

## Death Magic 271

### Chapter 271: Before the Finals

Faced against unforeseen events, due to circumstances, Gallienne, Staxius, and the bodyguards headed to the mansion. There, settled in the locked bar, drinks were served, the one volunteered to mount the counter, Theodore. He knew how to make drinks.

"The place sure has changed, " commented Gallienne on the way in.

"Credits to my housemates," he voiced without much interest.

"Shall we discuss the fate of this country?" the conversation turned serious. With a few drinks and cigar lit, opposite one another, A Queen and King.

"Let's start with stating the obvious," to which he went into greater details of what had been gathered. "The events leading up to our current situation have been planned for months. When you mentioned the existence of another heir, the gears clicked. So far, I've got a basic idea of what is happening, and I assume that you do. Currently, I've got people patrolling the streets in case of all this being a massive decoy. Can never be too careful," a sip and peer towards Gallienne revealed a focused face. One ready to go to battle. "Now then, based on my thoughts, I think the Goldbergs are responsible. Not just that, but I think there's another group of people pulling the strings. It's tough to think of them being able to scheme such a plan. There's almost no indication, no evidence nor what could happen next. I thought that it was chaos they were after, then that all crumbled. Then I thought of a plot of assassination, even that was foiled. What I'm left with is this, they're planning to overthrow the current monarchy. You've had thine doubts from the beginning, no need to act any longer. The worries were ever-present; though bound by the dying words of thine father, you focused yourself into accepting things as they were. Admirable but foolish. Even so, I think that the way you ruled is nice, I enjoyed seeing the heartless queen grow compassionate. It made a big impression, to which I think the populous agrees," he paused to breathe.

"Before you start," she interjected, "-you mentioned something about people patrolling the streets, care to elaborate?" it piqued her interest.

"I'd rather keep that secret," he stared with shady eyes, "-you've done deals with the devils, and these are far worse than demons," a mild warning for her to forgo any urge of curiosity.

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"As you wish," another drink was ordered.

"Back to what I was saying. There's another organization, maybe a province, or an underground group. Hard as it may, I know who killed my daughter, tis was members of Snow. Which makes me believe that there's a bigger plot. Fondly enough, the apostle jumped into mind earlier, for some reason, you announcing her presence cause me to pause and ask. I've personally experienced this; Kreston isn't that virtuous. Part of me thinks that they're responsible. Though mere assumptions, I think you provoking them might have a tie in all this. Not to forget, the war between Kreston and Dorchester was passed off as a holy-crusade against Sten's wife."

"What you say may be right," her head bowed in embarrassment, "-you might even say that I was involved in that war. On a personal level, that era was different, people viewed me as a monster – and I loved it. If the speculations are true and Kreston is involved, there's no way to know. Unless another organization is working on their behalf; I'm afraid that it's impossible. What we do going forward is the issue at hand."

"I agree," cigar in hand, "-tis was but a summary," a puff later, the dim room grew more ominous. "A plan to ensnare and turn it to our favor," a bold statement.

"Using their plans against them?" she smirked, "-I'd like to do that," her gaze wandered to the doorway, "-but I'm afraid that they've been secretive so far."

"I agree," relaxed, calmly enjoyed the drinks being made, "-a coup d'état."

"In case they do success and pull the throne from under my feet, I doubt the people will stand by and watch. Rosespire is essential for the survival of Hidros, I'm sure that all the inhabitants here know said fact. Unjust as it might seem, it's the way of life. Therefore, unless I'm forcefully removed under a different pretext other than my death – in no way will that growing spark catch fire."

'She's got a good point, how do we change this around, how do we get the upper hand. So far, the advantage they have is that of her Blood-line, if that wasn't the issue, her attempts would have her named as traitor to the crown...Eira,' he mumbled.

"That might work," her glass emptied, "-I'm sure you were thinking of this. If I had a child, the weak succession wouldn't be a problem. Goldberg's claim would get farther back."

"It's the advantage we need," a gesture brought forth more drinks, "-if Eira is announced as thine daughter, one who has been hiding in exile in fear of her life – then the populous and nobles alike would bow down," taking a puff, the stare turned into a glare, "-it doesn't hide the fact that she's the princess of Arda."

"I knew it'd come down to this," she sighed, "-listen..." had enough, she tried to stand.

"-No wait," he stopped her from growing impatient, "-maybe there's another way. Who says that we need to speak the truth," he smirked, "I've got an idea – tomorrow will be a fun day, just wait. If it doesn't go to plan, then it's doomed, you'll be forced to kill any who stands in thine way, rebuilding on a pile of corpse, what do you say?"

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"Fire with fire doesn't seem overly complicated and is random – I think it's going to work. If not, we can capitalize on the effect that it will bring."

"Good," they stood, "-the end of the finals will also be a defining moment for the continent," he said with a nonchalant voice. To which, they teleported back to Claireville, only the queen knew of a plan he had concocted.

"Where have you been?" asked Xula in the company of Undrar and the others.

"Had something to talk about," sat in a lovely restaurant out in town; everyone he knew had dinner. Including the people from Dorchester, with Adelana's not so inviting face, arm locked with Xula, he walked towards a seat further back – an area reserved for people of importance.

"Master," called Emma,

"Are you ok?" asked Emmy, still shaken from the passing of a family member, Kniq were reluctant to approach their guild master.

"Yes," he smiled, 'there's no reason to make them worry over my state of being. It will be selfish, I rather bear everything,' to which, the tone returned to one somewhat friendlier.

"You had us worried," said Deadeyes with flushed cheeks, around him were Avon and Achilles – each bearing the same fate.

"The party began faster than I expected," a semi-serious statement that got a chuckle out of Auic.

"Still bad at telling jokes," she laughed.

"Don't mind them," interjected Undrar, "-I'm glad Queen Shanna is here. I've no clue on how to persuade brother from going off onto a needless killing spree. Thanks for everything, I'm grateful," for the first time, the demi-goddess bowed.

"There's no need for that," with haste, she stopped the bow and turned it into an embrace, "-you're all my family as far as I'm concerned. I see the love and respect you all have towards one another, tis a thing to be proud," her charisma never failed.

\*Get the men ready. There's a plan that needs to be put into action as soon as possible. Get it done however you can, I need pictures, videos, witness reports, fake them all, I care not, buy witnesses if needed. Those are the fundamentals needed for tomorrow's plan. Blackmail the nobles if needed, but don't let it be obvious – we're fighting an invisible enemy. Good luck, Strategist,\* a message sent when they were at Rosespire.

'Talk about not pulling punches,' displayed in greater detail, the plan for tomorrow. 'You might not give yourself credit, boss,' she smiled, '-but this scheme is far more complicated than is let onto. Time to work,' to which, using their special channel and blackout as cover, the gears kicked into motion. 'You'll fully realize how dangerous the Dark-guilds can be.'

"You seem spaced out, is something the matter?" asked Avon.

"Not really," he stood, "-I'll go pay a visit to a friend." Engaged with one another in conversation, the girls took to Xula, similar to how the Silver-guardian took to her. Seated differently, in another room, the old party had dinner in silence.

"Depressive," mumbled, a figure voiced monotonously.

"Mind your god damn business," a not so inviting response from Millicent.

"Aren't you passed the age of getting periods?" again, the voice spoke or rather, mocked they who sat.

"Leave her alone," Julius stood and turned, "-oh..." the would-be fit of rage halted.

“Hey,” staring him, an old friend with white hair ending in crimson. Emotionless ruby-colored eyes, facial features close to those of a girl with no facial hair. The lips seemed discolored, the skin, paler than usual – an ungodly white. The outfit, an exquisite and expensive-looking suit with Ardanian craftsmanship. Buttons in which held dark purple Alexandrite. An ore deemed as expensive as diamonds depending on the quality, made an impression. Not only were the sleeve buttons expensive, but he also had a crest, one of the golden dragon being displayed on the front pocket. Even the shoes were made of the skin from a griffin, the sunburst color left another mark.

“Seriously,” Julius took a step back, “-you’re here?” spoken as if they would have never met.

“Are you surprised?”

“Part of me screams yes,” to which he smiled.

“I’m glad to see you,” they went in for a hug.

“You’ve done pretty well for yourself,” Julius commented, “-seeing you left everything to us, all you owned except the noble crest. Look at you now, everything radiates rich,” he chuckled.

“Speaking of rich,” he turned and stared at the ex-companions who were awestruck. “The dresses are looking very nice. Not to mention expensive,” the gaze returned to Julius, “-and you’re calling me rich?”

“You’ve got me there,” they laughed.

“Where’s the blue-haired Fenrir,” asked Staxius for the girl wasn’t present.

“She headed for the washroom a few minutes ago, the food didn’t suit her taste,” explained Julius in greater detail meant in jest.

“Master,” a voice called to which two hands, with inhuman strength rushed in and latched on his back. They wrapped around as if a snake around its prey.

“Yes, calm down Fenrir,” moved as if it were nothing, he turned, “-you’re looking well,” he smiled.

“I missed you,” she rushed in for another hug.

“Excuse me, but have you seen King Staxius?” asked a lady coming from the other room.

“Fenrir?” a lady dressed in a lavish dress walked, her necklace, earrings, and accessories sparkled in the chandelier light. A crown shaped diamond pin adorned with red-rubies rested beside her chest.

“Queen Shanna,” immediately, from hugging Staxius, she went over to Xula who welcomed the attention, “-sure has been a long time,” she smiled.

“Greetings master,” one by one, the silver-guardians stood and bowed.

“There’s no need for that,” he gestured for them to stop, “-I’m no longer thine master, that title belongs to Julius. I’d refrain from doing that ever again, it’s quite disrespectful.”

“We do apologize,” voiced Ancret, “-the force of habit, we didn’t know how to react,” their tone felt hesitant.

“Let’s drop the formalities,” intervened Julius, “-it’s a pleasure to see you well, majesty.”

“Waggle thine tail all you like, doesn’t hide the fact that he abandoned us,” bitter, the sound of Adelana’s voice came as a surprise.

“SISTER!” gritted Ayleth.

“What, I’m just saying the truth. Look at him, rich, king of Arda, and holding more power than we can ever imagine. He wanted it all, the selfish ignorant boy who we once bowed to in fear,” the tone held malice and hate.

“Quite daring for a commoner to speak using such an insolent tone,” not impressed nor troubled, Xula fired back, “-art thou so stricken by jealousy to utter such nonsense at a King?” angered, “-should I remind thee of thine place, lowly guard, I care not if thou were mine friend once. If thy mouth opens to dishonor the King of Arda, then I’ll have thine head.”

Desperate, the sister tried to silence Adelana, “heh, Queen Shanna Islegust. I don’t care who or what you are, lady – I’ll say it once more, that man is selfish and inconsiderate. I’m sure that’s the reason that young girl died. He wasn’t present during her time of need, was he now?” stood with her hands resting on the table, “-tell me that’s not true,” her eyes, ones fueled by regret and distress, “-I’ll kill you,” gritted, grabbing a knife, she leaped straight for the jugular, \*Slash.\*

Chapter 272: Counter

Blood sprayed across for an artery hit, “-how can thou be such a fool,” happy of her hit, she stared up at her victim. Standing without so much as bothered, the flowing blood, before hitting the other people, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* turned into crystal.

\*Snap,\* no hesitation, nothing, the crystals turned into crimson shaped daggers. The latter, four in total, charged and struck her hands and feet, the momentum proved so great that her body got impaled in a cross on the wall.

\*Ancient Magic: Fairy Dust,\* immediately, Xula conjured a wall, one that blocked the view from outside in. Though on the inside, one could see out without trouble. Now inside, ex-companions from Dorchester, Xula, and Staxius.

“What happened?” asked Julius for only a second went by, a gust of wind shook his composure. On the wall, stuck and bleeding, the lady who tried to kill a king.

“SISTER!,” In rushed the Silver Guardians, the dress was torn in half, they made a barrier separating the injured Adelana.

“How can you be so cruel?” yelled Ayleth for emotion whelmed from within. Their sisterhood remained true; eyes filled with doubts but ready to protect if needed.

“How interesting,” he approached with a crimson halo, Xula maintained the barrier and watched, her eyes disgusted at their sight. “I’m the one who’s cruel?” a glare that froze the futile resistance, “-I was attacked without provocation. A courteous visit to friends whomst served well in the past. Anyone else would have died from that attack,” he marched, “-enough is enough,” index finger raised. “Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,” Adete hovered with her mouth-watering. As sharp and tiny as needles, the halo transformed and hovered beside.

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"Staxius," Julius grabbed his shoulder, "-are you sure about this?" he asked.

"Do you wish to meddle in this affair?" turned, the response cold and without mercy.

"I'd prefer not to," suit jacket taken off, "-but if it's to protect my companions, then yes," from behind, he joined with the opposition.

"I see," the glare changed from cold to freezing, "-Fenrir, Autumn; pick a side or watch, what will it be?"

"Fenrir, don't join this battle, take Autumn and wait," ordered Julius.

"Sorry," the wolf lady jumped to Staxius's side, "-I've sworn my eternal allegiance to my master. Weaklings aren't worthy of giving me orders," she transformed back into the legendary Wolf. Affectionately, she rubbed her head against his chest to which Staxius patted her fur.

"Sorry brother," Autumn jumped in, "-but I'll join. I'm not a little child anymore," her eyes filled with the resolve to fight.

"There you have it," added Julius with a sigh, "-King or not, and foolish as she might be, Adelana is still our companion. I will not stand by and watch, the Silver Guardians aren't sworn to the Haggard name, they are sworn to the province of Dorchester," to which, swords materialized.

"As you wish," \*Snap,\* vanished.

