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Warning: This story contains macro and hourglass curves.

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The Toughest Call, by DragonMasterX.

Alur was a fringe city next to the edge of the kingdom of Laylor. Located between the plains and the desert, Alur was known for its exotic spot in the wilderness. Life was tough being so close to the badlands where beasts of all kinds could be found, the rivers and lush vegetation so far away. Alur wasn't the kind of place to go to for a vacation. However, many connoisseurs appreciated Alur's rich, ancient history and appreciated its mysteries.

Legends spoke of the small kingdom being the gathering point for wizards, shamans and other mystical practitioners from all over the continent. Studies and research on various topics of the magic arts used to be conducted in Alur, where its clerics and priests would pray to the old gods for peace and prosperity. One such myth focused on the birth of the first dragon goddess, a benevolent creature who blessed the world with her eternal protection, delivering innocents from evil and securing the lands in exchange for absolutely nothing. Since the rituals to summon the great deity's wisdom happened in ancient Alur, the fringe city earned its other name: "The city of dragons." And those who prayed to the goddess came to be known as: "Dragon callers".

Young prince Arton of Laylor had concerns he could only take to the city of dragons. He had a friend versed in the magic arts currently taking up studies in Alur, although Arton could hardly be pleased of his location. It hadn't been long ago since Arton's father, the King, had decided to declare the goddess' worship taboo. Being next to the larger kingdom, Alur became under siege by numerous inquisitions, driving away those that would spread the ancient teachings. Only the most headstrong priests or those under the Laylor King's payroll remained, making it hard to come by a friendly face. As a result of never-ending harassments, Alur became something akin to a ghost town where only the brave or foolish would venture. Especially if one was of Laylor royal blood.

Arton's problem was beyond those reservations. Donning a cloak and muffler to hide his face and using torn rags with which to clothe him, the young prince left for his lone quest to find his friend in Alur. Once he had reached the gates of the ancient city, he was able to confirm the rumors on barely a soul being left wandering in the city of dragons. "Only dragon callers that oppose my father's tyranny hide within these walls," Arton reminded himself as he peered carefully about near empty streets. He recognized the royal crest of several knights posted regularly throughout the city, likely part of the inquisition. With every knight there under his father's thumb, Arton was better off without any of them recognizing him. To make it easier on him, Arton had left his bodyguards behind, patrolling Laylor as it was the duty of the royal guard.

Even with his low profile and map, navigating the city to find his friend was difficult. It had been very long since the last time Arton had visited Alur. He remembered coming all the time when his mother was alive, but he was far too young for his memories to help. However, there was a certain place etched into his mind's eye. Arton remembered it with fondness, the remains of an old church where he used to hang out with his Alur-bred friend whenever he would visit.

The desert breeze nearby was covering the place in noise, hurting visibility. It was hard to tell, but

Arton was sure he remembered the broken belfry at the top of the old prayer tower. Having sent a letter preparing his advent, Arton had notified his friend to wait to meet up at their usual spot. Luckily, that far off spot in the city wasn't heavily guarded and the zealous dragon callers didn't use it anymore. Arton took a deep breath and tipped his hood up, double-checking that there wasn't anybody following him, before he ventured inside.

The abandoned church clearly had seen better days. The exterior gave the impression of it having been ransacked already, but the inside looked decrepit and old. Light filtered through broken multi-color glass windows and one could hear the rats and birds which had nestled in. Arton had to mind his step as the floor was rickety and showed signs of falling apart. He could hardly believe the state in which the building was.

"Lord Arton?" a voice called out to the prince. Arton immediately took his hood off and lowered his muffler. "It is you!" the source of the voice revealed themselves, a figure emerging from the corner of a confession room. He was also heavily clothed in order to blend in with the marketers and street peddlers like Arton.

"Xander my friend. It has been far too long," Arton smiled and gave his friend a look. Xander was less the kind of mage one could expect to see flinging fireballs out of a hand while chugging ale with the other and more like a meek little scholar devoted to theory. Nevertheless, Arton was here for his knowledge and not his magic power. The two childhood friends shared a brief embrace before Arton led Xander to one of the few tables that hadn't rotten apart yet. From a bag concealed under his cloak, Arton produced a wrapped item in the shape of a sword. They exchanged firm looks. "I am not beating around the bush, Xander. As I mentioned in my letter, I can't trust any of the court's mages. I need you to have a look at this."

"Right away, milord," nodding his head, Xander carefully unwrapped the item which turned out to indeed be a battle sword. The blade looked normal at first glance, but Xander squinted at the runes inscribed on the purple handle. "This is certainly no Layorian script; foreign to anything I've seen on the continent in fact. Is this the mist weapon you spoke of?"

"Yes it is. Xander, what else can you tell me about it?" Arton put a hand to his chin, already looking concerned as it appeared Xander was having trouble reading the mystical artifact.

Xander carefully spun the blade, focusing on its handle and the single gem encrusted in a central socket. "Hmm, enchanted, no doubt about it. It's hard to read, but not because I lack the crypto-key. The runes are simple to translate; they are derived from an ancient ritualistic language, which is very ancient to begin with. This, milord? This appears to be much older; like the primitive form."

"What does it say?"

"Power."

"That's all?"

"Yes, but its strength enhancing capabilities do come at a cost." As Xander explained, Arton closed his eyes, inhaled deeply and prepared for the answer he dreaded.

Before enquiring however, Arton decided to fill his friend in further: "You do remember my brother Kruon, don't you Xander?" Xander nodded his head again, "He's always been hot-blooded but lately he has become unreasonably violent to the point of dangerous aggression. I have reasons to believe the mist weapons instilled by my father are responsible for this, Xander. I've seen the

changes in the army; those knights look more like beasts than men. Doubly more so for my brother, who is always seen with two of these. This is one of his two swords.”

Xander gulped, “Milord, this is not good as you have probably already surmised. The magic that enchants these blades is dangerous; I can’t quite place my finger on it just yet, but it is surrounded by an aura of malice. The energies flowing through it are... not natural.”

Arton looked more decided than ever after having heard the mage’s words. Those weapons were making Laylor a powerful nation, earning his proud father a large number of successful conquests. But he had changed; he wasn’t the kind ruler he once was, his methods were not one with the man Arton used to be familiar with. His change was slowly changing Laylor with him, persecuting religious men and women for no apparent reason, slaughtering dragons for sport and not meals or necessary equipment. After learning that his father had consorted with evil magic, the prince had no more doubts in his mind. Arton armed himself with the resolve to finally confront the King about the mist.

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The royal city of Laylor was a dark place to be. In contrast to Alur, the capital was full of people. With more people however, there was more unrest. Years had passed since the population’s beloved King had decided to start hunting down dragon callers and go on bloody crusades. The civil unrest was palpable to outsiders who toured the capital, but the kingdom’s life conditions were the best on the continent. There were the poor and the rich being divided by the usual wall, but everyone agreed they did not want to leave the safety of one of the sturdiest walls in the entire continent. As such, few were the ones that spoke out against the king.

Ciel wasn’t interested in the humans’ political or economic struggles as much as she was concerned with their state of mind. War was keeping them content but sad and anxious at the same time. It was like a paradoxical status of constant self-inflicted struggle. In her mind, humans showed an almost equal need for war as they did peace in order to exist. Laylor’s capital seemed utopic from an outside view, but Ciel had spent months in her little shack, observing everybody.

In her human disguise, Ciel appeared as a small, gentle-looking young lady of modest upbringing. She ran a charity as a town healer, discreetly using her magic power to treat and cure illnesses and mend wounds. She never once asked for payment, but her more grateful patients donated food and blankets to her. Ciel was in no need for any of that, but she took it anyway as a sign of trust between her and the townspeople. One of the local carpenters used what little spare materials he could get to build her a home, since she had none. Tales of everyone supporting the town’s miraculous healer spread and slowly but steadily, people began to chip in to help Ciel treat patients.

That was really all Ciel had wanted for Laylor. It brought her a smile when she saw humans supporting each other without any pretense. Her dragon race was a proud one, and no one would really accept nor offer aid, believing in an individual’s self-worth. Dragons, however, were born strong. Humans were much weaker, yet they showed much promise in numbers. However, not everything was quite as perfect as Ciel had hoped.

Fights often broke out in the nearby bars, with the usual culprits being the king’s violent, royal guard. Incidents such as fires or vandalism would happen, plunging the victims into fear and despair. Ciel had her hands full because of jealousy, fear and general ill will.

And the mist was an ever-present, looming cloud over the kingdom that threatened to engulf the city. It was an oppressive, malignant aura with roots on an otherworldly power that she could not

explain. The only thing she knew for certain was that the mist was linked to humans, and that it was up to them to push it away. Ciel had already tried to use her blessings to drive the evil away herself, but it always returned stronger, weakening her in the process. As an all-mighty goddess, it was emotionally crippling that she could not use the full extent of her power to rid the pitiful humans of their problem; just being inside of Laylor with the mist sapped her strength. Ciel often had to leave before the day was over in order to regain her stamina, lest she was knocked out or something worse happened to her.

Each time the blonde girl left Laylor's capital, she did so under the cover of the night, but only after making sure those in need had been tended to beforehand. Sometimes this meant staying in the mist until absolutely the last second, but Ciel believed that just helping one more human and convincing them that facing adversity together was possible was another step towards realizing her dream of a peaceful world. The young dragon goddess was convinced that it was more than just a dream; it had to be possible. She just had to keep trying.

The goddess' human vestiges were a stark contrast to what she really looked like. In truth, Ciel was a fifty foot tall sky-blue and white scaled creature with a very thick yet feminine build. She had two breasts many times the size of her own head, the firm and spherical mammarys pushing out of her chest like gravity-defying pink-tipped cream balloons. Under her monstrous cleavage, if one bothered to look away from the gratuitous under-chest, Ciel sported an incredible set of 8-packs bulging outward on her abdominal wall. She was very wide hipped, thick thunder-thighs rippling with huge muscle cord balancing out the two heavy, round rump cheeks under her massive tail. The giant goddess' arms were thicker than castle towers, with their highlight being her enormous shoulders and bulging biceps. Her muscles were both dense and huge; making fun of boulders they could easily crush. Ciel's curvature was the pinnacle of femininity, soft yet perky mounds at her front and full yet springy buttocks at her back. Those and her deep-sea blue eyes and flowing golden hair made her an exotic combination of strength and beauty.

