

## Death Magic 321

### Chapter 321: Roth

"You made it," stood with a luscious aura complimented by her skin-tight outfit. Courtney gave winks towards the boys who shamefully stared the floor.

"Don't overdo it, ma'am," said Yves as a way to calm her libido. The twin-sister, despite being part of Staxius, had embodied a very seductive and hungry personality. Young boys of which she imagined to be bathed in their blood, had her skin tingle.

"Sorry about that," unknown to the students, she got her mind to the task at hand. Approached at the group who gave off the feeling of abandoned kittens ; moved to somehow avoid her gaze.

"Welcome to Phantom's Airfield," said in a commanding voice, the rest stood behind Eira who didn't seem afraid.

"Is it just me?" interjected Simone, "-or does the lady resemble thy father?"

"Good eye there," said Courtney who heard the mumble, "-I'm Lord Haggard's twin-sister," attention grabbed, "-you will be flying on the TU-03. Another team shall be waiting at the Capital at the next stop."

Guided by guards, Class 2A with baggage loaded into the cargo bay were seated with treats and beverages. Courtney accompanied them for the flight. Readied, the plane taxied onto a more favorable line to then accelerate.

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"Have you seen the choppers and vehicles Phantom owns?" commented Tony who peered out of the hublot.

"You interested in military affairs?" asked Courtney who stepped closer.

"Yes, very much so," with a roar, the rotors went full throttle.

"My lady, should you not sit?" asked the boy in concern.

"No," she chuckled with the plane taking off, "-this is too easy to lose balance over." Confident, the nose lifted, though seated, the pressure had many pressed against the back. "See," in midair, "-no need to sit when one can resist the pressure," giving a wink, "-back to the matter, you said to be interested in arms."

Nodded, "-were those choppers the RS-F1 and 2?"

"Look at you," giving a clap, "-and correct. However, they're not the normal model for it was specially made to suit Phantom's need."

"What about the guns the guards carried, DV-43?"

“Wrong,” in came Elliot from the cargo bay, “-those were the DVR-32,” he smiled, “-the commercial version of the DV-43, that only a few of our guards have. DV-43 is only useful if the user can use mana; the DVR-32 uses gunpowder.”

“I see,” hands-on chin, “-what about your rifle?”

“Knightfall,” a hasty response, “-Cursed Series Zero.”

“Never heard of it,” shrugged Tony who peered out the window again.

“Don’t look so shocked,” consoled Courtney, “-Knightfall is a very old weapon. The kid might not know how powerful it truly is.”

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“If the weapon is old, surely one should replace it,” voiced Tony from a logical point of view.

“Don’t get me wrong,” turned Courtney with a sharp gaze, “-old as it may, Knightfall has the raw-power to destroy a tank.”

Frowned at the illogical prospect, Tony nodded to falsely acknowledge what was said.

Meanwhile, a few seats to the front, the girls were gathered around Eira who held a look of disdain.

“Tell us the scoop, how powerful is your father?” asked Kim.

“Pretty powerful,” a nonchalant response.

“Surely you must know,” voiced Mille with a desperate gaze, “-we might be nobles,” stared at the back, it seemed as if she peered out the plane and onto the airfield.

“Even for royalty, I don’t think that amount of wealth is humanly possible.” To which Kim took out a piece of paper, “-if I’m to calculate this correctly,” joined, Mille gave a few pointers, “-I’d guess around Five-million gold has been spent on that base alone.”

“Five million you said,” refuted Anastasia, “-all that cash could have been used to help the people in need,” mumbled, it eluded most.

“What did you say?” noticed Christina who lend a hand, “-is something the matter?” filled with genuine love and care, hard was it for the girl to act up.

“No,” rolling her eyes to stare outside, “-don’t worry, I’m fine,” less aggressive, she breathed softly.

Continued throughout the journey, Eira had herself into an interrogation whilst Tony and his friend were mystified by tales of war told by Elliot and Courtney. The rare grit and attention to detail of the description of death had Timothy clicking his tongue in disgust.

Seated at the main-guild named Roth per the adventurer’s request, Staxius worked in the company of Serene. The reason for being named Roth was simple, tis was a memorial for a true hero. The first fighter who gave his life protecting a family of two out in the forest. Fang-wolves, an evolution of the first generation. This kind bore crimson-colored tail; a pack of seven could easily tear a village to shreds. Tier 9-8 was the rank assigned for any mission concerning their extermination. The more the numbers, the high the tier; the highest gotten was Tier 5 as the quest detailed two packs of eight. Handled after a

hard and prolonged battle, Roth, died saving the villagers. Short has it been since the guild was put in place. Discussed with Xula, the issue of Arda being a single body came to be a difficult prospect. Division of land and resources had to be made; the representatives already ruled a piece of land, what needed was a cartographer. The argument made was, “-if we don’t have a firm grasp on where borders end and where villages stand. The guild will not be able to guarantee the survival of said people. I’m proposing the idea to better manage our forces. For the sake of our people, Arda needs to develop, not to pollute the land, no, but to ensure a better life for the youth.” Understood, the queen proposed to have the idea be discussed in the upcoming representative meet. At the moment, only the Capital named Astral could be defended. Most knew firmly where to stop and what monsters resided. On expedition, adventurers were paid a bonus if information about what kind of monsters fought was given. Hence began the List of Mobs.

[List One: Astral] – ranked by numbers opposed to strength;

1. Goblins.
2. Undead Army.
3. Fang wolf.
4. Evolved Bat – Bloodthirst.
5. Desal.
6. Bustorn.

Uncomplete, those were the six common monsters one was expected to fight around the forest of Astral. Goblins, excluding Hobs, were usually easy to kill if alone and stranded. Their horde and coordinated assault had many fearing for the repeat of the Massacre. Undead Army; unknown from where they came, soldiers of warriors buried and not burnt would rise again on the full-moon. A curse of which the scholars knew not who or how it was cast. The only way to kill was to defeat, then burn the remains else it would rise again.

Fang wolves hunted in packs, nocturnal for the most part, if one was during the day, chances of meeting one were slim. That was only if the pack had plenty to eat; wildlife in particular.

Evolved Bats- Bloodthirst, not a fitting name for they were ghouls in the shape of bats. Migrated from Noctis Hallow; servants of the Nightwalkers. Breed by infecting any other monsters; the curse of blood was what made them fearful. Nonhuman and beast alike, they preyed on monsters if only to quench their pallets. Bloodthirst was the name given to the beast cursed. As for Evolved Bats; it was just to say to be mindful of those creatures for they carried the curse to infect all in their wake.

Desal, a type of tree monsters for the lack of information. During the few encounters, Desal mimicked the appearance of a tree to lurk and kill, tis was the only piece to go off of.

Bustorn; same type as Desal though it could change its appearances to flowers and bushes. A single touch from its torn and one could expect an eternal sleep. Desal and Bustorn, were passive, monster who attacked only if provoked. The difficulty and tier ranking of the monsters were assigned per the description of the Quest. Higher the trouble, the more money one had to pay.

Separate from said list, lived another. Tier-6 Emerald and above: [Boss Class: Astral]

1. Dale [Tier-5 Ruby]
2. Helt [Tier-4 Bronze]
3. Ginzo [Tier-4 Bronze]
4. Fhelo [Tier-3 Silver]

Dale, a humanoid elemental spirit who had the skill of Absolute defense. Located at the east of Astral, guarding a mountain pass that led towards the outer town of Vale. The inhabitants of said place would always have to go around the mountain range, a journey that took 3 months could have been made in 2 if only the pass was safe. Killed, it would be revived after two weeks. Either asked, the guild never sent people to kill said monster. Minimum requirement: Tier-5 Ruby above and four parties of six. 24 in total. Since Ruby was a high already, Tier-8 Steel was allowed to participate only if they were in the party of Tier-5.

Helt, a snake that guarded the abandoned mines of Melo to the south. There was no reason to go out and have its head.

Ginzo, resident of the west, guardian of the lake of Malt. Recognized by being an ordinary crow who perched on the outer trees. The best example of not judging a book by its cover for it held power over Sound. A single screech sufficed to have many fall unconscious and devoured by the neighboring beasts.

Last but not least, Fhelo, a griffin that came from the southwest. Land of another major mountain-range. The place wasn't exposed for the journey took more than 4 months. Residing at the same peak under which Dale protected, the griffin rarely attempted human life. Hunting on animals, a few unfortunate adventurers who fought Dale were wiped in a single gust of wind.

Though only a part of Arda, Monster problem reined more outside the reach of Astral. Thus, the reason for a clearer map with all the towns and villages displayed. The plan to extend the guild to the other part was a long time coming.

"Guild Master," spoke Serene with a fearless gaze, "-I've gotten the message that Class-2A will be landing soon."

"Good," stood with a sharp movement, "-I've gone over the Mob List. Have Bustorn be brought down to Tier-8. I don't think they're of many concern," reached for the coat-hanger, "-let's continue this later."  
\*Click,\* curtains shut with a press, Serene reached for her coat as well.

???Class 2A is here. The girls are more interested in alchemy than fighting. Either way, what they learn here will be my responsibility,' outside the Roth, they walked to the other guilds behind which trained new adventurers.

"Guild Leader," marched with a disciple, her cloudy white fur had many beastmen staring with a contented gaze.

"Lady Nufry," stopped, "-a pleasure to see thee again," formal, they exchanged nods.

"Is it true the princess Eira will be joining the guild as temporary adventurers?" she asked seeking confirmation.

"Yes," blinked, "-have you not read the report?"

"I have, though I thought his majesty, with no disrespect, to be a little overprotective," her ears twitched.

Taken aback, he frowned to then smile, "-Eira is very much my daughter. Worrying is a normal feeling, still, preventing her growth due to mine feeling is selfish. Not that it matters," breathed, "-I'll have the students down for basic training. I'm hopeful that lady Nufry shan't have a lack of resolve. Treat the princess as you would any other fighter, tis an order."

"Lack of resolve," she laughed in a scary manner forcing the bystanders to turn away in fear, "-that will not be of any concern. I'll have her trained to fight monsters, count on it."

"Tis in thy control," he held out a hand, to which she accepted.

'The time is here,' walked to the top in the company of Serene, '-fighting in a training arena and the real world is much more different. I hope that you are to not give up.' Unable to use mana as the Death Element was harmed during Avon's rebirth; teleportation was out of the picture. Nevertheless, a portal to the overseer's room stood at the ready on the first floor.

#### Chapter 322: Exchange

"We're arriving shortly," came through the intercoms. Outside, from flatlands to then suddenly greenery onto miles to see, the plane entered Arda. All-around as if natural barriers, mountain ranges some with snowy peaks and without stood at the ready. Towards the front, a massive tree, unable to be quantified stretched up into the heavens. Branches the size of roads, the plane slowed in speed.

"Are we to live in a tree?" asked Anastasia with a chuckle.

"Don't get too excited," voiced Eira, "-as we're still quite a way off." Confused, the already immense size kept on increasing without stop. A few minutes later, one could not see past its trunk.

"What is this?" asked Timothy with a fatigued face.

"Everybody calm down," spoke Courtney for the noise grew annoying, "-sit, we'll be landing soon."

"There they are," pointed Serene with a short dress and furred coat. Buttoned, the latter hid her dress giving an illusion of not wearing anything.

"I see," emotionless, none knew of what he felt. Deep inside, the magical element found it hard to produce mana. Each time it tried; the mind was hit with a wave of pain. 'Pathetic,' he thought as the plane grew closer, '-regeneration should not take that long. If fighting is involved, I'll have to fight with my weapons without augmentation. Blood-Arts might be overkill,' lost, Serene gave a quick elbow.

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"Are they here?" he coughed.

“No,” said with a half-hearted smile, the feeling was one of sternness. A blue canvas painted with spots of white, the sky behind was one of utter beauty. Birds could not be seen so up high. If one were to stare off the edge, the ground would not be seen. So high that clouds were visible. Unable to touch, tis was what people referred to as fog. Sliced through the air, the TU-03 slowed to then have a vertical landing.

Accompanied by a few guards, butlers, and Serene, Staxius waited patiently with warm clothes. A signet ring with the Ardanian crest rested on his left pinky. Tis was the only visible jewelry he wore. Official documents normally required a seal from the crest followed by a signature. In that respect, the ring was but a mere tool. Adorned with smooth precious stones, very flashy. Ordinarily, said trinket would have only served the purpose of being a stamp. Ordinarily that was for Staxius had imbued the ring with magic. A shield that blocked physical and elemental attack with a single press on its back-side.

Mindful to not stand close of the edges, the guards waited as one unit behind the King. Nearly blown off the platform, the wind off the TU-03 came to hastily stop.

“Here they come,” said Serene, “-be at the ready,” palm opened, the guards were on alert.

Opened with a tsst, the staircase lowered. First exited Courtney who held a stern face.

“Be on our best behavior, she said,” whispered Fletcher intimidated by what he saw outside. To which the boys rectified their posture and allowed the ladies to get out first.

“Very windy,” said Kim who held her hat in place as the gust blew hard.

“Wait here,” gestured Courtney. One by one, her classmates stood in line. Two groups were formed, one male and one female. Cold to the point of shivering, hard was it to keep a firm stance.

“Class 2A of Claireville Academy,” spoke Serene, “-state thy name.” Standard procedure for entering another province, especially when one of the Monarch was present.

“Kim Lone Franquet.” curtsied, the others followed.

“Christina Valerie.”

“Mille Stalin.”

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“Ysmay Mallkin.”

“Anastasia Whitstar.”

