

Death Magic 91

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World Break

The banquet ended abruptly. The royal family got out into a room of which it was surrounded by guards. The one leading said guards stood firm and strong, his failings prior to that moment – all jumbled his mind. Raulf, he who failed at protecting the king, remained as unshaken as a rock. A council was decided to be put in place. The foes who appeared that night had left an incredible impression of fear and dread. The power they displayed, though it all ended quickly – made them cower. The new adventuring system had to be put in place as soon as possible.

Town square remained normal. To their knowledge, the only thing they battled was the dizziness from booze. The news about monsters being an actual threat did shake the whole community. Despite this, none dared raise any more trouble. The individual guilds who were left out of the banquets; all received the message promptly. From the top to the lowest, adventurers were happy. This was the first time since their apparition that the title adventurer became acknowledge by the kingdom. Long had it been that mages were atop the food chain; this world was now in another era.

Far, far from the capital, they ran, they hid, they fought. The emblem shone in the moonlight sky, a warrior knelt and offering his sword; Blades End. Sweat dripped from their forehead, blood on their armor, the duo fought countless beasts. “Edward,” one yelled, “-its time for us to get back, this village doesn’t need our help.” *Slash,* the last foe dropped. From the vanishing body, coins, potions, and armor were spotted. “Gurdan,” the other shouted, “-if you’re done with the last wolf, come help me loot.” Slaying beasts for a small village located in Plaustan as a quest. Both the promising adventurers had fulfilled their mission. With that complete, they returned to the village in need as heroes. People sang their praises, gifts as the form of food. All celebrated, not as much as the capital, but all had fun. Edward and Gurdan weren’t the only ones who fought day and night. Scattered around this vast continent, the threat that the monster presented loomed as the death reaper’s scythe.

In addition to small parties going out to help people, the ones who controlled their guilds were also working. Maintaining and making money through adventuring still wasn’t reliable. Most guilds, or rather, the top ten were affiliated to successful businesses. Keeping together a band of people for the sake of helping people wasn’t plausible. None did anything for free; though there was exceptions to that rule. Guilds competing against one another, quests got completed at a higher pace. Everyone patiently awaited the arrival of the measuring device whose name was yet to be decided. All wondered who the first platinum ranked adventurer would be. Most speculated that Raulf was to be the first. However, nothing was set in stone, not yet at least. A strange discovery was reported to the central guild not long ago. A nameless wandering bard stumbled in drunk. He spouted nonsense,

“Adventurers have the gift to become powerful with each devastating strike they give. Those people are monsters, the harder they fight, the fiercer they become. Like an open flame, the more you give, the more it devours and the stronger it becomes.”

Some took his word with a grain of salt. The people who were directly concerned took it personally. What he said on that day was true, they had the power to grow stronger. None knew why or how, but they grew stronger with each strike, each skill, each ability they used – stronger and faster.

Thunderstain grew silent – Staxius had tried to get in contact to no avail. Knowing how secretive Rose was, it didn't come as a surprise that their headquarters moved. After the party ended, most nobles hastily returned to their homes. On that same night, Kreston against all odds fled. None knew why they left before anyone else. The two intruders had vanished, Julius took everyone to his home out in Claireville academy's noble district. He who passed out after the fight got taken to his car thanks to Avon and Prophecy. Xula's gaze felt tired and saddened. She still sensed it, the pain the demi-humans suffered across this province. She kept a stoic face, Julius drove in front.

One by one, everyone arrived at the house. Staxius had to wake, Xula began to play with his face once they had entered the car. She tickled him all over until he gave. The eyes opened once the car stopped. It felt familiar, Staxius stumbled out. This place brought back memories. Memories that should have remained hidden, the massive door, pleasant exterior. This was Sophie Mirabelle's ex-home. "Welcome to the Garnet household," Julius opened the door. The light raged out like a pent-up beast. It blinded Staxius more than anyone else. Xula held his hand, he remained shocked. Before him, everyone smiled and called on him to enter. All his friends, companions, and family members he met and cherished were there.

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Little did they know that this was only the beginning of the end. Avon came out and met all. They sat in the dining hall and continued their meal. All laughed, booze came in regularly. Often, Ancret would tease Xula, but she remained as unshakable as ever. Autumn and Eira got along pretty well. A growing feeling of being kept in the dark about something raised Staxius's curiosity. A quick glance towards Xula, she read all their mind and chuckled and reassured him. They were all hiding the fact that a secret party had been planned for tomorrow in honor of their engagement. To that, all conversed and bonded. They caught up on lost time – Adelana spoke about how Castle Garsley had turned into a small village; one that was filled with happiness. "Despite this, we need to build a wall. One for the village itself, as you know monsters are becoming a threat." Julius put forward the quandary that had bugged him for weeks on end. "I see, we need something to keep out both monsters and humans. I'm guessing we need one that can hold up against a full army if the day ever arises." Without knowing the details, Staxius gave a correct proposition. "That is it, yes," Julius agreed. The table turned silent, the conversation became serious and important. "Pardon me, but I think Arda can help in that endeavor." Xula broke their silence. "Really?" Staxius asked sarcastically. "Of course, we would be happy to take you up on that offer. Worry not, money is not of any concern." Julius replied. "Don't get me wrong, Julius. I need not your money, mine own request, selfish as it may, is to have Staxius join me in the royal court." She said it, at last, the news about Staxius leaving Dorchester became known too all. "B-but, if s-Staxius leave D-Dorchester, how are we suppose to g-get by?" Adelana added, her fears stood true once more. Staxius was going to leave again. "Ahh, old friend, is that how it is." Julius gazed at the ceiling. "-you have decided to abandon us all yet again." It glistened; a teardrop faintly formed around his eyes. From Millicent to Eira, all acted as if he was leaving forever.

"All of you are imbeciles." He broke the silence, frustration filled his tone. "I am not leaving Dorchester for good. Shanna only said I was joining her royal court. It's necessary for we are to wed soon. One might think that I shall be living in Arda from now on. That much is true, yes, however, I've already discussed this with Shanna. We are to build a portal that joins both our provinces. Instant transportation; it will feel as if I haven't gone nowhere." He took a quick pause, their faces changed for

the better. “-on top of that, seeing as no other province will ever try and help us, why not seek the help of someone who has sought and gain their independence.” He placed his hands atop Xula’s. “you all know how the princess is, earlier, there was even an attempt at assassination by poison. It’s a given that she will come after all of us, for we have rebelled against her.” They all knew what he meant. The conversation ended, but the celebrations didn’t stop, alcohol kept on being served.

“Master, they have all left the banquet as you ordered.” Far, far away, where it all began. The god-slayer had reached his final step in his plan. The purple liquid that came from the meteor had reached the planet’s core. More importantly, the one that ruled over Hidros. It possessed it, everything changed; world-break reached its conclusion. From the farthest corner of the continent to the highest peak, everywhere, it screamed. The cries of agony from a being none knew who it was. The continent cried; the purple devil had infected the life-force itself. “Finally, it’s complete. This world now has turned into a battlefield for heroes and demons. Master, we’ve successfully invaded this realm. None can stop us now, our friends have turned immortal. Now, my army can fully rise up. Unlimited spawns, this realm has turned into our favor. No angel nor god can oppose us now, we’ve altered this plain forever.” He held his hands up high, thunderbolts landed behind. The quest he set had been accomplished. A fantasy world born anew, a place where he; the first demon-lord would rule.

Clueless villagers, peasants, and inhabitants, all who celebrated that night would remember it for centuries to come. That day marked the beginning, dragons flew over towns and villages, an army of monsters attacked. Some dropped from the skies, other dug from the ground, the beasts launched a surprise attack. All fought, the lucky increase in adventures helped in pushing back their forces. However, it was at the cost of many lives. World-break, the god-slayer had summoned portals over the continent. A minute part of his army attacked. A show of strength and power, a preview to what was going to come. The night ended with blood and tears, no one had the power to rise.

Families and friends lost, homes destroyed, villagers set ablaze. The true power of a being that could rival gods had been witnessed for the first time. What could unprepared humans do, Arda fought off the invasions pretty effortlessly. Kreston did the same but lost some in the process. Plaustan had no report to speak of. Oxshield managed to repel the majority, for it was that province who was the primary target. Dorchester, a struggling province with only a castle as a refuge for the inhabitants... Blood, bodies, and pain. Most of the other provinces had an army to defend but that wasn’t the case for Dorchester, none knew what had happened. Adelana had a bad feeling and so did everyone else.

The irony was that people celebrated not only the king’s day of birth. But also, the genocide of many from the hands of monsters. The extent of the damage was only discovered at day-break where the bodies of many were found. Recruits from individual guilds had protected the cities for the whole night while others had fun. It brought shame to the royal family and the people responsible. In this, for the few days to come. People around the kingdom focused on rebuilding stronger walls, the new system got put in place. It was a reality check for many, the attack came out of the blue. None knew what and how it happened. Confusion ran rampant, but adapt and survive became the norm quickly. Guilds dished out quest like there was no tomorrow – more and more people tried out to become adventurers. The first Gold-rank was assigned to Raulf Serlo. The platinum was left out of reach, all who had battled previously had their ranks checked regularly. That day, it really did alter the kingdom. The day monsters became immortal, the day the adventurers were deemed worthy to protect the kingdom and the day mages

were forever forgotten as reliable fighters. World-break, a spell that changes a realm for the worst. The monsters who were previously killed now had a chance to spawn yet again.

Stood atop a tree and watching over the forest. A man, dressed in grey with a sword to his hip. He waits, the sun shines down, a horde of goblin approaches. Flying beasts stopped dead in their traces. Eyes closed, he rushes down and slays them all, no regret no guilt. What he seeks is the dead corpse of the ones who've harmed him. Once a mage and now but a fighter, Staxius Haggard fights and trains, the world has more in reserve; the Era of Heroes has begun at last.

Chapter 92: Change

"Use the fire skill," a yell resounded in what appeared to be a cave. The air felt dark and moist, one would feel claustrophobic. "Watch out for the goblins, they have archers," another yell followed by swords clashing paired with gunshots. The sweet melody of death and despair. "The reader says a boss tier monster resides here," the faint white color of porcelain sparkled around her neck. It moved around the one who held that device, a girl with black hair. "But this quest was only tier-ten," the guys with her argued – a loud gnarled perturbed their already frightened bodies. The adrenaline rushed even further, some felt their hands shaking, some grew strong and some felt no pain. Nature's boost, though it didn't suffice for the next day; bodies were taken out of said cave.

"Another adventuring party demolished by that tier-ten quest." A young girl with hair covering her eyes spoke, she held a notepad close to her chest. "I'll notify the central guild; we need to up the skill level." The guild leader replied monotonously. The guild leader for one of the branches of the central guilds located in Plaustan. More precisely, the town of Swanview. Since the king's day of birth – change happened at a rather fast pace throughout the continent. A few months had passed, the seasons changed unnaturally. Swanview slowly changed from a lonesome trading town to a booming adventuring town. All this happened thanks to Plaustan being so closed to Totrya, the monsters were more commonplace. As for the terrain, it differed, once one got closer to the south-west, it changed from plains to mountainous. If one headed to the south-east, the sea would prevail.

Swanview, that town flourished exponentially. The traffic brought about by adventurers held a lot of weight on their daily commerce. Though the skill level for that area had been raised to tier-nine, novice still rushed here. Loads of beasts were to be slain, which meant more money and fame. Since the new tiers got implemented, more and more non-fighters found that they held the potential to become adventurers. The lower three tiers, from ten to seven, were filled. The rank people sought after was Emerald, the green glimmer made all envy. Only a few held that rank, and fewer than five held Ruby. The climb to Gold was but a dream, for Silver had no one in it. As time went by, people got more experienced. This meant that one day, the upper half of the ranking would be filled as well.

The individual guilds were constantly moving, Plaustan, though relatively quiet thanks to their rulers – were at risk of an invasion. The display of strength that happened months ago sent shivers down all their spines. Everyone had one goal in mind, to get stronger. The inter-magical tournament was to be hosted in the coming months as well, it gave another incentive. Arda grew more distant from the rest of the kingdom apart from Dorchester. Those two became allies quickly which benefited Dorchester even greatly. The development of castle Garsley got onto another level. Dwarfs, expert builders, were sent to oversee the operation. The once small village grew into a fortified town – a large one at that. A massive wall, made with magic and fragments of adamantite were scattered all across and before long it rose.