She couldn't, however, allow herself to be seen by humans like these just yet; much less in Laylor's capital where she couldn't maintain her true form for long thanks to the mist. Ciel's exits were always low-profile. She would turn invisible by the gates outside of the capital before assuming her true form and using the immensity of her glorious wingspan to take off into the skies.

To recover from a long day of hard work, Ciel returned to Crystal Falls, where she could retreat from the ill effects of the mist and rest; away from the rest of the world. She enjoyed the humans' company, and she had made friends, but Ciel was also very comfortable in her own solace. In her cave she could be free of constraints and walk around in the buff and be as big as she wanted; or at least as large as the cave would support. Even while relaxing however, Ciel would spend a good portion of her down time reading books and novellas, picking up interesting facts on deities and gods of yore to help her in her new role.

In both fiction and non-fiction, gods and goddesses were reported to help mortals by imparting knowledge and granting them confidence to carry out their will. Ciel's will was peace, so she thought deeply about inspiring the people of Laylor to be better neighbors and help each other. "Ahem..." the dragoness cleared her throat, "Lo' and behold, for the misery and strife wrought upon you may be cast away merely by looking out for each other! S-so be nice...?" Ciel shakily pronounced, making one of her many attempts at inspiring speeches, although she became nervous when she thought of revealing herself to the humans. Poking her indexes and crossing her legs, Ciel blushed nervously. "Maybe I could speak out while invisible, then I wouldn't be so nervous."

"Poppyclock, I say," an irritatingly fast-speaking voice made Ciel sit up straight. Her pointy ears stood at attention as a thick cloud of smoke silhouetted a familiar figure. "Why lass, form and shape

are as important as the message. Why would you want to avoid showing yourself to the masses? Ah, could it be stage fright perchance?" As the tobacco-scented smoke cleared out, Ciel quickly summoned her giant pink-bathrobes to cover her humongous body in front of the unexpected visit.

A human-sized yet relatively tall, featureless man appeared before the goddess. Wearing a black Armani suit, gray striped pants and designer shoes, the thin faceless male made his way into Ciel's study. Walking cane in one hand and cigar in the other, and wearing a fashionable billycock on his bald head, the mysterious being was known as the One with Time; an all-powerful observer from the multi-dimensional plane known as the Rift, and also a guy with complete disregard for a woman's privacy.

"How come you never knock before barging in, Gary?"

"Then it wouldn't be known as barging anymore, Ciel." The gentleman stopped, looking up at the absolutely massive female with an accusing pause, "I have told you that name displeases me."

"Yeah, well, I have told you your other name is a mouthful, so Gary it is." Ciel licked the tip of a clawed finger before turning the page on her resized book. "What are you doing here? You usually pull me into the Rift when you want to talk." Ciel paused herself to think on her own words and widened her eyes in fear, "Did something happen?"

"It is no present emergency, my dear," the one referred to as "Gary" waved his gloved hands to disperse Ciel's worries.

"Surely you didn't come here just to poke fun at me." Ciel sighed, relaxing her tense muscles and folded her arms. Gary didn't budge an inch.

"I have come bearing visions of the future, lass. It is worrying, although the mist obscures most of the details," the otherworldly being leaned back against one of Ciel's tall bookcases. "Tensions between Alur and Laylor have reached their peak as you're well aware," Ciel nodded, so he continued. "Your work has been extra demanding as of late, no?"

Ciel was beginning to grow impatient, since she didn't have the ability to look into the future. "Cut to the chase, Gary."

"Danger approaches, lass. The city of dragons in the kingdom of Alur, is where disaster will strike."

"When?" Ciel squatted and leaned her comparatively gigantic snout next to the One with Time.

"When is this happening, Gary?"

"Tut tut, I said it is obscured. It is not happening right now, but be aware it might happen sooner than you think."

Ciel pulled herself up and covered her maw with a claw, "Hmm. Maybe the prince knows something. I should ask lord Arton when I go back to Laylor tomorrow."

Gary seemed to laugh, "Ah yes. Has he offered flowers yet, Ciel?"

"What do you mean?" Taken away from her thoughts, Ciel blinked and looked past her monstrous cleavage down at the little being. Gary was already lighting a second cigarette, to which Ciel frowned before reaching down and putting it out between the very tips of her fingers. "None of that in here, Gary. I rather like the unperturbed scent of nature."

The One with Time could only sigh as his cigarette was reduced to a crumpled up bundle of tobacco. “Woman, you certainly have no idea what class is about, and I’m sure one of these days I’ll have to dedicate an afternoon to lecture you on why taking out a gentleman’s smoke is simply poor form. But right now, I’m rather amused you’re at a loss for even the most basic of human customs.”

Ciel was less than looking forwards to the faceless man’s proposition, but she was still hooked on his other topic. “What basic customs are you talking about?”

“Why, courtship, lass!”

“Oh! Pfft, pshaw, you- hah! Don’t even, sheesh! Haha, oh Gary.” Ciel’s flushing cheeks were absolutely betraying her already flaky deflection and fanning, dismissive claws.

“That said,” Gary continued, leaning down on his black-tipped cane, “Could this little prince be why you wish for you and your ostensibly big knockers to remain invisible during a speech?”

Ciel shifted uncomfortably on her rock, having no comeback.

“Ah, hit the nail on the head, did I?” the teasing man’s words rang true in Ciel’s heart. Deep down, she found prince Arton attractive despite being a human. It went beyond physical attraction: He was a symbol of virtue and humility while at the same time being brave and self-less. She still fondly remembered her first day on Laylor and how he braved a house fire with her in order to save a trapped civilian. Then later, despite his duty to take her in after he had seen her performing magic without a catalyst or permit, he had let her go. Also, she liked his cute armor-cladded little butt. “Earth to Ciel.”

“Yes?” the dragoness shook her head as a thin cloud of vapor engulfed her face. She frowned and glared down, “Gary!”

“Wot. If I can’t have a smoke at least let me have my tea,” the gentleman was indeed holding a cup of tea on his right hand, his pinkie arched properly and everything. He shook his head and shrugged, “First visit and you compete for the nagging Nancy title already. The lad’s in for hell if he takes you for a wife, I say.”

Ciel’s face became bright as a tomato. She tried averting her gaze but one of her eyes kept trying to look down at the tall fellow. “Have you seen any of this?” Gary put his cup down on the table his left hand was holding and suddenly laughed.

“Oh ho ho ho! Would you not like to know, lass?”

“Nngh... no! I don’t want to,” the flustered Ciel turned and gave her back to the One with Time, seeming to shrink as she crossed her legs and dragged her book in front of her with her tail. “Now if you’re going to stick around, please be quiet. I have to practice my speeches.”

“Ah yes. That is actually important, dear.” Gary suddenly appeared on her shoulder, sitting down while enjoying the rest of his hot infusion. “Inspiring speeches are part of any good leader’s repertoire. And the material you’re using for reference is one of my favorites in fact.”

“Really?” Ciel blinked in absolutely surprise. Had the sarcastic little man finally decided to compliment her for once instead of being patronizing?

“Quite. Although I must raise the question as to whether they will be as effective,” Ciel focused her blue eyes at the One with Time as he appeared to be rubbing his chin in deep thought, “It will certainly be a miracle if your audience pays attention to you instead of the flapdoodles the size of elephants bouncing on your chest.”

Ciel’s gaze narrowed as she calmly removed her claws from her lap and took a deep breath before she swiped Gary off her shoulder and stuffed her deep into her cleavage, trapping him between her gigantic mammaries. “And here I thought you were being serious.”

“Guh!” the entrapped deity groaned, “This is SO not lady-like behaviour, Ciel!”

“Although you have a point,” the giantess conceded, casually bouncing her enormous rack up and down on her palms. Even clothed in the thick and cute pink bathrobe she had ironically received as a gift by the One with Time during their first encounter, her bust line was such an attention caller that it might interfere if she ever had to reveal her true form to humans. “I’m going to need different attire... and I know just the thing!” Ciel snapped her fingers with a smile.

“Right. Would you be so kind as to let a fellow out of this improvised squishy prison first?” Gary chirped out, “I would very much like go back to my Earl Grey now.”

“I can do without hitchhikers while I’m changing, yeah.” Ciel giggled as she fished the One with Time out of her cleavage and gently set him down by her giant coffee table.

“Might I remind you that it was you who put me in there in the first place?” a floating boiled-water kettle appeared next to the faceless gentleman, who produced a new cup on a plate on his palm. Gary then then dramatically swished the cup as he placed a teabag in it, followed by pouring water in it. He sighed to the smell.

“You don’t need a tea addiction just because I don’t let you smoke in here,” Ciel stuck her tongue out playfully at the deity, who scoffed.

“A true gentleman relishes tea time, my dear. Speaking of which, shall I fetch you a cup for when you’re done?” Gary offered, getting a nod from her, “Now it’s only a matter of finding a container large enough to...” but before the One with Time could finish his sentence, Ciel began to shrink before his eyes. Her overly buff form reduced its thickness by about fifty percent of its usual girth, leaving her with a female body-builder’s shape and while her curves adjusted, they remained spectacularly large. After resizing herself to a more manageable 15ft. tall height, the dragoness stretched and walked out of her shrunk pink bathrobe. “...never you mind then.”

At her new size, Ciel knew she could have an impact on anyone that saw her while at the same time be practical for the apparel she had in mind. Ciel bent forwards for a moment and folded her massive wings, erecting her tail to a horizontal angle as she touched the tip of her clawed toes. From there she started dragging her fingers back towards her ankles. Light streamed out of her fingertips and the glow soon caught her feet and ankles, starting to cover all of her as she steadily worked her way up on her long, muscular legs towards her thighs. She moved her hands to her sides when she reached her hips and gradually assumed a vertical position until her hands reached her shoulders, arms crossed over her voluminous chest. Once the light had completely engulfed every inch of her muscle-bound, curvaceous form, her mighty scaled body was revealed to be dressed in a shiny set of armor plating. “Hmm, I might need to tweak the design later, but this should help!” she giggled in excitement, twirling about and looking over herself as her naked tail and wild, long mane of hair fluttered about.

Gary simply served more tea while nodding, “Not much in the imaginative realm, but you look comfortable in it. Allow me to suggest imbuing it, lass. It might come in handy.”

