

Evil 291

Chapter 291 - 291: Monster.

"Prepare the carriage!" Aurelia shouted as she looked at the paladins that stood on guard around her. "The people are in danger!" She added and looked at the small dots in the far sky.

Isador was standing at the far back, and then he heard the sounds of greaves coming from the temple. When he saw his father, Julius with Arandil behind him, he immediately ran toward them and stopped them from coming out.

"Don't go outside..." Isador stopped his father and Arandil from leaving the temple. "If you go... You'll die..." he said with a serious expression.

Isador still took Rasmus's and Aris's words seriously when they both wanted Arandil dead. He still hadn't given them the answer, so he wanted to prevent Arandil or even his father to leave or to be near Aris.

Julius and Arandil furrowed their brows when they saw how panicked Isador was. They slowly moved their gaze toward a tall woman with short silver blue-ish hair, standing still and staring at the sky. They were shocked by how similar and look-alike Aris was to Rasmus's late mother.

"Please, father..." Isador said with fear in his eyes.

Julius had never seen his son have fear in his eyes, and he wondered what had happened to Isador during his short reunion with Rasmus. He then decided to agree with his son's plea and went back inside with Arandil by his side.

"What do you think, Lord Arandil?" Julius asked as he walked in the empty hallway.

"That woman, she seems to be a lot stronger than Count Blackheart's late mother. The way she stood, she wanted nothing but destruction, a walking disaster, Your Imperial Highness," Arandil answered, realizing his fate was no longer his.

"And somehow, the only person who can prevent her from rampaging is Count Blackheart. That man, did we make a mistake to keep him alive?" Julius asked as she rubbed his chin, his troubled expression was written all over his face.

"I believe we made a grave mistake, Your Imperial Highness. We didn't let a child live, we let a monster grow. Now, that same monster has no reason to fight for humanity, and he will use humanity until humanity loses its value..." Arandil answered as he closed his eyes, walking behind Julius.

"Not only did we let the monster grow, we might have killed the lives of those who wanted to eradicate evil. We... I have failed to keep what my ancestors fought for..." Julius sighed as he entered the prayer hall.

Aurelia, Serena, and Videl were in the same carriage, going out to the fifth layer of the Holy Nation. They saw the wyverns begin to rip the roofs of the buildings, toppling the walls and taking many lives.

The paladins tried their best to protect the people, guiding them to a safe place. However, they were no match against the wyverns, a beast that could swallow a whole bison like a pill. The razor-sharp teeth and strong jaw that could rip, tear, and crush thick walls. No steel could keep a human body safe in the face of a beast that was related to a dragon.

Paladins were trained differently than any knights, they were trained to fight demonic beasts where no normal knight could do. However, this time, it was different. They weren't not fighting, they were purely being hunted and massacred by a beast, and they could do nothing about it.

The citizen screamed as they ran for their lives while the Paladins raised their massive shields to block the fire breath and the wind breath of the wyverns. The shields were heated up, close to their melting point. However, the Paladins didn't even scream in pain, they held their shields up high and did their job, which was to protect the lives of the people.

They created a barrier made of shields, protecting the tunnel where the people gathered to hide. It was effective until the wyverns began to use their claws and jaws, ripping and chopping the top half of the Paladins' bodies.

The Sages from the Magic Tower who were stationed in the Holy Nation for safety purposes finally joined the battle. They immediately created layers of Mana barriers around the tunnel and in front of the Paladins. They began to invoke magic formations and started to release ice bolts, fire bolts, or wind cutters.

The Mana barriers acted as enhancement as well toward the spells the Sages released from within the barriers. They were both the fortress and the arsenals, however, they knew very well that Wyverns were nothing like any beast. Wyvern had the ability to manipulate Mana around them and if any magical attack reached them, they could mitigate the magic, but only to a certain level.

The Wyverns got bombarded by highly concentrated Mana spells that they could barely mitigate the magic. Unfortunately, the Sages knew that Wyverns were blessed with thick skin. Although the Wyverns couldn't mitigate the magic, their second defense mechanism stopped the magic from piercing through their skins.

Only a handful of people around Neva could defeat an airborne wyvern. Knowing that, they were powerless and unable to stop the wyverns from rampaging. They could only watch the walls and buildings crumble and collapse by the force of nature.

Aurelia's carriage arrived at the scene, and saw the wyverns destroy everything that stood tall. She looked at the dome of Mana barriers in the distance, protecting the citizens from the wyverns that tried to break through the barriers.

"No..." Aurelia looked at the dead bodies that had been buried under the rubble. "No..." she gritted her teeth, angry and feeling guilty for the deaths of her people as she walked toward the bodies.

"Lady Aurelia!" Serena shouted.

A deafening screech from the sky made Aurelia look up at the sky and saw a dark blue wyvern dive toward her with its claws ready to butcher her. She immediately created a divine barrier to protect herself as she closed her eyes. Suddenly, she heard a steel hit a tough surface in front of her.

When Aurelia opened her eyes she was baffled when Videl could stop a diving wyvern with its unbelievable weight and momentum with a mere sword. She watched Videl clash his sword against the mouth of the wyvern. She was about to help him but then Videl pushed the wyvern away from him and followed by a vertical slash.

The attack sliced the wyvern's head open before the massive body collapsed and shook the ground. The paladins were dumbfounded with their eyes wide open underneath their helmet. A single man could overpower a wyvern and not to mention the single attack that cut the wyvern's head open.

The other wyverns found Videl as a threat, and so they began to send a breath of fire and wind at him. However, Videl didn't try to dodge it, he was ready to embrace it. Suddenly, Serena stood in front of Videl and watched as the fierce flame approached her.

Serena kept staring at the flame, and when it was close to her, she flicked her left hand to the side. The wall of fire suddenly dissipated, leaving only a trail of smoke. She then looked up at the wyverns and saw the lingering demonic energy around them.

Aurelia saw the traces of divine energy when she witnessed the power of Saint Serena. She wondered if she could do the same, but then she realized it wasn't about whether she could do it or not, it was her that got to overwhelm by the scene and the bodies on the ground.

Aurelia knew she had just made a huge mistake by ignoring the threat out of grief and guilt. She realized it wasn't the time to see the dead bodies, it was time to look at the threat and how to protect those who were still alive and fighting.

"Lady Serena... Mister Paladin... I apologize that I endangered your lives for me..." Aurelia said as she looked at both of them, gripping the robe she wore tightly.

"It's fine, Lady Aurelia..." Serena shook her head as she kept staring at the wyverns. "You were right, those wyverns seemed to be corrupted by demonic energy," she pointed out.

"Yes, we are the only ones who can see them," Aurelia nodded as she looked up at the wyverns in the sky.

"Your order, Your Holiness?" A Paladin captain approached Aurelia as he went down to one knee and lowered his head.

"Protect the people, that's it. Please, don't let any more of innocent people die," Aurelia clenched her fists as she stared at the Mana barriers in the distance. "Try to lead the remaining survivors there," she continued.

"Yes, Your Holiness..." The Paladin captain nodded. "But, what about the wyverns, Your Holiness?" He asked nervously.

"That's not our problem, thankfully. We have Lady Aristoria..." Aurelia answered as she looked at Aris on a white horse, staring at the wyverns.

The Paladin captain understood his task and immediately ordered the paladins to find the remaining survivors.

Chapter 292 - 292: Related.

Aris rode her horse toward an open space, making herself an easy target for the wyverns. The paladin took that opportunity to move behind buildings where the wyverns couldn't see them. Aurelia, Serena, and Videl went toward the Mana barrier to assist the Sages and the injured Paladins.

The wyverns floated and flapped their massive wings above the city as they stared at Aris. There was nothing but resentment and anger in those eyes, and Aris could see them since she was an Orthias.

The biggest wyvern in the sky suddenly roared, attracting the other wyverns' attention. All the wyverns suddenly flew toward its leader and flocked like birds above the open space where Aris was below them.

All the wyverns began to roar and screech as if they were communicating with each other in their own language. Aurelia and Serena were busy healing the wounded, but that didn't stop them from observing what was going on in the sky.

"They're... acting strangely the moment Lady Aristoria showed herself..." Aurelia said as she stopped the bleeding of the paladin who lost his left hand due holding the melting shield, protecting the people from the fire breath.

"It's because Orthias said to be the origin and the descendant of True Dragon, Lady Aurelia. It's confusing, but that's how it is. So I'm assuming, the wyverns who shared the same blood as dragons, see Lady Aris as a threat. I think it's similar to conflicts between the human races?" Serena responded as she hugged a small child who was crying because he lost his parents, giving him comfort.

"Rivalry?" Aurelia looked at Serena with a curious look with her brows raised.

"Perhaps, or rebellion..." Serena answered as she caressed the boy's back and calmed him down. "We won't know... not until Lady Aris chooses to tell us," she smiled gently at Aurelia.

Aurelia nodded slowly, eyes drifting to the sky. Only then did the weight of it hit her, not just the destruction, not just the wyverns, but the quiet power behind every figure that stood beside Rasmus.

They weren't allies, they were forces. Then it struck her, when she looked at it from a different perspective. Serena wasn't left behind by accident. Rasmus purposefully left Serena in the Holy Nation to shield her, perhaps to watch every move she made.

Aurelia felt grateful nonetheless because it didn't change the fact she felt safe and she could focus on her growth as a Saint. But deeper than the gratitude there was a creeping fear, something that could keep her awake at night.