The reason why adamantite got added was that it served as a catalyst. The magic spell cast onto it made the whole stone wall have the property of adamantite, arguably the strongest material.

The king's health worsened; the shock from the attempted assassination sent his mind into a frenzy. The next in line after his death was none other than Gallienne herself. Unknowingly, Eira also had a claim to that throne. The royal family grew silent, Raulf became in charge of the politics. This was a bad time for them, but the people acknowledge that the king wasn't immortal. All awaited the news of his majesty's passing any day now. Everyone's life went on as normal in those passing months. Nothing of any big relevance occurred. The implementation of the new system happened inconspicuously and without arising trouble. People accepted the change quickly and monster-slaying became the norm.

Far, far away, hidden in the forest, away from prying eyes. A man with only his sword and wits fought. 'Three, one, four, six.' Six enemies laid dead before him after one strike. He had stayed here for months on end. 'Four, two, one, three,' another four dead. The discovery of uncharted biomes and unknown enemies. Eyes closed and sword ready to strike, Staxius had fought his way deeper into Arda. Deeper into where none dared to go, a place supposedly haunted. After witnessing the power of the demons that night, Staxius vanished. He had spent his night with family and friends after disappearing once more. None knew where he went, Arda got attacked more frequently but they made it without any hassle.

A warmth, dispersed across the foliage of trees, made its way to Staxius. He sat, hands close to his sword and rested. Around his neck, a small bag with a notebook that described the monsters he fought. It was necessary to input all the valuable information he had for the more one knew about their enemy, the more efficient and less dangerous it would be. 'I've lost track of time.' The small powernap broke, 'I should head back, I've stayed away from the castle for too long.' He rose, *crack*, it made him on edge. That was the sound of a branch that just broke. 'Focus, close your eyes and feel the enemy,' he stood with eyes closed. It became clear, from not seeing objects to outlines, Staxius could now sense the objects before him. A bright red aura of dread blinded him despite his eyes closed. 'A strong foe,' the beast stood behind him, they were separated by a tree.

In a matter of seconds, the tree trunk broke into tiny pieces. The beast, the leader of the wolf-fang, a beast that had a tier-eight level rating, had stranded away from its pack. The attack sent echoes around the forest, as a result, the peacefully resting birds all flew. Gone, Staxius disappeared just before the strike. He didn't see it coming, rather, he sensed it. Despite the speed at which he dodged; the wolf still hurt his arms. The claws slashed through his grey armored suit as if he wore just a plain old shirt. The wound was deep, it bled, but this didn't faze him in the least. *Sniff, sniff,* instantly, the smell of blood gave away his location. The eyes turned redder; the wolf's demeanor changed from wandering to aggressive. To which, its strength increased proportionally. The angrier it was, the stronger it got. The right hand, the one with which he gripped the weapon, lost its vigor. The blood made holding tight, harder. It all happened in a matter of seconds, both opponents stared at each other. Staxius kept his eyes closed, all he saw was a pair of eyes from which he sensed the aura, a beating heart, and shiny claws with a faint outline of what the enemy was.

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The months spend inside the forest was for this exact moment. To see semi-clearly when he closed his eyes. The goal; to become the fastest and most accurate man who walked this Earth. Swift and efficient,

all his magic turned to augmentation as opposed to offensive assaults. The fighting style didn't change, for he used a sword before magic long ago. However, he used them separately. Now, after some getting used to, he managed to combine his magic with swordplay flawlessly. The beast snarled and rushed him, swing after swing, it tried to bite, maul his head off, rip his body in half, but Staxius stood strong. The wolf gave him a run for his money. Desperately, he tried keeping up but the beast kept on getting stronger. The tier-eight increased half-way to seven.

The fight remained defensive; his foe attacked relentlessly. Each shock fractured bones, it reminded him of the time he fought against his loyal companion. 'Fenrir,' he mumbled, the wolf pounced, he leaped on its head and shot up into the skies. 'Why am I fighting so defensively, I've fought harder enemies. Is that fight against the Hydra still weighing on my sub-conscious?' he had reached the peak, the sight of Arda from the top was only but green. 'not possible, I've trained hard to become stronger, I can't let some wolf show me up. I've defeated a legendary wolf after all, that beast is but an ant before her.' The freefall began, he quickly gained ground. The foliage came into view fast. Baffled, the wolf stared up at Staxius, *Boom,* a large explosion rattled the ground. The smoke cleared, the wolf laid on the floor, the body vanished. Slain in less than a second, though he defended for ten minutes.

Moments before the explosion was heard, Staxius conjured a fireball. He threw it with enough velocity to fall just inches away from his hands. The sword, common and basic, just steel without nothing special to it, lit with a dark mist. Before touching the ground, the sword pierced the wolf's heart, the fireball exploded almost simultaneously. It served to break his falling velocity. It revealed a large hole in which he stood with burnt marks all over. The death element's recovery healed him quickly. 'Regeneration is overpowered,' dusk set-in.

The cold-night breeze blew and the walk began. He decided to head for Arda's capital – though the journey had taken him, far, far away.

"Your majesty," stood before her, a row of elves and dwarves. "Raise your head and speak," the throne room remained the same, the greenish light emanating from behind made her as imposing as ever. "Us dwarves have been working the mines per your orders. However, tis not the issue, the sudden rise in monster activity in our area has proved to be of a greater danger than we anticipated. Our fellow brethren have been going missing ever since. Therefore, we humbly plead for her highness to send royal troupes and help quell our quandary." The short-bearded man lowered his head once the complained finished. With a silent sigh, she spoke once more, "you may now start," she pointed at one of the elves. "We've encountered the same problem your majesty, out in the forest, beasts of unknown nature all but ambush us while we hunt for food and provisions. Obtaining the necessary sustenance for the lower level's taverns have grown more difficult. We all but require an escort for when we go out hunting, a scout if you'd prefer – someone who can clear out all the pesky monsters before we go on our hunts." She took a minute to think, "very well, you shall have your escort and I'll send part of my army to help clear out the mines. Ask for further details in the portal room."

They all cheered and thanked her, her smile changed into a frown as soon as they left. "you're sending out too many of your royal guards to deal with weak monsters." The sage came from behind. "I know that, but if the people are dead, who is going to reinforce this kingdom of ours." She replied with pride in her voice. "Well, what if the queen dies, who is to lead the people into prosperity?" The sage fired back, he cleverly twisted her words. "Bore me not with your wittiness, I haven't the time to argue." She exhaled, "how I wish Staxius were here," then pouted. "Worry not, he shall be back soon," the sage

patted her shoulder and smiled. "Months have gone by; I haven't heard from him ever since that party. I just hope he's doing alright." She stared in the empty hall. "Why don't we form an adventuring guild for the people of Arda. I'm sure the kingdom will be more than happy to help." He added, the old man said something she hadn't thought of. "An adventuring guild for non-humans, this may be a tough undertaking but..." she liked the sound of it. "that's not such a bad idea." She smiled.

Chapter 93: Hobgoblin

"Hurry up, provisions for this week has arrived," Adelana yelled. The sun out here proved to be a daily challenge to overcome. The castle which once rested atop a small hill had extended its territory. The outside camp grew in a circle around the first castle wall. It became almost like a big circle encircling the smaller circle which happened to be the castle. The hill's slope wasn't that bad, buildings, shops, taverns, and many others were put in place. The upper half of that circle, just behind the north-east facing fortress became the residential area. Houses of great heights and excellent craftsmen shops rose one after the other. It looked almost like any other noble district. However, what differed here was that it was commoners, otherwise referred to as Dorchesterians lived. That term got put into place by Millicent, she felt that using commoners and peasants to be belittling. Also, using Dorchesterians as the universal term made all feel unified.

Through adversity and hardship, this town managed to crawl from the depths of hell and turn into a haven for the forgotten and lost. None of this was planned to be built this early, however, a small incident forever altered how all thought. On that night, when the demons and monsters attacked, Garsley was left alone and without defenders. They invaded, from small goblins to wolves and flying creatures, all laid siege. The damage didn't affect the stone fortress – rather, tis were the inhabitants that suffered. They rushed through the front gates and slaughtered all in their wake. The woman and children slept without trouble thanks to lady luck. The few men who stood as guards died a painless death. None suffered, none knew what happened, the assault began and ended in complete silence. Outside, all who stood were killed, however, at dawn – something peculiar stood out. Piles of gold coins, potions, and lost gears were found. No trace of a fight, no trace of blood, nothing. All was as pristine as usual, only three men went missing of which they were runaway slaves. Just as luck would have it, a small child bearing light-brown hair, freckled cheeks, and brown eyes, found an emblem; a black and grey circle. She who thought tis was but a piece of ornament hadn't the clue that tis were a crucial piece of evidence that Adelana would come across later. Her secretive and powerful ally, the merchants of death.

Adelana spoke to their leader, she found out the whole truth about that night. Only the members of the noble council had knowledge – the Dorchesterians, if were to learn about this would panic. As proposed by Shanna, the queen of Arda, Julius accepted her conditions and sought help. Paramount was the survival of castle Garsley, the last beacon of hope for Dorchester, the first step. Thus, letting Staxius go for the sake of his fellow countrymen felt like a good choice. Sadly, before Julius could voice his and the other's decision, Staxius left. Following that, Shanna ordered dwarfs to teach their mastery and help with the construction. She personally visited the town after the wall was built. It lasted no more than five minutes for her purpose was to cast a spell. The spell that rendered the latter impregnable to both humans and otherworldly beings – the best defense there was. And so was how castle Garsley became a thriving town and haven.

“Focus your mana even further,” a girl spoke calmly, she held a great-sword. “I c-can’t,” another feeble looking lady panted. “Fine, let’s take a break,” the first spoke, her white hair glistened with the sun. Dorchester wasn’t the only one on the move, Eira also worked twice as hard. She trained daily, and spent all her time into studies and learning how magic worked inside out. Claireville academy became her new home, though she grew popular, animosity from the other nobles grew as well. Boys envied her while girls hated her. The new ice-princess, her facial expression remained neutral. Sophie Mirabelle, though Eira didn’t know her past, had a bad feeling about her. She felt weird, almost to the point as if she were just someone’s puppet. It reminded her about the time she met that little girl back at the Pussy Palace. Not heeding those baseless accusations, Eira continued training.

It didn’t come as a surprise when she overtook her fellow students in practical as well a theoretical. Nothing fazed her, the battle training grew too simple and predictable. Seeing how gifted she was, Josiah made up his mind. He offered her an apprenticeship – she would learn under him. Joyfully, she accepted. The standards and hope he had for her were on an astronomical scale. The first day of training they held together proved to be a whole other game. Thus, the reason why she engulfed herself into the inner workings of magic. ‘I will stand by your side one day, father.’ Soon after, she reached his expectation and they worked together as if a grandfather teaching his granddaughter.

Night gave way for the day, Staxius had traveled quite a distance. The thick foliage blocked his path on many occasions. Getting lost was the least of his worries for with each step he took, the danger of an ambush grew. Almost regularly, a strange creature would charge and attack, it didn’t bother him. With each killed, he wrote down their characteristics. Not being able to use other elements apart from the shadow, fire, and the death element; he could not test their weakness thoroughly nor could he use fire openly. He respected the forest and did nothing that could prove to be harmful. Instead of walking, he chose to run with his eyes closed. He decided to use all his mana and transfer it into raw speed, just one of many types of challenges he set for himself. Navigating through the trees, while running at speeds no human could ever hope, his agility and reflex sky-rocketed. Not to mention, he did them with his eyes closed – almost possessively, the goal was to master that trait. Something unique to him, for the experience of death, had overwhelmed this false sense of security all humans had.

Days went by without worries, monsters were slain, trading remained normal. No big event had been set to happen anytime soon. The capital felt quiet and mundane, Totrya went dark. Little did the people know that adventurers weren’t the only one leveling up. Monsters did the same, the stronger the foe, the stronger they become. No one truly had the edge over the other – small goblins mutated into hobgoblins, shamans, and leaders. Hidden away, they multiplied. Not only were they immortal in the sense that they would come out of portals at regular intervals. They also bore children like any other living creature. Camps, small hideouts, and other unsightly places got built. They didn’t grow smart, instead, they adapted. This all happened under their noses, none had any clue to this development.