“Eira Haggard,” same curtsy, the boys came next. A moment many dreaded for commoners didn’t know etiquette. Bearing down on them with judgment eyes, Arda was known for being very unforgiving when it came to manners.

“Timothy Clark,” hands on chest, he bowed.

“Fletcher Vega,”

“Harold Cumber,”

“Simone Style,”

“Tony Parker,” mimicking how Timothy introduced himself, a stroke of genius from Fletcher who had no idea how to act. Completed, they stared Serene who held a tablet, checked off one by one, “-that’s everyone, majesty,” bowed in turn, Staxius walked forth. Eyeing from left to right and not bothering to notice Eira, “-Welcome to Arda, Class 2A. Director Josiah told me that thee wished to study under Kniq,” deep and commanding, a strong posture, “-Kniq has been dismissed as an official guild. To suit thy needs, we came to the arrangement of having thy class study in Arda.” Glanced over to Serene, she nodded and approached, “-have preparations for their stay been made?”

“Yes, your grace,” replied the secretary.

“Excellent,” glancing one another the students were confused about what he meant by stay. “Thou seem a little perplexed,” he said with no particular emotion, “-arrangements have been for thee to have a peaceful night of rest.” On those words, Serene gestured the servants, “-please, this way ladies,” courteously, maids escorted the girls further inside.

“As for you boys,” peering over them, “-Youst, the head butler, shall teach thee a little lesson on how to act when meeting the Queen. The lesson of having a good posture seems to have sunken well.” Shuddered, breaths, let alone words couldn’t be formulated. “There’s no need to be alarmed, follow what he says to the letter and it is sure to be fine.”

“This way,” voiced Youst. To each their own, separate, the girls and boys had differing room to stay the night.

“Majesty,” called Serene, “-you sure are evil.”

“Don’t say so, I’m only giving them a good night’s rest till the real challenge begins.”

“I take back what I said, evil isn’t the correct word, I’d choose sadistic.”

“Guess my job is done here,” said Courtney who folded her arms.

“Yes, I’ll notify when to return. For now, concentrate on the production of our merchandise. And ask Cake to focus on changing the hangar.”

“Alright,” nonchalantly, “-rest up, brother,” she smiled, “-the element isn’t looking so good,” parted on those words, \*thump,\* shot back, the vision grew blurry, losing balance, “-majesty,” aided by Serene, “-are you alright?”

“I do apologize,” forced, “-I feel lightheaded. It’s the lack of air,” a convenient excuse.

“I see,” an eyebrow raised, “-why not take the day off. Most of the work at the guild has been handled, take care, majesty.”

“Thank you,” firm, he climbed down the stairs inside the tree. ‘What a pain, I haven’t felt this bad in ages. Constant nausea, that experiment with Avon took more out of me than I thought.’

“Hello Staxius,” in came a strange voice, eyes opened to a clock.

“Creation?” hovered, ‘-what happened?’

“Good to see that you’re awake,” stood in what seemed to be a girl’s room, space and stars swapped for white and pink decal room with flowers scattered all over, Creation held out a hand.

“Why am I here?” grabbing her hand, he sat upright with the vision sharpening.

“Another mission,” said Creation with a little girl scribbling in a color book, “-you are to go and take care of a low-tiered god in Ingyn’s realm.”

“Sure,” stood with a tired face, “-the angel sure looks peaceful,” a remark to the toddler. No response, only a wave followed by a white mist.

\*BANG,\* smacked against a marble brick wall, blood splattered across as if a piece of art, or a bucket o’ paint thrown on a canvas. ‘What just happened?’ cheers and applause echoed, blurry vision, ‘-my hand,’ sat against the wall, ‘-the pentagram, it’s emanating smoke.’

“I guess you were right, Lord Death,” sat around in a coliseum, “-the next god of death isn’t that strong.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he refuted, “-Zeus, you might be the Supreme God; I’m sure that proving thy strength is nothing but a snap of the finger. Utter control of lightning must be nice,” legs crossed, “-the wielders of death magic don’t have that luxury. We’re bound to always lose something sooner or later. My prodigy did break the curse of starting over, yet, the curse of misfortune bears heavy. Sooner or later, he’ll come to that realization, what we fight isn’t the other, what we protect isn’t the world. The answer is simple, no matter how much despises us, death will always be superior to God’s. Tis the truth without facades.”

Held by the neck, Staxius lost air quick, the opponent, a champion of Zeus named Nemo; the strongest competitor out of the arena had the god of death on the edge of defeat.

“From what I see, Haggard isn’t that strong,” snickered Zeus who had a legion of maids feeding him fruits. Down to the first row, Lixbin held a conceited smirk, ‘-no matter how much one beats down on the god of death,’ \*bouf,\* the sound of a punch echoed around silencing the cheers, “-he’ll always win.”

‘Damn you Creation,’ breathing heavy, Staxius had managed to land a punch after which Nemo fell to the floor. ‘She fooled me into fighting for the pleasures of the other gods, what the heck...’ \*Smack,\* Nemo gave a chop to the opponent’s ankle. A disgusting muffled crack had most queasy. Broken, he fell to the floor with the head bouncing off the arena.

“So much for always winning,” whispered Mi, a new goddess to have joined the Eipea Empire.

“Well, I never said I knew the future,” laughed Lixbin.

“I guess so,” unimpressed, the match continued. It had been more than five hours; Staxius was killed more than a few times. Yet, unable to return a strike; the death element kept on aching. \*SMACK,\* opposite the first wall, the body sunk deep.

“What do you say to end the match?” proposed Zeus with a smirk.

“I suppose it’s for the best,” said in a disappointed tone, ‘-you’re not ready yet. If one can’t overcome the strain of unleashing one’s true strength, then thou might as well be naught.’

“Victor; Champion of Zeus, NEMO!”



No applause nor cheers, for the only viewer was Lixbin and a few. Broken bones, loss of blood, no mana to speak whatsoever, a complete defeat. Dragged, “-get him to the spring of regeneration,” ordered Zeus. Fluttered over to aid, Staxius’s body disappeared without the chance to rest.

‘Weak still,’ face down on a pink bed, ‘-I guess I forgot to say that unleashing the last level of Nevermore directly is as pushing high-pressured water down a tiny hole. Self-destruction, not that it’s any of my fault. You’re weak, partner. An Archangel has been summoned onto thy realm. I wonder if you’ll be able to fight, only the death element will be able to heal itself.’

\*COUGH,\* ‘-what happened?’ no strength left in the arms nor legs, the head remained bound to the head. ‘-I’m back in our room. I don’t sense anyone. How long has it been, I fought against a champion named Nemo. Weird that I don’t have a recollection of the fight itself, did I lose?’ asked, pain constantly bombarded the mind and body. ‘The body of a god, are you serious. How absurd was that statement, if this vessel can’t handle the power of Nevermore, then what hope is there?’

“Is he ok?” asked out in the hall, Xula paced towards the throne room followed Rosetta.

“I have no idea, majesty. Patrolling elves found him passed out on one of the linking bridges.”

“Tis similar to when Adete came to tell us about the sudden pull of the trigger,” inside the room, a few representatives of which controlled factions of the Guild stood at the ready. ‘What has happened to you, Staxius. I don’t feel that much aura oozing out thy element. Preparations have to be made for the exchange program, better get up soon, King.’

Stuck facing the ceiling, the mind wandered in and out of conscience. ‘Is the curse of misfortune active? What could be the cause of why the death element destroyed itself. I can’t complain, if it was left for me to develop, in no way could I have assimilated the divine mana. Nevermore isn’t the reason; if I’ve glossed over a crucial matter then I’m more of an idiot than I think.’

Chapter 323: Welcome to Arda

Dressed in more suitable attire, class 2A made its way towards the throne room. Before that, the servants gave a summary of how to present oneself before the queen. Shaking in their boots with overwhelming reluctance, the students approached.

“Stop shivering,” voiced Simone towards Fletcher.

Frowned, “-I’m not shivering,” staring over the shoulder, “-I’m just cold that’s all.”

“Cold you say,” chuckled Timothy nervously, “-do pardon my presumption, thee do seem to sweat from the forehead,” a cheeky remark that had the others grinning.

Up ahead of the boys, walked the first with sharp posture and dignity. Nobles were of a class of their own. Eira led the way for she knew the palace in and out. It came as a surprise to see that the portals didn’t link to the Overseer’s room. Else, it opened into passageways and room similar to a normal castle.

“I fear the coming meet,” said Kim who straightened her round glasses.

“Is the Queen harsher than the King?” asked Christina who twirled a lock of hair around her index. A subconscious way to keep the mind busy.

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"Have thee not met her during the closing ceremony?" asked Eira with a cold expression.

"Not that I remember, no," voiced Mille with her hands wrapped around itself.

"I suppose I must apologize?" spoken, another massive door came with haste.

"Mind thyselfes," voiced Rosetta who had the door opened with a single press. Magic opposed to technology, a silent unlock. Stood in order, guards stretched onto till the podium where sat a mysterious figure. Along the red carpet, glances towards the first floor showed people in expensive coats and attire peering down with wine glasses. Towards the left, in a corner, a few shadowy figures were grouped. They seemed to only speak in one another's ears.

"Majesty," bowed Rosetta, "-I've brought our guests." Led to this instant, pressure turned into a fog that had spread throughout the throne room. What they saw wasn't the grandiose décor or show of prestige, through said mist; a single-window atop which glared the queen.

"Majesty," knelt Eira with a lowered gaze.

"Majesty," said the others who did the same. Nods of acknowledgment were given by the judgmental nobles. They who were adamant on any intruder to be very respectful of their monarch had no trouble.

"Raise thy heads," ordered she who held power. Dressed beautifully in a radiating dress of which the shoulders had frills running up and down the sleeve. Ending with a white glove and rings, her eyes were as green as the leaves on a bright Sunday morning. Far from being combed, the hair was left to be long and straight.

One by one, they stared to only avert her gaze and admire the tapestry behind. Changed depending on the occasion, the wall behind the throne could be either wall of flowers, tapestries, and even portraits. Today was one that had the sun as the main attention, the light radiated towards shadows who rose from a canyon.

"Welcome to Arda," stood sharply, Simone gasped. Few cold gazes could be felt on the back, gulped, the attention turned to the queen.

"Today thee will stay as guests of the royal family. A buffet has been organized and we also host a hot spring. Relax and have some fun, I do warn thee from venturing outside the castle. An alliance might be in place, some of the more extreme pro-Ardanians are yet to calm their thirst for vengeance."

"As you wish, majesty," voiced Eira who held a fearful gaze. First was it to have witnessed Xula's cold and harsh personality.

Blinked helplessly, "-all questions are to be sent to King Staxius for he's in charge of thine class," elegantly stepped off her seat, "-Rosetta, make sure that they don't cause trouble," an order overheard by a few students alone. Still knelt, the nobles teleported away, soon, the guards would march leaving only two.

"Stand up," spoke Rosetta, "-good job," her ears rose, the head tilted followed by a comforting smile.

“Man, that was tough,” hands behind his back, Tony lounged on the red carpet, “-the queen of Arda is as beautiful as she is scary.”

“Say that twice,” interjected Simone who fully laid on the floor; chandeliers resembling stars were hung. Not intent of speaking, Fletcher, Harold, and Timothy were content to just catch their breaths.

“Eira, is thy mother that cold?” asked Christina with warm eyes.

“I dare not say,” she smiled, “-hot and cold, I’m sure Queen Shanna had her reasons.”

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Approached without sound nor presence, “-relieved?” peered down, Staxius held a grin.

“Majesty,” sat upright, Tony’s face changed to dread. The yell had the others turned in fear.

“Rest assured,” posture straightened, “-it’s normal to get the cold-shoulder at first. Tis how we of Arda perceive people. The more of a good impression that is made, the warmer the feeling will return. Treat people as thou’d want to be treated,” held out, Tony accepted and took Staxius’s hand to then be pulled. “I know that it’s intimidating to be in a foreign kingdom without humans around. Believe me, I found it frightening at first,” spoken gently, the tenseness subsided.

“What do you mean at first, majesty?” asked Kim as the class grouped around.

“I forgot to say,” deep breaths with a grin, “-I was a student of Claireville Academy around a decade ago.”

“Around a decade ago?” asked Mille, “-thou doth not seem that old.”

“Flattery shan’t get you favor,” chuckled, “-I’m very much thirty-six, I think.”

“You said at first, that implied that his majesty was human or still is human?” interjected Timothy.

“Astute, that is correct. I was human for my birth town was Krigi of Old. I grew up in a warzone, and I think that Eira did the same. We both grew on the battlefield, subjected to watch as people were left for dead.”

“Majesty,” called Youst, “-the meal is running cold.”

“Let’s follow the conversation later.”

“As you wish, majesty,” simultaneous, he left in the company of Serene.

“Quite a change in persona, from the helipad to now, the King is very interesting a man,” added Anastasia who spoke for the first time. “What’s the matter?” she asked with a squint for her classmate stared with smug faces.

“Nothing that particular,” whispered Ysmay, “-it’s that that you didn’t lash out and cause a problem,” finished Christina.

“How dare you,” fist clenched, “-thee speak as if I but create issues every time might mouth is opened,” shrugged away, she breathed a humph of dismissal.

“Right...” in harmony, they exchanged glances to then burst in laughter.

“This way,” called Rosetta.