Aris stared at the wyvern that seemed to be the leader with a cold gaze, challenging it. However, the wyvern didn't show any fear and then it opened its mouth wide open, gathering Mana and turning it into a ball of fire that grew bigger and bigger. The other wyverns followed the leader, gathering Mana into their mouths and creating massive balls of fire.

The wyverns blasted the balls of fire, creating extremely hot flares and pointed at Aris. The moment the flares reached Aris, everything melted, the street, the building and even the glass melted in almost an instant. Aurelia and the others that were far away from the scene felt the heatwave, and if they were exposed to the heatwave for more than a minute, their insides would melt.

The sea of fire slowly devoured the fifth layer, and the paladins that were looking for survivors couldn't save everyone. They wanted to find more, but knowing it would be pointless since no humans could survive such heat if the wyverns didn't stop pouring fire into the city.

The Sages released a mist of ice to lower the temperature under Aurelia's request because she knew the paladins that were out there and the remaining survivors would die from the heatwave. They tried their best and poured cold mist from the sky, neutralizing the heat, however it wasn't enough because they were outnumbered and their cold mist couldn't outmatch the constant heat.

Suddenly, all the wyverns lost their ability to gather Mana around them. They stopped releasing fire breath and watched the sea of flames dissipate slowly because of the cold mist. They kept their gaze on the sea of flames beneath them, but then they saw a silhouette inside the flame, untouched and unmoved.

The moment the silhouette showed the greatsword in its hand and swung it around, the sea of flames that was blazing the city dispersed in almost an instant. That was when it was revealed that Aris was unscratched, her clothes were untouched by the flames even though everything around her had melted.

The wyverns roared as if they were in disbelief and enraged by Aris's ability. They all began to dive and showed their razor-sharp teeth at her, ready to rip her body apart. However, before they could get close to her, a gravitational force pushed them all down vertically to the ground. They were slowly being crushed by the force as they roared and screeched in pain.

Aris watched dozens of wyverns around her, screeching and roaring with a cold gaze. The moment she stabbed her sword to the ground, all the wyverns' heads exploded and killed them instantly. The only one that was still alive was the wyverns' leader, and Aris purposely let the wyvern watch as the other wyverns died and was unaffected by the gravitational force.

The wyvern began to show fear the moment Aris showed how powerful she was. It was in its nature as an animal, to fear the strong. However, because the wyvern was affected by demonic energy, it chose to keep fighting out of hatred that had been deeply rooted in its nature.

"Come down here..." Aris said as her eyes glowed bright blue.

The wyvern suddenly lost its ability to control its body as it began to descend. It tried to fight it, but it was pointless because the body was being under Aris's influence. And when it landed, the wyvern lowered its head and touched its chin to the ground as Aris approached the wyvern with the sword in her hand.

Aris placed her foot on the wyvern's nose and put a lot of pressure to the point the wyvern felt pain. She stared down at the wyvern and she could understand wyvern's weak growl. The wyvern wanted to kill her no matter what because the wyvern wanted to kill everything that he saw no matter who they were. Knowing that, Aris swung her sword around and then stabbed the skull, piercing through its brain and killing it instantly.

"Is it... over?" Aurelia noticed the complete silence in the city as she kept healing the wounded paladins.

"It's over, Lady Aris killed all the wyverns. It's safe now," Videl answered as he stared into the distance. He couldn't wait to absorb the remaining live force in the wyverns corpses.

"I see, let's get out of the barrier and find the remaining survivors. We need to gather all the bodies so I can bless their souls..." Aurelia said as she looked at the Paladins.

Without wasting a single second, Aurelia left the barrier with Aurelia, Videl, and the Paladins following her from behind. They checked every rubble for dead bodies, and that part was the hardest for Aurelia because of the guilt.

(At the same time in the temple)

Rasmus and Astrea were enjoying their tea when suddenly they heard a knock on the door. Astrea allowed the person to enter the parlor, and she realized it was one of the Cardinals.

"Your Holiness, may I have a moment of your time?" The Cardinal asked as he glanced at Rasmus. "Privately?" He added as he looked at Astrea.

Rasmus stared at the Cardinal's eyes and noticed the anxiety in those eyes. He then noticed Javi standing at the door, and when he looked into Javi's eyes, Javi gave him a nod.

"Make it quick, and don't hurt him," Rasmus said.

Astrea and the Cardinal looked confused and shocked by Rasmus words. Javi suddenly disappeared and reappeared behind the Cardinal, hitting the Cardinal's nape with his hand. The moment the Cardinal collapsed and unconscious, a dagger came out of his robe sleeve.

"What's going on...." Astrea was dumbfounded when she saw the dagger.

"I apologize for my rudeness, but I sent Javi to check every Cardinal ever since we arrived here," Rasmus answered as he slowly got up. "It seems things have changed when you were away, Lady Astrea," he said as he walked toward the Cardinal and grabbed the dagger.

"What..." Astrea muttered with a confused look written all over her face.

"They want to get rid of you, Lady Astrea. Some Archbishop and him are plotting something and they want to make Aurelia their puppet," Javi revealed as he carried the Cardinal on his shoulder.

"Wait! Where are you taking him?" Astrea asked as she tried to reach out to Javi.

"Where else, Lady Astrea? I'm going to cut him open, literally and figuratively," Rasmus answered with a stoic expression. "You can join me if you wanted to find the source of the pungent smell," he continued.

Chapter 293 - 293: Interrogation.

Rasmus stood in front of Cardinal Eros, staring down at him as he held his cane with both hands. Astrea entered the room reluctantly, and then Javi closed the door in front of him and locked it. The room they were in was an empty storage room, deep in the temple which had barely anyone visited the room or the area of the temple.

"Count... You're not going to hurt him, right?" Astrea asked as she looked at Cardinal Eros on the ground, unconscious.

"That depends, Lady Astrea. I don't find joy in hurting someone, nor do I want to do it. However, it's necessary to gather the information that I need. I won't hurt him if he chooses to speak and answer all my questions truthfully. That's what I can say," Rasmus said as he pressed his cane on Eros' throat, making it harder for him to breathe.

Astrea was about to stop Rasmus from harming Eros, but then Eros regained his consciousness and gasped for air. She immediately moved her wheelchair back, away from Rasmus and Eros. She wanted to stop Rasmus, but knowing Eros planned to kill her, she felt conflicted.

"Wha... What are you doing?! Where... Where am I..." Eros slowly crawled on his back, moving away from Rasmus as he looked around.

Rasmus pulled out the dagger that was hidden underneath Eros's robe. When Eros saw it, his face became pale as cold sweat began to appear on his forehead. An old man who seemed to have less than a decade to live was scared and panicking.

"Answer me truthfully and you can live without having to feel any physical pain," Rasmus said as he stared at the dagger that seemed to be specially made.

"Yes! Yes! I will tell you everything! Please don't hurt me!" Eros slowly went to his knees and clasped his hands together as he looked up at Rasmus.

"What were you planning to do with this?" Rasmus asked as he stared into Eros's eyes with a cold gaze and played with the dagger in his hand.

"I was only trying to threaten Her Holiness... We needed to make a move against that demon called Nemu! We need Saint Aurelia to guide the people! Prevent them from going astray from our God!" Eros answered, his voice trembling and cracking with fear.

Astrea was confused by Eros's answer and Rasmus's information which contradicted each other. Rasmus said that Eros was planning to kill her, but then Eros said that he only wanted to threaten her. She looked at both of them and wondered who lied, but then she remembered something about Rasmus.

"(He never lied...)" Astrea thought as she looked down at her weak body covered in bandages on a wheelchair.

"You wanted to bring salvation to the people by harming the very person who can give them salvation? You really have a funny sense of humor," Rasmus said as he glanced at the tip of the dagger and noticed there was a thin layer of liquid on the blade. "Then who gave you this dagger?" He asked.

Eros couldn't hold his sigh of relief, and his breath calmed down a bit so that Rasmus could see it. He didn't expect Rasmus to swallow the words he said without questioning his answers at all. He felt a bit relieved and realized he could get out of this situation if he put himself off the big picture, letting the others take the fall.

Astrea was confused when she noticed that as well, and wanted to question Rasmus for changing the subject without even questioning Eros's words. She knew Rasmus wouldn't be that clueless, so she thought that there must be a reason behind it.

"The dagger? It was Archbishop Wersel! He gave me the dagger this morning. I swear to God that I'm telling the truth!" Eros answered.

Rasmus kept his stoic expression as he stared at Eros, observing his behavior and expression. He then turned his head to look at Astrea, wondering if she knew what kind of motive Wersel had to pull off something like this. However, Astrea shook her head, surprised that Archbishop Wersel, one of the most respected and liked Archbishops in the Holy Nation would do something like that.

"Did you know that this dagger has been coated in poison?" Rasmus asked as he brushed the dagger on the table, leaving a faint trail of liquid on the table's surface.

"Poison?! I don't know anything about it!" Eros answered immediately and put on a panicked and confused expression on his face. "He didn't mention anything about poison. If I hurt Her Holiness, she might die..." he looked devastated and shocked at the same time.

Rasmus never changed his expression for one bit, and when Eros stole a glance at him, Eros looked anxious. Rasmus then put down the dagger on the table, and slowly took a seat on an old chair.

