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Ciel belongs to mysteryman01.

Warning: This story contains macro and hourglass curves.

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Into Eternity, by DragonMasterX.

Ruins are known for their almost supernatural ability to bring in both the brave and foolish to places better left alone. An expedition from a far-away kingdom, comprised by no less than a dozen armored soldiers, was the party currently intruding on a very old maze-like structure. The decrepit tunnels almost looked hostile, as if emanating an aura of rejection that drove people away.

“We’ll leave you behind if you keep dilly-dallying, rookie!” the expedition captain barked at the backline. “Hardly a place you want to stay fending for yourself.”

“Apologies, sir!” the apologetic rookie hurried to put away the documents he had been comparing to the inscriptions on the mural-like walls of the maze. The rookie was on his first mission, and his duty as a cadet was to be the acting scribe of the group, documenting their journey.

It had been a vastly uneventful trip from their kingdom, but now that his group had ventured into the catacombs, it was hard not to stay on one’s toes. Everybody was on edge, as if they were being watched through the walls. It didn’t help that the surfaces were unstable and ready to give away at a moment’s notice, so everybody was exercising additional caution.

The rookie cadet couldn’t have hoped for a better mission. All of his life was riding on his efforts. As with most of the military in training, the cadet was one of many teenagers of low birth with nothing to his name. The one exception to this rule was the girl waiting for him back home. Ever since joining the army he had become convinced that he would rise through the ranks and make captain of the guard. After all, the rookie wanted to have something to show to impress his fiancée’s father. He wanted the recognition and fame, but most of all, he was hungry for the respect his captain received. The cadet looked up to his captain as many rookies are wont to do, and he knew that no job was too small to contribute for the sake of their nation.

“Scouts, check this split,” the captain ordered as company reached a bifurcation. The expedition into the labyrinth had been going off without a hitch so far, but the captain’s men were showing signs of exhaustion. Save for the rookie, whose moxie was likely derived from an overabundance of excitement. “The rest, take ten.”

“Sir!” the jubilant cadet shot his hand up high while the other knights were just glad they could sit down to rest their feet. “May I reconnoiter as well?”

“What’s with the rookie?” one of the soldiers groaned as he struggled to open his water bottle. “I’m just glad we haven’t run into any beasts here.”

“Hey, rookie! Cap’n says you take ten. Leave the recon to the pros. Plus the way you lag behind drawing silly pictures will just hold me back!” A row of laughter made the rookie cadet lower his arm sheepishly.

The captain, however, saw the merit of that request. Perhaps the rookie could use this chance to learn a thing or two from the scouts. "Go with Edward, rookie."

"What?!" Edward's laughter died down. He really liked to pick on rookies, as it was customary to give the newer recruits a hard time. On the flip side, he hated baby-sitting cadets. "C'mon, cap'n! You can't be serious. Look at that pansy's legs. I can outrun him for at least a mile ahead."

"Then you won't have any problems, since I'm not asking you to run around in this labyrinth," the captain delivered to the sound of laughter from his troops. Edward looked both humbled and embarrassed.

With a defeated grumble, Edward glared at the rookie's relieved face and beckoned with a dismissive hand wave. "Let's go, chump. Don't slow me down."

"Thank you, sir! I won't let you down." The rookie nodded and was smacked down by a growling Edward, who wanted his friends in the party to stop laughing and teasing him. After pulling his helmet back up, the rookie gasped as he saw Edward leaving for his side of the split.

"Here," Edward threw a satchel at the rookie, who caught it after slapping it in the air twice, "You want to learn. You put the glowstones down."

The rookie opened the satchel and produced several little pebbles that seemed to be infused with a low amount of light magic. "Ah! I've read about glowstones. They're what we've been leaving behind to cover our tracks, right?"

"...right," Edward wasn't the teaching type, but figured he would humor the cadet since they were stuck together. "They'll react to any being within a small radius as long as they're alive. They're perfect for enclosed but empty spaces like these."

"What do you think they built this place for, Sir Edward?" The rookie asked, looking around as he carefully placed a glowstone every few yards they covered.

Edward smirked. He didn't like babysitting cadets, but damn it to hell if he didn't love getting recognized by his title as a knighted soldier. "I have no idea!" the scout admitted, realizing it too late that his response carried little next to nothing to be proud about. "Uh, that is, nothing really indicates the purpose of these ruins, rookie."

"It's almost like the intrinsic maze was built as a safe-guarding mechanism of some sort," the rookie seemed to beam with happiness as he dragged a hand over moldy bricks on the walls, trying to find more inscriptions or any kind of art that might clue them in.

"Right. That's what labyrinths are usually built for," Edward agreed, turning to the right at an intersection where he could tell the dead ends were right around the left corner and right ahead.

"This place is ancient!" the rookie exclaimed as he took out his notes, doodling and writing notes about every little thing he noticed.

"Falling apart, too," Edward sighed, starting to get annoyed once he noticed the rookie start scribbling without looking forwards. "Hey, look where you're going, rookie. You don't want to..."

"Gwah!"

“Gak, what did I just say?!” exclaimed Edward as he turned around to catch the cadet by the arm to stop him from falling face-first onto the floor.

“S-sorry, sir Edward. I must’ve tripped on something on the ground,” the rookie quickly composed himself. He crouched to gather his things as Edward picked up the satchel and glowstones that had been haphazardly scattered as a result. The rookie’s eyes widened in surprise once he felt a rough patch over the ground with his fingers. The surface felt different, as if painting some sort of trail for his palm to trace along.

“What’re you up to now, kid?” Edward rolled his eyes as he watched the rookie stand up and drag his palm over the walls of the narrow passage they were following. The scout looked up as the rookie ended touching an ancestral scone. “Wait, hold on!”

“Huh?” the rookie didn’t have time to react to the warning before his fingers knocked against the metal plating, causing the scone to shake and retract. “Wh-what in the world?!” the entire passage began to shake and quake all of a sudden.

“Now you’ve done it! Must’ve triggered a trap or somethin’!” Edward cried as he quickly hooked the satchel of glowstones at his belt, “We better trail back, quick! C’mon!”

“R-right! Coming!” the suddenly meek scribe had every intention on following his superior back the way they had come, but he was stopped when the ceiling suddenly began to collapse.

“Dive in, quickly!” Edward ordered as he rolled forwards to avoid being crushed, but the rookie was so stunned that he didn’t move in time, and the rubble from above came crashing down. “Kid!” Edward yelled, rushing towards the immense pile of concrete to begin digging. Unfortunately, the large pieces of debris were far too heavy for him to lift on his own. “Rookie! Answer me! Are you okay?!”

“I-I think so...” Edward never thought that hearing that mousey voice would give him so much peace of mind. “I got knocked back. Hurt my arm when I landed, almost got crushed by a falling rock. I-I can walk though!”

“Good! Good... the tremors seem to have calmed down too. Look, I can’t clear this rubble on my own,” Edward explained to the rookie, “I don’t know how long I have before this tunnel decides to crap out on us again, but I’ll try to make a dash for the captain, get some extra hands to dig you out.”

“Thank you, sir Edward! What should I do while I wait?” the rookie was understandably scared, and a lot more wary about his surroundings now. He could swear he heard a collection of clicks and rock-on-rock grinding, which was making him even more nervous.

“Just don’t touch anything. You have an emergency fire gem with you, right? Use that to light your way around. I don’t know how long we’ll be, but seeing if you can find a way around can’t hurt. You might even run into Johannes.”

