

## Death Magic 331

### Chapter 331: Promise

"Greetings Majesty," said a guard with a salute. Held onto a short magic wand, the elf worked as a guard for one of the magical universities. Clifftorn was engraved atop the arch of an entrance. Curved, the letters went along without difficulty. Inside the campus, a green yard stretched from right until a domed-roof building of which bore several floors. \*Do not enter,\* warned many to not ruin the well-cared grass. Pass the middle, a sphere made of cement hovered with various writings. Split into four paths, the destination was the central building. One in an E-shape with the middle being the office. Inside, a help desk waited with a beastman who wore small round glasses

"Majesty," he stood without wasting time, "-a lecture room has been prepared to the left," pointed, Staxius was on his way.

'Who was that?' asked the helper with the reading glasses pulled down, a glimpse of an unknown figure.

Heavy looking dark-wood inlaid with metal stood strong. Now on the very silent first floor, the hall stretched to the right until one could not see further down. \*Click,\* a slap of warm air sprawled out. The smell of wood and the crisp fragrance of flowers lingered. Tis was the same room he had used during the presentation for the mining plans.

"Majesty," said an innocent-sounding voice.

"Anything the matter?" turned facing a girl with bright red hair, she smiled.

"No, just amazed that's all. Who would have thought that the Death Reaper would be a king in this realm? Very much fascinating."

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"Think what thee wishes, Intherna, I'm still going to wait till thou swore fidelity."

"Such theatrics," she leaned on the table, "-why do thou care? Isn't the point of a puppet army to blindly follow their creator?"

"Forgive my saying but thou art ignorant. Making puppets out of gods and goddesses is a thing of sacrilege. Yet, I've decided so, as to atone, tis a chance at a new life for those trapped in mine soul."

"Divine beings, I still can't believe that the Supreme God would just abandon a loyal follower. Nevertheless, the god of death granting life has been the first of what I've seen. Isn't that the job of Creation I dare wonder."

"Destruction may well be my creed, though, I've been given the boon of Box of Alche. A substitute and lesser powerful item of which grants the ability of Creation itself."

"That's how you were able to create such a comfortable vessel. Lord Death, I add that you're quite peculiar. Thy mind and thoughts intrigue me, a very good trait to have if thou plan on creating more of divine puppets." Triggered, footsteps of many was sensed climbing the stairs.

“Do take a seat, Intherna, we’ve more to accomplish later,” uninterested, a book landed on the table with a loud crash. Intherna, who held a strange stare, turned to grab a seat with one leg atop the other.

‘Intherna, her soul has transmigrated. She can escape into my shadow and remain there without the need for food nor water. Able to do and experience anything a lady her age would wish for, there’s also another side of that body I made. If the day comes where we’re separate, a single word from me will have her body and soul teleport to my aid. The best way to describe her is a human-spirit, though she’s more than that.’ Exchanging stares, she knew of those abilities as well.

‘Smart when it comes to magic, I’ll have to decide if this god of death is worthy of my support. Well, it’s good that I’d think that, his holding all the cards right from the beginning. A gesture and my conscience are reduced to naught with my powers for the vessel to use however way it wants. What’s the end game, Staxius, what is indeed the end game?’ deep in thought, the door opened with many teenagers respectfully walking in.

“Good morning Class-2A.”

“Good morning, Majesty,” said the class with all present.

“Who’s that?” asked Simone quick to spot the mysterious girl.

“Don’t ask,” whispered Timothy, “-let it slide.”

“I see that the fighter’s guild is here as well,” devoid of emotion, the tone was but a singular note. “Eagerness to learn,” he nodded in acknowledgment. The boys walked in followed by the girls who were at a slower pace. Kim led her group with confidence. On the way to take their seat, white hair brushed against the table. Red eyes locked against one another, Eira’s face seemed wanting to speak, as if a matter of heavy concern held her chest tight. What returned her intent was a face distant and cold, Staxius held no particular interest in speaking. The warm heart that had grown over the years had ice slowly regain its reign. A mere single second felt like an eternity.

“Well,” turned to the giant display, “-as promised, I’ll explain and give a course on the basics to alchemy.” Earnest to listen, the room soon fell into a morguelike silence.

14:00 came faster than a blink. “-that’s all to what is needed for a good base to Alchemy,” he concluded.

“Hey, hey,” gripped Fletcher, “-isn’t Alchemy supposed to be hard?”

“Let go of my hair,” said Kim with a baffled expression, “-it’s hard,” she turned, “-I had lessons prior. Complicated beyond belief it took a few hours of me to understand what went on.”

“Yeah,” interjected Mille, “-the lecture was simple and easy to digest. Time went by so fast, a sign that our brain didn’t work that hard.”

“I understand,” yelled Tony with a notebook in the air, “FOR THE FIRST TIME, I’VE UNDERSTOOD THE THEORY BEHIND MAGIC.”

“If Tony understood, then there’s no excuse for those who didn’t follow,” laughed Harold. Anastasia and Eira remained aloof of class-filled banter.

“Excuse you,” echoed down the center, “-I didn’t say that the lecture has ended. We’ll have ten-minutes to answer any questions.” Scared, the laughter died out.

“I’ve a question,” Christina, he nodded to give the go-ahead. “I don’t understand how Alchemy can change the properties of any item. Isn’t that improbable, the change of lead into gold – won’t that create more trouble than due?”

“No, not at all,” calm, “-Alchemy isn’t the search of transmuting item into another. It’s the research of how mana reacts with elements. Tis a simple definition. Let me elaborate on the transmutation subject. Some who wish to know, changing an element into another is a thing of myth, yet, it’s possible in theory. When one uses a spell such as a fireball, the mana converts from life-essence to the particles required for the spell. Mana conversion from life-essence is still a hypothesis – thus I shan’t go into details. What it means is that,” \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* from a tiny injury, blood hovered forth till above the right palm to then crystalize into an alchemic circle invisible to the students. Not wasting time, he called a droplet of pure-mana from the air to hover into liquid and rest on the palm. “-if one has the proper conduit, good catalyst, and ample energy,” an amber spark had the class jump back. “Changing one thing into another is possible,” a rose-bud transmuted from Mana.

“You said in theory,” voiced Mille.

“But that was in practice,” yelled Kim.

“In theory for other people, I can perform the transmutation spell. Prerequisite is the absolute understanding of Mana conversion. I’ve studied the source of magic from well before you were born. I’ve yet to see someone propose the theory in the alchemic world. I doubt it will be the case for a few years to come. GateSix, as you know, the research group, has had a few discoveries along the same line of thought.”

“You said energy,” pointed Timothy, “-how much?”

“Perceptive as usual,” he turned to the boy, “-quantifying the exact number is daunting. A good reference would be the combination of two-A-ranked mages casting high-tier magic to transmute a droplet of mana.”

“How about the medium?” asked Simone who surprised all.

“It can be anything as long as sufficient energy is given. I suppose mana is easier for it’s pure and subject to change.”

“If a lot of energy is required, would having a good Catalyst lower the strain?” asked Ysmay.

“I’m afraid not, the catalyst acts as a starting agent. One still requires energy to toggle the catalyst, think of it as climbing a hill with a bolder – after the top, it shall roll down on its own. Now imagine the energy required is an almost vertical slope.”

Faced with that truth, the questions stopped. “If there’s no more question, then class is dismissed.”

Stood reluctantly, Kim had her way to the front, “-will there be another class?”

“No,” he returned with a cold glance, “-I promised to give the basics of alchemy, a promise which I’ve now fulfilled. Don’t forget, there’s; Astronomy, Botany, Magic, and Medicine to study before partaking

the test. Each of which one has to take four years to study. Throwing the term alchemist around lightly is an insult. Only those who work hard will pass the test. C is the bare limit to being certified. If one isn't yearning to being the top, then thou may just give up. The world isn't going anywhere, take your time, Kim," facing the students, "-you as well. Decide well, being an Alchemist is more work than people know."

"Majesty," spoke Mille.

"What is it?"

"We know about the certification grades. Perchance, could we see yours?"

The emblem of alchemy always held the alchemists' grades written to give tough jobs to people of worth.

"Sure," reached inside the suit-jacket, "-here," shiny and well kept, turned on its backside, \*Staxius Haggard: S-Ranked.\*

"Oh..."

"You seem disappointed," laughed Harold, "-did he not have the adequate grade?"

"Not really," turned to her peers, "-it's S-ranked."

"S..."

"Yes, S ranked, for those who don't understand. To be certified, one must have C and above. Scoring A+ is the best one can get. As for the S ranking, that one is given by the Master Alchemist. He has to review thy papers and have a council with other masters to decide."

"I know of only five people with the rank. They all work in the Cobalt Unit," turned Timothy in awe.

"Yes, yes," aloof, "-this isn't the time to get excited about my rank. We'll go on a quest tomorrow. Be at the ready,"

"You mean we get to fight?" laughed Tony.

"That's right, return to the castle, rest, eat a good meal; we'll meet tomorrow. As for those who signed up to be a trainee mage; we've reached 13 days so far. If you are to come tomorrow, the journey might last another week to a month, it all depends. Therefore, all who want to return home, inform Serene."

"Thank you, majesty." Cheerful, the students headed to the door with a lot of chatter. Giving a standoffish stare, Eira followed suit.

"I must admit," stood Intherna, "-alchemy is quite the subject."

"Yeah, well, it's thanks to said subject that I'm able to bound souls and give life anew."

"Where are you headed now?"

"To the castle, I have to gather a few weapons and armor for tomorrow's expedition."

"Where are you headed though, for the supposed quest."

“No idea, I’ll decide once at the guild.”

“Whatever,” she approached, “-I’m going to shadow you wherever you go.”

“Do what you want,” closing the door, they headed for the castle.

Shy of the entrance, Ruslan walked nervously with the old sage. Bound to listen to the orders of Xula, it soon turned to chaos. Maids ordered by Youst were asked to not stand in her way. Rosetta took extra care of Lizzie; scared of what could happen, the second princess was a priority.

“Majesty, are you sure this to be wise?” asked Ruslan with sweat pouring out the forehead.

“Yes,” she turned with a glare, “-are you going to oppose my orders?”

“But Majesty,” interjected the old sage, “-if the mine is ordered to be closed. There’s no way we’ll be able to run the state. Arda relies heavily on its gemstones – if we don’t do something quickly, taxing our still recovering people will become an only viable option.”

“I don’t care, people should be able to fend for themselves.”

“What about the protection of our people, will you dismiss the Royal guard?”

“Ruslan, are you my councilor or not, thy job is to find a way to make my decisions work.”

Stopped shy of a balcony, “-I have an idea,” she turned, “-why not have the adventurers be posted as the guards around the province. Wasn’t the whole point of their coming to ensure our people’s safety. What of it now, tis the guards who are still killing monsters out in the further villages.”

“I’m afraid that is out of our control,” said Ruslan.

“Out of your control?” she laughed.

“What is this I hear of stopping the mine,” cold and direct, a voice came down the hallway.

“Blood King,” bowed Ruslan for he was sworn to him.

“This isn’t of your concern,” turned Xula with a glare of which her eyes locked with Intherna, a girl as pretty as Venus.

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“I beg to differ,” he approached weapon in hand, “-Ruslan, care to explain what is going on?”

Checking on the queen for answers, she stared away without a care.

“Majesty, its that the queen has decided to stop the mine project and bring all the guards’ stations around the country to the capital. A premonition came to her, is the reason, she’s scared that war may break soon.”

“Is that the reason?” he asked monotonously.

“Yes,” said the sage filled with shame.

“What about her majesty, how do you think of bringing more funds?”

“Selling our weaponry,” she smirked.

“I see,” he breathed, “-to whom?”

“Anyone who wishes to buy.”

“MAJESTY,” voiced the sage, “-if you do that, there will be no way we could defend against monsters let alone a war.”

“Why not, isn’t that the job of adventurers?” hurtful on purpose, the queen tried to make the king seem incompetent.

“Ruslan,” uninterested by her provocations, “-have the mine resume their work. Phantom will purchase the land for 200,000 gold. I’ll make sure that the workers are paid fairly. If the queen wants to sell, then I shall buy it. Have an invoice on how much weapons she wishes to sell; I’ll purchase to hand out as compensation for the protection of our people. As per the contract, Queen Shanna signed to the leader of the nightwalkers, we agreed to join the council under the agreement that we’ll have full control on what we wish to do. Thus, I’ll take control of the weapons manufacturing and the lands under Arda’s control. Have the minister readied for an audience, I’ll be there in two hours,” menacingly, “-if Queen Shanna has more demands, do take it to Serene. Making sure that the people don’t suffer on a childish tantrum is my responsibility as the monarch of Arda.”

Chapter 332: Thoughtless

“Excuse you?” refuted Xula upon hearing the term childish.

“Something the matter?” stared blankly, “-I see no reason to be tactful for actions that could result in the kingdom’s sufferance. I’ve accepted to thy demands, there’s no further need to talk.”

“Quite the show,” spoke Intherna who locked arms with Staxius.

“Vixen,” fired the queen with a strong step forward.

“Don’t,” halted Staxius with an over the shoulder glare, “-don’t you dare point thy finger at me or Intherna. You made thy choice, and that is final. On a last note, do tell Ryul that I’ll be waiting at the guild – we need to discuss some business.” Hearing those words, her angered self calmed to one of a sheep.

‘He knows?’ she thought and examined.

‘I’ve struck a chord,’ disappeared down the hall, ‘-my guess was right.’

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“What was that about?” asked Intherna very interested in the matter.

“A spat between the royal couple,” to which he winked, “-not that it matters. She’s her own person, and I’m my own.”

“Heartless, aren’t you, lord death?”

“Not that heartless,” he patted her head, “-I did give you thy will after all.”