"Can you prove your words that Archbishop Wersel is truly the main culprit of this scheme?" Rasmus asked as he stared at the dagger.

"Yes! I do! I have every hidden message he sent me secretly in the past few weeks! I can show you everything!" Eros nodded repeatedly and slowly slouched his back, no longer in fear or panic.

Astrea finally saw from her perspective that Rasmus didn't confront the lie because it was easier and faster for Eros to cooperate. Rasmus bought the first lie, putting Eros in a safe space, and then made Eros reveal the truth willingly and completely shift the blame to Wersel. She was completely shocked and petrified by Rasmus's mastery in understanding human nature.

"Tell me where you keep those, and that man over there will take them all," Rasmus said as he pointed at Javi. "But if you lied, you should be prepared for the consequences," he glanced at Eros with a cold gaze.

"Of course! I won't lie!" Eros nodded repeatedly.

Eros began to reveal where he had hidden all the letters in his chamber. As soon as he gave the exact location, Javi left the storage room and went to Eros's chamber to find the letters.

"I really don't know about the poison! I wouldn't agree to help him if I knew. I did it because I believed it was the right thing to do. We are in a time where we need to make a move, not idling around like this..." Eros began to pour his mind willingly because he knew he had everything to prove his innocence.

Rasmus didn't say a word even after listening to Eros's blabbering. Eros noticed the changes in the way Rasmus looked at him and how Rasmus began to ignore his words, uninterested. He started to panic again, but in Astrea's eyes, Rasmus had been like that from the very beginning. The illusion of safety that Eros felt slowly crumbled, and he realized he had been digging his own grave willingly, and the whole conversation was only giving away more information.

"Seeing that you're bad at lying, it seems you were a devoted follower of God. However, it seems you have taken a different path and used God's name to justify your action," Rasmus said as he grabbed the dagger and got up from the chair.

"Wait... Wait!" Eros began to sweat again as he clasped his hands together, pleading for his life. "I'll tell you everything! I'll tell you the truth, I swear on my name! On God!" He begged as he lowered his head and raised his clasped hands above his head.

"Oh? So you were lying? Which part?" Rasmus asked, staring down at Eros with his brows slightly raised.

Eros's heart raced so fast that he could feel the pulsing behind his eyes. His body began to tremble and his breath shortened when he realized he wasn't only digging his own grave, he was about to bury himself in it.

Astrea, in her wheelchair, witnessed how Rasmus watered the lies, and made it bloom proudly, and Rasmus stood there ready to pick it up. The lies were no longer hidden, it was fully open, exposed, and the last thing that would happen was to see the lies wilt in his hand.

"I knew about the poison... It wasn't just Archbishop Wersel, there were more. I also lied about planning to threaten Her Holiness... I was planning to kill her..." Eros answered, completely defeated, knowing that telling the truth and continuing the lies wouldn't matter.

"The wyverns attack, this isn't a coincidence, isn't it?" Rasmus asked as he held the dagger firmly.

"It's not a coincidence... we knew this would happen. We were planning to take this opportunity to get rid of Her Holiness Astrea...." Eros answered, muttering his truth with a blank expression as he looked down at the dusty floor.

Astrea shed a tear when she heard the truth, and she couldn't believe how the Holy Nation had become so corrupted. She couldn't think straight, and the storage room made it worse for her. But suddenly, Rasmus opened the door widely for her, knowing that she wanted time to think and to grab fresh air.

Astrea pushed her own wheelchair out of the storage room, not even batting an eye at Eros. Once she was outside and stared out the window, her mind was blank, and tears didn't stop coming out of her eyes. Rasmus glanced at her as he closed the door in front of him, locking himself with Eros in the storage room.

Astrea sat in her wheelchair with a blank expression for minutes until she was startled by the screaming from inside the storage room. She panicked and realized she had just left Eros alone with Rasmus in there. She had never heard such a scream of pain and the gargling voice of Eros begging for his life.

Astrea slowly covered her ears, turning a blind eye and trying her best not to hear the scream. She was powerless, and she didn't have the ability to prevent Rasmus from doing what he was planning to do.

"God..." Astrea muttered, her trembling voice as she pleaded to God for the mess in her head and what she chose to ignore.

Chapter 294 - 294: Sins.

Astrea kept pressing her hands on her ears, trying to ignore the scream and the agony of Cardinal Eros. Her knuckles went pale, her ears were dark red from getting pressed so tightly. She mumbled repeatedly, hoping that Rasmus would stop torturing Eros or whatever he was doing inside the storage room. Javi was standing in front of the door, witnessing her struggle, but chose to stay quiet and make sure nobody was around to hear what was happening.

After a while, Eros stopped screaming, and Rasmus unlocked the door. He came out of the storage room and saw Javi standing beside the door. He looked at Javi and nodded his head, signaling Javi to dispose of the body silently and stealthily. He then saw Astrea in her wheelchair, still with her hands covering her ears.

"Here are the letters that he mentioned..." Javi offered the pile of letters to Rasmus.

Rasmus looked at it for a moment before he took them from Javi's hands. As soon as Javi gave the letters, he went inside the storage room to clean up the mess. When Javi saw what Rasmus had done to Eros, his eyes narrowed slightly before he approached the body.

Rasmus slowly walked toward the window and noticed that the window could be opened. He slowly reached out to the handle and slowly opened the window in front of Astrea. The breeze entered the empty hallway, bringing fresh air with the sweet scent of roses.

Astrea smelled and felt the breeze, slowly lifting her head to look at Rasmus, who was covered in blood. She looked at his bloody hands and his stoic expression back and forth, realizing that he didn't even feel a thing, even with blood in his hands.

"The issue is worse than we thought, Lady Astrea. The Holy Nation is no longer a sacred place. It's not the place, it's the people that have been corrupted," Rasmus said as he leaned against the wall beside the window, staring at Astrea. "This has happened before your reign as a Saint, perhaps even before your late mother's reign," he continued as he watched Javi carry the dead body that had been covered with an old, dusty rug.

Astrea was still speechless, still believing that what had just happened was a nightmare. However, the more she stared at Rasmus and his stoic expression, reality slowly pulled her back by the slight stench of blood. She slowly closed her eyes, slowly putting her hands down from her red ears, and then took a deep and shaky breath.

"What happened during the Great Era of Neva, Lady Astrea? What was it that they discovered?" Rasmus asked with a serious expression.

"It's in the Angelis Palace... There are a few records that revealed the truth behind the Great Era of Neva," Astrea answered as she lowered her head. "You're not allowed to go in there, and I can't give it to you because my daughter is now the Saint, not me," she continued.

"Why should I waste my time when you could tell me what it was? Right here, right now," Rasmus responded as he pulled a handkerchief from his suit pocket and cleaned the blood on his hands.

"Hearing that you waste your time saying that, it seems you're unwilling to tell me, Lady Astrea," he continued, his gaze becoming cold toward Astrea.

Astrea couldn't deny his suspicion because he wasn't wrong. There was a reason why she couldn't tell him, and it was because of the oath she took. The oath that powerful families took after the Great Era of Neva. She then slowly nodded her head, and she didn't need to tell him the reason behind it.

"Are you going to ask Aurelia about it, Count?" Astrea asked, afraid and anxious, if Rasmus would do something similar or less gruesome to Aurelia like how he did to Eros.

"If I had to make a guess, those dirty secrets you and those people kept away from the world, the people would turn their backs on you. I wonder if Aurelia could bear the sins or the incompetencies of her predecessors," Rasmus responded as he put the letters down in front of the window. "So, no. I'm not that heartless, letting her know the sins of you and your predecessors," he answered coldly.

Astrea once again closed her eyes, knowing too well that there was hypocrisy that she chose to keep. She knew that all too well, especially after she found out about it from her late mother. She didn't have a choice, she took an oath in front of her late mother before she could know what it was about.

"I may be ruthless, but I won't let anyone carry the sins of my actions. I carry all my sins, not pass it down like a hypocrite," Rasmus said as he put the bloody handkerchief back into his suit pocket. "I'll keep my promise to protect your daughter. And I just proved it to you," he continued and grabbed the letters before he walked away with the cane that supported his weight.

Rasmus was back in the parlor, reading about the letters that Javi found in Eros's chamber. He found out all the names, and Eros was indeed the mastermind behind those names, however, Eros was just one of the pawns. He found out from Eros himself that he met with Nemu, the emissary of Evil a month ago, exactly after the news spread that South Neva had defeated the demon forces.

Eros believed in Nemu that he wasn't the emissary of evil but rather someone else that was hiding in the shadow. Nemu showed his ability to use divine power, and he also hinted his accomplice, another emissary of evil to Eros. Eros was easily deceived because of his blind faith, and Nemu could easily persuade those with blind faith and those who questioned faith.

"Penemue, the most ambiguous fallen angel even in the book of Enoch..." Rasmus muttered as he stared at the scattered letters on the table. "He has spread his webs across Central Neva. Who knows how many people have fallen for his wisdom..." He sighed as he slowly leaned back, making himself comfortable on the couch, and stared at the ceiling.

While Rasmus was deep in thought, someone entered the parlor without knocking on the door. He already knew who it was without having to open his eyes. It wasn't because of the behavior, but rather he could smell it even though he lost his ability to smell. The smell of something that he couldn't describe but was somehow oddly familiar.