"I've won," deep and monotonous, it took a second but the realization hit, arms and legs cut, all who stood against were forced onto the ground. The blood turned into crystals the moment it left their bodies.

"What the fuck?" coughed Alyson, her eyes could barely see what happened.

"See that?" whispered, the unconscious Adelana slowly came too, "-those are the people you foolishly threw under the bin. Look at them, despite the selfishness to go against me, they stood up and defended thee from thine mistake," before her eyes, knelt on to the floor with their hands grasping onto their wounds, the silver Guardians, Autumn, and everyone from Dorchester.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE," she cried.

"You reap what you sow, and this time, the fruit was a curse," a flick of the finger later, countless swords embedded into her stomach. "I YIELD."

'Wait,' eyes opened, '-w-what happened?' sat, she awoke to a cacophonous mess of laughter and chatter.

"Illusion spell," voiced Staxius from across the table, "-I showed you what would have happened if you went through with the attack," her hand held a knife.

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"I-I'm sorry," the knife fell, "-excuse me," ashamed, the lady stood and ran towards the exit.

"Go after her," urged Staxius.

"Damn it," with a smirk, Julius followed her out.

"Good job Fenrir,"

"Did something happen?" asked Ancret with a flirtatious tone.

"Not really," laughed Fenrir, tis was an inside joke.

"We should be off," Xula took the lead and excused themselves from the table.

"What did you do?" she asked whilst returning to the other room.

"Nothing much, just a bit of illusion. Adelana had blood lust in her aura, being there, I used a spell alongside Fenrir to show an alternate possibility. In that dream, everyone died." On that, the dinner resumed, Ernis took to Staxius, both drank and chatted. The ladies, Kniq, included, had fun gossiping and enjoying pastries. Deadeyes and Avon grew bored in the middle and headed off to bar-hop around town.

"Ernis," unaffected, he turned to a flushed Prince, "-is it true that the couple from Autumn's Blossom had plans to come to visit?"

"Not had plans, we took the same jet here. The heroine said that she had some business to attend to, from last I heard, they went to Arda, I've no idea why."

"Arda you say," interest piqued, "-excuse me."

"Where's he going?" asked Xula, slightly tipsy from wine.

"OH, look," pointed Achilles which diverted her attention.

'What business would Stars from Iqavea have with Arda,' stood in an alley, the guild card turned on. It didn't take long to contact his secretary, Serene. A few minutes of back and forth revealed some interesting information, nothing that relevant. 'If they were allowed in Arda, it means that they're inhuman. Be on the lookout,' her last message of the night.

"Lord Haggard?" \*clap, clap,\* heels against the stone pavement, two figures approached.

"Who may I have the pleasure of seeing?" unimpressed, he faced the duo.

"I've got a bad feeling," mumbled Adete.

\*Woosh,\* "-Is this a bad joke?" hair blew backward, pinched between the thumb and index, a sharpened dagger, "-I hope that this isn't some form of greeting of another land," veiled by a hat, the attacker chuckled and retreated.

"Now," she yelled.

"Look a copper coin," he bowed and escaped a horizontal strike from behind, "-oops," as if caught off balance, the right foot kicked him who had attacked from the back. "I'm so sorry," seemingly worried, he leaned over,\*SNAP,\* the innocent coin pierced his head.

"My hand slipped," it made a hole through the head and into the pavement. "Enough with the jokes," stood, "-care to tell me thine name?" he dusted off his shoulder.

"I see," voiced the figure wearing a hat, "-you are the Blood-King," the lady gave a curtsy and removed her hat.

"We do apologize for this bothersome meeting," called the other figure, "-I'm Darius Edmund," turned into a bat-shaped mist, "-she's Venus Edmund."

"I'd like to say well met," the head shook, "-but tis not a way to greet someone," the eyes turned cold, "-especially when said someone is known as the Blood-king."

"We do apologize for said indiscretion," they bowed and knelt on the dirtied ground, "-please forgive us," the man seemed sincere.

"Is that so," he turned, "-keep kneeling till day-break, I'll come by then. The first progenitor will stay behind and watch," a scarlet-colored guillotine materialized, "-move one inch and she'll press the button without a second thought. Stars or not, I could care any less. Those blades will kill you, don't bet on regeneration," after which, wings sprouted. Thus ended the night, a meeting with superstars from Iqavea turned into torture. Afraid of their lives, the duo obeyed. Back in the restaurant, after having engaged people of interest, idols included, arms locked, Staxius and Xula teleported to the mansion.

Gallienne joined the party a little late, things were put in place. Thanks to the information blackout, moving around became easier – Cake pulled an all-nighter planning, re-planning, and filling in holes. Many weren't aware of said fact, many of the hitmen gave some nobles personal visits. Those who didn't comply had a family member killed before their eyes, blackmailed, and murder reigned supreme. Gallienne had plans to break out of the previous King's cursed shackles, the shackles of incompetent and greedy Lords.

Larger numbers than ever before, both arenas filled out. The fight would take place in the second arena whilst the first had screen broadcasting the fights. Not only that but outside rested other screens. Those who couldn't get a seat laid gently on the green pastured yard. Chatter and excitement filled the vicinity. Merchants walked along the path selling various snacks and toys. Time was around 10:00, "-has everything been taken care of?" asked Staxius.

"Yes," said a fatigued Cake, dark-circles were apparent. "I'll take a nap, the match doesn't start in two hours, to which the call ended."

'Should be fine,' phone inside the pocket, he walked into the bedroom, "-ready yet?"

"Yeah, let's go," another lavish outfit, \*Ancient Magic: Teleportation.\* Instantly swarmed by nobles, Xula seemed at ease. More business to attend too, he stepped out. Along the way, Gallienne gave a nod, one that signaled that she was ready. Strangely enough, the crowd kept on growing without stop.

"Have you heard about one of the participant's lineage?"

"Yeah, apparently she's the Queen's daughter."

"Not to mention that they're both identical."

Rumors bearing the same message with differing wording spread around town. 'Good work,' atop the arena, Staxius overlooked as people moved. 'I've put you in checkmate,' he turned and stared the Goldberg's, "-what will you do?"

"My lady," voiced a butler, "-the rumors are gaining popularity," the social groups divided.

"It's but rumors, isn't it?" she fired back shaken.

"Our contacts say that it's most probable, they've checked the mana – there's overwhelming evidence to sway the judgment of the noble. We could stand to lose everything if a move isn't made soon."

"It doesn't matter, we've got the backing of a Dukes and Marquess. Oxshield's council is under our thumb – if the girl becomes an issue, there's always the option to take her out of the picture," a pause later, "-be sure to tell our contacts to have the armies ready to march into Oxshield. Gallienne, your rule is over – once I'm queen, I'll make sure to destroy that annoying power couple from Arda." Ruler of the border near Kreston and Oxshield, the Goldberg's powerful as they were, were not that loved by their people.

"Boss, it's as you say," suddenly the phone rang, "-Kreston in alliance with the house of Goldberg is moving into Oxshield."

"Hook, line, and sinker," awaiting the invading troops, Karlson – he stood above a tank. An unbreakable barrier of weaponized vehicles, "-kill 'em all," orders given, the spark of rebellion was doused with water.

"Everything is in your hands now, Eira. This victory relies on your win – become the next Prodigy," beside him laid in wait, a sniper.

"Cigar?" offered Staxius as the wind blew hard.

"No, Sir Shadow, I'll rather stay vigilant, tis a shot I cannot miss," dressed in the uniform worn by the Goldberg soldiers, the man waited. Not only that, but next to him, another man, one dead but alive – necromancy, "-are you sure this old man isn't going to kill me?" he asked.

"There's nothing to be worried about, the man is but the icing on the cake," after which, Shadow jumped off the building. 'The butler you killed has come back from the dead, Lady Goldberg, the rebellion you're trying to spark will be squandered. Wait and watch, this kingdom isn't going to topple so easily, not when the throne is being held by strong backbones,' he returned and sat beside Xula, she held a smile.

"Venus, Darius, where have you been?" Aceline asked with an energetic tone.

"Was held up by something," added Darius with a not so pleased tone. Combed hair, well-maintained facial hair, and a handsome visage, the ladies were heart struck. Beside him, arms locked, Venus, her black hair, and inviting charisma also did their work.

"Good to see you," Sugar went in for a hug, "you sure look out of it today," he commented on Venus' aura.

"Let's just say I had a rude awakening," a side-glance towards Staxius made him chuckle.

"What's so funny?" asked Eira.

“Nothing much, just karma,” after which, the ceremony for the finals began. Sophie charged in with more energy than before, behind, a band performed, a show put on to celebrate the efforts of the participants.

“Let the final battle begin,” overseeing a chessboard, all his pawns had moved without any trouble, the opposition’s queen grew clearer. The other pieces remained hidden though findable, an elaborate plan. ‘A wise man once said that if he had 60 minutes to save the world, he’d use 50 minutes to understand the problem first.’ Tis was the methodology used these past few days – everything now depended on Eira.

#### Chapter 273: The Next Prodigy

“In comes the finalists,” announced Sophie, “-first we have a talent who hails from mysterious origin, Vipan Eqihr of the Order,” the screen displayed the prior matches, “-since the start, many had him as favorite. Wielder of the legendary Gold-element of the tale of Midas, give him a round of applause,” together with the representative, he walked in with no gestures nor sudden movement; the face ready to fight. The crowd responded to her request and applause filled the arena.

“Second,” Eira’s picture came up, “-strong Wielder of the Ice-element, Eira Haggard,” cheers resounded, though lesser than the boy, “-showing amazing results in the survival battle, Eira of Central Claireville Academy, alone, was marked as an easy target. However, were they wrong, she took down the infamous SSS-bot and made her way to the semifinals,” as opposed to Sophie, Aceline was she who gave her introduction.

Faced against one another, the representatives. Both climbed on a small podium – there, speeches were given. Nothing fancy, just the hope of a well-good fated match.

“Let’s not take more of their time,” voiced Aceline.

“Time has come for the finals to begin,” on that, a forcefield materialized around the arena.

‘Let’s do this, Lady of Ice, go full power from the start,’ snowflake lit, her eyes changed from red to blue.

“Eira Haggard,” shouted Vipan, “-let’s have a great match,” he said with a smile.

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**\*DING\***

\*Dark-Element: Shadow-Step,\* speed was crucial in any fight. Velocity increased, a steel-greatsword in hand, she charged. Content, Vipan called forth his Gold-Element: the latter held immense power. The mana inside the arena felt as if being sucked into a vacuum. A special skill inherited by birth, the skill of Mana Absorption. Unlike other mages and similar to Witches, Vipan had the ability to use the mana surrounding him. An endless supply followed by a long-sword being summoned – no wonder that the boy was given the nickname: Argo of the Sword. Argo as in Argonaut – which meant hero. From flesh to name, the boy embodied all the traits needed.

“Quite impressive for a lady,” a rather disrespectful comment as he easily parried heavy swings.

“Don’t look down on me just yet,” the voice, disfigured, raged with anger – in mid-air, the force-behind her swing tripled. Sensing the danger, without a word said, \*Gold-Element: Barrier,\* opposed to blocking her attack, the weapon destroyed the wall.

“You think a boy with a hero complex is going to defeat me?” shoes turned to ice-skates, the arena froze over – her mobility increased. On top of the rough terrain, icicles erected at random places.

“Obviously not,” he winked and jumped, \*Gold-Element: Midas’s Touch,\* caressing one of the icicles, it turned from sparkly blue to shiny gold. \*Come to me oh great and powerful armor, I, Vipan of the Sword ask thine help, master. I call on thy, Karas Armor of Vengeance, engulf me with thine power.\* As blinding as staring the sun, Vipan called forth a unique summoning spell. \*Crack,\* the heaviness of the landing broke the ice around him. Fully armored from head to toe with the crest of the sun on the chest plate, he yelled fanatically. “The hate and regret felt by Midas, all that rage turned to bliss and fed into Karas, Eira Haggard, you are worthy,” the voice, deep, echoed around the arena.

Stance changed, he took on the offensive, the terrain didn’t matter for each step taken, the ice shattered. \*CLANG,\* a loud high-pitched impact, without breaking a sweat and feet dug into the ground, Eira stood with her head high. Horizontally above her head, her sword, which changed from silver to white – ice merged with her weapon.

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“Don’t underestimate me,” yelled Vipan, his grip tightened, inhuman strength came into play – with all that force, he pushed down.

“Likewise,” snickered Eira, \*Ice Element, Gergusser Variant: Niflheim,\* unleashed, the true power of her element. From cold to freezing, the temperature dropped, it dulled the golden armor, \*Ice Element, Gergusser Variant: Fenrir’s Howl,\* a spell that requires concentration and high-levels of mana. One taught by the legendary wolf – behind her, a wolf’s head, semi-transparent, materialized then charged forth. It bit her opponent. Injured, it by-passed the golden armor, the blood froze as soon as it left the body. The pain jolted across from limb to limb.

“I’m not done,” \*Gold Element, Midas Variant: Thousand Sword of Retribution,\* in a circle, uncountable amounts of weapon. Each bared its tip at Eira, \*Snap,\* “NO,” he screamed having realized what happened. The spell was one designed to kill, or rather, slaughter, a lethal spell with the sole purpose of exterminating the opposition. Unable to stop the spell, he sprinted to no avail.

\*Lady of White, do you wish for power?\*

“Yes,”

“Element under mine rule, I, Gergusser, dragon, and bearer of the Ice, called on thine help. Beseech mine host with all thine power temporarily – Limit Breaker, use mine ethereal body as the object of thy backlash.”