“I understand!” the rookie replied from the other side of the rubble, “I’ll take this time to show what I can do and map out the area for when you all can get through.”

“That’s the spirit, kid. Don’t worry, I’ll run extra fast!” Edward called out to the cadet. The scout’s quick steps told the rookie that he was finally alone.

After igniting his fire gem, the armored scribe began to look around. He really was alone. It was the time to prove himself. While holding his source of light ahead, he lightly swung his arm to test just how hurt he had gotten it. Fortunately, it didn't feel serious, but he thought he'd need the team's medic to look at it later in case he fractured anything.

The young man gulped, feeling the narrow tunnels grow in size before his eyes all of a sudden. Now that he had nobody backing him up, the young scout didn't feel as courageous anymore, and the scope of his situation truly was dire. If there was no way around, then he was forced to follow on this path until the others came to his aid. On the other hand, there was nothing guaranteeing they would be able to clear the rubble. "If it was a given that they would be able to remove the rocks obstructing the path, Sir Edward wouldn't have told me to find my way around." The rookie had come to terms with the fact he would only waste time if all he did was sit around waiting.

After a moment of illuminating his way around, the rookie looked up and took notice of the pattern he had followed to touch that scone up on the wall. He focused his eyes on it, "If this was a trap meant to kill us, why did it only separate us instead? If I had to design a trap like this, I would make the entire ceiling collapse, not just one part of it..." The scribal cadet found this observation to be peculiar. It also became clear something far more important was off when he took note that the wall directly underneath the collapsed scone was indented. "Those sounds from earlier..." he muttered, his fingers reeling away from the curious surface before they came into contact. The rookie remembered Edward's words not to touch anything.

"Maybe I shouldn't. But... what if this wasn't a trap?" the rookie insisted in his mind, the ravenous curiosity in his mind nagging him until he finally pushed his hand against the indentation. Now that the mechanism above had been triggered, the wall in front of the rookie began to fall apart like crumbling blocks, revealing a path inside of the hole. "That's it! This place is so unstable that it can't support the amount of movement from the mechanism operating this secret path. I must've stumbled into something big here!"

The rookie looked back away from the secret passage, wondering whether he should wait for the others or press on forwards. "What if this is an exit?" the cadet rubbed his arm, turning to the hole in the wall again. "I should at least check it out. If it's too dangerous I'll just turn back!" And with that in mind, the young recruit ventured forwards.

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The tunnel was long winded, but surprisingly benign in design. It was mostly composed of dirt, as opposed to concrete like the rest of the maze-like structure. After what the rookie calculated were ten minutes of straight walking, the young man came in to a hidden chamber built in now aged wood. The rookie was baffled to the sight. There was a table, a bed, and even a door whose in-built window-hole was filtering sunlight through. "It... is this? Is this an exit?" the adventurer was dubiously examining his surroundings, unable to believe what he had stumbled upon. His first reaction was to reach for the door, but upon opening it, the rookie's legs gave and he fell backwards with a scare. "Unbelievable..."

The door did lead to the outside, but it led to a ledge on a mountain. The very mountain which acted as the belly of the ruins his team had been sent to explore. The rookie could hear and see birds flying, so the altitude was very high. He could do without the image of that perilous, probably fatal fall that had greeted him after opening the door. He immediately stood up and closed it behind him.

He turned around, trying to examine the oddly constructed chamber. The rookie hadn't noticed it at first, but against the wall was a table different to the one next to the bed. This table was smaller in

size, but what made it stand out was the material it was made out of. It was less table and more a crystal altar whereupon a very strange artifact had been poised atop of. The rookie approached this display, mesmerized by the flawless craftsmanship, momentarily absorbed away from his dire circumstances. The rookie knelt by the crystal altar, reaching down with a hand, hovering his palm above the artifact. It looked like a very exquisitely crafted smoking pipe, its otherworldly sheen seeming to refract light in all seven colors of the spectrum. The rookie had never seen an object so beautiful before. The boy couldn't resist it and grabbed the precious item in his hands.

The warmth of his touch transferred to the crystal pipe, which began to glow intensely. From one moment to then next, the mouth of the pipe began to fume thick puffs of smoke which started to fill the room. Frightened, the rookie dropped the pipe and scooted away from it. "What is this?! Sorcery?" the young boy asked out loud.

"Verily," a second voice answered as the smoke focused in a single spot, coalescing in a rectangle shape that suddenly cracked open liked a door. From behind the smoky door, a man emerged. "Huzzah!"

"Gah! Who... what are you?!" the rookie cried out, backing away from the creature which had appeared from the smoke. The being in question was a very tall humanoid dressed in very spiffy and likely expensive attire. With cigarette and walking cane in hand, the man in the suit tipped his black billycock.

"Well that's hardly a proper greeting, lad! Repeat after me, will you?" the creature was purely white-skinned, as if it was a dressed faceless mannequin, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir!"

"P-puh..." the rookie couldn't believe the turn of events, but the last thing he wanted to do was offend this otherworldly interloper. "Pleased to uh... make your acquaintance..." the rookie paused as the gentlemanly being leaned down on his cane, appearing impatient. "...s-sir?"

"Capital!" the humanoid clapped his gloved hands after placing his cigar where his mouth would be. "There's a good lad. World could use better manners, do you not agree?" The rookie rapidly nodded, honestly at a loss for what to do or say. In turn, the suited man sat down on the crystal altar and picked up the artifact which had summoned him. The creature seemed pensive all of a sudden. "Now, don't take this the wrong way, lad. I'm all in for surprise visits, but as I imagine, you're quite a ways from home, are you not?" The rookie nodded at the gentleman, who offered the crystal pipe back at his summoner. "This is quite a turn of events, I might add. Neither you nor anyone was supposed to make it here."

Finally able to rouse some courage after seeing the creature murmur to himself, the rookie spoke: "Are you a... uhm... a genie?"

"A Djinn?! Why, of all the...!" the suited gentleman tipped his billycock forwards, his cigar's tip burning brightly as he dismissively waved a hand from side to side. "The very gall of comparing a gentleman like my person to those uncultured, lamp-huddling louts! Lad, you're speaking not with a cosmic buffoon, but the One with Time. I am the overseer, he who observes and grants insight to those that require it."

"Insight?" the rookie repeated, his inquisitive nature sparked by the tall man's passionate speech.

"Quite, my dear and unenlightened chap!" the One with Time blew a smoke ring out of his non-existent mouth, tipping ashes down into an ashtray that materialized atop the crystal altar. "And despite my reluctance to play this charade again..." he grumbled, lamenting the artifact held in the

boy's hands, "...I owe you three pieces of Insight, for as long as that artifact is in your possession."

"But what is it? What is insight?" the rookie asked, confused more than now than ever. The One with Time sighed and put his cigar out on the tray, which disappeared in a puff of smoke as suddenly as it had appeared before.

"I can allow you to look deep within the well of knowledge, to peer into its vastness to fish out the answer to any conundrum you can imagine, lad," the One with Time replied, making the scribe gasp. "I was supposed to be retired for an eternity or two, but it appears the dance must be repeated once again. So, chop chop, tell me what is it you want to know!"

The rookie was absolutely ecstatic. If what this strange being was saying was true, that was three answers to any meaningful question he could ask. There was so much he wanted to know, but with only three options he had to carefully make the decision on what he needed to ask and how to ask it. The rookie thought about it. "I could learn so much, instantly! But... what I really want, what I need..." the scribe smiled as he thought of his ambitions. He could have anything he wanted by asking how to find it in vast quantities, but was materialism worth it? The rookie didn't want to make any mistakes. What he wanted was respect, power and recognition. He wanted to make his future wife happy and be able to raise a family free of worry. With that as his primal concern, the question took form. The rookie didn't want to be the guard's captain anymore.

