

“If anything happens,” Julius spoke, “-close the main barrier,” a secondary door which sealed the town completely.

“As you wish brother,” stood atop the wall, Autumn watched with archers and gunners hidden behind cover.

“Staxius, we might have a small problem,” he walked closer, “-there’s people hidden on the castle walls, and those three in front are oozing with killing intent,” Adete relayed information as opposed to him personally checking.

“Is that so,” he mumbled and approached nonchalantly. The upper half of the shirt torn at the neck level, insignias and crests were displayed.

“Everyone, stay on guard and don’t attack without a reason.” Julius took command. Adelana had her great-sword sheathed on her back, the cursed-blade was ready for a fight. Fenrir was ready to transform at any second.

“No need to worry,” he raised his right hand, “-I’m here as a friend and not foe,” he shouted, they came in viewing distance.

“Sorry about this,” Julius spoke, they stood a few meters apart, “-we can’t let anyone in I’m afraid. You see,” he pointed at Krigi of old, “-earlier, someone or something altered the weather down there. Since thou came from the same direction – you must understand the dilemma we face.”

The face covered by hair, Staxius could not but wait patiently for Julius to take a more relaxed stance.

“Don’t move,” Adelana yelled for he tried to reach inside the suit-jacket.

“Seriously,” out of spite, he sighed, “-can’t you tell between an ally and foe,” he ignored her warnings and continued.

“Julius, I’m going to kill him,” she reached for the sword, her patience ran out.

“STAND DOWN,” he yelled, “-watch closely.”

The hands reached inside, took out a piece of cloth and tied the hair in a pony-tail. “Do I look familiar yet?” the voice monotonous and the gaze emotionless.

“Don’t tell me,” Julius stepped back a little, “-there’s only one person who would act that way...”

Chapter 182: Athus

“Long time no see,” a casual smile; a ray of light broke through the cloudy weather.

“Impossible,” Adelana stance faltered, she nearly tripped out of shock.

“MASTER,” without notice, Fenrir transformed and jumped.

“It’s good to see you,” rather than fall, he grabbed and hugged the beast that was just as big as a human. She didn’t transform fully, nevertheless, he embraced and close the eyes. The fluffy and comforting fur, he had missed that feeling for too long.

“What just happened?” Julius asked; the eyes open out of shock. Those two’s meeting would normally end with Staxius hitting the ground and her drowning him in saliva.

“It’s good to see you,” trapped, Fenrir changed back and jumped onto his back; an involuntary piggy-back ride. Unbothered, Staxius walked, the ground showed no sign of movement. Catching someone as big and powerful as Fenrir was bound to make the person fall back a little – in this case, the man stood as if a bolder.

“Staxius...” Adelana regained her mind and rushed over, “-are you alright?” the changes to the body became apparent.

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“There’s no way I’d have guessed that it was you...” Julius spoke in a subtle tone, “-what happened?” they wanted answers for he who stood was reborn.

“It’s nothing to be worried about,” from casual – the face returned to normal, “-there were things that had to be taken care of,” without wasting time, he walked towards the gates.

“In any case,” Julius and Adelana walked side to side, “-what brings you here?” he asked in a curious tone.

“Honestly,” he faced the duke, “-I wanted to head to Rosespire but I’m a little tired.

“Are you referring to that thing over there?” Adelana figured a guess.

“Partly my fault, I should apologize,” before he could bow, Julius jumped in, “-no need, Dorchester is thy place of birth. That area is abandoned anyways, there’s no need to worry,” with a smile, the trio accompanied Staxius inside.

“Who’s that guy?” they walked through town, the few bystanders asked. An unknown man had entered town, one that seemed powerful and menacing. One that quickly garnered their attention, seeing the Duke and Adelana with Fenrir riding on his back, most thought that the man was someone important.

“The place sure has grown big,” Staxius commented, it took a few minutes before arriving at the castle, it boomed with activity. Kids ran around, families settled on the ground as if a picnic – time now was close to five.

“Sister, look at that guy,” the kids stopped and pointed, their eyes lit with wonder – the white and red hair made him cool in the eyes of said children. As opposed to the usual feeble and plain-looking body, with the new vessel – standing out became easier. Rather than keeping the stoic face, Staxius waved and smiled, it became something he did often; almost second nature.

“I wanna be just like him when I grow up,” they joked around then went back to playing.

“Someone’s popular,” Adelana teased and punched his arms. “Holy...” her eyes opened.

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“Is everything alright?” he asked to which she quickly dodged the question. Without much trouble, they quickly got a seat vacant – Staxius ate, then slept amidst the cacophony. At first, people paid attention then the longer time went by, the more their eyes focused on the celebration at hand.

“Julius,” in the hall leading towards the throne room, Adelana pulled the duke into one of the rooms.

“What is it?” he asked, the face filled with doubt and worry.

“Are you sure that man is truly Staxius?” fear could be seen, “-I punched him earlier, the body felt as if a brick – the master I knew was skinny and inconspicuous, this guy is the opposite. The hair is changed. All that made him ordinary is almost out of the picture. The one I remember is a guy who would do anything to not stand out, there’s something wrong here.”

“I see...”

“Who stands there?” both jumped back – an uninvited voice spoke.

“No one particular,” Adete hovered, “-I’m Staxius’s helper, a pretty little butterfly,” she knelt and took a stance as if praying with both hands in front.

“Cut the theatrics; how can you prove that he’s what you claim?” the reply harsh and unworthy a lady, Adelana spoke without restraint. Julius could not but take a back seat, he watched as both talked it out.

“Tsk...tsk,” rather than explaining, she shook her head in disappointment, “-it’s sad to see that humans still use things like someone’s physical trait as identification. Can’t you see beyond and into the man’s eyes?” she flew away, “-if only you had the guts to stare him in the eye, you’d see,” the tone smug, Adelana had it coming.

“You reap what you sow,” Julius shook his head and stayed on Adete’s side.

“I don’t care if I’m wrong or not, we can’t allow someone like him to walk around town... h-he m-might...”

“He might kill us all,” Julius cut her off “-are you saying that anyone who’s remotely more powerful than us is here to end our lives?” he left in turn, “-grow up, I knew from the start that you were jealous of the man you called Master at one point. Don’t forget that I’ll always be behind Staxius no matter what,” he

stood in the doorway, “-I saw your expression when he said that he’d abdicate from Dorchester; either way, it’s none of my business,” the blond hair vanished into the dimly-lit hall.

‘That’s not it, you idiot,’ she sat, ‘-I just don’t want anyone to disturb the peace we made. Me, you, my sisters, Autumn, Fenrir, and Millicent, I don’t want someone to take it away,’ a tear shed.

“Wake up, vampire,” teeth sunk. “Stop doing that,” he came too but didn’t yell, the short nap ended. People were all oblivious for it had come for Ayleth to cut her birthday cake.

“We should probably leave,” the girl hovered and voiced, “-I did some scouting around, the people here aren’t as trusting as they appeared to be,” she warned.

“Let me do my evaluation first,” he whispered back, not wanting to always obey her words – Staxius used Sense-personality. Similar to prior in the day, a single look with the all-seeing eye was enough to see what people thought and how they felt about him or anyone else.

“Yeah, I guess your right,” hidden by the people cheering, he slipped out and headed towards the back of the castle. A place secluded without no soul around, one that faced Rosepire.

“You there, stop,” out in the corner, Adelana ran out with her sword in hand.

“I’m sorry, is this place supposed to be off-limits for I haven’t seen any sign saying else wise.”

“It’s not out of bounds,” her gaze lowered to the ground, “-but still, I’m sorry, even if I’m wrong, there’s no way I can trust you,” the stance felt hesitant, she was confused to what was happening. A mixture of emotions, he could not but stare intently.

‘Guess it’s hard to swallow,’ he sighed, “-Listen,” the voice strong and loud, “-I’m Staxius Haggard. I care not if you believe so. The reason I stopped here was for a place to rest and get some food. I’m glad to see that the tavern being free has become a tradition; almost law. It’s good to see people smiling again, castle Garsley is truly a haven for the forgotten,” the eyes stared up into the sky, dusk approached. “To avoid further confusion or conflict,” wings sprouted, “-I’ll take my leave. If there comes a time where my services are needed, go seek me out in the capital,” a single flap which shattered part of the castle, he disappeared.

‘Time to head home,’ *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* mid-way through takeoff, a portal to the magical guild opened.

“Adelana,” people ran outside, “-where Staxius?” hearing the news of his arrival, the silver-guardians came out with plates filled with cake and drinks, they wanted for him to partake in the celebrations.

“I’m sorry,” knelt with the hands caressing the damage left, she mumbled.

“Where did he go?” Ayleth walked out, the lady desperately wanted to thank the man who saved her. A letter arrived at the castle a few weeks ago, one that had details about the payment of her treatment.

“My doubt and fear forced him to leave without saying a word,” all who stood had uncertainties that were cleared thanks to Julius. Nevertheless, it was too late, the man they once called master was gone.

‘This place sure is deserted,’ he arrived near the operating room. Adventurers from Swift, the guys in charge of the lower-tier quest, sat. News about the incident had reached all who were connected with

the main-guild. Diane and Melisa were forced to spread it in hopes of discouraging anyone from venturing into that vicinity. A forest close to the border of Kreston and Oxshield, one north-east of Riverwood.

'There's no time to think about why they are here,' he walked, footsteps echoed down the hall. "Is there any news about what happened to Kniq?" the voice friendly and affectionate, he asked the grieving Porcelain-ranked teenagers.

"I don't know, sir," a boy answered, "-try asking master Isorin," to which he pointed in front, the wizard sat with Clarise passed out of exhaustion.

"Isorin," a few gentle taps on the cheeks sufficed to wake the old man.

"Who are you?" he yawned and asked.

"It's me Staxius, what's the status on Kniq," the hands placed onto the sluggish shoulders. "-Are they ok?" the grip tightened.

"Y-yes," he yelped, "-they're resting in the room in the next hallway. Before realizing what happened, the figure ran, "-who was that?" Clarise awoke and stared, a glimpse of white and red hair.

Click, 'please be okay,' the door opened, faced with three beds, he stopped. Torn out jacket resting on a coat-rack, he approached without making noise. Achilles, Undrar and Dead-eyes slept. Their faces looked in agony but the injuries seemed treated.

"We took a beating," a voice came from opposite the beds, "-the ones before you are the true heroes that saved the few people here," half of the face bandaged with an arm missing, a man spoke.

"Who might you be?" Staxius asked; the eyes wandered till a sapphire-colored necklace came in view. A tier-seven adventurer, "-isn't it common courtesy to introduce oneself before asking for another's name?" despite the injury, the man had attitude – a good sign of someone who hadn't given up yet.

"I apologize, I'm Staxius Haggard, leader of Kniq," introduction complete, he took a seat.

"I'm Athus, vice-leader of Swift," he paused, "-I know what your thinking, how can a sapphire-rank be a vice-leader?" the one eye locked onto he who sat.

"Not really," the reply unexpected, "-I was just wondering how someone would have the strength to speak after such injuries."

"The answer is quite simple; I don't feel pain. I was born with the Skill: Numb, I can't feel any physical pain. Emotionally, I'm as normal as the next guy," the breathing calmed, "-what about you, what's your story?" he asked seeing that Viola was Silver-ranked. "I was sure that the girl over there was the leader, do you outrank her?"

"Not really," he showed the weird-necklace, "-I'm silver as well, though there are gold and platinum too."

"Peculiar, very peculiar," the body leaned and relaxed. "-are you here because of what happened?"

“Yes, I came seeking answers,” they locked eyes, “-care to tell me what happened,” he faced away and stared at Kniq, “I doubt they have any answers for me,” the gaze returned to Athus. One filled with determination, he needed answers. His comrades were in bed, injured. There was no feeling of regret nor anger, tis was the way of the battlefield. Everyone understood the risk of such a job, someone had to put their lives on the line to save others. With that in mind, he sat and waited patiently, ‘-who is strong enough to take down elites with such ease?’