"You say that as if it was a favor. Besides, we both know that if I go against you, my conscience will be wiped."

"Fair argument, I suppose I am cruel."

"Intherna," close to a door leading out back, "-I've a favor to ask. There's another vampire by the name of Serene who's probably speaking to Queen Shanna. Make sure she doesn't get hurt."

"You said you wouldn't order me around," she frowned.

"Tis, not an order, I merely requested, please?" courteous, the eyes were ones of desperation.

"Fine..."

Yonder to where the queen stood in the company of counselors, "-sage, what are we to do?"

"Ruslan, thou heard what the king demanded. Have the minister and general sent over to... the location was never told, was it?" missing information, he spun in hopes of gaining another few words.

"To the Adventuring guild," said a flirty voice, "-he shall be waiting there," out from the shadows of the corridor, Serene stepped out with a courteous bow.

"Serene," lashed Xula, "-care to explain what all of this is?"

"I'm afraid not," stared up with a smile, "-I've sworn my soul to the Blood-king. I do remind thee that nightwalkers are the only race that hasn't sworn to her majesty. We've sworn to the council on orders per our king. Thou shall know best of what stands down this path of mindless whims."

"You dare threatened me?" she yelled with an imposing stance, "-prophecy," called upon the spirit, "-go take her head," in a flash of light, unable to react, her weapon dashed forth with blade in hand. Serene, took by surprise, could but face away in hopes of a painless death.

\*CLANG,\* exploded in a burst of fire, red-hair levitated with the ends on fire. Eyelashes with the radiances of another worldly sun had the weapon fall back. "I would not be so sure," hovered in a circle behind her head, multiple fireballs of differing hues.

"Who are you?" asked Prophecy with her physical self.

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"Intherna," she stared with terror burning deep inside, "-daughter of Rah, the sun god."

"What does that mean?" a step forward, Prophecy stopped suddenly.

"It means that she's a goddess," said Xula who now stood before the spirit. "Have you come to fight?"

"Not really," nonchalant, the flames extinguished with her face returning to beautiful and gentle. "I was requested to keep an eye over Serene," to which she grabbed the secretary's hand. "Have a good day, the wife of my master."

"W-what?" disappeared into the abyssal corridor, Xula stared the sage and Ruslan in deep confusion.

"To be clear," coughed Ruslan, "-she said the daughter of Rah?"

"I think so," turned the sage.

"The king has a goddess under his wing," biting her nail, "-how powerful does he want to become?"

"Majesty," now knelt, "-please, think thy actions through. It shames me to say this but if the king and queen are to have a fallout, our province, which is already under heavy strain; might break apart."

"Sage," seeing her old friend knelt, "-I understand," with a deep breath, "-I won't be mindless of my actions," facing the balcony, "-I've yet to forgive my husband," to that, she vanished in turn.

"You suppose that worked?" asked Ruslan.

"It better have," whispered the sage, "-after all the trouble of having her come here and Serene in the shadows. The goal was to have the royal couple talk and resolve the issue."

"I guess we helped but aggravate the situation," facepalmed the mustached vampire.

"Yeah," giving a raspy chuckle to the point of suffocation, "-we know that the King isn't going to back down easily. Did you see how he calmly answered to her will and found solutions?"

"I doubt it would have been possible if, you know, our king was lesser of influence. He's renowned both in Arda and out. A reputation of which could scare a babe to sleep."

"Let's just hope for the best, I'll fetch the ministers, you go take care of the general."

Minutes turned to hours, Staxius sat in the adventuring guild awaiting a few guests. Stood beside him were Serene and Intherna. The latter was pleased to have shown immense strength; she loved the prospect of fighting, and even so of scaring away a potential fight. As for the former, redder colored lipstick with casual stares at Intherna had the duo bond rather unnaturally. In the middle, he sat with a cigar in mouth staring out the window.

\*Knock, knock,\* the door opened with two assistants leading the way for the guests.

"Majesty, have thy requested an audience?" asked the first guest with a gravelly tone. From casual to a sudden aura of fear, the guests stop shy with two ladies glaring. They seemed to judge every single movement the two made; intimidating to the point of a full stop.

"General Niroz and Minister Yael," deep, he turned. "Why art thou still at the doorway, please, enter and take a seat," said with the cigar smoke highlighted by the sun's ray. Black hair, square borderless glasses, pointy short ears and dark-skin complexion, a dark-elf, Yael walked to sit rather timidly. Niroz, on the other hand, walked with a filled-out chest, heavy armor, the seat didn't fit his stature.

"I'll stand," he said with hands now behind his back.

"Suit thyself," turned to Serene, she leaned to give papers. Needless to say, being her, she couldn't stop from showing a little cleavage, one that had the Minister flustered. Laughed internally, her torture ended with a wink. Accustomed to her ways, seeing differing reactions for people always brought a smile to Staxius's face. That was, during a time where situations weren't as complicated.

"Have a read, then we shall proceed."



“Majesty,” first to speak out, “-are you sure this is right?” Niroz’s stance faltered upon reading the paper. It stated in detail what the queen had demanded.

“Yes,” staring up at Niroz, “-our queen has had a premonition of a possible war. That is why guards over the whole province are to return immediately. Gearing up to that eventually is a must.”

“I understand, however,” eyebrow raised with the ears twitching, “-calling the forces back to then be redeployed will have the populous at risk from monsters. In no way can we have that happen. Not that we blame the adventuring guilds, thee have been more of assistance than ever.”

“Tis were her orders, general,” monotonous, “-that isn’t why I’ve called you here.”

“Why then, majesty, what takes precedence over a possibly kingdom devastating premonition?”

“Thy queen had another idea. Funds are running low, I’m sure the other representatives know. We’ve always had the policy to let the people live with minimal taxation and freedom. Arda has to remain said way, therefore, she has ordered for our weapons to be sold to any who wishes to buy.”

“MAJESTY,” tone dowsed in worry, “-RECONSIDER, that’s... it would be as if telling our enemies where to strike.”

“That is why,” shrewdly, “-that is why, Phantom, an arm’s dealing company, shall buy the weapons. No need to worry, Phantom is my company – we’ll take said weapons to distribute amongst the adventurers who will most probably guard the frontlines in case of an attack. As of today, the universities in charge of weapon research and fabrication will be under my control. Many representatives and professors have accepted the contract. All I require is thine signature, as thou art the general.”

“What will happen?”

“The money spent on arms will go to the state’s coffers. Phantom will be at a loss,” to which he turned to the Minister. “That’s where you come in – Yael, we’ll also purchase the land around the vicinity of 30 kilometers radius for 200,000 gold. The miners will be paid by us, of course, and the ores, precious stones, extracted, will first cover Phantom’s losses.”

“Is that to counteract the queen’s plans on stopping the mine?”

“Yes, the money Phantom is to provide will suffice to last the kingdom a few months.”

“I see that the papers are in order; there’s also the condition of having lands around directly under her majesty’s command be given to thee, what does entail?”

“Development of paths able to have trucks and vehicles move from town to villages and so forth.”

“Will that not perturb the forest?”

“Of course, it will,” eyes sharp, “-sadly, if Arda is to survive, we need better ways of movement. It takes far too long to travel across our province.”

“What about the Dryads?” asked Niroz with a smile, the prospect of faster travel means easier deployment of troops.

"I've sent for someone; he'll make contact soon," reaching conclusion, "-what will it be, Minister, General?"

"Nothing more need be said," Niroz stamped his seal.

"I trust that you have Arda's best interest in mind," accepted the Minister.

"May the goddess bless thee." Glimmers of relief displayed across the faces told a story of him having won the first battle.

'Sorry, Xula, sacrifices have to be made.'

"General, please have someone inventory the armory. The funds will be given through bank transfer."

"Yes, sire."

'I own the land and armory of Arda. A good stronghold to have, the premise of helping the inhabitants worked charms. The mine will bring a lot of money – with the gold I crafted from alchemy, it should help cover a few of the costs. Now then, Queen, what is your next move. Are you going to keep up this needless fight?'

"Blood King," spoke Serene, "-what is the plan going forward?"

"Serene," turned to the secretary, "-tell me, what is the only wish a nightwalker would exchange his life to obtain?"

"That's a tough question," she paused. "I guess it would be to freely move around during the day. Especially since non-purebred are bound to the night, I think it would benefit everyone. Imagine, vampires, able to run during the day, that freedom would make us even more powerful."

"I see," turned to face the outside, '-a cure to have the populous be able to move around in the day. It should be simple enough,' smirking, '-the Arcane Library – I could turn my blood, defragment it to have the protection against sun. Replicating it as a potion should do the job. Easier said than done; I need the vampires to grow fearsome.'

"Why did you ask?"

"Out of curiosity."

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Ended, the day would continue till dusk. Many rumors of the spat between the king and queen went around the noble houses. Most were dreading the outcomes; with a few having the spark of ambition turned into a blaze. At the risk of another faction amassing power, Staxius had Serene work behind the scene in gathering information on those heavily ambitious. A lesson learned through the incident during the inter-magical tournament. To squander any possible revolt before it grew out of hand. The premonition about war – though he thought to be a convenient excuse, stood true. Xula, many nights prior, had a dream of the people screaming, dying, and brought to ruin.

Chapter 333: Accident

"One and two and three and four,"

“One and two and three and four,” echoed behind, trailed with the stomping of boots against the ground.

“One and two and three and four,” said he who panted heavily with a sweaty forehead.

“Early morning training,” commented Ysmay peering out to the yard outback.

“Yeah,” returned with less enthusiasm, Eira seemed to have left a part of herself – somewhere far deep beyond reach of an arm.

“What’s the plan for today?”

“I don’t know, I want to go with the guild-master onto a quest, yet, something is holding me back,” solemn, her face held the expression of a withered tree. One left for ages to come, one that had not seen a droplet of water for long.

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“It’s fine,” smiled Ysmay reassuringly, “-everything will work out.” A short discussion for they had been awake minutes prior. Farther into the castle, the panting of Class-2A that trained, grew more into an empty chamber. Dark, somber, and devoid of life.

Ordered to meet at the Roth in a few hours, Serene was appointed as a babysitter once more.

“Let us in, let us in,” rays of the sun blinded the guards surveying the main entrance. The noise of volume came as if thunder. Bristling of leaves exploding into a carriage with horses that had gone mad. Came with it was the stench of rotten meat. “LET’S US IN,” said the merchant with straw-hat.

“HALT,” in the process of stopping the fanatic, a guard stepped forward with hand held out. Not apparent at first, the horse had gone crazy.

“Stop!” yelled again to no avail.

“GET OUT OF THE WAY,” screamed the merchant.

“HE’S ABOUT TO BREAKTHROUGH, GET OUT OF THE WAY,” stood on a tower that connected itself with the upper-bridge, an elf, Sergeant to the Royal Guards, drew a bow.

“AIM FOR THE HORSE,” he hailed at the other archers on duty. No hesitation, the spring recoiled darting an arrow straight through the horses’ head and onto the floor. Brain matter latched itself on the tail of said projectile. In a blink, after yelling at the guards, he took command and shot. As for the gate, it shut instantaneously with a crash, one that had the floor rumble.

Dead, the horse dropped with its momentum, the carriage spun out of which it threw the merchant out at a lethal speed. \*Foup,\* arrow shot high onto the tree, the elf swung without hesitation to grab the would-be casualty. Saved, the carriage tumbled with sheer strength to break onto the gates. Dust rose as if one had thrown a veil of mystery over the carnage. Next to it, the elf slowly descended with the victim in hand, unconscious with a head injury notice only after they landed, “-WE NEED A MEDIC, NOW,” he screamed.

“SERGEANT,” overheard, “-OPEN THE GATES,” hailed the overwatch. Clanged into being lifted, “-where can I find a medic?”

“No medic here,” said one guard.

“The second floor,” added another.

“I NEED NOT LOCATIONS, I NEED ANSWERS, THIS MAN IS ABOUT TO DIE!”

“TO ROTH, TAKE HIM TO ROTH,” yelled few bystanders, “-THE GUILD MASTER SHOULD BE ABLE TO HEAL.”

“Alright, thank you,” and off he went with the bystanders close behind.

“Look at this mess,” voiced another who approached the broken carriage and it’s contents. The foul stench had many taken aback. None really wanted to stick close.

“This isn’t the rotten food,” said a beastman on the way back, “-guards, what happened here?” a crowd had gathered.

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“General,” instant salute.

“Explain what happened?” arms crossed; the eyes stared in want for answers.

“Sire,” came forth an elf who gave a summary of the events.

“Crazed horse, what about the contents?” he asked deeply.

“We’ve yet to check, sire,” ashamed, the heads lowered.

“Are you scared by the smell?” he breathed in dismissal, “-out of the way,” commanded, he knelt to unveil a stained sheet from which hailed the god-awful stench. A pull later, the growing pungent rotten devil, dispersed for meters on end. A ground of returning farmers gave a glance to hurl out in a bush. Not only did it travel horizontally, but vertically as well; the proof was of elves pinching their nose. Came upon his eyes were the pale faces of adventurers – the tag around their neck was of Bronze and Ruby. Unknown to him, “-soldiers, take the deceased to the morgue this instant.”

“Yes sire,” laid on the broken wooden planks, the bodies were taken inside into the guards-quarters that hosted a morgue.

“What of the survivor?”

“He was taken to Roth by Sergeant Kelfir.”

“Right.”

Further inside from the accident, the merchant dropped in and out of consciousness. Gasping for air, the sergeant ran as fast as he could. “Here,” waved another fellow trader with a carriage, “-get it,” he said with the back containing the same bystanders.

“Thanks,” a word of gratitude and the horse galloped further into the capital.

“Lady Serene,” opposite the entrance walked Class 2A.

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

“What quest do you think we might partake in?” excited, Tony skipped with a smile.