"I want you to give me Insight, One with Time," the scribe asked, "Please tell me how I might be king!"

The One with Time seemed silent, his usual cheerfulness gone for a moment. After pondering for a brief moment, the faceless deity hid behind his black hat. "Do forgive me, chap. I cannot grant you any Insight until I know your name. It seems I forgot to ask."

"My name is Graom! Now grant me with insight! Tell me..." the rookie grinned, "...tell me how to become a king!"

"Graom..." the One with Time paused as the artifact in Graom's hands started to shine, basking him in iridescent light. The gentleman crossed his legs and sat up straight as the young man's eyes began to light up, information being streamed directly into his mind. "The first part of the contract has been fulfilled."

Graom, the man who would be King.

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A King with no authority, a husband without wife and a father betrayed by his own blood. A man who has little else to lose is a very dangerous man. That was never truer for Graom, his reason all but lost to his burning rage as he glared ahead of him.

The epoch and location were different, but the players were the same. The One with Time stood patiently in front of his summoner. Had the deity a pair of eyes, they would've been locked with the imprisoned, mad king's, showing no sign of intimidation. "Get on with it then, lad. I have places to be, people to meet, ravishing sights to see."

"Nothing more than a self-serving, fake god to the very end!" Graom snarled within the dungeon's walls. "You have no right to carry that attitude of yours with me, after all of what you put me through, demon!"

“My, that sharp tongue could cut straight through a golem’s stone heart,” the One with Time leaned back against the prison’s locked door, folding his arms with his cane hanging off the right one. “I do believe you didn’t summon me to spew childish insults.”

“Childish?!” Graom snapped. Closing the distance between them, he grabbed the One with Time by his suit’s collar, pinning him to the wall. The deity did not resist. “Your agenda cost me my one true love, you manure-devouring imp!”

“All in the name of balance, my good man,” the One with Time paused, craning his neck back as if looking skyward. “For the greater good, a phrase your kind is so familiar with.”

Graom growled, slamming the deity against the wall hard. The One with Time didn’t grunt even as he fell down. The billycock fell off the creature’s bald, equally featureless head. The deity grabbed his hat and put it on before standing back up. The king was beyond frustrated, but he perfectly knew there was no way for him to harm an immortal. The one creature who had made it possible for him to build the kingdom of his dreams, to form the family he had for so long since his young days hungered for. Graom detested the One with Time more than anything else in the world. “Edorias does not respond.”

“The fellow does have terribly bad manners, yes,” the One with Time replied, “Why, inciting an entire continent to go up in flames, tsk tsk. He’s certainly not receiving any invitations to my next tea party.”

“Silence, jester! It’s not humor I seek from you.” Graom was losing his patience, “I want to know how to contact him again. Provide me with the insight necessary to summon him to this world!”

The One with Time pointed the hook of his cane at the ousted king. “You meddle in very affairs well beyond your capabilities as a human being, lad. Let me be perfectly clear when I say...”

“I don’t care! Your words are meaningless to me, false deity!” the king finally shouted, “Unless it’s the knowledge necessary to achieve my goal...”

The faceless gentleman interjected. “Your goal is tantamount to releasing a nihilistic dark god upon the world.”

“And I was so close to achieving it in my own way, without having to rely on your parlor tricks! I don’t need any of your insight to know you had a hand in aiding Arton. I just know it! But it doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve lost it all, and you’ve had your laugh, seeing me fall so low.” Graom clenched a fist, “This world is already in ruins, strung along by false promises from those like you, who manipulate and heartlessly deceive!”

“I say! Those are rather big words coming from the one pulling the proverbial wool over their own country’s eyes.”

“Hmph,” Graom began to smirk, “This world and everyone in it is far more endangered by the enemies they can’t see than any bloody war I could wage. The mighty Edorias is no joke, unlike you. It is not the destruction of mankind I seek, merely its liberation! Even without your eyes I can see you fear him! Edorias loathes you and the Guardian; every single pompous god and goddess who believes human life is chained to their will! You know he will be coming for you first. The world will be freed of your kind’s tyranny!”

The One with Time had no instantaneous retort. “Irony aside,” the god continued, “You have no

idea the price you will have to pay for this kind of knowledge, lad.”

“I will pay any price,” Graom confidently responded, “Enough talk! I command you to give me the insight to bring the god of the mist, Edorias, into the mortal realm!” At Graom’s insistence coupled with a tight grip on the One with Time’s artifact, the human king was enveloped in a familiar glow which focused on his eyes. This was the third time he had felt the mysterious power of insight pour inside of his mind in his life, yet it felt just as exciting and overwhelming as before.

Information in the shape of images and symbols began to clarify within Graom’s consciousness. Edorias’ summoning ritual had been lost to time, and he was currently the only being who knew it in detail. The drawings necessary were simple enough. The materials had to be procured, but perhaps the most important part for the ritual was the sacrifice necessary for it. Flesh, blood and soul imbued with a supreme amount of hatred while at the same time linked to the summoner’s lineage. “...my son...” Graom gasped as the realization came to mind.

The One with Time, having been patiently waiting for the process to end, tilted his head up, directing his attention to the king who seemed to have gone back to normal. “Now you see. Edorias will demand your firstborn, soaked in his ire-inducing toxin in exchange, before he will show himself again.”

“My son...” Graom repeated as the images of what he had just seen constantly flashed before his eyes again. He wasn’t listening to the One with Time. As far as he was concerned, Graom didn’t need him anymore. He began to feel through the walls of the prison, cackling silently to himself. “Dear, young Kruon, your father has need of your services one last time.”

The One with Time sighed; hiding behind his hat as he finally gave up on the mad king. Graom had truly gone off the deep end. Audience with Edorias was enough to poison a mortal’s mind, and that was why no one had been able to successfully pass on the summoning ritual. Many throughout the ages, even those among the virtuous, had been lost to madness after learning of the devilish secrets imparted by the details of Edorias’ calling. As a result of the unbridled chaos this knowledge spread, the gods had decided to seal that knowledge away for no one to attempt the calling again.

“What one does with Insight is up to one’s self,” the One with Time recited as Graom’s fingers collapsed a series of bricks in the dungeon’s walls. A hidden passage built precisely for an occasion like this allowed the king to make his exit. “Times three was the number this one could assist you in your pursuits, be they noble or selfish.”

Graom was on his way into the tunnels of his castle. He had prepared for such eventualities. He had learned the hard way not to trust anyone but himself. He knew what he had to do to open humanity’s eyes. Edorias was going to be deliverance.

The One with Time watched as the door behind Graom closed, becoming a part of the wall once again. The deity walked over to the crystal pipe the king had dropped and watched it fade away. The artifact would materialize elsewhere in the world, awaiting a new master. “With the contract fulfilled, it is time for me to bid farewell...” and thus the suited gentleman began to vanish from sight.

King Graom of Laylor had left to prepare for the important ritual.

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“Any luck, Ciel?” asked a worried prince Arton. The young royal was standing a couple feet away

from his older brother Kruon, who lay in a magically induced coma.

The modestly dressed, blonde healer held a hand up to her chest and shook her head with a perplexed stare. "I'm afraid I can't point the source of lord Kruon's mist. It's as if his entire being has become one with it."