“You’re right,” from relaxed, the eyes closed, “-I can tell you what happened,” a quick pause later, “-this may and may not be helpful, it’s up to you to decide, Staxius.”

Chapter 183: Ogers

With a big exhale, Athus closed his eyes and began recounting the event that led to this situation.

‘Five adventuring parties, one’s unknown to each other. At the morning quest’s display, one stood out in particular, one that involved wiping out a horde of monsters. The rank assign was tier-six with a special requirement; five parties would have to work together. I don’t know the reason why, but it all started then and there. The higher-rank party, Kniq, took command of the others. All were respectful, the journey to the location took quite a while. Upon arrival, the forest, one that seemed dense was cleared – a path in the middle led straight towards an open field. For some reason, it reminded me of an arena with the trees as spectators. Very quickly, the teams were placed in formation, Swift and I stood in the back with Kniq. The other three were decoys, a plan that we all agreed. There wasn’t a doubt in our minds that victory was assured, the warriors taunted over and over again.

The first hour went by quietly, all who were specialized in long-range battle took refuge in the foliage. Afterward, goblins of low-rank rushed us, they seemed unorganized and filled with hatred – the eyes burnt with a reddened color. It was simple enough dispatching those low-tiered devils. With each strike, confidence grew, every group had an area to cover. We were in charge of the middle, the formation changed half-way through. The others covered the four cardinal points, our job was to kill anyone who got past their defenses. Horde after horde, blood-shed, but they kept on coming. Fatigue took over, just as the breathing grew erratic – wolves ran out. Some were being ridden by goblins; a dire situation to which we pulled through by Stamina-potions. In that fashion, two to three hours went by.

The nauseating sound of someone’s head getting bitten off took us by surprise. One of the recruits the others had brought was ambushed. The formation broke without us noticing, we were all over the place, that ambush was the spark that triggered our defeat. Gunshots were fired, Deadeyes did all he could to protect the rest, Achilles and Viola took charge when we all fell into the depth of uncertainty. Guilt whelmed our party, that girl who died was because our fault – the beast slipped past our defenses.

Thinking we might have had a chance, with Kniq fighting to keep us alive. We rose yet again, this all happened in seconds that felt like minutes. Doubt cleared, vigor found, adrenaline pulsing, we fought, the hordes only kept on increasing. It was hell, slash after slash, the battle raged. However skilled or talented one was, fatigue was the only thing that held back and got fighters killed. In our case, tis was no different, it felt as if we were being toyed with. In a flash of blinding light, Achilles sprinted around the edges of the field, she sliced through trees and slew all who hid in ambush. A move that was supposed to give us breathing room – but none was the wiser to what came next. Hobgoblins, a single swing sufficed to sent the girl across. Unconscious, they rushed her without paying heed to us. Obligated to help,

everyone ran and stood in the monster's path. They were as big as a two-story house, bigger than the trees, and larger – I'd have given them Tier-four ratings.

Despite this, with Avon helping in supportive magic, the giants could not be stopped. People crushed, some eaten, some getting their head torn; all that death and suffering. At that moment, the one whomst I thought was the leader of Kniq stepped in, her appearance changed to which a blur is all I remember. Crimson colored lights slashed through the attackers; they fell.

A smile could have been seen, out of the five parties of which consists of four members each, only three remained – they gave up their lives to give us a surviving chance, but we were fools. As if lightning, the moment the hobgoblins died, other beasts came from behind, ones taller and stronger – ogres. There had been rumors about those monsters, one that even higher-guilds had troubles with. It didn't take a second for one of the three remaining parties to be destroyed. Face with three of the beasts, the end came – fatigue, fear, and doubt, we all stood. Deadeyes rushed in despite being the support – he jumped in whilst trying to save me. One of the Ogre caught him and bit part of the leg; I could not stand by and watch, the man's eyes screamed of regret and wanting to live. In that instant, all became clear – I jumped in the way trying to push him away, they got my left-arm. I didn't care, my savior was saved.

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Just as my life flashed before my eyes as the club approached, Swift's leader jumped and use Iron-maiden. An imprisonment skill that did equal damage to the host. He felt possessed, thanks to him, we were saved just for a few seconds. Laid in our blood, I saw the figures of two who were worthy of the title of hero; Achilles and Viola. A high-pitch noise was the last thing I remember." The event retold, Athus's breathing grew erratic. The memories triggered a sense of fear unlike any other.

"Thanks for helping," strong hands patted his forehead to which he fell asleep.

"I find it hard to believe that goblins would work together with other monsters. The seamlessly relentless assault was a plan to tire out the fighters – that's my take on it," Adete voiced.

"I agree, the story has some inconsistencies but now we know what happened," he stood, "-even if it's a part of it," the body relaxed.

"Are we headed on an expedition then?" she was sure that he would run to find out more details.

"No, we've got something more important than chasing monsters who might not even be there," the door opened, he left. 'There's a deadline to fulfill, I can't waste time on things that are beyond my control. Even if that attack was planned out by a higher-being, I doubt this is the last time we'll hear of them,' a wise assessment, cool and composed, he walked down the hall.

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'Jona is working beyond that door,' he stopped and watched, 'none shall perish whilst that lady is here,' he continued walking.

"Wait up," footsteps scurried from said hall, a piercing voice, "-Just who are you?" Clarise stood and stared up.

"I'm Staxius," he showed the alchemist badge, "-can't a guy have a chance to change up the hairstyle?" the goal was to make people think that all these changes were done as a fashion statement. A hard lie to sell but she fondly got behind said prospect.

"That doesn't matter," she ignored the statement, "-I came searching for you earlier on. There's a task that requires your intellect," reluctant, a letter with an unknown insignia was given. "The nature of what the task is in there," without another word, she turned around and walked away.

'Things never change,' with a sigh, he teleported back to the shop.

"Best get to work," the head refocused after all that happened, the clothes torn, there was no time to rest. The machine worked double time; highly concentrated God's ale was brewed. A few hours later, at around midnight – a third of the required amount was readied. This invention from Arda performed well beyond expectation, the ability to influence the process on the mana-level, made it all the easier.

Beep, the table vibrated, a table on which his sword, Tharis, a phone, and a glove were rested. All the commodities he carried were laid out.

'I almost forgot about her,' a quick glance revealed Cake's name. 'Better pick-up.'

"Hello?" he asked rather than a greeting.

"Glad to see that the phone I gave wasn't just for show," her tone felt frustrated but expected. "-where are you right now?" she asked, just as immediately her voice changed.

"I'm at my shop, is there something the matter?"

"Yeah," she stood before a building in flame, one located outside the capital, a few hours drive to the north-west. A small town named Rotherham, a place ruled by repute merchants on the outside but controlled by the Underground on the inside. All who remained there were corrupted to which the royal-guards never had a clue.

"Care to give more details?" a fire could be heard in the background.

"Long story short, our hideout and storage facility have been destroyed. Sprinkles is truly over," the voice woeful, she could not but watch as her hard-work turned to ashes.

"I see, there's no helping it," he took charge, "-get back to the capital," to which he gave details of where the shop was located. It would take another few hours before she arrived, rather than wait, Staxius worked to get the first shipment ready.

'Whilst I'm at it, why not take a look at what Clarise gave,' the scroll opened, he completed the brewing process.

"The second task assigned to the Alchemist Staxius is a detailed examination of the following substances." [Difficulty: A-Ranked]"

Confused to what substance, he thought long and hard till it clicked. 'The substances must be the stains on the paper,' placed in the light, three spots of what looked to be a light-colored fluid were seen. Without much effort, samples were taken – it didn't take long thanks to what the engineers built.

'Three droplets of liquidized mana; interesting.' Compiled in a file, the task was complete just in time. A roar came from outside, Cake arrived; the timing could not have been any better.

"Elegant," helmet taken off, she sat on the bike and wondered.

From the top floor being lit, the ground floor came to life, the door opened, to which Staxius signaled for her to come in.

"Nice hair," she commented and entered.

"Thanks," he guided her upstairs, there was no reason to hide anything.

"May I ask what's the purpose of this place?"

"Tis a magical shop," he sat at the desk, she was free to look around. The place relatively empty aside from all the apparatuses on the central table.

"I guess you're an alchemist," she sat on a stool, one that was used to get onto higher shelves. Her outfit was one skinny and made of leather, one that looked easy to move around in.

"Before we start," he spoke, "-what is it that you want to do, what's your purpose?"

"Seeing my position, there's no getting back to the normal world. I haven't a single clue right now but I swear I'll find out who was foolish enough to mess with me," the words came out as if a raging storm, her eyes lit with tenacity, she hadn't given up yet.

"Good to see the fighting spirit hasn't gone out yet," sense-personality was used to check her innermost belief and thought. No schemes, no plan, nothing out of the ordinary, the lady burnt with passion – the passion to kill all who did her harm.

"It's safe to assume that Sprinkles has been wiped out. The men you rescued are unable to fight, it's only us remaining. Getting back repute amidst the people of other gangs is going to be hard. The fight for survival is harsher, if something displeases you, pull the trigger, that's the only rule we got. Shoot first, ask questions later," she had seen her fair share of killing. The eyes of a murderer – there were more in common than they realized.

"Nothing is lost," he voiced confidently, "-you're a strategist of fame. People are afraid, starting over isn't always a bad thing. Call it a purge – anyway, starting today, forget that Sprinkles existed. I don't care if you had attachments to your companions, they're dead," the eyes devoid of emotions, Staxius spoke without restraint, "-starting up will be hard but not impossible. We'll begin as manufacturers for god's ale," he pointed behind, "-that's the product that is meant to be delivered to Karlson later. There are more ways than one to gain influence," he smirked – she understood his intent.

"Rather than being powerful, we make ourselves essential to the organization, forge the path to being irreplaceable through alchemy; I like it," she smiled, "-a battle of wits rather than a battle of strength."

"That's right, we'll build up a strong foundation – gather members; elites, quality over quantity. Then set out on a quest to exact revenge on the gang who dared make us an enemy," two masterminds at work, their ideas and goals intertwined – tis was the birth of a new sect.

Chapter 184: Targets

“We better get ready to move,” the prior conversation ended, Staxius stood outside with Cake. The shop was closed, time was now three in the morning, it was nearly an all-nighter. Dressed with a white shirt and torn jeans, the duo made their way towards the hoodlum district.

“Sure is lively,” Staxius voiced, people were still at it with the late-night celebrations. No reply came from Cake, she followed behind and kept a close watch. Adete rested atop his head, the hair felt more comfortable than before.

“Ay, who might ya be?” a familiar voice spoke, the man worked to keep people’s drink filled. Most had flushed faces – nothing out of the ordinary.

“Hello, Timothy,” he approached the bar and spoke monotonously.

“I recognize that tattoo,” he referred to the symbol underneath the eye, “-you sure have changed, friend,” with a smirk, he knew what to do. Accompanied by Cake behind, the bartender could not but help them towards the toilet.

“Twin Jellyfish Bar,” Staxius mumbled, the secret doorway opened, “-feels like ages since I’ve been here,” they walked, purple light gave faint guidance admits the dark.

“It’s only been four to five days, let’s not get reminiscent,” she stepped forward and walked side to side, “-people are more prone to violence at this hour,” she gritted out of frustration; news of her defeat must have reached the ears of all her rivals. From hunter to prey, that fall was about to spark some people’s interest.

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“I know what your thinking,” he had a good grasp on the situation; tis was commonsense, “-if anyone pisses you off, just take them out,” telling her to kill someone so casually was beyond human. Even though she had killed before, her mind was numbed and hated every moment of it, no human with an inch of compassion could ever just blow off death as if it were a pest.

“Knocking them unconscious will do just fine,” she fired back, “-remember, Jason hates to clean up,” a quick chuckle later, the bar came in view.