“This isn’t a trip to the fairyland you know,” mumbled Harold.

Up ahead, a few meters away from Roth, a crowd was seen gathered around the entrance. Chatter and rumors filled the street. ‘What happened?’ quicker on the feet, they walked closer.

“Do you think the trader will make it?”

“No idea, did you see the injury on his head.”

“Yeah, none can survive that.”

“The gate took damage from the wild carriage,” assumptions of the crowd went in circles.

‘What the heck is happening?’ focused, Serene made her way to the front of the line where droplets of blood went inside. Baffled, the bystanders were distracted by she who’d spoken.

“Please,” said the adventurers now posing as guards, “-the guild master has denied access to anyone.”

“Tough luck,” voiced Serene, “-I’m his assistant,” to which they bowed and allowed her passage.

“The students, my lady?”

“Let them in,” she scurried up the stairs to follow the blood onto the fifth floor.

“I need bandages, mana potions, healing potions, and some alcohol,” ordered the guild-master with hands dowsed in blood. The body of the trader was laid bare naked on the table. Hidden by the shirt, they missed what seemed to be a bite mark on his shoulders. “BLANK SCROLLS TOO,” he yelled to which assistants ran down to the lower floors. Alone, facing the injured man, the entrance to the meeting room had Haru and Mieshre with strong stances.

“What happened?”

“Serene,” turned Haru, “-all I know is that one of my men got injured. I overheard the rumors.”

“Information travels fast,” added Mieshre.

“Excuse us,” voiced the guild assistant who carved a path between the students.

“Is he going to be alright?” asked Christina with a throbbing heart. Never had the students seen the true horror of what it means to fight. Facing Staxius who sweated, they watched with upset stomachs.

‘Minor injury to the head, the problem is this bite mark. Stained dark-purple, the curse from an infected monster. What a pain,’ \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread,\* needles of differing shapes and sizes hovered above the hand. ‘Thankfully they’ve taken care of disinfecting his wound; the first order of business is the stitch the head injury,’ sown without physically interfering, Blood-Arts worked for precision work. ‘The curse; it hasn’t reached a lethal level yet. Good thing no arteries were hit. For him to make it all the

way here, a fighter, strong and resilient,' a glance showed a demi-human with dog ears. Whimpering, sniffles, and yelps of agony followed; he kept on going in and out of consciousness.

"Please stand back," turned to the assistant, "-removing the curse is a dangerous process," moved to the door, \*Death Element: Magical Barrier,\* a sphere engulfed him and the patient. 'No time to think,' eyes closed, the hand wrote symbols in the midair. Words of power faintly shone as it stuck onto the blank magical papers. \*Snap,\* it headed at five-point to form a pentagram, drawn blood for the trader, the symbol settled. Focused with hands pressed together, \*I am he who slays without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thy see. Heed mine call, thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed: Ancient Magic – Astral Binding.\* Flamed, the scrolls held a crimson hue. It went around the contours of the symbol after which it grew bigger. The taint visibly retreated from the bite marks. Sucked into the symbol, the papers turned black. "AHHHHH," screams of a man in severe pain had the students taken aback. Grueling, the screaming raged for five long minutes.

"Over," sighed, the barrier dropped. The empty scrolls, now black, dripped what seemed to be a slimy substance.

\*Burnt eternally in my domain, I, Staxius Haggard, the god of death, call forth the flame that purges gods and demons alike. Set ablaze for I've ordered so; Abyssal Wrath.\* Black to white, the curse turned to dust. Still yet to recover, the wound was quickly stitched. 'He's used up more mana than I thought,' stood daringly, '-if he's not given mana soon,' grabbing a mana-potion, the latter did naught. Complete refusal from the host, lower concentration, and not refined.

'Damn it,' breathing a sigh, \*Mana Control: Waves,\* the lines around drew to him, \*Mana Control: Spiral,\* a downward vortex led into the forehead of the demi-human. Charged, the energy dispersed across his face and throughout the body. Able to contain the flow, neither had an idea of what happened. 'Healing potions should help in the recovery,' helped to sit upright, the trader drank with a few spills. Wiped clean, Staxius had the man sleep on the table. A step back to the breath, the sun-burnt itself across the window and on his back; hot yet reassuring, as if a comforting pat.

Blood covered hall cleaned by assistants, he stood with dried blood in hand. \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* soon, the crimson life-force formed into an orb of which resembled an apple.

\*Crunch,\* he walked to the door where individuals stood.

"Will he be alright?" asked Haru noninterested by him eating an orb of blood.

"Yeah, a few hours rest, the healing potions will aid in fast recovery," in the corner, a glimpse of Ryul who leaned against the wall. Many of the students wanted to speak out, especially Eira. Attempted to formulate a sentence, "-Ryul," he walked straight past without acknowledging their presence. A crimson hair figure walked beside the king.

"Majesty," he bowed in utmost respect, "-I've come as thou demanded."

"Lord Ryul, we've a few matters to discuss."

"Hey, isn't that the girl from yesterday?" pointed Timothy.

"Lady Serene," called Eira, "-who's that?"

“That’s Intherna,” she smiled, “-Majesty’s new,” paused, “-let’s just say his new companion.”

“Why would he require one?” snickered Anastasia, “-maybe the king has grown tired of his family. I surely would,” referred to the drama in the castle, none could refute for it was true.

“Why, don’t you know?” urged Eira with a frown.

“Listen,” distant, “-the king does what he wants,” facing Anastasia, “-I do partially agree with the girl. There may well be truth in those words – a replacement for a daughter; an heir, a disciple, and even a new wife for all that matters. Intherna is very charming, I see no reason for her to be more than that,” left on those words, silence prevailed.

‘Ryul,’ sat in the office, ‘-what drives you,’ peered mercilessly, he scoured for any facial queues.

“I do apologize,” entered Serene.

“Just in time, I’d say,” a casual response of which she smiled.

Closing the door, she walked across with hips moving seductively from left to right, any man worthy of the name would have their heart skip a beat. An overly tight dress, decent yet dangerous, she stood in the company of Intherna who held another charm, one of innocence yet mercilessness.

“What is it that you w-wished to discuss?” gulped Ryul, Serene’s thighs were at eye-level from a sitting position.

‘I just know she’s enjoying tormenting the boy. The charms of a woman, what better way to gain the trust of a man. Intherna as well, she’s trying her best to put on the air of virtuousness. I swear these two are the bane of any man who’d dare walk in here. Time to play some mind-games, Ryul, let’s see thy worth, ally or foe, prove thyself.’ Matched with a face of utter control, the mage frowned. Anywhere he tried to stare, was either faced by the girls or Staxius.

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#### Chapter 334: Report

Curtain close shut, the amber from the interface partially lit the office. Bookcases turned to shadows of never-ending solitude, the atmosphere turned claustrophobic.

“M-majesty,” lost track of the ladies, a single point of focus, Staxius’s emotionless face. Neither was it too dark nor too light, a perfect balance. The latter used for the relaxation of the guest’s mind had an adverse effect. Ryul, elf and used to the bright sky, had a sliver of terror rose from inside. One hailed from the subconscious. Readied to speak, Staxius waited patiently, any feeling of guilt would rise from within. Unless one was versed in the ways of interrogation and trained to handle mental battles disguised as a chat, the body always gave signs.

All-seeing eye active, the emotionless stare changed to one of fury; the hues of fire had the Elf cowering. Pinching his thighs, Ryul managed to regain composure in facing the guild master, “Why did you call for me?”

“Right,” relaxed to stern, “-I’ve matters that have been brought to my attention. It concerns the queen and you.”

'Queen and me?' gulped, '-does he know?' eyes narrowed and ears twitched, "-could you elaborate?"

"Yes," blank, "-rumors have spread around the noble houses. I think it might be wise to, let see," leaned on the chair, "-face them openly."

'He knows... doesn't he? Why can't I read his face,' frustrated and shook, the heart spiked to which sweat filled the forehead? "W-what rumors?"

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"Rumors of the mines being shut down," direct, '-you're hiding something,' thought Staxius in control of the discussion.

"W-what mines, I thought you were referring to the possible takeover of the univer-" stopped, '-what am I saying?' a nervous shake of the head, "-the mines are being shut down?"

"Yes," choosing to ignore the obvious blunder, "-that's why I called you here."

"What c-can I do?"

"A lot of things, actually," elbow on the table, "-you could assist the scholars in creating the paths leading to said mine."

"What about the Queen's orders," distraught, "-I thought she stopped the operation," a sliver of discontent flashed across the face.

"The area is owned by Phantom. The University's magical weapon's research is also under my rule as well as the land around Arda. That is why I called you here, to have assistance in creating paths using magic. The Ether element would be convenient for construction."

"I-I see..."

"Master Ryul," interjected Serene with a smile.

"W-what is it?" broken out of the would-be dream, she leaned over to hand papers.

"Kindly review the papers," the allure of a nightwalker, "-I hope for you to help us," comforting, the hands slowly reached for a stamp inside his robe.

"I-if it's what his majesty wants," stamped, "-then I shall do what is must."

"Good," parted sharply, the curtain had the sun beamed into the room. Blinding to the point of disorientation, Ryul left with a nervous expression.

\*Click,\* the door shut, "-learn anything of value?" asked Serene with the signed papers.

"Yes," smiled, "-Ryul and the queen have plans on doing something."

"Is it normal that the paper lit?" asked Intherna with eyes on the supposed papers.

"You noticed," stood with a nod of acknowledgment, "-those papers aren't normal."

"What do you mean?" from one, it separated into multiple blank copies. "What?" baffled, the latter was thrown on the table.



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"Alchemy is a very good tool," examining one of said papers, "-the flash of light was a reaction brought on by Ryul. An original replica of his personal crest. Contracts, agreements, and much more. With this, I can essentially take away his power as representative and professor at the universities. An ace in the hole."

"How did you?"

"Going into details shan't do us good. Have those blanks securely locked. Two of them will be drafted into agreements of abdication from the royal council as well as personal wealth."

"Are you going to blackmail him?" inquired Intherna impressed by what transpired.

"Not exactly blackmail, it's insurance. Don't forget, we're waging war against the monarch of Arda."

"What about you, aren't thee the monarch?" perplexed, she tilted her head and watched.

"I'm the monarch, yes. Only because I'm married to Shanna."

"Majesty, thee forgets that thou art the leader of the nightwalkers. The title of Blood King isn't for show, thou have the right to start a new kingdom as well as a faction."

"I know," turned to Serene, "-that is why I've chosen to take out her support first. The castle is in disarray ever since her rather faulty mistakes and stupid orders. Many are soon to wonder if what she's doing is right. To do so, we need the majority of the representatives, excluding the nobles."

"Are you planning a coup?"

"That isn't my intent. What I wish to send across is the message that if she continues down the path of reckless abandon, the wrath of the people will fuel my climb."

"I see," smiled Intherna with an innocent expression, '-all that he does and says has a deeper meaning. Purposefully ignoring Ryul's blunder, Serene's charm at knowing how and where to speak to have a mind turn to confusion. Interesting,' joyful, "-very interesting."

\*Knock, knock,\*

"Who is it?" asked the secretary.

"It's me," a relieved face of a demi-human walked straight into the office without care, "-STAXIUS," overwhelmed, her steps turned into a sprint.

"Calm it,"

"I CAN'T," Haru leaped with mischievousness brought from within.

"Be careful," side-stepped out of her path, he reached out to grab her arm and pull. Rocked, she stood with the head-spinning, "-Is that how you treat a lady?" pouted, another entered the room.

"Guild master," saluted Mieshre.

"What is this about?" suspicious, Staxius stepped back to lean against the table.

“We’ve come to say but one thing,” in line, the guild leaders bowed, “-thank you for saving the life of a fellow comrade.”

Inches away from a metallic grip under the table, ‘-are they here to say thank you?’ the arms crossed. Glances exchanged with Serene revealed that her nails and teeth were sharpened. Nodded, her face returned to courteous. Facing Intherna, the girl did naught but wait.

“There’s one more thing,” smiled Haru, “-the merchant is awake.”

“Is that so,” they left the room to head downstairs. Plans of revolt, plans of having Shanna feel his presence were yet to be put underway. On alert, Staxius and Serene were seen as a potentially rebellious faction. Nightwalkers, famed and hailed for being strong, were also subject to less than ideal chatter. Views as god yet spoken as if trash, many held resentment for the long years of suffering their kind brought. Sucking blood till death – the night was once a death sentence.

Sat on chairs aligned against the wall, Class 2A waited patiently for instructions. Few discussions on the reality of fighting monsters, questions, and so forth, was answered by Haru and Mieshre during the interrogation upstairs. Glory and praise with the price being their lives. Young and cared for with the utmost diligence, the mindset of being treated as noble didn’t allow the girls to even think of fighting. As for the commoners, they knew all too well of the pain the devils brought. Mixed feelings displayed across the faces, Staxius gave a once over to then meet with the trader.

“Guild Master,” fatigued, “-sorry to have called you.”

Choosing to let the man speak, he waited with a calm expression, one that had the trader breathed a few sighs of relief. “I was part of the supply team put together and sent to Mont Blanc. Two Bronze and three rubies; after god knows how long, we arrived at the village of the winged-wolves. The situation is far worse than is being reported. That village, once a town, is in ruin. The inhabitants have fled farther down the Mont. Despite the warnings, we pushed through the harsh climate to venture up high. The first team, as we speak, is still fighting. From a supply run to life or death, we were ambushed. The adventurers died protecting the carriage, I thought I was next till the first team came in rescue. Next thing, I awoke in the village to be sent back. They are in severe need of help, Guild Master. The Winged-wolves are nearing exhaustion of viable food and drink.”

“No more,” spoke Staxius softly caressing the trader’s forehead, an assistant cast a sleeping spell.

“What now?” asked the guild leaders shaken by the news of death.