"Damn it," Arton slammed his fist on the wall out of frustration. He had known all along that the mist weapons the dragon slayers of Layor had been using were bad news, but Arton had never imagined the problem ever escalating to heights like these. "Do you think his earlier transformation might have to do with his current state? I've never seen a man turn into such a monstrous beast."

"I know. If it hadn't been for you and your friend Xander, I doubt we would be having this chat right now, your majesty," Ciel sighed, depositing her body on a chair. Exposing herself to the mist in Kruon's body, even if majorly subverted from how strong it used to be, still made her feel a bit woozy.

Arton had been watching Ciel work for the past four hours. He loved his brother, but this girl, with the vast powers she possessed, had risked life and limb, and continued doing so, for the sake of others. He couldn't bear to watch her torture herself for his sake. "Ciel, I appreciate what you do, but please don't push yourself. I'm really, really grateful that you decided to come to the castle, knowing how busy your clinic is."

The blonde smiled, heart-warmed with Arton's concern for her well-being. He was such a contrast to his father and brother. "I'm fine. And, thanks to you sending your people to repair and upgrade my little shack in Ground Layor, plus the staff and supplies you so generously decided to assign to my clinic, I have earned a bit of time off." She frowned a little, "I only wish I could do more to heal your brother."

"If only he knew that a kind-hearted creature like you is looking out for him, Kruon would think twice to strike out against dragons again. It makes me feel like there's hope to get my older brother back," Arton took a seat across Ciel, the set of armor he was wearing clattering as he adjusted himself. "You know, he and I used to go to Alur all the time back when we were kids. Our mother would take us there to learn about different culture. Kruon didn't always hate dragons. He used to be fascinated with them."

"What happened?" Ciel found herself pulled in by curiosity, forgetting her manners. She caught herself a little too late and blushed, awkwardly shaking her hands up in the air. "D-don't mind me, majesty. That's not my place to ask!"

Arton laughed, amused by Ciel's sheepish behavior. "For a dragon goddess, you are rather modest. You address me and my family with respect despite my kingdom hunting your kind. Ciel, you don't have to call me majesty, or feel abated by me. You've done marvels for my country and Alur, and we've even stood together in battle. I consider you a friend."

Ciel raised her eyes to meet Arton's as she rested her hands on her knees. She felt even more humbled by the speech. He spoke so confidently and smoothly that it was impossible for her to want to contradict him in any way. In the end, she nodded in agreement. "I still shouldn't snoop in the privacy of your family's..."

"It's not like I was avoiding the question!" Arton chortled, dismissing Ciel's worries. "You see, I was too young back then, but Kruon, being the elder among us two, was very fond of mother. Perhaps too attached, I might say. She was a very kind woman, always looking out for those smaller

and weaker. In more than one way, you remind me a lot of her.” That unexpected compliment made Ciel tug at the collar of her dress, making her feel a little awkward, although appreciated at the same time. She then noticed how sad Arton was looking all of a sudden. His amicable expression soon grew a little cloudier as he recalled painful memories. “When father one day returned without her, his expression cold and humiliated, like a man who had just suffered ultimate defeat, I saw Kruon’s last vestiges of innocence disperse like a rose’s petals in the breeze. Mother had been diagnosed with an incurable disease, and she grew frail and sickly by the day. Father left with her after learning of a treatment that could save her life but...” Arton paused.

Ciel was on the edge of her seat, her eyes almost begging for the conclusion of the tale. At the same time, her gaze was softened by seeing Arton, usually so confident and strong, revealing a vulnerable side to him. The dragoness in human disguise was always surprised by mankind’s diversity, showing so much promise in spite of all the evil they were capable of. Empathy was such a great emotion. She wasn’t prepared for the conclusion, however.

“...on the way there, mother perished. A huge dragon intercepted them and in the struggle, father lost her. He never gave details and I never asked, but ever since then, he and Kruon have been unable to forgive your kind.”

While Ciel’s heart sunk to the revelation, she couldn’t help but wonder about Arton. “I’m sorry, Arton,” she excused herself; “I... can’t help but notice you don’t include yourself in that last sentence.”

The prince returned a soft, although pained smile. “If you’re wondering about you, Ciel, don’t worry. Maybe it’s because I was too young back then to truly understand, but if there’s one thing I learned from mother, it’s that one can’t judge every member of a species for the action of an individual. If that were the case, I wouldn’t be able to trust even my fellow men. That is what I think she was trying to get us to understand by bringing us to Alur, whose religion is so different to ours. And as for you, even after so much has happened, even after so much unspeakable bloodshed, a goddess with fantastical powers decides to help me and my family without so much as doubt? No, I think I’d be doing mother’s wisdom a great disservice if I allowed sadness to cloud my judgment.”

“Arton...” Ciel felt bad that she had dug out such a painful memory. She was at a loss for words, but at the same time felt much closer to the young prince. “I... I’ll do my best!”

“Yes?” Arton was taken by surprise by the sudden outburst of exuberance.

“I know I haven’t been able to find out how to cure your brother, but we’ve come this far! Lord Kruon, your brother... and your kingdom, I’ll help! I’ll do my best to help everyone so that we can all live together in peace!”

Arton gave Ciel a firm, determined smile. “I have no doubt you have the power to do that, Ciel. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” The prince stood up and started walking away to the door. “I’m afraid that father’s incarceration has left quite a void in the decision-making top. The last few days have been quite... hectic for me. But it’s my responsibility as the only currently able, acting royal.”

“I understand, Arton. I’ll go check to see if the clinic is good with supplies and then head to Alur. I’ll take this opportunity to speak with Xander. He’s likely found out more about the mist than I could ever hope to learn from my failure to treat Kruon.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Ciel,” Arton stopped, turned around and rested a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “You’re very wise not to take it all upon yourself. Let’s work together. That’s the only way

we'll get through this problem.”

“Together!” the blonde healer closed her eyes, smiling. A satisfied Arton nodded in approval and prepared to leave. After bidding farewell to each other, the prince headed to meet his duties while Ciel abandoned the castle. She was going on a quick trip to her clinic in Ground Laylor before she would leave for Alur; the second trip would take her longer, but thanks to her dragon form it would be much faster than walking there.

Arton felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest. Ever since he had seen Ciel emerge as a goddess back in Alur, he had been tense around her. By opening up to her and talking, the young prince had managed to find a certain amount of closure in these troubled times. Managing a whole motley crew and whipping them into shape to serve as the royal guard had been challenging, but affronting the needs of his people was a draining activity. Arton had always skimmed economy and politics, uninterested in those subjects, especially knowing his older brother was going to be the heir to the crown. Now that it had all befallen to him, the young prince considered himself fortunate he could count with friends.

After a long day of answering questions, listening to his advisors and presenting his strong points about the amends and reparations Laylor had to make to the poor people of Alur, as well as convincing his tacticians that an aggressive takeover simply was not an option any longer, Arton had exhausted himself. He didn't wish to see anyone anymore. Day had given way to a rather beautiful afternoon that he simply could not continue. Convinced that he had given his subjects an agreeable amount of his time as ruler, Arton decided he would retire to his chambers early; but not before he decided to check up on his brother like he did every night.

The castle was quiet late in the day, with everybody either in their studies, offices or preparing for dinner, if they hadn't outright left the castle to be with their families. Arton could also enjoy solace, basking in the calm. He only wished his own family could've been more fortunate than to be in this sad state of affairs. “No. I have to put faith in Xander and Ciel. He's the smartest sorcerer I know, and she's a goddess for pity's sake. What am I worried about?” he chuckled, murmuring to himself as to not give away Ciel's identity. He approached Kruon's chambers, preparing to open the door, “Kruon will be fine... brother?” The prince gasped and rushed inside as he saw the empty bed. “Where?! Kruo-ack...!” he grunted as sharp pain to the back of his head rendered the prince unconscious. He had been ambushed.