"The wyverns were corrupted by demonic energy?" Rasmus slowly opened his eyes and saw Aris standing next to him.

"If the wyverns are easily corrupted, they're not the descendants of the dragons," Aris answered as she sat beside him. "They were blinded by rage, hunger, and thirst for human flesh and blood. Their senses and emotions were enhanced, so it couldn't be called corruption. Wyverns don't even have a hundredth of dragons' wisdom and knowledge. They're close to brainless beasts, so I'm not surprised if they were being used that way," she continued as she looked at the letters on the table.

"You smell like blood..." Aris glanced at Rasmus's pocket to see where the smell of blood was coming from. "You found them?" She asked.

"Just one of them, but soon there will be many that will go missing," Rasmus nodded. "Why? You want to hunt them down?" He raised his brows as he looked at Aris.

"Yes, every single one of them..." Aris answered.

Rasmus noticed that Aris had been in a really bad mood ever since she found out about Arandil. He was quite surprised to see her lose control for the second time, and she was slowly showing more emotions ever since she joined him.

"If you really want to deal with that, Javi knows their locations and where they sleep. I'll tell him to guide you there tonight," Rasmus nodded with understanding as he sat straight and grabbed the letters, putting them neatly on the table.

"Tonight?" Aris raised her brows.

"Yes, we are going to cleanse this place tonight," Rasmus nodded and offered the letters to Aris.

"Okay, I'll make it clean," Aris answered as she took the letters and put them in the spatial ring since she was the one who wore it. Rasmus couldn't use Mana, so Aris was the one who had been wearing the ring ever since.

"There's no need to be clean, Aris," Rasmus said as he held the cane with both hands, staring at the window from across the room. "Make it as bloody as you can. We are going to send them a message. We are going to tell them that we are here and we are going to get rid of them fast if they choose to play nice," he continued.

"You want to be the bad guy now? Knowing that they're playing like Saints here?" Aris asked as she tilted her head.

"The bad guy? I believe everyone who knows me already knows that I'm a bad guy, and I never put myself in the light of goodness," Rasmus smirked as he glanced at Aris. "Just have fun tonight, and let the world know what's about to happen," he added.

"Then I will take my time to enjoy it..." Aris smiled coldly as she stared at Rasmus.

Chapter 295 - 295: The truth behind one's beauty.

The sun was setting, everyone was busy cleaning up the mess and preparing the grave for the people who died during the wyverns' attack. It didn't take a day for neighboring countries to find out about what had happened to the Holy Nation. Their representatives came to assist and donated a lot of things to rebuild the city on the fifth layer.

Rasmus came to see the damage that the wyverns had caused. He could see the melted glass that had become one with the ground. He also watched the paladins carry dead bodies that were wrapped in white cloth.

Aurelia was trying her best not to shed a tear, trying to endure it and to stay strong in front of her people. She didn't want to be seen as pitiful and pathetic by her people for crying because she couldn't do anything. Every action she took would affect her and everything around her.

"Lady Aurelia, you can sit down with me here," Serena smiled as she patted an empty spot on the bench she was sitting on. "You don't have to stand for the rest of the day. We can have a talk..." she suggested, knowing what kind of struggle was within Aurelia's mind and heart.

Aurelia turned around and stared at Serena for a moment, thinking if she should listen to Serena or not. She then realized the stinging pain in her feet from walking around nonstop for the past few hours. She decided to sit down beside Serena even though she felt awkward around her.

"Beautiful things never last," Serena muttered as she stared into the distance.

"I'm sorry?" Aurelia was startled by Serena's sudden statement.

"Oh, you heard that?" Serena raised her brows as she looked at Aurelia. "I'm saying that beautiful things never last. If there's anything beautiful that lasts forever, that means it's rotten from the inside," she smiled at Aurelia.

"I don't understand what you mean, Saint Serena..." Aurelia was genuinely confused by Serena's words.

"It is literally what it means, Lady Aurelia. Beautiful things never last, and when they last, it means it's rotten from the inside that keeps that false beauty on the outside," Serena explained, still with a smile on her face. "You can interpret it however you want. But I can assure you, this is a good sign, that the beauty of this place doesn't last either," she continued.

Aurelia was mentally exhausted, so she couldn't process something heavy. However, when she thought about the past that happened to Serena, the Cardinal from Holy Nation schemed to kill her out of protection and to prevent prophecy, she realized something. She began to connect with what Serena said about the lasting beauty, and realized that the beauty of the Holy Nation, the image of sacredness and beauty for more than a century, could be hiding the rotten inside it.

"Do you think the Holy Nation is rotten inside, Saint Serena? That some of us tried to protect the sacredness and beauty of this nation by doing something corrupt?" Aurelia asked with fear within her heart, fear of knowing the truth and bearing responsibility for something that wasn't hers.

"Isn't that the truth, Saint Aurelia? Why do you have to question something that's real?" Serena tilted her head. "I died because of that, and I came back to life to be the witness and the victim of such corruption," she continued.

Aurelia couldn't say a word and chose to be quiet, thinking about the possibility that something like that had happened for a century without the world knowing. The crippling fear slowly overpowered her and she didn't know if she wanted to confront it or tried to ignore it.

"Just think about it like a person. Nobody is purely beautiful on the inside and on the outside. They believe it's righteous, but they do things that are questionable just because they believe it's the right thing to do. To protect lives, they choose to lie to them. Their righteousness is just an illusion coated in assurance and a sense of relief, believe they're sacrificing their morale for the goodness of the world," Serena said as she leaned back and crossed her arms and legs. "If that's what righteousness is, I guess that means righteousness is only out of convenience and self-interest coated in martyrdom," she continued.

"But not all like that. There are people out there like that, and unfortunately, they're powerless," Rasmus said, joining the conversation as he approached the bench.

Both Aurelia and Serena were startled when they heard Rasmus's voice. They all turned their heads to the left and saw Rasmus walking with his cane.

"Nobody is inherently wrong or corrupted, only their surroundings that turn them that way. So, I do believe, something beautiful can last forever, but in doing so, they'll be seen as rotten and ugly by others," Rasmus said as he looked at the dead bodies that were carefully laid down on the ground. "Beauty isn't about making yourself beautiful by other standards, it's the opposite. You grow to be honest with yourself, and that's when they see you as beautiful. Just like flowers," he continued as he looked at Aurelia.

Rasmus glanced at Serena and realized that she had seen nothing but the hypocrisy of human beings. After all, she was Lilith underneath, the first woman who was condemned to hell and saw nothing but the tormented souls of sinners. He realized that Serena would be a bad influence on Aurelia, and he had to explain to her about the plan he had for Aurelia.

Aurelia was deep in thought that she didn't realize that Rasmus and Serena were communicating with their eyes. She considered both Rasmus and Serena's words, one of whom revealed the ugly truth and the other brought the light from that truth.

"Then what does that make me, if I've lived trying to protect a lie I didn't even know?" Aurelia asked, knowing that she might have indirectly taken over something that she didn't commit to and hold accountable for it.

"That depends on you, Aurelia. Do you want to live in dishonesty? Following the same tradition, becoming someone like Saint Serena said or being someone that you can be honest with yourself, without taking a hold of responsibility that isn't yours to begin with," Rasmus asked as he stared into Aurelia's eyes.

"What do you mean by that, Count? Why is it that you sound so certain of something as if you know more about the Holy Nation than me?" Aurelia asked with her brows furrowed. She found it suspicious, scary, and concerning at the same time.

"Why don't you ask your mother about it, Aurelia? She's the one who knows everything. Me, I'm just someone who got information from my own way," Rasmus answered as he looked at the stars that

began to light the sky. "It's getting dark. I believe everyone is ready to for you to give them a proper burial," he continued as he looked at the paladins that had gathered all the bodies they could find.

Aurelia was confused by Rasmus's statement, but then she realized that she still had a duty that awaited her. She looked at the paladins and the people, they were indeed waiting for her to give her blessing to the dead. She then took a deep breath and slowly got up from the bench, steeling her heart.

"Being a Saint is to help people who struggle, this is one of the many forms. A path of being Saint isn't an easy path, but please, be honest..." Serena said as she got up and placed her hand on Aurelia's back.

"Yes, I know that..." Aurelia nodded and then began to walk to where the bodies were laid down.

Videl, Rasmus, and Serena followed Aurelia from behind while listening to the sobbing of the family who had lost their loved ones. Aurelia was holding back her tears when they saw the dirty and the blood-covered cloth that wrapped the dead bodies.

Aurelia stood in front of hundreds of dead bodies, and began to pray with her hands clasped together in front of her chest. The people slowly clasped their hands together, eyes closed, and on their knees. Serena began to pray beside Aurelia while Videl pretended to pray on his knees. Rasmus on the other hand, he stood still and looked at the exact numbers of the bodies.

When Aurelia was busy praying, Javi appeared behind Rasmus like a shadow. Nobody noticed his presence other than Videl and Serena. He then whispered something into Rasmus's ear, it sounded almost like a wind.

"Lady Aris has killed every single one of them..." Javi whispered.

Rasmus nodded with understanding, and then he watched Javi leave and disappear into the night without making a sound.

"God, please have mercy on these souls..." Aurelia said as divine energy began to descend toward the dead bodies with its white translucent light. "May they rest in peace and be by your side, Amen," she continued.

Chapter 296 - 296: One Man.