“You mean with a portion of my power?” the dragoness looked down as Gary somehow sipped tea despite his lack of an oral orifice.

“Quite. The mist has detrimental effect on your power. Imbuing plating with a reserve could ensure your survivability even if you were caught off guard at a precarious moment. Sugar?” the tall man offered, getting two fingers raised by a contemplative Ciel. “You once nearly collapsed on a night of particularly big disharmony if I recall.”

Ciel took the comparatively small cup in her gauntlet covered palm and enchanted it to grow bigger to fit her size. Then she took a small sip before nodding, “The day Layor’s incursion on Alur began. Its fringe city was hit badly. Many innocents were slaughtered...” she trailed off, staring at the steam fuming out of her cup with a sad frown, “Gary, why do you think Alur hasn’t reprised yet?”

“Alur is an ancient kingdom which is based on the doctrines of the first of your predecessors.”

“Right. She was here before even Nizara,” Ciel breathed in deeply and shakily breathed out. “Gosh, I don’t know if I’ll ever measure up. She created a whole culture before Nizara, who guarded the world before me, even took up the mantle. I have so little experience compared to them!”

Gary shook his head, “The circumstance of your ascension is irrelevant, my dear. You are equal in capability; your actions are the ones which will determine if you measure up or not; which is an amusing thing to mention considering your big...”

“So Alur doesn’t fight back because its king is a fundamentalist on their religion that advocates peace,” Ciel said without paying heed to the One with Time after interrupting him. “But I know for a fact several countrymen left the capital already. Their peaceful ways might be the only reason Alur doesn’t have a lot of mist.”

“But it still does; and resentment builds in haste with time,” Gary explained after another sip, “If you’re ever headed for Alur to help, be careful the townspeople don’t know you’ve been healing the people responsible for their oppression.”

“Hey Gary,” Ciel was looking less than hopeful, staring at her now warm cup of tea, “Do you think I’ll ever be able to fix things between two kingdoms?”

“No lass. Not without bloodshed.” The One with Time’s words were heavy and meaningful, making Ciel cringe in disappointment. “However,” her ears perked up, “You can aid and guide those humans when they need it. That time is now. They need you, Ciel.”

The armored dragoness finally smiled. He had a very strange way of showing it, but Ciel was convinced that the One with Time was looking out for her. As thanks she reached down and pulled him in for a hug. “Thanks Gary.”

“Can’t we at least discuss the bloody name?” the deity grunted.

“No. Shut up.”

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Layor's barracks were very noisy nowadays. The royal guard shared training grounds with King Graom's Dragon Slayers, whose numbers kept growing. Prince Kruon led the latter force which was in charge of protecting the kingdom and its interests from wild beasts. Lately however, any dragon in their way was as good a prey as any. Ever since the addition of mist equipment, Kruon's squad had become indomitable and fierce, seeing action every day even if there was no danger. Kruon believed in the old "guts and glory" adage, so he had no qualms on just riding out with his Dragon Slayers to kill for sport.

The royal guard was losing its members. Upper Layor, where magic catalysts made life simple and decadent, was really the only place that warranted protection, as the nobles living there paid their taxes. Meanwhile, Ground Layor, with their minimal living conditions, was gradually being left unsupervised by the shrinking royal guard. They were all jumping ship to Kruon's squad, addicted to the adrenaline of the hunt, addicted to their charismatic if violent leader, but most of all, addicted to the power of swinging weapons capable of shredding through powerful dragon hide. The pay was good, and they did not have to deal with pesky nobles or annoying peasants down below.

Arton was on his way to the royal court, having arrived from his brief, although secret journey to Alur. It seemed to be a peaceful morning. From the magically projected solid light bridge, Arton lamented the beautiful dawn that starkly contrasted his depressive country. His thoughts were soon interrupted as a gruff voice alerted him from below.

"I'll behead you and the rest of you sissies! Just try pushing me again!"

From the castle's second floor, Arton stopped in his tracks; the crystal magic casting a bridge under him concentrating in one place. There was a scuffle in the training grounds. By the looks of it the royal guard was arguing with dragon slayers instead of working out.

The young prince had instated his lieutenants to perform daily drills with the troops at the first hour of the morning to keep sharp. The Slayers would normally bustle in later since they had different schedules, but it didn't look like that was the case any longer. "What's going on here?" Arton demanded loudly as he began to step down, the magic bridge casters following him and generating solid light steps for him to walk down to the grounds.

"Your majesty!" one of Arton's lieutenants stood straight in salutation followed by the rest of the troops. The slayers seemed both disappointed and quiet.

"At ease, soldier," Arton nodded, the clanking of armors rustling like metal leaves in a rusty grassland. From the looks of it, soldiers and slayers had been having an argument. The air was so tense one could slice it with a knife. "What seems to be the problem?"

"The slayers demand the guard to relinquish the training grounds, milord." As one of the lieutenants explained, Arton didn't even have to look away to hear the chuckles and teases from the red clad knights on the other side. Many of those voices, Arton recalled; they used to be part of his regime.

Regardless of their attitude, Arton turned, speaking loud and clear for all to listen. "There is no need to fight for training space. There is more than enough room for everyone."

"I don't want no coots from these women!" one voice came from the larger, red group and the crowd exploded in laughter. Arton remained silent but steeled his glare and in-between his increasingly aggravated countrymen. Teasers and teased, no good would come out of this. "Yeah! We're what, 3 to 1? We deserve the space more 'n they do, they should go look after old people in Ground Layor, hah!"

"I will not have fools upsetting discipline in the army," Arton vociferated with enough loudness to break through the booming laughter, "If you can't share the training grounds, that is fine. But I will not have internal bickering turn into pointless in-fighting."

"And why not, brother?" Arton gasped as the smirking Dragon Slayers parted to the side like an angry red sea which had just been split in two by a single man. The red-haired heir to the throne, prince Kruon, leader of the slayers, was walking towards him. "It's a perfect opportunity to weed out the weak and spineless!"

"Brother, don't further aggravate these men. They clearly are..." Arton stopped himself from talking; his older brother was no better. He could see it now: the slayers' crowd all had the same bloody-thirsty look. No, Kruon far exceeded theirs. One could say the older prince was at the epicenter of some sort of spiteful, maddened craze. Arton struggled to find proper words that would defuse the situation.

"Milord, please be reasonable!" Arton's lieutenant stepped forwards, a brave man who had stuck it out with the young prince for a long time now. He was trying to appeal to the red-headed slayer. "Our drills take two hours to complete every morning, and then we leave for patrols. Your Dragon Slayers have the grounds for all of the..." the lieutenant had to stop talking when Kruon approached the lieutenant, who had to take a step back or else Kruon would have toppled him over.

"Out of my way, worm." Kruon spat the soldier's face. The lieutenant lowered his head and stepped aside before Kruon stood in front of his brother. In a sudden swipe, Arton could feel his brother seize the wrapped blade he had been carrying. "Now what are you doing with my favorite toy, brother?" Kruon used the sharp claws on his gauntlets to shred the bandages apart to reveal his second blade, "Could it be you're thinking of switching for the winning team?" he laughed.

Arton cursed himself, mentally regretting his decision to bring the same mist sword he had taken earlier. But he couldn't show weakness now. "There are no winners in a slaughter, Kruon. You keep hunting every dragon around Alur and you'll trigger a war."

"And isn't that what our beloved father wants?" Kruon smiled, brandishing his sword, licking the blade while slowly dragging it against the back of his hand. Arton grimaced in disgust, recognizing the expression of a deranged killer. "Alur is an outdated country ran by senile old men that believe overgrown lizards rule us all. Us! The mightiest nation in the whole world!" he shouted, receiving an accompanying "Hoo-hah!" from all of his men. "You're damn right it's a slaughter, little Arton. A slaughter I'm more than pleased to lead. We took the small desert city, and we will soon march to eradicate the last of those reptile-worshipping vermin. That's the first step. After that, the rest of Alur will fall!"

"Are you done?" Arton grunted, unable to condone, much less understand the motives behind his older brother's and father's ambitions. Alur and Layor used to be such good friends, which was probably why the former had not yet officially declared war despite having almost lost a city to the incursion; but Arton knew the situation was a time-bomb, and when it exploded, there would be no survivors. He had to act now. He had to convince his father to stop this madness. Arton had no time to waste on his brother's insulting smirk or his jacked-up slayers backing him up. Turning around to leave, Arton was nonetheless stopped by his older brother's hand on his shoulder.

"Come brother. Forgive my nonsense," Kruon gently said with a smile, "Why don't you stay for the execution?"

“What in the name of the gods are you talking about, Kruon?” Arton had lost his patience and slowly turned around to see his lieutenant captured by some of the dragon slayers. “Unhand that man right this instant!” he shouted and tried to advance but got Kruon’s hand smacking his chest.

“Tsk tsk, little brother. You know worms aren’t allowed to speak out of turn! This guy is only getting what he deserves. Yes...” Kruon grinned and tripped Arton down, pushing him to the ground before turning around. The mad prince approached the begging lieutenant while the rest of the guard stared and the rest of the dragon slayers cheered; although Arton could see some of them visibly disturbed by what was going on.

“Kruon, what are you doing?! Stop!” Arton called out as he got up to his feet.

But Kruon was far gone into his realm of blood lust. He was eager to kill, like a single-purpose machine bent on extinguishing life and nothing else. The gem at his sword’s handle was glowing brightly. He raised his blade at the lieutenant, “Suffer for your insolence, maggots!”

“STOP YOURSELF!” Arton screamed at the top of his lungs. He had no time to perform a take-down so instead Arton summoned all of his leg strength to propel himself and tackle his brother. Caught unawares, Kruon was brought down with the collective gasp of everyone present. Kruon’s mist sword was let go flying into the air, but it fortunately impaled the moist ground only.

“Let go of me, Arton! Do you want me to kill you too?!” Kruon snarled like a struggling beast while Arton locked his arms at his back, kneeling on top so his crazed brother wouldn’t harm anyone.

“Listen to yourself, Kruon! This isn’t you!” Arton growled back, having trouble holding his enraged brother back.