A cloaked figure lugging the comatose Kruon over their shoulder stood over Arton. “I need your throne room for a spell, “majesty”.” The assaulter removed his hood and muffler, revealing Graom's aged face as he spoke with sarcasm. “Stay in your brother's room, traitor. I won't have you interfering.” After locking Arton inside of Kruon's chambers, Graom gathered his supplies and carried Kruon over to the throne room. It was time to begin Edorias' Calling, and finally bring the gods to justice. “It's the only way I'll ever find closure after what they did to you, my dear Nizara...”

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“Nizara, please, you must rest and conserve your strength!” a younger king Graom pleaded as he held his wife's hand in his. His dream to found his own country and form a loving family had become true, yet fate had dealt his beloved wife a poor hand.

“Dear, I have been sleeping for the entire trip,” Queen Nizara was a beautiful woman, even with her sickly appearance. With long, golden locks of hair and her gentle personality, Graom and her two sons weren't the only ones that loved the queen. It hadn't been long since she had fallen ill. At first

it was the symptoms of a fever, but with time her condition worsened until she couldn't move her body under her own power. She was currently being transported via caravan with every single amenity and comfort her doting husband could think of. "I don't want you to worry."

"You still concern yourself with me, dear Nizara, even in your state," Graom counted himself lucky for the maiden he had chosen, only because she had been the one to choose him from among so many much more successful men during their adolescence. That was why Graom had wished for the insight to become king, to give her everything she deserved. Yet no matter with how much Graom pampered Nizara with, she never would grow spoiled, and always keep dignity along with the humility that made her so attractive. It broke his heart to see her so afflicted. "It won't be long. We're nearing the location."

It was thanks to Nizara that Graom had dropped his aspirations for fame and glory in place of leading his hard-earned kingdom to greatness and prosperity. To see her taken away by illness was such an unthinkable future that Graom had exhausted every single one of his resources trying to find a cure for her to no avail. His court doctors were stumped. Even medics and healers from other countries could not find a way to restore his beloved's health. Finally, Graom saw no other way but to delve into his own, private fountain of knowledge. He had fortunately not been loose-handed with the available insight that he had. Nizara was worth it; both of his remaining ones, if necessary.

After an audience with The One with Time, Graom was granted with his second insight, the information necessary to bring about the miracle that would make his wife better. The images were clear, and the message had been delivered to his mind. Bring her to the South Eastern corner of the City of Dragons. If his intention to heal her was pure, then after braving the forest and finding the Dragon Goddess' altar would make her better. Graom saw no greater purity in his love for his wife, the owner of his heart and the one responsible for all his happiness in life.

Graom wanted to take absolutely no chances and go against the prophetic instructions. He had followed each and every step in his quest to become king, and that had made Laylor the reality that it was today. That is why he carried his weakened wife deep into the forest alone; asking his caravan and guard to stay behind. Whoever he had to prove that his intentions were pure, he didn't want to disappoint. "Nizara, forgive me. Your fever is so high," Graom frowned, hating himself for being so meticulous when his wife was suffering so much.

"I... I'm fine..." Nizara reached up to put a hand on Graom's cheek. She could barely talk. "My king. You've always looked out for me, so so much. I never thought I was deserving of such kindness, but you always were there to listen and hold me together."

"Nizara, what are you saying? Your fever must be making you delusional," Graom half-laughed, tightening his grip on his wife as he crossed over a small forest stream. "It's always been you who has pushed me forwards. You've given us such wonderful children. And even when you're so small, you've always taken care of everybody around you, as if you were also their mother. You're the strongest one out of all of us."

"Graom, listen. I don't..." Nizara coughed as Graom crouched, gently lying her down against a flat rock so he could use the stream to replace the wet cloth he was using to keep her head cool.

"You mustn't speak, my queen," Graom shook his head, rinsing the cloth over the stream as he smiled, "I'll find the way to make you better. And if I fail, then I'll only try again until I succeed. I promise this to you... Nizara?" the king rushed to her side as he saw her eyes closed and her breathing having slowed down considerably. "Nizara! No. Not now! We're so close! I'll protect your life; I'll do it at any cost!"

The young king scooped his unconscious wife in his arms and pressed on. He couldn't afford to pace himself anymore, so he began to run in the direction his insight was pointing him towards. Graom came out into an enclosed space bathed by the high noon sunlight, a tall, earthen slab the focal point of the area surrounded by huge trees. "Is this it?!" the king exclaimed in desperation.

"This is the place, lad. Good work," a familiar, thick accented voice made Graom turn his head. The One with Time had arrived. "This is, indeed, the altar of the Dragon Goddess."

"What now? What do I do? The insight just showed me the way. What will heal Nizara, One with Time?" Graom demanded, beside himself with impatience, "Is it a flower? A herb nearby? Must I hunt a mystical beast, prove myself in combat?"

"Ease your head, old chap. I'm here as a gesture of good-will, to offer a spot of aid," the gentlemanly deity pointed the tip of his cane at the slab at the center. "Lie your wife down in front of the altar. The power of the goddess will do the rest."

Graom nodded, giving his unconscious wife one last smile before he brushed her hair away from her face. "It will be alright, Nizara. You'll come back to us..." he said as he walked over to the designated spot and carefully set her down. He turned to the god, "I am grateful for your assistance once again, friend."

"None of that, lad. It is my duty to see balance preserved," the One with Time responded, beckoning with one of his gloved hands, "Step away so the ritual can begin." Upon the One with Time's insistence, Graom stepped away and began to pray for the well-being of his significant other. Just as the faceless god had decreed, a supernatural phenomenon occurred.

Nizara's body was permeated by blue light spewing forth from the slab, showering her in mystical energies. The queen could feel vigor returning to her once decaying body, renewing her strength and bringing her back from the fever-induced dream she had been having. Nizara almost instantly sat up as soon as her eyes opened again. She was confused both by what was happening and the person standing next to her husband. The alien sensations running amok in her body was making her perky as if she had just woken up from a reinvigorating nap and walked out of a hot, refreshing shower. Nizara felt like her morning, no, that her life had just started again!

As he saw Nizara stand up to her feet, Graom couldn't hold his tears back. After a month and a half of watching his angel of a wife being unable to eat a meal on her own, Nizara had practically bounced back up on her feet. This truly was a miracle. "My love...!" the emotional king jumped forwards with the intention to embrace his wife.

"Halt, lad! Not yet!" the One with Time warned, but Graom didn't listen. Nizara was happy to see her husband come hug her, but before their bodies could come into contact, a crackling jolt of electricity forced them apart. Graom shouted as he was flung against a tree while Nizara stood there in confusion.

"Dear god! What just happened?!" Nizara screamed, trying to step out of the altar to go check up on her husband, but she was held back in place by a mysterious force.

"The rite of reincarnation requires full cooperation, my dear," the One with Time explained to Nizara.

"Who are you? What are you doing to me?!" the queen asked out of fear for the strange suited man.

“Goodness, lass, calm yourself. You have my word there is no nefarious intent at work here. Allow me to introduce myself, Queen Nizara,” the featureless man bowed forwards, “I am known as the One with Time. And so you don’t think there is any deceiving, allow me to skip to the explanation. I am sure you’re familiar with the fable of the Dragon Goddess.”