“Bartender,” he grabbed the first seat available, Cake joined.

“How may I serve you today,” courteously with a cloth drying glasses, Jason approached with a smile.

“You’ve brought in new ladies,” Cake voiced, the girl was a bit on the adventurous side. For her, gender didn’t matter, anything went as long as the partner could take her tenacity.

“There’s no need to get aroused,” Staxius turned around and joked – a friendly relationship grew between them. “No need to worry,” without waiting, Cake took off to satisfy her needs.

“Quite a handful,” Jason commented.

“Yeah, she sure is lively,” both locked eyes, a drink got prepared but the stare off never broke. Jason was scarily talented at his job.

“May I ask what brings you here, are you working under Cake?” the dim lighting made recognizing the man harder, to which he assumed it was but another bodyguard.

“Come on,” the voice monotonous and soothing, “-it’s me,” a single stern glance sufficed, a second of pure-blooded killing intent.

“My apologies,” another drink got offered as recompensation.

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“It’s fine,” the finger signaled for privacy, there was business to be discussed. A nod later, Jason understood, “-please wait for me in the private room – I shall join you.” Drink in hand, Staxius walked and changed locations.

‘No other ears and eyes,’ he sat, the eyes closed – any aura which might have spied on them were sought out. The place was thoroughly scanned, *click.*

“Did you wait long?” the door closed; Jason walked in.

“Long enough for a quick scan,” he whirled around the glass, Staxius looked as scary as ever before.

“Before we proceed, I’d like to give you a tip. Most of the people around here know of Sprinkles’ recent downfall, the bosses could not care less. Though, some idiot in search of fame might try to take the head of Cake – that lady is quite a looker and has a bad past of people who want her dead. There once stood forty meat-shields protecting her life, now it’s the reverse – she stands as your shield, one weak physically but a predator when it comes to strategy and wit,” the arms crossed and eyes narrowed, Jason implied more than he let on.

“Putting her out in the open is a bad move,” Staxius leaned, “-I agree with that,” the drink finished.

“What would happen if a morsel of meat is thrown down to a pack of starved animals?” the eyes looked somber, “-the morsel would get devoured.”

“What’s the point of doing that then?” Jason impatiently asked.

“Let me finish,” he sighed and sat in a more relaxed stance, “-what if at that moment in time, a hunter stayed behind the lines and waited. Rather than going into the shadows, why not get those who wish to harm, come to us. An open declaration of war,” the eyes lit with determination, “-whoever wishes to have an express ticket to hell is welcome to try and attack,” a smirk, one of a man readied for anything.

“Good to see the high spirits,” Jason laughed, “-what’s the business talk about?”

“God’s ale is ready to be exported; tell me the location and time – the cargo will be sent without delay.”

“Moving that much stuff around will be difficult, are you sure you want to transport it all alone?” he asked, the tone confused.

“I’d rather hand it off myself, can’t afford to be careless; especially when the walls might have ears,” he meant nothing by that sentence but it sent a firm message across.

“As you wish,” a piece of paper was handed over, one that had details to when the next plane towards the main-land would take-off. “-I’d watch your back,” he whispered then left, not in a threatening way

but more of a warning. Since news about him working directly with Renaud reached the ears of some influential people – it marked him as a target.

A few minutes later, Staxius stepped out and took a seat at the bar. There, he drank till Cake stumbled out of the room with her face flushed. Her stance barely stable -“they are good,” slowly, she made her way to the table, it had been more than an hour, the passing of time didn’t look apparent for Staxius was engrossed in tasting Jason’s masterpieces.

“Took you long enough,” he added as if teasing the lady.

“I had to let loose,” a drink was ordered, “-after all that fucking mess I made, that’s the only way I know of relieving stress,” she drank.

“Sure,” uninterested, Staxius drank – the movement of people around felt strange, a subtle one. The gaze of certain individuals was placed onto her neck; a target.

“Cake...” he whispered, a few hits with the elbow sufficed to capture her attention.

“Is something the matter?” from the drunken act, she asked with the voice of someone in control. This had all been a scheme from the start, a little act to provoke anyone who might be of interest.

“Yeah,” the voice subtle, “-I can feel their intent, there’s two who wants to kill.”

Once the information was given, Cake went back to her venerable act, Staxius played the part of not being interested. He purposefully focused on Jason, thus giving an opening for anyone to abuse. Oblivious, the bartender kept on conversing.

‘That’s strange,’ the presence lowered, the killing intent subsided. ‘Our enemy is far smarter than they let on,’ the mouth spoke one thing but the mind thought another. A battle was taking place behind the scene, a battle that none realized. A bait, a fish wanting to bite but took its time, the more the bait became obvious the lesser the fish’s likelihood of biting.

“You’re being overzealous, keep it down,” at the same time, a bulb on stage broke, it took everyone by surprise.

“Not again,” Jason sighed, “that’s the third time this week,” those who danced were taken into another room.

‘Sorry for the troubles,’ the reason it broke was because of a hairpin. One Staxius got from Cake, he had to get all the eyes away from them. Turning around and giving orders to which, her attitude might change would have given a clue about the scheme.

‘Good, they didn’t notice. After that commotion, it’s unlikely that they’ll attack. The only viable option is to ambush us in the tunnel. This might be overthinking,’ he stood, ‘-if they’re following orders by a higher-up,’ he wrapped her arms around his shoulder, ‘they’ll be forced to attack.’ The duo took their time and disappeared into the darkness. ‘If we’re left alone, then we can assume that the people acting independently. There’s also the possibility that the attack might get called off, either-way there are too many variables in this scenario. The best thing is to go with the flow and stick with what is probable.’

Half-way across, he stopped, “-I didn’t take into account that the assassin might have the ability to hide his presence,” instantly, he pushed Cake away, *clang.*

“How quaint,” a voice spoke, one dignified and bearing an accent similar to Renaud, “-are you just an alchemist?” it snickered.

“Depends on my mood,” he stood unbothered by what had happened. ‘With this new vessel, everything is possible,’ that strike was stopped so fast that the brain only realized what happened after the body reacted.

“I’d be a fool to take you on right now,” from whence he came, the man retreated.

“What just happened?” Cake regained consciousness, she hit the wall too hard.

“No time to explain, we need to get out of here,” teleportation was used.

“Were we attacked?” they arrived to which she hurled.

“Good thing we teleported outside,” a casual joke as she puked her guts out. Teleportation paired with low-alcohol tolerance, a stomach-turning combination. “Long-story-short, there’s somebody after you. I’m going to guess it’s someone from the assassination sect. There’s no other lead left,” the backdoor opened.

“That is to be expected,” she finished, “-what are you going to do now?” the eyes ready to rest.

“For now, a good night of sleep is in order. Do you have somewhere to crash? I don’t mind letting you stay the night, but we’ll sleep on different floors; I’m a loyal man,” he pulled out his tongue.

“I’ll take you up on that offer, there’s no way I can return home in this state,” the decision made, Cake slept in the attic whilst Staxius pulled out a futon and slept in the lab. An eventful day came to a close – the return to the capital was one even he could not have expected. One that he didn’t regret – leaving behind the boy who cried, lessened the burden Staxius carried alone, without anyone ever knowing.

Inside the magical guild, treatment for all who were injured ended a few hours earlier. Jona returned to Claireville academy via help from the scholars, her face looked disappointed. That night, Athus could not sleep a single bit, the memories kept flooding his mind. That man wasn’t the only one suffering, all who were injured by the ogres had vivid nightmares.

Sadly, out of the seven who returned, two passed away in their dreams. Jona had her doubts about their survival. The amount of blood loss and mana exhaustion was detrimental to anything she could have performed. Even the Rare-potions provided weren’t enough, Kniq, Athus, and Heath survived. The latter being the leader of Swift, the man who risked everything to save the others.

The next day began with woeful cries, the death and near annihilation of Swift made both the leader and vice-leader angry. Their eyes burnt with pain and vengeance; the body of their comrades taken away on stretchers. Covered by a white-cloth, there was no fighting the reality of their situation. This was by far the worst defeat the main-guilds as a whole had suffered. Many talented adventurers killed; this was worse than the apparition of the masked-murderer.

Even so, teetering on the edge of despair, a phrase from Viola sufficed.

“All who died will live on in our memories; we were given a second chance at life – any sort of decision made in the heat of the moment would only bring shame to our comrades.”

Chapter 185: Grief

“What would you know about losing someone?” a boy mumbled, the eyes tired from crying, the cheeks swollen and overall stance fatigued. “Your comrades are living and breathing,” an outburst, emotion overthrew what little manners and respect he had.

“Calm down,” a hand grabbed his arm, Athus tried to quell the frustration the boy had.

“No,” he turned, tears flowed yet again, “-I don’t care for formalities. Who does she think she is?” he broke out of the grip and stomped over to Viola, anger, and sadness, he stared down with all his might.

“Don’t you think I know the pain of losing someone?” reasonable, Viola didn’t act rashly to which she spoke courteously. Adding fuel onto an already burning flame would not bring anything. “I sympathize with you, but there are people who lost their father, some their mother and some even their child. The ones in this room were given a second chance – don’t you think it’s selfish to blame thy frustration onto someone else? I know its hard, losing someone isn’t easy...” she sat and held the boy’s shoulder, “-what do you think they would say if all saw the state you’re in?” as if a mother, she pulled him close in an embrace.

“It’s not fair,” he broke down, “-big sister said that she’ll never leave... now look at her,” the grieve never stopped, he was orphaned in a matter of seconds. Tis was the same boy Staxius spoke too, the one who held hope despite the situation. Sadly, it came crashing down, all present could not but shed a tear as Viola helped the grieving boy.

The day began as normal for the people not involved. News about said incident reached the Guild master’s ears. It would be later in the day that this blunder would be publicized by reporter whomst thirsted for news and attention. Sat with the body facing the outside, Raulf worked tirelessly with other guild leaders. This situation had to be put under control – independent from the royal family; this would not affect the princess. Not directly anyway, there were many ways to alter this situation against the newly crowned queen.

“Your majesty,” rather than sitting in the throne room, Gallienne sat inside an office. Her desk filled with paper works and complaints from various companies and guilds. They wanted change, some sent heartfelt letters whilst others were more on the aggressive side. “What is it?” unwilling to focus onto another person, her tone alone gave off the feeling of not being invited.

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“YOUR MAJESTY,” the one who called didn’t back down, unafraid to take her ire, the boy stood strong and waited.

“WHAT IS IT?” she stood, the boy captured her attention, “-oh...” seeing who it was, her pen slipped onto the table.

“I have news from master Theodore and Raulf,” tis was the son of Rose, the trainee-combat butler, the only person that could speak with Gallienne without fear.

“Go on then,” she turned around and stared at the still weak sun.

“Things in the capital are changing, many factions are on the move. The reason why is unknown, Theodore has advised caution,” a quick pause later, he spoke again, “-Raulf has other news. He asks for permission to leave the castle for a day or two. Three promising adventuring party were wiped out by an unknown enemy just on the border of Oxshield. He fears that whoever is responsible might try and attack the close-by villagers.”

“You’re dismissed,” the news given, the boy bowed and left. ‘Be cautious,’ she wondered, ‘-they sure are lively this early in the game,’ she sat again, ‘-adventurers,’ a drawer opened revealing a book, one that was stolen long ago. ‘It’s been a long time, uncle,’ she stared intently, ‘-how is it that I’m the only one who remembers your identity? The amount of knowledge hidden in these pages could revive mages all together,’ it closed, ‘-adventurers are the future, time isn’t right to fight nature. I must focus on father’s goal, Hidros must unite under the same cause – who knows what might happen,’ though improbable, the queen thought about the possibility of Hidros being a target for kingdoms wanting to start a war with Iqavea. ‘Heh,’ she chuckled, “-as if that would ever happen,” the world’s peace would not be perturbed on accounts of petty misunderstanding. War was a thing that none wanted to experience again, the great-war where many mages distinguished themselves and where countries fought one another for power. A memory that many wanted gone from the surface.