A growl resonated across the arena; it went beyond the academy. Low and deep, a feeling of nausea welled from within. \*Absolute Zero,\* halted, the weapons and user of the Gold element froze over. Time inside the arena stopped, Eira, from white hair – transformed. Her outfit changed, a cape with a snowflake in the center, a crown made of ice, hair, now of a lighter shade of blue. Her eyes matched the

hair, the eyelashes were longer and ending with snow. In her hand, the Greatsword, cracked, changed into a staff. "Human, you've done well," she said with confidence, "-sadly, having called forth a spell with the intent of killing grew the last thing you do. Heir to Midas's curse, live on," she tapped the armor, "-strive to maintain control of that heathen's power," it cracked, "-all who's blinded by greed will suffer the same sentence," Vipán fell to the floor frozen and paler than white. With a smile, the lady of white stared around the arena, everyone seemed to have been stuck in place. Everyone, except one person – her gaze met his, arms crossed, a man bearing the aura of a God. Hands-on her chest, she bowed, \*Release,\* a clap later, all reverted to normal.

Vipán laid on the floor, the forcefield grew clearer, the thousand swords turned to snow and fell gently on the ground. Standing with her head held high and sword on the ground next to the unconscious body, her mind came too.

"THERE WE HAVE IT," screamed across the speakers, "EIRA'S THE WINNER OF THE INTERMAGICAL TOURNAMENT," the battle lasted ten-minutes in total. The last few seconds seemed as if it were a flash, from white to clear in a blink, none witnessed the apparition of Lady Ice.

'What happened,' she thought, '-did I really win?' confused, fireworks and confetti set-off one after the other, music and celebration came rushing down as if a flash flood. 'Vipán?' a glance below revealed a half-naked warrior. Realizing her win, she stared at the only person that mattered. There, beside her mother, Staxius, the stance changed from arms crossed to him clapping wholeheartedly and cheering. Unbefitting Royalty though none cared, happy for his daughter, whistles could be heard as well," relieved, her hands and feet felt tingly, the feeling of ecstasy bolted across. Euphoria rendered her speechless, tears caressed down her cheek. On top of that, the crowd grew ecstatic. Amidst the never-ending cheers, Sophie and Aceline walked in.

"Congratulation to Eira Haggard," they lifted her hand whilst Vipán, half-awake, was escorted off the arena.

"I'm sure this must feel amazing," added Aceline with a smile.

On the verge of crying, she wiped her face, "-it must be overwhelming," said Sophie, "-to properly celebrate her win," she turned to the crowd, "-the trophy will be given in the next hour," after which, Aceline began to sing with her band jumping right behind.

"I'll be back," stood, Staxius dashed out the room.

"There he goes," voiced Ernis with a smile, "-go after him," urged Gallienne.

"Thank you," Xula followed right behind.

"That was a well-fought match," commented Josiah next to the entrance, "-using everything you had to win, I commend the efforts, well deserved, my student, well deserved," he patted her back.

"S-sorry," a few snuffles followed, "-I'm a bit emotional at the moment. It all feels like a dream," she turned towards the hall.

\*BOOF,\* "WELL DONE," caught in a tight embrace, she watched baffled by what happened. 'This smell,' she turned to see her father, "DAD," she wrapped her hands around even tighter, "I d-did i-it," she smiled.

"I'm so proud of you," the man was genuinely happy, "-the show, performance, and grit touched me dearly. It was the same as watching Tempest win his tournament. Honestly, the fight made me feel the same way as I did so many years ago, inside his lab. I can't ask for anything, you've turned my dream into reality, thank you," the hug turned into a kiss on her cheeks.

"Come on," she laughed nervously, "-it's embarrassing," her smile meant the opposite of what she said. Around, students, staff, and the representative watched a touching moment. All were calmed by said display, "isn't that the King of Arda?" the realization hit, her classmate stared in awe. A few steps back, her attention fell onto Xula, her majesty, reluctant to join in the reunion, smiled. "Mother..." she sprinted towards her, the same as Staxius, she gave a tight embrace.

"I'm so proud of you," smiled Xula.

"Thank you," tears of happiness flowed.

"Uncle Josiah," an instant change of persona, "-there's but one thing I have to say. Everything will be handled in the next hour, I hope that the towers are brought to life for the broadcast. No matter what, make sure that the transmission doesn't cut," vague words at best, left the latter speechless. 'Did he manage to avert the crisis at hand?' with only broad shoulders to look at, '-best keep the transmission running,' the information blackout was fixed earlier that day.

Having congratulated Eira, Xula and Staxius returned to their seats. The winner was left in Josiah's hand for preparation for the award ceremony was to be made. Three awards, Bronze, Silver, and Gold. The title of Prodigy came with a lot of advantages. Stating a few, she had the right to access hidden books and training regiment into becoming a better mage. The Order would grant her privileges and a secure place in their closely tight group. It meant a stable and planned out road to become a world-renowned mage. Amidst that, there was also the ceremony of being knighted. All the winners would have an audience with the Queen and given a badge. Even if one was a noble, the ceremony amounted to being something worthy of being proud of.

'Eira won the tournament, the biggest variable has been dealt with. From what Cake told me, Karlson annihilated the invading forces. For some reason, the army compromised mainly of forces from Dukedom of the Goldberg. I was sure that Kreston would have a hand in this invasion. Not that it matters, the threat is that lady. Now's the hard part, what will Gallienne decide. To acknowledge Eira as her daughter or keep her at an arm's length to prevent another fight for succession.'

"Majesty," whispered a butler, "-there's trouble. The Goldberg and some nobles have taken to Josiah's office." Exchanging glances, Gallienne nodded, signaling that the next move was made.

'Time for Shadow to take to the scene,' he stood, "-I'll be back shortly, do enjoy the meal." Walking at a fast pace, he jumped down the flight of stairs, "-Hello, Cake," the earpiece turned on, "-were the nobles handled?"

"Yeah, every one of them should be cowering in fear of the name Shadow. About the evidence and video, there should be an agent posing as a merchant. Look for the man with a pony hat,"

"Yeah, keep me informed," from visible to erasing his presence, a new trick learned over the few days sneaking around, "-could I have that hat?" he asked after coming up to a merchant.

"Sure," with a nod, a black bag was handed.

"Got the package, I'll make sure that they don't cause trouble. Get the sniper ready," timing could not have been any better. Time flew by at a rapid pace, the arena changed for it was time for the award ceremony. On stage, stood Gallienne with a sword and guards around the vicinity. Eira, dressed in normal uniform, stood proudly.

'Sorry about what's to come, Eira.' Outfit changed, face hidden by a crimson mask, Shadow walked inside the administrative building.

"Director Josiah, I'm sure you know of this. But Prince Ernis was shot on your watch. I've evidence and testimonies from Dukes and Viscounts. As we speak, I've prepared my forces to walk into Oxshield. Not to mention that my informant, due to the information blackout, set off for Iqavea on the first day. He's headed to the Imperial palace; the note should have been delivered by now. One that states the incompetence of the current rule, the failure to protect the heir to the empire. Not to mention my assassination to wipe any other bloodline in greed and fear. I want this whole award ceremony to be canceled, Eira Haggard, though I'm afraid is her illegitimate child, will be killed. If my demands aren't met. Not only are the dukes in this province on my side, but I've got the Church's support," sat with nobles surrounding her, the office became a battlefield.

#### Chapter 274: Lady Fate

"What will it be, director," emphasis placed on the last word, the lady waited.

"I'm afraid its too late to cancel the ceremony," said in a nervous tone, a screen turned on displaying a live feed of the event.

"I see," she stood, "-if this is how you're going to act," reaching in her handbag. "Hello, this is lady Goldberg, has the note been delivered?" a phone call to the informant who was given passage into the Imperial Palace.

"What do you mean no," her face changed, "-Martin, is that you?" on the other side, bearing an accent, Renaud. "Martin boy is tied, my lady, what part do you wish for, head, hands, or feet?"

"What sort of joke is this?" her tone grew menacing, "-hand the phone to Martin this instant."

"Sure," the voice faded, "-aye, bring that little man child, a lady wants to speak to him... what, you cut off his tongue? fucking idiot. \*BANG,\* loud, the call deafened her ears for a few seconds, "-I'm afraid the informant is dead. Sorry about that."

"What do you mean dead?" her face lost composure, "-ARE YOU INSANE?"

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"What he says is true," as if a ghost, Shadow. He moved as gently as a feather floating, "-hey, God-father, sorry for asking such a favor," he spoke in turn.

"If it isn't my money-maker, no worries, Shadow, do what you wish, your part of the family, we'll look out for one another. Have a good time," the voice was filled with pleasure and cut off.

"Who might you be?" she glared unimpressed by what happened.

"No one of interest," effortlessly, the phone got squashed using his grip alone. Now leaned with one foot on the table while the other rested on the floor, the jacket swayed and displayed a pistol, "-have you heard of the Dark-guild?" he asked, the mention of said name sent shivers down the other's neck.

"Duchess Alice Haworth, Duke Edmundy Riviera, Marquess Jeffrey Hart, Count Charle Gaulle, and Viscount Munich Hertz," one by one, he pointed and called out the names, "-quite admirable to see the main players holding the Queen's throne gathered."

"Don't ignore me," she snapped.

"I've not forgotten about you, Teressa Goldberg, child of Blaine Riverty," he returned a glare.

"Are you going to say something or will you move?" her attitude didn't falter.

"I'm here as proxy to Josiah," through the mask, a murderous intent could be felt, "-any dealings will have to go through me."

"A puny commoner isn't worthy of dealing with a duchess," she turned in disgust.

"Puny you say," he hopped, "-Cake, could you pass her through?" the earpiece turned on. "On it," she replied and his phone went on loudspeaker.

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"M-mother?" a scared voice came through, "-i-is t-that you?"

??KATHERINE," she screamed, "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" pure anger lashed out.

"That's enough," he cut the call, "-what I've done?" nonchalant, he walked and stood behind Josiah, "-a few days ago, a girl by the name Lizzie Haggard was kidnapped, raped and killed. I heard that she was a classmate to your daughter?" from looking outside, the attention turned forward, "-what would the media say if another girl, despite the masked-murderers having been killed, shows up with the same sign."

"Those murderers are alive," she remained adamant, "-people will see right through the lie and impersonation."

"Sadly not," a press on the keyboard, one hacked by Cake displayed an image of the body of the killers, "-they're dead. In the public's eyes, the fear of them roaming around holds."

"I understand," her shoulders slumped, "-killing anyone and blaming it on a phantom," to which her voice raised in pitch, "-you'll get caught sooner or later."

"I doubt that," he chuckled, "-you've got the wrong idea, Lady Goldberg. This game has long been lost," to which, the screen displayed the award ceremony. "Pay close attention."

"To award the prize of the winner of Inter-magical Tournament, Queen Gallienne," the crowd went wild.

"Very well done," she smiled as Eira knelt, sword in hand, the first order of business was her being knighted. "Eira Haggard, with the power bestowed upon my name by the crown, I grant thee the title of Knigh- \*bang.\*"

"MY LADY," shocked, the crowd screamed, \*Prophecy,\* in the VIP room, Xula stood with her fingers pointed towards Eira. Just then, using her spirit, a bullet was swayed off its path to graze Eira's shoulder.

"Get in cover," yelled Theodore.

"Get in formation," yelled the guards.

"No need to worry," angelic wings sprouted from her back, graceful as a butterfly, Xula landed next to Gallienne.

"An assassination attempt," the camera panned to where the bullet was fired. "Impossible," voiced Sophie whilst maintaining a shield. "The head butler of the Goldberg family," missed, the man ran, "after him." Complete silence engulfed the arena, guarded, the Royal family were bunched up, every mage present called forth barriers.

"It's been taken care of," face covered in blood, a young adventurer ran in, "-this was what I managed to salvage," he gave a piece of cloth holding the Goldberg crest. "T-the man imploded when he was surrounded by the guards, an act to vanish with his evidence."

The audience grew nervous, "-Worry not," with impact, Gallienne spoke out, "-tis is why adventurers deserve our utmost respect," she pointed to the young boy, "-if it wasn't for the effort of this young man, the culprit who dared to ruin an auspicious day would have gotten away," she turned, "-what do you say," asking the crowd, they yelled yes in support. Being healed, Eira smiled, "-I shan't back down, I've faith in my entourage. Queen Shanna of Arda jumped in to save both me and this young child here. A child that bears a similar resemblance to I for I'm her mother," her tone turned woeful, "-I'd like to apologize. The royal family bears many secrets, and the lineage of Eira Haggard was one meant to be kept till death. However, today proved that despite this, the life of a child would be put at risk for the satisfaction of a person's lust for power," she showed the crest, "-The Dukedom of Goldberg have done sacrilege. By trying to kill the blood of the Riverty name, she wished to take to the throne," in tears, the crowd flipped.

\*TRAITORS,\*

\*They should be put to the fire,\*

\*KILL THEM,\*

\*DON'T LET THEM OFF THE HOOK,\*

Confused, Eira stared Xula who but shook her head. "Is this true?" she whispered.

"Yes," voiced Xula, "-your father told me about how he picked you up on a raft. Don't ask questions just yet, everything will be explained in greater detail soon. Worry not," her comforting smile sufficed. Masterfully, Gallienne led and swayed the people's emotions.

"W-wait," confused, Teresa grabbed onto his collar, "-WHO DID THIS?" she asked fully enraged.

"There's no way that would work. Even if the people agree, we hold the real power. Gallienne will not beat me that easily," she let go and turned to the nobles, "-you're backing my ascension, aren't you?" their gaze fell to the floor.

"Poor little lady," he shook his head, "-don't you realize that you've lost," he moved over to the nobles, "-they're not going to help you," playfully, the gun unholstered and touched their faces. "These supposed dukes and marquess are nothing but pawns," disrespectful and cavalier, "-the spark of revolution has long been extinguished," he cocked the revolver, \*BANG,\* a shot that grazed Teresa's cheeks. "What will it be?" he asked, "-I've got around five shots and I promise that the next won't miss."