“T-they died...” whimpered Haru, “-a-all of them?”

“Yes,” holding a strong front, “-we must honor their memories,” the heart of a true warrior didn’t allow Mieshre to cry for it would be an insult.

“There’s only one thing to do,” turned to Serene, “-come with me,” stepped into the hall. “Class 2A,” they stood, “-it’s been my pleasure to have thee visit the province. As you’ve seen, the situation has taken a turn for the worse.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Tony with a tense stance.

“That isn’t of the issue, priority is thy safe return to Oxshield. I’ll have Courtney bring the plane. Pack up thy stuff, go out into town, purchase some souvenirs.”

“Clo,” gestured to an assistant.

“Yes, guild master?”

“Have funds readied for the students,” of which she nodded and left.

“Just like that?” asked Simone.

“Mind thy tongue,” glared the secretary.

“Let him speak.”

“N-no,” he pointed to Eira, “-I only repeated what she said.”

“Is there something you wish to add?” asked courteously, Staxius waited to see her resolve.

“What does it matter to you,” she rolled her eyes defiantly.

“That’s it,” strict, “-rest of class 2A, Guild Leader Haru, shall give thee a tour. I’ve a few words to discuss in private with her highness.”

“B-but s-sire,” shyly, Ysmay tried to mediate to then be stopped by Anastasia.

Locked in the office with Intherna and Serene outside, the curtains swayed with the wind.

“Why did you bring me here?” frowned, anger could be sensed oozing.

“To have a tête-à-tête, does the meaning elude thee?” calmly, cigar lit.

“Discussion, let’s get this over with already,” not wanting to partake, her eyes stared the bookshelves.

“Listen,” puffed, “-princess of Hidros, daughter of Gallienne and Piers. There’s something you need to know. The words that you said, and I quote, you’re not my father, opened my eyes. I thought long and hard about this day. The day where we’d eventually part ways. Going forward, I’ll do what is best to suit my purpose. Enough playing house, you created this outcome based on thy actions and words. I’ve tried, believe me, I’ve tried to be a good father. A good place to study, a good home, and plenty of money to spend each month. All you had to do was study and become someone you were proud of. Guess that was my fault, always looking out for you, I wanted to see you one day fighting by my side. Stories have to come to an end. Say the word,” a blank stare, “-tell me what you want. Your claim to Hidros remains true. Gallienne even said so, she said that she wanted to have you back in her life. I was the one who obstinately refused said offer. Thus, here’s what I’m proposing. Follow thy heart, resent me, I care not. Do what makes you happy.”

“There you go again,” watery, her face stood on the verge of sobbing, “-always acting kind, always giving me the choice to go against you. Why, just why, why do you always act like the bad guy. You willingly try to become the center of hate, WHY,” stomped to where he stood, “-ARE YOU GOING TO LET ME LEAVE WITHOUT A FIGHT?” tears flowed, sniffles followed by a wipe from her sleeves.

“Did I say anything about letting you go?” grabbing her head, he gently placed it against his chest. “I never said anything about letting you leave. I might have implied it, though the words never came. Eira, you’ll always be my daughter.”

“W-wait,” calmed, she took a step back, “-did y-you p-plan this?”

“Don’t forget who’s thy father.”

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“Honestly, WHY,” she dashed to give a combo of light punches.

“Stop,” he laughed, “-I had forced you into feeling guilty, else, that supposed rebellious nature would have stayed.”

“You’re the worse,” she mumbled.

Chapter 335: Level-headed

“Settled?” asked Staxius seeing a relieved face.

“Y-yeah,” her breathing stable and mind focused, “-why are you staring me so harshly?”

“Harshly?” shaking the head to move close to the window, “-what you call harshly is my resting face.”

“Really?” scurried behind, they stared out the same window onto the street below. Silent and lesser movement compared to any other day; the incident had many o’ folks intrigued. A crowd, not exceeding about twenty-people, went to and fro. The front line would leave to allow others to have a peak and gossip. Well organized in a moment of crisis.

“I guess so,” he sighed, “-could you explain the reason for thy outburst?”

“Outburst...” turned with an apologetic gaze, “-I felt betrayed after the whole mana control arts. It was as if I never knew who my father was. The more I thought, the clearer that truth became, you and I weren’t that close. It frustrated me, especially since mother would always say that she wanted to know you more. Then, that man came, he turned everything upside down – I don’t know how he looks but it was a heavy presence. One similar to Aunt Viola at time, I can’t put my hands on it.”

“A heavy presence you say,” blankly, ‘-similar to Viola. A being with angelic, demonic, and even godly aura. The mist is slowly fading.’

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“Are you sure it’s a man, are you sure that he’s responsible for the things that happened?”

“Not really,” she paused, “-I don’t remember him very well now. This isn’t right, is my memory faulting?”

“Don’t strain yourself,” patting her head, “-it’s not that big a deal.”

“Are you sure?”

“Eira,” startled, she stood straight, “-my daughter. This is very important, words said in anger are often the reflection of what a person thinks inside their heart. And you said that you didn’t think me as thy father,” breathing a sigh, “-which is fine with me. I don’t need you to think of me as a parent-figure.”

“Again?” nervous, “-are you bringing that up again?” spoken as if a girl getting news of a pet’s death, the voice softened and the pitch raised. “D-don’t you t-t-think of me as a family now?”

“Calm down,” he said unbothered by her facial expression, “-this is the truth. I don’t want to force anything onto you. My decision stands firm, choose, Eira.”

“Stop with the drama,” cold, the floor froze all over, “-I’m sick of this bullshit,” eyes changed from red to blue, \*Ice Element: Gergusser Variant – Spike,\* stabbed straight through the heart, Staxius fell to his knee. “The supposed person that brought all this confusion is no other than Eira herself.” \*Smack,\* a knee to the face had Staxius dead on the floor. “F-FATHER S-SAVE M-ME,” screams of agony, screams of pain, a cry of help went unnoticed, “-they’ve summoned and I shall go.” Icy-wings sprang out her back, “-before I leave,” \*Ice Element: Gergusser Variant – Zero Barrier,\* erected in a form of a triangle, the body froze without restraint. “See you,” making a circle in the air, the wall froze to then crack leaving a massive hole.

“MASTER!” hearing the noise, the door bashed into a frozen landscape. The comfort and warmth it once brought were replaced by pure-shiny-blue.

“Over here,” gestured Intherna who spotted the body.

“GOD DAMN IT,” Serene rushed over and knelt, “-this isn’t normal ice,” knocking a few times did naught. “Did Eira do this?” turned to Intherna, she all but shrugged.

“Is something the matter?” came the guild leaders worryingly. “We heard an explosion, what happened?” laying eyes on Staxius, “-MAJESTY,” screamed Haru.

“Assistants,” ordered Mieshre, “-go outside and see who did this!”

“O-on i-it,”

\*Thump,\* resounding throughout the room, \*thump,\* a heartbeat, “-why is everyone so stressed,” moved to shatter the prison from within, the stab mark vanished. ‘I knew it,’ stretching, ‘-Eira had to do with Xula’s change. I knew it, she’s the only one who could add ideas into my poor wife’s head without her realizing. Trusting innocent looking girls, especially thy daughter, none would have seen it coming for a mile. The subtle changes in her tone, her eyes, her personality, I had Mieshre keep tabs. The Lady of ice has made her move. Are the ancient dragons plotting their move?’

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“Are you ok?” asked Haru who had snuck from out the field of vision and snuggled his arms.

“Guild Leader,” pushing away her head, “-please, this isn’t the time. I wish not to take the price that so many young fellows wish to conquer.”

“Seriously,” shadows hid her eyes, “-are you serious,” cold and monotonous, “-what am I, a quest?”

"Tis a great idea, what about Conquest: Win Haru's heart or get under her blanket?" coughing a few laughs, the others were distracted on the matter at hand. Side-glanced to Serene, she nodded.

"That should do it for now, please, Guild Leaders, could thee get ready?"

"Ready for what?" Haru asked amidst the laughter.

"Ready for a quest," spoke Staxius, "-we're going to Mont Blanc. A supply run as well as to assist the adventurers."

"You heard the guild master," exclaimed Mieshre, "-let's get this journey readied."

"Yes, ma'am," resounded across the room.

"Are they gone?" whispered, Staxius's face turned paler than usual.

"Yeah," checked Intherna.

"Good," fell to the knee, "-damn it," clenched tightly on where he got stabbed, the wound reopened.

"This isn't ideal," \*cough,\* blood dripped down the mouth.

"She got you good," smiled Intherna, "-a daughter betraying his father, what a plot."

"Oh, shut it," gnarled Serene, "-this isn't time for jests," trying her best to care for the man, her efforts would soon be washed away by an overflow of blood. Frustrated, the girls began to pester one another.

"Shut up," yelled Staxius with a fist, "-you're giving me a headache," stumbled up, "-give me space to breathe. I'll come back in a few hours, Serene, have my weapons readied. Gather potions, scrolls, and a lot of supplies. We need provisions for at least a village to survive a few months."

"A-are you sure?"

"Do I look like I'm playing?" serious, black-feathered wings sprouted out the back. "Intherna, come to my shadow." Obligated, her body transformed into a beam of light that shot at him. "I'll be back," a flap of the wings later, the room turned upside down from the gust. 'Mont Blanc, I'm certain that Eira is going there. I should have kept my guard up. Underestimating her is a bad idea, Eira, sorry, but I won't think of you as my daughter. Depending on what decision that persona inside thee makes, you might die. I'll do what I possibly can to stop that from happening. Last case scenario, I'll take thy life and take mine afterward. It's only fair, killing the father who has failed you over and over again."

Landed at the entrance, "-majesty, are you ok?" said the guards who saw the blood drip.

"Yes, I'm fine, where's Queen Shanna?"

"In her chambers," said a maid with a bow.

"Thank you," limped across the castle, many o' servants came in hopes of aiding.

"I'll be fine," he said to push them away. Expression of sadness and regret was plastered across the faces, not ones concerning his, but ones that were caused by a differing reason.

"Majesty," stood Rosetta in the hall leading to the royal chambers, "-please, don't go in," she begged with Lizzie in hand.

“Why,” sharp, “-why can’t I do so?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, but the queen has ordered us to not allow anyone passage.”

“Why is it that she has left Lizzie out to the elements?”

“I- I,” turned to the floor, “-it’s cruel.”

“I see,” cold, “-Intherna, come to me,” ordered, the girl materialized.

“This is my first order; I know I’m breaking my promise but this is dire.”

“No need to say anymore,” smiled, “-I’ll kill if that is what you’re wondering.”

‘Xula, I really hope that you haven’t betrayed our loyalty. If that is indeed the truth, may God have mercy on thee.’

\*CLICK,\* the door opened, “-I TOLD YOU TO NOT LET ANYONE IN,” on the bed partially naked with another lying beside. “S-Staxius?” her face froze.

“Xula,” shut, he walked, “-care to explain?”

“I-it’s not as you think,” she covered up with a blanket.

“Ryul,” he said whilst staring the duo, “-I see,” paused. “I suppose, this is my fault, isn’t it.”

“W-what d-do you m-mean your fault?” perplexed, her face turned into one filled with sadness.

“A husband with a devoted wife must have been more diligent. The blame lays squarely on him for he couldn’t provide and return her feeling. Xula, my wife, thou whomst has broken the vows of marriage, thou whomst has disgraced the secret ritual of marriage, I forgive thee. Not out of pity, not out of respect; I do so to take responsibility. I came to say one thing, Eira has been captured by a dragon. I’m getting ready for her rescue,” heavy thumps had the chest tightened, the wound reopened once more. Blood flood down the mouth and the chest. “If thou find solace in the company of another, then do as thee pleased. Thou art a monarch, a lady filled with beauty and passion. Do as thou wish, however, from this instant forth – don’t consider me thy husband. Farewell, I’ll be taking Lizzie,” headed for the door, “-Intherna, sorry, but I’ve changed my mind.”

“Not succumbing to emotions, I applaud the restraint. You’ve scored another point in my books.”

“Thanks,” patting her head, “-I suppose that I’ll make do with what is there.”

\*CLICK,\* “-HOLD ON.”

\*SLASH,\* the door handle sliced in half.

“A fight?” he turned; “-do you want to fight?”

“Yes, actually,” said Xula with a grin, “-I want to fight.” Stood beside was Ryul.

“I don’t see a reason why we should fight. I told you, you chose your path and I’ll choose mine. Let’s part ways without any harsh feelings. Let me keep the sliver of love I feel for you, please, don’t let it turn to hate. I’m tired as is, having to tear away another from my heart is harder than expected.”

“Why, don’t you have Intherna, why not love her?” her tone turned bitter.

“This isn’t about me,” smiled calmly, the back rested against the door, fatigue had drowsiness invade the mind, “-it’s about you, and your decision. As for Intherna, I love her, I do love her, I love her as I love my companions. I love her as I love Eira, I love her as I love the people who care about the castle, I love her as I love the people of Arda. Yet, the love I speak of is nothing but a feeling of wanting to protect, a feeling of wanting to ensure their peace and quiet. A feeling to not let the world around break into chaos.”

“What about you Intherna?”

“I have no reason speaking to someone weaker than me. I came to this plane per request from the God of Death. I’m a mere observer, if he says that he loves me, then I say that I love him back. Or rather, I hate him back as well – strong, and level-headed. I have sensed his thirst-for-blood, he loves killing, but even more than that, he knows what killing and fighting will bring. That is why I admire him for the short amount of time we’ve known each other.”

“Staxius,” walked over with a blanket over her head, “-you’re seriously the worst person one could ever fall for.”

“Is that right?” tired, the legs gave and he fell to the floor leaving a trail of blood on the door.