Meanwhile, at the magical guild, the leftover Rare-potions was given to all. Last night’s rest without magic was a decision made by Jona. She knew that using magic this early on would prove harmful – the fighter’s mana level had to return to a stable state. The curse, one that Staxius removed without anyone noticing, had left substantial damage.

“If only they had managed to hold out till day-break,” Clarise muttered whilst giving the potions.

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“They’d have been saved,” Viola continued the silent thought process. The girl only but nodded in agreement, tough times for the guild. Out of the goodness of the citizen’s heart, spearheaded by Blades’ end, a campaign to raise money to help out the affected families started. It gained attention quickly. Adventurers from all over came out to donate copper, silver, and gold. The higher-tier guilds helped as well. Though strangers, bound by the battlefield and safety of their citizens, the protectors of Hidros united to help those in need. As a sign of respect to those who died – the guild’s activities were halted for the day. The doors stayed open for anyone who wanted to donate.

“Isn’t it unfair for the other fighters who might have died prior?” Melisa asked, the building devoid of people.

“In some way, yes, but this time it’s different. Not only were warriors killed but there were low-tier and mid-tier guilds wiped out. We lost three-emerald ranked adventurers, do you know how bad that number is?” her voice shuddered, “-not to forget the vice-leaders who were above tier-eight Steel. Those were elites, Melisa, the best of the best,” the implication slowly sunk in.

A few hours went by, Athus and Heath were moved to Claireville Academy per Raulf’s orders. The man got permission to leave the capital; he helped with the donation effort. Josiah could not but agree for Raulf was an old war-comrade. The twenty-first regiment, a band of people who wiped out enemies with jaw-breaking attacks. People who were now gone, some perished due to old age and some lost with time. Raulf and Josiah were the remainders, a piece of information that many had forgotten. This

was also the place where Tempest Haggard first made his debut as a mage after graduating. History had a weird way of interlocking people's fate.

"Are adventurers worthy of keeping us safe?" people with newspapers ran around. The time now was noon, information about what had happened spread out. The reaction was more compassionate and understanding. Those people fought and died without orders from her majesty, adventurers were heroes who kept many safe without a stable source of income. A noble profession to which the populous joined in the efforts led by Blades end.

"Who knew that alchemist could have prevented such a disaster," the magical guild cleared from the survivors – Clarise had time to breathe.

"You did a good job," Isorin complimented her efforts.

"If it wasn't for Jona and Staxius, all of this would have been for naught," the girl knew more than she let on. The curses being removed as soon as Staxius vanished wasn't mere coincidence.

"Something must have changed," she thought out loud.

"I beg your pardon?" the wizard asked to which the girl left.

After a few hours of rest, Staxius awoke. A quick check in the attic revealed that Cake was gone. Her motorbike wasn't outside the shop either. 'I didn't have time to check on Lizzie and Auic yesterday,' filled with energy, he stepped out. Mana recharged, stamina overflowing – instead of teleporting, he jogged.

"Good morning, master," a casual voice spoke.

"Guess you're alive," he smiled, the hotel came in view after a few minutes.

That night, Avon took time to recover, he fed off Staxius's mana; the spirit had to heal somehow. "All thanks to you," energetic, he clung to the master's arm when they stopped.

"Lizzie, Auic," without much effort, both were seen at the inbuilt restaurant, one located next-door to the hotel.

"Good morning, mister," Lizzie spoke, her voice skeptical. "May I ask who might you be?"

"Now, now," Avon came from behind, "-there's no need to be worried, this man is Staxius," he calmly took a seat.

"My apologies," the tattoo helped in convincing the girl – she had had quite a change of heart since going to school. Mannerism for a change, the old one would have created a scene without much care to ethics.

"Don't you have school today?" Staxius asked.

"I skipped because of the incident earlier, Melisa told us what happened. Are they ok?" her voice filled with worry, she stayed back to keep watch over the still shy Auic. People disagreed with a demi-human roaming around the halls, the gazes being sent were heartless and cold.

"I don't know," he ordered snacks and drinks, "-I did visit them yesterday. At the moment, their situation is unsure."

Avon left the conversation and spoke with Auic, the latter had been troubled with all the news going around. Names weren't mentioned but they had information about people dying after being operated on.

"I'll be frank, there's nothing that can defeat Kniq – this lost is but a stepping stone," confidence and trust, no doubt. "Thanks for taking care of Auic," he stood, "-continue working hard, vacations are next week." Recovered, Avon took charge and kept a close watch on those two.

"Morning, vampire."

"Took you long enough to wake," he headed towards the magical guild with a file in hand.

"Shut it," she lashed out, "-the amount of work I put to keep that consciousness alive is more than is worthy," a soft punch on the forehead.

Quietly, Staxius entered the guild. The assistant made haste in calling Isorin. The first task was information about how Kniq held up. From what was told, the trio was free to leave. The rare-potions were super-effective. That out of the way, a burden relieved, the next task came at hand, the task assign was completed. Clarise was called to personally evaluate his work.

"It has not even been twenty-four hours," she walked in with eyes wanting to sleep.

"I shan't waste your time," he slid across the file. "-I've got a small question to ask," the tone implying something shady had happened without him knowing.

"Ask," her eyes sharpened.

"With the tasks given, there's no way this is true," a sigh later, the face stern, "-is the Alchemist sect trying to invent mana-potions?" it took her by surprise, her eyes subconsciously looked away as if trying to evade.

"No," devoid of doubt, she spoke, "-Mana-potions is and will be a myth. There's no way we can create those. Healing potions are the extent of our possibilities."

"Not that I doubt what you say, but it's hard to swallow. Why would those two specific tasks be given to me?" he didn't back down, that subtle moment of uneasiness was proof enough.

"I think we're done here," she stood and headed for the door.

"Wait," the voice deep and frightening, her foot stopped. "You may be a genius, but still a child at heart, therefore," he turned around and stared at her back, "-there are things that are happening in the background without my knowledge," being used without knowing why made him annoyed. "The files in thy hands are faulty research papers," reluctant, she turned around.

"The ones that you need are here," a single page that detailed everything was held out, "-I don't mind handing this after the purpose is told." Her face defiantly stared away. "Guess you won't need this then," a snap with the left-hand conjured a white flame. "I'm not that talented of an alchemist after all."

Chapter 186: Raulf Serlo

“Aren’t you ashamed to blackmail a child?” visibly irritated, Clarise tried to play the victim. Her tone lowered to one of a girl who had been left without an escape, she tried pulling onto his heart.

“A child?” he laughed, “-you’re one of the top alchemists,” the paper pulled closer to the fire by the second.

“STOP,” she yelled – another one fell prey into his hand.

A sigh later, her body relaxed, her posture straightened, “-its true, we’re researching mana-potions.” Embarrassed by what happened, the face stared down.

“Why could you not have said so earlier?” confused, he didn’t care about the reason any longer.

“The Master Alchemist ordered us to keep silent – only after the prototype has been made; tis only then that we’re allowed to make it public. I’m sure you already know the implications, potions to regenerate one’s lifeforce at will. Adventurers will get reckless, people will go around using mana till its depleted without restraint,” the reasons were pretty clear, he could only but watch. The girl for some reason had doubts about the project.

“Thanks for the cooperation,” without having a chance to speak, Staxius burnt the papers before Clarise’s eyes.

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“YOU SCUMBAG,” she dashed in hope of punching the man.

“Calm down,” swiftly he got out of the way, the result ending in her jumping onto an empty seat, one comfy and soft. “The files you have are the real one, all the results in there are true,” he stepped out, “-I just wanted to toy around before I left,” with a wink, he headed out.

Inside, Clarise threw a tantrum and wailed around. There was no merit in getting that information out, but the way she acted could but pique his interests. ‘Mana potions,’ he walked down the flight of stairs and occasionally waved at people who recognized him. The tattoo on the face pretty much acted as his fingerprint.

‘A good idea overall,’ he walked out, a gust of wind blew – the street empty and lonesome. The adventuring guild a few steps ahead seemed wary. ‘Mana potions sure are a way to bring in coin, but the problem is who will provide the essence of life. Turning a substance of which had unknown properties and proved to be a person’s life – into a drink, doesn’t sit right with me,’ curiousness drew him closer to the guild. Step by step, the grieve from the recent expedition came to light.

Families and friends were all gathered; with nobody to bury or cremate. The guild built a memorial in hours. Mostly adventurers walked outside where the pillar was erected. A reminder that death always loomed, a reminder that life didn’t come cheap. Underneath a metal plate on which the names of the fallen had been engraved. Raulf stood at the front,

“All of us who’ve gathered today. We must not think of this as a goodbye – people live on in our hearts, the heroes who died courageously for our safety will always be remembered.” Short but effective, all the unrest felt by those affected were soothed. Being personally recognized by a man of repute was

more than enough. Stood behind the crowd, away from all the attention – Kniq. They stood with Melisa and Diane on either side, it felt as if restricted to move.

Not wanting to get involved yet, Staxius crossed and stood on the opposite side of the street. A place where the sun couldn't reach, a place where none would think to look. It took quite a while, people took turns offering their prayers.

"Can't help but wonder if it would have been better to pay their respects in a graveyard." The whole thing in front felt as if an act, no ounce of true sympathy. Apart from the families who cried, the people around seemed numb.

"Graveyard or not," Adete came to life, "-it doesn't matter," she was right, finding out about why they did what they did wasn't important. At the end of the day, it didn't concern him. Impervious to what followed, he waited.

One by one, the crowd diminished, slowly but surely, people left till Raulf, Melisa, Diane, and Kniq remained. By what looked to be a serious thing, Raulf spoke with strength and determination – Undrar seemed down, Achilles didn't fight back and Deadeyes was in no position of standing. By what seemed to be an outburst, Raulf walked in, Kniq followed behind reluctantly.

"Wait a minute," before the door closed, Staxius stepped out from the shadows. The sight of him sent Diane into a frenzy, she desperately tried to shut the door.

"What's the matter?" irritated, Raulf asked.

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"Nothing guild master, I'll shut the door," her forehead dripped with sweat.

"Mind if I join in this conversation?" a monotonous voice asked.

"How did you..." a gentle breeze followed by a blue mist.

"Just who might you be?" the towering figure turned around, the face annoyed and voice angry, Raulf stood as imposing as ever.

"I'm Staxius Haggard, leader of Kniq," he introduced nonchalantly.

"Master," the three let out a sigh of relief.

"Whatever, just come along already," they headed upstairs into a meeting room. The guild master stood at the head of the table, many questions about the monster's details were asked to which they replied. Staxius stood back and watch – nothing had been out of the ordinary. The man wanted to know what had brought about such changes. A cause he got behind without much convincing. The conversation changed half-way through into a questioning.

Raulf probed at a personal level – he wanted to know more about the adventurer's family, location and such.

"If I may interject," at last, after half an hour of a one-sided conversation, Staxius spoke. "Is it necessary for the guild to know where my companions reside?"

“Matter of fact, yes,” the master didn’t back down.

“And to what purpose? I thought all essential information had been sent over during the sign-up process,” a point well made, Raulf could not refute the logic. A few seconds of reflection later, he spoke yet again, “-it doesn’t matter, I’m the guild master,” showing his power before one relatively unknown and unfamed.

“I don’t wish to challenge thy authority, guild master, but the thing is,” he looked over at Undrar who seemed out of it, “-my comrades are injured and need rest. I know not the reason why you seek such information. Honestly, it would look shameful for the heroes who’ve survived an encounter with ogres to suddenly go missing isn’t it?”

“And what do you exactly mean by that?” the eyes opened wide.

“My apology, I have a habit of speaking out loud,” a courteous smile later – Raulf had to back-down.