“I’ll kill you, Arton! I’ll kill everyone!” Kruon continued to yell, his deranged outburst starting to scare both his and Arton’s men. Some had already fled, fearing for their lives. “Do you hear me? I’ll kill you all, and then I’ll kill those idiots at Alur! I can’t wait for this to be a war, I WILL MAKE IT A WAR IF I HAVE TO! I... ACK!” the older prince gagged after shouting as loudly as he could. Arton gasped in surprise as he felt Kruon stop resisting and choke.

“Brother, what’s the matter?!” asked a bewildered Arton as he noticed the blade by his brother stopped glowing. Suddenly, Kruon stopped struggling entirely, seemingly to fall into an unconscious state. “By the gods... Xander was right...” Arton muttered as he bore witness to his brother’s bruise on his face growing over his skin, turning it slightly purple like the mist aura on weapons. “Now, all of you!” Arton yelled at the dragon slayers, “Drop your weapons! Let go of my lieutenant!”

“Sire, what happened to the commander?!” the dragon slayer who only moments ago had been jeering at the royal guard chirped in like a scared wet chicken.

“I need you- all of you to listen to me, right now.” Arton gathered soldiers from both bands, “Find and stash every mist equipment away in the armory. Make sure nobody has access to them, understood? I need someone to take care of my brother while I take this up to the king.”

“I will, milord.” The now freed lieutenant who was about to be executed nodded to his leader, “Please hurry. His majesty has to know!”

Arton couldn’t believe the fealty of his men despite the odds and struggles. Even in dark times they showed unity and compassion. This further convinced Arton that Laylor was broken, but fixable.

The kingdom had great people in it; they were just making bad choices, influenced by evil. “The mist is causing this madness,” Arton thought as he glanced at his unconscious, purple-skinned sibling. “At this rate we will tear each other apart before Alur. It has to stop now!”

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“Father!” Arton’s voice rang through the court’s halls. The young prince brazenly entered the throne room where King Graom was, startling his trusted advisor, the tactician known as Mukori who was the only other person in the throne room.

“Your highness, is something the matter?” Arton wasn’t in the mood to listen to the boot-licking strategist talk; the prince couldn’t trust a man who so gingerly plotted other countries’ demise without question. It had been Mukori who suggested the incursions that hurt their already wounded relationship with Alur, and he was likely talking to the king about a larger scale attack. Arton ignored Mukori’s question and stood in front of his King.

“Arton, this is highly irregular, even for a child of mine,” King Graom sat at his throne with his head boringly rested upon his palm.

“One of your children is about to die because of more pressing irregularities father!” Arton barked out without any sugar coating. That made the King sit up straight as Mukori became startled.

“What did you say?! An attack?” King Graom demanded. Arton approached while shaking his head.

“No, father. It is the mist weapons! They’re affecting the troops, they’re toxic; Kruon has already fallen ill!”

“You said he was about die, Arton. If that is true, then why are you not with him?” King Graom asked. Arton grunted and glared up at his father.

“Aren’t you even going to see him? Father, I saw him with my own eyes: His skin turned purple, his eyes red and filled to the brim with a bloody lust. There is...”

“...no link between the weapons and his condition.” The King solemnly declared, making Arton want to reply but he got turned down by his father’s authority when he raised his hand in front of him, “Arton, I know you have your concerns, but now isn’t the time for your fantasies. Every second I spend listening to your nonsense about purple skin diseases, our enemies prepare to strike.”

“What enemies?!” Arton shouted out, unable to contain himself any longer, “You arbitrarily decided to make an enemy out of everyone out there!” he yelled, gesturing outside with his arm, “You’re killing this country, father! Alur used to be our friends. Mother used to take me there to learn about dragons, how can you...”

“Enough!” Graom stood up with a deep shout. The king stepped down and faced his young son. Arton had short blonde hair just like his mother used to, and the same clear eyes. Graom couldn’t bear to stare at them much longer, much less recall painful memories; he had a mission, one that had to be carried out before any sort of sentimentalism; at all costs. “I will not be questioned by my own child, in my own throne room, in front of my advisor. Leave me, Arton.”

“But father!” Arton insisted as the King turned his back on his son. Mukori by now was dead set on not opening his mouth unless ordered otherwise.

"I said..." the King grunted out, "Leave."

Despite his bold attempt, Arton knew he had failed to turn the situation around yet again. There was no arguing with a man as hot-headed as his father. "What changed you?" Arton cringed to ask, "Was it mother's...?"

"Now," Graom's firm voice cut through the air. Arton swallowed and finally turned his back.

"You were right about one thing. I have to be there for Kruon, because you clearly don't care about the son you've doomed," Arton cut back, using his only method of offense left to him: Feelings. Both sides stopped talking, but before causing any bigger scene, Arton left the throne room.

"M-Majesty...?" Mukori softly muttered. The King sat down without reply. After a few moments though, he spoke without looking at him.

"Resume, tactician."

"Y-yes! Immediately milord!"

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Fortunately for the disheartened young prince, Kruon hadn't shown signs of worsening when he arrived back at the training grounds. For fear of Kruon's condition, nobody dared move him. The castle healers had been monitoring them for a while when Arton got there, but they couldn't diagnose the problem. To them, it looked like a particularly bad rash of some encountered kind.

"Sire, it seems as though lord Kruon isn't showing any life-threatening symptoms. Shall we bring him to the ward?" the ever dutiful lieutenant asked, even offering to carry Kruon. But Arton declined.

"I'm afraid if our more experienced healers have no idea on his condition, it's pointless."

"Then what should we do, milord? We can't let lord Kruon suffer. I am the one who agitated him!" the lieutenant's honest words made Arton feel warm inside. For one reason or another, Arton could tell just from looking at the man's eyes that he wasn't just afraid of being executed if any ill happened to befall his afflicted brother; it was true, selfless concern. "If only we had someone more versed in this strange type of hex." Arton smiled and put a hand on the lieutenant's shoulder to calm him down, but then an idea hit him.

"That's right!" Arton clutched his hand as he remembered someone of similar personality back in Ground Laylor, "Lieutenant, we might just have the expert! Please arrange for a stretcher, we're headed to Ground Laylor!"

"B-but your highness, in the lord's condition...? To where the common rabble is?" one of the healers worriedly approached but was stopped by Arton's wagging finger.

"If you have nothing better to do than run your mouth, I suggest you go back to your ward," Arton stared daggers into the veiled woman's eyes, "I'm grateful for your services."

The stretcher was prepared without delay and Kruon was laid down on it. Two soldiers, the lieutenants and Arton escorted the unconscious elder prince to the castle's exit, seeking aid in the

most unlikely of places...

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Time was going slow for Ciel. She was busying herself picking out forms and shapes on the part of the skies not tainted by the mist. Laylor kept her permanently occupied, so slow days were a welcome sight, but sometimes too much of a good thing actually went against her. At least this meant less people were suffering. "I wonder what Gary is doing. Probably harassing more female deities and lecturing them about boring gentleman things," she thought out loud, unaware that in the Rift in Time loud sneezing had just occurred.

Laylor could be a nice place if one didn't focus on just the bad. Even being poor, children were ingenious and crafty when it came to having fun. She could see kids drawing pictures on the dirt using sticks and building make-believe forts out of tree stumps and logs the local wood cutters would share. Just looking at the toddlers play seemed to have a good effect on people's moods, so Ciel liked to think ever since her arrival and keeping everyone healthy, she had contributed to some of their happiness. "It seems so easy for them all to just smile and cast away the bad things. I wish everyone else in this kingdom could see this peace right now and really think it's possible to be happy without the need for conflict."

Those thoughts disappeared when the disguised goddess started noticing people silently making way for the royal guard, which was bringing a stretcher down the street. Ciel dusted her wrinkled apron and stood up, blinking her eyes as she noticed the covered person on the stretcher. Most of the pedestrians and bystanders seemed to be praying, thinking the guard to be carrying a plague victim. Ciel didn't know any better and was deeply confused. One aspect of her powers allowed her to see through covers and even detect life signs. For some reason however, she couldn't see nor feel what the guard was transporting. Before she could even wonder why however, the knights had stopped by her shack. Prince Arton of Laylor emerged from their numbers as the two leading guards stepped to the side. "Arton!" exclaimed a surprised Ciel.

Arton grabbed Ciel's hands and held them in his while staring directly at her eyes, "Ciel, thank the gods you're here. Am I right to assume there are no urgencies in your clinic?"

Blushing, Ciel was more than humbled for her precarious little shack to be called a clinic. Given Arton's look of extraordinary concern, Ciel decided to put her feelings aside and nodded twice. "There's no one I know that needs my attention right now, your highness," she paused and looked past his side and at the stretcher, "Unless...?"

"Yes. It's my brother, Ciel," Arton nodded, trying to keep calm. In truth, he had no better idea than anybody in the royal court could say. But Arton had seen Ciel perform miracles before. He knew and kept it secret that she could use magic without the aid of catalysts, however, so Ciel was the obvious choice for a healer. "I beg of you, please look at him."

"There is no need to beg, milord." Ciel nodded and walked away to hold the curtain to her little shack open. She slumped slightly and nearly tripped but caught herself in time.

"Ciel, are you alright?" Arton asked out of concern. Ciel waved her hand dismissively.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine, I haven't started working yet. Perhaps I got numb while sitting down for so long..." she gasped, surprised at her own clumsiness. "There's a bed inside. Please bring him in."

Under the pretense of needing a watch, Arton asked his escort to remain outside. If Ciel had to use

sorcery to mend Kruon, then it was better no one but he saw. Ciel lit a candle and put it by the table, then knelt by the bed.

“Let’s see him,” she softly said. To be frank with her, Ciel had no idea what to expect. It was the first time she couldn’t immediately know what she was dealing with. It became clear why when Arton slowly removed the covers. Ciel covered her mouth with a hand as she saw the dark purple man, unconscious, on the bed. However, that was what Arton and the others could see. What Ciel’s eyes witnessed was the ghastly appearance of a dark, malignant aura completely enveloping the red-haired knight’s entire body. It was like cloud of black smoke ready to devour the human. No wonder she had felt weak and clumsy before; it was the mist! “Arton, what happened to him?” was all Ciel could say in her state of shock.

The young prince grimaced. “I was hoping you could tell me. Ciel, I believe a powerful curse has taken hold of Kruon.”