“I didn’t break our vow of marriage. Ryul came to me earlier and explain what you had done and what you had said,” stood close behind was Ryul, the face changed to Prophecy who waved as if a child. “I’m bound to forever be loyal to you, my dear husband. Things went amiss, a family spat I suppose. Despite my countless attempts at provoking a reaction that would give me a reason to hate you – all I received was either a blank stare or a kind smile. I thought that you see me in bed with another man would have thee see blood,” holding his finger, “-I’m sorry, I needed someone to lash out at.” Cold to the touch, “-Staxius?” her face froze, “-wait...” \*Bam,\* the head hit the floor without warning. A puddle had the blanket soiled, “-why didn’t regeneration kick in?”

Chapter 336: Lie within a Lie

‘What happened?’ floating amidst a never-ending tunnel. One white with the background blue like flying through a cloud. Headless faces spun around, they mumbled, they spoke, some cried, some screamed without sound. Utter silence, one haunting, an image of a town in ruin came from within. ‘Dorchester?’ he thought, an army of unnamed soldiers, a lady with white wings at the helm, charging the attack. Met by a weak defended town shattered to then be conquered. Leaders, protectors, people, all came to a grueling end.

\*Gasp,\* shocked, the eyes opened to a dark-room, one different and shorter in size compared to the royal chambers. A glance to the left showed normal size windows with a beige curtain. A table adjacent said opening with a cupboard right after the table. Feet on the cold floor, ‘-isn’t this a room for a student?’ warmth from the feet had the cold floor around turn foggy.

Humming followed by a click; the door opened with a lady dressed in humble clothes. “You’re awake?” entering with the back, she pushed the door for the hands were busy holding a tray.

“I guess?” perplexed, a glimpse of green hair had him staring intently.



"Here's your coffee," facing him, the lady gave a genuine smile.

"Xula?" asked, he stood brusquely in search of answers.

"Y-yeah?" cheerful tone turned to one ashamed.

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"What's the meaning of this?" stood face to face and separated by a tray, their faces showed multiple emotions.

"I don't know," sighed, her shoulders relaxed.

"Surely you must know," taking the cup to have a sip, "-bitter," he pulled his tongue.

"We're in the maid's quarters," her eyes rolled to the left.

"Maid's quarters," gulping down the tea, "-it's good," a glance at the clock revealed 14:00. "I have no idea why the queen is wearing those clothes. Bothering to ask questions isn't the priority, where's Ryul, did he not sleep with you?"

"Don't you remember?" she asked surprised by the calmness of him saying those words.

"No, I'm sure I said what I wanted to say," walked past without an inkling of interest, "-you chose your path and I did mine. Don't bother, Xula, or rather, Queen Shanna. I understand now, playing house with a caring wife, a lovely daughter and another in the making isn't ideal. Suppose this is a farewell, I'll be taking Lizzie, Rosetta, Youst, and a few servants to Hidros. I have no use of staying in a place where I've been shamed. It's been fun, make sure to not cause the kingdom trouble, that's the last of what the people want."

"WAIT," she screamed, "-YOU'RE MAKING A HUGE MISTAKE."

"I wasn't the one who began this senseless war, goodbye, majesty," slammed shut, the destination in mind was the office.

"Majesty," teleported the sage, "-are you ok?"

"Yes, better than ever," giving an uninterested nod, "-has the General sent the invoice for the arms deal yet?"

"Yes, and for the property of the mine as well, Serene is looking over the procedures right as we speak."

"Good, where is she?" walked at a pace of a light jog, the sage gave into fatigue and hovered alongside the king.

"She's at the queen's office,"

"Good, have the head butler and maid meet there."

"O-ok?" stopped, Staxius vanished into the many empty corridors.

"Intherna?" whispered, a flare of light hovered above the right shoulder.

"What is it?"

“You were there during the whole supposed plot to have me blow a fuse, right?”

“Yeah, I was there till you fell on thy feet.

“Good, I overheard that Prophecy had used Ryul’s face, is that correct?”

“Yes,” the voice seemed confused, “-a minute ago, you spoke as if you had no idea on what had happened.”

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“I knew that it was fake, don’t you think I’d have recognized his aura. Besides, I was going to kill anyone who would have dared lay a hand on my wife. She’s smart but idiotic at the same time, emotions over logic and reason. If I told you that prior, she would have read thy mind and my plan would have been foiled.”

“Are you telling me this is another scheme?”

“Not so much a scheme, consider it a punishment. There’s no way Ryul could have made it to the castle in that short a time. Besides, the talk we had has scared him beyond belief. The fear you girls placed onto his heart is frightening. He’s probably going towards the mine.”

“Why, why go through all the trouble?”

“Simple,” paused before entering the office, “-I’m sure that Eira’s words of warning about a man aren’t baseless. Lady of Ice might have helped a little in the confusion around the castle, though, I presume there’s more that is being let on.”

“Oh, I see,” she smiled and materialized, “-who knew the human world would be so interesting.”

“You haven’t seen the bit of it, as we speak, there are countless thousands of convoluted plans being enacted behind the scenes.”

Opened, Serene stood patiently with a hovering screen, details of contracts and orders he had given prior were recorded. “You’re awake,” she gave a courteous nod.

“Are the papers ready?”

“Yeah, all we need is the payment and approval.”

“How much for the weapon and land?”

“200,000 with an additional 50,000 gold.”

“That much?” perplexed, “-fair enough, cheaper than I had envisioned.”

“What do you mean cheap?” she frowned with a crinkled forehead, “-are you saying that amount means nothing to you?”

“Hey,” voiced coldly, “-Phantom is rich; not that I wish to brag but the plane that came to collect those kids is around 175,000 gold. Don’t underestimate the arms business,” winked, “-head to Roth, I’ll join soon,” to which the door knocked.

“As you wish,” a press on a green-ring had her teleported.

“Majesty?” in tandem, Youst, and Rosetta stood with heads bowed.

‘Perfect,’ spun, ‘-Rosetta mustn’t have known about Xula’s plan. I think everyone is kept in the dark to not allow a leak. A perfect opportunity to have the tides turn in my favors. A mysterious man is roaming around these halls – he manipulated both Xula and Eira. I don’t have the luxury to play detective, the matters of Mont Blanc take precedence,’ from blank to woefully disgusted, Staxius walked with a feeble step. Catching onto the intent, Intherna reached in to give a helping hand. Stumbled on the knees half-way across, the servants rushed to his aid.

“Majesty, are you ok?” asked Youst with his hand wrapped around the king’s shoulders.

“What happened?” asked Rosetta who did the same on the opposite end.

“I apologize for such a weak display,” said grievingly, they walked over to a couch. “The Protector of Arda, King of nightwalkers, what a shame,” slamming the couch in frustration, “-I’ve dishonored my titles and responsibility. I couldn’t protect my daughter; my wife wasn’t satisfied with our relationship of which she turned to another man. It’s pitiable, I’m supposed to be the strong man, right?” glanced at Rosetta with warm eyes, “-tell me, what should I do...”

“So it’s true,” she stood straight, “-Queen Shanna broke the vows of loyalty.”

“Mind thy tongue,” fired Youst, “-it’s not wise to speak of such matters openly, the walls have ears.”

“What of it,” she argued, “-what of it, a sin such as extramarital relation should be shunned and punished. Princess Eira is nowhere to be seen, King Staxius came to us in a near-death situation, and our Queen is off doing the devil’s work. How do you expect me to stay silent?”

“I understand the frustration, this could all divulge into disarray, the peace might be harmed,” he raised good points.

“BUT,”

“Please,” cutting the maid off, “-if you both fight over the current situation, what of the castle, what of the people, won’t that bring about harm. Leave it as is, Rosetta, I’ve excused Queen Shanna, her actions were due to my failure as a husband. Don’t take thy fury on her, direct the hate at me, it’s for the best.”

“No, I simply can’t stand this unruly behavior, please, Majesty, if you were to say the word, you could have thy wife be punished for her actions.”

“Enough,” voiced loudly, “-sorry, Rosetta, but this isn’t what we must do. The kingdom is what matters. We’re still new and possible targets for war from a foreign land. Breaking that promise now will have everything crumble. That’s why I asked for thy assistance. Youst, Rosetta, will you come to Hidros with me?”

“Hidros, sire?” confused, they stared one another for answers.

“Yes, Hidros, I can’t have Lizzie fall to the hands of a possible coup. Please, there are far more problems brewing in the continent. I can’t have my daughter be raised in a place like this.”

“Yes,” knelt Rosetta, “-majesty, I’ll swear my loyalty to you and Lizzie.”

“Same for me, sire,” knelt Youst, “-however, I shan’t move to Hidros. If both leaders were to leave, the maids and butlers would be led astray.”

“T-thank you,” knelt in turn, “-thank you,” reached for a warm embrace, “-thank you for trusting my words, friends.” Overwhelmed by the show of affection, Youst’s ears lowered with the tail wiggling back and forth. Rosetta’s ears straightened with her cheeks flushed.

“M-majesty,” said the head-maid with a soft voice, “-you shouldn’t go around calling servants friends.”

“Nonsense,” embrace broke, “-those who help in a moment of pain are true friends. Despite being sworn to the queen, thou choose to side with me with the risk of being turned against by the others.”

“Don’t worry,” stood the bunny-lady, “-I shall have preparations for our departure soon. I have a few butlers and maids who will join us willingly.”

“As for me,” stood Youst, “-I’ll stay in here and keep an eye on our queen,” both held out a hand, “-I see that thou still love her much,” he smiled.

“Yes,” chuckled with an underlying tone of sadness, he accepted their hands.

Walked to the door with growing admiration for the King’s devotion and less than ideal prospect on the Queen’s action, Staxius stood with a cavalier face.

“Oh my,” whispered Intherna, “-thou art frightening. You took the Queen’s lie and turned it against her.”

“Well,” nonchalant, “-I suppose it was a given,” they took the portal to Roth. ‘I need Rosetta to take Lizzie out of Arda. Preparing for what is about to be unfolded is a must. There’s no way I’m going to get blind-sided. Not that I wish to say it but that head-maid is worth the trouble. She’s trustworthy, a mother, and loyal, bunny-people are very truth full by instinct. Sense Emotion didn’t catch anything amiss, the anger she felt when the news of Xula cheating caught her ear was real.”

Sat inside a broken-down office with a temporary barrier, the eyes were turned to papers on the table. Intherna was sat on a couch to the left with a puzzle-cube. She seemed very interested in the toy. Serene, on the other hand, stood beside her master and worked via a tablet.

“Hello?”

“Boss?” replied Cake through the phone.

“Hey, I’ve sent you some papers, could you review it?”

“Yeah, about purchasing land and arms in Arda for 250,000 gold I assume?”

“Right on the mark.”

“I’ll contact the bank, who is it directed at?”

“Send it to the Ardanian Royal Family’s account.”

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“Too hard a hassle,” sighed, “-how about this. Do you have your personal bank card, the one Godfather gave.”

“Yeah, there’s about 60k gold in there.”

“Should be fine, I’ll have 300,000 gold transferred from Phantom’s account.”

“Deal, could you have Courtney and Elliot brought over to the mansion in, let’s say, three hours?”

“Alright,” the conversation ended.

“Majesty?” called Serene, “-forgive me for asking, but that was a lady’s voice, was it not?”

“Yeah, that was Cake, my secretary from Phantom. The best strategist I’ve met.”

“I’m jealous,” she pouted.

“Are you not supposed to keep those inner thoughts?”

“Hell no, why would I,” laughed, “-Phantom was it, majesty, I’m very much curious of how much power you wield, truly.”

“Why?”

“Gathering 50,000 Gold alone is a feat that would make a man richer than lower nobles let alone 250,000 gold.”

“Money is a means to an end. The question about power, let’s just say that Phantom has yet to reach its potential.”

Chapter 337: End of Student Exchange Program

“How’s the patient doing?” asked Staxius inside the trader’s guild. A few hours had passed, the sun seemed to be on its way to sleep.

“He’s ok, I think,” turned Haru with a not so inviting face. Slouched and without the energy to move, her eyes barely kept level with the body. The commotion of the accident earlier in the morning attracted a lot of attention. Nevertheless, as time continued, people grew tired of waiting and drawing conclusions. News of the victim out of danger had many breathe sighs of relief.

“May I ask why you’re here?”

“I came to pay a visit,” said without much thought. Boxes were loaded and unloaded behind the counter to add to her fatigue.

“I appreciate the sentiment, guild master. Class 2A, after the tour around town, was taken to the castle by the Sage. They sure kept me on my toe, especially that Anastasia girl, always bickering. I ended up duct-taping her face, the silence was blissful.”

“I doubt she’ll have a favorable response,” feeling the curious gaze of the mindless upon their exchange, “-I’ll get going for now. I suppose the supply will be readied for tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ve sent for more carriages to be brought from a stable to the East. Should be here at night.”

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“Good work,” waved, he left to return at Roth. ‘What’s this about?’ walked up to the stairs, an elf in uniform stood, he seemed on edge and nervously peering up the spiral.

“May I help?” spoken, it startled the man into a gasp.

“Guild Master,” saluted, “-I’m here to ask a favor,’ the face lit with integrity. A uniquely shaped bow had piqued his interest.

“Which is?”

“It concerns the incident today. The carriages were taken to the junkyard. I came to deliver this,” guild-tags hung out a clenched fist.

“Now I remember,” taking the tags respectfully, “-are you not the Sergeant that saved the fellow merchant?”

“Yes, all happened so suddenly I never got time to introduce myself,” stepping back, the right arm laid across the chest diagonally, “-Sergeant Kelfir from the recon unit.”

“Sergeant Kelfir, tis was an amazing display of marksmanship. You hold the tradition of the elves proudly,” from top to bottom, Staxius watched closely, “-before I leave, where are the bodies of the men who died?”