“Thanks for your services, Knig,” he stood, “-a scouting party will be dispatched to follow up on the aftermath,” the immense presence left. With that, it concluded the ambush situation. Staxius helped the rest home; care and attention given; it would take a while for the trauma to subside.

“Why do you think he wanted that information earlier?” stood outside the hotel, Adete asked.

“Don’t know and don’t care,” the reply haste and without restraint – Staxius headed back to the guild.

“You know something, spit it out already,” pestering never stopped.

“There was nothing malicious in that man’s eye. He wanted to get a more reliable way of contacting us if trouble arose. I just wanted for him to back-off for a while and let them rest,” a vague explanation later, he arrived.

“What else do you want?” Diane asked with the usual animosity.

“Your life?” he asked implying to kill her then moved on to Melisa.

“Good to see you again,” she smiled.

“Likewise – I came to discuss the possibility of opening a guild,” the voice serious, it took a while for Melisa to gather her thoughts. “I’m sure you know that three guilds were wiped – with my party, which I remind you consists of silvers – covering for a few emeralds would not be much of a problem.”

“What is wrong with you?” Diane fired back, her face filled with disappointment, “-people died and you wish to take their place already?”

“Listen, dead people can’t fight. Either bring a necromancer and make them mindless soldiers or think about the future. I’m not that heartless, we need to think about what this means. With the hit the adventuring guild took – you can be sure that more lives will be at risk. What if an urgent request about a massacre happening pops up, one that only a silver-ranked crew could handle? Are you seriously going to contact the higher-tier guilds or dispatch Porcelains to rush to their deaths...” an argument well made, the assistants were left dumbfounded.

“What about you, guild-master?” he stared up, the man in question approached the balustrade on the higher floor – he overheard the conversation.

“Depends,” without wasting a moment, the man jumped. “I agree that we are sorely lacking manpower,” sword in hand, he approached the desk. “Nonetheless, it doesn’t mean that we’ll certify any rag-tag group of people to become guilds for the sake of it,” he glared, Staxius looked unbothered.

“I’m confident that my party has accomplished more than a few lower-tier guilds have,” he added, “-in no way am I taking credit away from them, I’m merely stating the obvious without defaming anyone.” Logical and level-headed, time and time again, Raulf was stomped by Staxius’s way with words. Any inconsistencies that might have been taken advantage of were quickly justified.

“Damn kid,” he sighed, “-you’d make a good trader that’s for sure,” the imposing figure smiled. Meanwhile, Diane and Melisa could but shudder, Raulf was a scary individual. “Still, I don’t think we can certify Kniq as a full-fledge guild yet,” he didn’t want to move, with no data on them – no decision could be made.

“I beg to differ,” he voiced, “-all prerequisites have been completed.”

“Firstly; the founder must be of a rank higher than Tier-four, Bronze. To which I present you my guild-necklace.”

“Second; the guild in question must have three members excluding the leader. Kniq is five people at the moment, with each one being powerful.”

“Third; the leader or party must have done something that is recognized by the central guild. To which I remind you of the capture of a fanatic who slain many porcelain-ranks. Also, returning alive from the recent attack and protecting whoever they could is more than enough.”

“Fourth; any endorsement though not required by other guilds will greatly boost your chance of being accepted. I’m sure that Swift will endorse us for saving them. I wish I could have been present to help others.”

“Fifth; the party in question must have at least fifty thousand gold pieces. Mere change, the money will be delivered as soon as the green-light is given.”

“Sixth; the guild must have a building to be used as their headquarters – I own a quaint shop that can be used for said purposes.” All the facts laid before the master.

“Nothing beats preparation,” he smiled, “-even so – I’m the one who gives the final approval,” the tone relaxed, Raulf didn’t stand down.

“May I ask the reasons why?” as cavalier as possible, Staxius asked.

“Simple, you weren’t present in any of those events. I’m sure the party has proven itself to be named a guild; but not the leader. A guild is represented by he who leads and not those who follow. It’s the guild leader’s job to give a clear goal and aspiration for the others to abide.” A point well made, “-Staxius, you haven’t proven yourself yet,” he fired-back.

“Is that so,” he thought, “-how about a duel?” the eyes emotionless.

“Surely you jest Staxius,” Diane laughed fanatically, “-he’s crazy,” she turned to face Melisa whomst stood as if a statue.

“Aren’t you a little overconfident?” Raulf felt insulted.

“Aren’t you a little judgmental to people when it comes to their capabilities. I may be physically weaker and less impressive as thou – however, it doesn’t nullify my prowess. Big is not always better, having strong muscles isn’t the only way to success,” the eyes looked strong, one ready to tear down any opposition.

“In honor of thy name and title, King Staxius of Arda – I humbly accept thy challenge,” he knew the hidden identity from the start. “Our duel shall take place in an hour, at the castle,” the tone polite, Raulf stepped out.

“ARE YOU INSANE?” Diane yelled.

“No,” he paused, “-I’m curious.”

Chapter 187: Protectors

‘As if by fate,’ stood outside the central guild, ‘-all that has been happening isn’t mere coincidence.’ A duel scheduled in two hours, a duel against the strongest man in Hidros. The Divine blade, protector of the royal family.

“This should be fun,” a smile, one of a person ready to fight with all his might. ‘Preparations are in order first,’ without wasting time, he teleported to the shop. There, a phone call to Cake and some contacts, “I need information about the newly built adventurers-headquarters. Now that I think of it, the first floor, given how high it is and with the immense price-tag; it doesn’t sit right. Maybe there’s another factor at play, that amount of money is possible but not wise to spend. Therefore, I need information about who built it, how it was built, and anything that may be hidden from the public. Time limit is two-hours, get to it.” Now a man of quite an influence, Staxius could throw his weight around and get whatever was needed.

The duel for his worthiness wasn’t for show, Raulf had other plans in mind. Not to mention that he used Staxius’s real title when accepting the duel – there was more at play. Adete flew around, *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* a portal remade; destination now was Arda.

“Welcome back your majesty,” he stood in the portal room, the overseer remained as composed as ever.

“Thanks,” he approached the desk, “-could you please get hold of the sage?” a nod from the lady sufficed. He walked through the doorway into the throne room, the Ardanians could see who a person was despite what their appearance might have been. A lower-version of Spirit-Sense inherited by all who were born in this province.

“You asked for me?” without a second lost, the sage materialized.

“Yes,” the face filled with determination – Staxius walked towards the throne. “I’ve got a duel scheduled; I’m afraid that this may be a turning point for Arda,” he voiced the concern but didn’t look bothered.

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“What did you do?” confused, the sage continued to ask.

“I challenged the strongest man in Hidros for a fight,” the voice proud, he walked till Xula came in view.

“Should have expected as much,” the sage sighed and stopped.

“Welcome back,” Xula spoke, Eira stood right beside.

“I’ve got news,” no thanks nothing, straight to the point – time waited for none.

“Do tell,” rather than fall into her casual demeanor, Shanna spoke as she would with anyone else.

“Your majesty,” he knelt, whether wife or not, a queen was a queen – respect was her right, “-I, Staxius Haggard, have challenged Raulf Serlo of Oxshield. A duel of honor to which I know not the conditions yet,” right hand on his chest, he stared. The aura felt tense, Eira could not believe her eyes and ears; a duel of said magnitude wasn’t a thing to be taken lightly.

“I’ve but one question,” the tone sharp and piercing, “-can you win?”

“Without a doubt,” the face confident and ready to undertake this whole ordeal.

A powerful wave that pointed at a tapestry with the people of Arda. “Be victorious,” she smiled, “-King Staxius Haggard, Protector of Arda, thou shalt represent all of Arda in thy fight. Make us proud and WIN,” the face lit with joy, Xula approved of the duel.

“Return to us victorious,” cheers came from the upper floor – many nobles were present. Those who represented races, all heard what was to happen. With that out of the way, he stood, the changes to his body appeared to the wife and child. They watched as a man evolved into one worthy of his responsibilities and titles.

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Eira tried to speak but was stopped by Xula who had tears running. “Mother?” she asked. “Worry not, tis aren’t tears of woe, but one of bliss. Remember today as the day the King of Arda took his responsibilities by heart.”

“Why did you call me here again?” the sage appeared, Staxius now stood inside the garage. “Is my uniform ready?” he looked around for things that might have come in handy.

“No idea, you best check with the engineering core,” the face filled with doubt; the master itched to ask questions.

“There’s no need to hold back,” without a single glance he knew what the old-man wanted.

“Are you sure about this duel? The fate of two-kingdom rests on both opponent’s shoulder. I’m guessing you know the implications; this isn’t just a duel to see who’s stronger, but one that might decide if our kingdoms are worth being allies or not.”

“Yes,” he replied firmly, “-as King, I must ensure that the kingdom has a prosperous future.” the conversation continued inside one of the universities. One focused on combat-oriented gear and research, offensive spells and such – he had studied under those master-mages for months.

“As I was saying,” he resumed; people all around with coats ran around and took measurements. Briefcases, countless battle-armor, and weapons laid on racks and stands. “I saw my party get beaten by monsters, a demi-goddess, and an ancient hero,” the reasons to why had happened was explained,”- there are many variables,” he paused and stared, “-this one is for certain. Monsters are getting more powerful with each passing day. Arda needs its own Adventuring guild to be able to survive. We’ve got talented warriors and spellcasters all around, youth wanting to prove themselves. However, without a place that can monitor and assign specific instructions – they are but mindless sheep to be slain. The military can only take so far, this is the reason why,” minutes went by, scholars carefully dressed the one who was due a battle.

This time, rather than a grey uniform, the color scheme was one white and red – it matched the hair. Same design but different colors, it looked more dignified and more menacing. The vampiric traits were put on display, the sharpen teeth had become obvious. Tharis and the Cursed-blade had quick maintenance. Little pills which contained healing potions were attached near the neck. Only a single touch was needed for the potions to be injected. Enhanced beyond the usual threshold – this particular suit was made specifically for the King. A project that he requested on the same day Tharis was made.

“Majesty,” one of the leaders approached, “-good luck in representing our province. News has already spread around the capital. We’ve done our best to support thy fight.”

“I’m grateful, without the assistance – there’s no way we could have made it all this way,” a smile of gratitude later, he walked out and headed towards the castle gates.

“Masterful,” a shadow spoke, it breathed down his neck

“Lord Balthazar,” Staxius called nonchalantly.

“I can see that you’ve become a full-fledged vampire,” he smiled, one shady but without malice.

“Yes, the changes are in fact subtle,” he fired back sarcastically.

“I apologize, it was supposed to only be the All-seeing eye that should have transferred. Guess there some mistakes here and there – you turned our curse into strength. The body is ready to go beyond its limits – an evolved vampire. Congratulations are in order; you’ve successfully turned into a pure-blooded nightwalker. One on par with she who was the originator – there’s more to learn. Grow and evolve the magical element and blood farther, heir to the Death Reaper, show people just how strong our protector is,” the shadow disappeared.

A sigh later, teleportation was used. Flash images of Xula and Eira standing at the castle gates soothed the soul.

An hour had gone by, *bring,* the phone came to life.

“You were right, the building is owned by Raulf and the royal family. The top floor’s high-price is to deter people from purchasing. The reason is yet to be found,”

“No need to research, it’s sufficient; good job Cake,” the phone hung.

Meanwhile, “your majesty,” a boy ran, “-i-it’s Raulf,” he panted, a few breaths later, “-he accepted a duel,” details unknown, Gallienne waited.

“Why should I be concerned?” she asked unwilling to move from the garden.

“I know not, majesty, but he wishes to explain the situation in greater detail.” Reluctantly, the queen stood and headed over the man’s office. Along the way, a familiar voice called, “-why is everyone in such a panic?”

“Aceline,” she sighed, “-did you spend the night again?” the tone casual.

“Maybe,” she yawned and walked, the Pride of Hidros had explicit permission to roam around the castle. The place was owned by her best friend, it was to be expected. “Again, why is everyone in such a panic?”