Kruon. That name sounded familiar to her. In fact, Arton’s brother looked very much like somebody Ciel had met already; someone unappealing and disgusting in his overtly macho behavior. Then she recalled her first day and her run-in with the red-haired prince. The way he abused his own subjects just to display his strength. And how he made the attempt to seduce her first thing when they had only crossed eyes, it reminded her of that cruel, insensitive man. Ciel thought it an odd coincidence that the two were brothers, but she didn’t think twice about helping Kruon despite his karma. “I can’t say I’ve seen this kind of curse before,” she didn’t lie. It was the first time Ciel had seen a living creature possessed by the mist, and to such degree, “But curses may be expunged. I will attempt a spell.”

“Got it. Please let me know if I can help,” Arton offered. Ciel paused and nodded his way.

“Actually, could you remove his armor? I will be able to operate on him better if there are no items between his body and my magic,” Ciel watched as Arton did as asked. It was bad. The dark splotch covered all of Kruon’s body; it was as if his very being had absorbed the mist; fused with it. Ciel was starting to doubt herself, “What is this ominous presence?” she silently asked herself as her glowing hands hovered above the infected human. “It’s almost as if the mist is rejecting me, trying to... ahh!” there was a blast of light followed by a groan as Ciel was sent reeling into the wall, struck by what seemed like a black lightning bolt.

“Oh gods, Ciel!” exclaimed a bewildered Arton who rushed to her side. “What just...? Ciel?” the prince paused, unable to put his hands down on the young woman. It wasn’t that he couldn’t; he was shocked.

“Oww, my butt...” Ciel groaned and put a claw to her face as she gradually picked herself up, her tail idly thumping the floor in discomfort. She looked up only to realize Arton was way below. She then reincorporated in time to realize she could feel her tail, and her wings, “Oh no!” she grabbed at her horns and panicked. Arton was slowly backing away from the draconic amazon of huge and curvy proportions. For some reason, Ciel had lost control of her powers; she couldn’t return to her human form and she was stuck at about 9ft. tall of height.

“What... are you?” Arton widened his eyes in surprise, but before Ciel could even explain, her voice was blocked out by a loud roar coming from the bed. Both prince and dragoness forgot about each other when they took notice of Kruon, his body caught in an unending spasm. His dark purple skin was glowing and he was convulsing, snarling and growling as froth in his mouth bubbled. “Kruon! What did you do to him? Ciel, answer me!”

"I did nothing to him. I didn't get the chance to!" the blonde defended herself, both she and Arton beside each other with worry. Their question soon received a grim answer when they began to see rather pronounced changes in Kruon's body.

It started off with Kruon's fingers elongating and being covered in spikes protruding out of his skin. The tip of his fingers curled down into claws, a path which the feet tearing through his greaves soon followed. The spikes started spreading from his fingers to the back of his hands and then up his bulky arms. Kruon roared and flailed his muscular arms as they expanded larger and thicker, smashing the bedside table which knocked the candle Ciel had lit into the wall. Meanwhile, Kruon's body further continued to mutate, painful moans of agony contrasting the now black-haired man's quickly deforming visage.

From a handsome young man's face, Kruon's canines began to grow out into fangs stretching out of his mouth all the way down the bottom of his chin; the rest of his teeth turning serrated and sharp like a shark's. His nose seemed to melt off into his skin, leaving behind only a pair of dark nostrils under his bulging eyes. One of Kruon's eyes seemed to pop larger than the other, becoming permanently widely open, gaining some sort of sick monocular capabilities. As his changed hair grew longer into a messy mane of fur, Arton could see his brother's side was coiling a trio of thin, whip-like tails coming out from behind him, each tipped with a spike like those surrounding his increasingly buffer form.

More beast than man now, Kruon's lower body exploded out of his armored leggings, shredding metal and chain links apart like lousy-made apparel, stomping his clawed feet like a monster throwing a tantrum. The crying beast's distorted voice was catching the attention of those outside, and it wasn't long before one of the soldiers peeked his head in to check in on those inside, but Arton was quick to react.

"Get out now!" the prince screamed, and the soldiers didn't need to be told twice. Kruon followed those sounds with his now pointy ears but before he could take action, the giant was forced to bend over in pain. He was a ten foot tall muscle-bound beast ready to tear through the ceiling, but then as if the mutation hadn't been enough so far, bloody slits formed under his shoulder blades. The slits tore out into holes from where bone-shaped spikes popped out. The blood coalesced instead of dripping, forming a strange sort of film between each spike that turned into a thick membrane, giving Kruon a large pair of wings which he roared at upon obtaining. "No, brother!" Arton tried, approaching the beast to calm him down when the transformation seemed to be over.

"Arton, wait!" Ciel tried, but Arton was smacked into her by the angered monster; fortunately, she managed to catch the prince but the force knocked her out through the wall. The monster roared and flexed his arms, stretching and growing another couple feet which finished decimating the shack. Those little sparks leftover by the candle from earlier spread and caused a fire, which the creature shrieked at. The people that saw the fire, the dragoness and the monstrous, transformed prince could only break out into a chaotic uproar of panic and dread. Ciel was at a loss for words or thought; she didn't know what was happening, she didn't know what would happen. She didn't know anymore. "This can't be happening...!" she cringed and shut her eyes, trying to convince herself that this was only a bad dream.

"But it is." A familiar voice brought Ciel back to reality; a reality which had stopped moving and progressing. Arton was readying himself to jump off her abdominal wall to try and stop his brother, who was stuck in an eternal pose of pain and fear, as well as violence and hatred. The panicked masses were caught in their moment of fleeing, and the flames were frozen in place, as if time itself had stopped for everybody but herself. "Oi, lass, you had better pick yourself up."

Ciel blinked her eyes and looked at her side. The One with Time was standing beside her, both hands on his grounded cane. If he had eyes, they were looking at the scene before them. "It's you..."

"This is the true form of the mist, Ciel," the gentleman spoke without turning to her. Ciel moved her eyes to look back at the pitiful, monstrous Kruon.

"The true form of the mist..." Ciel repeated with a gasp.

"A transformation bringing out the strongest of human emotions, twisted into an uncontrollable amalgam where rage takes charge. This lad here is the first victim you've seen, yes?" the One with Time sighed as he lit a cigarette, "There isn't much time, lass. You must spring into action."

"But how? How do I stop him? My powers are blocked. The mist is weakening me!" Ciel whimpered, smashing a fist on the floor out of frustration.

"It's not 'How do I' as much as it is 'How do we', my dear," the male deity puffed out some smoke before tipping his billycock hat, "Remember what you set out to do. Don't lose sight of what's important and for the sake of every crumpet in this universe, put something on."

Ciel looked down at her torn clothes hanging off her curvy, muscular body and then realized she had a trump card she had yet to use. "Got it!" Ciel knew it wouldn't be enough to assume her human form again, but she had to try. Concentrating on the little energy she had left, the dragoness summoned her divine armor which came to her replacing her destroyed human clothes. Now equipped and protected, Ciel could feel energy returning to her as the stored power gave Ciel her health back.

"That is the only advantage you'll have into battle. That, and the lad's ingenuity. Don't forget to count on him, Ciel." The One with Time started to blur out, "Blimey, it's almost time to resume the show. Good luck, lass. Don't disappoint me!" the gentleman puffed out a last tiny cloud of smoke before disappearing.

"Wait, Gary! Where are you...? Oh sure, leave it all to the newbie!" a frustrated Ciel whined as time slowly started to pick back up where it had left off. The mist probably had adverse effects on him as well; but she was at least grateful for his words of advice. "No, I can't rely on him to bail me out. He was right! I... no, we have to take care of him!"

"We have to...? Ciel, who are you talking to?!" Arton asked from below, struggling to get out of her grip. Ciel looked down at the prince and frowned a little, sad that she hadn't been able to show herself for who she truly was in different circumstances.

"Arton... I'm sorry I deceived you. I'll explain later, but for now we have to... eek!" before Ciel could even consult the prince, a large beating of wings by Kruon made an even bigger whirlwind of air blow everyone back. The roaring dark purple creature took off into the air, seeming to fly out of the kingdom. "N-no!" the dragoness cried out and stood up, but it was too late; he was out of reach. She could certainly fly after him, but in her state she wouldn't last against that mist monster for very long.

"Kruon...!" Arton gasped, "Oh no...!" his horrified expression told Ciel this was worse than simply seeing the monster escape, "He's headed in the direction of Alur!"

"The city of dragons? But why?" Ciel blinked.

“He’s been waiting for weeks to go hunt the last forest dragons around the prairie of the kingdom’s fringe city. But in his current deranged state, he’ll probably get inside the city and slaughter everybody!” Arton’s explanation only served to sink Ciel’s heart further, but at the same time it helped her steel her resolve.

“We definitely have to stop him, Arton!” Ciel said.

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Arton replied, “Now put me down!”

“Wait, Arton. Listen! I’m on your side, okay?” Ciel pouted, feeling bad about everything going on, but she couldn’t bear the thought of having him mad at her. To her surprise, Arton briefly turned his glare into a smile and nodded.

“I know.” The prince nodded again, “Now please put me down. I can’t give orders to my soldiers if they think a 9 foot tall dragon is about to eat me.”

Ciel realized too late that they were not alone and that there were several weapons pointed at her. She meeped and immediately put the young prince down, stepping back. “Calm down, everybody! This is our ally!” Arton called out to the crowd gathered in front of him. He was at least glad that more soldiers had showed up after the commotion initially happened. There were concerned dragon slayers in their midst as well, all of them asking about their commander. “Our beloved commander Kruon has fallen victim to the terrible power of mist weaponry!” he yelled out loudly, “Listen to me, forget about those infernal tools, they are manufactured by the very devil and their only goal is to steal our humanity!” he claimed, getting whispers of fear and anxiety from the troops, “You saw with your own eyes as my brother was taken hold by the curse, transformed by the mist into a creature of hatred and anger! But I...” Arton paused, looking down at Ciel who nodded at him, “...we believe there is a way to reverse this! If we do not act quick, innocents in our neighboring kingdom will suffer, and we don’t know how many casualties will follow if this situation gets out of hand. Those who will not stay and guard Layor, prepare your horses, for we march to Alur!”

Those who swore fealty to the prince, frightened or not, all responded in unison. Royal guard and dragon slayers had a common goal, and that was to stop the creature and protect civilians. After Arton’s speech had been delivered, everyone started hustling, dividing into two organized groups of mixed squads.