Arrived safely; schedules for upcoming days were handled inside the Alchemic tower. Head to the desk, the eyes closed for a moment of rest. Papers of which had hypotheses on mana manipulation were all around. Yet, a feeling of unrest remained. One that one felt after their parents would give the famed disappointed gaze. Worse than being told off and far deadlier than the death-stare mothers innately possessed. ‘Should I continue fighting?’ wondered, ‘-my element is strong. Yet, despite defeating Intherna, I still can’t fulfill the quest of making a puppet army. Avon was my first successful attempt. Quite presumptuous of me to have taken all the strain. There must be a way to reduce backlash. I don’t have an idea, my brain feels heavy, I can’t see the chessboard. No premonition, no deduction on what is to come. I can’t even read the emotions of people. Hopefully, nothing of major consequence happens.’

Few hours went by, the students of class 2A were given a good meal, a warm bath for those who wished, and unrestricted access to the castle. Rooms were also prepared, rooms that overlooked towards the right of the castle. There on, the buildings stretched on without end. Hard to believe that they were inside a tree for the sky matched the outside. A cycle of day and night, if one was to never step out of the tree; in no way could they have guessed that they were inside. As for the stairs that reached around the trunk, a barrier was cast to stop the light from blinding the climbers. Next to it, two upward portals of the size of a house were built.

“Majesty?” the door to the Alchemic tower knocked.

“What is it?” head on the desk, he rose to have a line running across the cheek.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure, enter,” he voiced.

“Lizzie has been crying for the past five minutes,” spoken in a shaken tone, Rosetta stood with her head bowed.

“What about the queen?”

“She has tried to change and feed the baby, all but naught, sire, all but naught.”

“Where are they?”

“Inside the royal chambers.”

“Do check on the students and call for Eira,” stood, “-I’ll use the portal.” Entered, Rosetta closed the door to the tower.

\*Wahh, wahhh,\* reached to the outside, “-Xula?” the door opened and shut rather abruptly.

“There you are,” held in a cradle with milk smeared over her cheeks, “-she’s acting up for god knows what reason.”

“Ahh,” approached, a darkish hue emanated from her head, “-can you not see the mist?”

“What mist?” perplexed, she frowned in suspicion.

'That answers my question.'

"You asked for me?" the door opened with Eira stood shyly.

"Does a father need a reason to meet his daughter?" smiled Staxius who held the crying babe, "-come ???ere already," he gestured.

"Don't mind me," closed behind, she sprawled into the Queen's arms. "Mother, you're a scary queen."

"Awh," embraced tightly, "-I'm sorry," she patted her head, "-I'll always be your loving mother first," to which Eira received a heartfelt kiss on the forehead.

'Lizzie's a bit out of control,' eyes closed, the Mana-lines were blurrier than normal. 'Her magical affinity has reached a new level. She'll soon have her element. I guess all that mana being pushed through such a tiny gateway will eventually break the latter.' Lit in amazement, "-how could I be such an idiot."

"Father?"

"Staxius?"

"I opened the gate too suddenly; the mana is already powerful as is. Forcing it onto the gateway resulted in how I am now," smiled, "-thank you Lizzie," \*mwah.\* \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* finger cut, a spell was written across the babe's chest.

"What are you doing?"

"Father, that looks dangerous, are you sure Lizzie is fine?"

"I'm no fool to have my daughter in danger," now on the bed, the chest lit with ancient writings. "The problem was that her magical affinity overgrew the gateway. The spell is a mana absorption conduit; it will take away the excess and channel it into something the body requires."

"And what does it require?" asked Eira with an unimpressed visage.

"Have you forgotten that I'm a certified alchemist, I've learned what it means to be a doctor. Though I haven't practiced much on human patients; when it comes to Mana, I've more understanding than anyone else."

"That's rather overconfident, don't you think?" voiced Eira again.

"Don't," interjected Xula, "-trust thy father. He's done the unimaginable, to manipulate the atmosphere's mana without a conduit."

"No," taking a strong step back, "-I don't believe it," her face flushed with fear, "-NO WAY." Cries from the babe returned to silence, her eyes opened to then closed into sleep.

"Told you," smirked Staxius, "-she'll be fine."

"Father, I want to believe, though, controlling the Mana from nature is unthinkable. Tis as if ruling over the very laws of nature. None must have that power; it could turn the entire planet into a catastrophe. Tis the lifeforce that has all living being alive and well, a mere distortion could have ripples, which turns to waves, and then a tsunami."

“Your refusal is understandable; I do know the risks involved,” off the bed, “-the research is at its infancy,” he stood with Xula by his side, “-the world will not break, the laws of nature wouldn’t be meddled with. What I seek is the same power of an elemental spirit; the power to draw and convert the raw essence of life into something humans can harvest.”

“Virtuous as it may be,” now at the door, “- I refuse to acknowledge one to have such power of nature,” slammed shut, she ran.

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“Guess she’s at that stage?” asked with an eyebrow raised, Xula had a few misgivings of what was said.

“I suppose...”

Chapter 324: Temporary ranks

Footsteps echoed till the door sprung open, “-Eira, is something the matter?” asked Ysmay as she panted.

“N-no really,” gasping for air, Ysmay reached over to give a comforting hand. Over towards the middle of the room rested a round table with the girls sat around. Filled with pastries, maids stood at the ready for any request.

“Let’s settle down,” she offered.

“Come, the cake is good,” said Mille with cream over her cheek.

“Do mind thy manners,” fired Anastasia who proceeded to wipe the cream off.

“Come on, sit,” smiled Christina with a sister feel.

“Thanks,” said the princess who joined the feast.

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Accompanied by Youst, Tony and the others wanted to have a tour of the military grounds. Though on the gravel floor, the castle hosted a training area towards the right. Hidden amidst trees, none would have figured said place existed.

“As you see, the ground is unoccupied. Her majesty had the guards moved the barracks down to the ground floor. The clashing of swords perturbed her enjoyment of an afternoon nap.”

“Too bad,” voiced Simone with a stretch.

“Still can’t believe we’re inside a tree,” commented Timothy with the head turns to the sky.

“Yeah, I agree,” mumbled Harold, “-there’s a differing atmosphere here. It’s as if nature itself is free to do what she wants.”

“A soothing environment, I get why barracks would destroy the sense of freedom,” interjected Fletcher, “-the place is so different from what we’re used to.”

“Should we head back?” asked Youst, “-not that it’s of any of my concern, it’d be best to take as much time as one can to rest. Tis a piece of advice from a humble butler; the coming days are to be feared.” Confused to what was said, the advice about taking rest sunk.

Saturday the 7th came around. Risen by the chirping of birds, Class 2A made their way to the dining hall where a heavy breakfast awaited. “Good morning,” voiced the King in a differing outfit.

“Morning majesty,” replied, the focus was on food opposed to who sat where. Dressed in a reminiscing grey-uniform-suit, breakfast ended after a few minutes. Xula still slept for the prior night was strenuous. A conversation turned into an interrogation, questions concerning the Mana Research had the king in peril. One after the other, it kept going on and on till the mind refused to answer anymore.

Finished and dressed in trainee uniform, the class stood before the entrance of the castle. “Here we are,” said Staxius who exited with butlers carrying baggage.

“Pardon my asking, could thee elaborate?” asked Tony in a respectful tone.

“Is it not obvious, thou art moving out of the castle,” voicing a smirk, “-Youst should have warned thee before. The program starts today.” Joyfully stepping down the stairs, “-welcome to Arda.” Looks of despair were exchanged behind his back.

“Now then,” stood facing the students, “-I was asked to do as I see fit,” beside metalized Serene in a bat-shaped mist. “You will be treated the same as the adventurers, no special treatment nor favors, if you fail, thou art going to return to Hidros,” the gentle tone emphasized greatly how the path ahead was treacherous.

“I’ll take over from here,” said Serene after which Staxius left.

“More details will be given at the guild. For now, come with me,” said strictly with luggage at their feet, Serene led the way.

“Guess it’s started,” smiled Simone.

“Yeah, I’m excited,” sparkled as given a candy, Tony sprawled with anticipation.

“Crazed-headed fool,” whispered Anastasia.

“I’m glad to not have brought that much stuff,” remarked Kim who peered towards Christina.

“Shut it,” she said, “-a lady must be prepared for everything.”

“Being prepared and hoarding are two different matters,” quipped Mille.

The stone brick path of a meticulous arrangement diverged into many streets. Taking a left, the group headed to a relay point. Walking till the edge would take hours due to its size. Tame and without noise, the area around felt nice. Lovely buildings reminiscent of the Ardanian craftsmanship.

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“Lady Serene, could I ask a question?”

“Go on, Timothy.”

“Is there a reason that a lovely place such as this seems to be dead?”

“Observant,” smiled the lady, “-monsters are to blame. A fissure caused goblins to shelter around in buildings over yonder,” she pointed to the left, “-referred to as little devils, the inhabitants soon moved away. Only the area in front of the castle is touched by the monsters. Specially trained guards make rounds every few hours as a precaution.”

Sunk deep, the lesson remained. Stepped into a cottage-like building, a portal stood with an old lady handling the desk.

“Good morning, Great mother,” said Serene with a bow.

“Good morning to you as well,” from studying the newspaper, she lowered her glasses to have a better look, “-Princess Eira.”

“Hello, Great mother.”

“Why do you stay so shyly, come here.”

Respectfully, the princess obeyed her whim, “-look at you,” instantly pinching her cheeks, “-do pay granny a visit sometime,” cheeks bright red, the Great Mother let go to reach for her drawer. “Lollipops for thee and thy friends.”

Bustling with activity, the populous walked without fear. At the market square of the ground floor, Roth stood a few streets away. Fruit baskets, kids in cute clothing ran around mimicking spring birds. Mothers gossiped with one another, a poor fellow professed his love with a waggle of the tail and an entire roasted pig. “Don’t dilly-dally, we’ve somewhere to be,” voiced Serene who had an inkling of interest at how the proposal would turn out.

“My lady, could we please see how this unfolds?” requested Eira.

“Sure,” reason being her curiosity.

Knelt at one of the meats selling stalls, a beastman with features of a cat had proposed to a demi-human with cat-features. “Me-ow lady, for long have I seen thy whiskers flutter at sunrise. Admits the full moon, I’ve admired from afar as you had milk under the pearly white stars. Would thou make me the luckiest cat in Astral?”

“Sorry,” refused the lady, “-I wish not to break thy heart. Come to the trader’s guild if thou art to throw the pig away.”

“HAHA,” cheered the crowd, “-If it isn’t our local heart-breaker, LADY HARU.”

“That’s so sad,” commented Christina.

“Haru Gel,” spoke Serene, “-she’s one of the representatives sitting at the Ardanian council. We best continue.” In jest, the boys bowed their head as if to pay respects. Moved along the town, the cheerful visage of the people had the class blissful. Smiles of the townsfolk meant a good and just rule. Roth soon came in view with adventurers of bigger build stood in a queue.



“Lady Serene,” many bowed at her sight. As for the students, some glared, some had killing intent, and other overly self-conscious. Survival instinct from when one was faced with the unknown.

“Look at this place,” said Tony. Spacious and technologically advanced for screens on where displayed quest details hung around. The middle was filled by people in search of work.

“Over here,” climbed till the 5th floor, a spacious meeting room with Staxius already sat facing an interface.

“You’ve made it,” he said with a wave, the screen vanished, “-please, take a seat,” offered, the students soon sat along a big rectangular table. Windows to the left held a good view. Unknown to what would happen, they waited for it was all that could be done. A flick of the wrist later, blue light dashed at the wall, \*tsst,\* in a sparkle, another display came in view.

“Let’s begin the meet,” he said. “First and foremost, I’d like to hear thy opinion on what you think must be done.”

“Speaking on the girl’s behalf, we requested for Kniq since of the opportunity to learn Alchemy. We can study opposed to training as the other guilds,” ended Kim with a smile.

“And the boys?”

“Excluding Timothy, I think that it would be a great honor to be trained by Xenos.”

“Fighting and studying. What about you Eira?”

“Both?” she said nonchalantly, “-I don’t see the reason to separate them both. The study of magic is ultimately a necessity for becoming strong.”

“Good point,” smiled the Guild Master. “Tis decided, Class 2A will be evaluated to then be trained by one of four guilds. Traders, Smiting, Mages, and Fighters. Ranks given will be temporary and not official for thou aren’t affiliated with Arda. Except for Eira, your rank will matter, consider this a test from the monarch. I wish to see first-hand the progress made in Claireville Academy. Serene, please have them evaluated,” to which she led the way. Pressure added, they climbed to the fourth floor.

“Is it necessary to be that harsh on her?” asked Adete who had remained in the front pocket.

“I need to see her results for myself. The tournament is impressive. Still, it didn’t test her raw potential.”

A floor below, one by one, ranks were assigned by machine.

Eira Haggard: Tier 7 – Sapphire.

Ysmay Mallkin: Tier 10 – Porcelain.

Anastasia Whitstar: Tier 10 – Porcelain.

Kim Lone Franquet: Tier 9 – Obsidian.

Christina Valerie: Tier 10 – Porcelain.

Mille Stalin: Tier 10 – Porcelain.

Timothy Clark: Tier 10 – Porcelain.

Fletcher Vega: Tier 9 – Obsidian.

Harold Cumber: Tier 9 – Obsidian.

Simone Styles: Tier 9 – Obsidian.

Tony Parker: Tier 8 – Steel.

“A good balance of Tier 9 and 8. How about the selection of guild,” paper slid across the table, “-take a good look and read.”

Mages Guild: Leader – Ryul Traxina. Focused on the art of mage and theory, the mages guild trains adventurers who are to become supportive allies on the battlefield.

Traders Guild: Leader – Haru Gel. Geared towards the dealings and trade of items. The guild is home to many businesses.

Smiting Guild: Leader – Skokdrag. Learn about the gritty methodology of metallurgy and craftsmanship.