Nizara nodded, still wary, but remembering the teachings of Alur, all that knowledge suddenly returned to the forefront of her mind.

“Of course you do. You prayed to her for your family’s well-being for all of your life and have been following the self-less path for just as long,” the One with Time nodded, “You must know, Nizara, that the Dragon Goddess is not one, but a line of females with great ideals who have been chosen by the powers that be to carry on the torch of responsibility.”

“I was chosen...?” Nizara whimpered out, unable to believe her circumstances.

“Why, yes. And by that very token, you’re being not just healed from the illness which would’ve taken you, had it not been for the efforts of your loving husband,” the One with Time gestured towards the half-conscious Graom, who thankfully was not seriously harmed after the shock, “You’re also currently being empowered with the power of a God.”

“The power of a God...” Nizara repeated with barely bated breath, looking down at her hands as the blue light danced all over her body, making her glow bright. It was true that she was feeling spry, even better than when she was a teenager! “B-but... I’m not worthy of this. I can’t...”

“If you reject it, then I can’t force you to keep it. No one can, in fact, lass,” the One with Time sagely nodded, “You were chosen because the previous goddess has met her end, but you certainly are not stripped of your own free will because of it. As I mentioned before, you may receive the full benefits of this power only when you willfully choose to do so. I can tell you however, without a doubt in my mind, you are truly worthy of this gift. The world needs a Guardian, and with your motherly personality in combination with the appropriate strength, you will be able to protect it.”

Nizara opened her eyes wide in realization. She had always been small and weak. There was no day she didn’t question why she was sitting at the throne next to Graom when she couldn’t even properly take care of herself. But there was one irrefutable truth to this all. The world had no Guardian, and if the legends of Alur were true, the world’s balance could only be supported by the Dragon Goddess. Nizara understood her role in this. She had to find the confidence within her and let the power flow. “I can’t let darkness spread and consume the world. Not just for my family, but for everybody we share the world with. I accept!”

“I see you’ve made your choice, dear,” the One with Time tipped his hat in her direction, “You’ll make a splendid Guardian.”

“G-Guardian...?” Graom groaned as he woke up, holding his head in pain. The concussion made him slip on his feet and fall back as he tried to make for his wife, “Nizara!” he yelled as he saw a whirlwind of magic energy kick up around the queen, her hair wildly riding the air current. “No! What is happening? You...!” the king turned to the One with Time, “What did you do?!”

The deity shook his head. “I did nothing, lad. This was your wife’s choice.” Graom almost hiccupped in bewilderment as he was forced to watch the ensuing transformation.

As power swelled within Nizara, so too did her body. Nizara gasped as she felt an uncontrollable

amount of energy surge forth, making the human start growing larger. The dainty yet femininely built queen began to stretch taller, causing her dress to tighten against her form. She didn't merely grow taller however, Nizara's proportions began to adjust her appearance to the motherly love she projected. As a result, her top and bottoms began to audibly tear and rip faster than the rest of her dress. The sight was incredible to behold.

A confused and panic-stricken Graom could only watch as the changes unfurled. Low constitution aside, his wife had never lacked for curves before, yet the growing Nizara before him was upping that ante with gusto. Nizara's breasts were the main cause for her top to bust at the seams as the mammaries gained mass. They enlarged to twice their normal proportions, each orb becoming comparable to the size of her own head in size. The dress' top shredded without remedy.

On the lower end of her expanding body's spectrum, Nizara's child-birthing hips were being enhanced with even more natural thickness. The round shape of her buttocks was amplified as they enlarged, yet remained springy. Her dress began to lift as her butt expanded, her wider and thicker thighs joining in the destruction of her skirt. The truth was none of Nizara was making it easy on her clothes. Her legs were becoming longer, adding inches that resulted in her height meeting and quickly exceeding her husband's. But the transformation had only just begun.

The taller, curvier Nizara felt the blue energy suddenly begin swirling even faster, turning into a darker shade until it translated through purple and into a vivid crimson. As her ears disappeared behind her hair, the skin and cartilage melded together, disappearing into her skull. Nizara shut her eyes as she felt four bumps on her head suddenly grow and push out through her scalp. Two pairs of dark red spikes grew out of her hair, shaped like horns. Her face began to contort, pushing out as her nose was absorbed by her rapidly changing face. With barely visible nostrils at the tip, the woman's visage altered into a snout. Her teeth sharpened into fangs and the pupils of her eyes became vertically shaped. Her whole body was both growing and changing at the same time.

The two men present witnessed as Nizara became taller and taller still, already over 8ft. tall, putting her at a towering height no woman, let alone man, could compete with. Nizara spread her arms out as the sleeves of her dress were torn apart by her growing biceps. To add to the incredible endowed curves, light musculature began to push her skin out. While her proportions remained like that of a sincerely curvy athlete, her skin also began to change. From silky and soft pink, the horned woman's dermic layer began to peel off in favor of resilient yet smooth, fiery red scales. This vibrant hide began to cover all of Nizara's body from head to toe, turning slightly darker in color from her neck to her voluptuous chest and all the way down her abdomen and underbelly.

Her toes suffered a change similar to her ears as they fused together at her feet. Instead of five toes there were now three claws of the same dark red coloration of Nizara's new horns, with a fourth, additional talon at the very back of her feet. Nizara felt an itch behind her as her tailbone popped out of her mutilated dress, elongating into an additional, red appendage longer than even her legs. Already at a ludicrous 15ft. tall, and with a last groan of protest, the enormous, scaly queen's attire lost the battle and was reduced to tatters. Nizara cried out as pleasure washed her over, putting her down to her knees as she hugged herself tightly.

The final change manifested as two pillars of energy projected out of her back, stretching out into two large, leathery, spike-pointed, majestic wings. Connected at her scapula, Nizara could feel the alien sensation of her new wings as they experimentally flapped, doing something similar with the tail idly swishing behind her. The process continued as she grew bigger and bigger, turning the draconic queen into a gigantic version of herself. Constant swelling only reached serene calm moments later, when the power had finally fallen under Nizara's command.

Speechless, but able to properly move, a befuddled Graom silently yet warily approached the enormous dragoness that used to be his wife. He didn't see the whirlwind of crackling energy surrounding the reptilian, scarlet beauty any longer, so he figured he could get close this time. "N-Nizara...? Is that you? Nizara!" he shouted.

"...did it..." she stammered, out of breath.

"Huh?" Graom couldn't make out what the queen was trying to say. He took a step back as she folded her wings and calmly sat up on her knees. Those gorgeous blonde locks of hair flowed down like a waterfall of pure gold. He saw Nizara brush her hair back as she revealed her smiling visage.

"I did it. I have the power, my sweet Graom!" the giant Nizara announced with a jubilant tone. The king had no words for this. That creature that looked nothing like the woman he loved was speaking with her voice. It was unmistakable. "Now I will really be able to make a difference for everyone. I'll be able to protect our kingdom... no, every kingdom in the world! And I owe it all to you!"

The king collapsed, falling to his hands and knees. With a sight so spectacular, Graom couldn't even make sense of what the exuberant, freshly minted goddess was talking about. A slow clap soon snapped Graom back to reality as he looked back to see the One with Time approaching them.

"Marvelous, fantastic!" the god cheered, "My my, you are looking so radiant, lass. Just look at you, taming the power of the dragon goddess in such a short time! And you, I say, old chap, the prostration is hardly necessary. Goddess or no, she still is your wife. No words of congratulations?"