As Arton prepared his own equipment, Ciel approached him. “Arton, that was impressive. None of them doubted you, not even about me.”

“It’s a wonder what a twelve foot, scarier monster can do to prejudice,” Arton sarcastically responded with small reassuring grin.

“No, really. I think I could learn a thing about how to inspire people from you but um... now’s not the time,” Ciel gasped, reminding herself of the urgency, “I don’t think we’ll make it as we are, Arton. He was flying too fast.”

“I’m afraid so, Ciel. How are we even supposed to fight something that big? Do we even have any hope?” Arton seemed lost in thought for a few moments, “I got it!” he snapped his fingers, “This curse, you said it can be expunged, correct?” Ciel nodded, “I know someone who became very interested in studying the mist,” she looked apprehensive, “Don’t worry, he’s focused on ending the threat, not adding to it.” She seemed pleasantly surprised, although Arton was now concerned with something, biting his finger. “The problem is... My friend is in Alur, and there’s no telling if we’ll

make it in time! ...Ciel?" Arton gasped as he turned only to see the armor-clad dragoness hovering above him, full wingspan.

"I'll go on ahead, Arton! You guys better hurry!" She took off, never listening to whatever Arton said next. Ciel's plan didn't have any tactical genius in it, but the only one with even a sliver of chance to hold that powerful creature back was someone with her power. Even diminished, it had to be enough to hold him back until the others could come up with a way to stop Kruon. She only had one shot and she owed it to these people to come through. "I have to make it... I have to!" she kept telling herself as she accelerated, flying through the kingdom at her fastest speed.

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The only thing Ciel regretted was not asking Arton what to do earlier. As she zoomed through the near noon skies, the armored dragoness could see once clear skies gradually being infected by the dark purple mist. "He's leaving a trail in his wake. At least it'll make it easier for me to follow." Soon, Ciel could see the outline of the city she had followed Kruon to. She stopped herself merely a couple dozen yards from the entrance as she trembled. "The mist is growing..." Ciel gasped in fear, hearing the screams and roars coming from the city where a swirling mass of darkness had suddenly appeared. The goddess could easily tell that people within the fringe city, whether from Laylor or Alur, were both in danger. They being attacked by the merciless creature of rage, and it didn't look like the Laylor crusaders were prepared to deal with it either. With the great concentration of mist, going inside the infected city of dragons could very well mean a death sentence for her. But Ciel steeled herself, "I have to stop it! I have to believe that Arton will make it!"

"What is this thing?! Take it out!" one of the crusaders yelled while in Kruon's grasp. None of them knew it was their prince wiping them out one by one, destroying Alur's buildings like an angry child trampling over sand castles. "Take it out!!"

Kruon was beyond any pity or remorse, completely taken over by the mist. His deformed eyes could see only the fear in the humans below him, feeding his power high as he tore them apart like animals. When they raised swords and lances his way, he easily deflected them with bladed protrusions shooting out of his forearms, like sharp scythes made of bone. He used them to slice, dice, rend and destroy. He was unstoppable, snapping those swords and lances like mere toothpicks. The worst part was Kruon wasn't focusing on the crusaders; he was also targeting civilians caught in the fight. There was no one safe from his bottomless, ill wrath.

"No more!" cried a voice from afar before Kruon could bite the head off of his newest victim. A fast-moving object crashed into the beast from the side, tackling him over and releasing the crusader. Ciel had no idea how many lives had already been lost, but it was clear from the large amounts of mist that Kruon hadn't wasted time. She held him down in her mighty grip, slamming his head down with a hand while another tried to wrestle his arms. "You have to stop this, Kruon!" the dragoness growled, "You're killing your fellow countrymen, being used by the mist!"

"More monsters!" the crusaders yelled out as they finally dropped their weapons, "We're not paid enough for this...!"

"I was done with this ten minutes ago, let's get out of this haunted city!" another crusader declared before they started scampering.

"Wait, I'm not...!" Ciel was interrupted by a punch to her right temple when she momentarily lost her concentration. The dragoness received the brunt of the blow which sent her rolling onto the ground. "Ahh! It... it burns!" The dragoness held by her stinging cheek. "I can't let him hit me again. His attacks are infused with mist!"

Kruon snarled and quickly got back up to his clawed feet, crawling towards Ciel like a monstrous insect ready to pounce and strike the final blow. Ciel squealed as she saw him coming and rolled out of the way just in time for the creature's scythe-like protrusions to impale on the ground and miss her.

"He didn't have that before. Is he still mutating? Oh no, I have to take care of him quick...!" Ciel kicked herself back up on her feet and warily held her hands out. "He's too strong for me to take on directly!" She didn't have any formal battle training, but she had spent all of her pre-deity life running away from predators many times her size, and multiple ones at that. "Hmm, but I'm here to buy time for people to escape. I don't really have to fight him. Alright coward instincts, don't fail me now!" she didn't break form. Ciel remained in her defensive stance to hopefully intimidate Kruon enough to make him ponder his next attack; that's how predators usually acted, waiting for the moment to strike. There was so much time she could get out of that kind of tactic however, and he would soon attack anyway, but it was enough space for her to scan the area for more options. "Houses to my left; they seem empty. Abandoned peddler stand to my right, a well too... They'll have to do!" Ciel breathed deeply to concentrate, feeding off the adrenaline as she felt her heart race. "He's going to attack, dive!!"

Ciel's instincts paid handsomely when she managed to dive-roll to her right, avoiding a double-claw pounce by Kruon that could've proven fatal. Ciel was now directly in front of the street merchant's stand. "Hey, you big bully!" she cried out to call Kruon's attention. The dark purple monster turned around only to get smacked in the face with a watermelon, "Have some fruit!"

Kruon snarled and got a second watermelon strike his face, the juice and seeds from the resulting fruity burst stinging his large eyes. He flinched and growled, trying to paw the watermelon chunks off his face. Before he could start roaring again, he got a third watermelon jamming his mouth shut.

"Bulls-eye!" Ciel pumped a fist triumphantly, continuing with her relentless food attack. She was out of watermelons, but then she started flinging oranges, apples, tomatoes, cabbage, everything she could get her hands and tail on. "More from where that came from!" Pelted and covered in fruit juice Kruon roared and splattered the watermelon in his fang-filled maw, smashing the ground with his fists before he finally started batting away Ciel's harmless projectiles with his burly arms. "He can't advance. This was a good plan!" Ciel grinned, but that was a short lived moment when she realized she was grabbing at the air all of a sudden, "Oh crud, out of ammo!" she looked back at the emptied out stand in a panic.

Kruon roared and started making a bee line in her direction. "This was a bad plan!" she lamented, but then switched her fearful expression for a cocky smirk as she bent her knees and jumped to evade Kruon's pounce. She used her palms to skip over his wings and made use of her weight to slam him head-first into the well behind her. "Hah, got'cha!" Ciel cursed the fact Kruon's back was covered in sharp spikes, or else she could've pinned him down. Not wanting to test her luck by standing around though, she dashed off in the houses' direction, fleeing before Kruon could recuperate.

The creature's head was stuck in the well, like a cat which had just been tricked by a mouse into trapping themselves. Kruon was having trouble pulling out, his anger intensifying. His black nostrils flared and his fangs snapped together, cursed black flames spewing out of his mouth. He roared and breathed out the unholy fire, starting to melt stone and dirt around him as if it was butter.

Peeking out of a house's corner, Ciel gasped as she saw Kruon free himself while the fire from the well started to spread along the grass. "You've got to be kidding me...! I didn't know he could do

that either!” she gasped, quickly retaking cover to avoid being immediately detected by the growling creature. It was clear she had successfully enraged him, so she was his main target now. “Now the problem is... how long can I last?” She was running out of options. “C’m on Arton...” Ciel panted, starting to feel the adverse effects of her exposure to the monster’s and Alur’s mist.

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Arton’s forces had luckily already made it to Alur. They hadn’t reached the main streets where Ciel and Kruon were having their battle, instead opting to secure civilians while Arton looked for Xander. The prince became worried when exhaustive searches only turned up corpses or more destruction; although nothing indicated his mage friend had been a victim yet. “Xander, old friend, where are you?” Arton wondered out loud as he turned a corner with his horse, having to hold it back as they almost trampled a bystander, “Ho!” the prince calmed his horse down. Arton quickly got off and went to help the toppled-over person, “Are you all right?”

“Lord Arton!”

“Xander!” The blonde prince exclaimed as the mage uncovered his face for him to see.

“Milord, what are you doing here? There’s...”

“A big, mean monster in town. I know, it’s my brother.”

“Lord Kruon?!” Xander vociferated in disbelief, “Milord, this is no time for jokes!”

“I wish it was. Kruon got possessed by the evil in his mist weapon, just as you said, Xander!”

“By the goddess...” Xander tilted his glasses up in a hurry, reaching down for his bag, “It’s premature, milord, but after the specimen you brought in, I couldn’t stop researching. The mist has a weakness.”

“Is that a fact?!” Arton’s eyes widened as he saw Xander nod rapidly. “Speak then, man!”

“Y-yes!” the mage pulled out a small vial, “This is holy water extracted from the castle’s blessed basin, my prince. Alone, it is not enough to drive away the mist. However, if a source of light were combined with this...”

“What source of light? Are you speaking of a flare? Of a campfire perhaps?” Arton hurriedly asked, ducking as he heard an explosion not far off, “Ciel!” he called out in reflex. Arton turned around and asked Xander to continue already.

“Those are good candidates, but if it’s a beast we’re trying to slay then...”

“No, that thing is still my brother, Xander!”

“Poor choice of words, milord, my apologies. If the holy essence is combined with light and used on the beast, it will be defeated and the curse should lift!” Xander explained, looking down at Arton’s belt. “Your blade, may I have a look at it?” Arton unsheathed his trusty sword and held it out for the mage to see. Xander nodded. “I believe if I enchant your blade with the flame element and then coat it in the holy essence, then you may have a shot.”

“This won’t kill him, will it?” Arton winced, but gave Xander the okay to get to work. The mage

spoke as he started casting his enchantment spell.

"I believe it will not, milord. It really has to do with how much the curse and the individual are intertwined. If lord Kruon hasn't been completely consumed by the mist, then he will live, you have my word."