“At the morgue,”

“Understood, as a reward for saving the life of a fellow guild comrade; I’ll have 30 silvers be readied.”

“N-no, t-there’s no need.”

“Bite thy tongue,” spun, Staxius hailed to the guild assistant. “Here you go,” a pouch was handed over, “-good actions must be repaid in kind. See you around, Sergeant.”

‘Can’t believe it,” the door to the office closed, ‘-we lost capable fighters on that supply quest.’ Toggling the Guild-Master Card, information such as the number of adventurers displayed;

Tier 1 – Platinum:

Tier 2 – Gold: 0

Tier 3 – Silver: 4

Tier 4 – Bronze: 0

Tier 5 – Ruby: 22

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Tier 6 – Emerald: 6

Tier 7 – Sapphire: 62

Tier 8 – Steel: 123

Tier 9 – Obsidian: 480

Tier 10 – Porcelain: 1250

‘We lost the only two bronze we had. As for rubies, three perished, what a shame,’ sat in the office with confirmations for the upcoming quest, the sun moved further down east. Paid in full, the weapons sold were ordered to be taken to Roth. There, in the coming few weeks, would be given across numerous towns and villages. An act of generosity to help in the monster fighting. Privately owned by Phantom, the mine would continue to work without trouble.

‘That should be everything,’ stood with Serene already headed to the castle, Intherna snoozed on the couch with the puzzle yet solved.

“Wake up,” harsh, her eyes opened as if doors kicked in.

“I’m up,” she said with a yawn, “-are we going to sleep?” drowsy, the day had taken a lot out of the duo.

“Wrong,” reached for the coat-hangar, “-I need to return to Hidros, don’t you remember, the deal made with the head-maid?”

“Ahh, yes,” jumped, “-I’m ready to see where you lead me.”

“Quite hard to remember that thou art a goddess,” teleported across to the castle, upon exiting out the other end, she glared.

“I see the reason why you’d think that way,” glanced downwards, “-my chest is adequate. Given that I may be a little cheerful at times; it’s a force of habit,” giving a shrug, “-the same could be said to you, god of death. You seem more of an old wise sage than a young-looking man.”

“Did you have to emphasize on the Old part?”

“Listen, I emphasized on what was important,” smirked, throwing banter back and forth had a good relationship developed. Stopped suddenly inside the alchemic tower, “-Intherna, could I have a few minutes to think?”

“Sure, I’ll head down and exercise a bit, the sleepiness is getting to my head,”

“Don’t burn anything,”

“No promises,” laughed childishly, she skipped down the stairs.

‘I’m tired,’ forehead to the table, ‘-here I thought of casually letting everything fall into place naturally. There’s a mysterious man in the shadows, Intherna has turned into a teenager; a goddess that’s as unpredictable as the weather. I lied to Xula about her supposed cheating. The nobles might attack throughout all this ordeal. There’s the issue of Mont Blanc, Eira’s heading there. The ancient dragons are making a move. So much to think about, and so little time,’ sat upright, ‘-breathe, take it one at a time.’ Physically fatigued due to stress from the exorcism; auto-regeneration, and overall overworking of the mind – as desperately as one might have glared at the night, the darkness would always shadow all else around.

Stepped into the yard, the castle walls lit with many o' lamps atop the battlements. Guards made their patrol, the night settled without notice. "Hello," waved Intherna with an orangish colored wall behind. Fissures of lava dripped onto the darkened grass.

"You said no fire," she laughed obnoxiously.

"Congratulations," a patronizing thumbs-up had her raised an eyebrow in anguish. Entered through the back, each step along the corridor inside had an eerie inkling attached. Unable to grasp the origin, Intherna's face changed from joyful to alert.

"Majesty," spoke a butler who waited at the front, "-the students are in the throne-room." Blinked twice as a gesture to say 'understood,' they walked into a random door to be taken straight to the throne room.

"Majesty," spoke Serene as if a teacher on a school trip, "-the plane has landed."

"Good," glancing the students with their bags packed and readied, "-I suppose the exchange program comes to an end today." No response only looks of acknowledgment and curiosity. "Don't worry about Eira, she's undergoing a special training at the moment. I'll have her back to the academy in about a week, is that sufficient, Ysmay?"

"H-how did you know?" taken aback, her mouth opened in awe.

"The look on thine face is one I'm very familiar with."

"Thank you for everything, sire," bowed the commoners, "-we learned so much from the guild leaders."

"Thank you for the introduction to alchemy," added Kim.

"I'm not alone in saying this," interjected Timothy, "-Class 2A is very grateful for the hospitality. I have rekindled my motivation to learn and become a top-class researcher. I wish to help the world as best as I can."

"The pleasure was mine," he gave a faint smile, "-Anastasia," called by name, the girl who had remained away from the group startled out her little world.

"What is it?" direct without respect, she quickly covered her mouth, "-I apologize."

"I see that the not so admirable personality is there. Not that you'll listen, but I think it's a good trait to have. Direct and open about what you think; dropping the pointless sarcasm and provocation will reduce how many enemies you have."

"Kim, you're already talented as a student, though from what Ryul reported, the mana control is there but underwhelming."

"Ysmay, I think you're much more complete as a mage as the rest of thy peers. Work a little on being more social, the people aren't going to bite you."

"Mille, I don't have words for thee, clumsy and a bit of an air-head, I suppose it comes with genes. Be mindful of where you shoot and how the team around you will react."



“Christina, thou art the big sister of the class, a born leader, one who shows what the correct path is. Lacking in the spellcasting department, going over the basics should mediate the problem.”

“Timothy, thou art too strong-willed when it comes to the disparities between commoners and nobles. Given the difference is there, we’re but human in the end. Magic wise, it’s adequate for what thou wish to accomplish.”

“Fletcher, I heard the Guild Leader dropped the insulting nick-name on the last day. A bad sign – though, I think you’ll be great as a marksman, try shooting a rifle once in a while, that iron-clad focus might come in handy.”

“Harold, the clown of the class, you’re as funny as the next drunken down the dark-district. Still, it’s that humor that keeps the class from crumbling by the heavy pressure parents and the school have on you.”

“Simone, you’re too quick to jump in fights. Taking a break once in a while doesn’t hurt.”

“Lastly, Tony, I heard from Mieshre that you were the strongest fighter out of the bunch. Good instinct and resilience, the makings of someone who will be relied upon in the near future.” Walked from students to students, he gave his honest opinion. Not overly flattering and there to give a basic idea on what to work next – the students smiled genuinely. The king had kept a close eye, reporting, revising, and reviewing their progress for the challenge they were given. Overwhelmed, Serene took charge and guided the students up to the helipad.

There, under the shadow of the moonless night, Class 2A returned home with many lessons engrained in their heads. “There they go,” waved Serene at those who stared out the hublot.

“The exchange program is over,” from massive to as small as a fly, the TU-03 vanished in the abyssal night.

“I guess it’s time for me to get to work,” turned, “-Serene, call it a night, you need rest.”

“Are you certain, I can still assist if there’s more work to be done,” she urged.

“Tis an order, head home and rest,” resounding, she obeyed.

Maids and butlers under Rosetta’s command stood in a line leading into the royal chambers. Each stood with a bag in hand awaiting orders. At the door, “-is everything readied?”

“Yes, sire,” she bowed.

“Good,” opened, the bedsheets were crumbled with a lonesome figure sat in the middle. It seemed to have wrapped itself around a bundle of clothes. ‘The cradle’s empty,’ at the foot of the bed, “-Majesty, I’ve come to take my daughter.” No response came, “-Majesty,” with a sharp tug, Shanna sat exposed with numerous lashes across her body. Her face swell and battered, a singular smile directed at a peacefully sleeping babe.

“Please,” she painfully articulated, Staxius reached in without mercy to take Lizzie.

“Pathetic,” daughter in hand, he threw a disgusted look, “-are you saying that repenting through pain and sufferance is enough? Don’t be so idealistic, go on and meet with Ryul, is he not thy moral support.”

“BUT,” she reached out filled with tears, “-I’m innocent.”

“What my eyes saw was true. I already told thee that I have forgiven thy actions. I’m only taking what is precious to me.”

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“Don’t forget your place,” an intimidating presence ooze, green hair turned red in anger. She dashed with a vicious killing intent, ‘-sorry.’ Burying his hands across her face, it killed her momentum to then be bashed into the floor that soon cracked.

“You’re the one who forgot who stands as the strongest, majesty,” knelt with one hand holding Lizzie, the Queen was knocked unconscious.

“WHY,” flew out Prophecy, “-WHY ARE YOU BEING CRUEL,” charged with daggers, the face screamed of wanting revenge. \*Bap,\* stood and held by the neck, Staxius halted her frivolous attack. Moved left and right to escape his grip resulted in naught as the stranglehold intensified. “Listen to me,” whispered, “-protect Xula no matter what. There’s more going on in Arda than it appears. Believe me, I love her, and I know she didn’t cheat,” dwindled, her arms lost strength by the revelation, “-this is for the best. Keep an eye on her, it’s a promise between you and me, Prophecy, keep my wife safe,” smashed onto the ground, the spirit exploded into dust.

#### Chapter 338: Retainers

Door shut without the chance to stare inside the royal-chambers, Staxius’s face with Lizzie in hand told the story. Rosetta, bound and sworn to him had no ulterior motive, her priority soon changed to doing the best for the princess. The night in the kitchen; the peaceful chat with a man who seemed to be on the top of the world had changed her perspective. Always running to her side, always intent on learning what is best to care for his babe, a sweet and caring side not many knew about. Changing diapers for the first time under her watch, still burnt vividly in her memory. Flustered to the point of paralysis, she showed him the correct way. Upon accomplishing the first daunting task – the smile of relief, one with the innocence of a little boy had her motherly instinct take over. Those who knew were dead, Staxius, behind the many facades, had a child’s heart. And as a child, he was innocent yet very vindictive – no mercy to the people who took from him, and even less for those who betrayed. Matured over the years; the childish side remained, locked deep within a heart made of ice.

The night wrapped its elongated fingers around the castle. A witch who had grasped upon the apple of creation, the apple of what was pure and righteous, the night had taken yet again. No moon, no stars, only darkness from miles on end.

Soon, Staxius and the retainers that willingly served his purpose followed. Led by Rosetta, a feeling of utmost duty to not fail the monarch. Stepped into where stood the entrance, guards who had shut the gates were baffled. Ruslan in the company of the old sage was thunderstruck. Lizzie on one side and Rosetta on the other with, maids and butlers, of which were combat-ready with the strength being twice as strong as the guards, walked with cold-glances. The strongest out of the last line of defense.

“Majesty,” waved Ruslan nervously.

"I've no time to speak," ignoring the counselor, he walked through a portal leading inside the alchemic tower. There, another portal that exited into the mansion.

"Still dusty from before," commented Staxius with a slight cough.

"May I ask to where we are?" inquired Rosetta who straightened her glasses.

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"We're at my mansion," climbed onto the first-floor, "-no name for it's too much a hassle," led into the corridor that contained the bedchambers, he walked out to the balcony. Opened with a fresh breeze, "-it's night and barely visible," stood inches from the balustrade, he gently caressed the babe.

"The estate is massive," commented one of the assistants.

"Well," turned to finally stare those who had come, "-why don't you introduce yourselves."

"I shall go first," said a handsome man with spotless pale skin, blue eyes, wolf-ears, blond hair, a piercing on the right ear. Gently sloped nose with a rounded end, the eyes were petite and vibrant, "-Rile from the Wolf-man tribe, I've come to serve thee, majesty," bowed, the black-suit added to his overall charm.

"Laurence from the Arachnids' sect," a well-built body, strong face, sharp-jaw, dark-black eyes, and stubby facial hair. "Before his majesty asks the question, the Arachnid sect is very much rare. Our people aren't that lucky when it comes to breeding. Nevertheless, as rare we might be, our powers far outclass many when it comes to strategical wars."

"I do apologize for my brother's tone," interjected a girl shorter than the rest, "-tis just how he speaks. Might come across as rude, but I swear, he means no harm," rambling, she quickly shook her head and bowed sharply, "-I'm Laura, Laurence's older sister." Braided dark-brown hair to one side, black-eyes, a gentler skin-tone than her brother, with a piercing on her lower lips.

"Do forgive these two," came another girl, "-they can get a little over-hyper at times," knee-high boots, a parasol in one hand, the hair tied meticulously, the outfit differed from the others. Dignified with a certain vampiric esthetic to it. "Blood-king," on her knee, "-it's my honor to serve under he who bears the blood of the first progenitor. I'm Seiran of the Lie par le sang clan." Black hair, frighteningly pale, a sharp nose, eyes of which screamed of thirst, she always kept a smile.

"Raise thy head," spoken thunderously, a subtle rumbling came from behind. 'A wolf-man, two arachnids, and a nightwalker, quite powerful.'

"Yes," added Rosetta, "-the four you see here will serve thee till death. Each came on their own volition; I had no part in convincing."

"Good," taking a deep breath, "-welcome to my mansion. From today forth, thou shall live here in the Noble district of Hidros. Rooms are over there," he pointed, "-take any you wish. The one with balcony is also up for the taking, I don't care for disparities between servants and master," glossed across, "-Rosetta, thy work starts now. I have guests coming shortly, the bar-downstairs is ruined. Have it locked," keys thrown, "-you'll be in charge of the mansion from now on."

"Sire," approached Rile with the eyes at the floor, "-please change into the proper attire for it's dirtied."

"Yes," approached Rosetta, "-I'll take care of her Highness."

"Alright," walked inside shy of the door, "-but first, go make thyself acquainted by the mansion's layout. Unload the bags, I'll be at my room," and off he vanished in the corner.

"Head-maid," spoke Laura with a sparkle in her eye, "-this mansion is big."

"I second that," slurped Laurence, "-there's a lot of dark-corners to make webs in."