“Guess we’ll both find out,” the office came in view, one that controlled the guilds from inside the palace.

“Majesty,” all the workers instantly stopped and bowed, they each had screens in front, one that displayed various people’s physical aptitude.

“I apologize for making you walk all this way,” Raulf knelt, the tone courteous.

“Drop the formalities, care to explain why everyone is visibly shaken?” Gallienne stood tall, Aceline remained in the back as if her shadow.

“I, Raulf Serlo, Protector of the Royal-Family was challenged by the Protector of Arda.”

“I see,” she thought, “-is this a declaration of war?” the eyes narrowed doubtfully.

“No, your majesty,” he quickly removed that thought, “-tis not a declaration of war. The people of Arda haven’t done anything to harm us yet.”

“Care to explain the reason why a duel is scheduled?”

“I take full responsibility,” the head faced the ground, “-there were things said that were uncourteous, I undermined the pride of a warrior.”

“Still, why is this duel of such importance?”

“Majesty,” the head raised, “-you already know the answer...”

“...” a few breaths later, “-you aren’t fighting for the pleasure – the burden of two entire kingdoms relies on the Protectors. He who loses must bow down before the opposition, a clever way to not bring innocent in the fray. Long story short, each will fight with the honor of their cause on the line. This is a battle that will define if peace will prevail or war might start anew. He who wins will have the authority to demand anything out of the ruler and fighter. Depending on the results, an alliance could be formed or a forceful takeover.”

Each kingdom had a protector. During the ancient war, after men were unable to fight – leaders of opposite armies would fight one-on-one with their comrades' weight on their shoulders. A way to discourage any pointless slaughter, the practice forgotten yet present was a duel to the death. As time went on, the condition for winning was a show of overwhelming power and being able to restraint any who didn't wish to slay their opponent. Defeat by death or surrender didn't matter, the one who lost had to comply with any wishes the other had.

"There's no say in the matter, Protectors have the authority to accept or refuse any duel offered." Gallienne patted his head, "-return to me victorious." News about the fight reached every noble that helped rule Oxshield. Some were angry, whilst some overconfident – the royal-family had the divine-blade on their side. An arena, one hidden away from the public eye at the back of the castle. A training ground which turned into an arena for all who wished to fight to the death. One the size of those at Claireville academy. A place rarely used but maintained. Covered by trees and plants, it wasn't apparent from the castle.

Dressed in adamantite armor paired with dragon-bones, Raulf stood with his sword sheathed. Time had come for the challenger to arrive, all waited at the castle-steps.

In the distance, a rumbling approached, light reflected from a blackish shadow. Void came to a stop, "-that's Staxius," Aceline called out, it took Gallienne by surprise.

"What do you mean Staxius?" she knew about him protecting Aceline during the trip to the main continent.

Slowly, the car stopped, the door opened, he stepped out. The face and stance ready, the uniform intimidating and weapons on his belt, he approached Raulf. With a nod, the latter signaled the former to follow. The walk to the arena began – the place where all would be decided.

"Are you really Staxius?" from behind, a voice whispered.

"It's me," he replied, guards surrounded both Protectors.

Chapter 188: Vampire vs the Divine-blade

A kingdom defining moment, the long quest of starting a guild was a few steps away. Staxius and Raulf faced one another, the ground dry and dusty. A few spells were required to clear out plants and trees. The battleground now stood visible to all who may have wanted to watch from inside the castle.

Rather than staying indoors, as opposed to the visiting nobles who rushed over, Gallienne stood outside. She was to act as the witness of said battle. The aura tense, the clouds covering the sun – Protectors for each kingdom were about to lay everything on the line.

"Before we proceed," the queen spoke, "-I wish to have a fair and honorable duel – one that would make each side proud. If there are any questions, do ask the opponent and come to an agreement. The rules are to be decided by the fighters per the tradition." She sat, the Queen Mother remained in the castle, the boy she had seen so many years ago was back.

"Master Raulf," Staxius spoke, the voice monotonous, "-are there any restrictions or rules?"

“No, this duel is free – the only requirement is defeating the opponent by any means necessary,” he replied sharply – the divine-blade was a monster of a warrior. An all-out battle without restraint to weapons.

“Since the conditions have been made, both fighters get ready,” a guard acting as another witness spoke. Raulf took a peculiar stance, the sword overhead and body close to the ground, he was ready. Staxius, on the other hand, did nothing peculiar, the hand rested on the handle – a fair stance.

“There’s no holding back,” the crimson eyes lit, the face changed to neutral, concentration heightened.

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“BEGIN,” two loud explosions, each opponent rushed one another. Raulf took the initiative and used magic, the ground froze immediately. It had only been a blink, both men were out of sight – flashes of blue and red were seen. Strike after strike, no one knew what was going on.

A battle beyond human capabilities, the fight started. The usual dodging and holding back style would not have done any good. Staxius needed to fight all out, Raulf wasn’t someone who could be underestimated. Even at his speed, the divine-blade kept up, every blink felt like a death sentence. The master-swordsman was specialized in stealthy and deadly style. He could vanish without much thought – invisible to anyone, even ones blessed with spirit-sense. Laps after laps, the two never stood still, they ran around waiting for opening then charged. Nothing extraordinary had happened yet, cards were being played smartly. With god knows how many years of experience below the master’s belt, Staxius could not but feel the pressure of that man’s aura.

With the cursed-blade unsheathed, the spirits that tried to latch onto his opponent were rendered useless. The immense aura that could deter an entire platoon for the attack was nullified and overpowered by the aura of a true warrior. Getting a stable footing was hard, not only was the speed reduced but it worked in Raulf’s favor.

The situation grew disadvantageous by the second, he was where the man wanted him to be. ‘Enough,’ without thinking, the Death-element activated. Void-flames emanated from his feet; it melted the icy ground thus increasing the footing again.

‘Smart,’ Raulf thought but didn’t seem bothered. Each strike he gave was precise and targeted, each contact they made had a purpose. Staxius parried and counterattacked, it even injured the man on a few occasions, mild cuts to the cheek. Nonetheless, after each engagement – Staxius felt it, ‘-the steel-sword is about to break,’ despite being cursed, the weapon wasn’t ready to take on the best swordsman in the continent.

‘Shit,’ the rhythm changed, from running around to a full-frontal assault, Raulf took him by surprise. *Crack,* the sword broke to which an explosion of dark energy shot out. It had the face of a screaming lady begging to be freed.

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“What the hell is that?” taken by surprise, Raulf jumped back trying to reassess the situation.

“My apologies,” the face dripped with small cuts, the eyes burnt vividly. The hand held out, it seemed as if the soul were absorbed. To which after the mist vanished, he pounced, it almost took Raulf out.

Staxius changed to a closer range fighting style, with no weapons, he had to endure and continue fighting.

There was no time for thinking, with the sword gone, the mobility increased, the fighting stance more flexible, he could easily evade the divine-blade and try to get close. A few punches landed, the element of surprise helped, the armor took all the force. "Damn," forced to reassess and being in reach of the blade, Staxius jumped back.

"You were careless," Raulf didn't allow it, he leaped with a downward strike. Both in mid-air, evading was out of the question. The battle was won, in normal situations.

"Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads," the blood which dripped from the face all shot out with a flick of the wrist. Staxius could control the liquid at will, as the name described, it made threads that had different densities. Instead of blocking, it shot out to one of the trees, thus giving him a chance to move. It all happened so fast none realized what happened. Shards of ice raised; many thought the battle was over.

"That was a close one," he spoke, the crimson threads hovered above his head as if a halo.

"Impossible," the battle stopped momentarily. Raulf took a few deep breaths, "-I would not have expected this," he spoke, "-a nightwalker. Didn't your kind die out... and that blood-control, you're not some low-level fledgling, are you?" the face lit with rage.

"You're right," the hair hovered subtly, the all-seeing eye came to life. Just like the Death element controlled his mana and magic, those eyes controlled another power. One given to a pure-blooded Vampiric-lord. Blood-Arts, the ability to manipulate one's blood at will. "I've gone past the human limitation, I'm no longer one of the living – I apologize for keeping this a secret, Divine-blade; but you must understand." The halo made of blood separated and formed tiny-sharp projectiles, "-I'm the Protector of Arda, a province filled with races that are unknown to the human race. A place alienated and shunned for being different, ever since the independence – the oppression onto demi-humans has subsided. So, it's not too weird to assume that the protector of said place isn't a mere human."

"I must apologize for the sudden outburst," the battle resumed, "-in the days of old, vampires have killed and eaten our kind for generations. Having fought against them time and time again has made my blood boil," he smirked.

"Well," Staxius vanished, "-I guess you know what to expect," it came from behind, the projectile launched. *Ice-element: Ice Barrier,* deflected, the high-speed fight was but an evaluation.

"You underestimate me," a voice came from behind Staxius, "-an ice-clone?" he called, the blade ran straight through his back.

Cough, blood sprayed, he teleported but the blade went straight through the stomach. 'You can't breathe for a second with him,' just as he thought, Raulf continued his assault. He had pierced through the enchanted uniform without breaking a sweat.

"You also underestimate me," he whispered. Raulf was in mid-air with Staxius's head as the target, the mind narrowed – an opening presented itself. His eyes opened wide; a dark-crimson colored substance traveled under the ice-floor. Without warning, it broke out and pierced the right leg and left arm. Despite injured, Raulf continued his path to Staxius's head. – Tharis unholstered, *Void Flame Aspect:

Maximum Capacity,* the trigger pulled – a giant beam burst forth, one the size of two cars. The sound which echoed around was the highest-pitch screaming one could have heard, it nearly drove some people deaf.

On one side of the arena, crouch with one hand covering the stomach wound and the other holding Tharis, he waited, the Death Element activated, regeneration at twice the speed.

On the other, still standing with steam emanating from his body and armor, Raulf stood without big injuries. Moments before the trigger was pulled, he slashed forward thus separating and dispersing the beam on either side, the ground burnt with a white flame, he stood in the middle.

“Raulf Serlo,” the injuries healed, Staxius stood, “-how powerful of a monster are you?” he smiled. The blood used returned to being a halo over his head, the more blood he lost, the more powerful the arts became.

“Look who’s talking,” he laughed, “-it’s been a while since I had a worthy opponent,” both were joyful; letting loose was the best feeling and honor a man could have. With a shake of the head, “the battle isn’t over yet, King of Arda – show me what you can do,” he jumped.

“I agree,” *Blood-Arts: Orenmir, Blood Blade of the Queen,* a sword came forth, one bearing similarities to the one he bought in the capital with the blade red and a long handle. Not wanting to move, Staxius stood still, Raulf leaped – an ice-beamed shot from his leg, it tripled his velocity, *Divine-blade Technique: Moon,* the shape of a crescent, the sword swung downwards, whirlwinds spawned with devastating strength. The surroundings turned into a death trap.

The moment the blades touched, the ground cracked, a shockwave blew everything in a twelve-meter radius away, the guards who watched over the fight threw up blood. Having countered such a move without moving, it took a toll on the body – in that instant, Raulf smiled, *Divine-blade Technique: Earth,* feet steady on the floor, a horizontal slash which came faster than a blink. Instinct took over, the second strike was blocked by turning the body rather than moving the sword, it lowered the defensive strength to which Staxius got blown away.

Ultimate Divine-blade Technique: Earth, Moon, and Sun, no breathing room given – Raulf’s eyes looked emotionless – the man fought on instinct, his speed increased and overall combat capabilities from the instant Tharis was shot. He slipped into the world where impossible became possible; Clarity. Strikes in multiple directions, a thrust, and a downward slash – the swordsman used all the techniques learned in a single assault. No block nor dodging, Staxius took the beginning of the assault fully.