Fighters Guild: Leader – Mieshre Nufry. Obedience and discipline, grow strong and lead the front line of the assault. True heroes are people who risk themselves to save others.

“Excuse me, guild master, but are we only allowed to choose one of the four?” asked Simone with a troubled gaze.

“What about training under Xenos?” asked Tony with a rather harsh tone.

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“What about learning alchemy?” asked Kim who didn’t seem pleased with the events.

“Silence,” yelled Serene who had bats flying all over, “-don’t cause a scene.”

“Class 2A,” spoken in a shady voice, “-do you think that highly of thyself? The highest-ranked amongst you is Tier-7, the winner of the inter-magical tournament. Where does that leave thee who art in the lower tiers.” Sharp, the words cut deep.

“We apologize.”

“How about a deal, here in Arda, adventurers are only allowed to go on a quest if either the mages or fighter’s guild has given their stamp of approval. It takes on average a month or two for any candidate to be accepted. You have a week, get recognized by the guild leaders and I’ll have a masterclass on the basics. We may also go on a Boss killing quest. It all depends on how well you perform. Show me what is meant to be called A-ranked students.”

“YES, GUILD MASTER,” shouted Tony, “-if we do as you’ve conditioned then we’ll go on that kill quest.”

“Do I have to repeat myself?”

“NO SIR,” decision made, they stormed out full of motivation.

“A regiment of one month in one week, are you pulling my leg?”

"I doubt any of them to be able to pass. Maybe Eira and Tony, the rest seem to not be interested. One week is but an excuse for me to recover. They'll get some good training out of it, tis the whole point of the visit."

Rushed down the hall, "-this is exciting," laughed Tony.

"Yeah, I can't wait," smiled Mille.

"Here I thought we came to have a gentle time to study," taking out staff from her belt, "-guess trainee mages do have to fight," sighed Kim. Thus, began the training of Class 2A. Little did they know that this trip to Arda would forever change their lives. Troubled brew in the north as well as the border of Kreston. Many players were readied to make their move, Gergusser had a premonition; one of an avalanche. Gazed the window with a hum from Adete, Staxius stood oblivious to how the province would soon react.

#### Chapter 325: Ardanian's Guild

"What guild are you going for?" tis was the real question asked by Anastasia who held a look of hate. Stood on the stairs before reaching the ground floor, Tony abruptly stopped.

"Watch your step," said Harold who had been running after him.

"Sorry," he faced the others, "-what guild should I choose?"

"My friend," in came Timothy, "-that is entirely up to you," bearing a smug face, he took charged and stepped off.

"You seem to have made thy mind," refuted Mille who skipped down, "-tell us o' mister the genius," a quip that had him on edge.

"Is it not obvious, the Mage's guild," he shrugged.

"Hey," behind teleported a lady, "-don't you run off again," said scarily, Timothy gulped.

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"Lady Serene," he turned with a nervous grin, "-it w-wasn't my intention."

"Neither was it mind to run after kids," placing her hand atop his head, "-I've yet to taste the blood of a noble-boy," a lick of the lips had him trembling.

"Please, I'd only taste of meat and fruit," an unwilling response that had the class holding breaths to not laugh.

"Jokes aside," a grin portrait itself, "-have thee decided what guilds to join?"

"Yes," one by one, they decided with confident gazes, the remark of Eira being the strongest had lit a fire underneath all. One that would further push them into breaking current limits.

Down the road towards the left, four buildings stood as if guardians. They were of better make than what could be seen around. In awe, faces wandered from left to right in appreciation of a different world.

\*Traders Guild,\* written in bold black next to an illustration of gold pieces carved into the board, the door opened with bells. Stalls of various merchants stood in rows of five throughout the room. A mini-market inside the buildings, “-this is where one can find the majority of items and order special loot by the counter at the back,” said Serene who showed the workings.

“Wolf fang, spiders’ eye, and witches’ fingers come one come all,” shouted a merchant with an obnoxious smile.

“Be mindful of crooks,” voiced Serene as they ghosted past the stall, “-there are many merchants who fake what is sold. It isn’t against the law nor rules.”

“Is that not false advertisement?” said Kim in a confused tone.

“That’s a punishable offense,” added Anastasia through her tensed lips.

“Reminder, where are we?”

“Right,” they said with a nod, \*Reception,\* came in view with posters about the potential business at Town Eden.

“Lady Serene,” came a joyful voice through the counter behind which hosted a multitude of carton boxes atop shelves. Workers could be seen carrying, loading, and unloading items, “-what brings you here?” soon after a lady with a towel wrapped around her face stepped into light.

“Guild Leader,” smiled Serene.

“Are these lovelies from Arda, Class 3A?” she asked bent with an elbow on the counter.

“No, Class 2A,” corrected an assistant who carefully glanced her bottom.

“Whatever,” she said with a humph, “-what brings you lot here?”

“A visit to show these adventurers what to know before going on quests.”

“A visit,” vaulted, “-Haru Gel is hereby Serene’s assistant,” she winked.

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“Please,” sighed the secretary, “-I’ve no idea how the Guild Master deals with you.” Not paying heed, Haru closely examined the female students, especially their breasts and hips.

“Underdeveloped,” she took a step back with hands on her chin, “-not you though,” narrowed eyed to Christina, she covered her chest. “I’m also in the business of dealing with panties, would like some?” she asked with a cheerful smile. Spoken loudly, the bystanders turned attention to Haru.

“Drop it,” smiled Serene with a murderous gaze.

“Fine, let’s get serious. The trader’s guild is self-explanatory, we deal in anything that has the potential to bring money. We buy and sell depending on the item. Not to forget, I’m also in charge of negotiations with Hidros per the king’s orders. You might have heard of it from Town Eden.” Nodded in agreement for they were caught up on current events, the students’ attitude changed to one focused and composed. Amidst jests and relevant information, Haru explained further.

“That is all you need to know,” she ended, “-now on towards the smiting guild,” led Haru with a smile.

“LADY HARU,” a scream broke her stride, “-the shipment of fish has been slowed. The chefs are getting annoyed, we need you on cleanup duty.”

“God damn it,” practically reaching for the door, her ears sulk to which it rose in anger, “-I’m sorry,” she stomped her way back all the while shouting insults.

“Quite a bundle of energy,” scurried Serene, “-let’s leave as long as she’s occupied,” twinkling of bells followed into the chatter filled road.

“Was that not the same lady from before?” asked Timothy.

“Yes, Lady Haru is as sharp as she acts childishly. Behind her pretty face lays a demon, one who at the age of twelve took over a struggling trading company and turned it into what it stands today.”  
Continued, they move to the Smiting guild.

Not as chaotic as before, “-here is where broken weapons are mended. Specially ordered arms are also bought and sold. Skokdrag is a busy man, I doubt a meet to be possible,” the guild also held a large queue of angry looking fighters.

Opposed came the Mage’s guild with a board on which held a staff. Opened without sound, lesser people than before, two elves in robes at a table with cups in hand. They spoke over a book that showed ancient diagrams. “Welcome,” said an elf with a smile. Glasses with long hair and the visage of a girl, the nameplate displayed, \*Aimon Elqen.\* Peering a once over at the ladies, a gasp overshadowed by Serene’s sharp voice.

“Afternoon, Aimon, is the guild leader here?”

“Yes,” a nod, “-do you have business?”

“No, actually not, I came to have a coffee,” uninterested, a sarcastic remark that had the man cowering.

“Lady Serene, I do apologize for how I behaved, my eyes aren’t that well-adjusted to recognizing people.”

“Pay it no heed.”

“Master Ryul is conducting the initiation process.”

“Excellent, on that matter, could I have some recruit take the test of initiation?”

“Are they the students of Hidros?”

“Yes.” Hunched over the desk, a quill dipped in ink wrote beautifully across the paper.

“My lady,” asked Ysmay, “-could thee explain what is happening?”

“And it’s done,” interjected Aimon.

“No, explanations will be given later. All who wish to be in the mages guild have thine guild card stamped.”

Admits the bunch; Ysmay, Anastasia, Kim, Mille, Christina, and Timothy, accepted her proposal. A stamp later, "Are you not joining?" asked Ysmay to Eira who shook her head in dismissal.

The sound of conjured spells approached as if the rising sun. Louder with each step, "-here we are," said Aimon with a push of a door. Opened to the training ground with an elevated dome barrier. Disfigured, the outside world grew to be blurry.

"Lady Serene," waved Ryul who supervised potential recruits, many o' races tried at casting magic. "Alright recruits, that is it for the test. You've all failed, please try again in a few weeks or head to another guild," not an ounce of sympathy. Disappointing look and lowered heads left the grounds.

"Are you serious?" asked Kim.

"I know," shuddered Mille and Christina.

"They had potential, even more so than I've seen from the first-year students of our academy," commented Timothy.

"Don't sell us so short," snarled Anastasia.

"That wasn't my intention, it's just that..."

"What Kim's trying to say is how powerful their auras felt," completed Ysmay.

Blue robe, a few staff at the ready; Ryul exuded an innocent feel with an underlying aura of menace.

"Still as unforgiving as thou art renowned for," laughed Serene.

"Not that it does me any favors. The mage's guild has rare members as is. Most are tantalized by the prospect of glory in battle. None wish to be true support. The true talent knows it best to continue studying at the universities. I've to be harsh to prevent mistakes on the battlefield. So, what brings you here?" peered over her shoulder, the forehead crinkled.

"School exchange program. These are the students you are to evaluate. Guild Master has added a new rule, if the test is passed, their training will have to be cut down to one week opposed one month. If they fail that as well, tis back to Hidros."

Raising an eyebrow to recruits, "-passing the test is hard as is. Let's see if Highness's class is worth the trouble."

"Alright, line up everyone," ordered Serene, "-those not in the mages guild are to not interfere," led behind a line drawn, the test was to start again.

"Class 2A, I shan't bother to remember thy names. Only if thou art worthy then I'll introduce myself. The test hereby starts, come at me with killing intent – use whatever method thou wish."

Exchanging glances, \*Spell combination: Majed,\* focused on a single point with Kim as the leader, "-GO!" a beam of high velocity flew straight at Ryul. \*Snap,\* the ground around him turn to the abyss, \*-Ether Element: Split,\* the body cloned itself to dispel Majed. Surrounded by said clones, \*Ether Element: Mend,\* back as one, \*Wave,\* a stomp had the ground shaking.

“Now,” jumped, \*-Five elements joined as one, come forth and heed my call, spirit of the angel Reina; Ethereal Barrier,\* a circle followed by many dots conjured as a shield by Kim.

\*The sound of mine voice enchants all around. Slumber as I command: Lullaby,\* cast by Timothy, he knelt to conjure more barriers.

“Let’s go, CHRISTINA,” screamed Mille, \*Come forth, weapon forgotten to the ages, Xnu’s bow,\* drawn, \*BLOOD MOON ARROW,\* a single arrow turned into five of which grew in power.

\*Amplify o’ the strength of mine companions: Enhancement,\* shielded by Timothy, Christina had all their mana output running at their limit.

\*Mud floor,\* whispered Ysmay as a puddle of goo reached out to grab Ryul.

\*Burn in hell: BLAZE,\* screamed Anastasia with a surge of fire.

“Impressive,” \*Ether Element: Dimensional Split,\* as if a broken mirror, the world around cracked, the spells seemed to stop with them stuck to the floor. \*Ether Element: Void,\* a vortex summoned to take away all the spells. \*Release,\* hands pressed, they fell to the floor.

“Did we lose?” asked Kim with a headache.

“Think so,” Timothy laid face down.

“Now then,” stood in the middle of the exhausted students, “-I won the moment my fingers snapped. My element allows me to create a pocket dimension that overlaps with the real world, thus, I essentially become a god in that realm. I saw the spell utilized weren’t based on thy magical elements; some were incantation that used the mana to alter the workings of thy limitation. I must applaud the efforts, many scholars have studied the same thing to forget that mana is very versatile. An element is only to show that one favors a particular type. Forgotten over the ages, I think that said misinformation had mages thinking of an element being only what a mage could use.”

“Is that how it works?” asked Kim.

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“What do you mean, how it works?” perplexed, Ryul frowned.

“We were told to think outside the box,” stood Timothy, “-so Mille and Kim figured to try and cast other types spells. It took a few months but they realized that it was possible.”

“Think outside the box,” he laughed, “-Lady Serene, the recruits have passed with flying colors.”

“Alright,” she smiled, “-we’ll head to the fighter’s guild. They are in thy hands, Master Ryul.”

Left, those chosen had a more detailed explanation of how they lost. “Ma’am, may I ask who Ryul is?” questioned Harold intrigued by the fight.

“A very powerful mage, one of the best our Kingdom hosts. How fearsome isn’t in his power, far from it. He has an innate talent at forcefully pulling a student’s raw potential out. A highly valued Professor who represents the Elven community as representative of the Ardanian council.”

Step by step, they arrived at a differing aura, from calm and compose to screams of passion and guts. "The fighter's guild, trust me, Master Ryul was harsh, however, Lady Mieshre is even worse. Get ready, her tests are brutal and always changing. Grab a sword, use magic, do whatever is necessary – she'll break the hardest man into a kitten to then turn into a lion."

#### Chapter 326: Fighter's Guild

Stomps of feet against the gravel floor. The nostalgic sound of a marching army. Geared to the teeth, figures over six feet stood with swords, bows, spears, and any weapon known. Injured with proud battle scars, the smell of sweat and iron spread the warrior's spirit.