"Do what you want," she didn't seem worried, "-the church and my army are marching into Oxshield. Their target is the village of Riverwood. I don't care if they are your pawns, my army will trample everything. Even if I die, I'll make sure to take everything from Gallienne."

"I won't rely on that," he laughed, "-the army you speak of has been decimated. That's checkmate, false queen, you never had a chance at winning."

"What are you waiting for?" he faced the nobles, "-leave before I change my mind. Remember, if you ever choose to cross my or the DG's path, I'll make sure to make examples of your heritage," the gun pointed backward, "-just like Miss Goldberg there." Scared, they ran off without looking back.

"What do you mean by decimated..."

"To keep it short, the plan to become queen backfired the moment you allied with Kreston. They helped thy in one operation, that was all. The rest came down to you, shooting the prince to cause doubt amongst the nobles. Not to mention the killing of your own butler to prove that she tried to assassinate you, done in the same people's presence. Trying to gather forces by announcing your lineage was a smart choice," he leaned and watched the ceremony, "-that's if a certain someone didn't intervene, you'd have probably done it. Let's take it from the start, the informant you sent to the capital – it so happened that the train he took crawled with my men. They were tasked to watch and take note of each passenger who stopped at the airfield. In the end, we decided to blow up the railway tracks so we could limit and control the movement even better. For those who took the plane – our God-father and talented hitmen in Iqavea did the rest. Finding that supposed undercover servant was but child's play," he pointed to the screen, "-you went against this country's shrewdest politician. Tamer than when I knew of her, what you saw was but a mere reflection of her scheme in the past. Director Josiah is personally acquainted with her mind," he gave a side glance then laughed. "Making an enemy of the King of Arda proved to be the last thing you've done. You made too many enemies, one of them being the greatest underground organization to ever exist," pointed at the side of her head, "-any final words?"

"None, my goal was to be queen. Guess it was short-lived. What will happen to Katharine?" suddenly, her persona changed, "-what fate awaits her?" she asked in fear.

"Death I suppose, the same as her mother. We'll have to end your lineage – blame your greed."

"Wait," voiced Josiah, "-are you going to kill her?" he asked.

"Should you not be by Eira's side and give her compliments? This matter doesn't concern you," to which, he was forced out the room.

"Who are you?" she asked, "-I know that I'm going to die soon, can I ask a favor first?"

"Go ahead," locked, he sat in the director's seat.

“Could I please talk to my daughter once more?” she asked.

“Five minutes, and I’ll be right here,” the phone dialed.

“Katherine,” she spoke, “-don’t cut me off and listen. Your mother has done a lot of miserable things. One of them is plotting the assassination of Lizzie, I was the one who got in contact with the Mask murderers. The only way I could assure your safety was to give them a good target. I posed as a friend of her father’s that day. I led her to her death, I’m sorry for what I’ve done. Your father will take care of you, I believe in him, that man will never leave your side,” the five minutes ended.

“Are you saying that it was you who was responsible for her death?” the voice held power, it made her shudder.

“Yes,” she stared the ground, “-tis my confession, I was the one who abducted the girl to save my daughter. I wanted to make her father pay – he humiliated me, a noble,” no remorse.

“I see,” the crimson masked turned to crystals and hovered, “-look at me,” he ordered.

“W-wait?” shocked, she couldn’t believe it.

“Lady fate sure has fun toying around,” he smiled, “-you’re going to suffer,” thumb bitten, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* “-I’ll make you feel the pain that my daughter suffered. \*As the god of death, heed mine call and grant this person immortality,\* a snap later, the first injury made had her screaming in pain, though she didn’t die.

\*Devils hidden in the abyss, I call upon thee, demons who thirst for lust and torture, I, the god of death, open the gate to the underworld, COME AND FEAST FOR I OFFER THIS LADY’S BODY AND SOUL,\* A reddened portal materialized from which Incubuses crawled out. Before him, the one responsible for Lizzie’s death was fated to a punishment worst than death – the demons of lust and torture began a gruesome procedure. The walls, bookcases, and screen splashed with blood, Staxius sat back and watched the ceremony whilst she got raped and killed, over and over again. The screams echoed, she begged, the demons grew more and more lively the harder she fought. In the end, without pity, the attention focused on the television whilst her body was scraped and ravaged.

## Chapter 275: Phantom

“Stop making all that noise,” he glared. Teresa laid on the floor, legs parted with countless incubuses on top. Her face, a mess of makeup, it resembled what a toddler would have made, given a bucket of paint.

“I g-give up,” with what little strength she had, her gaze, filled with regret, asked for an ounce of mercy, “-k-kill me already.”

\*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* without looking, the blood around the room transferred into the halo. Circles of various circumference hovered above her head, “-the torture has only begun,” he said with a smile, \*snap,\* it latched onto her mouth and stitched both lips together. “Enjoy,” he winked and returned to the award ceremony.

There, still protected by shields, the Queen awarded what was due. Eira knelt and was knighted, a hexagonal pentagram with the royal crest inside, was pinned to her uniform. Overwhelmed, the new Prodigy could but smile.

"Lady Eira," voiced Sophie, "-care to say a few words?"

"With pleasure," with a sniff, "-I'd like to thank everyone who has helped me conquer this fabled stage. I'm very honored to have received the Queen's blessing and knighthood. Words can't truly express how I feel; therefore, I'll say one thing. There's someone who I need to catch up too, and today is the first step," she stared the camera, "-heed my words," she smiled, "-you know very well who you are, I'm going to stand next to you one day, as an equal."

"Awesome," added Aceline, "-though it might have been a little bumpy with the whole assassination business, LET'S END IT IN STYLE," she yelled.

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"May I?" asked the queen, she wanted to have another minute with the microphone.

"Before the tournament concludes," her voice seemed serious, "-most of you might not have shaken the words I've said earlier. Eira, is related to me, however," she turned and faced Xula, "-blood isn't the issue, nor is it nepotism, Eira Haggard made her own path to this stage. Please don't let that misjudge thine views of her. Lady Eira is and will always be the daughter and princess of Arda. Tis a promise I made to a friend. Our Kingdom of Hidros will strive to become better. Let's endeavor to be more cordial to one another, strength in unity, I wish to unite all the provinces. Make Hidros a powerful continent so that one day we can stand proud as a nation," she held her hand, "-are you with me?"

\*YEAHHHHHHHH,\* the crowd roared, her message later went into greater details. All and all, her usage of words made it clear that Eira had no claim over the throne for she was Princess to another Kingdom. Her family name, Haggard, was all that mattered.

'You did it,' amidst muffled moans with his feet on the table, Staxius waited. 'Eira's the next prodigy, her life as a mage is all but assured. Queen Gallienne did well to manipulate the crowd with her words and actions. I'm very impressed. The issue of the Goldberg is at hand,' feet off, he leaned with his elbow against the table, "-Lady Goldberg," around thirty-minutes had gone, her entire lower body was covered in blood mixed with another fluid. \*Release,\* a gesture later, the portal closed, the demons retreated – the stitched lips were set free. Naked with messed up blond hair and tears that would pain any men's heart. "Look me in the eye," he demanded.

"W-what do you want?" whimpering continued.

"Here's a question," he smiled, "-what is it that you want?" after which, the press of a button later, a video of her being defiled played on the screen.

"Kill me," she begged, the video broke her from within, "-KILL ME, THERE'S NO PURPOSE IN LIVING LIKE THIS."

"Choosing death," he stood, "-you know what?" \*Bap,\* as if a ball, he kicked her using all his might – it nearly tore off her head. Splattered across the bookshelf, her skull cracked – regeneration kicked in. "I-I'm s-still a-alive?" the relief she felt when it darkened, crumbled.

"Yes," he knelt and grabbed her hair, "-I've bestowed the curse of immortality on thine body. Can't let you off the hook that easy," the eyes burnt, "-you won't be able to use magic since it will all be focused on thine survival," \*Void-Flame,\* effortlessly, an inverse pentagram resembling a goat was burnt onto

her right arm, “-tis a curse of which only a god can undo. Making an enemy out of me was the worst thing to ever cross your mind. Don’t worry about Katherine, I’ll return her safe and sound to your husband, that includes you. The curse I speak of has two purposes, to stop you from killing yourself and stop anyone else from killing you. That power will always be under my control, even if you try to use it – it will only partially heal you so that you’re left barely alive,” he stood and \*slash,\* her hair cut. “-I forgot to say, the crest you bare is the one used by the ruler of demons – a magnet to attack all sorts of devils. Bye, bye, to the peaceful nights – the life you’re to live from this day forward will have you craving for death.”

Walking back to the table, “-don’t you have anything to say?” he grabbed the revolver.

“What do you want me to say,” her eyes lost the vigor to live.

“So boring,” he aimed, \*Bang,\* five shots, one in her skull and the rest into her body.

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\*AHHHHHHHHHH,\* screamed, she fell and gritted as the excruciating pain bolted across her body.

“Adete, go on and feast,” he called.

“With pleasure,” \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.\*

“How’s the taste?” he asked as the gun was holstered.

“Delicious,” she smiled, “-I want more.”

“Have at it,” he winked, “-she’ll never run out of blood or die – consider her a buffet for thine pleasure,” hearing that, she flew across the room and went for the neck. Gulp after gulp, the girl drank till satisfaction. “Yummy,” covered in the nectar, she returned.

“Come on,” he wiped her mouth with the sleeve, “-do be a little cautious.”

“S-Staxius,” coughed, she turned, “-you’re going to die a painful death,” her eyes turned lifeless.

“Not going to happen,” he walked over and grabbed her neck, “-you know why?” she tried to get away but suffocated, “-I’m he who attained divinity. Stand in my way and I’ll bring havoc on thine soul,” the index finger grew sharp nails and pierced her neck upward to the brain. \*Bound to the mortal realm, I curse thy, soul who’s done wrong, to be forever in pain. Dare to speak this to anyone,\* a burning sensation wrapped around her heart, \*-just the mere thought and thou shall suffer a fate worst than one may imagine.\* Thus, another symbol was carved on her heart, a curse of silence. One that assured his identity remains secure and that she’d never open up about anything she ever saw. Nonchalant, he stood, “-there are clothes under the desk, make sure to clean thine face. That is if you want to keep the little dignity you have among the nobles,” the door opened, “-I’ll come to take your life in ten years. Judgment has been made – suffer a life of misery,” shut, the crimson mask reappeared.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she fell to her knee, ‘-I’m so sorry,’ tears flowed without stop, ‘-w-why did I e-even do this,’ she cried – the moments of her getting defiled was etched deep inside her mind. The sight of animals ravaging her whilst the man remained calm and composed, ‘-w-why would you be so cruel,’ as if the room was never dirtied, she crawled over to a mirror. ‘my hair, my face, I WANT TO DIE,’ grabbing a shard of glass, one left on the ground from the bullets, \*SLASH\* For an instant, the darkness welled

from inside – peaceful and devoid of doubt. \*Not so fast,\* hands grabbed her feet, \*-thou art bound to the mortal world,\* the curse of immortality kicked in, her soul returned.

“You sure are heartless,” voiced Adete for Shadow returned to being Staxius.

“You enjoyed it as much as I did,” smiling, the clothes were placed in a bag. “Hey Cake?” he tapped the earpiece.

“What is it?” she asked without much interest.

“I’ve sent over a video, take a watch and tell me what you think,” a few minutes later. “BOSS ARE YOU MENTAL?” she screamed meanwhile the back entrance of the arena came in view.

“Like it or no?” he asked.

“It’s disgusting,” she nearly puked, “-how could you even do that,” it sent shivers down her spine.

“Don’t worry about the how’s, just be sure to blur the face – use this as a warning to anyone who wishes to mess with our gang. Not the Dark-guild, but Phantom. I’ve decided on the name.”

“Phantom you say,” she smiled, “-I like it. I presume that you’ve seen how valuable it is to have a foothold in the underworld. What you saw in the past few days were but a few months of making God’s Ale and Angel’s Dust. Imagine what we can do if we decided to fully invest in guns, vehicles, a center of operation – just think of the possibilities.”

“I agree, get working on that, Cake. Snow is the target; we’ll take our time and find out as much information as we can. Gather agents, arm up, ask Renaud to send over some toys from the mainland.”

“Before that,” she interjected, “-we need a base.”

“Isn’t the town of Rotherham controlled by the Dark-Guild?”

“No, it’s more like a collaboration of smaller gangs uniting and preserving our foothold.”

“Then that’s perfect, I’m planning on building a runway with its hangar and base of operation, what do you say?”

“That’s a far stretch,” her voice remained serious, “-but I’m sure we can pull it off. I’ll get on scouting and see if there’s a place we can occupy. That place is pretty small, putting a runway and hangar there might raise suspicion. Nevertheless, I’ll go on the lookout – do check with the Queen, since you’re her friend and all.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry about that,” the earpiece turned as he entered the VIP room. On the arena, the ceremony continued, the participants gave the last bow. Empty, he sat and watched through the broken glass, Xula’s good-will made it go according to plan.

Stumbling up the stairs, a lady with short blond hair. Dressed normally, without noticing, took a seat in the center.

“Bold move,” a deep voice came from above.

“M-majesty,” a glance later, her feet trembled.

"There's no need to fret," spoken as if nothing happened, "-I'm glad that the assassination was stopped in time."

"Y-yes," she gave a half-hearted smile, '-what's wrong with him,' she thought, lady Goldberg freaked out internally.