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\*Smack,\* "-now isn't the time, dear Laurence," smiled Rile with utmost pride, "-we mustn't sully our master's reputation."

"Why did you smack me," rubbing his head, "-is that the correct way for the heir to the Eastern tribe should act?" smirked Laurence.

"Shut it you two," sighed Seiran with an alluring voice, "-we have jobs to do, a duty to serve his majesty."

"I agree," nodded Laura.

'Can't believe these four are the best combat-servants in Arda,' shook in disappointment, "-alright, let's move."

"Yes ma'am," taken to the rooms, the retainers quickly ran around the mansion to familiarize the layout.

"Wow," said Laura in awe as the visit continued.

"Yeah, the king of Arda is super-rich," commented Laurence with the eyes gazing upon Void and Red-fury.

"Get to cleaning," ordered Rosetta with a mop in hand, the bar-room was in a complete mess.

'Now then,' sat on the bed with curtains shut, Lizzie slept peacefully. 'I brought Lizzie to Hidros. The four that followed seem to be very strong. Her safety is assured.' Walked to the door, the curtains opened. 'Next is to have the vampiric cure for daylight sickness.' Spun to face Lizzie, '-you look so much like Xula. It's a shame I had to do what I did. A broken Queen without a place to turn too, that should be bait enough for the mysterious man to show himself. Eira, I believed what you said, the Queen had a part to play. Might be wishful thinking, though I think someone is pulling her strings. All that confusion will bring about senseless destruction. That's the only way to bring whoever it is out into the wild.' Three tasks presented themselves: the rescue of Eira, providing aid to the Wing-wolves, and to bring out the puppet-master.

\*Knock, knock,\* "-majesty?"

"Yes, come in."

"I think that the guests you speak of are already here," reported Rile with a bow.

"Have Rosetta come to my room."

“As you wish,” he scurried away. Putting on a t-shirt and shorts with flip-flops, the muscles definition shone, it filled out the clothes. Untied and parted down the middle, the white and crimson hair was left to hang. Crests, necklaces, guild-cards, all were placed inside a locked coffer to the side of the bed. The ancient marking seemed as if elaborate tattoos down the arms and legs.

“You asked for me?” the door opened to have it be closed once again, “-majesty!”

“What,” he opened the door in turn, “-I’m home, can a man not wear casual clothes?”

“Casual, are you serious, I’ve shivers just looking at you,” with the same tone as a mother with similar aggression and a mild touch of humor, the face could but give a small grin.

“Well, it’s perfect attire,” stepped out, “-take care of her highness, the guests will be here soon.”

“As you wish,” she bowed and entered the room.

‘A moment’s peace,’ hands inside the pocket, he skipped down the stairs with clothes none had seen before. Always well-dressed and formal, the sight of the king in casual clothes had the servant’s stopped.

“Majesty?” called Laura with an inquisitive tone, “-is that you?” she stopped polishing a golden statue next to the stairs.

“The one and only, do call me master, majesty is a little bit too formal. Haggard if thou wish, do drop the title of majesty for now,” exchanging with the others, “-out in Hidros, I’m known as Xenos, an adventurer, and leader of Phantom. A king is a king inside his domain alone. Outside, he’s but another target for the taking.”

“Understood, master,” harmonious, they were still nervous about living with such a powerhouse of a man. Flickers of light followed by the air being cut echoed to the porch.

“What is that?” asked Seiran with her parasol in hand.

“A helicopter, members of Phantom have come to visit,” facing Laurence, “-have tea and some snacks readied. The fridge should be full of supplies.”

“On it,” he nodded and walked without making a sound. Abusively loud, the chopper landed with two figures jumping out. Lessened to a stop, the silent peace returned. Walked to the porch, a figure stood with a massive gun on the back. Blood dripped down the cheeks. The other stood gracefully with a fully-drawn sword with blood on its end. Sensing the danger, three out of the four, walked to stand menacingly behind Staxius. An aura of dread oozed, from cheerful to serious, the face tensed for an eventual fight.

“Master,” somber to out in the open, “-it’s a pleasure to see you,” said the first figure.

“In shorts and t-shirt,” remarked the other, “-should have seen this coming.”

“Courtney and Elliot,” voiced Staxius, “-glad to see you made it.”

“My brother called after all,” as if teleported, Courtney skipped to embrace her brother.

“Lady Courtney, please, do you not see the scary people behind?”

“Calm it, Elliot, they are powerful and I doubt we’re here to fight,” she winked.

A palpable tension rose, “-enough, that is enough from everyone,” he cut the would be strain.

“Damn it,” sighed Seiran, “-alright, let’s get back to work.”

Sat with tea and snacks served, the dining hall felt slightly full. Emptied, the days of when Kniq roamed around was a good memory.

“Why did you call for us?” asked Courtney with a few sips.

“I have a job.”

“Does it involve killing?” asked Elliot.

“No, it’s guard-duty.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Sure, due to circumstances, I had to move away from Arda. A lot is going on – I had called on thee to help in guarding the mansion. You see, I’ve brought Lizzie along. She’s still a babe and defenseless, that’s why I needed the extra assurance.”

“My niece is here?” asked with an excited smile, “-where is she?”

“Sleeping,” commented Laurence with a smug tone.

“Is that so,” her expression sunk, “-are you sure you want to use that tone?”

“Courtney,’ yelled across the table, “-don’t, that’s the way he speaks. Leave the man alone.”

“Fine,” rolling her eyes to the snacks, “-oh, yummy.”

“About the guard duty,” interjected a more serious Elliot, “-what does it entail? And why both of us?”

“Simple, I had plans to choose only one. Since you two are the closest to Cake and me, why not protect my daughter as well.”

“Count me out, I already told you I came here to fight,” she refused with a grape in mouth.

“That’s what I figured. So, Elliot, what do you say, why not take some time off the battlefield. I’ll make a portal from here to thy house, that way, you can spend time with thy sister,” the suggestion piqued his interest fully.

“Take time off the battlefield,” materialized the spirit of Knightfall, “-a bold statement.”

### Chapter 339: Third Boon

“I accept!” rose Elliot with a firm face, “-the privilege to guard master’s daughter is the greatest honor I could have.” Knightfall with the intent to oppose was silenced by her master. The latter had covered her mouth followed by a glare. It was the first time he ever stood up, stood up for what he wanted, and stood up for what he believed. Lessening her tantrum, she relaxed into deep breaths.

"If my owner wants to protect her highness so bad," licking her lips at Rile, "-I suppose I can't refuse." Catching her intent, Rile rolled his eyes and smirked.

'Not you,' her face changed as if smelling something unpleasant, her eye wasn't on the wolf-man, rather, she had taken a liking to Seiran. Heart-broken, the ears lowered with Seiran giving comforting pats on the back.

"Then it's decided," speaking abruptly, Courtney tripped and bit her tongue. Innocent and warm, her face flushed in pain, "-Elliot will also be guarding the mansion." Footsteps with sobs walked to the dining hall.

"Perfect," stood, "-Rosetta," few inches away from her, "-here's Elliot, a talented Marksman who'll work as a guard. Maintaining this big a mansion and caring for Lizzie will be daunting," babe held in a cradle, her sobs stopped with him swaying back and forth, "-everyone, make thyself acquainted to one another."

\*Dring,\* phone rang, "-Brother, I have to go."

"Thanks for coming," he said with a smile.

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"Now that's a face I didn't expect to see," watching the father and daughter had the heart skip a beat. "My niece is very much cute," reached to give a quick peck on the forehead, her lipstick stood against the pale skin. "I hope this arrangement is for a few months," whispered in his ear, "-Lizzie needs a mother. We know how painful it is to be brought up without one. My other self, I feel for her the same as you do. That's why do what is needed to have Arda returned. Major players are moving all around the globe – tis a warning, I can but protect thy if the time comes," stepped away with good intent, "-Elliot, let's go, thy job starts tomorrow."

A flicker of light followed by the air being slashed, the chopper took-off. Darkness overwhelmed the continent, back against five new servants, Lizzie in hand, a familiar warmth rose from inside. One of comfort, one of a passing moment of peace. In that instant, the mind became clear, doubt about Xula, the kingdom, and everything, turned to naught. It was as if someone had patted his back and another held its arms around his shoulder. Faint, what the other saw were mists with white-eyes of which screamed death. All the previous Wielders of Death Element were there, gathered around the heir.

'What's happening?' turned, the mansion disappeared, many o' black spirits merged into one. "Who are you?" asked, the words echoed in every direction. The figure continued to walk without care, "-WHO ARE YOU?!" asked once more, it stood at arm's length.

"One of the same," said the disfigured humanoid body. It burnt with the Void flame. "We're your predecessors," the sheer power in those words held immense pressure. Similar to standing underneath a waterfall – it wasn't water, but sheer strength, one that pierced straight to the bones. Behind it, a familiar face sat with a cup in hand.

'Lord Death?'

"Listen," voiced the figure, "-the time has come to awake as a god. We've judged, we've plunged thy into the pits of hell. Every time, you stood up to face the whole world alone. The power granted to you

was true, yet, thou choose to fight with normal-tier magic. The use of the vampiric blood and wit opposed to showing thy true self. Hell, even if you wanted to unleash it all, the right to the power is locked by us, we're the guardians," split into five beings that circled;

"Saving a child named Eira," said one.

"Saving the Silver Guardians," added another.

"Losing thy home town, thy best friend, and the only thing with connection to your past."

"Sacrificing thyself in the battle-against Gallienne."

"Spending more than a decade imprisoned by a spell."

"Released by the will of Tharis and her apostle for they viewed thee as worthy."

"Returning to a war-torn province to aid in the rebuilding efforts."

"Sending away comrades due to conflict rivaling nations."

"Swapping sides to Arda so that Dorchester could be left alone."

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"Fighting to protect, always losing more things valuable for the better of the others."

"Ashamed for having placed a comrade in peril, thou did all to save her life."

"The arrival of monsters had the capital in chaos."

"A massacre of the people, thou had to craft scrolls in hopes of saving them."

"Marrying the Queen."

"Forming an adventuring team to help in fighting monsters."

"Rescuing Auic, a plaything and turning her into a strong-willed woman."

"Carrying the burden of thy companions."

"Willingly give up thy humanity, to be able to act with it mattered."

"Taking on the responsibility of raising Lizzie. The girl found solace."

"Helping protect the people of another continent. Guarding she who was the reason for people to smile."

"Happiness swapped with despair when Lizzie died."

"Saving the kingdom from the shadow, helping an enemy."

"To now," one by one, vague snippets of his life were spoken in random order. "You love killing but even more helping another. Willingly becoming the harbinger of hate. Thou know full well that hate and a common enemy can unite people as if nothing. God of Death, you've saved people and killed even more. Not out of spite, nor out of a sense of duty," monotonous to warm, one reminiscent, "-you even



challenged the god's curse and broke the one of starting over. Staxius Haggard," unrecognizable to a man in uniform, "-my son," he smiled which then turned into an embrace. "I've seen you grow from the eyes of Lord Death. What I couldn't do, you've done admirably. I was strong but never strong enough to protect those who mattered to me. Not you, my son, not you, even if you lost, you crawled up again to take what was yours."

"That is why," sat on a hovering stool, Lord Death approached, "-that is why the predecessors came. Thou have been evaluated, my heir. Action speaks louder than words, and that is the reason you're worthy. Staxius Haggard," from five, they split further, "-come and take what is yours, the god of death, thy ascension to divinity is complete." A staircase erected from out of nothingness, golden railings with white-tiles going upwards to a clear blue sky.

"Divinity," stopped to stare, "-will I be able to return to my plane?"

"What is this?" turned Lord Death, "-what do you mean to return?"

"I assume that climbing those stairs is a one-way ticket."

"No," turned with a chuckle, "-my heir, my prodigy, you needn't worry. Said stairway is only a means to an end. Each step you climb, and the more power you'll harness. As Creation crafted Nevermore, us, Death Reapers, have a limiter only given when proven to be worthy." \*Snap,\* another pathway materialized, one ascending and one descending. "Each step gives more power, and more power means more strain – the immortality will forever be active, you'll never die. Going beyond thy limit and breaking the Death Element will result in a long slumber, one that could last centuries."

"How far till my element breaks?"

"Right to the point," he smiled, "-the furthest reached was 50 steps upwards and 20 steps downwards," stood in the middle of the diverging paths, "-let me warn you, you're now a God. And with that comes responsibilities of which I shall take care of. The first duty assigned to you is the protection of thy dimension. About the stairs, before attempting to climb up or down; the limitation on Nevermore must be removed. Without the Death Gate open, climbing the stairs will not be permitted."

"I understand,"

"Go," harmonious, "-all will be clear soon. God of Death, welcome to the realm of divine beings," trailing on the last sentence, the consciousness teleported to an empty room. One with two paths – up and down.

'I awakened as a god. They found me worthy, the divination process is complete.'

[Divinity – Third Boon: Mortus.] The last boon given to the God of Death. First was the body, second the mind and third, the unlimited powers of the divine. Complete at last, Staxius reached the third level, the three pillars of Death were acquired.

Eyes opened to a chilly room; the right hand burned. The pentagram changed to a triangle with a scythe in the middle. Sat upright, the clock showed 8:00, '-my body feels so much lighter,' walked over to a mirror, '-nothing's changed. I'm the same, wait...' conscious, "-I don't have to hold back my powers, there's normally a copious amount of Mana that escapes daily. I feel great for a change, the triangle is containing the Death Element. Even Blood-Arts feels more powerful."

\*Knock, knock,\* “-majesty,” the door opened, “-tis I, Seiran, I’ve come to wake you.”

“Seiran, do you know what happened yesterday?”

“You fell unconscious after handing over her highness to Rosetta.”

“Is that so, and what of Elliot, has he come?”