‘I’m not losing any longer,’ the eyes closed, wings sprouted to which a single flap later, both men broke through the castle wall and went off the hill atop which rested the castle. A giant fall was what awaited the combatants. *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* more blood which dripped were turned into the vampiric arts – it pierced Raulf’s hand and went all the way to the neck, the man was out cold. With the chest opened for all to see, Staxius bled more and more. Flying away was out of the picture, body strength depleted, *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* rather than hitting the ground at full speed – they materialized in the arena and landed with the same impact.

The speed at which Staxius flew and speared Raulf and paired with the speed of breaking the wall, would have killed anyone instantly. The icy-ground turned into a puddle of blood, Raulf was badly

injured, all that people could see was a heavy mist. “Stay with me old man,” grabbing the potions made for self-use, he injected it into his foe.

All the blood being lost turned into crystals. In turn, they were used to cover up any mortal wound the divine-blade might have sustained. For the first time, Staxius felt the need to do something, Raulf Serlo was an amazing person under which he could learn a lot. A few seconds later, the icy-cold mist melted, none realized what had happened. The healing potions worked, Raulf came to as soon as the plugged-up wounds regenerated.

The eyes opened, he gasped for air as if drowned. “What happened?” he panted, Staxius sat right beside. “I won,” he winked and healed. “I get why people call you the divine-blade,” the eyes stared at the sky, “-your technique and raw strength are unbelievable. I shudder to think how powerful you might have been in the olden days.”

“No need to flatter this old man,” he coughed, “-you’re the second to survive, Earth, Moon, and Sun,” memories flooded back.

“Who’s the first?” he asked with interest piqued.

“Your father, Tempest Haggard,” he smiled.

“Yeah, that’s something he would do,” Staxius chuckled.

The mist cleared, Gallienne walked, her footsteps echoed. Both warriors stood, “-I apologize for failing you, majesty,” the old man bowed to which she stopped and hugged. “No, you were amazing,” a tear shed – it might not have been apparent, but Raulf and her were as close as family.

The face neutral, the hair which seemed on fire, the flames in the eyes quelled. Staxius stood victorious – the wings retracted, Blood-Arts dispelled, the crystals soon turned liquid.

“Protector of Arda,” the hug ended, “-you’ve defeated our protector and the kingdom as a whole, what is it that you wish?” bound by prejudice, the queen thought that war would be the thing the man sought after.

“On behalf of my kingdom as well as the wishes of my Queen, setting our differences aside – what I wish is for a lasting peace between Arda and the Royal family. Once human and now vampire; I understand how badly the demi-humans were treated. Thus, I wish for but a thing, cooperation and to set aside our crude past. As the new queen ruling your many domains, tis in thy hands.”

Chapter 189: Peace

The battle ended; the Protectors were escorted inside. The Queen decided it would be best to discuss and continue the conversation someplace esthetically more pleasing than the aftermath of the duel. What used to be an arena was destroyed, no sign of holding back. The blood which dried, broken down walls, scorches on the earth and more – a guard sustained lasting injuries from a shockwave. Those guards weren’t weaklings to which proved just how powerful those two were.

A few minutes later, after the injuries were treated by a medic, Raulf and Staxius sat inside a room. One immense and filled with portraits and relics from the past. No apparent reason for said arrangement was given.

Being able to use Blood-arts came to a surprise to the user himself. It felt like a moment of inspiration, the blood felt alive to which all the things he could do was transferred over to the consciousness. Similar to how the new breed of adventurers unlocked and learned skills – no training was required. After a few conditions were met; depending on the person, a certain set-of-skills could be mastered. The details of each individual's limit were a mystery to themselves. Rather than focusing on the don't know, attention was placed into what kind of Arts it was.

While both Protectors waited for Gallienne to arrive, Staxius thought. He stood opposite Raulf whomst stared outside.

'Guess I'm a vampire now,' the face returned to the normal emotionless state. The mind thought, images of the fight continued to be replayed. Using every scenario, all the possibilities ended with Raulf being the winner. If it wasn't for Blood-arts kicking in, the battle would have been lost during the first frontal attack. 'The ability to manipulate the host's blood which can be used only if comes in contact with the outside world.' A vague sentence Adete whispered on the way inside. 'An ability rare and given to only night-walkers who had reached Lord status. Of which, their blood must have been pure.' Those thoughts went around, now capable of using both Mana and Blood as weapons, he effectively became a killing machine. The thought of being able to use his blood reflected in a smile – he was happy.

"Gentlemen," the door opened with the aid of guards, the Queen entered with a stern face.

"Majesty," both stood and bowed.

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"Now then," she sat, the room devoid and secretive – the conversation would only concern that trio, "-I must congratulate you on defeating the strongest swordsman in Hidros," she spoke grudgingly, a sour taste of defeat.

No reply apart from a nod, the aura tense and visages troubled; Staxius studied their mannerism.

"Queen Gallienne," Staxius spoke out.

"Yes?" it took her by surprise.

"Before we begin, can I ask a question?" the gaze piercing, it could not but intimidate her.

"Sure," she remained composed.

"Being newly crowned, what are your aspirations and dreams about this continent of ours. What is it that you wish, depending on thy answer – I'll exert my authority as the winner," a tough question; one that carried the weight of the continent.

"I must admit," she sighed, "-I've done a lot of things in the past. One fouler than the other, in no way, am I a virtuous lady," the eyes shone with sincerity. "Despite my past, with the death of King Blaine, my eyes were opened, my ways had always been trouble onto everyone around. Many people came into my life, they slowly changed the less than attractive personality into one fit of someone who can atone for her sin," the gaze never backed-down- she stared Staxius with resolve.

"I apologize for what I did so many years ago," her head bowed, "-I realized that my fear about you was baseless. From being shunned as a lust-crazed fiend to cursing thee -my prejudice and action are not

worthy of being forgiven,” all the while she spoke, Staxius used Dark-arts, all the things said were truthful. “Therefore, do what is needed to compensate for my actions; as Gallienne and not the Queen. Seek retribution on the girl who did wrong and not the kingdom as a whole, please.”

“Queen Gallienne,” he spoke, “-the past is but the past, thinking about what is done isn’t the way forward. In no way am I going to forgive with words; what I need is actions. However, that can come on a later date. I’m here as the Protector and King of Arda. You’re here as the Queen, let’s not bring things of the past into this conversation,” the voice friendly and courteous, he didn’t care about what happened.

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“...” the reply came as shock, it rendered her speechless.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” he urged.

A quick shake of the head later, she returned to her senses. “As queen, there’s but one thing I wish; that is for our kingdom to become whole again. Not via intimidation nor war; through cooperation. Each province will have its autonomy but we’ll work as one. I’m sure the news about monsters growing stronger each day has reached your ears. There are more things at play outside our continent. The world is a big place – with continents far bigger and more powerful than us waiting to pounce. The fear of impending disaster looms overhead constantly. From the visit to the main continent, you must have realized how far behind we are in terms of technology. Rather than grow separately, why not work as one and grow together. This is what I want, and this was what the previous monarch wanted as well. The Unity of Hidros,” her goals and aspiration placed on the table; Staxius thought.

“I’m not opposed to the idea,” he added. Her face lit gently, “-though what you ask is improbable,” the mind wandered.

“As King, there are much I must consider,” he voiced, “-our people have been oppressed and still are being oppressed by humans,” the eyes stern, “for a change to happen, one must be radical,” the voice confident. “Thus, what I want from the Kingdom of Hidros is a peace-treaty; one everlasting and one that binds our countries into a friendly relation,” he smiled, “-you wanted to have a chance to grow with others right?” he stood, *snap,* a portal manifested.

“What are you doing?” confused, Raulf voice strongly.

“Queen Shanna Islegust,” he voiced, green-hair and beauty exceeding reality, she stepped through.

“Greetings Queen Gallienne,” she smiled.

“Greetings Queen Shanna,” her eyes opened, she was more confused by her visit than anything else.

“I apologize,” Staxius spoke softly, “-but here’s the chance at convincing the ruler of Arda about how strongly you feel. This is what I seek, as the winner of the duel – I want Queen Gallienne to speak with Queen Shanna. All the tools are at your disposal, I shall leave you both to it,” a hand gesture later, Raulf followed.

“I apologize for my husband’s behavior,” Shanna smiled.

“There’s no need for such a thing, I should be thanking him instead for this opportunity,” to which, the conversation began. It wasn’t right to decide peace from the get-go, there had conditions and changes to be negotiated. With lesser knowledge than Xula, he smartly used the reward. What happened next laid in the queen’s hand. Under normal circumstances, this would have been the farthest thing one could have thought.

“What is it that you wish?” Raulf asked; both stood outside for the garden was located close to the room. The wind blew gently, the sun shone.

“No idea,” he answered, “-it all depends on what happens in that meeting. I did what I could to lay down the groundwork. This is a first where I went into battle without thinking about the future; I guess it turned out in my favor,” they sat.

“You sure are an enigma,” Raulf chuckled, “-still, there’s another wish due, ask what you want from me.”

“An adventuring headquarters,”

“Should be easy enough,” the guild-master smiled.

“The top-floor in the newly built headquarters,” the eyes serious and unfaltering, Staxius watched. “You and the queen own said building; it should be easy.”

“...” lost for words, Raulf stared off into the distance, “ha-ha,” laughter burst out. “You’re worthy,” he smiled, “-you’ve proven yourself both in strength and wit – consider it yours and consider the guild registered with no fee.”

It was done, after weeks and months, the connections made, the titles acquired all helped. Staxius finally opened a guild, one that was yet to be decided for paper-work were due. On top of that; he acquired the first floor – a sign of power, one that remained above all the other guilds, above the top-guilds.

‘I did it,’ he smiled, ‘-after all this time,’ the body relaxed, the quest complete.

Meanwhile, minutes turned into hours, the conversation continued.

“It all comes down to this, what I wish for is peace. To compensate for the suffering endured by the demi-humans, I shall do what is under my power to redeem their faith and trust.”

“I’d be lying if I said that there wasn’t a lingering feeling of hate towards Hidros. Nevertheless, the King pathed the way for us to be allies – I shan’t jeopardize the future generations on emotions.”

“To a fruitful future,” Gallienne stood,

“To one filled with bliss and prosperity,” Shanna did the same, it ended. The decision was made. Staxius entered at the perfect time.

“King of Arda, I must thank you wholeheartedly for being considerate of my feelings and the wishes of my late-father, again, thank you,” she bowed.

“A friend of Aceline must not be such a bad person, there isn’t a need to apologize nor thanks,” he added in hopes of calming her troubled mind. “Judging by the facial expressions, did the talk end smoothly?”

“Yes,” Shanna spoke, “-each kingdom had their differences and differing mindsets but the same goal. One of peace and unity. Starting next year, after preparations have been done; we decided that embassies would be opened in both our capitals. The ambassadors will be decided on another date. Trade routes and free access will be given to Oxshield. To one condition, they will have to pass through Dorchester first. A trading town will be built on the outskirts of our province, the Ardanian hate humans but that doesn’t mean we can’t get along. It will be a slow process,” she stood, “-Arda and Oxshield are officially allies,” with a smile – she walked out.

“Who would have thought,” he mumbled, “-allies,” the eyes neutral. “Guess my business is done here,” the door opened, “-your majesty,” before leaving, “-don’t apologize and beg for forgiveness. It’s a sign of weakness, rather, earn said forgiveness,” a word of advice.

‘Going with the flow and not planning,’ Void started, ‘-what a weird way of life,’ the mind focused, ‘-papers will be handed over tomorrow.’ The time now was four, the plane would take-off at six, God’s ale had to be delivered. The castle gates opened, Staxius drove out; the first time he felt compelled to save a foe.

“Good job out there,” Adete flew from outside the pocket.

“Where have you been?” he asked, forgetting the time she whispered inside the castle.

“Watching how a new vampire fought,” she added casually, “-I’m impressed. Utilizing Blood-arts as if it was second-nature, welcome to the group of elites.”