Graom couldn't process it. He had come to look for a cure for his ailing wife, the same wife that he estimated had grown into a 20ft. tall red dragon! "What is the meaning of this?!" he snapped.

"Hostility? I assumed you'd be simply ecstatic about this, lad. This confuses me," the One with Time replied, rubbing a hand under his chin.

"Cut the act, you double-crossing fiend!" Graom stood up and turned to face the faceless deity. "I asked for a cure. Not to turn her into this... into this monster!"

"All for the sake of balance, lad. No Dragon Goddess, no healthy world. She was a candidate."

"Couldn't it have been anybody else?! Why did it have to be my wife?" Graom reproached. "She doesn't deserve this... to be tricked into serving your purpose or your balance!"

Nizara looked down at the bickering pair with a frown of increasing concern. "D-dear..." she stuttered, worried for her enraged husband, "I'm still me. I took this form to better command the power of the Guardian. I am in control now, I promise."

"Nizara... oh god, Nizara, it still is you..." Graom turned to the looming giantess, "But why? Why did you have to fall for his words?" he begged. Approaching the red dragoness, he leaned against her right knee, which was like a wall to him now. Nizara softened her gaze at seeing such worry. She very gently reached down to pick her husband up in her hands, holding him up to her snout.

"Honey, listen," the dragoness spoke, "I am still in love with you, and I desire no other. This gentleman explained it all to me. The previous dragon goddess passed away, and in her place, I had the choice to receive her power to help make the world a better place. I made that choice and am ready to face my new responsibilities. Do you hate me for it?"

Graom had no words to retort. That was a question with no right answer. The young king felt betrayed, but at the same time the love for his wife was making it impossible for him to direct any anger at her. Without anything to say, he just hugged Nizara's big cheek as she nuzzled his body. "We... we can make this work. Somehow."

Nizara smiled and stood up, making the section of the forest to rattle from her size and might. "I will never leave you, Graom. I love you."

"Nizara, my love..." Graom hugged her harder, overcome by the joy of hearing his wife once more speak with so much energy and passion. Her life had been saved. No matter the circumstance, that had to be enough for him.

But time, unfortunately, was not kind to the couple.

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Xander of Alur was a very studious, scholarly mage. While adventure and riches awaited those that would quest for glory, the youth knew his calling was in unraveling the secrets of history lost in books. This skill of his was being used to its maximum potential as he had practically buried his study with very old books, some of the ones he had yet to read covered in thin layers of dust. The reason for the extraordinary effort he was currently making was to help his old friend, the Layor's prince Arton.

After all of what the neighboring country had done to Alur, the city of dragons, Xander felt strange researching for the sake of saving Arton's brother, who had transformed into a monster and destroyed a portion of the town, and had been hunting dragons for sport all along. In different circumstances, Xander would have found it ironic that he would dedicate so much of his time to do this even for a friend. But things had changed with the advent of the goddess.

The scholar put the book he had been reading down and held his eyeglasses away while rubbing his sore eyes. As he tried to unwind from so much information gathering, Xander's thoughts went back to Arton's friend, Ciel. As a scholar and devoted Alurite, the young man was very interested in the blue dragoness who fought against the monster alongside Arton. After their victory, Xander's fellow townspeople were ready to unleash their ire upon an unconscious Kruon, but Ciel, transforming into a gigantic dragon, managed to defuse the situation and restore people's faith. The very fact of having witnessed such a miracle and having had the honor of assisting the goddess in her endeavors had made Xander confident about his abilities. He knew he had what it took to help others now, and about how important impartiality was when it came to give it.

His motivation reinstated, Xander downed a quick glass of water and got back to work. Before he could properly focus however, a loud sound alerted him. It was like something had wacked against one of his windows. There were no blinds in the humble little abode, so it was easy to see if there were people standing outside, which there weren't. Xander stood up, curious, and approached the windows to see if there was anything going on outside and screeched when all of a sudden a massive eye opened next to the leftmost window. "Gah!" he fell back, startled.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" The huge dragoness crouching down next to Xander's stone hut apologized.

"Y-your eminence...! It's you. What an honor!" the scholar exclaimed, quickly getting back on his feet.

"I didn't mean to land so hard. I was focusing on keeping myself visible only to you, Xander. Sorry

I surprised you! I was just about to get changed.” The gigantic reptile closed her eyes, glowing and reducing her size. She changed her appearance back to her human disguise, dressed in her healer outfit. The blonde spoke from behind the windows like a normal person, “May I come in?” she gently asked.

Xander was left speechless at the transformation. It took only five seconds, but the imposingly huge creature of raw power and size had successfully changed herself into an unsuspecting human. The sheer amount of magic power necessary for an alteration spell of that magnitude made the scholar almost burn his brain trying to crunch the numbers and relevant conversions. He shook his head, brought back from his daydream by Ciel’s request. “Why yes. Of course, please come in!”

Ciel had been making frequent visits on the last few days. It was faster than relying on correspondence between Laylor and Alur. The goddess was just as invested in helping cure the deep mist poisoning currently holding Kruon. Xander was the one who had the most expertise in hexes and curses thanks to all of his reading, so his knowledge was invaluable to Ciel, who was still pretty new to magic. Even after all these visits, Xander was still not used to having a goddess walk up to his door and politely ask to enter his house. On the other hand, Ciel still couldn’t get used to the honorary titles the Alurite would use with her.

“I apologize, your ladyship,” sighed the mage as they shared a cup of tea, “I still have been unable to find anything new to help Lord Kruon’s condition.”

“Oh, please don’t apologize, Xander. I know you’ve been doing your best!” Ciel shrank a little with a nervous smile, “It’s not like we’ve been making a lot of progress either. It really is a vastly powerful curse. I’m just glad that we only have to work with only one case.”

“It is our only saving grace,” Xander agreed, turning to grab the tome he had been reading, “The mist appears to predate the records on Alur’s history books. Even the oldest logs and journals I managed to find, at least those that speak coherently of what they identified as mist, seem to be convinced it’s untreatable. Like some sort of supernatural rabies, put in layman terms.”

“I see. It really is daunting to see that we’re fighting a magic disease that’s been around for so long,” Ciel didn’t have the heart to tell Xander that the mist was actually borne out of man’s heart. “But at least we don’t have to worry about it spreading so much thanks to Arton having confiscated all of the cursed weapons that had been harnessing it.”

“How is he? I mean Arton,” Xander put the book back down, Ciel was about to respond when she suddenly stopped. He followed her eyes to the side where his book had been only to fall off his chair when he saw someone standing next to him. “Wah!”

“Oh dear. A thousand apologies, lad,” the being standing before the surprised Ciel and the grounded Xander was none other than the One with Time. Bolstering his usual attire comprised of an Armani suit, striped pants and designer shoes, the apologetic deity offered Xander a gloved hand. “You two were simply so absorbed in conversation that I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Wh-who are you?” the terrified mage looked at the tall humanoid, but accepted the help up while examining the creature. On his head, a black billycock hat, and on the hand he wasn’t offering, a walking cane and lit cigar tucked between his fingers. Perhaps the most identifiable feature of all was that he had no facial features at all, like a talking mannequin. “A golem...?”

The god seemed to take offense. “I say!” he exclaimed in his thick accent, “I realize my manners are lacking as well, what with the whole unannounced arrival, but to compare me to a lumbering

chunk of ore and mud? Why, the very thought of..."

"Gary!" Ciel cut him short, "What are you doing here?" the girl asked, sliding off her chair to approach the tall male, "And why did you not stop time? I thought you didn't want mortals to see you."