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“STOP THE BATTLE PRACTICE,” one of the instructors yelled. “GO NOTIFY THE QUEEN,” the sound of giant footsteps made the ground vibrate. The first one to experience the full terror of beasts was Arda. The thick forest, hidden caves, and unventured territory made it a breeding ground for the green devils. Inhabitants, mainly girls, were reported missing ever since. None knew the real reason; the royal guards deployed all over to no avail. “But m-master,” one of the students tried to help. “GET BACK,” he yelled, the aura emanating from this wave of monsters had a feeling of dread. Subtle and muffled, each step

grew closer and closer. Said battleground was located at the foot of the tree. The monsters would come out of the forest at precise times for a full-on assault. Their weak nature proved to be good exercise but today it played against Arda.

The elves standing guard atop could not believe their eyes. Arrows were shot, the sound of tree cracking and breaking overwhelmed all. Non-combatants rushed inside; the air filled with malice. It did nothing, the arrows, it bounced off their bodies. 'If you can't help, don't try helping, it will bother people who can help,' an idea which seems cowardly in nature, taught by none other than Staxius had saved many lives before. At first, the guards didn't like it, but slowly, it became common knowledge. The moment the arrows didn't work, archers retreated. None wanted to get in the way, and it proved to be wise.

"We've got a big p-problem. We're under attack, or soon will be, please relay this message to her majesty, we need help on the bottom floor." A demi, bearing dog's ears fell soon after the message delivered. He died and revealed an arrow inside his back. "Carry him to the medics, and do inform this to her majesty," the lady who sat behind the desk remained as monotonous as ever. "As you wish," one of the guards replied.

The message reached Shanna's ears quickly. "I won't say I didn't warn you," the sage stepped forward. "-but sending most of your army to help with common problems has now come back to haunt you," she held a frown, the sage spoke the truth. "It's true that the guards are away." She stood up, "-if they can't protect this kingdom, then I shall do the deed myself." The first step she took forward felt weak, she stumbled. "Mind yourself," the sage quickly caught her. "-trying to fight in your condition isn't wise. Have you forgotten that your transformation has now reached half-way," he took a quick pause, "-trying to fight now is madness. The immense strain on your body despite you being a fairy isn't bearable." The man spoke truthfully, she could barely stand let alone fight.

"But i-if I can't p-protect them, w-who will," she glanced over, her stare changed. The color of her eyes turned blue; she was dead serious. "I shall accompany you," the sage conjured his staff. "If you're fighting in your state, then tis not wrong for me to use up my remaining mana in this fruitless endeavor." He smiled. "But you absolutely can't, if you use magic now, death will be knocking on your door." She fired back with a sorrowed tone. "Isn't that selfish of you, first you try and save the kingdom by sacrificing yourself and now tell me that I can't do the same?" their argument continued.

While they conversed, the hobgoblins tore the bottom floor apart. They rushed out of the forest; any remaining combatants fought with all their might. One after the other, sword and magic did naught to them. The massive green bodies in which their eyes remained as white as a blank scroll rushed them. Swing after swing, the foe held overwhelming strength. Their clubs changed from dark-brown to red in a matter of seconds. Poor were the ones who tried to stop the assault. Most of the royal guards were off on an expedition. The Kingdom, though powerful now remained powerless.

"Three giant green demons accompanied by countless little devils are invading the ground floor as we speak. Anyone willing to help, please make your way downstairs, this fight is for our survival," this message reached the upper floors as well as the queen. "I haven't the time, thus I will compromise with you. I shall send Prophecy on my behalf and you will restrain yourself from combat." She stood before the portal, "I agree," he replied. *Prophecy, I summon thee to fight on mine own behalf,* A blinding light materialized. It stepped through the portal and headed down.

'I sense it, fear, hatred, death,' Staxius had been traveling for days and had now reached the capital. 'I sense it all, the beasts, they are strong.' In the corner of his eyes, the bushes moved. "H-help m-me," it mumbled. Staxius stepped forward, laid before him a young elf with a dagger inside her stomach. He knelt and stared at the weapon. Hands on his sword, he unsheathed and sliced away her clothes – revealing the wound without touching the dagger. Black marks, it spread throughout her stomach, poison, a potent one at that. *Cough, cough,* "H-help m-me," she begged. "Listen, you've been stabbed by a poisoned dagger. If I remove it now, you may bleed to death, by what I see, the blood is rather powerful." His eyes, upon the sight of blood, changed, it grew neutral. "I h-have a f-family," she coughed blood. "We all do, but prolonging your suffering isn't worth it," he replied with a cavalier face. "Tell me your name," he asked, she had reached her limits. "F-Faraine Aebalar." He patted her forehead reassuringly, "worry not."

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, from when you were born and till you die, I, the god of death, hold in my hands the strings which binds you to this world, by my authority, I order thy chains to be severed, spell, Tactus Interitus. "Good night," he snapped, the girl died. Out of respect, he took out the dagger, placed both her hands on her chest and covered her face with the cloth he sliced off – her face held a smile. 'Here I come.' A smile shone through his emotionless gaze.

Chapter 94: Chaos

"Keep it together, the queen has been notified; back up is on the way," they yelled, screamed, and motivated each other. The fight had been a losing battle since the start. Many lives were lost already, the archers, though useless – kept on shooting arrows. This time, they retreated inside the tree and aimed for their eyes. Swing after swing, large numbers of demi-humans got crushed. Not the royal army, not battled trained mages, nor local sell-swords; they were inhabitants who had traveled to the ground floor.

Blood covered their bodies, the green mixed with red, their clubs destroyed all in their wake; the hobgoblins walked inside. Normally, a barrier would always be put up for only chosen individuals who were allowed in the capital. However, due to the absence of the royal guards, none could verify who came and left. Thus, a single guard was appointed to check on whoever tried gaining access. To that end, the barrier fully closed leaving only a small doorway. People leaving were advised to use the upper-level's exits. Sadly, on the same day, a small event was organized to celebrate the founding of the royal guards. All were invited, the event ended abruptly for unstated reasons. Though this didn't stop them from celebrating the occasion, the barracks held a feast.

Boaw, the barriers broke effortlessly. "everyone inside, please evacuate to the upper-floors." Panic filled the entire ground floor. The miscommunication proved to be lethal, as people tried to get down for help, some also tried climbing up for shelter. A massive blockage stopped all movement, the inhabitants grew more fanatic. Tis was their survival instinct – stronger than any human for they were demi's who still kept strong characteristics. Order remained but a fantasy at this moment in time. The small goblins ran through the broken debris left by the barrier. Their goal, to slay anyone in sight. What more opportune than people blocked on a rather small stairway. One by one, women, children, and more were backstabbed mercilessly. The screamed echoed throughout, fires were set ablaze. Prophecy was nowhere to be found, the hobgoblins focused on destroying the fort, they began with the barracks. Club in hand, their assault raged on.

Defenders, they used magic, swords, but it was all for naught. Imprisonment spells, walls, spiritual barriers – nothing could stop the wave. Hope had been lost in the first five minutes. A quick glance at the path leading inside the capital told it all. Guts, body parts, blood, brains, it all scattered around. Disgusting and putrid weren't enough to describe the screams – if hell were to exist then that scene would have summed it up. The victim count increased by the second, the stairway was still blocked. It got to the point where friends and families push their own kinfolk off, none cared – utter chaos.

All seemed lost, the goblins continued their slaughter, the hobgoblins continued their destruction, few shamans; hidden away from the general populous set the few buildings on fire. Girls and teenagers who were unlucky enough to be caught got taken outside the trunk. They wailed, screamed, cried, but the sound of people dying overwhelmed all. A crisis that could have been averted if only the royal guards were present. Hope wasn't lost yet, a whiteish portal opened, a shadow rushed out. On the stairway, just where the goblin stood, said portal unveiled the famed and mystical Prophecy. The spirit, partially transparent rushed out, sword in one hand and magic in the other; it annihilated the small devils in a matter of seconds.

'I smell blood,' before he stood a familiar place. A place he once deemed as heaven, but now had been corrupt by the ways of war and tragedy. The resemblance stood uncanny to the battle out in Dorchester decades ago. 'War, a false way to protect the peace.' In the corner, just near the border to the forest, a trail of blood caught his attention. Though the inside needed help, he carefully stared at the trail. "Avon, please go help whoever is in need." Instantly, with sparkles in his eyes, Avon appeared. "Master, should I hold back?" he asked with his head slightly tilted and in a joyful manner. "Definitely not, use everything you got and slaughter all the monsters; leave no one alive." He patted his head, the voice remained monotonous, the eyes blank, Avon vanished.

"Millicent, come and help me, this load is a bit much to carry," blue hair, wolves ears, and beauty unlike any other – Fenrir had been unloading the merchandise. "Right, I'm on it," she replied and clumsily rushed outside.

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'It has been a long time since I've done this but, let's try it.' Staxius continued following the trail, he sensed more and more goblins; some had a peculiar feel to them. *As the one bounded to my soul, heed mine own call, dearest friend and companion, Fenrir, appear before me.*

"Hey, Fenrir are you feeling alright?" Millicent asked. The blue eyes felt weird, it looked worrisome. "I'm perfectly fine," the fear faded, she smiled and poof vanished into thin air. "MASTER," the summoning worked, Fenrir jumped on Staxius as soon as she appeared. "Fenrir, how I've missed you," he fell to the floor. Her tail wiggled, the ears playfully moved about; she licked his face. Smothered with saliva and compassion, Staxius squinted his eyes and gave to Fenrir's antics. "Someone is blissful aren't they," He finally had space to breathe, "Yes master." She stood; "-it's been a long time since you've summoned me like this." Her playfulness vanished into seriousness. "I guess you've sensed whatever awaits us," a small chain glimmered around her neck. "Yes, I smell strong and powerful enemies," her eyes directed towards the trees and into where they hid. 'That necklace, green in color, what is it?' Curious, he took a quick pause and examined, then it came as fast as lightning. "You're an emerald ranked adventurer?" Staxius spoke, his face changed from neutral to surprised. "Yes," she quickly turned her head, her long

hair followed behind and gave a quick smile. “-I’ve gotten this rank by defeating the monsters around Dorchester,” she proudly held up the ornament.

“Let’s leave the questions for later, we’re in Arda, the capital has been attacked. I’ve already sent someone powerful to help with the capital but my guess is that they will last around thirty minutes. We need to cut off wherever they are coming from.” He stood and carefully looked where she stared moments prior. “Thanks for the insight master, I see that you know well what to say in these kinds of situations. What’s the plan of attack?” baffled, he stared at her with a face of a guy hell-bent on slaughter. “Isn’t it obvious, we run inside and end their lives.” No intonation whatsoever, he resembled a demon, a person whom death didn’t faze. “Sounds good to me,” she smiled. “-whenever we pair up, strategy becomes second nature. After all, we’re bound by soul, aren’t we?” she winked, her appearance changed into a fearsome and gigantic wolf. She had gotten stronger over the years, it showed by how large she had gotten. The claws had engravings of lightning bolts. As opposed to being white and blue, the fur had black spots all over, it looked like ancient markings – just like the ones he once had on his chest. One look was all it needed, both ran out of the woods and headed straight for the beast’s lair.

“Come on, fight,” the few stumbling sell-swords who made their way down fought. The goblins had stopped their invasion, Prophecy had struck fear into the little one’s heart. Instead, green devils gathered around the hobgoblins who also stopped their assault. They slowly marched back from whence they came. They weren’t overpowered nor getting slaughtered, the beasts suddenly grew more cautious. Their strong survival instinct helped to make that decision. “What are small little pests waiting for,” one of the men urged them to fight. A standoff of the attackers and defenders. Gathered near the broken barriers, they stopped. “Now, now, time isn’t to retreat,” Avon casually walked behind and placed his hands on one of the hob’s muscular arms. *Grrrrrr,* it tried to push him, sadly, said arm tore away from its host and vanished into small bits and pieces. “Don’t touch me,” using the other, the hob tried to smack Avon with its club but ultimately, *Clap,* the beast broke into tiny pieces. “Nasty little things aren’t they?” Avon spoke, the crowd before him stood in awe. “WATCH OUT,” another club came straight for his head, *slash,* another arm sliced off. “Hey there Prophecy, how are you doing?” he casually winked. “Get it together,” a tiny girl’s voice, Prophecy spoke for the first time. The second hob died thanks to a thousand cuts.