"Heads up," wrapped in a ball, a handkerchief was thrown, \*-Don't be so on edge. What transpired will remain between us. I'm the last of your worries – who knows what the Queen will decide. Luckily, you don't have to worry about dying, I made sure you're going to suffer. Hence, wipe thine messy visage, it's unbecoming a noble. But I doubt you're to hold the title of Duchess any longer,\* written in blood, it soon vanished.

"The ice-princess did it," yelled the students from inside the changing room, "-WE'RE SO PROUD OF YOU," they cheered. She who had been the center of attention from the start had proven her worth as Eira."

"Good job," a hug from behind, "-I'm so happy for you."

"Ysmay," she turned and jumped.

"Eira's ice-princess nickname stand true," joked one of her classmates, "-princess of Arda and strong wielder of ice, please go out with me," he said in jest.

"Die," a cold response without even flinching.

"THAT'S OUR EIRA," they applauded, "-ahahah," they laughed.

"Do get ready for the party afterward," voiced Sophie, "-you are all welcome. Be sure to dress properly for the party will feature many nobles and people of importance. Call it one of the favors granted to the one who won the Inter-magical tournament."

"Yes, instructor," they said in tandem then left.

"They sure are lively, the second years," added Josiah.

"Their classmate was knighted and given the title of Prodigy, of course, they will be happy. It's a tradition that all the classes from the same year to attend. Though many will already be present since they're of noble birth."

Out on the roof again with the wind blowing, "-you came," he turned.

"You did send a message," pointed out Josiah.

"Good to see you're holding up well," he smiled then took a few steps forward, "-the job is done, uncle," whispered, he left without stopping.

"Wait," he turned to no avail, '-gone yet again,' he laughed, "-Tempest, you would be proud, Staxius turned out to be the man you endeavored to be all along; I'm relieved."

Chapter 276: The Ball

"Where have you been?" asked Xula, the award ceremony ended a few hours ago. Sat in a restaurant in town, with the people being oblivious who were seated – the sun began its journey downward. The bright lit sunlight turned to one orangish yet present. Time was around 17:00, many returned from the arena. Since the train tracks were broken – most were forced to take buses or taxis. All and all, it didn't matter since the tournament was a hit amongst all. The fights, the idols, not to mention the unexpected showing of Autumn's Blossom. They walked on stage to perform a piece out of sheer kindness, the crowd loved it. Tomorrow would be the last day, the day where all the artists would get to take to the stage and perform until the countdown struck zero.

Hosted in the noble district, inside the largest mansion in Claireville, preparation for the party began. Countless numbers of servants and butlers were brought over by many nobles. Gifts, food, and much more. Since Royalty would be in attending – security grew tighter.

"There was an issue that needed to be resolved," said as vague as possible, he sipped tea whilst eyeing the town-square.

"Are you sure?" she leaned, "-even if I can't read your mind," she squinted, "-I know something is up."

"Fine," he gave, "-you know the whole assassination of Ernis? Well, it was something related to that. I found the culprit and had to tie up loose ends," the cup emptied, "-happy?"

"There's no need to seem so agitated," she backed away with a baffled look.

"I'm sorry," feeling guilty, "-I'm speaking the truth. I had to do some vile inhuman things to get the desired results."

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"Care to elaborate?" she asked, genuinely wanting to listen.

"Well," he sighed, "-the bullet that was fired didn't come from the Goldberg," whispered so that only she could hear, "-that was a sniper I employed. The real target was Eira," the gaze felt cold, "-the order I gave was for her to get shot," to which, he backed off.

"I'm sorry," she held his hand, "-I'm just glad everything worked out," a gentle smile followed.

Time continued, as usual, no stop, nothing major. Nobles, dressed in expensive attire with accessories arrived one by one. The party was set to begin at 19:00.

"Is this good enough?" Xula screamed across the hall – the voice echoed to the study since they returned to Rosespire.

"Sure, looks great," he fired back.

"You haven't seen it," she sighed.

"I did, a red gown, isn't it?"

"How did you know," she covered her chest.

"All-seeing eye," he yelled without much interest.

"The ultimate peeping tool," to which she giggled, "-I'll be ready in twenty minutes. Sure is hard without maids around," she complained.

'Heh,' he chuckled, '-Xula's trying her best to make me laugh,' stood inside the room where lessons were given, he watched; flash memories of Lizzie sitting and sometimes napping played as if movies. 'You were going to pass that exam...' her notebook, opened, was closed. 'I'm not resting till Snow is taken care of. Tormenting the one responsible did give a sense of closure. Still,' the door locked behind, '-I've only begun,' dressed in a royal-blue suit, he headed downstairs. Void, currently parked at Claireville Academy, waited patiently.

Twenty-minutes turned to thirty-minutes, "-we're going to run late," it showed 18:15.

"Yeah, I'm coming," radiating, she climbed down with a smug look.

"Someone is happy on her appearance," a snarly remark.

"And someone feels less tense than before," she winked. Using Teleportation, the duo sat inside Void, "-we're off to the mansion," it roared into life.

??My lady," bowed the head-butler as nobles were escorted inside. The mansion, massive with high-walls all around. As soon as one drove through the entrance, it went around in a big semi-circle towards the left. There, another identical gate. The road made a separation between the mansion and its garden – the ways of the nobles still surprise most at times. The mansion itself, as big, if not bigger than a four-story building out in the town, continued towards the back of the property. On its right side, a place to park one's car. In front of which held a pond with trees that reflected dusk.

One by one, walking on a red carpet, one entered inside a very well-lit hall with portraits. It held a giant stairway that split and went toward the upper floors. The party itself was hosted a few steps behind, the ballroom. The latter was unlike anything one had ever seen, at the far right – a live orchestra of talented musicians playing mournful melodies. They rotated from that to peaceful and sometimes joyful. Waiters went around with plates holding drinks – refreshments were placed along the wall immediately to when one walked in. Doors led out to masterfully crafted balconies that overlooked pleasant scenery. Close to it, the social gathering of people from the ranks of Dukes and higher, including Gallienne, the queen-mother, and Piers Riverty. The Prince consort made it back in time.

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"We're late," shaking his head, the car entered.

"I'm I the one to blame?" Xula asked sarcastically.

"I would never dare to say such a thing," he covered his mouth as if having said something disrespectful.

"Whatever," she glanced over to the left, away from where he sat.

"Whatever indeed," he mumbled, \*mwah,\* "-what was that all about?"

"A little present," she smiled.

"A present for what?" the car stopped.

"Quit it with the questions," her voice trailed off. The real reason why so many questions were asked was to vex Xula. Teasing to see what reaction he could get – a ball of fun.

"Majesty," seeing the Ardanian Royal couple arrive, the butlers and waiters bowed diligently. All the back and forth stopped, to which, after handing the key, the car was parked in his stead.

Meanwhile, in the ballroom, Gallienne stood outside with a woeful face.

"Why do you look so out of it?" asked Piers, "-the nobles want to see you," he urged seeing that Sely was the one doing all the talking.

"I've no idea myself," she rested against the balustrade – local artists performed inside the arena. As for the rest, the idols called it an early night since tomorrow would be the final day. "These past few days were tough; I don't even know how I'd have managed to survive the ordeal without help."

"You mean the King of Arda?" he asked, "-I heard of him from Adelana. She doesn't have very admirable views towards him. Apart from that, the others seem to love his company, Julius included. He who waged war against the Clyfford family for the sole purpose of clearing a friend's name, I've no idea why he'd talk so fondly of someone."

"Dear God," she sighed, "-Piers," her voice seemed exhausted, "-what's the name of the king?"

"Staxius Haggard isn't it... wait," the eyes lit, "-we need to hide. That's the man we blamed your pregnancy on, he's coming for revenge."

"Astute as you are, you do act rather foolishly," her woeful expression changed, "-all that has been handled. I'll explain everything at another time," to which – a gasp was heard inside.

"Did something happen?" she asked and walked over.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the King and Queen of Arda," announced the butler who then bowed and left.

'Talk about being overzealous,' time felt as if it stopped, many were awestruck, Xula wore the flashiest gown that evening. Adorned with real diamonds and precious stones, "-I forgot to ask," he turned, "-how expensive is that gown?"

"This," they walked, "-if I were to guess, considering the quality, and all the precious stones, I'd figure around 10,000 Gold."

"Ten-thousand gold," the eyes opened, "-and did you pay for that?"

"Of course not," she laughed innocently with dignity, "-it's just one of the many outfits that were crafted especially for me. Don't you realize that Arda is the richest province in this continent, we've so many resources that if we were to seriously get to mining, our chest would overflow."

"Aren't I lucky for being married to a Queen," he fired back in a polite tone.

"Speaking of attire, yours didn't come cheap either, not to mention those overly precious looking buttons and crest."

"Fine, it's around 2000 gold, tis was a gift from Noctis's Hallow," the conversation, playful in nature, ended.

Not even Gallienne's gown could come close to his suit; the Ardanian couple made a definite impression. Too scared to even approach the duo, the music resumed; Barons and Dukes alike turned their head in fear of offending them.

"That's the man?" asked Piers.

"Don't be disrespectful," gracefully, Gallienne walked inside to greet Xula and Staxius.

"Tis a pleasure to see you," added Staxius.

"Likewise, dearest friend," she smiled and turned her attention to Xula.

"G-good evening," flustered, Piers lost composure and held out a handshake, '-I messed up,' his face seemed worried, handshakes were meant for people of equal standing. Before lowering his hand, Staxius caught his grip, "-a very good evening to you as well," he smiled, "-don't lower your head, look at me straight," he whispered.

"Do as he says," elbowed Gallienne, she knew why Staxius did so. All eyed them, if the prince consort would look down and retreat his hand from the handshake – it would mean that Hidros were lower than Arda.

"Why not continue our reunion out on the balcony," he offered, butlers came in with wine-glasses.

"Lead the way," asked Gallienne.

"I-I'm sorry about that handshake," outside, away from prying eyes, Piers went off. "It must have been so humiliating to formally greet..."

"Please," he interjected, "-there's no need for such formalities," the tone, comforting, helped relaxed the prince. "We're all friends here," behind him, stood Xula and Gallienne, both got along very well.

"Do mind my asking, but are you THE Staxius Haggard?"

"If you mean a boy who was wrongly accused of rape and thrown into a dungeon, then yes it's me. I'm also the man who took care of thine child – honestly, if it wasn't for the passage of time, I would have still had a grudge."

"About the announcement," added Gallienne, "-I'm sorry I had to tell everyone about her lineage."

"No harm is done; you did make it painfully clear that Eira had no claim over Hidros' throne. She'll abdicate her claim, willingly, on another date. For now, let's just take the time to sit back and relax," he took a sip, "-the people involved have been dealt with. The Dukedom of Goldberg, what's the verdict?"

"I'll strip the traitor's rank and make their family Knights. They'll become the perfect example of what it means to lead a coup against the royal throne."

"About the lady," Staxius leaned, "-she's cursed to forever suffer. The rest is up to your discretion, all loose ends have been handled. The powerful houses won't ever dare to make a move," to which they laughed.

Staring one another, Xula and Piers shrugged.

"How have you been," the curtains parted, Sophie, Silvester, and Meriel appeared.

"Brother," the siblings hugged one another, "-it has been a long time," they smiled and chatted.

"Good to see you," voiced Sophie. Her and Gallienne were related, hence the familiarity.

"Majesty," the Clyffords bowed out of respect.

"Well met," he smiled, "-Good to see that you're doing well," Staxius nodded.

"Likewise," smiled Silvester.

"Meriel," since the others found companions to engage with, he turned to the little girl left alone.

"Hello," hands behind her back, she tried to be formal.

"Hello," bent over, \*snap,\* glitters materialized out of thin air, given it was blood-crystal, the girl laughed. "Watch this," with the girl fully unguarded, a few movements whilst concealing the blood being used, "-a rose made of crystal," shiny and pure – redder than a ruby; blood that went beyond being ordinary. "A lovely rose, for a lovely lady," he offered with a smile.

"Thank you," she took the ornament, her eyes sparkled.

"You sure know how to entertain an angel," commented Sophie as a compliment. Before he realized it, their conversation was stopped since his interaction with the child became more interesting.

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"They for once don't lie and speak their mind," the posture straightened.

Chapter 277: Eira's choice

"Mom, look," the girl scurried over to her parents. Rather than being, that's cute, the expression changed. Staxius stared off into the distance, the wind blew – they were at a loss for words. What he had said, though simple upon first look, had a very deep meaning.

"Majesty," in came a butler, "-Students from Year Two of Claireville academy have arrived," with a bow, he left.

"We should go greet the guest of honors," nervously, Gallienne smiled and left with Piers.

"See you later," voiced Silvester as he locked arms with Sophie and headed out, Meriel followed behind. Her big eyes kept on admiring the ornament.

The atmosphere changed, "-what happened?" he turned and asked, Adete flew to stand on his shoulder, even the lady had put on formal attire.

"Nothing much," tilting her head, she gave a smile, "-what you said about innocence, was heartwarming. We all felt the sincerity when you spoke, it was as if something tugging on our heart. Pure without malice," she came closer and whispered, "-evil, good, neutral, you sir, art he whomst mine heart belongs too." Shy, even the clouds moved in to hide the moon, the land around darkened as the duo locked lips.

"My lady," without warning, "-you need to head inside as soon as possible."

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"Will do," nonchalant, arms locked, they walked in.

"Be a little more tactful next time," he turned to Prophecy for she brought the message, "-thanks for being there," he smiled.

"Worry not, majesty," she gave a peace sign and followed.