"Then there is no time! Do it!" Arton commanded, watching his good friend set his sword aflame before dousing it with holy water. The once common sword then began to shine a yellowish hue before it turned into a proper aura.

"Lord Arton, listen," Xander said as he handed the weapon back, "I didn't think we would have to try this so soon and in this way. At this point it's all theory, you see..." Xander hurried the explanation when he saw Arton's stare, "But I didn't bring another vial of holy water. If your weapon is lost or destroyed, then we will not have another immediate chance. You must strike true to the creature's heart to expunge the darkness! Only then the holy essence will purify your brother."

"Easier said than done, my friend," Arton groaned as he remembered how easily Kruon escaped with his wings earlier. His tough spiked hide and beast-like movements were also going to make it near impossible to get close too, "But I didn't come here to give up. You have my gratitude, Xander..."

"Sire, hold on!" Xander hurried after Arton who had already jumped onto his horse, "Please take me with you. I might not be on the robust side, but maybe I can be of help at a distance!"

Arton allowed himself a small smile and nodded. Normally he wouldn't endanger his friends like this, but he was also conscious that this wasn't a battle he could win on his own. "Ciel, Xander, everyone in the royal guard... I have a lot more confidence now thanks to you!" he thought to himself, helping Xander up before the two rode horseback to where the loud cracks and roars were coming from.

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Ciel wasn't faring very well. By some godsend, her battlefield had been evacuated so there was no chance to get any innocent caught in Kruon's rampage, but she had already lost every place to take cover and hide; all of it reduced to flaming rubble. "Persistent little bastard, aren't you?!" the dragoness panted, falling to one knee as the larger, demonic creature snarled down at her. She was tired of running and dodging, her breath laborious now thanks to the long exposure to mist. "He really has been toying with me all this time," Ciel weakly grunted as she tried to get back up to her feet, looking around at the black flames surrounding them, "But his intention was to trap me all along now that I'm weak and there's no escape!" she collapsed on both knees and her hands, unable to even lift her head now. "No..." she cringed as she watched Kruon growl and stomp towards her, brandishing his scythes by clashing them onto one another like a butcher sharpening his knives.

"Fire the carronades!" a commanding voice rang out before the whole circle of fire illuminated with several beacons glowing around Ciel. She used what little strength she had left to watch Kruon flinch at the blasts hitting him from every conceivable direction, wondering what was going on. She finally realized that the flaming marketplace had been encircled by Arton's armed forces. They were using magic dousters to put out the flames and were putting pressure on the beast despite cannon fire being unable to visibly harm Kruon.

"Ciel!" Arton shouted as he made his entrance on his horse, jumping over the carronades and down

to where she was. “Ciel, gods, are you all right?” he quickly jumped off his horse to tend to the dragoness. She managed to weakly smile.

“Took a beating, but I’m not about to croak just yet,” Ciel lied, feeling more like taking a nap than standing up.

“Goddess, is she a dragon?” Ciel blinked in surprise at the shorter, bespectacled man carrying a tome between his arms, examining her like some sort of living, breathing wonder.

“Well Ciel, are you?” Arton demanded while the dragoness looked between them. She slowly nodded, not wishing to say more. Arton looked towards Xander, who nodded and fished into his satchel to pull out a small crystal.

“Lady Ciel, allow me to mend your wounds,” Xander said as she approached the goddess. Arton stepped away to let Xander channel energy from the crystal into Ciel. Almost instantly, the blonde felt refreshed; not fully restored, but able to stand on her own two feet. She was taken by surprise not just by Xander’s nonchalance on her appearance but also at how effective his treatment was.

“What did you just...?”

“I’ve had to treat many wounded dragons afflicted with mist poisoning. It weakens you, yes?” Xander grinned, “I figured this little number would work on you too. Although allow me to say, I never thought to see the day I would see an anthropomorphic dragon. Not only are you smart enough to speak, but you have the knowhow to wear armor and...” Ciel was already starting to puff her cheeks out in annoyance.

“Xander, that’s enough. Save the admiration for later. We just ran out of ammo...” Xander and Ciel both stood up and looked on at the clearing smoke. Xander adjusted his eyeglasses and swallowed, having seen the monster earlier and having barely escaped with his life intact. Ciel flexed and stretched, feeling her strength slowly returning to her, although she was nowhere near capable of performing any miracles. Arton’s muscles tensed as he held his sword sheath upright and tightly gripped the handle.

“Arton, are you going to fight him?” inquired a worried Ciel, looking at the prince slowly unsheathe his blade. She was instantly marveled by the golden sheen on the weapon.

“If I can get close enough, I should be able to deliver a cut to his chest. That is all we need to stop this, Ciel,” Arton explained without taking his eyes off the roaring creature in the center of the marketplace.

“But are you strong enough to cut through that hide?” Ciel questioned, making Arton grit his teeth.

“I don’t think so, but if I can get a running start...”

“...or a boost!” Ciel smiled, flexing an arm while pounding her chest with her free hand. Arton looked up at the dragoness of Amazonian proportions and understood her idea.

“I’m in your claws, lady,” Arton held his blade with two hands as Ciel gently picked him up. The dragoness blushed nervously at the lady comment, “Hope you’ve had practice doing this.”

Ciel nodded, “You’re sturdier than a watermelon, right?”

“What?” Arton blinked. Ciel shook her head with a small chuckle.

Kruon seemed disoriented thanks to the pungent smell of gunpowder lingering in the air, roaring and swiping at the air like a confused animal fighting an invisible enemy. Ciel looked at the pitiful creature with a frown as she lifted Arton and took aim, “Whatever kind of person he was before, the mist is responsible for this. If this is the fate humans have sown for themselves,” she narrowed her eyes, “Then I’ll be razing fire that purges the land before these corrupted seeds may be harvested.” And with renewed conviction, Ciel pulled back and waited for the monster to stop and look at them. Before Kruon could process what was going on, Ciel reared back and launched Arton with all of her might, “Go!”

Arton flew through the air like a shining arrow, holding his sword out like a spear tip ready to impale its target. He braced himself for impact and hoped Kruon didn’t slap him out of the way like an insect. “Hiiiiyaaaaahhhh!” Fortunately, everyone heard the blood-curling scream coming from the beast as it arched backwards. Prince Arton was hanging from its chest, pending from his blade encrusted into the massive mist monster’s chest. Like Xander had predicted, the holy flames endowing the blade with magical strength were enough to sever the connection between man and monster, cutting out the source of Kruon’s curse.

Everybody present let a collective gasp of shock as Arton was repelled back by the creature’s roar, who in a last ditch attempt tried to grab the sword impaled in its heart to pull it out. Ciel dashed forwards and caught Arton before he impacted against the ground, sliding on the floor with the prince in her arms. They both watched as the monstrous Kruon fell to his knees, defeated.

Around them, the skies began to clear as the wound in Kruon’s chest spewed out black smoke which caused him to start shrinking. Bit by bit, the insect-like creature that could have completely wiped out Alur was restored to human form, replacing monster with man. Kruon, back to his normal size and self, collapsed after the sword harmlessly fell off his chest. He was back to an unconscious state.

“You did it...” Xander trailed off as he approached the unconscious elder prince. He put away his tome to examine the collapsed Kruon. It took him a few seconds, but eventually the young mage gave Arton and Ciel a thumbs up, “He’s alive! Lord Kruon lives!”

Ciel and Arton both momentarily closed their eyes and let out a sigh in unison, looking back at each other with fond smiles before averting their gazes rather abruptly. They ended laughing together, simply happy that they had managed to solve the problem. However, their celebration was cut short when several of the carronade operators, farmers and other Alur townsfolk started voicing their objection over the outcome.

“What are you waiting for?! Kill that monster!”

“He destroyed our homes! He killed my family!”

“He’s the mad prince from Laylor! He’s been killing dragons all this time!”

“He doesn’t deserve to live!”

The crowd was growing agitated. Arton’s guard and the dragon slayers supporting him couldn’t hold the enraged, irate townsfolk back. They were demanding the monster to be put down for good; they didn’t care that he was weak and had been manipulated by the mist; they had to hold somebody responsible. Ciel watched in desperation as Arton dashed off to protect his older brother from the

wrathful people of Alur. They advanced towards the sleeping Kruon, demanding his blood; there was no way to put a stop to them! “Unless...” Ciel paused and stood up, looking around her. She nodded to herself. “No going back from this...”

The dragoness closed her eyes and began to glow. Her armor began to melt away into her scales, revealing her buff, naked body. At the same time, she began to expand, increasing her size fast and steadily, her shadow looming over the townsfolk. They stopped advancing as Ciel’s heavy front claws descended on the ground with a thud and she gradually changed from her anthropomorphic shape to a gigantic, blonde-haired feral dragoness. Without moving her maw, the enormous dragoness look down at the stunned mortals and words began to echo out of her shining body.

“People of Alur, please heed me.”

“Is she talking?” one of the blacksmiths fell to his knees, “This must be...!”

Xander couldn’t believe his eyes, “It is! Lady Ciel is...!” he went down on his knees, followed by the rest of the Alur townspeople. Arton simply watched as the fierce yet beautiful looking beast continued her speech.

Sitting on her spot, tail coiled around all four of her legs, Ciel closed her eyes. “That man is responsible for many sins and his judgment shall one day come. However, know this: A great evil took hold of his heart, and that is why the monster controlled him, transforming him into a tool of destruction.” She took a deep breath, basking in the silence and reverence. “Understand that I, like you, know the pain of losing those dear to me, but you cannot allow your anger to blind you to your actions. If you take this man’s life into your hands today, then the circle of hatred and anger will know no end. It is the time to mourn, but it is also time to bask in each other’s support. Alur and Laylor have their differences, but think of them like fellow human beings rather than kingdoms. While you can hurt and may be hurt, the ability to reconcile and help each other through strife is within you as well.” Ciel spread her wings majestically, letting everything be taken under her colossal yet protective shadow, “Children of men. You are both the cause and the solution to all of your problems, and that is why I must ask you to allow forgiveness into your hearts, ‘lest you consume your world in madness. You are all under my watchful eye, so do not despair.”

With those last words, Ciel encircled her vast form with her wings, slowly vanishing from sight as the people below prayed and thanked her. “The goddess has spoken!” one of the pastors of Alur vociferated in joy.