“Who are those two?” the sell-sword asked out of fear, they had witnessed the birth of one of the strongest duo in the history of Arda. “You do speak,” Avon vanished, he matched Prophecy’s speed as she sliced off the heads of the small devils. “Shut up, her majesty the queen has ordered me to fight on her behalf. I haven’t the time to entertain a foolish spirit.” She increased her speed. “I’m not that foolish,” her sights were set for the last hob who went into berserker mode. “Impressive, so you can keep up with my speed, how about this?” gone, nothing, they disappeared. “This isn’t fast at all my old enemy,” he kept up with her. “Let’s just slay this monster before we engage in conversations,” her tone always remained quiet but monotonous. “Sounds good to me,” minutes went by and the remaining monsters died, qaisars dropped.

Before they could breathe a sigh of relief; one of the surviving goblins screamed. It was so loud it broke the thing’s vocal cords, tis was a cry for backup and help. Subconsciously, both Avon and Prophecy stood in front of the broken barrier. Loud footsteps came closer and closer. Hands on swords, both took their stance – the aura they felt were of something of greater power. It reached heights they hadn’t sensed

before. Demons, utter demons with the power to destroy a country. “We’re probably going to lose this battle,” Avon spoke. “I agree with you, though I’m a powerful spirit, without my master by my side, my abilities are locked.” The footsteps reached the edge, “attack,” Avon screamed. *Boof,* he came to a sudden halt. “Mind yourself, Avon,” Staxius had stopped him with a single hand, “- you could have gotten hurt,” he smiled and kissed his forehead. Instead of getting angry, he patted his head and walked. Avon was like his small child. Stood beside Staxius, Fenrir, she was covered with blood. “Greetings Prophecy,” Staxius waved at the spirit and stepped inside. “Master, what about the enemies back up?” Avon asked curious to where he had been. “Damn, this town has seen better days hasn’t it?” Staxius ignored whatever he said, the sight before he felt sad. The buildings continued to burn, the chaos hadn’t gone out yet, the stairs were still blocked. “Sir, mind me asking what’s that on your companion’s back?” Prophecy asked in turn. “Those are the girls and women I found while clearing out the goblin’s hideout.”

As he gazed upon the battlefield; the sell-swords and people who hid came out of their shelters. “Is the battle really over?” some asked, “who are they?” others collected the Qaisar. “A human?” one stated the obvious. “Don’t spout such nonsense, don’t you recognize that crest, that’s the rumored guardian of Arda. Also less commonly known as her majesty’s fiancé.” The gossip spread like wildfire; he had returned. “Avon, you should probably get back,” Staxius patted his back, “-job well done,” he smiled. “Prophecy, could you kindly conjure a portal straight to where her majesty is?” The stare changed from emotionless to normal and friendly. “This way,” a portal opened and the invasion stopped. The events that transpired on that day would greatly influence the queen’s decision on adventurers and how Arda should be ruled.

Lives lost; people killed; buildings destroyed. This was the norm for villagers without anyone to protect them. What he encountered in that cave would forever change his outlook on how people lived. The terror and how ruthless monsters were didn’t really get through his head. None ever knew what he saw there, and none will ever know – Staxius had an awakening.

Chapter 95: The Hospice

“I’ve sent Prophecy, what else do you want me to do?” Shanna had reached the end of her rope. The arrival of people in distress; soldiers turned from occasional to often. The rate at which all rushed through that portal raised the pressure in the already tense room. At any moment, the queen could break and rush out of that damned purple portal. The portal that led directly into the ground floor, a doorway accessible only when trouble arises. Tis was but a whim for the sage had strongly grasped her shoulder and tormented with psychological pressure. If she did something stupid then the old man’s life would be voided. She sat, helpless as ever; eyes yearning to help but feet solely stuck. The screams and chaos didn’t reach the second floor; the castle stood peacefully and away from harm. Though the green devils occasionally snuck through hidden passageways; they were killed almost immediately.

A dazzling white light stopped her lamentation, momentarily; it blinded her. The sage looked with a hint of skepticism; he had drawn his staff in case of an attack. Caution over regret, an idea he lived by since the days as a youth. “No need to threat,” a familiar voice spoke through. Her gloominess changed to subtly anxious – that voice sent shivers down her back. Time had been gone for so long, her memories betrayed her. She had forgotten how her partner looked let alone how he sounded. Normally, her memories would have been perfect; sadly, the transformation put a fair share of strain on her psyche. “It c-can’t b-be,” she mumbled, a figure walked out as if he had conquered the world.

At that moment, everything felt slow and unmoving, time stopped. Her heart made laps, the sage let a little grin slip. The nobles who usually sat atop, where nowhere to be found. He had returned at last, the man she called fiancé and the man who made her realize how faulty her line of thinking was. "Greetings your majesty," he bowed, the portal vanished. Prophecy returned to her master; Avon had disappeared long before they arrived. Fenrir stood, her size put the throne room to shame, out of that human-sized portal, a beast twice its size walked out. "Welc-," before she could speak, Staxius held his index finger to his mouth. It signaled her to remain quiet, that gesture would normally have gotten him kicked out for disrespect. Not this time, he had made his place in Arda, though the Ardanian's didn't know, the nobles and higher reaching individuals knew. "Master sage," he quickly pointed and asked his master to come. "Would you kindly summon a portal, we need to take those girls to the hospital as soon as possible," he pointed up, up Fenrir's body. They didn't notice it until now, her white fur hid them perfectly. "Excuse me, I'll get on it right away," with a swift upwards flick of the wrist, a greenish portal appeared. Staxius escorted the injured.

"Now tis a quandary mine own student, the hospital has been utterly filled with patients. We've run out of healing potions let alone magical scrolls; they're being treated using normal medicine." A quick conversation with the director revealed worrisome information. If the pace kept up and the inflow of patients didn't decrease, space would become a dream for it had been jammed packed in the first few minutes. "Fenrir," they stood outside, the building was located on the second floor. "-change back into human size, we need to figure something out." The staffs were out of options, medical mages were brought in but that didn't help the situation in the least.

People gravely injured themselves for their lack of respect for one another. They did more hurt than the monsters could. Who would blame them, in this godforsaken land, everyone is out for themselves and none can change that truth. Not even the noble heroes and gods could overturn that truth; survival of the fittest has and will always be the thing that unifies the world. "Master sage, I'm sorry to ask you a thing." He took a quick pause, an idea popped inside his head. "-do you have low-tier blank scrolls?" he asked, the tone felt serious and concerned. "Personally, I don't, but the library does have them in stock." He replied intrigued. "Could you please get a hold of them for me? And some magical ink as well." The great white building stood behind him. It had stairs that led to four gigantic and curly pillars in the front and two on both sides. In total, there were eight of said pillars. The latter helped to support the structure as well as provide a bit of esthetics.

Within, just before one entered the hospice, there laid a vast and empty vacant space. Covered with white tiles, said spot was large enough to accommodate two medium-sized houses. It held true that said building was large in nature, however, it had to be that way for non-humans varied in shapes and sizes. It had to be big enough to accommodate even the tallest and widest being known to them. Nevertheless, on that day, that vacant spot had been filled with patients. Entering the hospice turned into a quest not even the rich and privileged could buy their way into. While all the moans, groans, and yelps echoed around the vicinity, the sage fixed his gaze upon he who had asked something peculiar. "May I inquire about your intention with said items?" he asked with his eyebrows slightly lifted.

"Time isn't for explanations; we have to accommodate the arriving injured. The staff inside are already drained, the mages are out of mana and we're running out of time -see for yourself," he pointed to a young boy who bled to death before his eyes, the white stairs turned into a small waterfall for the blood. The parents were just as bad as the young one, tough was that sight on the old man. "Alright, I

shall get to it right away," he quickly contacted one of the librarians and made sure that the items were brought hastily. "Another thing, is there any way we can open a temporary first-aid tent?" Staxius asked once more, "I think we can take the two closest buildings, they're vacant." He pointed in front, 'how does he know so much about Arda,' Staxius was impressed about the extent of his knowledge concerning the kingdom. "Alright, bring the supplies to the first house, I shall join you momentarily," Staxius said while the sage vanished; he had his job to do.

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Staxius ran inside the hospice, though not trained in the arts of treating a person. He quickly gained the trust of the people in charge. With sheer determination and intent of saving lives, the hospice got behind him. Patients were separated into three groups, green, yellow and red. Green from being least injured to red being on the verge of death. Said system had already been put in place but wasn't that well organized. The first mansion became temporary for the green-labeled patients, the second for yellow. Third, the hospital cleared out and took in red patients only. A few minutes went by, the once overcrowded entrance cleared out. A team of volunteers began to help whoever was hurt. Mages used teleportation magic to escort people who were at death's door.

The supplies arrived, Staxius worked tirelessly. Minutes turned to seconds, he wrote healing scrolls of rare quality. Turning low-tier common scrolls into rare spells was a feat deserving praise and applause. However, he didn't care, the scrolls quickly got distributed through the first and second house – it healed most. Item qualities held six ranks in total: common, uncommon, rare, epic, legendary and relic. From common to rare held its merits. The day carried on in without any more trouble, the pace changed from chaotic to normal. Together with the people, they helped many lives that day. The doctors were praised highly, Staxius chose to remain in the dark, it was for the better. An unknown entity helping by turning common into rare scrolls was a lie not even a child would swallow. Nighttime came by, a massive portal blocked the entrance down below. Graves were dug, bodies were respectfully sent off.

Fenrir helped in transporting the injured. Godly wolf became her nickname, the one who saved the day for many. The last of the injured left, no more scrolls were required. "Finally," he let a sigh of relief; his hand shook violently. The strain of writing for so long and at such speed had emptied his stamina. 'Clarity...', alone in that dark room, he engrossed himself so passionately that he opened the fabled door. The door to Clarity, a place only a few chosen ones were allowed. The whispers from the past legends who reached that dimension still lingered in his mind. They were mostly unintelligible, however, it felt as if they encouraged him.

Click, the door opened. Expecting light to blind him, he held up his hands. "Staxius," nothing of that sort happened, a figure holding a candle spoke instead. "-are you still alive in there?" the voice felt feminine and dignified. "Xula?" he mumbled; the strain still hadn't fully left. "You're alive, what a relief," she sounded sarcastic. "Did you wish otherwise?" from leaning back, he inclined forward and rested his elbows on the scroll filled table. *Click,* the light turned on," color me surprised, Arda does, in fact, have electricity." He chuckled, Xula's greenish hair twinkled. "Has't the gods hath left the door to Elysium opened, for one quite quaint as a goddess herself, hast did step through mine own heart," he said in a jestful manner. "Stop it with your foolishness," she walked inside. He meant part of the words he said but chose to leave it be. "Isn't it a bit inappropriate for royalty to walk about so late at night?" he asked, elbows still resting. "Tis my kingdom, I shall do what I please," her walk continued, the candle still lit despite lights being turned on. "No arguments from me, your majesty," he fired back, she had a point.

Each step she took felt menacing, her face changed from worried to angry. The eyes turned red, he sensed it. She had been angry for him leaving for all this time. "Staxius Haggard," she stopped, "- yes your majesty," he stood up and stared. "Do you have a complaint you wish to voice?" he asked, he tried to fight her cold-heartedness with his own. "Matter of fact, I do," she went around the table and stood inches away from him. "-you've been gone for so long," her shoulders relaxed, "you can't begin to imagine how much strain the apparition of monsters has put on me," her eyes closed, the months of pressure cracked. "A job well done," he hugged her tightly. The immense air of suffocation lifted, in his arms, she relaxed, all her worries turned to dust. They felt firm and strong, his touch gentle as a feather and voice as mesmerizing as an opera, Xula smiled. "We still have to get engaged, don't we?" after waiting a few minutes, he whispered gently. "Soon, we'll do it soon," her voice felt feeble and filled with laziness. "No matter, you've done an awesome job, Xula. I'm proud to be your partner," he gently caressed her head till she fell asleep in his arms.

'You shouldn't let your guard down even around me.' He chuckled, 'but it's no worries; you're starting to grow on me, Xula. You're definitely changing me for the better,' he smiled gently. In the cover of night, with a fake starry lit sky above them, Staxius carried her to her castle. The whispers, gentle breeze, soothing temperature, and her breathing on his back – this was what he dreamt peace would be like. A place to call home, someone to call special and the strength to protect it all; it had been his drive since the beginning.