Inside, the orchestra changed from mournful to one dramatic yet soothing. At intervals, the sheer passion and the pain being portraited through the violin could but make one smile. Josiah at the helm, the students walked in dressed in uniform. The bunch included commoners; it grew obvious by the way some of the boys gawked around. They were obviously new to the ways of the high society. In such manner, they walked in, Gallienne now stood in the center, nobles waited behind her arranged by ranks and prestige. The Ardanian couple stood away since these were two different kingdoms. Even so, the boys and girls could but glance over – Xula's beauty made many embarrassed. Staxius's strong stance with a mysterious allure had many batting eyes in fear of it being false.

"Eira Haggard," spoke the Queen, "-Prodigy, welcome to a ball organized in thine occasion. Tis tradition for the winner to have an event dedicated to them – take this chance and meet new people. Many influential personalities of Hidros are in attending, be sure to get acquainted. Strength can only take you so far, one also needs companions and allies. A man can take on a few soldiers but a team can take on an army," she paused and stared the other students who knelt, "-this applies to thee also, my children. This country is just as much yours as it is mine. Enjoy the evening and have fun," on that, they raised their heads and headed off to their families. The music played and the party began.

"Father, Mother," dressed in uniform, Eira walked with her long hair flowing. Behind, her friend, whomst intimidated, halted as she laid eyes on the King. "What are you doing?" noticing Ysmay, she grabbed her arms then continued.

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"Congratulation," said Xula. For some reason, Eira seemed angry, her eyes were narrowed as if saying, you owe me an explanation. The object of said demeanor was revealed as she took a strong step in front of Staxius.

"Good to see yo..."

"Father," she cut him off, "-my lineage, a sister named Lizzie Haggard, what have you been up too, there's so much I'm left out off. I can't believe that you choose to keep me having a sibling a secret. Finding that out made me very happy, sadly, I later got told by the eldest daughter of the Remingtons, that she was killed..." curled in a fist, her hand rested on his stomach, "-am I not your daughter," she looked up on the verge of tears. Facing her, a stone-cold visage that sent shivers down her friends back.

"Don't..." trying to warn, he grabbed her hand and walked off to the balcony. The door shut, '-better leave them to it,' thought Xula. "Over here," gestured Ernis, the prince had just arrived.

"Are you going to explain-," \*baf,\* without warning, arms wrapped around. "It's not fair," her anger faded, "-hugging me after so long, you're mean," she voiced. Fatigued, her tone lowered to one slothful.

"I do apologize," he stepped back, "-Lizzie was a girl who I took in after a run-in with a not so virtuous noble. At the time, I thought selfishly since the shop needed workers. Later, I found out that she had gone through a bad upbringing, the only favor she asked was to never pick up a weapon again. To that, I agreed and Auic, my secretary, took charge and had her admitted to a school. I thought it was all good until a few months ago – I took notice of how badly she was being treated. No complaint, nothing, she kept on smiling for my sake and to not cause more trouble. On that day, I decided to take responsibility and atone for such a foolish act. We grew closer, I took her to school, taught her, played, and even invited her friends over. Her fake smile swapped for one genuine. Seeing her have so much fun, I, also, felt relieved. In her I found something worth protecting," hands on the balustrade, he turned, "-sadly, things are never that simple," the wind carried droplets of rain, "-I always carried a curse. One that had bound me to never be happy and start over, in fear of said curse, I set off to face my fear. Little did I know," the grip tightened, "-that it would come at a greater cost – a Pyrrhic Victory. I beat the curse to only find myself losing the very thing I had endeavored to protect, again, for god knows how many times. Still, there was only a thing to do, and that was to move forward – the tournament began on the same day. I thought that if I told you then and there, it would take thy mind off what was important. You have a future to work towards," he faced Eira, "-that's just the surface. Your real parents are Prince Consort Piers Riverty and Queen Gallienne Riverty," the voice grew serious, "-listen, this is a choice you have to make by yourself. I pledged on the day we met, \*-In the near future even if thou choose to leave mine own side, you'll always have a place to return,\* that's part of what I remember. Hence, the decision is up to you. You're not the little babe I remember so fondly, even if I wasn't there to see you grow, I can say one thing; you've matured into a very beautiful young lady. I'm proud and happy that I took you in so many years ago. Eira, thank you for everything. There were times where thine face helped in overcoming my troubles and insecurities," stood strong and peering down, "-Choose thine path, Eira. Become what you want to be, I said this before and I'll say it again if ever the day comes where you choose to fight against me, I'll face you with all of my power," the rain stopped, wings sprouted, Nike's wings traveled from the hand to the forehead – veins turned to gold and went throughout the body. A bloodied halo materialized, the nails grew sharp – ruby eyes lit and an immense presence unleashed itself. "I'm Staxius Haggard, the God of Death and King of the Vampires. What will it be," he showed his true self – the winds around were like blades, it cut into the balcony, even the weather bowed to his orders.

"F-father?" scared, she backed off – survival took over the body. A mist of a skull materialized behind – \*Stand strong,\* called a voice, \*lady of ICE,\* changed, the area froze, a cape, a staff, and a crown of ice – blue hair and blue eyes. 'What's happening?' she asked seeing her power for the first time.

"Lady of Ice," perched on her shoulder, a dragon, "-I'm one of the ancient dragons – beings who were once considered as gods. I've pledged my allegiance to the god of death, he had but one demand," it turned to the God, "-that was your protection."

Toe to toe, the ice tried to ease its way into the area where Staxius hovered, however, the presence alone sufficed to create an impregnable wall.

'Father has never done anything to bring me harm. Even if he's the god of death,' she took a step forward, '-I won't back down just because he says so,' the aura blasted her ice shield the closer she got. \*That's it.\*

“God of Death,” she called, and forced her way inside his aura, “-I’m Eira Haggard,” the cape tore, the ice shattered, “-daughter of Staxius Haggard,” hands wrapped around, “-I care not how bad of a person you might be, I’ll always be the daughter you cherish. My father has and will be you, father, YOU’RE MY HERO.”

“Good,” nonchalant, \*Revert,\* hands pressed, the weather which started to take a turn for the worst, returned to the norm. “Now you know,” as casual as one could be, he smiled.

“Seriously?” baffled, she backed away, “-you showed me your true form and just go back to being normal as if nothing happened?”

“Not really,” he smiled, “-that wasn’t my true form. I did attain divinity but the process of ascension is long and tedious. The current god of death holds all the power, he watches over us even at this instant. At the moment, I can only withdraw power from one of the Symbols,” to which he pointed, “-The Sickles from Kronos, Scythe from the Death Reaper, and Wings from Nike, Goddess of victory. If I did unleash his power, it would cause another Xenosious.”

“Where the world will be plunged into darkness,” her eyes opened, “-you better hold back.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing for all this time,” he sighed, “-holding back is the worst part of a fight,” the head shook.

“Anyway, I’m glad you told me what you did. I’m grateful for everything, Arda is my home now, nothing will ever change that.”

“Shall we go in?”

“Let’s,” she smiled.

‘There are more things that you need to hear. I’m glad that you decided to accept my true self. That was but a test, Eira, if you had turned and run away – I’ve no idea what would have happened. A test directed to Gergusser; I can now rest; it won’t do anything to harm the host. Out of everyone, it had to be Eira who was chosen to inherit that alter-ego.’ A less than normal reunion, one where the father got to see what he needed and what the daughter decided. No doubts for all the secrets were revealed, Eira walked in with a smile.

“Father, could you wait here a minute?” she asked as they stood near the window.

“Sure,” he agreed with a smile. Across the room, Ernis and Xula were spotted laughing and having refreshments. To the right, Gallienne engaged in conversations with the dukes involved with the whole ordeal. Barons and lower nobles were at the far left, sitting around tables and having tea. Many of the students were in the company of their parents. ‘Boys will be boys,’ he noticed the youngsters checking out all the lovely ladies, mostly, Xula. ‘Take it all in,’ he grabbed a wine glass, ‘-that’s the queen of Arda.’ Flattered by how popular she was, he drank and waited.

“No...”

“I’m not going there,” Adamant, they refused.

“Come on, her majesty told us to get acquainted with the nobles,” argued Eira, “-let’s start with the King of Arda.”

"I would," gulped one of the commoner boys, "-but he seems scary, no scrap that, he is scary," he nodded, "-look at that posture and stare."

"Boys these days have no balls," she sighed, "-come Ysmay, let's go," grabbing her roommate, Eira charged forth.

"Did she say we have no balls?" commented one of the boys.

"You're going to get destroyed," another voiced with a soft and elegant tone.

"Shut up pretty boy, if we don't do something, the pride of our manhood will be put to shame," leading the charge, the self-appointed leader.

"Here they come," voiced one of the girls.

"Yes, just call them out on their manhood, and it's easy," leading the pack, Eira headed towards Staxius with her class.

'Is that her friends,' glance turned into a glare, '-what approach should I use?' seeing boys, '-the stern one.'

#### Chapter 278: Eira's Classmates

Stood in line with about five boys and six girls, Eira's class. From right to left, they stood according to their rank and prestige. In front, a princess, followed by the daughter of a duke, so on and so forth. Four out of the five boys remained at the far left, not too surprising since they were commoners.

"Greetings," spoken in a deep voice, the face stern and aura menacing, he eyed everyone.

"Greetings," they bowed, shaken by the experience.

I'd like to introduce my class," Eira took a closer step and went one by one. Each spoke their name and bowed. The moment the introduction ended, the commoner boys, named: Fletcher, Harold, Simone, and Tony – slacked off their posture.

"Keep it together," voiced one of the girls named Mille. From there on: Christina, Kim, Anastasia, and Ysmay.

"You're being disrespectful," urged Timothy, the only noble among the male group. Scared, doing some weird unnatural motion, they stared up with shoulders not level and neck at a perplexing angle.

'Seriously,' without warning, he took a step forward.

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"We're so screwed," whispered Tony as he stood last in line.

"Good luck man," the other three turned and gave a thumbs up.

"You're going to hell," he mumbled to the traitorous friends. A shadow peered down onto him. Eyes shut, he prayed and whispered some chant to be given protection against evil.

“Stand up straight,” thunderous, Staxius grabbed the boy’s shoulder and straightened his posture. “Chest out, stomach tucked in and face forward, be mindful of how the body looks,” the same way, he went around and sorted the other’s postures. Confused, they could but admire – a man with so much power without care about his standing, reached out. “Listen,” he took a step back and kept a strong front, “-there’s nothing more important than dressing and looking the part. If one wants to make it in the real world, you’ll need to acquire certain skills, skills of which includes adaptability. Thou art young men, act the part, be confident, else, how will you be noticed by the opposite sex,” to which he raised an eyebrow towards the other nobles in attending. “Look at them for example,” he pointed at a few ladies, “-engage or married, some are always on the lookout,” to which some were caught eyeing the King from top to bottom, not only were their ladies but men as well. “-This doesn’t go for me either, take a look at Prince Ernis,” they turned, “-see how the ladies flock to him, that’s not because of rank or prestige. I can guarantee if he wasn’t of noble birth, that man would have more attention than he has right now.”

“It’s true,” they were in awe.

“For the young ladies,” seeing them getting distant, “-why don’t you all come here,” he gestured.

“What’s happening?” asked Ysmay.

“I’ve no idea,” shrugged Eira as she stared Kim and Mille.

“Since you all are in the same class as my daughter; there are things that aren’t taught in school that you need to understand. Bear in mind, tis but the opinion of a man who has seen a lot,” he paused, “-first of all,” he pointed towards Timothy, “-what is it that you aspire to become, young man?”

Startled, “-s-scholar y-your majesty,” a feeling of uneasiness went around their heads – each glanced seeking confirmation of what was to happen.

“Scholar,” he paused, “-what type of scholar, magic or scientific, or both, which is it?”

“I d-do apologize,” Timothy shook his head, “-I misspoke, I mean to say, Alchemist.”

“I see,” he smiled, “-anyone else?” to which, the girls nodded.

“What about you four?” he turned to the commoners.

“Adventurers sir, we wish to protect our village. We came here in hope of learning the ways of magic, monsters have ravaged our fields for far too long; we wish to give back to the people who helped us come here,” in agreement with Tony, they nodded.

“Good,” he breathed, “-we’ll start with Alchemy. What is alchemy?”

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“I d-do apologize your grace, but is this necessary?” interjected Eira.

“Do refrain from asking needless questions. I wish to see how the students nowadays compare to sixteen years ago,” strict, Eira bowed and apologized.

"Alchemy is the research on how matters interact with mana and the natural elements. It's the study of many subjects of which the end goal is to advance mankind into a better future," Kim answered confidently; top in her class.

"Correct," he paused, "-now answer me this. With all the knowledge you possess, in true or false. Do you think it's possible for mana to be extracted from a person and made into a potion?"

"False," the answer was unanimous, "-mana is the life force of a person, one can't just extract it for it would be the same as taking away someone's life," argued Anastasia.

"Good," he held out his hand, "-mana is the life force of an individual," a magic circle engraved itself atop, "-though that is one is led to believe," in a blueish color, the circle took on ethereal shape and turned into a potion. "You should have learned Sense Mana by now," he stared up, "-care to try it on this."

"Whatever you say, sire," reluctantly, Kim closed her eyes and used Sense Mana. "-Impossible," her concentration broke, "-t-try it," she asked her friends to do the same.

"You're kidding me," even the boys were at a loss for words.

"So, you see," the flask turned to dust and the mana in its purest essence floated above his hand, "-with enough mana control, one can construct, deconstruct and reinvent spells and do a lot of things. What you see is but a sliver of my mana," \*Snap,\* it turned into a blade and cut Kim's finger.

"What's happening?" opposed to blood, a white essence bled out.

"Enough mastery of magic and one can affect another person's magical circuitry and draw out his life-essence. What the school doesn't say is that when a person runs out of mana, they don't die, not immediately – they're sent into shock, the physical body tries hard to safeguard the ethereal self – which, if not treated within a few hours, the brain will die which beckons the question yet again, what is alchemy?"