Aurelia and the others were on their way back to the first layer of the Holy Nation. They were in the carriage when they saw commotion near the gate to the first layer where Paladins were patrolling around the walls. Aurelia's face turned pale because the first thing that came to her mind was her mother's safety.

"What's going on?!" Aurelia asked the Paladins, who were guarding the gate.

"Your Holiness! It's not safe inside! An intruder just killed seven Archbishops and Cardinal Eros. Please wait here while we are looking for the killer," a Paladin answered.

"What?!" Aurelia's eyes trembled in disbelief. "What about my mother?! Where is she right now?!" She asked, raising her voice because she was worried and panicking.

"Her Holiness is fine. She's currently with His Imperial Highness, Julius and Lord Arandil. She's safe, and we are sure about it. I will bring Her Holiness to your side, please wait here," the Paladin answered and hurriedly went through the gate.

Rasmus walked out of the carriage and looked at the commotion. Hundreds of Paladins were patrolling and guarding the walls. It would be impossible for anyone from leaving or entering without them knowing.

"Saint Aurelia," Rasmus called as he stood next to the carriage.

Aurelia turned around and looked at Rasmus pointing at the carriage. She didn't know why he wanted her to get into the carriage, but she followed his instructions and went back inside. She then watched Rasmus carefully get back inside and sit across from him.

"It was me who did it," Rasmus said with a cold expression. "I killed those Archbishops and Cardinal Eros," he revealed.

Aurelia's heart plunged and it felt like her inside was churning and being squeezed tightly. She wasn't speechless, but no words could come out of her mouth. She was devastated because Cardinal Eros was almost like a father figure to her. He was the one who made her feel that way, to be compassionate and kind. He was the one who listened to her problems and was the one who comforted her when she felt lonely.

"Why..." Aurelia's voice was barely above a whisper, tears fell to her chin.

"I'm not someone who would kill for no reason or to harm you. If you want to find the answer, your mother knows the answer," Rasmus answered.

"This is my home, Count..." Aurelia said with tears that made her see nothing but tears on her eyes.

Serena was about to open her mouth, but Rasmus raised his right hand. He shook his head because he didn't want Serena or anyone else to get involved in his deed. He didn't want anyone else to explain and to justify his actions because he didn't need to be justified.

"Then reveal it to the paladins, Your Holiness. I'm powerless, and I can't defend myself. If you order your paladins to kill me, I'll die," Rasmus said as he slowly opened the carriage door for Aurelia. "I won't threaten you nor stop you from doing so. My fate is in your hands," he continued.

Aurelia hurriedly walked out of the carriage as she wiped off her tears. She then looked at the Paladins that were only a few meters away from her. However, she couldn't open her mouth, she couldn't even move her hands to take their attention.

When Aurelia slowly opened her mouth and was about to call for the Paladins, she saw Astrea walk out of the gate with dozens of Paladins on her side. She forgot about what she was about to do and hurriedly ran to Astrea's side to hug her.

"Mother..." Aurelia sobbed as she clung onto Astrea's body.

Astrea was shocked and confused by Aurelia's reaction when she saw her. She realized that something had happened to her, and when she saw Rasmus walking out of the carriage, she knew what had happened. She slowly looked down at her daughter, trying to comfort her and calm her down.

They both clung onto each other, one was feeling guilty and the other was clinging toward the person who had let corruption exist in the Holy Nation. Rasmus stood there, staring at them without any judgment in his eyes. However, for Astrea, she felt like she was being judged because it was the guilt that spoke to her, not her mind.

Suddenly, they felt a strong earthquake coming from behind the wall. Everyone panicked and hurriedly went to check what happened near the temple.

Julius and Isador ran for their lives when shockwaves almost made both of them stumble. The Paladins came to protect them and safely brought them to the gate. The others were baffled and petrified when they saw the temple crumble and collapse. The temple that had existed for more than a century and the symbol of peace had turned into rubble, unrecognized.

"Count! Please stop her!" Isador said as he looked at Rasmus. "Lady Aristoria is planning to kill Lord Arandil!" He revealed.

Isador's voice echoed and everyone found out what was going on over there. They were supposed to be the protectors of the sacred temple. However, compared to Arandil, the strongest swordsman in the world and Aris of the ancient race, they were like fleas trying to conquer the sky.

"You haven't answered my question, Isador. Which one do you choose? Save one life or the countless?" Rasmus stood there, holding his cane with both hands.

Isador remembered that confrontation from earlier that day. Arandil who executed and beheaded Rasmus's parents, the one who killed his mother who was also an Aristoria. He hadn't given an answer to Rasmus, and this moment was the moment where he decided the future.

"The countless! But not right now!" Isador answered with determination.

The others were confused what those two were talking about except for Aurelia and Astrea who were there when that happened. Rasmus then gave Isador a simple nod, and then began to walk toward the gate.

When Rasmus was about to walk past Julius, he muttered something, loud enough for Julius and Isador to hear.

"I'll be taking your head, Emperor..." Rasmus muttered with a stoic expression as he walked past Julius.

Julius and Isador were speechless, there was no moment in their lives where anyone would dare to threaten them. They were the Suncrown family, the strongest and the most respected family in whole Neva. The family that brought peace after the Great Era of Neva, a figure that had been respected for more than a century and would be respected for another century or even more.

The paladins opened a path for Rasmus to walk through the crowds. They looked at how fragile he was, and yet his posture and his gaze showed no opening or fear.

Aris relentlessly swung her greatsword in her left hand and Rasmus's sword in her right hand. Arandil was overwhelmed and knew he stood no chance, not even if he could train endlessly for a hundred years. All he could do was to block and dodge because the moment he tried to attack, his head would fall off of his body.

Rasmus stood there, holding his cane with both hands as gushes of wind and dust hit his face. He stood there and watched Aris try to kill Arandil even though she didn't use all her strength to do so. He knew that Aris wasn't blinded by rage while others thought she was. She wanted Arandil to know that the one who would take his head would be so powerful that not even Gods could save him.

"If you want to live, go stand behind my back," Rasmus said, his voice was loud and clear even amidst the chaos.

Even during life and death situation, Arandil could hear Rasmus words. He took a split second glance at Rasmus and realized he could survive if he chose to run toward him. He then gathered all the Mana he could in a matter of a second and then released it like two walls of steel crushed onto each other at Aris.

It didn't even take Aris a second to disperse the Aura that Arandil made, not even close enough for her to get affected by it. However, Arandil already ran for his life and stood behind Rasmus with his trembling hands after blocking attacks that felt like the mountains were toppling on top of him. He was out of breath and he didn't know if he could survive even another minute against Aris.

Aris stared coldly and menacingly at Arandil with her stoic expression. Her breath was calm and relaxed, not even breaking a sweat.

"Funny that you hide behind the child of the parents that you beheaded, Lord Arandil. I wonder what will happen if that same child has decided to condemn you to death," Rasmus said without looking back at Arandil. "You were untouchable when the world bent to injustice, but now that the reality is slightly tilted toward the truth, you seem... powerless," he looked over his shoulder and glanced at Arandil.

"Every action has its own consequences, be prepared for them, Lord Arandil," Rasmus said and then walked toward Aris.

Serena stood at the gate with Videl standing behind her, acting as her personal Paladin. She witnessed everything and she had seen enough of what kind of a person Rasmus was.

"A man who could bring destruction to a sacred place that has been protected for more than a century in a single day. He, who revealed his deeds, threatened the emperor, and humiliated the strongest man alive, and yet he's still free and stood above them," Serena chuckled as she smirked and stared at Rasmus.

"Now you understand why I chose him in the first place. No humans can achieve something like that, nobody..." Videl responded.

"Yes, unlike you who used lies to deceive. Humans are indeed better than the likes of you," Serena glanced at Videl and gave him a mocking smirk.

Chapter 297 - 297: Built on a lie.

Rasmus and the others used the house that belonged to Eros to stay in for the night. Carrion, Daryus. And Erlina heard everything from Rasmus about what he did and what he found. They had been with him for too long, and they knew that questioning his methods was pointless.

"But still... to think that the Holy Nation has been infiltrated by the emissaries of evil, the other nations stand no chance..." Carrion said as he tapped his knee with a troubled expression. "Am I the only one who thinks that Central Neva is more dangerous than South Neva back then?" He asked and looked at Erlina, who sat beside him, and Daryus across from him.

"You can say that..." Erlina nodded in agreement as she took a bite of the grape. "But the real question is. What about us, Count? Carrion and I are planning to explore Central Neva to spread our influence here. If they found out that we are associated with you, even if we hide in a sewer, it won't be safe," she pointed out as she looked at Rasmus staring at the fire in the fireplace in front of him.

"Marquess Garret can help you two with that. There are business partners that I have here, they will help you two get what you want. Esprella Bleuman and Rouben Orbeliani," Rasmus answered, remembering that those two were still getting a lot of profits from selling wristwatches. "As long as you both can keep them interested, they will do anything to protect you," he continued.

Carrion had heard enough about those two families with great backgrounds and connections from Garret, his brother. He was planning to approach them even without Rasmus telling him to. It made him realize that it was a perfect opportunity for him and Erlina.

"Javi, you will follow them," Rasmus said as he glanced at Javi in the corner, staring at the ruined temple of Angelis.

Javi responded with a simple nod, without any question or doubt.

"Then what about you? Are you going to be on your own with Lady Aris since Saint Serena, Videl, and Daryus will be staying here in the Holy Nation?" Erlina tilted her head.