"Lady Serene," a deep voice that sounded as if scraping the bottom of a bucket came from behind a counter. "I didn't expect to have thee here so early," cigar in mouth, an eye-patched wolf beastman.

"Jazl," nodded the lady who took a strong step forward, "-I'm here for the initiation of recruits."

"Ay," he puffed and stared the counter, "-they the lasses of Claireville Academy?"

"Indeed,"

"Me lady has been waiting for them lot," he turned with a clang, "-get over here," a gesture that led them to the back of the guild. Two arenas divided by a barrier, on one side trained adventurers and the other empty. Battle cries and the sound of the sword crashed against one another had the class lagging in their steps.

"Look at them," pointed Simone, "-that is what I call manliness."

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"Don't be an idiot," a slap to the head, Tony had a sparkle in the eye, "-manliness can't compare. This is what I've dreamt, to be trained by those who are strong."

"You're not the only one," smiled Fletcher after which Harold soon joined the group.

'Manliness they say,' frowned Eira who peered the trainees, '-I don't see that much grit. The swings are wasted energy, not efficient. The power is there, yet, I feel unrest as if compensating for fear.'

"So, you've made it," stood in a line facing the Guild Leader, a greatsword rested on the ground beside her fully armored body. "Class 2A," giving a once over, "-I see that we have her Highness in the bunch," to that, a smile surfaced, "-should be fun." \*Clap,\* warriors sprawled from out of nowhere with weapons of various kind. "Thou must have a favorite. Choose any and head to the battleground."

"Wow," said Fletcher, "-I'm going to use the spear."

"Daggers for me," winked Harold.

"I think I'll take the long-sword," reached Simone.

"Battle-axe," yelled Tony who reached impatiently.

"Do be careful," interjected Mieshre, "-the weapons are fairly heavy." Upon taking the handle, it dropped for the weight had caught many off guard.



“What do you think?” posed Tony, “-they aren’t that heavy,” he winked.

“Stop showing off,” laughed Simone.

Away from the boys’ reckless chatter, Serene reached for the Guild Leader’s ear, “-are you not going to say something about the lack of discipline?” whispered, her ears moved in dismissal.

“What about you, Highness?” asked Mieshre.

“Give her the short-sword,” laughed Harold for they didn’t enjoy the ice princess’s presence. Birthed by how Staxius had voiced her superiority over the others, they were in a mindset to tease.

“I’ve heard that you’re quite fearful with thy ice-element. Does surprise that thou didn’t choose to partake with the mages,” resumed the leader.

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“Probably because she was too scared to go against Ryul,” whispered Simone that had the others in laughter.

“Don’t mind them,” sensing Mieshre’s face turn in ire, “-boys being boys, should not matter,” giving a disgusted side-glance, “-thou did say any weapon,” reached, she pulled out the great-sword as if it were child’s play. Almost as big as her, the weapon turned to have the end inches away from Tony’s neck, to then be thrown as if a toy.

“You have guts highness,” laughed Mieshre, “-I do have to ask for the sake of asking, are you sure about using my weapon. She’s a little, how should I say, hot-headed.”

“I appreciate thy concern,” said with utmost grace, “-if she’s hot, then I’m cold,” on which a white-mist froze the handle.

“I like it,’ she howled, “-highness, thou exude as much guts as thy father.”

“Thank you,” curtsied, “-he’s the reason I’ve vowed to become strong. The first and only time he showed the true power wasn’t even in a fight. Goes to show how much catching up I have to do.” Lined with the others, her glare had subdued the childish banter.

‘Time to see what the first-princess is made of,’ smiled Serene sat on a chair. The opposite half stopped to watch.

“Ay, is our princess hard?”

“Jazl, tis not hard, the word is tough. Language has never been your strong suit, has it?”

“Yer right, what do they ought to say faced with a knife. I slash to then dip in the casserole.”

“Sounds as if you’re to make a meal,” she chuckled with one leg over the other, “-still, I agree. What’s the point of talking when one’s opponent shall die?”

“Alright rookies,” stood firm, Mieshre held chains to differing cages brought over. The latter had gnarls and hisses coming through. “Today’s test will be different. I know that our guild is here to train into fighting monsters,” rolling her eyes, “-I’ll let you experience how powerful the things many take lightly

are. First off, you with the seaweed hair. Why don't you have a go," pulled on one of the chains, it revealed a snake.

"Listen closely," she yelled, "-that is a Naga. A drop of its venom inside thy blood and you die. For training purposes, that right there is Nelson, we named him because tis harder to kill something with a name. He or she, we know not, is about seven months old. Most vicious at that age, you can expect a lot of bite but no venom, I think anyway, I'm no specialist."

\*Clap,\* another barrier closed around Nelson and Harold.

"Here we go," cheered the other trainees. \*Clang,\* the locked undone, it sprawled at lightning speed. \*SMACK,\* "-AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH," the snake had its fangs dug into his legs.

"Minus one point. Screaming like a bitch and not reacting fast enough," voiced Mieshre with no sympathy.

"Die, die, die," repeatedly stabbing the snake, it eventually let go to slither back to its cage. Not even half a minute had gone by, "-my legs..." blurred, the boy had subconsciously stabbed the other leg. The venom was of illusion. "Get him a healing scroll."

"Next, the big-nosed fellow," another cage, another match.

'Come on, I can't lose this,' he thought not paying heed to an injured comrade taken away.

"Going by what I saw, thou art weak. Therefore," squealing of a rat had him baffled. "Your opponent is a sewer rat," uninterested, her voice was one of fatigue. "Not much threat, the name is, Sewer rat five."

\*Clang,\* the gate opened. \*Air-Fire Blast,\* a single swing had the beast fried.

"Don't UNDERESTIMATE ME," yelled in passion, Simone glared the beastwoman.

"You've got guts," \*whistled,\* "-go on Nelson."

'Not again,' hands crossed, conjuration of a spell, \*Air, Fire element: Firebo...AHHHHH,\* another bite had the boy in pain on the ground. Filled with attitude, the snake returned to its cage.

"Get the healing crew again," facepalmed, she shook her head in dismissal.

"Are you purposefully disrespecting us?" asked Fletcher in a polite voice.

"Did you just realize that?" her eyes grew tense, "-I've no patience with boys who don't know how to behave in presence of a guild leader. I'm the one who's being disrespectful, huh? I would have had thy head on spikes the first moment I laid my eyes upon thee. Sadly, you're here as a guest, and guest we shall give what little respect is due." Shoved to the arena, "-you don't mean anything to us, understand?"

\*Clang,\* an ox who bore fiery red-horn moved in utter confidence.

"Charlie!" came from the other arena.

'If that's how she wants to play, then I'll just have to prove them wrong,' eyes opened, "-what happened?" feet light, the back of the head bounced off the floor knocking him unconscious. The ox had charged in the slight moment Fletcher focused.

"NELSON," ordered the guild leader. The snake pounced and aimed for the middle of the boy's legs.

"AHHHH," forced awake, "-my balls," he fainted. Total humiliation, pride, and cheerfulness slowly turned to dead silence. The laughter grew louder, Mieshre began her tortures regiment. The breakage of pride and qualities a man held important.

"Next, Tony," called by name, "-you're to fight a goblin."

"Do forgive my asking," bowed, "-why is it that you choose to call me by name?"

"Even though you acted like an idiot at first, thine instinct quickly forced thee to be more respectful. Not partaking in the leg-pulling while having a proper manner. Thou art worthy to be tested fairly."

"I appreciate it, ma'am," walked to the arena, few cages rested. Red flashes of light broke out of the dim-cages.

'I came here to study, not to have fun or get humiliated. The King might have insulted us, yet, it was based on the truth. We were fools to think highly of our strength. What does it mean to be a rank-A student?' \*Clang,\* the cages burst open.

\*Crimson Wrath – level one: Root,\* a red glow emanated from his body. Held tightly, a dash behind the green-devil, heavy and slow, they dodged the battle-ax. Said goblins were monsters used for practice; not actually goblins but cleverly concealed training dummies. Leaped, the objective was simple; to attack. Swing after swing, the goblins dodged left and right. Constantly checking the back, they tried to get into blind spots. \*clash,\* well-guarded, they attacked he who defended well despite the size.

\*Crimson Wrath – level two: Sacral,\* red to orange, the speed and power visibly increased. The movement altered from a strong and direct style to agile and fast. Possessed, the body moved across the horde, one by one hits landed though no damage was felt by the devils. "He-he," increased as well, the coordination had him guessing of the next attack. 'Don't underestimate me,' the beasts opposed to fighting had changed to an annoying style. One that had many give up their life to grab onto their prey, a desperate move. Swung downwards in fury, \*smack,\* a club to the head.

"It's over," signaled Mieshre.

Disappointed, he stood to an applauding crowd. "Good job out there," nodded the leader. "I shall tell thee more on why thou lost later."

"It's because I had my guard down. The one who struck my head wasn't in the original horde, I sensed the attack too late. The giggle broke my focus to which my judgment grew foggy."

"Learning from defeat, a good trait to have."

"Next," already on the move, Eira had the sword on her shoulders. The noisy ground grew dead silent. Cold and pretty, her white hair flowed with unprecedented grace.

"Guess she's ready to fight," said Serene with elbows on her knees.

“Highness is to fight a hobgoblin,” gasp of fear escaped.

“Eira did win the inter-magical tournament, is a hobgoblin enough?” wondered Tony.

“Thinking aloud again,” mumbled Simone, the injured students returned with lowered gazes.

A cage twice as big as before stood with snarls and heavy shaking. ‘Hobgoblin, from what I’ve seen of her personality. Another training dummy, I haven’t trained year long and won a tournament to lose here. I don’t care if this is Arda, I have to catch up to my father.’ \*Ice Element: Ice Shards,\* summoned above the head, it hovered as if guns. ‘Prolonging the battle isn’t a good option. Fast and quick,’ taking a low-stance to the ground, ‘-the fastest attack in my arsenal.’ \*Clang,\* opened the cage.

\*Lightning Strike – Shadow Variant,\* from white to somber, she burst forth leaving a trail of destruction behind. Sliced in two, the hobgoblin fell, the ice shards impaled the remainder without mercy. \*Ice Element: Freeze,\* clenched, yet another spell just in case. \*Poof,\* exploded in smoke, sparkles flowed into the air.

“Lady Mieshre, the sword is a very good weapon. She’s amazing,” returned with the utmost respect, Eira stood in line nonchalantly. Speechless, even the guild leader took a few moments to process the information.

“Could I please borrow the sword,” reached Tony curious to what she said, “-woohh!” the weight pulled his hand downward. “It’s heavier than the battle-ax,” turned to the guild leader, the test ended.

“Alright,” from noncaring to disciplined, “-all you rookies are to start training this instant. Have the cards stamped by Jazl, we’ll begin with physical enhancement.”

Chapter 327: Achilles’ decision

“Rosespire’s here people, get your shit together,” yelled a broad looking man with a scar on the forehead. Walls now of a greenish moss color caused by rain felt as if the foliage of a tall tree on a rainy day. Dull and somber, a truck of many passengers had made the trip of a week and a few to the Hidros’ heart.

“Lady,” said the same man, “-you better head to the guild and report what has happened,” throwing a gaze of sympathy, he jumped aboard the truck to return from whence he came.

Inside the walls, life went on oblivious to the pain and suffering endured at the border.

Stood with a singular bag atop which rested a sword with a broken blade, Achilles stared the passersby empty. ‘I’m home,’ she thought with ever so heavier memories.

“You there,” hailed a guard on horseback, “-adventurer?”

Flashing her tag, the man gave a nod to then point at a bus. “New transit for visiting adventurers,” said doubtfully, the horse neighed to sprint down the street.

“You coming?” asked the diver with a cap shadowing his gaze. Aboard, a peek through the windows revealed strong-willed individuals with less than inviting faces. At the back sat the worse, battle scars that would have shuddered a normal man. Coming to the bus, the fare displayed in illustration.

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'Three coppers,' sighed, she climbed on board and sat at the first opened seat. The outside felt duller than the walls of moss. Despair, faced with utmost evil, her boon of invincibility had saved her life. Flashes of the day kept on haunting as if a jarring old wound.

Settled under a white blanket with medics at her side, the tent's opening flapped with the wind. Unconscious for two days, wakened to the sound of horse hooves, her eyes opened sharply.

"Achilles," smiled the nurse with a medic bag with potions and scrolls behind. "You're awake."

"What about the others?" fatigued, rising her own head felt as if trying to breathe underwater. A desperate attempt to swim ending in naught but death. Courteously, the nurse slipped a hand under Achilles's pillow to then give a little push.

"You should really be more careful," said the nurse faced with she who sat on the edge of the bed. The adventurer kept a gaze of want. Her thirst for knowing what had happened made the medic nervous.

\*Recon party has made it back,\* screamed a childish voice who ran to pass the information.

"Wait," yelled the nurse as her patient stood.

"Sorry, I need answers," sharp and direct, parting the entrance, light burst forth. The medical camp stood a few meters away from the briefing area. All who fought had their orders given by the Dungeon Master for it wasn't wise to go onto a death march. Head lowered and stood on a small wooden podium a few inches off the dirt floor, adventurers stopped and stared.

"Greetings comrades in arms," a deep raspy voice echoed to grab all the focus, "-it has been a few days since of the mysterious rumble that cut out connection with the Exploration team. We've tried hard and mighty to get back said connection. Sadly, after recovering one of the members; a recon party was sent forth. Battled all the way to floor 30, bodyless stains of blood are all that remain. Weapons, armor, and most importantly, the Guild Tags told but one thing, the team's extermination. Thanks to their courageous efforts, us of the Dungeon, can entrust their knowledge onto the new generations. Their deaths will not be in vain," stood with a salute, "-let's have a moment of silence to remember those who perished." Stone cold, the one minutes felt like an hour, Achilles fell to her knees upon hearing the news. Hard was it to think of the what-ifs.