“She’s right! I don’t know what came over me,” the blacksmith next to Kruon bowed his head down, “I couldn’t take a life no matter how angry I got. It felt like I was being manipulated!”

“That’s right, brothers and sisters, we must abide by the goddess’ law,” the pastor declared, “It is us who will defeat this evil under her marvelous guidance, and we shall not taint and forsake her love by perpetuating the bloodshed. There have been enough sacrifices for today...”

Ciel sighed, having gone invisible for just a moment in order to return to her human form. It was small and compact, so it didn’t consume a lot of her energy, which was slowly being restored by now clean Alur and the praise she was receiving from the prayers. She was soon able to materialize clothes and stand back up on her own, but was still far from recovered. Filled with concern however, she couldn’t help but make way through the unassuming masses and to where Arton was.

The young prince was holding his brother his arms. Kruon was covered in towels to keep him warm, which made Ciel smile as she realized her speech had actually motivated those in Alur to

forgive and support each other in times of need. Humans had cooperated to defeat the mist monster, and now were cooperating to get back on their feet, together, just as she had wanted it to be. Soon, she was spotted by Arton, who approached her. “I think I’m going to like whatever explanation you’ll come up with later.”

Ciel blushed and nervously laughed; thanking the fact that only Arton had seen her transform from human to anthropomorphic dragoness.

“You did well, Ciel,” Arton bowed his head, “You have my gratitude.”

“You ah... you did very good yourself, majesty,” Ciel playfully stuck her tongue out while gingerly holding her hands together at her back.

The kind prince put his brother on the back of his dutiful horse and fastened him so he wouldn’t fall; he turned to look at Ciel, “I’ll take it from here. You um... better avoid all these people for the time being. My guard probably is wondering what happened to you back in Laylor.”

“Oh! Right,” Ciel nodded, “I’ll see you back there, maybe?”

“Definitely. Also, I’ll have your clinic repaired and upgraded! Look forwards to better facilities.”

“Seriously?” Ciel asked with a small blush, surprised at the sudden generosity.

“You can count on it,” Arton smiled, then assumed his serious face again, “I want those able to remain help Alur to repair their city of dragons. Detain any crusader that attempts to oppress the public, on my orders! The rest of you, we march back to Laylor, men!”

Ciel looked at the Laylor regiment leave, her heart skipping a beat each time Arton commanded his troops. She decided to remain out of sight and just watch them gallop out into the plains outside of the desert city. Ciel laughed a bit, “I think I’ve earned a dragon nap for today...” she tiredly said, deciding to make herself invisible before flying out in her dragon form.

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Laylor was still on high-alert when Arton and his troops returned. The townspeople and guards cheered and celebrated their return, but Arton had other plans. He had most urgent business to take care of.

The doors to the royal court opened again, but this time Arton marched in with his older brother in his arms, followed by his knights, dragon slayers and Xander at his side.

“What is the meaning of this?” Tactician Mukori cried out from the King’s side, the rest of the council present in the meeting.

“Father,” Arton raised his voice.

“My son! You have brought your brother safe and sound,” Graom raised his hand and stood up, eliciting a cheer from the rest of the council.

“Enough of this charade!” shouted Arton with the strength of a crashing wave, “Members of the council, this man has been deceiving us! The weapons and equipment he has forced onto his soldiers have tainted their hearts! My brother was the first victim, but it could have been anyone.

No territory is so vast nor any country so rich to warrant using these vile tools. What war is worth waging if the bargaining chips are our very own souls?!”

There silent was poignant. Stares were exchanged, but ultimately they fell upon King Graom. Before the startled man could answer however, Arton followed up: “Father! You have gone mad. Mad with the power these weapons bring. You are not fit to rule this country anymore!”

A collective, deadpan gasp followed.

“My own son, attempting to oust me? What is this, a jest? Are you that hungry for the crown, Arton? Is that it?!” Graom spat out with venom in his words, making Arton shake his head.

“At this point, anyone with two functional eyes can rule Layor, father. You are but blind,” the young prince declared, making Graom chuckle. The old King’s smile disappeared from his face when he noticed the members of the council whispering amongst themselves. They were passing documents to each other, the whispering growing more and more outrageous. Graom noticed the copies were being distributed by a green cloaked mage.

“Slander! Slander and calumny! That wizard you’re consorting with is part of those animals in Alur!” Graom shouted at the top of his lungs. Arton narrowed his eyes as his friend Xander finished distributed the copies of his mist research.

“Those animals you speak of decided to forgive and spare the son who became tainted by the very weapons you gave him to destroy them with, father.” There wasn’t much Graom could say anymore, the council was convinced now.

“This is madness! Cast those infidel eyes of yours from me!” even Mukori was stepping away from the increasingly agitated King. “Would you condemn your own ruler?!” King Graom clutched a fist and swiped his arm across the air in defiance. “You have no idea. I have a mission!” he screamed, “Alur is just one of the many kingdoms controlled by the mad gods! Gods who would see us ruined!”

As Graom exploded with rage, the head councilman ordered his arrest. “Apologies, sire,” said the knight that apprehended his king.

They could all hear King Graom shouting and screaming all the way, calling for his sons, telling them not to be deceived or charmed and to embrace their freedom. Nobody understood the mad King’s rant, but he was finally put away.

Arton felt his conscience heavy as this all developed. He had to believe there was a reason for his father’s errant behavior, but he couldn’t let the rest of the continent suffer his transgressions any longer. The council finally decided that an investigation would take place and the mist weapon and equipment be reevaluated with the newly acquired information. Meanwhile, the King would be subject to house arrest until the investigation concluded. There was no telling how long it would take, but it was at least clear that there would be no more inquisitions for a while.

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Ciel and Gary watched it all unfold from one of the Rift’s many crystal balls. Ciel could hardly bring herself to smile, despite it all having ended in a victory. “Congratulations, lass,” the One with Time said while offering her a plate with cookies. “I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

“Thanks, Gary,” Ciel took a bunch of the treats in her claw as usual, popping them into her mouth one by one. She sighed while silently munching.

“What’s the matter? You saved Alur, and the lad’s brother to boot. Alur’s faith in you has been renewed and nobody except the prince knows your secret; and he doesn’t seem the tattletale type to me.”

“It’s not that,” Ciel grumbled, not only sad about Arton having to be the one to accuse his own father, but she was also deeply concerned. “Will this all really be okay?” she asked as the vision on the crystal ball vanished, “I mean, is everything going to be fine between Alur and Laylor now?”

“Time will tell, my dear.” Gary dramatically spun his gloved hand while he leaned on his cane, “Humans are complicated to understand. As long as they populate the world, there will be conflict and strife.”

“But they can achieve so much when they work together! Like Xander and Arton...” the dragoness grumbled again, puffing her cheeks in annoyance out as she remembered when Xander was inadvertently saying dragons were dumb.

“And it’s your job to see that they learn to do just that,” Gary put his hand on top of the other and looked up at the starry blackness of the Rift, “Don’t worry your pretty little head, lass. Those wankers won’t destroy each other for a while, so you have plenty of time to think up a solution,” he tipped his hat, “Now, you must excuse me.”

“Huh?” Ciel perked her pointy ears up and blinked in surprise. The Rift began to disappear as Ciel appeared sitting on her cave in Crystal Falls, and Gary slowly started to blur out. “Are you going?”

“Mm, yes. It appears I have an unscheduled appointment, my dear. Toodles, lass!” the gentleman waved his hand at the dragoness before he was replaced by a puff of smoke that too vanished.

“Alright... Wait!” Ciel tried, but it was too late, “Aww. What did you mean with think up a solution? Ugh, for a gentleman he can be so vague!” she grumbled, grabbing by her head to force an idea out, “Think Ciel, think!”

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In the Castle Laylor’s dungeons, the cells were pretty empty. There weren’t a lot of criminals in the kingdom, much less those that needed to be held in the castle itself. The incarcerated King was the only one there. Graom waited until his guard locked him up and left to sit down to think. He silently put his face in his palms to rethink the current state of affairs.

“This isn’t how it was supposed to be. Mighty Edorias, heed my call...” Graom tried praying for the entity who had given his country the ability to build mist weapons, but he received no callback. “Mighty Edorias, have you abandoned me, as well?” Graom sobbed, more out of anger than sadness. He tried again, and again and again. He spent many hours praying and asking for Edorias, until finally he gave up.

The empty dungeon’s silence was driving him mad. Graom’s thoughts turned to his family. His youngest had performed admirably, having brought Kruon back unscathed. Gods, Arton reminded him of his wife. The wife fate had taken from him. He felt so alone. The one thing in the world that could make Graom smile, now forever gone. “I knew you would hound me until the end, Arton,” the sobbing King put the ball of his hand onto his forehead with another sob, “You’re just like she

was. Too honest, too damn good at everything you do.”

Becoming agitated, Graom put a hand to the pendant on at his collar. He calmed down and opened the memento of his wife: A picture locket with happier days of his family being together. Graom then pressed the locket on two opposite sides, opening a small, hidden compartment where a tiny little object was. He clutched it in his hand tightly and held it to his chest. “Come to me,” he ordered no one in particular.

In a few moments, the jail cell began to fill with thick smoke. The heavy scent of tobacco burned the King’s nostrils, making him wave the cloud off. A second person had just appeared in the cell, donning a black Armani suit, striped pants and designer shoes. A gray billycock rested on the white, faceless humanoid that stood leaning down on a black-tipped cane. “I figured I’d never see you again, ol’ chap.”

“Save it, you fake deity,” Graom growled as he faced the One with Time after what seemed like forever. “I have business with you.”

“Why, of course you do. Blame a fellow for oddly interpreting another’s wishes?” The gentleman lit up a smoke while talking, the tip brightly flaming as he seemed to inhale nicotine. “I believe it was: “I never want to see your flat ugly mug again.” Or some-such, yes? Oi, don’t give me that look; I can’t say I enjoy that decrepit look on your face either.”

Graom simply stared at the mocking deity. A long pause sustained before Graom revealed the tiny little artifact in his hand, which grew to the size of a marble, then to the size of a mug. It looked like a pipe made of an exquisite material. “This is not a request.”

The One with Time seemed to look at the pipe then back at Graom. The deity stood upright and tipped his hat. “Right you are. Let us fulfill the contract, then.”

To Be Continued...