"Do you know the answer?" asked Eira.

"I'm afraid not," he smiled, "-studying never ends, whether it's magic, alchemy, swordsmanship, being more social around others, scheming. Anyone can remember stuff they've read, that's not knowledge, you're but a puppet. The true people who seek knowledge are those foolish enough to question the very fabric of reality, some are called insane and some geniuses, there's no straight answer."

"Do apologize my asking," Anastasia jumped in, "-this may come out rude, but what is taught at the academy can't be wrong. Are you saying that you know more of what the people who are paid to teach know?"

"Don't," Christina grabbed her arm, "-you're speaking to royalty, mind thine self," her eyes held fear.

"No," she shrugged her hand, "-I won't stand by and say nothing as what we have been taught at school is dragged through the mud as if being nothing but worthless babble."

"Young lady," he breathed out, "-losing composure and resorting to lashing out is a justifiable reaction. I'm not here to discredit what has been taught at the academy. Why else would I send my daughter to study there if I wasn't trusting in how they taught," a good point made, the girl could but stare away.

"Aspiring alchemist," instantly he turned to the others, "-have you heard of Clarise and Flein Reinhart?"

"Yes," she fired back, "-Clarise is a prodigy and Flein is a master alchemist with so much knowledge."

"What about the Cobalt Unit?"

"An elite group of scholars of various fields working in conjuncture to make discoveries around the world. It's so tightly fitted that people are only asked to join if they have made a revolutionary discovery or have performed what some might say miracles. It's the goal of every scholar to become one of their members," smiled Kim, the prospect made her excited.

"May we ask why you'd bring up their name?" asked Timothy, intrigued by the way the King spoke.

"Not to boast," he reached inside the suit jacket and took out an emblem, "-I'm an alchemist who was once invited to join the Cobalt's unit."

"Hold on a moment," Eira interjected, "-when did you become an alchemist?" she asked confused.

"Eira, wait," voiced Mille, "-what sort of discovery did you make, sire?"

"I wouldn't say discovery though I did help in cracking the methodology of how mana could be extracted and turned into liquid and even solids."

"You really did extract Kim's mana as if it were blood," Anastasia pointed out whilst trembling.

"As an alchemist, I'll say but one thing, thou aspiring alchemists, work hard and study. Being smart isn't the full picture, one must also know how to apply the things that he has learned," with a smile, Josiah approached.

"Sorry for taking so much of your time," the director bowed, "-let's go, students, you've taken too much of his majesty's time. There is another guest you need to meet," after which, the class headed out.

"Eira," called Tony, "-the king isn't that bad a person. Given I didn't understand anything about the whole mana situation, he seemed knowledgeable."

"I'm sorry for lashing," apologized Anastasia, "-I just thought he was being pretentious. However, that backfired real quick, an alchemist who was invited to the cobalt unit."

"More impressive than that was about the possibility of mana potions," lost in the clouds, "-I'd have wanted to hear more about what he had to say," she drooled.

"You're a noble, act like it," intervened Ysmay.

'I think I overdid it,' arms crossed, the eyes wandered till Carla's face, hidden behind a crowd, was spotted. 'The Remington's are here,' to which, minutes turned to hours, people chatted – the center cleared up, some couple went ahead and danced. Having engaged many people in conversation, Xula and Gallienne walked out onto the balcony to rest.

'Tomorrow's the last day. I've no idea what's the plan but I need to think of the future. A problem dealt in the shadows; none will even know that behind said tournament, a potential devastating scheme brewed. As expected, the Goldberg didn't show. Becoming more involved in the underground seems a good enough goal for now.'

"King Staxius,"

"What is it?"

"I'd like to discuss something," away from the ballroom, in the garden outside as he strolled, a voice spoke.

"About what?" he turned and faced Gallienne.

"I don't want to say this, but are you involved with the Dark-guilds," she stood with arms crossed, "-I've got a faint idea on how you managed to keep the revolution under wraps," she paused, "-that sort of operation can't be led by one person alone."

"I've no idea what you talking about," he turned away, "-underground or not, the job was fulfilled. Josiah owes me a favor and so do you," cigar lit.

"I see," she walked, "-are you trustworthy?"

\*Puff,\* "-listen to me," he smoked, "-do I look like the kind of person to go out of his way to help a former enemy. Daring to question my credibility at this point is tantamount to disrespectful. Not even that, it's close to shameful," he turned, "-say what you want to say, Queen Gallienne. My intent from the start was to establish good relations between our province," using the cigar, he pointed at the back, "-I could go in, slaughter everyone and blame it on you," the voice held no doubt, "-for all I care, lady Goldberg is still alive. It would not take long to establish a puppet ruler."

"Good," she smiled, "-I'm glad," her gaze stared the stars, "-if you'd had said otherwise; I might have distrusted you. I now know for sure that you're an ally," she held out a hand, "-Hidros is on the path of change, will you assist me, King of Arda?"

"As long as it's within my power," a handshake.

"I know thine real identity, Shadow," she smiled, "-I've my dealing with the underworld too, don't forget that I dealt in human trafficking not long ago."

"I know," he smiled, "-Viper," he winked, "-though forgotten, was quite a powerhouse back in the day.

"Things have changed, a new order, I've no intention of going back."

"I might call in a few favors starting next week, it involves cash and property."

"As long as it doesn't affect me or the kingdom, you're free to do whatever you want, neither will the public order nor the adventurers ever question your faction."

"No restriction?" he asked.

"None whatsoever, do as you please," she smiled, "-tis how I shall repay the debt I'm due."

## Chapter 279: Outclassed

Basked in the warm morning glee, through the curtains parted slightly, Staxius awoke. The smell of perfume lingered, one of rose and flowers, a smell that intensified after turning over. Hair messy and

tangled with one another, Xula slept with a defenseless face. Her rosy lips, pearly white skin, and sweet fragrance, a glance at the clock revealed 9:00.

Sat on the edge and wiping his eyes, another smell came from outside. A machine roamed around the yard, a gardener employed not so long ago tended to the grass. Tingly, the aroma felt harsh as the wind blew cold. 'Today's the last day,' he thought and stood. Besides a pair of shorts, nothing else was worn – the markings were left exposed to the open.

Last night ended in good faith, for all the people he had met along the way were present. A good and earnest conversation, Eira and her friends, though hesitant at times, seemed to have questions in their minds. Date was the 28th of February, "-if you want land inside Rotherham, then ask the Haworth family since that town falls under their jurisdiction. A call should suffice, the list of people given, mainly the turncoats – I've made sure they're put back in their place," a fleeting sentence which came out of Gallienne's mouth.

'Guess we're going through with the plan,' breathing in the fresh morning air, Xula shivered from the coldness. Her feet left expose near the end of the bed, retreated. The cold made her curl and lay deeper into the sheets. The shuffling caught his ear, "-am I interrupting?" he asked politely.

"Not really," the voice sleepy, "-just close the door when you head out, I'll sleep in more," fatigue of the few days caught up.

"As you wish," pushed, it remained ajar, the coldness didn't bother as much as before.

"Aye Boss," the gardener waved.

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'Why is he calling me boss,' he returned the wave so that the man didn't feel excluded. With almost a smile, the man, covered with a poncho, returned to tending the grass.

[Breaking News] half an hour later, the television in the common room turned on, sat on a couch with tea and fruits – he watched.

[Last night, the church of Syhton was broken into by an unknown faction. No valuables were stolen, nothing apart from the disappearance of the Apostle. The church has made it clear that there's nothing to worry about, however, the populous is adamant about finding her location. The break-in and disappearance aren't a mere coincidence, tis is what the public are saying] to that, the subject changed to the Tournament. They reported on the winner and assassination attempt on Eira – though her majesty's speech was showed in full.

'Apostle vanishing,' he sipped, '-this isn't good,' he thought, '-wait,' suddenly, as a window left open slammed shut with a loud crash, he stood. "Were this what the church was hoping for. It fits,' the mind worked, "-the sudden withdrawal of the Kreston's army, Goldberg's argument about them being backed by the church. I thought it was but a lie to get out of the situation unscathed. It's the truth then, the whole assassination was just a diversion – the true operation was the abduction of Syhton's apostle," as the piece fit one by one, near the border, after a long hour drive – trucks were seen speeding along the roads. Unbothered by tanks, they rushed as nonchalant as one could ever be.

'Isn't that?' gagged with a blindfold, Karlson noticed a girl inside said vehicles. Unable to reach for it bared the Holy Church's emblem, with a bow, the supposed emissaries returned.

\*Brr,\* vibrating, messages flooded the phone – the sender, \*Karlson.\*

'I've not the patience to get involved with another conspiracy,' hands-on the forehead, '-that last one took most of my strength. I was wrong, the true player wasn't Goldberg, but someone else, the face remained shrouded.'

"Hello," at around 10:00, with Xula upstairs getting changed, a phone call was made.

"What's up, boss, anything the matter?" in the middle of packing, Cake answered with a toast in her mouth.

"Is there some way you can get in contact with Duke Hawkins?"

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"Hawkins from Kreston?" she asked.

"Yes,"

"Not that I know of. It's the Overlord's wish that we not get involved in religion. Therefore, we don't have any contact in that country of heretics. Is it important?"

"Not really," he breathed, "-don't worry about it. Thanks for everything, Cake, I'll ask Jason to distribute the payment later – those men need rest. A job well done; the operation was a success."

Brewing across the continent, another plot against the kingdom. Torn from one side to another, the real masterminds made their move. They used their pawns to capture this kingdom's Bishop. Without faith and anything concrete, the populous could be led astray, especially with preachers of various beliefs roaming around the streets during day and night. Understanding said issue, with semi-formal clothes, the duo returned to Claireville.

Echoed across town, a melodic voice mixed with instruments. "The ending ceremony has started early," an idle comment since the silence left a feeling of anxiousness.

"If you say so," displeased, Xula's mannerisms were random and erratic at times. Not to mention, demanding – a sudden show of affections in terms of hugs, and bouts of anger, with her pinching his cheeks or twisting his arm. Walking towards the arena, people were less abundant than yesterday. For once, the yards were cleared with trash all over the place. Flyers of vendors, advertisements for food and such, 'disrespectful,' a disappointed shake of the head later, they entered through the back.

"Xula, Staxius," in came Gallienne with a smile as big as her temple; her hair parted down the middle revealed a very big, shiny forehead.

"Father, mother," in the corner with Remington's and Meriel against the window, "-glad to see you well," voiced Eira with a smile. Empty, for the most part, some of the nobles returned home – the stage below lit with a thousand lights; Sugar performed his heart out. Allowed entry on the arena, girls flocked to the front, all and all, a flashback to the time in Iqavea.

"Where's Piers?" asked Staxius.

"He headed off to Dorchester with Julius. Something urgent came up, he's staying there to help in expanding their capital city. Some people are interested in taking residence inside the noble district again – all and all, that province is getting back to its feet."

"Could I have a word in private?" he asked, as soon as pleasantries were exchanged.

"Sure, lead the way," offered the queen.

"Take your time," Xula nodded and moved to where Eira sat, Ernis arrived with a bottle of champagne.

"Let's drink," he dashed towards Staxius.

"Not right now, highness, I've business to discuss," the tone formal.

"I understand," with a nod, the energetic persona faded into one neutral – Lucy arrived after a few seconds, she panted.

\*Ancient Magic: Teleportation,\* on the rooftop, "-what was it you wish to discuss?" asked Gallienne.

"The fight isn't over," he said in a concerned tone, "-I've no idea if you've heard this, but Syphon's apostle has been kidnapped."

A gust blew, the realization hit, her cheerful demeanor swapped for one worried. "Are you serious?" she asked.

"Everything that happened here was just a small part in a bigger scheme. I know it might sound improbable, but you did try to enrage the Pope. I'd say, you brought this upon thine self," he turned, "-not that I blame you, that province is always crawling with fanatics."

"The whole scheme involving the Goldberg was just a decoy?" her eyelids flickered, "-so elaborate for a decoy, how deep does this conspiracy go?" shoulder slumped – the mind had but one thing, '-we're outclassed.'

"Problems keep on stacking up," the voice monotonous, "-I thought I'd let you know. There's still the possibility of another upset. As is now, the noble factions aren't united since that whole incident – we might have them blackmailed though nothing guarantee's that they won't run off to Kreston."

"I've heard that they have been collecting weapons and vehicles, their military keeps on getting stronger."

"And I guess since you're tied to the empire, gathering forces might seem like an act of revolution or foul play. It will have to be brought up to the emperor," he paused, "-let me guess if that were to happen; you could stand to lose the status of queen, unlikely as is, it's there. People will call thine rule worthless and incompetent."

"It pains me to say this but it's true. How ever you look at it, even quieter than the wind itself, Kreston has us in checkmate," a true statement, she knew that the kingdom was hanging on a few threads.

"I agree," he stepped away, "-if nothing is done, Hidros will come crashing down without a chance to fight back. Unable to gather forces, unable to go against the church and with the people having lost their apostle, quite a conundrum."

"I can't well ask for help again," peering over the balustrade, "-you've done more than enough. Arda might also be targeted since the disparities between humans and nonhumans is far more rampant in Kreston."

"Listen," deep, it broke her daydream, "-I'm not opposed to helping," he offered, "-I won't get directly involved but I can provide some pawns for you to play this game of chess."

"Do tell," her eyes lit.

"Goldberg, for once, we know they're traitors but I doubt that Kreston knows. Then you have the Adventurers, if you can't get the army – there's another one right beside you, people who've transcended the norm. Ernis as well, he could pull some strings and make it possible for Rosespire to amass forces. Kreston will have to be declared as traitors to the crown, can't do that without proof. Lastly," he stared, "-Duke Hawkins."