Later that day, the Dungeon Master paid a visit. The shock of losing someone she thought of as family had the world around crumbling. A singular thought went through the mind, the faces of the Lymsey sisters who faced the same heart-tearing sadness. In the middle of it all, the man who had called her forth from another dimension, Staxius. She longed for how he had hugged and comforted the girls; the Argonaut wanted to be consoled.

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"Lady Achilles," stood with hats taken off, "-I'm sure you've heard of the news," after which, a carton box was brought by an assistant. "These were all the salvage team recovered," weapons, pieces of armor, and guild-tags. "In respect of those who died, we're returning this to thee." Sat inside the dormitory, the door to her room closed.

“There’s no need for being softhearted,” said Achilles with a forced smile, “-the armor will be more useful to the living than dead. I’ve but one request, return what remains of Kyle; else known as Deadeyes.” The dimness from the lack of a window had an atmosphere on the edge of peril – any wrong move could have an adverse reaction.

“As you wish,” stern, “-tis what remains,” a pistol, a lock-in which had the picture of a couple with the man’s face hidden by smeared-blood, and the Guild-tag.

“I appreciate it,” she said with emptied eyes.

“I know this to be sudden,” coughed the vice-leader, “-what are thy plans?”

“Plans,” she stared to then face the floor, “-I’ve lost my way as a warrior. I failed my friends when they needed it most, that monster isn’t Boss-class; tis a demon,” elbows to her legs, her eyes closed in solitude.

“There’s another thing,” just as the vice-leader was to speak, “-wait,” interjected the Dungeon Leader. “A truck is leaving later today. Rest is a must if thou wish to rise from the ashes again. Despair not, Achilles of Kniq, the one who bears the mantle of a hero, we’ll wait for thy return.” Startled to be cut off, the vice-leader frowned with the Dungeon leader glaring.

The bus came to a screech; “-adventuring guild,” voiced the driver. One hand through the bag, Achilles got off with a neutral face. Chatter and smiles of young warriors spanned till the entrance. Excited by gear, a new quest, or boasting about new skills. Common behavior for those fresh of heart.

“Please, this way, there’s plenty to go around,” smiled Melisa as they dealt with the daily overflow of quests request.

“STAND IN LINE OR NONE SHALL BE QUESTING,” as eager as ever, Diane’s strong personality had the men cower to make a line. Displayed across the screens were the request to protecting caravans, the extermination of bandits, or kill-quests.

\*Boof\* heavy bag dropped onto an empty table; Achilles took a seat with an empty wallet.

“How may I be of service?” came one of the waiters.

“A coffee,” she reached for her bank-card, “-bring the one that is most bitter,” with a tap, the waiter bowed out of her vision. ‘This place never changes,’ tightly grabbed, her left hand-held multiple guild-tags.

“Hey, did you hear about Kniq’s sudden disbandment?” whispered across onto another table, Achilles turned in with her heart sinking. ‘Is that the reason why my guild-card had no guild?’

“Yeah, apparently the leader came to personally end their legacy. There’re rumors that the secretary had an affair. The members just up and left after that.”

“Considering they were the strongest upcoming team; clashing of ego’s I presume.”

“Ma’am, your coffee,” placed the Waiter.

"Fuck off," slapped, the mug fell to the floor with Achilles in anger, "-what is this of Kniq disbanding?" stormed to the next table, the duo stared perplexed.

The tag flashed of red, "-listen, lady, we don't mean to be rude, but you're kind of being a pain."

"Listening of another table's conversation is pretty scummy," smirked the other.

"Scummy you said," held by the neck, she rose the two without breaking a sweat, "-give me answers NOW!"

"ACHILLES," Melisa dashed across the room to give a tight embrace. "Please let go," she begged, "-it's not wise to cause a scene." The room's feel turned to bitter, hands-on swords, many were readied to strike. \*Crack,\* dropped, the two men fell. "Let's head upstairs," smiled Melisa as the crowd gave side-glances.

"Fine," shrugging off the embrace, she reached for the bag and glare all who dared to stare. Fierce and dangerous, the hardest fighters could but twiddle their thumb, match by her aura alone.

"Can I have answers now?" sat at the upstairs room, Melisa waited on the opposite end.

"In a minute," she smiled reassuringly.

"Sorry I'm late," the door opened with Diane holding a file.

"I do apologize," dropped onto the table, the sound alone revealed its weight, "-the news of Kniq disbanding came rather forcefully."

"Skip the bullshit, I need answers."

"Fine," fired Diane with a frown, "-all that I'm about to say came from information given by Xenos. First off, the guild has disbanded. Reason being that Auic and Avon eloped to go who knows where. Without someone to manage the guild as Viola is in Dorchester, he thought it wise to end it."

"What about Deadeyes?" asked Melisa who held a piece of paper, "-is he not here?"

"No..." paused, "-he's dead. We made it to the 30th floor to be squashed as if bugs. None can compare to how vicious that tower is. Deadeyes was like a brother; we fought a lot but it was for fun," reached deep into her pockets, "-here are the people who've died. The strongest Exploration team to be created, ended in a mere five minutes," crinkled forehead, one could see her gritting teeth and clenching hard.

"I'm sorry," mumbled Melisa with a feeling of regret.

"Doesn't matter," leaned Achilles, "-doesn't matter if he's dead or not. Our family, my home, is gone, Kniq is dissolved."

"I wouldn't be so sure," fired Diane, "-do you think thy leader to be so coldhearted?"

"I do actually," she snickered in response.

"Don't be so cold," slid a piece of paper across the table.

"What's this?"

“Take a look.”

\*Dear members of Kniq, I assume that tis Deadeyes and Achilles who are to read this letter. I know that the guild disbanding might have seemed selfish. Well, it is selfish, I did use thee to attain my goal of opening a guild in Arda. Nonetheless, we’re family. I’ll tell thee the real truth. Avon was an artificial spirit whomst had sworn to assist my every whim. As for Auic, she’s noble of Ardanian blood. The two-built relation though Avon could never experience the real warmth of what it means to be human. To repay their kindness, I granted Avon a human body and Auic the freedom she wished. Viola agreed as well, they wanted to make a family thus who was I to stop their future. The Lymsey sisters have retired as adventurers, girls their age have much more to look forward to. Young, pretty, and a hell of a lot smart – they’re living a good life in the company of foster parents. It may look as if I don’t care, but I know what my companions are up too, after all, Kniq is our family. Deadeyes and Achilles, you two went off to fight and pave the way for the tower. I doubt this day to come, however, if ever despair overwhelms thee, I’ll be waiting. To be truthful, Achilles, I know you’ve returned because Deadeyes has died. Our ideals may clash and butt-heads, you might see saving people as thy duty. It’s all fair and good, I won’t argue with what decision you eventually make. Carve thy path and disappear if thee hates me; come to slay I for all that matters. I’ll wait no matter the conclusion. Just know, the door to the mansion is opened, the door to thy room is opened, and the door back into my life is opened as well. We’re a family, and family will always stick with one another even if the path chosen is far from ideal. Come to Arda, I’ll be waiting, dearest Argonaut.\*

‘Master,’ even by not being here, the words written had tears overflowed. The image of the sisters being held by Staxius replaced to one of him comforting her in turn.

“What does it say?”

“I’m going to Arda.”

Chapter 328: Fallout

\*Report of Class 2A’s progression. \* Written in bold; a file-stamped and approved by the guild leaders laid on the table. The interface on, the usual amber color changed to one blue and bright. In the company of Serene who had her attention on another matter, Staxius held his breath. A week and a few had passed, the sun rose around two hours ago. Contact with the students was cut for the duration. Focused on gaining the adventuring pass, 2A showed their resolve.

‘Guess the time is here,’ with breath held, a slide of the flowery shaped letter-opener, the papers slid across to land on the table. Individual reports for each, ‘-let’s see.’

[Mage’s Guild:]

Ysmay Mallkin – Pass

Anastasia Whitstar – Pass

Kim Lone Franquet – Pass

Christina Valerie – Pass

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Mille Stalin – Pass

Timothy Clark – Pass

[Fighter's Guild]

Eira Haggard – Pass

Fletcher Vega – Pass

Harold Cumber – Pass

Simone Style – Pass

Tony Parker ??? Pass

'They did it,' he smiled, '-not less from A-ranked students,' on his feet sharply, Staxius reached for the door without speaking to Serene. The latter gazed over her shoulder with a nod to return to work. Climbed down the flight of stairs, the destination in mind was the guilds. Abrupt, the walk had few gazing in awe at the King. A mere gust of wind that blew through the door and out of Roth.

Few steps away stood the Trader's guild with carriages filled with items.

"Guild Master," waved a lady with a wink.

"Guild Leader Haru," nodded, he continued down the street.

"Guild master," opened with a jingle, the guild assistant held breath for someone of power had come personally. Unusual for nobility would send a messenger or a retainer to carry messages.

"Aimon," walked towards the counter, "-I've come to see the Guild Leader."

"Sure," no questions asked, "-Master Ryul is at the training grounds," he pointed at the back.

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Flashes of light, the air charged with volatile Mana, a boom, resulted in the dust flying all over. Caught in a storm, Staxius had his elbow to his face as a way to not breathe the particles. At the center was the students and guild leader, a fight had ended with no apparent victor.

"Good," from a low stance to the ground, Ryul stood to dust off his robe. "I'm sure, thee, temporary adventurers shall be fine. Go out proudly for I've deemed thee all worthy. Try and not die, glory can only be gotten if one is alive." Limped and some on the floor face down, clothes torn and faces dirtied, the young ladies' hair, usually of a gentle nature was oily and rough. Their faces, untouched by injuries, held looks of extreme fatigue. One of the most prominent factors were dark-circles underneath the eye. A side note to consider was their ear-lobe, it had darkened due to mana fatigue.

"Thou hath succeeded," approached a tall figure of a man.

"Majesty," bowed Ryul out of respect.

"Tis good to see that the students survived thy training."

"All but naught sire, mine training isn't a matter of praise for tis was their passion and grit."

"Acknowledge by Ryul," from stern, "-good job, Class 2A," to casual, he held out a hand to Timothy who laid head first.

"T-thank you," stood with utmost pain, mana exhaustion was palpable, hard was it to have a firm balance as Timothy would lean to one side.

"Majesty," coughed Anastasia, "-we did good on our promise," her face, lesser of anger and more of relief, "-I won't remain silent. Are thou still sure of Eira's superiority?" flames of which had his inner self shouting in anticipation.

"Thou have proven far more than was due. Congratulations."

Giving a smile, "-I'm glad," her head rolled back to which she fell.

\*Mana Control: Waves,\* with a snap, the mana in the vicinity that all but flowed aimlessly until called upon, rose with a shock. Attracted to a singular point on the battle arena, a bed of which felt fluffy and warm caught Anastasia's unconscious body.

"Majesty?" on edge, "-what art thou doing?" asked Ryul who stepped away.

"Controlling mana," said in a reassured tone, "-you need not worry. It shall take but a few moments," \*Mana Control: Spiral,\* from waves to now a circle, it went around the students. "Replenish," mumbled underneath his breath, the mana lost in battle recharged without difficulty.

"Am I to believe that is Mana Control?" asked Ryul, "-the mysterious art his majesty created?"

"Yes," he turned with a nonchalant gaze, "-returning their mana is a must. Else, the effect of fatigue might have adverse effects on the still-growing elements. Thou must know of the trouble."

"I agree," nodded empty, "-tis why I had mana-potions at the ready," the tone was one of disagreement.

"What is done is done," he turned to the conscious trainees, "-I've but one thing to say. Mana control, though it has been shunned by many fellow-subjects, will still be an Art that I've endeavored to follow. My title isn't only King of Arda, but tis the Blood King. The one who presides over the immortal race of Vampires. If the control of mana has thee on edge, what shall happen, I wonder, per se, mine vampiric powers are to be displayed?"

"I meant nothing of the sorts, majesty, thou art our monarch. Thy word is the law, do as thee pleases, we shall but follow," to which he dropped to his knee as if to be beheaded.

"Raise thy head, Guild Leader," shouted, "-it isn't graceful to lower thine head in the dirt. One must always stick to what he deems is to be right. Arda isn't a country of mindless followers, thou art smart, logical, and reliable. Mana control is still a subject shunned; of which I apologize. Needless to say, that tis will be soon that mine art will be praised as one being noble."

"Majesty," head risen, "-I sincerely hope the quest of knowledge doesn't send thee into a spiral to ruin."

Chuckled, "-Lord Ryul, if the time comes when I do fall into said spiral, her majesty will stand at the ready to have mine head," formal to casual, it ended in laughter. On that, the students awoke to a cheerful sight.

“Guild Leader,” said Kim with a smile, “-we’ve done it,” she proclaimed after which the others cheered.

“My challenge was complete, a promise, I shall give a masterclass on the basics of Alchemy.”

“YES, FINALLY,” yelled Timothy, “-all the hard work paid off,” laughed maniacally, Christina edged closer to slap the back of his head.

“Not immediate,” raising an eyebrow, “-thou need rest,” turned to Ryul, “-would thee kindly escort them to the castle?”

“As you wish, sire,” in line, the mages teleported to the castle leaving a battered ground exposed to the wild.