Chapter 96: Confession

Night followed; the chaos imbued atmosphere subsided. Peace and quiet spread throughout the capital. Her majesty slept in her bedchambers while Staxius trained. Alas, he naught but wonder if tis was wise to help out the people how he did. 'Wouldn't that cause a problem in the near future? What if someone found out the truth that I changed blank scrolls into rare quality.' The steel sword, the one he took on many adventures' prior had chips and tears all round. The handle covered with cloth had been bloodied so much it had its own aesthetic. The sword, if seen by another swordsman, one who was talented could see, or rather feel its aura. Said weapon changed from an ordinary piece of metal to a demon who hungered for blood and life. Lucky were they to not touch that sword for it had been cursed, cursed by Staxius unknowingly. The terror, the annihilation he brought upon each fight thoroughly took refuge within its shiny edges. The cries for help, the cries for mercy, the sheer fear that his enemy faced – all were on that blade; like a book who recorded his every count.

Strike after strike, a small blackish mist manifested. '-writing magic scrolls isn't easy, some call it a talent only a few possess. The sheer mastery and inner workings of how mana and the outer-worldly element intertwine take decades to assimilate. Like an idiot, during that crisis, I thought only about saving whoever needed help.' Silent as a cat, the training dummies who stood before him all fell. 'so many scrolls used without any care – the number of coins all that could have brought us.' He stopped. "Thanks for helping my little sister," a small innocent voice peaked through his mind. Tis was the voice of a boy, a young boy named Yaegar Aebalar, the lady he took out of her misery, that was her son. Still young and feeble, with a face unlike a boy. A face clear from all scratches and fault; a face that looked feminine, that was Yaegar Aebalar. 'That boy, I must find him at all cost,' amidst the cold and darkness, he knelt. The sword fell beside him, it felt as if it could move on its own. 'Yaegar Aebalar, I've only heard and seen you from afar, but I sensed something.' It had piqued his interest. The only thing he cared for was to personally, as the man who slew her mother, to give him the news of her passing. Tis was illogical but

morally gratifying. The complexities of how the mind worked eluded him, thus he never chose to understand it.

Thus, in that manner, he trained throughout the night. The anticipation of daybreak lit a fire, a fire to work twice as hard. The sword screamed, but none heard, the screams of pain and suffering. Neither of them was his, tis were the final emotions of the many victims.

Day came faster than expected, Staxius laid on the floor. The castle grew loud, people sought an audience with her majesty; they all had their quandaries, questions, and doubts. Countless lives were lost, all the blame turned to Xula. They didn't care, though most had unintentionally taken part in the slaughter of their kinsfolk. They all but wanted someone to take the blame for their shortcomings and mistakes. Who better than the gullible queen for that selfish endeavor.

"Raise your head and speak," sat with her full authority, Xula spoke sharply. "Your majesty," one of the residents raised his head. "-the blame lays squarely on your shoulders. I've lost my child and wife due to your foolish decision to send our famed royal guards on expeditions to hunt ants and pests." Her gaze stared right through him, that man spoke the truth; he was one of many who kept his cool and didn't give to fear. Sadly, despite that, the absence of adequate protection brought ruin to his family. It had been the fiftieth person since morning to have voiced the same question. "An apology isn't what you desire from me, I've been a fool. However, measures are being taken to prevent such pointless slaughter to take place ever again. "W-WHAT ABOUT ME?" Tears shed; he rose swiftly. "Calm down their buddy," the guards stepped in and pinned him to the floor. Not royal but court guards. The man cried and broke down, Xula could naught but keep a straight face. 'This is all because of me,' her fist clenched, anger towards herself turned the eyes red.

"My friend," footsteps, "-worry not," the sound of two bodies embracing one another reverberated. "I know you've lost your family, and all that was precious to you," *Dark-Arts: emotional control,* "-never the less, that doesn't give you the right to plead ignorance." Staxius hugged him, people, humans, and non-humans alike had similarities. They hungered for affection, a hug during a bad moment, a pat on the back when one achieved something great, those subtleties mattered. "Do you realize that the one who saved us all was none other than her majesty herself. You may have been blinded but she sent her prized and famed weapon to rescue us all. Ask the mercenaries and thou shalt find the answers." The hug ended; the man's tears stopped. "B-but I-I have n-nothing," he argued back, the eyes looked dreadful. "You have something you can hold onto, dearest friend," Staxius held his hand and lifted him up. "You have the will and strength to start again. That vengeance and anger that flows in your blood – channel it. Use it not to lash out at her majesty, but use it to get stronger. Become powerful, take your vengeance. Slay the monsters without mercy, immerse yourself into the craft – do that and you will stop another family from losing their own." Staxius smiled, the man's tears stopped. A faint light relit; his eyes burnt with motivation. "T-thank you," he left the room hastily, "monsters, here I come," he mumbled.

"Looks like you've been having a good morning," he changed his gaze to Xula. "... " she remained quiet. "A mouth is given for one to speak and eat, not to frown and growl, now speak my lady." The voice felt peaceful yet it had a hint of anger within. "Have you always been this belligerent?" She stood. "Guards, tell that her majesty is taking a break. The audience will be held on a later date; I shall personally make an announcement later in the evening." With a wave, the guards quickly executed her orders. "What brings you here, dearest Staxius," she climbed down her throne. "I've come to check up on you of

course.” He patted her head, “I’ve been worried that your gullibility and compassion would overthrow your judgment.” He smiled. “Worry not, I’m not that big a fool,” she smiled. “Thank heavens,” he breathed a sigh of relief. “Shanna, I strongly recommend that you and the council call a meeting. The events that transpired yesterday has left a bad impression on the populous. We need to clarify the situation. I’ve got an idea – to open an adventuring guild here in Arda.” He held her hands tightly.

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“How did you know?” she replied, “-how did you know that the old sage and I have been mauling over that possibility.” She gripped his hands tighter, “it’s not a bad idea?” her eyes glimmered. She needed confirmation over this crucial decision. Opening an adventuring guild would mean that the borders to Arda would have to be made accessible to humans. Her eyes sunk back into cluelessness.

“Is the thought of opening Arda to humans ailing you?” he spoke, her grip loosened. She nodded, affirming his speculation. “Tis not an issue, we have enough people here to maintain and run the guild. We need a party and guild master – the process is still unknown to me.” He backed away; “-therefore, I shall take that responsibility. Just give me the word, I shall have a trip to the capital and see what is need to be done for this to happen. Arda is its own nation, and like every other nation, the order views us as a differing entity now. Negotiations would have to be made; however, I think it’s possible.” The tone felt serious and filled with determination. *BouP* Xula leaped into his arms. “Staxius, please help me. I’ve been clueless about what I need to do. Today, you’ve given me a way to make everyone and everything slightly better.” She breathed a sigh, her mind had been put at ease once more.

“Xula,” he held her shoulders, “we need to get engaged; if not married as soon as possible.” His eyes were dead serious. “W-what i-is this all of a sudden?” her cheeks flushed; it came suddenly. “I want us to be united,” he sincerely wanted this. “Isn’t it a bit too soon?” she asked, her voice turned feeble. “This is the opportune moment,” he took a pause, “marrying right after a disaster may seem inconsiderate. Treating them as lost lambs isn’t going to make anyone happy. Stop with the self-pity, we need them to cheer up and get excited about something. This would most definitely help towards that. Not to mention,” he winked and coughed. “-never mind, forget that.” He chuckled.

“What do you mean by a wink, huh?” she squinted her eyes. “Nothing,” he tried looking away. “-joking aside, I really want to be with you, Xula.” He held her hands and knelt, “will you become the ruler of mine own heart as well?” her face flushed even more, she didn’t expect this change of events. “I-I w-will,” first she proposed by throwing her glove, and now he proposed without a ring. Staxius and Xula, the most unorthodox couple to ever walk on Hidros.

“Congratulations,” cheers and applause reverberated throughout the hall. “What...” both glanced up to see the first floor filled with nobles and people smiling. “You didn’t think we were here now, did you?” one of the nobles yelled jokingly. “Thanks to old sage, he hid our presence.” A quick glance to the old man revealed a joyous boy, the heart of a child. “...” Shanna was deeply embarrassed, Staxius stood, she hid behind. “Thank you all,” he smiled and bowed. He didn’t care in the least; his face held a smile. “You’ve got our support and blessings, our queen has found her king, let’s hold a banquet in their honor.” One of the vampiric nobles held his glass of wine. “Say no more, we shall celebrate tonight,” the representative from the dwarves slammed a giant barrel onto the table.

"Fenrir," Millicent called, she had passed out before the entrance. "F-five more minutes," she mumbled. "Wake up," Millicent splashed water on her pale white face. "What is it?" Fenrir looked tired. "Where have you been?" Millicent asked. They both walked towards the resting room, the tavern remained as loud as ever. "Nothing much," Julius walked by, the duo caught his attention. "Staxius summoned me to fight by his side." She smiled, "we had fun," sleep caught up to her. "Did she really say Staxius summoned her?" he smiled. "I think so," she replied, the voices grew louder. "Excuse me," without any notice, she ran out and headed for the tavern. 'She never changes, does she?' he continued his walk. *Click,* the door to the throne room opened, "Julius," Adelana called out, she hung up the phone. "Eira has been making strides in the qualification tournament. Her spot in the main tournament is assured." She smiled, Eira was well on her way to becoming someone strong. "I just wish Staxius could at least attend one of her fights. She's his daughter after all," her voice faded. "-no matter, we've got bigger fish to fry," they got back to work.

"Another fight, another win," the thunderous voice of an old man overpowered the crowd. "-you were sloppy, that fight should have ended in the first five minutes." He patted her back, "no matter, it was a fine fight." Eira panted, sweat dripped. "Thank you, teacher, I shall work twice as hard." Her gaze turned upwards. 'How different would it have been if you trained me, father.' Amidst the sweat, a tear rolled down her cheeks.

Chapter 97: First in line

Sat in a disorderly manner, a council had been called. In the middle, facing everyone else, Shanna seated herself. The table had a peculiar feel for its shape was circular. On her right-hand side, the representative of various races. Starting with the vampires and ending with the beastmen. On her left side, her counselors, advisors, general and people related directly to how the kingdom ruled. Closest to her, on her left side, a seat had been always left open. A seat reserved for the king, or the next in line to rule. That chair had always been vacant, none ever dared to approach it.

All who seated heard the news about her majesty deciding to get married. Their faces held smiles, she quickly read their minds to check but all their thoughts were filled with confusion yet a glimpse of happiness cleared out the distorted state of mind. The hint of blissfulness was brought by the unexpected news about her. Murmurs and chatter filled the room, some seats were left empty. Many were away due to various complaints voiced by the general populous. However, this meeting had been of utter urgency, one after the other; portals materialized and the seats filled.

"Thank you all for hastily attending this council," the old sage, the one who controlled said discussion spoke loudly and stepped forward – silence befell the room. With a big inhale, "as you all know, Arda was recently attacked. Nonetheless, we managed to end said attempt of an invasion." He took a quick pause, the room felt tense, the expression people held were gloomy. "-though it was made at the peril of our citizens; we cannot afford for this to happen ever again. Thus, this meeting is for all to come and voice their arguments and frustrations." He stepped back, it allowed the representatives to breathe and gather their thoughts.

"Pardon me," the representative of commoners, an old lady bearing whiteish hair and a golden collar spoke. She went by the nickname of Great Mother, otherwise known by her real name as Ayluin Orilana, a dark elf just like the old sage. "-we all know that her majesty isn't responsible for said invasion." She stopped to gather her breath, everyone around her crossed their arms and nodded in agreement.

“however, failing to oversee the possibilities of an attack is foolish and inconsiderate. A lack of responsibility that does not lie on her majesty’s shoulder but the general Niroz Knakthix.” She stared right at him.

“Great Mother,” his loud voice made the table tremble, “I do take part of the responsibility. Sadly, sending royal troops without my consent or asking me my thoughts on the matter lays on her majesty’s shoulder. Sadly, even if she had asked me – I’d have given permission, therefore, I’m one to blame.”

Never make excuses and always admit when you’re wrong, A true warrior accepts their weakness and endeavors to never repeat said errors. The council saw the sincerity in his eyes and voice.

“I’d like to apologize for my shortcomings,” Shanna spoke, everyone’s faces turned pale. “Your majesty, you should not be saying sorry,” Ruslan, one of her counselors added. Everyone followed with, “yes, you should not be apologizing,” none wanted to see their ruler lower her head in shame and guilt. “Enough is enough,” an enigmatic voice stopped the pointless blabber, “I haven’t come to watch a drama play out.” The man responsible, the richest noble in Arda as well as the oldest and most powerful vampire – Zachaeus Balthazar. Long black hair, red eyes, skin white as snow with an attire truly worth a vampiric lord, a top hat that rested on the table and a heavy, dark coat.