"Isn't he close ally with the pope?" confused, she asked.

"Not anymore," the sun shone, "-I've my sources, and last I heard was that he and the pope were on bad-terms. Pull him on your side and usurp half of what the Pope controls."

"That's a tall order," she sighed, "-fine," the old look of hate welled, "-they've decided to move against me. Uniting Hidros through bloodshed if I need too, King of Arda, I humbly ask for thine aid. Lend me thy strength," a bow.

"if it's death that you wish for," he smiled, "-Then I'll grant thine wish," a skull materialized behind, "-Kreston is far worse than monsters, the sooner they are crushed the sooner we'll be able to break out of their shackles."

"No plots, no using their plans against them. Hidros's religious faith is at risk – we need to rescue her. If she dies, things will become far worse than it already is – tis the favor I ask," from bowing, she knelt, "-rescue her at any cost, I'll make you get whatever you wish for," a kingdom bowing to another, '-I sense no ill-intent nor ill-will,' hidden behind the sun's glare, a smirk, 'Gallienne, you foolish queen,' he thought, '-you've admitted thine defeat. Hidros is under my thumb; never would I have expected this change. You were supposed to bow to Xula, not me, but I don't mind. Arda will be the strongest Kingdom, I'll make sure everyone witnesses the power we wield.'

"No need to kneel," he grabbed her shoulders, "-we're friends," a sincere smile.

"Thanks for understanding," she stepped back, "-bring her safe and sound home, I'll take care of the rest," her persona changed, "-the dormant ice-queen is breaking free from her shackles. You, Staxius Haggard, King or not, were my enemy and now are my ally, I respect thine strength, Arda and Hidros will forever be allies – I vow to never betray thee or thy kingdom."

"Good," he stood on the ledge of the railing, "-give this message to Xula, I'll be back soon." hands on his chest, "-there are two notes on the floor, one for you and one for Jason. They have detail explanations

of what I want to have built, money isn't an issue, get that runway built," eyes closed the body fell backward.

"WAIT, HOLD UP," she ran to try and catch, \*Poof,\* in a black-mist, Staxius disappeared to never be seen for the coming days, weeks, and months.

That day, Xula and Eira felt something tugging on in their heart, "-where are you?" searching to no avail, Gallienne called a meeting a few days later – she explained in greater details of what was spoken that day. The looming threat, the implications – Jason got the message meant to be given to Cake. In it, the code to Pandora and instruction on how the machine worked. Taking longer, God's ale delivery never stopped. Renaud didn't hold contempt nor anger, rather, he willingly accepted the decision and said, "-as long as we have Gods 'ale, the money will keep on coming. Shadow is part of my family; he can take however long he wants."

#### Chapter 280: Escape

"Come on," the footsteps muffled by heavy rain hitting the thick foliage above, "-this isn't the time to give up," urged with bloodied hands, face, and a suit drenched in the liquid. \*Bang, bang,\* echoed with flickers of light, bullets landed all around. \*Fwoop,\* a direct hit, "-keep moving," coughed, white hair turned red.

"Leave me behind," hand in hand, a girl, with half of her visage burnt, "-it's not worth it," the rain raged, behind, in tandem, forces of unimaginable quantities.

"Don't give me that self-sacrificing bullshit," with a hard tug, "-we're getting out of this together," shielded, five shots as loud as explosions, "Cough" each hit, blood dripped.

"You're not fine," paralyzed by fear, the girl, now in a princess carry, could but stare vividly as the rain, turned crimson, dripped from her carrier's face and body.

"Are you seriously going to stand there and take this abuse?" from the back pocket, a fairy hovered, "-fight already," she stood with her arms on her lap.

"Don't you think I want to retaliate," gritted, an injured Staxius struggled down the forest, the path seemed to go on forever. "Have you forgotten we're being hunted by saints and an angel no less, the bullets from that fucking Knightfall doesn't help either," regeneration didn't kick in.

"P-please," the girl begged, "-I-leave me and escape, I've already lost my dignity as an apostle."

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"Shut it," a sharp refute, "-shelter," amidst the pouring rainfall and barrage of bullets – he slid and leaped into an abandoned mine, trees had overgrown. Invisible during the brightly lit day, at night, was as dark and somber as space itself.

'Damn it,' rested against the rough edge wall, he panted.

"W-who are you?" asked the girl with a confused look.

"No one particular," the shirt opened, bullet wounds that didn't heal nor regenerate, "-Adete," he turned, "-this is bad."

“What do you mean?” for the first time, there was a look of defeat on his face.

“I’ve used up all my mana, I’ve barely got anything to heal nor use magic. Infiltrating this land of fanatic took more than seven months, can’t believe we’re reaching the eighth now,” the face leaned back, “-no mana to use means that the regeneration isn’t going to take effect,” the hands trembled, ‘-this is bad, super bad,’ eyes closed, he thought. ‘The saints, the angel, and an entity who has gone beyond the realm of reality, Kreston is more than the land of fanatics. I should have taken more precautions; it was a wise choice to infiltrate and track down the apostle’s location. I managed to make contacts, the process was tedious, killing was out of the picture – the angel has a barrier all around the province, and remote killing-intent or foreign mana will immediately notify my presence. I can’t fight, using all my mana without recovering for all this time – used to create a shield so that I’d be able to slip under the radar.’

“Listen to me,” worried, Adete grabbed a hold of his cheeks, “-look at me,” she ordered, consciousness barely there. “Don’t give me the bullshit of you dying on me. Have you forgotten who you are?” her voice serious, “-you’re he who thrives in killing. Stop holding back for the sake of the kingdom. You’re scared that any move you make here might have repercussion on Arda and Hidros,” she pointed towards the girl, “-look at her, these people aren’t worthy to be left alive – go out and slaughter them. Who cares if mana is out, WAKE UP BLOOD KING.”

“No need to make it so dramatic,” he sighed, \*Release,\* the all-seeing eye returned, for the entirety, he had been surveying the land for an escape. “The saints are not that far off; the angel is back at the church – he’s worried that I might go ahead and kill the Pope. Soldiers are roaming around, not to mention that sniper, waiting for us to leave.”

“Excuse me, why is it that you’re here?” she asked, with a star-shaped mark on her forehead.

“I’m here to return the very much-loved apostle to her people. Don’t you have to spread the word of Goddess Syhton – so many people thrive in her warmth and kindness. That’s why we’re heading back home no matter what, I’ve got a pregnant wife waiting, I miss her so much.”

“It’s been eight months since I was abducted, I thought I was going to die on the first day,” she stared off in the distance, “-turns out, the pope had ulterior motives. My face is proof, just look at it,” burnt without an ounce of pity, her right eye was bleached to white. “I’m relieved,” she smiled, “-despite all that pain, my faith never faltered. The stars always gave me the courage to go on. Then, before my execution, a man dressed in a suit with silvery hair swooped in and rescued a damsel in distress.”

“Don’t overthink it,” ripped, the sleeve and cloth torn into makeshift bandages, “-they got my leg,” tightened, the blood poured right through. “We won’t be doing much running,” outside, numerous presences approached.

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“Listen to me, girl who I’ve yet to ask her name – burn this message in thy head. The cruelty of this province, the inhuman brainwashing,” a side glance later, “-only a monster can take down a monster.” Knuckled cracked, “Adete, get ready,” with a smile, the eyes rekindle.

“On it,” stood on his head with arms crossed, \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.\*

“Don’t you dare move from this spot; I don’t want someone innocent to bear witness of what is to come. Trust me, it’s better for the both of us.”

“As you say, old man,” the last part came out involuntarily, “-sorry I didn’t mean it,” her hands covered her mouth in embarrassment.

‘Old man,’ he chuckled, ‘-seriously.’ \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* wings sprouted, fingernail sharpened, the aura around the cave changed.

“Come out so that our faith can purge thee heathen.”

“We’ve got the god’s emissary watching our backs, there’s nothing you can do about it,” a reference to the sniper.

“At ease,” in swooped a man dressed in a white robe with a great-sword, “-leave this hunt to the chosen,” a hand gesture forced the fighters on their knees.

“Saint Marl, we’re saved,” they bowed with respect and admiration. Across a narrow line of sight, laid on a small cliff, the scope of Knightfall bore its fang on the entrance. “Better not miss,” seductively, a lady caressed the wielder’s cheek from right to left, “-else I’ll be forced to find another host,” she whispered with a chilling breath.

Relentless, the rain flowed down the veins, as if curtain, with a sharp gesture, “-who has come to purge me?” Staxius asked rhetorically and approached. The stomach bled the face fatigue, he limped.

“You’ve finally shown yourself,” menacingly, a man with the title of Saint, bearing a strong religious belief with an unforgiving aura, “-you’d better show where the pseudo apostle hides.”

“I’m going to hit him right in the head,” forced, the sights lined with the target’s face, “-wait...” shocked, he backed away.

“Why are you retreating?” asked the lady.

“It’s him,” he mumbled, “-he stared through my scope and smirked...” panic set in, “-that’s impossible.”

Crashing down, after glaring at the sniper, the attention turned to the saint and fighters. All were on guard with weapons drawn, lasers could be seen lined up on various mortal spots.

“Quite a predicament,” he limped slowly.

“Don’t take another step,” voiced the soldiers, “-we’ll shoot if you don’t comply,” threats and orders dished at intervals.

“Please, I mean you no harm,” reached out the Saint, “-the will of god is the persecution of they who spread lies and false belief. We are not crazed individuals with a lust for killing – our business is with the apostle. Hand her over and you’ll be given safe passage back to Oxshield.”

“Sire, please don’t approach that man,” yelled a man across the field, “-he’s dangerous.”

“You needn’t worry,” smiled the saint, “-he bears the crest of the holy one,” painted in red on the chest, “-any who carries such strong faith must be given a chance to explain.”

\*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* “-I appreciate the sympathy, saint. Don’t look down on people, even if they’re injured,” as if a conductor, with gentle motions, the symphony of death. Blood turned to weapons, \*slash,\* turned to ground meat, what was a saint fell to the ground.

\*OPEN FIRE,\* they yelled, eyes closed, the darkness and rain didn’t matter. Limping across the battlefield, opponents fell one after the other, their blood turned into orbs that Adete kept on swallowing. The more she ate, the stronger he got – back at the church, using magic, the Angel witnessed what transpired with utter shock. Merciless as he could, no care for life, the night turned into an orchestra, one with the mellow tone of bone cracking and limbs tearing.

“GET A GRIP,” yelled the apparition of Knightfall, “-if you don’t,” too late, using sheer speed, from the ground, Staxius hovered before the marksman. “Tell me,” arms crossed, the boy dragged his bottom across the ground in fear. “Who gave the order to shoot?” Staxius asked.

“You won’t win that easily,” angered, the spirit tried to protect her host.

“Mind thine place,” another swipe slit her throat, the apparition vanished.

“Now then,” unable to kneel fully, he grabbed the boy’s neck, “-I’ll give you two options. Turncoat and work for me or die right here and now,” pressure as heavy as thunder dropped without warning. “Is dying here thy wish or do you want to survive?” having sensed how weak the boy’s mind was, he figured it would be best to have someone who knew how the province worked. A turncoat, face with death, even a king could bow down and relinquish all his possession.

“If you can save my sister,” tears flowed, “-then I’ll agree to forever serve you.”

“I see,” eyes closed, the All-seeing eye scoured the numerous prison and dungeon around the province, “-found her.” \*Heed mine call, Wings of Nike, I humbly ask for a mere fraction of thine power. Grant me this favor so I can save this child’s sibling.\* Red to gold, the wing hovered and latched onto the forehead, “-hold my hand,” grabbing the rifle, \*Ancient Magic: Teleportation,\* back and forth, they stood in front of the cave.

“B-brother?” a girl around the age of fifteen trembled in fear. Her body was as shrunken as a starved animal, one could see her skeleton exposed – not an ounce of meat.

“Elista,” dropping the rifle, she who knelt got a heart-warming embrace.

“Damn it,” Staxius gritted, a sharp pain shot out the head, the overload caused veins to burst and bled profusely.

“Old man, are you ok?” one hand on the wall, staring the ground, he bled.

“Forget about me,” holding in the pain, one that felt as if dying over and over again, “-we need to move,” one eye closed due to injury. \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* barely, the wounds were stitched haphazardly.

“T-thank you so m-much,” sincere, the young man aided in supporting Staxius.

“We need to move,” on the brink of death, the mind had but one thing, to move forward. The sister, apostle, sniper, and Staxius kept on running.

"Before we continue, what're your names?" asked Staxius.

"I'm Elliot, and the girl you rescued is my little sister, Elista."

"I'm Sharon, Apostle of Syhton."

"I'm Staxius Haggard."

"Sir, what do we do after we reach the border?" asked Elliot worryingly. "-I doubt the pope is going to stand back and watch as we escape."

"I've something in mind – just keep moving, we need to make it there before daybreak, else we'll be cut off by the patrol," from limping, doing emergency first aid using Blood-Arts, the leg regain movement.

"Come here," without warning, grabbing Elista, "-we need to go faster," it turned into a jog.

"Sire, if you push there's the possibility of bleeding to death."

"Focus on the path before us, we need to escape. She's light as a feather, don't worry about it."

A covert mission that had undertaken months of information gathering whilst blending into Kreston. The mission assigned on the last day of the Inter-magical tournament came to a close. Though not out of trouble yet, the man, in toe with possible allies, made his way down the forest as the thunderstorm intensified. 'I hope Cake followed the instruction I gave. There was a code inside that message – a big gamble. Come on, don't fail me now, Strategist," barely alive, the phone turned on – a blank message.