Back on the street, tis was time for the fighter’s guild. ‘Mana control is still a subject of which most have disagreed toughly. I understand that a miscalculation could rupture the flow of life in Arda. Cut off, the plants would die and soon the capital might crumble. Maybe I shouldn’t use it here any longer. I’ve scoured the Arcane Library for the past week. Another body on which to transmute Intherna’s soul is readied. Should be simpler than before. The Death Element recovered very nicely; I feel great again. There’s a limit to stubbornness. The implication of Mana control has grasped my heart. The faces of Xula, Ryul, the sage among many more, is a sight that can’t be ignored,’ breathing a sigh, ‘-I’ll digress for now.’

“Guild Master,” spoke Jazl in a raspy voice, “-students are at back.”

“I appreciate the courtesy,” nodded, he walked down the corridor to the sound of weapons clashing against one another.

“YOU’RE MINE,” in mid-air posited for a downward slash, \*Ice element: Zero,\* great-sword turned icy white, Eira followed through the attack. Effortlessly, a heavy helm of a battle-dummy of a minotaur broke to explode into smoke. Backed by the others, they panted.

“Nicely done,” complimented Lady Mieshre. “As for you, Simone and Harold, fear has thee in its shackles. A few more close encounters with death shall suffice. Overall, thou art readied as trainee adventurers.”

“Yes ma’am,” a simultaneous salute unbothered by fatigue.

“Highness,” voiced Mieshre with inquietude, “-thou seem disappointed.”

“Tis not it, my lady, I just feel empty. We trained hard and got stronger than before. Yet, something gnarls at me from the inside, I can’t shake the feeling of nonfulfillment. Did we fight for naught?” disrespectful towards the others who face glee in bliss, Eira’s statement had sunken the mood.

“Very presumptuous,” walked a harsh tone onto the field-

“Majesty,” bowed the students and Mieshre alike.

-stood before the princess, “-are you to tell me that the work put in by the others means nothing to you. Thou have completed a regiment of two months into a week, is that not sufficient?”

“No,” stared defiantly, “-I don’t see the point,” the tone harsher than before, “-it’s all your fault. Breaking the law of nature, jeopardizing all who live in harmony. I can’t shake the feeling of regret.”

“I see,” a somber aura emanated from his feet, “-selfish, I don’t have to mind thee being selfish. Tis a basic right, however, I can’t stand by and let you disrespect the hard-work put by lady Mieshre and Class 2A.” \*Blood Arts: Blood Blade of the Queen – Orenmir,\* summoned in a crimson glow, Staxius stood with sword in hand. Adete, who had ideally remained atop his head soon stood with a smirk.

“MAJESTY,” yelled Mieshre, “-highness is still young. I doubt that she means what has been said.”

\*Death Element: Unleash Aura,\* glared at the guild leader, she all but nodded and escorted the class out of the fighting zone.

“Unsatisfied you said,” monotonous, “-Eira, my daughter, if that is what you had to say, then this is my resolve as thy father. Pick up thy sword, I’ll show you satisfaction.”

“Whatever,” said in a disgusted tone, “-if it’s a fight you want,” screamed the apparition of a dragon from out her back. Eyes turned red to blue with the hair paired with a crown atop her head, “-then it’s a fight you’ll get,” harsh, “-I don’t care if thou art my father. Matter of fact, you’re not even my father are you, Staxius Haggard. My real parents are the ruling couple of Hidros. Not you, a blood-crazed fiend.”

‘Blood crazed fiend,’ thought Staxius with a tear rolling down his cheeks, “-if that is what you think,” from a few feelings of regret to numb, “-Then I’ll show you no mercy. I’m not related to thee, after all, Eira, not even Eira, nameless child of which I took pity.”

“ENOUGH,” yelled, a blast of icy cold air followed by her jumping straight to strike at his neck. It happened too fast all the others saw was her sword drawn and close to his neck. \*Clang,\* blocked, \*Blood Arts: Crimson Threads,\* biting the lips, sharp needles flew for her vital organs. \*Pfft,\* knocked against her frozen armor, she changed the grip to summon an ice shard that pierced through his stomach and froze for the skin and organs to die. Coughed, blood spewed across her face, “-I’m not thy father,” he smiled, “-I never was your father, how could someone who abandoned you for so long be called a father.” Jumped back, the injuries healed instantly, “-that’s why I won’t show mercy,” lowering his stance, \*Click,\* faster than a blink, \*Click,\* he stood behind Eira. She fell to her knees without visible injuries. Staxius had reversed the sheath to that when drawn, the backside of the blade would strike.

Turned without emotion, he walked straight past the unconscious body. “Congratulations Class 2A,” stood firmly, “-I hope that this family quarrel doesn’t ruin thy stay. A bath has been prepared at the castle. Please rejoin the others.”

“Yes sire,” they smiled in relief. The past week was tough. Eira acted in a way unbecoming royalty, arrogance, and pride. It sunk deep onto her comrades that her inability to work as a team was due to overconfidence.

“Are you sure it wise?” asked the guild leader without a clue to what was said.

“Yes, the princess is a little confused,” giving a glance of anger, ‘-the words mumbled today has given me a new perspective. Eira, not even Eira, child of Gallienne. Thou have yet to formally abdicate thy claim to Hidros.’

Chapter 329: Facades

Brought to the castle by medics of the Fighter's Guild, Eira's still unconscious body was placed into her chambers. Scared for the worst, the maids and butlers were in disarray to what had happened. By turn, the servants came to check on their princess – a doctor was called. The latter, after an examination, told there was nothing to be worried about. A mild concussion caused by battle.

"What happened to her?" dressed in better clothes, Ysmay, and the mage's team – walked to her door.

"Unconscious," said Simone with a not so invested gaze.

"What happened?" pried Kim intently.

"She got injured, that's about it," nonchalant, Tony's voice said more than the words. One of not wishing to speak, one that had the others skeptically yearn for more answers.

"I'd let the situation go if I were you," sighed Fletcher who stood beside Harold.

"It's a matter concerning Royalty, we're guests here," shook Harold who had second thoughts on the whole matter.

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"Don't you think it senseless?" turned to Tony, Harold's seaweed hair felt as if curtains over his lonesome gaze.

"What is wrong, what is right, I'm not Tharis," he shrugged.

"Class 2A," deep, an immense presence came out of nowhere.

"Majesty," they bowed as the clapping of his shoe grew close.

"I see," glanced at the door to return at Ysmay, "-Eira was injured by me."

"What does that mean?" asked Christina who had held her breath in fear, fear for her friend and not hers.

"Since thou art her friend tis normal for thee to know what transpired," on that, he explained further what had happened. Shock and speechlessness clinched onto their throats. A feeling of suffocation, one unrivaled, any attempts of speaking out was met by a feeling of nausea. "In a nutshell, that's the whole matter at hand. I won't voice my matters for tis up to thee to decide. Eira made her decision when our blades crossed. Tis in her hand. I'd strongly advise on resting the next day. The masterclass on Alchemy will be hosted at a university the day after. All who wish to join, thou art welcome," nonchalant, he walked down the hallway where Youst and Rosetta waited.

"What's this about?" turning the corner, green hair with red eyes stood with arms crossed. "What did you do to Eira?" strict, Xula's anger raged.

"I did what was needed," nonchalant, he stared with an equal presence.

"That doesn't answer my question, Blood King, what did you do to the princess?" she pressed on with reckless abandon. Around, maids gathered with shuddered gazes.

“Should you really care about my actions?” from neutral to one of the abyss, the crimson glare burnt as if magma, “-why don’t thee ask of what Eira has said. Her truest feeling, do you know what she feels? Have those answers ready and then we can continue to argue. As for now, I’ve no interest in clashing heads. Have a nice day, Queen Shanna,” redressing the suit jacket, the king marched with a change in the aura.

“Don’t anger the king any more than you have too,” whispered Adete who buzzed as if a fly.

“What does that mean?” she turned with an intimidating gaze.

“Figure it out,” smiled, her hands rubbed against one another as if prophesizing of a coming future.

Walked to the royal chambers, Staxius stood facing a cradle of which rested Lizzie. Far away to where Eira rested, Xula waited patiently beside her bed with a warm smile.

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“Lizzie,” stopped, “-am I that bad a person?” sat on the bed, “-am I qualified to be called a father.” No response, “-emotions, they’ve grown on me for the ages. Long are the days where I felt nothing. Xula, Eira, and everyone had a part to play in unlocking my cold heart. I felt love and was able to love. Not that it matters, Eira voiced her feelings strongly. The path left to me is to voice my resolve. If Mana Control is the host of the problem, then I’ll devote myself further into its intricacies. Enough of playing house, enough of caring for the people around me. I’ve had enough,” stood with a deep breath, the room’s warmth dropped.

‘Intherna, I think it’s time for you to be awakened,’ teleported to the alchemic tower. Suit-jacket off with only a white shirt and pants – hair tied in a bun with locks on either side of the face; the mind slipped into the Arcane Library.

Minutes turned to hours, breezy swayed the curtains above Eira’s head. “Where am I?” awoke with her hand intertwined with Xula, her face flushed.

“Mother,” called, the queen awoke.

“Eira,” said sharply, “-you’re here,” embraced tightly, “-I thought you were injured badly.”

“The back of my head does hurt,” gently grazing the area, her eyes met with one of sternness. “What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter, are you serious. Don’t you remember?”

“Remember what actually,” confused, she actively sought for answers, “-oh... I remember.” The perfect recreation of what had happened played as if a movie. “My parents are the royal family of Hidros,” holding her mouth, the heart raced, the chest heavy, tears flowed, a thousand needles made itself known at the back of her mouth. “-Y-you’re n-not my d-dad,” a few tears turned into an overflowed river during the rainy season, whimpering turned to sobs.

“Eira,” caressing her head, “-I see what happened now,” the tone changed to one soft and caring.

"I knew it," laughed a voice. "-I knew it," emerged from the shadows, white hair stood with blade drawn. "Queen of Arda and princess of Hidros," walked Courtney, "-I sensed the trouble in my other self's heart. I wonder, could it be that Eira said something hurtful."

"Majesty," came forth Prophecy with a Five-Star barrier around the bed.

"Daemonum Gladio," said Xula unimpressed, "-who are you truly?"

"Me," laughter ensued, "-the name given is Courtney Haggard, thy husband's real support. Once upon a time, I was wife to the ruler of the underworld. Stolen and turned into a weapon as a means to free my soul, Lord Death gave me the power that could rival the gods. That doesn't concern those of the mortal realm; to answer thy question simply, I'm Staxius Haggard's support. You might have saved him during Lizzie's death or the many instances of which he would have fallen into the abyss. Yet, I was also she who'd pick him up. The one who came when called, the one who had to fight on his behalf when the journey grew difficult. My quest has yet to be accomplished, Staxius's is my other self, he needs to grow strong for us to be one." \*Death Element – Daemonum Gladio Variant: Shift,\* merged into the barrier, "-quite a lovely bed," she sat inches away from Eira.

"Highness,"

"Don't move," ordered Courtney with her blade against Eira's neck. "That goes the same for you, ruler of Arda."

"What do you want?" asked the queen trapped by the twin-sister.

"Nothing," she smiled, "-I only came to add a little fuel onto a burning fire. Tis not in malice; I warned that thy husband would soon change. Guess the time is here – Eira's words spoken in anger, defy it as you may now, defend and say it was on impulse, naught will change. The Blood King has always believed in the wise word of his father, one of the many lessons, words said in anger are always what the person thinks deep down. So, you see, child of Piers and Gallienne, none shall ever comprehend how he thinks. Don't even try, thou hath lost said privilege. Family has thy back, I would so take thy head," spat onto a tiger patterned rug, "-disgusting, for all he wanted to accomplish was a stable way to gather mana and turn it into an engine abled to sustain the inhabitants."

"Enough," yelled Xula, Eira's hands trembled in fear.

"Whatever," \*Click,\* the barrier broke with Prophecy on the floor, "-legendary fighting spirit," mocked over the shoulder, "-I long for the day he abandons such an ungrateful province."

"Mother..." red from crying, Eira's sniffing grew loud.

"I know," peered with the same look of bafflement, they embraced one another. The words spoken by Courtney, vague on the top, held a deeper meaning. She knew all along what brewed underneath. Xula, virtuous as she might have seen, held more than was let onto. Smirked, the alter-ego knew best. 'What does that twin know? Arda may be at peril. Staxius, dearest husband, forgive me.'

Lost in the sea of knowledge, a hand reach over yonder. Came with was a message, '-beware of Arda. Light always has darkness. Blood King, thee should start to amass support from the nobles. Bleak as it may sound, the four clans shan't betray thee. Nightwalkers are bound by more than loyalty; they've

sworn their survival on their leader. If the latter can ensure said survival, expect to have a very warm everlasting bond.'

\*Gasp,\* '-I nearly drowned,' scanned, the surrounding felt strange. 'What did that message mean, Arda has darkness?' papers filled with notes laid at his feet.

"O' brother,"

"Courtney?"

"That's right," materialized the twin with a wink.

"Did thee come after sensing my disarray?"

"Was that rhetorical?" leaned on the table, "-I'm glad to see that the emotionless visage has returned."

"What are you on about?" to which she lifted a mirror, '-she's right,' touched the cheeks, it held nothing.

"See what I mean," paused, "-that's not the issue at hand. I've come to say this – thy wife isn't the person you think she is. I dare say you were blinded to the truth. Brother, I've watched everything from a differing point of view. Eira too, why did she suddenly lash out. I don't want to add to any more conspiracy, but do be careful – this isn't what they seem to be."