"Yes, it will be just the two of us," Rasmus nodded as he put his hand on the fire. "We will be the bait to attract their attention," he muttered as he watched how the fire couldn't burn his hand anymore.

"I'm a bit worried about Aurelia..." Serena said as she placed her hand on the window, staring at the palace where Astrea and Aurelia lived, which seemed gloomy, no longer sacred and holy.

"The rise or fall of the Angelis family will be in her hands. Tonight, she will decide the future of this continent," Rasmus responded and pulled his hand away from the fire, rubbing the ashes on his palm.

(At the same time in the Angelis' Palace)

Aurelia was sitting at the dining table, her eyes trembling as she stared at Astrea, who was sitting across from her. Her fork and knife couldn't even reach the meat on her plate, even though it had been an hour since they had made dinner. She was so shocked that she had been sitting there like a statue, her eyes were the only thing that moved and revealed what was in her mind.

"What do you mean by that, Mother?" Aurelia finally spoke, her throat was dry because her mouth had been hanging since she found out the whole truth about what had happened.

"Every archbishop and Cardinal who died today had become pawns by Nemu, the emissary of evil. I was there when Count Blackheart killed Cardinal Eros, and I was powerless... no... I was letting him kill Cardinal Eros," Astrea answered as she stared at the food in front of her, the food that they both always made when they were both at home.

"I know how special Cardinal Eros is to you, Aurelia. He was the only one who stayed by your side whenever you felt happy or sad. He was a great man, one of the few, but unfortunately, he took the wrong path and was consumed by his emotions," Astrea continued as she clenched her fists, and didn't dare to look at her daughter in the eyes.

"He made one mistake, Mother... He was being used! Why was it fair for anyone to be judged and condemned to die because of a single mistake?!" Aurelia raised her voice for the first time to her mother.

Astrea was deeply and utterly shocked when Aurelia raised her voice at her. She was both angry and felt guilty, and she didn't know what to do at that moment. However, she realized that it was a perfect moment for her to reveal the truth.

"Because everything that we built, what we have, and what we have achieved, those things were built based on a lie, Aurelia. This nation, this family, we used a lie to get to where we are right now," Astrea answered with her eyes closed.

"What do you mean, Mother?" Aurelia furrowed her brows, confused and suspicious of Astrea's answer.

"We lied, the Angelis family lied to the world. We lied to protect their lives, and we used that lie to our advantage, and that same lie had turned us into something that we fought against..." Astrea answered as she lowered her head. "Anything that's made of a lie, not come from a truth, something that isn't

real, will break into pieces the moment the truth is revealed. That truth, Count Blackheart has it, and that's why we lost everything while he gets away with it..." she continued as she clenched her fists.

Aurelia dropped her fork and knife, making a loud noise that startled Astrea and made her heart drop for a moment. She couldn't stop staring at her mother, in disbelief that someone who she loved so much and cared so much for turned out to be hiding something that made her see her mother in a different light. She felt as if she was sitting at the dining table with a stranger, not her mother.

"Aurelia, there's something that I want you to see..." Astrea said as she tried to stand up on her own, but she was too weak, mentally and physically, after what had just happened. She was about to collapse, but she didn't want her daughter to be worried about her. She believed that she didn't deserve her daughter's love anymore. "Come..." She said quietly, enduring the pain of the wounds all over her body.

Aurelia stared at her mother for a moment before she decided to follow her from behind.

They went to the deepest part of the palace, and then Astrea showed a secret door by tilting the painting of the first Saint of Angelis. Aurelia was shocked that there was something like that in the palace, something that she hadn't known for almost 20 years of living in the palace.

"Traditionally, you have to swear, to make an oath, before you can enter this chamber. But..." Astrea paused as she slowly turned her head to look at Aurelia. "I don't want you to make that promise, the promise that will turn you into someone like me, someone like our predecessors..." She continued, her expression weary and exhausted.

Aurelia stared at her mother's expression, and she wanted to hold her, but she couldn't do it. She then looked at the oval hole behind the painting and decided to climb into the hole while Astrea watched her from the side.

"Everything in there it's now yours. You can take them, destroy them, or reveal them to the world. I will take responsibility for whatever choice you're going to make," Astrea said as she looked at Aurelia.

Aurelia turned around to look at her mother for a moment before she decided to explore the hidden chamber with an orb of divine light on her left palm to light the darkness. It took her almost a minute of walking down the stairs until she set her foot on the floor. She looked at the simple door made of wood, nothing fancy, even the handle was made of wood as well.

When she slowly opened the wooden door, she saw something that she hadn't imagined to exist in this sacred and holy place. She slowly collapsed as she covered her mouth, fear and anxiety hitting her, and making her mind go blank.

Astrea was standing still outside, waiting for Aurelia to come back. However, she knew what was inside that chamber, and she remembered when she despised her late mother for making her swear an oath for something like that. She remembered how she felt devastated when she saw the truth, and how she wanted to reveal to the world how peace that had existed for more than a century was based on a lie. However, the older she became, the more she resonated with her late mother, that peace was more important than anything else in the world.

After what felt like an eternity, Aurelia came out of the hole with tears and red eyes. Astrea's chest got squeezed really hard so that she couldn't breathe or even say a single word. She then watched Aurelia walk away without saying a word or batting an eye at her.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart..." Astrea muttered as she shed a tear.

Chapter 298 - 298: Contrast.

The morning came, and the paladins were still patrolling around the walls. Aurelia couldn't sleep, she couldn't even close her eyes for more than a few seconds. She decided to go into the garden, the place with so many memories of her with Astrea and Cardinal Eros.

"I knew you would be here..." Isador said as he looked at Aurelia, sitting on the bench and staring blankly at the flowers. "Is everything okay?" He asked.

Aurelia glanced at Isador coldly, and that was enough to stop him from coming closer to her. There was anger, disappointment, and resentment in her gaze toward him.

"Did you know?" Aurelia asked coldly.

"Did I know? What?" Isador asked back with a confused look. He didn't know what had happened to her and why she was being hostile toward him. "Can you tell me what's going on?" He added, didn't dare to take a step closer.

Aurelia looked down to her left where the record she had taken from the hidden chamber was. She grabbed it and threw it at Isador, landing right in front of his foot. She kept staring at him coldly and menacingly without saying a single word.

Isador looked at the record and slowly grabbed it. He read the record carefully and thoroughly, wondering what caused Aurelia to be so furious at him. However, when he read the content, he was deeply shocked and in disbelief.

Aurelia could see it in Isador's eyes that he had no idea about it either. She realized that it wasn't just her, Isador also didn't know about the truth during the Great Era of Neva. She slowly softened her gaze and expression as she looked away, feeling guilty that she assumed that Isador knew about it all along since he was the crown prince of the Sun Empire.

"Where did you get this?" Isador asked, his voice trembled, his pupils trembled as he looked at Aurelia.

"My mother showed me the hidden chamber in the palace. She showed that place because I'm now the Saint. This whole time, we were believing in lies, and we brought this whole thing to ourselves..." Aurelia answered as she clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palms.

Isador slowly walked toward Aurelia and reached his trembling hands with the record in his hand at Aurelia. He was deeply shocked and petrified by the lies and the things they had built were based on lies.

"That means..." Isador muttered as he looked at Aurelia. "My family is... My family is the mastermind behind all that?" He asked with his brows furrowed.

"Our families, and the others. We used this lie to attain peace, and we neglected the problems just for the sake of that peace..." Aurelia said as she looked at the record in her hands. "We brought this onto ourselves, and now the lives of the people we lied to, they're becoming the victims. Our families are the worst hypocrite in the history of mankind..." she continued as she clenched onto the record tightly.

"Does that mean... our families killed all the Blackheart family members, every last of them because they were afraid that the Blackheart family would disturb that peace? We killed the ones who wanted to make a change, we erased the ones who wanted to fight evil..." Isador collapsed onto the bench, his eyes were empty and filled with fear.

Aurelia didn't need to say a word or make a gesture because Isador should know that she also thought the same thing. They both sat there in silence, realizing the lies and the sins their families had committed. They realized their families were as evil coated in righteousness, the worst form of hypocrisy.

After a long silence, Aurelia suddenly stood up and held the record in her hand. Isador was confused, wondering where she wanted to go, and why she held that record.

"I'm going to meet him... and show this to him..." Aurelia said as she looked at Isador.

"You want to show that to Count Blackheart? Do you know that right now, we are in the most vulnerable state. If he took that information and chose to get rid of us, we would cease to exist..." Isador looked up at Aurelia with a worried expression.

"It would be great if he would kill me. I don't think I have the courage, the heart, and the sanity to live on after knowing this..." Aurelia smiled weakly as she stared at Isador.

"Then let me join you..." Isador got up and stared Aurelia in the eyes. "We both are responsible for the sins of our ancestors. We are in this together, and if you wanted to die, I would die with you. However, if

you chose to reveal it to the world, then I would be there beside you..." He said with a serious expression, filled with determination.

Aurelia lowered her head and slowly nodded her head.

Aurelia and Isador walked side by side, the paladins and the Archbishops were focused on them. They could feel the difference in their way of walking, their gaze, and the way they ignored their surroundings.

"Your Holiness!" Esper kneeled in front of Aurelia with his sheathed sword in his right hand. Ulric kneeled beside him and lowered his head.