“Greetings lord Zachaeus Balthazar of the Nox clan,” Shanna smiled courteously. “Greetings your majesty, I hope my arrival didn’t come as a surprise.” Lord Zachaeus wasn’t really known for attending these meetings. However, he did come, on special occasions to help quell a problem. “May we have your opinion on this matter,” Great mother asked in a feeble tone.

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“Surely,” he leaned towards the table. “This quandary isn’t much to talk about. The kingdom failed to protect their citizens; mostly because the guards were away. However, confusion was also brought about by the lack of order. Most people were killed by the hands of others. Nevertheless, the action taken to save the remaining lives by utilizing rare scrolls did leave an impact. People were shocked to see such precious items being used to save their lives. Rich or poor, the nondiscriminatory usage proved to have already set their minds at peace. All they need now is a small push to help them celebrate and get out of their state of woeness. We’re a nation without humans, our emotions aren’t the same. We can grieve someone without lashing out – our understanding that all things must die one day is best for when tragedy inevitably strikes.” He stopped, everyone felt mesmerized by how he spoke. He relaxed into a more comfortable posture, “on that note, why don’t we all celebrate her majesty’s wedding. Isn’t a banquet being called forth later tonight.” He lifted his wine glass. “I agree with Lord Balthazar,” one by one, everyone lifted their cups; the problem had been fixed yet again.

They all took a sip, “but then again, I do wonder where the kingdom had the coins to purchase so many scrolls at once.” Zachaeus raised another important question. “There’s nothing to hide,” the old sage stepped forward, he stopped Shanna from saying anything. “-those scrolls were crafted from blank ones by the man our queen has fallen for-”

Cough, “Avon, please get the weapons ready, we don’t have all day,” Staxius shouted. “Fine, fine, no need to shout master,” he winked.

“-now I see that many of you are confused, therefore I’ll say it again. Staxius Haggard, the only human in Arda was the one responsible for writing the scrolls.” Chairs screeched aside, part of the council stood

abruptly, “excellent, with someone that knowledgeable by our side, Arda is sure to prosper.” They praised him and her majesty. It had been a long quest for Arda, the universities fully invested in researching how to make scrolls – with Staxius by their side, that would prove to be no longer a dream.

“Everyone, settle down,” the sage got all to regain their composure. Xula did but watch. “On that note, we also have something else to propose.” He signaled Shanna to speak. She nodded, “Staxius, I as well as the sage, have been mauling over the possible idea of opening an adventuring guild. The prior incident proved to us the importance of having adventurers. Hypothetically speaking, if we already did have said system in place, royal guards would not be ordered to leave the capital. This, in turn, would limit the risk of an invasion, the adventurers would fight on our behalf – monsters killed, tis a win for all.”

“Wouldn’t that mean opening our borders to humans?” Lord Balthazar asked. “Most definitely not.” She fired back with full confidence. “-since our independence, the order views us as a separate entity. Our guilds would be for Arda’s use only.” Balthazar looked skeptical but agreed. “Seems logical, why open a guild to another foreign country.” His mind felt at ease.

“We’ll have to make a trip to the capital, but as you know...” discrimination against them proved a problem, “-don’t tell me,” great mother figured it out. “Is Staxius going to be negotiating on our behalf?” she asked confidently about her guess. “Yes, he volunteered for the deed himself,” Xula replied. Balthazar’s stance faltered, ‘that’s why he wants to marry her majesty this quickly. We all know they were sweethearts, however, if he wanted to get any leverage while negotiating on our behalf – he will need to be someone powerful in our kingdom.’ He chuckled. ‘I like you, Staxius Haggard, I like how you think.’

“May I propose something?” he spoke out loud, “go ahead,” she replied. “If Staxius is going to be negotiating on our behalf – his title as baron of Dorchester isn’t going to have much weight. However, if he were to marry her majesty, this would put him first in line to the throne as well as making him a consort prince. Normally that is, but for him and for the sake of Arda, her majesty will have to bestow upon him the title and rank of King. Normally, that would be unacceptable, a foreigner to hold the title of King after marrying, it mostly depends on the council.” He smiled and faced everyone, “the council is us, and we fully acknowledge Staxius as a man of courage and bravery. He cares for Arda as much as her majesty, his actions have proved that time and time again.” He stood, “therefore, I plead for all of you to accept him as king,” and bowed. ‘Staxius Haggard, I’ve paid my debt; saving Aurora and changing how she thought has only brought about happiness in her life. My great-great-granddaughter is someone who has a smile on her face ever since she left the royal guards. Thank you for defeating and sparing her life.’

Applause filled the room, “well said, lord Balthazar, well said.” Ruslan smiled, “tonight’s banquet will not only be a celebration of their marriage but also – it will be the night where the seat of King is finally filled.”

“With this, the council is over, you may all return to your activities.” They all left with smiles on their faces. None expected this development – from consort prince to first in line to the throne and king, Staxius remained in the dark about said news. Shanna Islegust is the first and only queen as well as the only one in the royal family. If she were to ever die, the throne would have to be taken by the next highest ranking noble as opposed to a member of her family. Since Staxius is to be wedded with her, this

will automatically make him next in line. Succession in Arda has never really crossed anyone's mind. The kingdom isn't bothered with the prospect of blood and all those preconceptions. No family with only one sole ruler means the start of said process. All knew that queen Shanna will never die for she's a fairy.

"Your majesty, are you alright?" the sage asked since all were gone. "I know not myself," she sat sloppily on her chair, her gaze faced upwards. "Aren't you happy that Staxius will be wedded to you later this night?" He approached her. "I can't put in words how much this means to me. However, making him king as opposed to a consort prince will put so much pressure on his shoulder. I don't want him to be restricted by Arda, that job is mine and mine alone." Her tone felt sad. "I dare say you have a massive misunderstanding – this is for the greater good of Arda. No matter what you think, Staxius knew from the start that entering a courtship with a queen will put enormous pressure on him. You are wrong to underestimate that man, he's far more powerful than any of us. The resolve and will to accomplish something when he sets his mind onto something. Blood, death, he will go to any length; I've seen it first-hand. There's a strange fire burning inside him; I sensed it when he furiously wrote scroll after scroll – he is no human."

"Your majesty," he walked away, "you better get ready for tonight. It will be a night that changes our kingdom – I'm going to inform Staxius about the developments." The sage left, Xula remained seated; the footsteps faded. 'King Staxius doesn't have that bad a ring to it. No matter, it's a matter of him accepting. I've made my peace with it, King of Arda – I await you.' Her face changed from gloomy to blissful. The realization that they were to be wedded later that night made her cheeks flush. Everything sunk in slowly and just like a little girl, she grew ecstatic. The wind blew cold across the continent, the sun faded and gave way for dusk. Time had come, Staxius's venture into a new world began with that first step. The venture onto a new battlefield; the world of politics – a battlefield that tests and tears one's mind apart.

Chapter 98: The Wedding

"These are the last adjustments, right?" The room mildly dark, a torch kept the darkness away. "Yes, master," another voice replied. The clanging of metal hitting one another, the sound of a blade being sharpened – the monotonous conversation between both who stood in said room, it all lasted minutes on end. 'I've got all I need for the journey to Rosepire. First, a visit to Dorchester; haven't seen the castle in months.' the trunk slammed shut, "master, do be careful, tis my posterior you're being rough too." Avon jokingly moaned, "stop it," Staxius chuckled. The Emerald necklace came as a shock; Fenrir was highly ranked. Tier-6, she was close to Silver.

Left, right, up, and down, Staxius washed and wiped Void. The car had been gathering dust; tis was an insult to such a beast. Bit by bit, he cleaned and returned it to its former glory; Avon was happy and so was he. All that he needed now was for Xula to give him the word. "Master," Avon interrupted his final touches, "yes?" he stopped, "may I ask how you manage to obtain this room for I to rest in?" the tone filled with curiosity, the chamber in which they stood was perfect. A small makeshift garage with supplies and whatever parts he needed. Said garage was located at the foot of the castle; the room had no exit whatsoever – just a portal. A gateway he could not control for he had to contact the portal-room. *Ouff,* he stretched his back, "Shanna gave me it, she thought it best for you to stay indoors as opposed to being exposed to the elements."

Knock, knock, the conversation stopped. "Enter, the door is opened," Avon vanished into his master's shadow. "Good evening, Staxius," a muffled voice spoke, the footsteps came closer. "Good evening, teacher," he replied courteously. "Nicely maintained," the sage complimented the room. "Thanks," he finished the final touches and walked to greet the sage. "What brings you here?" Staxius asked while they shook hands. "I've got big news," a smile as big as the sun was portrayed on his face. "Did something happen, why do you seem so blissful?" The torch's flame gently shook, the face; masked by darkness, lit at regular intervals. "The joy I feel cannot be contained, dearest Staxius," he placed his feeble hands onto Staxius's shoulders. A gentle breeze entered the room shyly, it felt like a child trying to steal a piece of candy; innocently mischievous.

"What's this joy all about?" Staxius squinted his eyes gently for he could not see the sage's face. "I dare not raise any more suspense." He breathed out loudly, "you're getting wedded to her majesty later tonight and bestowed the title of King as well as becoming second in line to the throne." The excitement in his tone could not be contained. *Cough,* "Excuse you?" the news seemed too unreal to be true. "Am I, a foreigner being named King – wasn't my title supposed to be consort prince." The eyebrows rose, they questioned the credibility of the old man. "This is why this news puts I in such a great mood. Dear disciple, you're to become the King of a rather new kingdom; doesn't that excite you?" Staxius, in turn, placed his hands onto the man's shoulder. "Of course, that brings me joy," he smiled, "-I've gotten more than I could ask for." He walked out the door, "however, won't that anger the council?" he turned and stared at the one who brought him the news. "I see you're the same as Shanna," he smiled, "-worry not," he patted his back, "the council, the queen, everyone has acknowledged you and your marriage to her majesty." They both walked to the throne room. "Preparations are in order," the sage replied, a portal opened.

"Come on, that isn't supposed to go there," a frustrated voice echoed round, "what is all this?" they arrived, the throne room was getting decorated and readied for tonight's banquet. "You should go meet with her majesty; I'll stay to overlook the preparations." He snapped, another portal opened, it was of a blueish color. "Thanks, teacher," he stepped through.

The breeze took him by surprise, the sun warm and gentle, the air clean and fresh. Before him, a few meters away, sat under a magnificent tree, Xula held her cup and sipped gracefully. The garden, the place where the courtship began. 'How beautiful can one be,' he walked.

"Greetings, your majesty," his voice startled her, the cup nearly spilled. "D-damn it," her gaze turned to the floor immediately. "Someone is a little bashful, aren't they?" he knelt and looked at her with a smile. "S-stop it," her gaze turned upwards, "stop being so adorable," he stood and leaned. "Thanks for agreeing to marry me," *mwah,* a quick peck on her forehead sent her heart into a race. He took a seat right next to her. "I can't believe it," he reached for his pocket, Xula was flushed. "Y-yes, i-its has been a journey," she turned to face him; her composure slowly returned. "This glove," he held up the piece of attire, "-thanks to you, everything began," it sparkled. "You still have that?" she asked. "Of course, I do. I always carry it with me. Tis a memento of our commitment to one another." He winked.

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Their conversation continued; the hall got ready. Minutes turned into hours; the guests arrived. The couple still spoke, marriage here in Arda didn't have such a big ceremony. No vows, nothing; for non-humans, another kind of commitment was required. A blood contract binding one to another, no ring

nor jewelry. Naught but a blood contract that is made with a kiss. A rather messy tradition but even royalty and high-ranking nobles had to go through with it.

"I wish Eira and my companions from Dorchester were here," he mumbled, Xula caught it. This was a big occasion and it was normal for him to want people closest to him to be present. However, Eira was busy training for the inter-magical tournament, Dorchester was still a growing town which needed all the attention it could get. "I wish I had someone I could call family," she replied in turn, "-the only one I can deem as that is the sage. He has been my guardian since the start, I've never felt at home here." Her ascension to Queen wasn't that easy, blood and death were the paving stone for said undertaking. "Worry not," he placed his hands on hers, "-you're not alone anymore. You've got the sage, me, and everyone in Dorchester as well as Arda. We're a big family, however, I'm the kind of person who once grabs onto something, never let's go even if death comes." He smiled, it set her mind at ease. "Staxius Haggard, you're my family." She whispered. "You're my family too," he caught it, her face turned red once more due to embarrassment.