"You're right," monotonously, "-I've sensed the discontent so many times before. Mana control, it's not just about the survival of the province, there's something that many don't wish for I to know. The lie about a distortion being able to tear apart Arda is a load of bullshit. I scoured the Arcane Library for more than a week, nothing came of the sorts. Courtney, I've a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"I'm about to start the ritual – could you have the circle drawn over at the mansion. The attic should do just fine."

"You've sensed it now?" spoken through telepathy, Courtney side-glanced the wall.

"Yeah, I did, we're being watched."

"What ritual?" she asked.

"Nothing much, just an enchantment process for a training dummy. I plan to sell it to the fighter's guild."

"Sure," she smiled to take away all the necessary materials.

'Foul play is at hand,' he thought, '-good thing that all my material is encoded so that only I can read. In the eye of another, it looks as if an essay, or poetry. Xula, Arda, Eira – it's over. I've known about it but choose to remain silent. Xula's attitude changed so much it made me on edge. Every time something of value was accomplished, there always remained a little stench of hate behind her words. I best find out who is on my side and who is not.'

"My queen," voiced a man hidden by shadows.

"Speak," sat inside the office with a less than desirable attire, "-what have you found?"



“The king was speaking of making training dummies for the fighter’s guild as a way to apologize.”

“Are you sure it to be true?”

“Yes, the words seemed sincere without any misdirection.”

“Then it should be fine,” green to black, Xula’s elbows rested against the table. ‘What are you to do, Blood King. Will you betray Arda or comply – Eira’s seed of distrust has been sown.”

“Majesty,” teleported in the sage with a staff.

“What is it?”

“Lord Ryul has come.”

“That boy,” she stood with a passionate look, “-he doesn’t seem to get enough, does he? addicted beyond belief.”

“Are you sure it wise?”

“Shut it, I’ll do what I wish.”

Chapter 330: Wake!

“This is impossible,” walked the Sage in anger, “-is that how royalty is supposed to act?”

“What’s the matter?” stood with a tablet atop Roth, Serene held a smile of which was suspicious.

“Tis our queen,” sighed the Sage as he gently sat to have his feet dangling off to one side of the building. “Something is very wrong with her.”

“Heart trouble?” asked Serene who came closer. Below, the people seemed as if ants wandering from point A to point B. With a bit of effort, one could also see the training of the guilds. Carriages filled with items guarded by armored men headed to Town Eden. Mild and lesser hot, the sun calmly kept watch over till the horizon.

“I’ve been with Shanna since her arrival onto this plane. Her heart has always been cold and shut to the world. Today, I saw a side that was never meant to be. A visage filled with sadness and regret, it’s as if she’s forcing herself to act as the worst person,” turned to Serene, “-thus my visit. I’ve come to ask the help of the Nightwalkers, especially you, Serene. I know how loyal you are to our King. I’ll do what I can on my side to stop any winds of trouble.”

“If it’s for my King, then I’ll do what is needed,” earnestly staring, the sage had shivers down the spine.

“Keep an eye Ryul, I’ll have a few of my disciples on the lookout to any malicious plots. Queen Shanna is planning something big, I’ve no idea what it may be. The likely target is the king.”

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“Before everything,” stood with an enigmatic face, “-I’ll assist with one condition. How does her majesty feel about her husband.”

“You dare doubt her vows of which she has sworn to him?” angered, he stood with a spark.

“There’s no need for being belligerent,” she said with a finger touching his heart, “-the world around isn’t that good a place. Arda is the same, no one is safe. I thought that for a while until I came to meet our King. To this day I have no idea what he thinks. A bloody murderer to then a merciful hero – I’ve absolutely no clue.”

“That’s a simple matter,” smiled the sage, “-they’re made for one another. Our Queen reads people’s mind and he reads people’s emotions. Together, they could take over the world if so wanted. Yet, if apart, they’re one another’s weakness. Imagine two stone-cold individuals slowly growing love for one another, have you seen it?” paused to give a moment for her to reply, she shrugged unknowingly. “I have, a bond of proportions I’ve no words to speak of.”

“I suppose so,” she smiled, “-what is this plan around, care to go into more details?” Heavy and loud breeze served to muffle what was spoken. The sage knew but one thing, Arda could stand to suffer if not careful whilst Serene had another thought in mind, the safety of her ruler.

“Adete,” walked through the portal into the mansion, Staxius glanced blankly with dulled eyes.

“What is it, vampire?” she hovered waiting for what was to be said.

“The first progenitor, I know that it might be overstepping if I say a thing, however, could thee grant thy heir a favor?” asked in the humblest way possible, she found it hard to refute.

“Tis a dire situation I suppose, what is it you want?”

“I want but one thing, information. In return, I’ll have an assortment of blood as recompensating for thy trouble.”

“Blood,” watered, she wiped the growing thirst, “-thou know the way to mine heart.”

“Thank you,” caressing her cheeks with a cold index finger, she gasped for it froze.

“Careful.”

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Ignoring her yelp, “-I’d like for you to go as a spy. Monitor and investigate the ins and outs of the palace. Blood-arts should allow thee to become one with the environment. The All-seeing eye, now evolved into one that has the mana of a god flowing through, will be more powerful. I’m sure I don’t have to explain the possibilities.”

“Yeah, I know,” rolling her eyes to the portal, “-not only is it undetected; the user can now control the mind and body of the victim. An undercover operation with blood as a reward. Count on me, Vampire,” hovered till his shoulder, \*bite.\*

“Again?” he said without much interest.

“Tis good luck,” after a wink, she disappeared into Arda.

“Well then,” \*click,\* lit brightly, Courtney stood beside the switch behind which stood the ladder to the first floor. “The attic isn’t that dusty as I thought.”

“Compliment?” said in dismissal, she frowned.

\*Ding,\* a notification had her jumped in embarrassment, “-my bad.”

“What is it?” they stared at one another.

“Job request from Phantom,” she grinned nervously with raised eyebrows, Staxius shrugged.

“Go,” he gestured, “-I’ll be fine from here, see you later.”

“See you,” jumped onto the ladder, she climbed with her upper body still, one could have mistaken it for her sinking.

Alone in a rather large attic, Staxius sat with legs crossed in the middle of a circle. ‘Arda’s dark side,’ the thought kept on pestering. ‘Find allies, what will come of this.’ Paused at few intervals, ‘-focus, this isn’t time to think of things out of my control. Intherna, Gophy, and the soul of a nameless god. Limited to one every six months, the transmutation of a goddess into a puppet will be delicate. A miss placement and...’

\*Summon forth, Box of Souls,\* materialized in a blackish glow, a chest with a massive skull on top.

\*Summon forth, Box of Alche,\* in a similar fashion, two Relic-class items hovered shy of his head. Stood with the puppet placed inside a convoluted circle mixed with pentagons and hexagons; the writings took most of the floor-space. A total of four hours was spent in settling the prerequisites.

‘Nevermore,’ hands on chest, ‘-Death Element. I’ll have to unlock the seal to the A-gate. Controlling Intherna’s power and soul will require a lot of mana. I’ll have to utilize Nike’s Wings to compensate since the A-gate gives the power to a Demi-god. I need the E-gate. I’ve yet to reach the sufficient strength – another breakdown of my element would knock me out for more than a week. The risk of not being able to conjure magic exists. Best keep to the lower three levels. Step by step, let’s begin.’

\*Death Element: Unleash Aura,\* slow and gentle, mana from the element flowed outwards of the body. A warm-up of the cycle of lifeforce into energy. Eyes closed, the room lit with lines of white, the puppet was but a meager figure.

\*Deep slumber, deep rest, awoken for the chance at retribution. Gate of which stands before mine way, open for thy master has come: Nevermore – Hell’s Gate.\* Slowly oozing mana to a growing tempest, the air around the mansion grew haunting. Eerie as it sent shivers to all who might cast a careless gaze. No visible change in the body, Staxius’s mana capacity increased, the purity was one of an Apostle. Not hard on the body, the power increased gradually.

\*Span across the ages, fear is what held peace, fear is what caused War, fear is the root of evil. I, the harbinger of the ultimate fear, have come to spread and reclaim what is mine of right: Nevermore – Terror Gate.\* Invisible a few minutes ago, the mana changed into the color of amber, relaxing for it resembled the sunset. Mildly, the power of an angel was granted. With it came a surge of swirling wind around the host.

\*Unbound by the laws of Heaven to Hell; unshackle mine power: Nevermore – Annihilation Gate.\* Burst with a thump, the mana had the veins bulge, opposed to the few times prior, the veins soon grew to settle. Twirling winds with an amber glow turned into a dark-grey which seemed to create a shield on the skin itself. Triggered, the symbols of power reacted with the pressure unleashed.

\*O' goddess forgotten by the ages, o' goddess who spread victory and peace over the souls of true warriors. I, humble vessel for thy Symbol, plea to have a sliver of thy strength.\*

'It came to me in a dream,' hands pressed as if to pray, '-the symbols of power aren't only a mere tool to use. They are the souls, emotions, and experiences of the respective gods. I mustn't fight to control their power; they have a conscience. Forgive me for I've been deaf for so long, thinking of how to grow strong without heeding to thy warning.'

"Child of Death, I hear thy plea," came a voice in the form of an orb of light, "-thy misgivings have been forgotten. I, Nike, shall grant thy wish. Be strong and be humble for if one exists without the other, the carnage will surely cloud his mind."

No pain, no hurt, the Symbol flew to gently take command over the forehead. Spread to connect with the eyes; her golden glow turned the right-eye from red to gold.

"Thank you, goddess," eyes opened, the world around seemed to have lit ever-so-gently. The puppet stood with heat emanating. Each fingertip felt tingly, the body light, and the mind clear. 'Let's begin.'  
\*Snap,\* a barrier surrounded the attic. Box of Alche hovered to spew a golden substance over the would-be vessel. Gracefully, the hand moved to conjure his mana into physical form. Carved and sculpted, the Puppet soon took the shape of Intherna. Another three hours later, dusk wandered its way into the continent as the sun headed to sleep. Focused, the influx of power made it all the difficult to be accurate. Moved as if a talented artisan, Staxius worked tirelessly to sculpt.

Deep in the night, time was midnight; the mansions around were dark for many slept. All but one, one of the bigger and greater properties in the noble district. The attic lit ever so often; the light would peer out of transoms.

'At last,' dropped to his knee when the clock struck 02:00, "-an immortal vessel worthy of a goddess. One that will grow alongside her power, I had to model it after my body. No fear of imploding or exploding if she goes beyond her real power."

\*Box of souls,\* called forth, \*-soul bound to forever be under my service, Intherna, come forth for thy master demands it.\* Transmuted into an alternate dimension, sparks flew, jolts of electricity lashed out at the walls and floor. An apparition of a lady who slept hands intertwined as if to pray floated towards the vessel. "AWAKE," \*CLAP,\* shook, her eyes opened menacingly, "-you..." mumbled without sound, her memory remained intact. \*Soul Transmigration.\*

Dim to an eruption of sun-like flares had him hold out a hand for it was too bright. Fingers twitched; the toes followed suit. Naked, her face, an exact copy, red flame hair flowed with matching eye color. Sharp nose with a resemblance to a doll, her figure soon grew to be petite. Small in stature with a blazing aura. Blinked to carefully scan the place, her face locked onto Staxius. The latter, moved as a conductor, meticulously crafting and sculpting her vessel had the Wing's of Nikes lessen in glow. A total of thirteen hours. \*Shackle mine strength: Nevermore – Full Restraint.\* Released, the body dropped lifelessly, "-I did it," he stared at the ceiling and laughed.

"What do you mean," angered, the girl jumped with killing intent.

"Stand down," a downward gesture had her face crash onto the floor.

“What did you do?” muffled, she struggled to gaze Staxius for an unknown force held her down.

“Let me gather my breaths,” panting, he gave a nonchalant glance.

“ANSWER!” fiery wings burst out her back, an insatiable thirst for fighting.

“Calm down,” he breathed with a look of disappointment.

“DON’T LOOK DOWN ON ME,” her power grew ten-fold.

Floorboard scorched, \*Full-power restraint,\* a snap had her fire extinguished.

“Don’t mess with the mansion,” glared, a feeling of powerlessness whelmed inside.

“Stand,” commanded, the body moved on its own. “Approach,” coldly, he watched without an ounce of regret, the body truly was a puppet. “Sit,” cross-legged, she sat facing her creator.

“Now then,” held onto her cheeks with the middle finger and thumb, as if he were about to eat an apple, “-do you have questions?” emotionless, what stared her was the definition of fear.

Able to only use her mouth, “-let me go,” asked in a gentle voice. He gestured upwards, the control lessened.

“FOOL,” she laughed and reached for his neck, a sudden gesture to the right had her slammed into a table.

“Intherna,” stood and looking down, “-I’m not that big a fool. Have you forgotten who I am?” \*Release,\* a snap had her regain control.

“Why are you setting me free now?”

“I’ve made my point clear through actions,” extending a hand for her to stand, Staxius held an alluring posture with a charming aura. “Intherna, we fought without restraint against one another. It was the best time of my life, and I think it goes the same for thee. You, who was a candidate for the Eipea Empire was asked to be killed by the Supreme God himself. An uncontrollable raging tempest is what he referred thee as,” grasping her attention, “-I’ll give you two choices. Either give up thy will and be a mindless puppet or be my companion. War is soon to come; all gods and goddesses who were killed unrightfully will be given another chance. The choice is yours, Phoenix, daughter of the sun, what will thee choose?”

“Another chance at living,” mumbled underneath her breath, she stared left to right to then accept his hand. “On one condition.”

“Speak.”

“I’ll swear my loyalty after I’ve spent a few months in thy company.

“Deal.”