“Yes, the boy is at the gate.”

“Alright, I suppose it’s time for breakfast, do give me a moment, I shall have a shower.”

“As you wish, I’ll have Rile come to assist thee,” she bowed out of the room. Staxius felt as if he was reborn.

‘I’ve been going back and forth around the mansion for the past few days,’ stood with a sword on the hip, a massive backpack and the outfit worn by Kniq, a lady arrived at the gates. Sun rose over yonder cast a shadow of the other buildings onto where she stood. \*Beep,\* a press of the button had a man jump onto the walls, “-who’s there?” he asked with face hidden by the sun’s ray.

“Achilles, member of Kniq, I’ve come to see Guild Master Staxius.”

“Member of Kniq,” paused, “-I’ll relay the information, do give me a moment.” The message reached his ears at lightning speed; in the process of being undressed, hearing the name Achilles, Staxius sprawled out with shorts and no shirt.

“Master,” waited for Laura at the foot of the stairs, “-is something the matter?” leaped at the fifth step, he sprinted out the mansion.

“WHAT HAPPENED?” sensing a gust of wind, Laurence rushed, “-are you safe?”

“It’s master, he ran out of the mansion,” overhearing Laura, Seiran was quick to sprout wings and follow suit. Medium-sized signified a very powerful nightwalker immune to the sun-light.

“Master,” next to him, “-Is something the matter?” she asked in mid-air.

“Achilles has returned,” dashing down the hill, the gates opened per Elliot’s command.

Panting, the parting of the entrance slowly revealed who stood on the other side. Matured with longer hair, Achilles showed pain unlike any other.

“Achilles,” returning a comforting smile, “-welcome home,” the arms spread.

“I’m back,” breathing a sigh, she dashed into his arms, “-it’s good to see you again, master.”

“Yes, I’m glad your back,” ending the embrace, “-what of Deadeyes, is he not with you?”

“...” no response, a faint glimpse of anguish, “-he’s d-dead.”

“D-deadeyes is dead?” the warm expression changed to blank, “-I suppose the prediction in the letter stands true,” faced away, Seiran waited to be explained of what happened.

“Do you hate me now?”

“No,” refuted Achilles, “-we were outclassed from the start. If only Kniq was there as a whole, we could have defeated that fiend,” filled with hate directed at herself, the wind blew sharply.

“I see, let’s go inside. We need to pay our respect to the man who has saved us countless times on the battlefield.”

“Let’s honor his death as a hero, Deadeyes, the man that always cared for his ally.”

“The man who had a heart as big as the world.” Returned home, Achilles and Staxius would join forces once more. To honor the death of their comrade of which the tower of Aris took away, a grave with his guild-tag was built in the flowery garden.

#### Chapter 340: Pledge

Peacefully one beside another, mementos of those who died rest in the garden. Left of the mansion and sat in the veranda that gave onto said assortment of pretty flowers and greenery, Staxius had tea in the company of Achilles. The latter, confused, shocked, and clueless, had sworn to not cry over the death of a comrade ever again. Flashbacks of the war that took her life flashed in tandem as the sun voyaged slowly across the skies. Leaves blown by the gust made spiral around the garden to land on the adjacent path. A moment of silence for the master of the mansion reflected. Inside, Lizzie was fed milk by Rosetta, she had taken care of the babe as if she were her own. A warm display of affection that had Staxius glance over the shoulder a few times and think, ‘-did mother care for me like that too?’

Next to the open space with a massive flat-screen, Rile and Laurence worked hard to clean the bar.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Staxius peering to the returning comrade.

“What else, I’m going with you,” smiled, “-being a hero and always caring for others did make me happy. However, that righteousness didn’t do me good when my friends were in peril. I really thought that our bond, our unity, would make me stronger, I felt powerful, in honesty, I was overconfident. The invincibility made me careless, no matter how strong the opponent was, I’d win. The truth came to light when those close to me died. A strong person is someone who can protect what is precious to them. In that aspect,” facing he who sipped tea and listened intently, “-you’re very strong.”

“Strong,” startled, the tea fell out, “-that’s not true. I’m weak,” staring out where leaves fought hard to cling onto their branches, the gust kept the pace to then break them away. The weak fell whilst the strong held. “I’ve lost a lot more than I’ve gain. I couldn’t protect my daughter – how the hell would I have the arrogance to say I’m strong. I’m weak, I might be a good fighter, but in the end, killing one to justify another is pointless. The circle of hate never ends; that’s the reality. I’ve grown rather distant when it comes to killing, I suppose with age comes maturity,” placed on the table without noise, “-nevertheless, if killing is the only viable option then I’ll happily slaughter those who oppose me.”

“Master,” perplexed, she watched fondly.

“What?” monotonous, he caught her glance and demanded answers.

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“I never realized it,” from frowned to smile, “-you’ve changed,” the grief of losing a friend was forgotten for an instant, “-the cold-blooded murderer isn’t soft, not that’s far from it, you’re far more ruthless

now. Ruthless in a way that others can't describe; I sense it, a relentless hunger, you're greedy and vindictive."

"I suppose," stood, "-anyone who takes from me ever again, will pay ten-fold, that is what I swore. I will not care who it is, take what is precious from me, I swear I'll become the definition of the apocalypse."

"I've made my decision," close behind, "-I'll follow you once more, master. I, Achilles, hero of another world, pledge my fealty to he who gave me life anew," knelt, Staxius turned to accept her offer.

"I, Staxius Haggard, accept thy pledge. Hero from another world, welcome home."

"I'm grateful for the honor," said in a mumble, upon standing up, she was assaulted by a plethora of angered jealous gazes from the retainers. Pledging loyalty was a great honor, and having the master accept was one even greater. The Ardanians brought up by a strict code of conduct knew the implications.

"Master," the instant the duo walked in, Laurence spoke, "-I have a question?"

"What is it?"

"Pledging one's loyalty to another means that he has to protect the master under any circumstances, right?" the eyes lit as if a heartbeat.

"Yes, as for you, Rile, Laura, and Seiran, thou aren't pledged to my name yet. Therefore, thou art still servants of the crown. Not that it bothers me, thou did come here on thy own."

"What of the head-maid?" asked Laura who appeared out of nowhere.

"I've pledged my service under his majesty's name," she smiled with Lizzie in hand.

"MA'AM!" lashed Rile, "-is that not treason, to pledge for one other than the Queen?"

"Listen," strict and direct, "-I've pledged to the Haggard name, which means that I'll do what is needed to protect master and her highness. Have you forgotten that Master Haggard is also the monarch of Arda?"

"I apologize," ashamed, the wolf-man returned to his duties.

"Rosetta," voiced Staxius softly, "-don't be so rude to the youth, are they not thy disciples?"

"Indeed they are," she glanced over to Rile who walked at a sluggish pace, "-a little idiotic at times, but they're worth the trouble."

"Master," spoke Laurence yet again, "-let's not get sidetrack, I was speaking of she who has pledged under thy name."

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"Listen," patting his shoulder, "-do you think you're ready to,"

"Master, may I speak?" walked the hero with a greater pace, "-I understand what the young man is implying. If you may, do I have permission?" locking eyes, he nodded.

“Very well, if thou wish to spar, then, the yard is open for combat. Make sure not to ruin the lawn, else, it will be a pain for the gardener.”

“I expected as much,” he cracked his knuckles, “-I’m happy to have left the capital, this will be pleasurable,” a spark lit between the two. Excitement overwhelmed her mind for a chance to battle another human. ‘Too long has it been, too long indeed.’

“Laura,” called Staxius now stood on the porch, “-can you head to the attic and bring me the sword on the table. It should have flowers on the scabbard.”

“Yes master,” she scurried upstairs whilst the duo got ready to fight.

‘The sword, the sword,’ opened to a dim and dusted open space, ‘-where’s the sword,’ she skipped around, ‘-found it,’ on the table, she reached to then jump away. “WHAT WAS THAT?” her instinct screamed of danger, “-that sword,” a dark-mist, invisible to the human-sight, emanated an evil presence all around. It was alive, waiting to strike, wanting to kill, the unquenchable intent to slaughter. ‘Is that his sword?’ she wondered to carefully approach the object.

“Here you are,” downstairs, she had turned pale from the experience, “-master, is that your sword?”

“Yes,” he smiled and held the weapon as if nothing, “-Orenmir is its name, the curse-sword of which sucks the soul of many,” paused to think, ‘-it also contains the soul of a certain man with an unfaltering will to win. The blade is alive and strong enough to cut down anything or anyone, my trusty companion.’

“We’re ready,” returned the duo. Dressed in black with daggers and blades all around, Laurence stood at the ready with the hand creating strings. Achilles, on the other hand, wore her adventuring gear, Kniq’s outfit – the wings of freedom.

“Hey, argonaut,” called Staxius, “-you don’t have a weapon, do you?” he smiled.

“Y-yeah,” she stared away in embarrassment.

“Here,” she caught his weapon with a baffled expression.

“Are you sure?”

“Go ahead, you should be able to tame a cursed-blade; that’s the handicap I’m giving Laurence.”

“MASTER,” screamed the man, “-that’s very insulting, do you not believe in my strength?” Stood on the path dividing the yard and mansion, hard was it to not hear what he said. Hidden by clouds, the sun could but fade away – an aura of dread rose from the butler. Gravely offended, the face shone with anger, one directed at his master.

“There’s a difference between you two, I accepted Achilles’ pledge based on merit. She’s far superior than you”

“Master,” voiced Seiran in a shady tone, “-you realize insulting Laurence means that we could potentially turn against you,” prideful, being belittled from a kid let along by the king, would have dire repercussion.

"We may be retainers," walked Rile with Laura in tow, "-that doesn't mean that we'll take anything you say, there's a reason we're known as the defects. Rules don't apply to us," all their faces changed to battle-readied.

"Yeah," whispered from behind, Seiran's nail reached for the king's neck, \*BANG,\* not an instant wasted, the girl flew to hit the porch. Giving a thumbs-up, Elliot stood with Knightfall in hand.

"Defects," he glared Rile, "-don't make me laugh," a side-step followed by a flick to the back of the head, the wolf-man went flying across and into the wall-around the mansion. "Know your place, you dimwits. Don't think that I'm going to forgive anyone who tries to betray me."

"HOW DARE YOU," leaped Seiran, \*BANG,\* a clean headshot had her consciousness fade, in mid-air her body flew forwards, \*Smack,\* bone-crushing sounds echoed with her smashed into the gravel-path. Staxius gave an elbow to the nightwalker – thus, ending her life.

"Laura," grabbing her neck, Staxius glared Laurence, "-if you want her life back, go fight with Achilles. You'll see the difference in power. Do you think I'll surround myself with weaklings like you," spat, " - prove your worthy else I return thee to Arda in body bags."

"M-MAS-STER," trying hard to escape the deadly grip, her mind faded to nothingness after a mere few seconds.

"DON'T UNDERESTIMATE US," howled, Rile changed into a wolf twice Staxius's size.

"Big Dog," side-stepped to then a half-powered punch, Rile flew across to crash near the gates with Laura still strangled.

"Quite a commotion," commented Rosetta who stepped to a bloodied mess, "-did you provoke them?" she asked peering over Seiran's dead body.

"Yeah," he tossed Laura near to Seiran, "-they underestimated Achilles and were being brats. Guess I wanted to show them a little lesson."

"A little lesson," coughed the nightwalker, "-you killed me," she stood with the face regenerated.

"You asked for it," holding out a hand, "-let's go watch the fight."

"Master," she shook her head, "-I can't figure what kind of person you are," to which she accepted the offer.

"My head hurts," awoke Laura, "-what happened?"

"We got annihilated," limped Rile from the entrance, "-that punch knocked me clean out."

"I did hold back," laughed Staxius, "-did you enjoy the lesson?"

"Never again," they bowed in tandem, "-sorry, master."

"No matter," patting their heads affectionately, "-there's growth potential."

Meanwhile staring one another, "-master took out all three in less than a minute," commented Achilles.

"In less than a minute, did he use magic or some kind of enhancement?" the reality seemed a dream, the defects were hailed as the strongest combat servants. How could they be defeated in less than a minute, it was impossible or so was what he thought.

"Are you stupid?"

"Excuse you?" he glared.

"He wasn't even serious; using magic on a bunch of kids would be overkill. Listen, what you saw was just his normal self," she laughed, "-don't go underestimating me," sword drawn, a whirlwind of screaming souls escaped.

"Oh, oh, she's gone and done it."

"What do you mean by that, Master?" asked Laura as they sat on the slope before the yard.

"That blade contains much more than just a weapon, it's alive and feeds off blood and death. The more it's fed, the more it will grow."

"Will it not hinder the argonaut?" asked the nightwalker.

"No way," he shook his head, "-Achilles isn't a normal warrior, she's a hero." Just as he said those words, the rampaging sword lessened into one docile. Two flickers of light followed with Laurence knocked on the floor.

"H-hold up!" screamed Laura, "-THAT WAS LESS THAN A MINUTE."

"She didn't damage the lawn, good job Achilles," he clapped. Sheathed, the sword returned to its owner.

"I didn't touch the grass," she laughed as they stood on the slope.

"Laura..." whispered her brother groveling at the foot of the slope, "-how can a person be so powerful,' a few minutes had passed, the altercation resulted in them on the lawn.

"I don't know," she replied with gritted teeth.

"Why are we groveling," asked Seiran, "-should we not be doing some kind of housework?"

"You dare ask," sighed Rile, "-we underestimated the king and the people who protect him. Defect, what the fuck, we're but pebbles on the road. He held back whilst not even trying, do you know how humiliating this is?"

"Alright," came Rosetta, "-the four of you are going to spend the day cleaning the outside, I don't want to see a single piece of trash, understand?"

"Y-YES MA'AM."

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