"Your majesty, your majesty, your majesty," maids invaded the garden. They seemed like soldiers, though they were not. "Your majesty, your majesty," they had looked everywhere. Time had been a lost concept to both her and Staxius. In their mind, only a few minutes went by. In reality, a few hours had passed. "Over here," she waved back, they all ran as if animal charging after their prey. "What's the matter?" she gracefully asked. "Your majesty, time is of the essence. We need you to get ready for your big day." Forcefully, two maids, people who were close to her, grabbed her arms. "Open the portal," their eyes felt like possessed individuals. "Master Staxius, you should head to your bedchambers as well. A butler awaits to get you ready, please make it quick, the guests are already arriving." Another portal opened before him. "I'll see you later, my queen," Xula pouted, she looked adorable; they took her away. 'I'm glad I met you,' he stepped through.

Meanwhile, the throne room had changed slightly. The pillars were now of a golden color, the background behind the throne changed from leaves and trees to a knight kneeling and kissing a princess's hand. "How romantic," the nobles praised the artwork; it was made masterfully. People from all overcame, all the representatives: werewolves, elves, vampires, demi-humans which included everyone from fox-eared to cat-eared. Witches, dark-elves, spirits, and many more were present but hidden from the eyes of many. Ethereal beings were also among the many guests. All stood in said hall, maids and butlers ran rounds distributing drinks.

The first floor was reserved for council members and higher-ranking nobles, from viscount and up. Though that restriction got put aside quickly for her majesty didn't like discrimination. People were free to roam around, and thus the banquet began.

"How do I look? Staxius asked jokingly, "-you look stunning, sir," the butler bowed and left. Staxius wore another suit, but this time it looked more like a uniform. On the left side of his vest, badges, and crests – among which his own shone brightly. The sleeves held golden buttons and the uniform itself was of a black with golden color on the extremities. 'Looks like I'm going to war,' he tied his hair and walked out.

"Staxius," a female voice whispered, "Aurora?" he turned. "Yes, it's me," she wore a glamorous black Victorian-styled dress. "what brings you here?" he asked confused as to why someone would come in the secluded part of the castle. "I've come as the one who is going to guide you to her majesty's room."

Snap, a gateway opened, “this way,” she went first. ‘So many portals, I’m about to lose my mind,’ he held his forehead and followed.

“Your majesty,” Aurora bowed. “Thanks for bringing him,” Xula replied, the maids finished their task at last. “Where are we,” Staxius came out, the light blinded him, “...” he laid eyes on Xula, everything stopped. Her beauty captivated him, it was almost like a trance, a spell that could ruin the strongest of men. “We’re done, your majesty,” the maids left, the room felt empty. She wore a white dress, her hair was tied perfectly, her face felt as if it lit. Nothing else could describe how she looked; it was as if an angel had stepped onto the mortal plane. If she were to sprout wings and fly away; that would not surprise him in the least. “Xula, my queen,” he gulped, “you look absolutely stunning.” He could not take his eyes off her. It was the second time this had happened. The first time being the banquet for the king’s day of birth. “Stop with the flattery,” she stepped down from the small podium onto where she got dressed. “tis not flattery when I’m saying the truth,” he continued praising her. “You look handsome as well,” she held out her hand, “not as beautiful as you,” he took her hand and walked. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked, a massive door came into view. “Nothing much, just walk out and be yourself – there’s nothing peculiar to an Ardanian wedding.” The door opened, “if you say so,” they stepped out.

One by one, pillars in an empty hallway gave way to light and chatter. The throne room came in sight, they were in the top-right vicinity. Her Majesty came into view, the room went silent, her beauty transcended everything they had seen before. She had the same effect on everyone, Staxius knew first hand how much that could affect one’s mind. Though she was the star of that show, Staxius didn’t look that bad himself. His build, good body posture, confidence and the determination that burnt in his eyes made him a worthy broom. Near the throne, the old sage dressed in grey awaited them. Time had come, silence remained, none wanted to break the state they were imprisoned in.

“Your majesty, please this way,” the sage signaled. “Keep smiling Staxius, don’t you dare look strict and scary,” she quietly mumbled. “Not my fault if that’s how my face usually looks,” he replied. “Just don’t look as if you’re going to kill someone,” she fired back. His face looked friendly and approachable, not with a smile but with the eyes. It looked peaceful and harmless; a person’s mood could be read not by the facial expression but with how one’s eyes looked.

They both faced each other, the background matched them exactly. Staxius stood on the left side, while Xula on the right. Their faces changed subconsciously, the smiles were genuine and innocent.

Chapter 99: Commitment

Their gaze, their eyes, the aura around them – it felt peaceful. Staxius, the would-be-king, lovingly admired Shanna in her full glory. Only a few minutes had gone by, though it felt like hours in Staxius’s mind. The thought process went from fully active to numb; her beauty mesmerized him, he could naught but hide his shyness. He wasn’t the only one feeling that way, Xula was deeply affected too. This moment was what she waited for so long. To be someone’s friend, someone’s family, someone’s lover, all she had wanted was to be accepted. Lucky was that day when they met, her heart raced ever since. The stares after wandering everywhere except each other’s face finally met.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” the sage spoke, it broke their dazed state. “-as you all know, we’ve gathered here today to celebrate a wedding. The unity of two souls, the bond of our queen

and her king – to that I say, let’s all wish them fortune in their endeavors.” He patted both their backs; almost pushing them closer. “Staxius,” he whispered, the crowd remained silent. “-since you’re new to our customs and tradition, I shall tell you what to do. Worry not, it’s a simple process,” he smiled. “As you wish, teacher,” he whispered back.

Time had come, “first, hold her hands,” the sage ordered, he obeyed. “Second, pull her closer to you,” he continued, “third, bite your inner lips so that you bleed.” He took a quick pause, Staxius had followed the orders perfectly. He held Eira’s hand and had pulled her closer, their faces were inches away from one another. Blood came out of both their mouths. “Now kiss her and I shall finalize the contract.” His heart raced, Xula closed her eyes.

Ingyn, Goddess of Marriage; we asked thee to bestow thy blessing upon the ones who are to be bound to thy name. May they always be together and never fall apart,

The sage nodded, the spell wasn’t that long nor was it complicated. Rather, it felt like a prayer more than anything, however one put it – speaking the goddess’s name acted like a trigger.

Their faces came together, the lips touched, the blood with the iron taste changed. The moment both came into contact, it felt sweet, a warmth surged from within. The blood’s taste changed; the pact was finalized. A faint line appeared on both their chests. Barely visible, it burnt – and marked them. Tis was the blessing of Ingyn, she had blessed this marriage. “Congratulations,” the sage muttered.

Clap, clap, clap, from monotonous to a full-on assault, the silent throne room rattled. People cheered, the applause felt genuine, the smiles shone like diamonds. Some shed tears, some cried for joy, nobles or not – people were happy. The couple faced the crowd, the smile on Xula’s face reached even the general – one who was supposed to be merciless. “Congratulations, your majesty,” some screamed; none cared about ethics, this occasion was too auspicious to be bound by good manners.

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Amidst the laughter and joy, the sage waved; it signaled all to lower their voices. From the right-hand, a maid dressed in white walked. She held a small pillow atop which rested a crown. Made of gold and embedded with countless precious stones, the girl looked as if there were an immense pressure on her shoulder. The round structure had small peaks that went around. The design, immaculate and dazzling, the light made it shine as bright as possible. Slowly, she walked, the pillow came into view. Besides the crown, a necklace with a crest, the Ardanian crest. The shape was peculiar, it was a tree with a halo atop. The tree, unknown to many but referred to as the Elmfang; the tree of creation. Xula’s eyes changed from happy to serious.

“Staxius,” the sage whispered, the girl walked up the stairs, “Kneel and don’t raise your head until she asks you too,” obediently, he immediately knelt. “Staxius Haggard,” she spoke, “I, Shanna Islegust, queen of Arda as well as your betrothed,” a cold and heavy presence laid to rest on his head, “- deem you worthy to become the King of Arda as well as first in line to rule.” She smiled, “now raise your head,” the crown fit his head perfectly. He gazed upwards; her face seemed blissful. Nevertheless, she wasn’t done just yet. Her hand immediately reached for the crest the girl had brought in. “This is the royal Ardanian crest, it symbolizes my rule as well as my title as queen.” She held the ornament gently in one hand and held out the other. “Give her your crest,” the sage whispered, however, Staxius had already figured that part out.

The two-crest touched; she mumbled a spell; they lit. Both merged, then separated – the dragon with lightning now had a halo over its head. “With this, you officially hold the title of King,” the crest returned to its master. Applause once again echoed around the hall; the wind blew cold. The night continued, everyone celebrated. The new king personally thanked all who came, from nobles to invisible ethereal beings, he thanked all.

A few hours later, the banquet ended. It had been a success, the night felt like day, the warmth from all the smiles had him at peace. “The sky, though fake does look beautiful, doesn’t it?” Stood out on a balcony, Staxius leaned on the balustrade, his back slightly arched, footstep approached from behind. Two light and feeble arms locked around him, her head rested on his back. Gently, he straightened his posture, “the night sure is pretty.” Xula quietly mumbled. “Yes, it is,” he held her hands, “-I’m glad I met you, Xula,” he smiled, her head still rested on his back. “I’m glad I met you too,” she smiled as well – with that, the night ended – Staxius and Xula became one at last.

“Wake up,” a soft voice whispered, “come on, wake up,” it urged. “Five more minutes, please,” he whispered, turned, and opened his eyes. “Xula?” her face flushed yet again, “-what’s the matter,” he fully awoke, his hand felt warm and had grabbed onto something that felt like jelly. “S-Staxius, I-I think you know w-what I-I mean,” she smiled and closed her eyes in embarrassment. “Sorry about that,” he quickly turned around and stood. The curtain lifted the darkness in the room, the sun awoke with them. Xula remained on the bed, Staxius walked towards the door. “Today’s the first day of our marriage isn’t it?” he still sought confirmation, it felt like a dream. “Y-yes,” she shyly replied.

The door opened, “w-what?” before him stood a number of maids and butlers all with their head bowed. “Good morning, master,” they all spoke simultaneously. Hastily, he turned and stared at Xula with confusion on his face. “Sorry,” is what she said for he lip-read her words. He shook his head and returned the good morning. The day went on, but many interruptions happened. Seeing that he was now king, people bowed and greeted him at every corner. Some were scared, some wanted to speak with him, it all grew tiresome. Sadly, that came with the territory, the clothes he wore were still the grey-suit from long ago. The new crest hung around his neck, though the crown was his, Staxius chose to put it next to where Shanna kept hers.

Slowly, greeting after greeting he made his way to the training room. The one reserved to the guardian of Arda. Thus, he got back in the old habit of working on his stance, magic and learned from the sage. A week went by, nothing happened – he wasn’t allowed to leave just yet. Parades were organized daily, he and Xula went out to the public for they were now the royal couple. After said week, everyone acknowledged who Staxius was.

“Being king is hard now, isn’t it? Though I shudder to think about the responsibilities and decision you must make daily,” sat under the same tree, both conversed. “It’s my duty and job, therefore I must honor those responsibilities.” She smiled. “If you ever need me, I’ll be here faster than you know it.” He reassured her. “Master,” a familiar voice whispered, “master,” a ball of light shot out of him. “Yes, Avon?” he materialized. “I’ve got news from the hospital; Ayleth has regained conscience.” The eyes sparkled, he smiled and gazed at Xula. “PROPHECY, COME OUT,” he yelled, another ball of light shot out and dashed straight for him. “Don’t order me around,” the girl replied monotonously. “Come on, our masters are now married which means that we’re also bound together,” he pulled out his tongue. “I’d rather die,” she returned to Shanna’s side. “Master Staxius, how can you deal with such an unworthy

and stupid spirit.” She asked. “Nothing much really,” he stood and patted Avon’s head, “he’s like my little son, a big bundle of joy.” He smiled in turn.

“Xula,” the tone changed from friendly to serious, “I think it’s time for me to leave.” The gaze changed from her to the scenery. “I knew this time would come,” she stood. “Ancret has awakened from her slumber. You should leave for the capital this instant; a familiar face is what she needs at this moment.” He turned around and embraced her, “I’ll also visit the central guild and see what is needed for an adventuring guild to be opened here.” *Snap,* “there,” she spoke, “a portal to the garage. I’ve added another gateway, it leads directly to the armory – take anything you want, King Staxius,” he stepped and vanished.