"We apologized that we weren't here, and we weren't able to protect the lives we swore upon..." Ulric added as he clenched his fists. "We will be at your service. We will stay by your side from now on..." he continued.

As the 9th and the 8th Swordmasters of Neva, they could sense any danger of hostility around them. They felt that danger and hostility, but they didn't expect it was pointed at something above them. The hostility came from nobody but the one they chose to serve, Aurelia. They both were too confused and afraid to lift their heads and look at her.

"Just stay by my mother's side. I'll call for you if I need something from you," Aurelia coldly said as she walked past them without batting an eye.

Esper and Ulric glanced and looked at each other, shocked by what had just happened. They slowly stood up and turned around to look at Aurelia, noticing the aura around her that seemed cold and dark. They were worried, and the only person who might know the answer was no other than Astrea, her mother.

Aurelia and Isador stood in front of the mansion where Rasmus and the others stayed. They both were anxious even though they were so determined a few seconds ago. They felt betrayed and were furious, however, the one they were going to meet was no other than the person who could make them feel worse than those.

Aurelia took a deep breath and then knocked on the door firmly. She began to sweat, and the worst part was that she began to feel regret. However, the moment the door was unlocked and opened, she knew it was too late to go back.

"Your Holiness?" Erlina raised her brows, surprised to see Aurelia after everything that had happened. "Please come in. I'll bring you to the parlor room and I'll ask someone to bring Count Rasmus," she smiled as she opened the door widely for Aurelia and Isador.

"Thank you..." Aurelia smiled as she entered the mansion with Isador following her from behind.

The three of them entered the parlor room, but Aurelia and Isador didn't see anyone else in the mansion. They wondered where everyone went, not even a single maid was seen in the big mansion.

"Lady Erlina, can I ask you something personal?" Aurelia asked as she looked at Erlina who prepared the tea for them.

"Of course, Your Holiness. Ask me anything and I'll answer it honestly," Erlina answered with a gentle smile.

"Did you and the others know about what Count Rasmus did? Everything that happened here and everything in South Neva?" Aurelia asked, wanting to know if all Rasmus people knew about him more than anyone else.

Erlina paused from pouring the tea into the cup when she heard the question. However, she put a smile as she continued to pour the tea while Aurelia and Isador waited for her to answer the question.

"Yes, some of us know everything, while the rest of us chose not to know more. However, we all know that everything that happened in South Neva a year ago, they were all orchestrated by him," Erlina answered as she put the teacups carefully on the coffee table in front of Isador and Aurelia.

"And you're okay with that?" Isador asked with his brows furrowed.

"If I'm okay with that? Hmm, that's not the right question to ask, Crown Prince. We weren't involved in everything he did back then, and he never asked for our involvement in the first place. He's not the type to drag someone into his mess unless they have the same goal as him and are willing to be a part of it," Erlina answered with a smile on her face.

"But you're following him. Doesn't that make his enemy target you too?" Aurelia asked.

"Of course, Your Holiness. It's our decision, and it's the consequences of following him. But if you asked me if we regretted it? The answer is no, Your Holiness. Because it's our choice to follow him," Erlina answered as she walked toward the door. "He will be here at any moment. I'll take my leave, Your Holiness, Crown Prince," she bowed her head and then left the room.

Aurelia and Isador looked at each other, noticing the contrast between their case with the people that followed Rasmus.

Chapter 299 - 299: Bitterness.

Rasmus entered the room, looking at Aurelia and Isador who looked depressed and lost. He slowly walked toward the chair and dragged it slowly toward the couch where they were sitting. He sat on the chair across from them as he rested his hands on his cane, staring at them with a stoic expression.

"Is there anything that you need from me, Your Holiness? Crown Prince?" Rasmus asked.

Aurelia slowly put the record on the table so Rasmus could understand the reason behind their visit. However, Rasmus only stared at the record and didn't even bother to grab it and look at the content of it.

"That record contains the whole truth behind the Great Era of Neva, Count Blackheart. I want you to take a look at it," Aurelia said as she stared at the record with disgust and hatred.

"Is that so? And what do you want from me since you're giving me that secret that the Angelis family and the Suncrown family had hidden from the world?" Rasmus asked with his brows raised.

Aurelia and Isador shared a look, not knowing what they wanted from Rasmus. In the first place, they didn't want anything from him, they just wanted him to know the truth and told them his opinion about it.

"We don't want anything, Count. We... we believe that you deserve to know the truth..." Aurelia answered as she shook her head.

Rasmus glanced at the record, but he still didn't show any interest in the content of it. He then looked at Aurelia and Isador, assuming what kind of truth was hard enough to swallow that both of them looked so depressed and lost.

"And if I'm not interested in it, what are you going to do, Your Holiness?" Rasmus raised his brows as he tapped his finger on his cane.

Aurelia and Isador furrowed their brows, confused by Rasmus's response.

"Don't you want to know the truth? I thought you prioritize truth over anything, Count?" Isador asked, his brows furrowed even deeper. "That record has everything that you're looking for. You can see the rot that my family and Aurelia's family had kept hidden for more than a century..." he continued as he clenched his fists on his thighs.

"And? What do you want me to do with it when I know the truth?" Rasmus leaned back, making himself comfortable on the chair.

Aurelia and Isador didn't know what to answer because they had never thought of it. People usually take the truth and never question what they would do with it.

"Do you want me to destroy your family? To tell the world about the rotten peace? What do you want me to do?" Rasmus asked as he placed his cane on his lap. "Do you need moral support? Do you want me to justify their actions? Do you want me to agree with you?" He added.

"You two came to me because you can't handle the truth, isn't it? And you're offering me this truth so I can bear it with you? Is that correct?" Rasmus leaned forward and stared into Aurelia's eyes.

Aurelia and Isador finally realized that they were indeed hoping Rasmus would carry the burden with them. They wanted someone strong enough to hold it for them and for them to hold on to. They were afraid, furious, and lost at the same time, and Rasmus was the only person who could be that cold and strong pillar.

"Why would I do that for your sake? Is there a benefit for me for doing so? From the very beginning you two already knew that I don't care about humanity the moment I got abandoned by them. Your truth isn't valuable to me," Rasmus said coldly.

Aurelia suddenly lowered her head toward Rasmus as she clenched her fists on her robe. She was begging, pleading for exactly what Rasmus said, to carry the burden with her because she knew she couldn't deal with it on her own.

"Please... instructor... I beg you..." Aurelia muttered, using Rasmus's past title as her instructor in the academy. She put herself not as a Saint, not as a woman, not as an adult, but as a student that Rasmus used to teach and care for.

"Don't beg me when you have no idea the consequences of it. The regrets will be a thousand times more painful than what you feel right now," Rasmus warned, and stared at Aurelia coldly. "I'm not going to be your saviour, and I won't help you carry the truth. I want to see if you throw away that truth like how your mother did, to carry that truth until you collapse, become a martyr of that truth, or you conquer it and become the true beckon of humankind," he continued with a serious expression.

Isador wanted to stand by Aurelia's side, but at that moment, he didn't know if he could help her convince Rasmus. He felt like a bystander even though he was dealing with the same issue as Aurelia. He then looked at Rasmus who kept his focus on her, not the two of them.

"You have so many choices to make. Do you dare to take the path where the truth is worth more than thousands of lives? Will you sacrifice the innocent in exchange for true peace? Will you look at deaths as nothing but numbers of casualties that are necessary? Will you turn your back against the family that has raised you because they have used lies to bring peace?" Rasmus asked and looked at both of them with a cold and stoic expression.

"Those things are what I call the truth. Even if they lied, it was a part of the truth. If you can accept all that, you'll become like Lady Astrea and Emperor Julius, but are you going to be different?" Rasmus continued.

Aurelia and Isador took a deep breath as they stared at the record at the table. They realized that even though their predecessors were hiding the truth, they embraced the truth and chose to hide it. They remembered that nothing was white and black, there was something in between, the gray area where Rasmus dwelled and resided.

Aurelia stared into Rasmus's eyes and saw nothing in them, there was no judgment, there was no hope, there was no emotion in them. She felt like she was staring into the pool of the abyss, where all goodness and evilness was born. It terrified her when she thought that Rasmus was someone who brought those two to the world.

"Am I going to be alone, Instructor?" Aurelia asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Her voice was wrapped in fear and uncertainty.

"Remember my question on your first class, Your Holiness, Crown Prince. Who are you without your family? You're raised to maintain the legacy, not to make one. Remember what you need to do to survive on your own, remember the assignment that I gave you back then. Use that knowledge, use

those solutions and answers to the real world," Rasmus answered, his stoic expression betraying his gentle voice.

Aurelia didn't find the answer to be satisfying, but then Isador with a serious expression grabbed the record and held it tightly.

"My father once told me that loneliness even within the crowds of people means you are being truthful to yourself. That loneliness is the first step to understanding who you are, and following that uncomfortable path will lead you to somewhere that you won't regret..." Isador said as he kept his eyes on the record in his hands. "I never understood what my father meant back then, but now... I start to understand it even though barely..." he continued.

"Your Holiness, loneliness isn't weakness, it's the first step. We may share the same burden, but we are alone with our thoughts, but that's okay. We both want the same thing, and I swear in the name of God that I won't follow my father's step. Right now you feel alone, but soon, there are people who will follow you just like those people follow Count Rasmus," Isador said as he looked at Aurelia with a serious expression and filled with determination. "You have become a Saint while I'm still a Crown Prince. You're way ahead of me in dealing with this truth, but I will be there once I raise to the throne," he continued.