The day of misunderstanding between Kingdoms resolved, the day where the impossible turned into reality. Staxius took a gamble, one of bringing Shanna into Oxshield. He didn’t know what she thought, that conversation might have turned into a declaration of war. Nevertheless, Gallienne held true to her new ideals – a faint ray of unification laid in the distance. This process would take years, tis was but a step towards climbing that mountain.

What it all meant was just that Arda’s borders would be opened to a few traders from Oxshield. All remain normal, the embassy was where things would start. A thought left for next year.

Having fought earlier, Staxius’s day was yet from over. Cake waited patiently at the shop; it was time to export the first batch of God’s ale. “You’re late,” she pointed out.

“No need to be prickly, I just fought Raulf,” the head shook in disappointment, “-give me a break,” the door opened. He was late by thirty minutes.

“Are we going to load these boxes in the car?”

“No,” he handed over a note, “-go to that location and wait. Call if when they’re ready to transfer the merchandise. Be careful and try to not stand out. Jason should be on the scene already – speak to him only and no one else, understand?” the voice stern, Cake understood and left.

Chapter 190: Kniq’s founding

As ordered, the motorbike sped along the street leaving Staxius alone to prepare. Tharis sustained damage from going all out during the battle earlier. One-shot that broke the barrel, the amount of mana used was beyond the gun's limit. Nothing difficult to fix, he'd have to wait till tomorrow for the ability to head out again.

It didn't seem obvious, mana capacity was used thoroughly throughout the day. Transferring the queen back and forth took a toll. Around a quarter was left, it regenerated but slowly. The delivery was what came next – a short rest was in order.

"Raulf sure is a beast," the preparations were complete. A dozen boxes of flasks filled with highly concentrated God's ale stood on the whiteish table.

"If you say so," Adete replied.

"Well, a win is a win, I did my job. It's time to move onto another task – convincing the Order to allow Arda have its central guild won't be tough. Meeting my sister was lucky," he thought out loud – minutes turned to hours. The consciousness faded into the world of dreams, a quick nap.

Beep, the phone came to life, it danced and shook the table.

"Are you there?" Staxius asked to her location.

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"Yes," the reply short and easy.

"Where's Jason?"

"In front,"

"Alright, give me a few minutes," the phone hung.

"Are you sure Staxius will come with the cargo?" Skeptical, Jason stood and faced a plane. The airfield was the same used by others – a private jet.

"Honestly," she sighed and stared, "-I don't know," the jet's engine calmed. Cargoes of other natures were loaded. Weapons and merchandise only accessed in Hidros.

"Did you wait long?" in a blue mist, Staxius manifested.

"Holy shit," confused, Jason and Cake pulled out a gun, they were taken by surprise. The hoodlums around took notice and pointed their rifles, the screams were loud.

"Calm down," he spoke monotonously.

"You scared the living hell out of me," Jason sighed, the guns lowered. "Where's the cargo?" he asked.

"Right over..." he paused, "-here," a snap later, boxes filled with flask teleported from the shop.

"Here," a sample was thrown, "-dilute it before testing; I'll carry them inside," the delivery went on without delay nor incident. All were happy, the business could continue as usual – the amount sent remained a mystery.

“That’s it for today,” Jason yelled, “-the delivery was a success, return to thy bosses,” a collaboration of gangs to deter any sudden uprise. They were here to watch for intruders and themselves.

“Staxius,” Jason called, “-the money will be delivered as soon as the big boss approves,” a soothing smile later, “-good job,” the motorbike started up. Cake rode in front.

“Take me home,” he asked in a jestful manner, it sounded like a jingle. “My pleasure,” it kicked into action and rushed for the capital. The day ended; it would be another few hours till Staxius arrived at the shop. Cake decided to stay at her nephew’s place, the little guy was a reporter and had a large apartment inside Rosespire.

Night replaced by day; it all began with a few knocks on the door early morning.

“Who is it?” unwilling to answer, he spoke through the circular window up top.

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“Open up, it’s us,” Avon shouted back, the whole gang was here. Force to wake, Staxius headed downstairs.

“Morning, master,” the door opened, everyone walked, including the still recovering Deadeyes.

“Morning everyone,” he wiped his eyes, they all came for the first time – the shop was changed completely.

“This place sure has changed,” Undrar pointed out – her vigor returned.

“Yes, it’s esthetically pleasing,” Achilles commented, footsteps scurried and took a seat in the lab.

“This is quite the surprise visit,” the door closed, Staxius followed behind.

“Yes, we heard from Diane that Raulf was defeated,” Viola added, “-they requested us to come and fetch you,” she explained the reason for the visit.

“I see,” he yawned and scoured around for something.

“Knig might have been bested once, but we’ll stand strong again,” Achilles’ determination never failed. Auic and Lizzie were back at the hotel; only the adventuring party came.

“I like the spirit,” he walked over to Deadeyes, *Rare Scroll: Healing Magic.* The body healed, a green light came from the injury, the one that made it impossible to pursue combat.

“There’s a thing we need to discuss,” the scroll finished its job – Staxius stood, all sat around on stools. “I realize that the prior incident came as a shock,” deep breath in, the voice changed from casual to serious. “All who wish to go out and live a normal and peaceful life, please set out the room. Tis the only time I’m giving this offer, if you wish to leave, then now is the time. I won’t reprimand anyone,” silence, none wanted to run-away.

“Good,” he sat down, “-starting today, the party will be officially recognized as a guild. Our headquarters will be based somewhere special. This means that we’ll have the possibility of recruits wanting to join us for training or go out on quests. It comes with the territory; guilds often assign themselves with a business to make more revenue. In our case, we’ll be a fighter’s guild that can provide magical

equipment. Our journey starts now, Viola will be in charge of the fighting aspect; her rank is Silver, which shouldn't cause a problem and I'll be in charge of the equipment side of things. I know this is asking a lot – expect a lot of tough fights to come. Many battles looms over the horizon – lives might be lost. Consider these the risk of being in this guild.”

“Hell yeah,” Deadeyes yelled out of reflex, the other joined in.

“Avon will take care of Auic as usual. Lizzie will continue school as normal,” with that out of the way, dressed in a white shirt and jeans – Staxius setoff to fill out paperwork. A day had gone by, the grief experience yesterday was all but gone. The place echoed with noise and cacophony, they all looked ready to undertake anything.

“How's it going Achilles,” some adventurers approached, all were familiar with Kniq at this point. “Viola, could you please explain how this spell works?” the party was popular. “Deadeyes, won't you join us already?” guys with guns, marksman, wanted to recruit him

“Avon,” a party composed of cute girls yelled, “-join us please,” their eyes held the same amount of sparkles as the boy did. “Heya ladies,” he quickly headed over.

‘I can't believe that Kniq grew famous,’ he watched with a feeling of pride. Everyone interacted, people still boasted but shared memories.

“Over here,” Melisa called, it was nearly time for quests to be displayed.

“Morning,” he greeted, Diane's eyes focused on the work at hand.

“Head to the meeting room upstairs,” her fingers pointed upwards.

“Alright,” without much time wasted, he walked up the stairs. The noticeboard flashed with quests and the noise grew.

“Always a lively bunch, aren't they?” as soon as the door opened, a deep, familiar voice spoke.

“Guild master,”

“Morning Staxius,” Raulf smiled.

“I'm guessing this is about the guild opening?” he figured as much.

“Yes, and this,” a card with number one written on it. The ownership to the first floor of the new guild-headquarters – one made for independent guilds. A few minutes went by, details were filled out, signatures and other verifications taken, Raulf personally compiled the files.

“May I ask a question?” Staxius voiced.

“Go ahead,”

“How tall is that building and does it have a name?”

“45 floors; the tallest in Hidros. The name is Rosenvan. You'll see it soon enough. Have you decided on an emblem and name yet?”

“Yes, the name will stay as Kniq. The emblem will be,” he took a piece of paper and drew, “-a pair of wings, one red, while the other white. Not too large but compact,” it was drawn elegantly. An emblem welcoming and friendly.

“Good choice,” the final stamp, “-from today forth, Kniq is officially recognized as a Guild.” Both shook hands, “-good luck in the future. There are already a few independent guilds throughout the kingdom. From fighters to traders, the way to the top isn’t easy,” he stood, “-feel free to go visit the Kniq’s headquarters. Emblems and patches will be delivered tomorrow. Do with it as you wish, there’s no rent nor fee – Guild Leader Staxius Haggard, this is a good opportunity. Neither of this is a favor – you fought for this right and were awarded what is due, I’ll wait patiently to see what sort of quest Kniq accomplishes.”

Instantly, the guild cards updated, rather than saying the user’s name and rank – it had a new line burnt inside. [Member of Kniq] for everyone inside the party and [Guild Leader] on Staxius’s card.

‘Guess a new journey begins,’ he climbed down to be ambushed. “MASTER,” everyone rushed for an embrace, “-congratulations on starting our guild,” they cheered. Happiness overwhelmed, the goal all worked towards was accomplished. This was a team effort, Staxius could but smile and pat their heads.

“Look at them,” the others smiled in turn, “-that’s the face of a newly formed guild,” all who stood in that room had experienced the same emotions. Tis was a thing worthy of celebrations.

“Where’s our headquarters located?” Avon asked.

“Is it the shop?” Achilles figured a guess.

“You’ll see,” he dodged questions and stepped out. A few minutes of walk later, they entered the business district, one close to the main-guild. The feel changed substantially, it felt as if the place owned and ruled over by nobles. Each building was expensive and radiated with flashiness.

“You must have taken a wrong turn,” Deadeyes felt intimidated.

“Nope,” he arrived in front of a gigantic building, it stretched onto the heavens.

“Don’t tell me,” Viola grabbed his shirt, “-did you buy it?” her eyes narrowed with doubt. Heavily armored and good-looking warriors stepped out, their gear was worth over thousands of gold.

“Just follow and don’t make a sound,” a pathway made of carved stone, trees and flowers which gave the feeling of home and bliss. The glass door opened, “-greetings, how may we serve you today?” a receptionist stood in the front. Behind rested trophies and awards by other guilds, her face smiled but eyes doubtful.

“Greetings,” the tone changed to one formal and dignified, “-we’re a new guild named Kniq,” a quick pause later, the lady looked confused. “-Raulf must have informed you about us taking the first floor of the establishment,” he showed the necessary proof including an access pass.

Her movements seemed erratic, from checking his face to companions and back to the papers, the mind blown by what happened. “I s-see,” she voiced softly, “-please take the elevator on the right,” she pointed, Kniq left.

“Who were they?” the other receptionist asked.

“An adventuring guild who was granted permanent access to the top floor,” she pointed at her screen, Kniq’s stood atop the hierarchy. “You can be sure the other guilds aren’t going to take this easily,” the other lady chuckled.

“Staxius...” Viola urged; the elevator headed up.

“I didn’t buy it,” he sighed, “-I defeated the guild-master and gained this as a reward.”

“The divine-blade...” Deadeyes muttered.

“YOU’RE CRAZY,” Viola grabbed him by the neck. The face remained monotonous, the eyes opened wide, he pulled out a grimace. In the end, she gave up, the elevator arrived. The entire floor was theirs. After the elevator opened, another door came, one black and metallic, the card slid in, “-Voila,” he proclaimed, it opened. Immense and filled with open space and empty rooms. A hallway led straight to a large window, one that overlooked Rosespire, it felt as if flying.

Close left to the end, an office with, [Guild-Leader] written on the door. The left side held three-rooms while the opposite side held four, they were smaller but still large. Most of the place empty, only the guild leader’s room was furnished.

“Good luck getting accommodated here, despite how high we are the sheer size of this place puts our shop to shame,” Viola added in astonishment.

“Welcome to Kniq,” he sat, the rest stood in the office.

“Ha-ha,” they laughed.

“The planning will be done soon enough,” he stood and stepped out, “-the elevator is far too cumbersome for easy movement. I’ll convert one of the rooms into one filled with portals which will link our buildings together. There’s no point hiding my abilities,” they all stared out the hall’s window.

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