“Annet, Annet,” the halls echoed, Millicent ran. “What’s the matter,” a voice replied. “AYLETH HAS AWAKEN,” she yelled, “for real?” one after the other, the Geua sister came out. “Yes, Julius just got the news from Claireville academy.” Stood in order from oldest to youngest, the silver guardians stared Millicent; tears ran down each one’s cheek. “I’m glad,” Adelana spoke, “finally,” Ancret added, “...” Alyson smiled, “It’s about time,” Annet added in turn. “We should make way to the capital.”

“Don’t rush, Adelana. We still have things to take care of in Dorchester,” Ancret broke her enthusiasm. “I agree,” Annet vouched for Ancret’s decision. “I’m afraid only one of us can go see her,” Alyson spoke. “Who’s going to go then?” The little group turned silent; none knew who was to go on their behalf. “Why not let me go,” Alyson spoke out, she voiced her opinion though her personality was one who never sought anything. “Are you sure?” Adelana asked. “Yes, considering you all have more pressing matters to attend to, why not let me undertake this voyage in your stead.” She ended; her eyes felt watery. “Agreed,” everyone nodded, “you shall go in our stead. Tell Ayleth we said hi.” Without wasting time, she got ready to leave.

Huff, Puff, panting, sweating, and blood dripping from her forehead, “Here’s your winner, Eira Haggard from class 1-B.” Cheers crashed like waves, sword in hand, she stumbled out of the arena – the medics rushed in; her opponent was badly injured.

“Another week, another fight, good job,” Josiah smiled and handed her a towel. “I’m proud of your progress, defeating a third-year isn’t that easy but you did it, congratulations.” He walked away. “Don’t forget that you have to choose a partner for the next battle, it can be anyone – though their age must be below twenty-five. That bonus fight is essential if you want to represent us in the inter-magical tournament,” he left. She sat and stared up. ‘Fight, fight, fight, that’s all we’re good for.’ Her head ached. ‘A partner,’ she took a sip of water, ‘how I wish that was a simple task. No one wants to be my teammate here in this academy, honestly, no one can keep up. I can’t ask people in my class; they might get hurt. I can’t ask the upperclassmen, their pride won’t allow it. Despite being able to bring in anyone, I don’t know that many people under twenty-five.’ Her eyes looked emotionless, she felt nothing – her personality slowly changed; she walked the same path as he, the one she called father.

Chapter 100: Visit

Clomp, clomp, the wall white, the floor clean, the smell sterile and clean. Nurses went back and forth, the atmosphere felt suffocating. People were taken in on stretchers, bodies covered with clothes from top to bottom, blood. The look of shock on some family’s faces, the always smiling receptionist. “Good morning, sir, how may I help you?” she spoke, her voice joyful, her tone regular – the eyes filled with

pity. "I'm here to visit a friend... never mind, a family member." He spoke, the tone was monotonous and eyes emotionless. "Name please?" the necklace shone, a quick glimpse. "Staxius Haggard," he replied and wrote down. "I've noticed the crest around your neck, sir." She interrupted him, "may I ask you to write down your title if you are noble?" her eyes filled with doubt, the pity subsided underneath her black eyes. "Is it mandatory?" he asked, tone still serious and soothing. "Not really, I apologize for asking," she took and did the necessary paperwork. "Ayleth Geua is on the first floor, take the stair further inside."

"Thank you very much," he walked away, 'Strange man,' she thought and resumed her work. 'This place sure does bring back memories,' footsteps echoed down the hall. It felt emptier than usual. Step after step, the climb to the first floor ended. Before he stood a wide but lonely corridor. 'Room 12,' he stopped, the door closed, the aura tense. *Knock, knock,* he walked in. Contrary to the dim hall, the room was well lit. The window faced the rising sun. The sunlight which came into said room cast a shadow on the white curtain that separated the door and the patient down the middle. A figure appeared, she sat upright, her head faced the outside. "Ayleth?" he whispered, "Yes?" the face slowly turned.

"Good morning," he spoke with a smile, the curtain opened. "S-Staxius?" her tone confused, "yes, good to see you," he walked closer and sat. "How have you been?" she asked, "forget about me," he insisted, the voice felt feeble as opposed to earlier. "I'm s-sorry," he apologized. "Sorry for what?" her gaze lowered onto him. He held her hands and stared at the floor, "I'm sorry I sent you on a suicidal mission." Her heart sank, "raise your head, master," he reluctantly obeyed. "This is nothing, really, I did it for I wanted you to have a use for me." She smiled. "You..." he saw her face at last; it left him shocked. "Is there something wrong?" she asked, she knew why he felt so lost. "Y-your face..." he spoke gently, "i-it's..." he could not finish it, rather, he held her hand. "I'm very sorry," he continued to apologize. "It's fine, Staxius," she patted his head.

Half of her face was burnt, it looked as if a demon had eaten her from within. Nothing could have been done – as said by the doctors. She recounted to him what the meds said, *we're sorry, your face could not be fixed by surgery. The intensity of the flame and the curse all made it impossible. If there were a way to fix it, I'd have personally helped, however, this is beyond my comprehension.* "That's basically the story in a nutshell." The right side was burnt. Both her right eyes and ears worked. Sadly, the burnt mark left on her could not be expressed. Black in color, it looked somewhat alive, her eyes had changed into a red color.

With a big inhale, "it doesn't matter," he spoke loudly, "you're safe and sound, that's what matters." He smiled; her face changed from joyous to woeful. The toll that took on her body and mind could not be measured, the pressure was too much. Her eyes felt watery, Staxius spotted it and stood. "Everything is still a daze, isn't it?" he gently placed her head on his stomach. "It's fine, cry if you want, I'm here to support you, Ayleth." Her heart cracked, she had enough – the tears flow uncontrollably, she let out all her pain and suffering. Footsteps came from the hall, it sounded heavy, almost like someone ran.

Three days had passed by since Staxius left Arda. Nothing much happened, he drove most of the time. Once at the capital, he stayed at a place named the Pussy Palace – something felt off about that place. The price was ridiculously high but after conversing, the owner gave into his charm and allowed him a fifty percent discount. Some little girl served him; her head always covered by a hood; never did he ever see the face. Unknown and unpredictable, at night, he overheard various rumors and details about the

capital. He took it with a grain of salt, one of the tales was of a fox-eared girl who none could possess for she was reportedly cursed. On the fourth day, after waking; he headed straight for the hospital. Avon remained quiet but continued with the usual foolery along the way. Both smiled and laughed, Avon had become almost like another part of Staxius. The latter knew that to be true as well, a spirit he freed changed into someone valuable. Same as Staxius, Alyson made her trip to the capital in three days. Though instead of staying at the capital itself, she stayed at Julius's manor.

Knock, knock, the door rattled, the one responsible seemed desperate. "Ayleth's tears could not be stopped but the door kept on pounding harder and harder. He accidentally locked the door on the way in, he didn't want to be disturbed while meeting the one he practically sent off to die. "It's fine, there's nothing to worry about," he patted her head gently, the injuries she sustained were all healed. The face also, though it looked black and badly injured, was in fact healed. 'Whoever is near that door is annoying,' he closed his eyes and stared at the entrance. Vaguely, he saw the objects and obstacle in the way but most importantly – he saw a white light. The same one Ayleth possessed, 'it can't be one of the silver guardians can it?' he asked, 'no matter, I still can't leave her like this.' She subtly leaned away from him, 'now,' *click,* the door opened. "I'm sorry for crying so much," she hugged him tighter. "It's no worries, just let it all out," the door opened.

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"Ayleth," whoever that was, ran inside. "Morning Alyson," Staxius stood with Ayleth leaning onto him. "Morning master," she approached and grew closer to her sister's tear-filled face. "D-don't look at me," she tried facing away, "we've been worried," her hands subconsciously caressed the scarred face. "A-Alyson," Staxius backed away and let the sister's meet. They embraced and cried together – hearing all that pain and regret, he slowly walked out and remain in the hall.

"Master," a voice sharply took him by surprise, "-please come back," it felt better. "What is it?" he walked in; the room's aura changed greatly from gloomy to lighthearted. "Thanks for everything," Ayleth spoke, "thank you for all you've done." Alyson in turn added. "Where's this coming from?" he stood with arms crossed. "They've told me that you took care of all the medical expenses and such," she added, Alyson knew more than she let onto. "Tis no worries," he smiled, "-I'm responsible for making you in that state, therefore it was my duty. Also, I didn't want to lose anyone precious to me," he winked, "-get your stuff ready, I'm going to go complete whatever they want me to do for you to be let free. I'm sure this room is suffocating enough." He walked out.

As promised, after a few hours, Staxius got Ayleth the greenlight to leave. "Thanks for everything doctor Jona," he bowed gently. "Anything for you," she patted his head and went back to tending to her patients. "Alright girls," Ayleth used him and Alyson as support to walk. Her feet were numb but they gradually got better. Once outside, the breeze and warmth of the sun made her feel at peace. The fresh air, it was the same when Staxius first walked out of this compound the first time around. "It sure feels like nothing could ever go wrong, doesn't it?" he asked rhetorically. "It sure does," Ayleth's mood had grown better since one of her sisters came to meet her. "Over here," they walked, a large and comfortable black car came into view, "Julius lent me one of the luxurious cars we used for the king's day of birth." She justified how the car was here before Staxius asked. "Awesome, I'm assuming you're headed to Dorchester this instant?" the door closed, she sat inside. "Not really, we're going to stay at the manor before leaving, Ayleth has to regain her strength back," Alyson went around and opened the driver's door. "What about you?" she asked, "I'm headed to Claireville Academy – I've heard that Eira

has been making strides.” Though he didn’t act like it, Staxius knew what his daughter was up to. He made it an obligation to check up on her through Josiah.

All of that was possible thanks to Avon, he’s the one who called and checked up on everyone even out in Arda. The spirit acted like a medium that connected his master to the outside world for Arda was secluded by nature. “Tell her I said good luck,” the door closed, she drove off. “Now then, I better pay the rest of what I owe.” He walked back inside. The lady took out a paper that read, 80,000 gold pieces paid. Staxius sign and left. ‘How is it possible for someone to have so much money and spend it all on treatment,’ the receptionist looked dazzled, never had she seen someone pay that much money. A single gold piece could get you just about anything – except a luxurious night at a hotel that costs around ten. ‘Damn, when I said the money wasn’t an issue, I didn’t expect them to empty out my whole fortune.’ A door opened, ‘-80,000 gold pieces gone just like that,’ the door closed. “Avon,” he spoke, “yes master?” the car spoke. “I’m going to head further inside, take care,” he stepped out. “Call for me, I’ll come to pick you up later,” Avon added before he went out of sight.

‘I wonder how much Eira has progressed.’ A few minutes later, hands in pockets, the fountain came into view. The hospital itself was built near the edge of the property. However, the scale of how large the compound could put a castle to shame. ‘Nothing ever changes,’ the school stood before him once again. Strangely, the shouts and cheers caught his attention. It came from behind the building, some big event was taking place. Curious, he headed in said direction. Fondly enough, the front of the school looked silent and calm, however, once he took the path to the battle arena, everything changed. There were more people than he had ever seen, “Eira is definitely going to win,” he overheard an argument, “no, she’s going to lose. After the last fight, she’s exhausted which lowers her chances of winning.” The other fired back. ‘This is pretty lively,’ he continued further along the path.

The first gymnasium lit brightly; a massive screen had Eira versus Goliath displayed. ‘Now this is interesting,’ a smile surfaced. The time indicated 13:00, ‘awesome,’ he took out the golden pocket watch. ‘Just in time,’ it read 12:45, after he got closer, the line of people waiting to get it stretch onto what seemed forever. ‘At this rate, I’ll never make it for the actual fight,’ he stared around carefully and memorized the surroundings. ‘Who cares, if I can’t get in to watch my daughter fight, I’ll just make my own path,’ *Whoosh* he disappeared. Using magic without an incantation had become second nature. The spell to increase the speed and velocity almost engraved itself onto his soul. The focus on speed and precisions really did change how he approached a fight. ‘There, found a way in,’ he jumped, a few turns here and there, the arena came into view. People cheered and screamed; the whole place was jammed pack. No wonder none could get in, luckily, he found a seat, one with a good view over the would-be battlefield. ‘Show me what you got, Eira,’ he crossed his arms and waited.