Aurelia felt that Isador's words weighed more than any assurance that she had ever heard before. She felt the connection, there was no pity, there was no sweetness, only comforting bitterness. She looked at the record in Isador's hands and then looked him in the eyes as she gave him a nod.

"Is there anything else, Your Holiness? Crown Prince?" Rasmus asked.

They both looked at Rasmus and realized that they didn't need him like they thought it would be. They both shook their heads simultaneously, convinced that they could walk the path on their own.

"If that's the case, I have to prepare my belongings," Rasmus said as he slowly stood up, using the cane to support his body.

"You're leaving, Count?" Isador asked.

"Yes, I'll be leaving tomorrow early in the morning," Rasmus answered. "You both offered me the truth, but I have my own truth to find," he revealed.

Aurelia and Isador looked up at Rasmus with a confused look, but they understood why he didn't want the truth that they gave. They both slowly got up and were ready to leave as well since there was nothing else to discuss.

"I don't have any expectations from you, I won't help you, I won't root for your success. However, I want you to know that if I saw you failed, that bitterness would stay in my mouth forever..." Rasmus said as he walked toward the door. "After all, you two were my students. It would be a shame if my teaching wasn't enough to make you two survive on your own. Take care, Your Holiness, Crown Prince," he lowered his head slightly at them before he left the room.

Aurelia and Isador lowered their heads to Rasmus as they watched him leave.

Chapter 300 - 300: Taking a different path.

Rasmus and Aris looked at the white horses that Aurelia had lent them for their journey to the Refenus Kingdom, which would take them at least a month. Aurelia offered them to use the Holy Nation's blimp, but Rasmus didn't want it because it would only bring unnecessary attention. He also knew that Aris preferred to explore the continent on foot, so she could visit each city and village.

"Are you sure you will be fine riding a horse with your condition?" Erlina asked as she stood beside Rasmus's horse.

Rasmus tried to climb onto the horse on his own, but his weak body was against him. He used a lot of strength to just get on the horse, but he wasn't ashamed or embarrassed.

"My condition is a lot better than before, I'll be fine," Rasmus answered as he looked down at the horse and gently caressed its mane.

"How are we going to contact each other?" Carrion asked as he stood beside Erlina and looked up at Rasmus.

"Javi knows how to do it. He will use his ravens to convey your message. Aris knows how to speak with Javi's ravens, so it won't be hard for us to communicate when necessary," Rasmus answered as he looked down at Carrion.

Daryus looked at Rasmus's pale skin, and even now, he couldn't do anything to help with his situation. However, knowing that Rasmus's health was slowly and steadily getting better, he felt relief and knew that Rasmus would be okay without his help.

"The Divine physician should be here soon, and I was hoping that he could diagnose your condition, Count. But, knowing that you're leaving, I guess that would be impossible," Daryus said as he looked at the horse's body, which looked healthy and strong.

"Don't think about me, Doctor. Focus on why you're here, and I hope you can fulfill what you're here for," Rasmus responded as he looked Daryus in the eye. "Lady Astrea needed someone like you by her side, especially with the current situation," he added.

Daryus nodded, realizing that the things that had happened in the Holy Nation would put Astrea in a depressed state. However, he didn't know anything about the situation between Aurelia and Astrea, and soon he would know about it.

Serena looked at Aris riding the horse, and when their eyes met, Serena gave her a gentle smile and nod. Aris looked at her for a moment and responded with a simple nod as well. Serena then approached Rasmus's horse and gently caressed its neck.

"All I have to do is to protect her, right?" Serena asked with her brows raised.

"Don't babysit her, and keep an eye on every move she makes," Rasmus answered as he nodded. "You can do whatever you want here, so enjoy your time," he said, looking down at Serena.

Serena nodded with understanding as she took a few steps away from the horses, putting her hands behind her back. Videl and Javi were standing on the side, had nothing to say to Rasmus or Aris since they already knew their duty, and they weren't worried about Rasmus with Aris beside him.

Rasmus then saw Astrea walking toward him with Esper and Ulric following from behind. He didn't see Aurelia anywhere, and that meant Aurelia was still avoiding and distancing herself from her mother.

"Count... Lady Aris..." Astrea said in a quiet and weak voice. Her expression was gloomy and exhausted. "I heard you're leaving already, so I came by to see you go," she forced a smile at Rasmus.

Rasmus could see there were thousands of words that Astrea wanted to say to him, but she knew she couldn't because of the people around her. He then looked at Aris and the others. There was no word needed, and they all nodded with understanding and walked away, far enough to give Astrea some privacy.

Astrea looked at Esper and Ulric, giving them a gentle and weak smile, wanting them to let her be alone with Rasmus. They both bowed their heads and moved to the side, the opposite side of Carrion and the others.

"Thank you for giving your time, Count..." Astrea said as she smiled at Rasmus. "I believe you have heard about everything from Aurelia since I knew she would come for you to ask about the things that happened here, the secrets that we hid for more than a century..."

"I don't read the record, Lady Astrea," Rasmus responded before Astrea could continue her speech.

Astrea was shocked when Rasmus didn't read the record, the truth that the Holy Nation had hidden from the world. She stared into Rasmus's eyes, and she saw no lies in them, even though she already knew that Rasmus wouldn't lie.

"Whatever that had happened here, or what you kept hidden from the world, it's none of my business. Do I care, no, so I don't need to know," Rasmus said as he patted the horse's neck gently. "Aurelia has decided on what to do, and her path will be hard and full of grief. What will you do?" He asked.

Astrea sighed as she looked at the site where it used to be a big temple. She found out that Aurelia was planning to tear everything down and rebuild it from nothing, but this time it would be built with nothing but truth. She agreed with Rasmus's words, and she already knew the answer to his question.

"Then I'll be her shield until there's nothing left of me," Astrea answered as she looked at Rasmus.

"And I'll keep my promise, Lady Astrea. Saint Serena and Videl will protect her as well," Rasmus nodded.

"Thank you, Count. Truly, I'm grateful," Astrea smiled gently at Rasmus. "I believe I have taken enough of your time. I'll let you be," she continued as she gently brushed the horse's cheek and then walked away to be with Esper and Ulric.

Rasmus rode his horse toward Aris and gave her a nod, signaling to her it was time to leave. They both began to ride their horses toward the gate, leaving the first layer of the Holy Nation while everyone watched those two disappear into the distance.

Rasmus and Aris looked at the empty streets, people were still asleep and the sun was still an hour away from rising. After they had had enough looking around, they began to fasten their pace and let their horses run as fast as they could.

Aurelia was in her chamber, writing a journal about her feelings and the decisions she would make in the future. She was planning everything and thinking about the risks and consequences while at the same time trying to find a solution for each of them. She barely had any sleep in the past two days, and she didn't feel sleepy because a lot of things were going on in her head.

While Aurelia was busy writing, she heard a soft knock on the door, and since there was only another person that lived in the palace, she knew who it was.

"It's not locked..." Aurelia said quietly.

Astrea slowly opened the door and looked at Aurelia busy working on the journal on her desk. She took a deep breath and slowly walked toward her. She stood in front of the desk, waiting for Aurelia to allow her to sit.

"Take a seat, mother. You don't have to ask for my permission..." Aurelia said, her eyes focused on the book and a quill in her right hand.

Astrea slowly sat down across from Aurelia, and she waited until Aurelia finished with her journal. However, Aurelia didn't pause or stop writing, she kept her focus on the book in front of her.

"Count Rasmus just left, I thought you would see him go," Astrea said in a quiet voice.

"I know that, and I already gave my goodbye to him yesterday," Aurelia answered as she kept her eyes focused on the book.

Astrea nodded, but she didn't know what else to say since she felt like she was standing in front of a thick wall. She couldn't break the silence because she felt like the hands of the lives that died a hundred years ago were covering her mouth and gripped around her neck. The guilt and the pain were so overwhelming that she wanted to cry and scream for help.

"Mother, I'm fine..." Aurelia said as she kept writing. "Count Rasmus made me understand how hard it would be for you. I understand why our ancestors chose to hide the truth. However, I don't want to live to protect the lies," she said as she slowly looked up at Astrea.

Astrea lowered her head, and didn't want her daughter to see how tired and exhausted she looked. Suddenly, she heard a chair being pushed away and footsteps that approached her. She slowly lifted her head and saw Aurelia on her knees beside her.

"I'm going to tell the world, mother. This is the choice that I'm going to do," Aurelia said as she held Astrea's hands. "I'm sorry for what will happen to us, to our family, and to our nation," she continued as she stared at Astrea's hands.

"No, Aurelia. You're doing the right thing. Although I swore to hide the truth, I did have a choice to reveal it, but I chose not to. I don't care about everything else, all I care about right now is you, my daughter..." Astrea shook her head as she held Aurelia's hands firmly.

"Thank you, mother..." Aurelia smiled as she leaned in and rested her head on Astrea's lap.

"No, thank you. You're going to lift us from this curse..." Astrea shook her head and began to caress Aurelia's hair gently. "Do what you must, and I'll be there behind you all the time," she assured.

Aurelia nodded and wrapped her arms around Astrea's waist.