"Y-you mean this Guh-Gary... is another god?!" Xander almost freaked out. What was it with almighty beings loving to put his heart in danger so casually?!

"His name isn't actually Gary," Ciel murmured a little, "But I like to call him that."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, lad," Gary bowed, taking his hat off during the introduction, "I am the One with Time."

"Th-the One with Time?!" Xander exclaimed out loud, "I... I recently read up on an ancient deity with that name. You're the guardian of knowledge. Scholars all over have been debating about your existence for more than..." the mage was suddenly interrupted by the gentleman raising an open-palmed hand.

"Lass, there's no time," the One with Time nodded politely to Gary before looking at Ciel, "I must make this quick. Layor, no, the world as you both know it, is in danger."

"What?!" Ciel and Xander both exclaimed. The girl spoke first. "Gary, what's going on? Talk to me."

"Layor's King has been absent from his cell for the past few days. He's been plotting and I'm afraid today is the day of execution," as the male deity explained, Ciel frowned in disbelief.

"But he was jailed! I was there when it happened," Xander questioned. The One with Time turned to look at him.

"I would assume he had help. The brilliant thing about loyalty and charisma is that not even a madman is without following," the gentleman took a pip of his smoke as Ciel interjected.

"But Arton is there! What about him?"

The god shook his head, "I have no practical way to know now. Look outside and see for yourself." Xander and Ciel exchanged quizzical looks with each other before they rushed out of the hut, looking out into the horizon. They both gasped in horror as gargantuan cumuli of miasma swirled above the darkened kingdom of Layor. "It can't be good if that is happening right now, dear," he said to Ciel, standing behind them with his arms folded.

"This can't be," Ciel held by the side of her head, "That is five times the mist that used to hover over the kingdom! To gather this fast and out of the blue..." she turned to Gary, "Why didn't you let me know sooner?!"

"I'm afraid that it was simply not possible, lass," the One with Time shook his head evasively. Xander couldn't quite understand what was going on between the two deities, but he understood something had to be done.

"I-I don't think this is the best time to argue. If King Graom is responsible for this, Arton must be in danger! We have to go to Layor to help!"

“You’re right. We’ll leave this for later,” Ciel walked off an adequate distance and began to morph into her huge, feral dragon form. “Quick, get on. I’ll fly us there in no time!”

“Hold on, lass. I am in no way overstating this is not going to be resolved through diplomacy. And with that huge amount of mist in one place, you’ll need an edge on your side,” the One with Time explained, flicking his cigar away, which disappeared in mid-air. “I know you can’t trust me right now, but for that very reason, I need to steal this bright student of magic so I can help him help you.”

Xander looked between the two gods, humbled once more by the magnificent, giant dragoness before him. She was looking down at the One with Time with a stare of contempt. At the same time, Ciel was convinced that Gary would tell her the truth eventually; for as long as she had known him, he had never lied to her. She nodded down at him. “Please hurry. I’ll go on ahead!”

“You can trust me,” Gary responded, turning to Xander. “Apologies for putting you on the spot, lad. But nothing I said was a lie. You’re bright, and well-learned. May I borrow your expertise? It’s time we finally give Ciel what she needs to win this fight once and for all.”

Xander gulped as the stakes continued to rise higher and higher. He had no idea what he could do to help a God, but he wasn’t the brawly type anyway. He nodded. “I’m in your hands, Gary.”

“Blimey. Not you too with the bloody name.”

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Arton’s head was pounding. He found himself looking at the floor of Kruon’s chambers, the foot of his empty bed next to Arton’s collapsed form. “B-Brother...” the prince was slow to get back up to his feet, “He was taken. The kidnapper and my assailant are probably the same. There’s no time for deduction.” Arton dusted himself off and approached the locked door, groaning in frustration. He took a few steps back and charged the door, making it audibly rattle. “One more!” he repeated the charge, causing the hinges of the door to creak. With a good, heavy kick, the prince knocked the door open, finding himself in the suddenly occupied corridors.

“The prince is trying to escape! Stop him!” one of the nearby guards called out. Arton didn’t understand the circumstances, but he was sure as hell not going down again. Drawing his sword as he was approached by the rebelled guards, the prince quickly dodged their attempts to capture him before knocking them all out with swift strikes from the pommel of his weapon.

“These aren’t impostors...” Arton gasped as he inspected his unconscious opponents. “That’s why they were so predictable. They used to belong to the royal guard. Are they in league with the kidnappers? I’m not going to get my answers by talking to myself.” Arton sheathed his blade and left for the other wing of the castle to try to clear things up.

On the way, Arton was shocked to see the skies above had turned a distinct, dark purple and were roaring with angered thunder. Something definitely sinister was going on. Just as he had expected, the castle had been occupied by more rogue soldiers, and both the loyal guard and non-combatants were being held down. The prince crouched to stay out of sight, overhearing the words “ritual” and “throne” as he snuck past them. He learned of his destination.

The doors to the throne room were closed, and four guards were posted there. Arton wanted to get to the bottom of this strange occurrence, but he knew fighting two guards wasn’t the same as four.

He lured one of them by taking the fire gem off a lantern on the wall before crushing it around the corner to make a bright sparkle. He took that one out with ease and then charged the second, putting him out of commission with a quick uppercut to the chin. With only two startled guards left, Arton dispatched them together with a swift flurry of blows before they could react. "This is why you don't skip your drills, gentlemen," the prince firmly told his defeated opponents. He turned to the double doors and felt his heart skip a beat. Just what was he going to see there?

Arton was greeted with a grim sight. The Lazor Castle throne room had been defiled with symbols and runes scattered in patterns that he couldn't recognize, but they certainly did not look like the recipe to summon a unicorn. At the center of three concentric circles were a cloaked stranger and, most importantly, his brother Kruon as well. Unconscious, but unharmed, Arton let out a small sigh of relief, "You must be very brave or very foolish to incite a rebellion in these troubled times. Let go of my brother, fiend!" Arton demanded.

The cloaked figure stopped his silent chanting to chortle and then laugh. "Fiend is it now?" the irrevocably familiar voice made Arton stop cold. "Arton, whenever did you get to be so pompous, my child?"

Arton's eyes narrowed as the man discarded his cloak, revealing the visage of his father, "You."

"Did you expect anybody else? This IS my throne, you ungrateful little whelp," Graom spoke with venom in his words, making Arton take a step back. The king smirked as he saw his son grip the handle of his blade. "And you're here to take it for yourself. But can you? It won't matter soon, either way."

"Stop speaking in circles, father!" growled Arton, "I don't know what you're doing, but I don't need to know it's going to be bad, and involved with the mist. Let Kruon go!"

"He's almost done performing his duties. A much better son than you, Arton!" Graom mocked. It was true that the younger red-haired man was clear of the dark purple skin, but something was wrong. The place felt almost prohibitory with a heavy atmosphere. Arton recalled the ritual that Graom's loyal soldiers had been speaking about and decided this wasn't the time to fall for petty tactics. There was only one way to settle this dispute.

"Give him back!" Arton yelled, drawing his sword and lunging for his father.

"Yes! Come for him! You'll fall to my blade!" Graom unsheathed his own sword and clashed with Arton. Metal upon metal sparked light into the otherwise dark throne room. In-between swings, Graom taunted Arton. "You're weak. This is why you're not fit to rule. How can you hope to take anything from me when you still swing like a child?!"

"I don't care to hear these moot observations!" Arton replied as he took swings, "Why are you doing this to Kruon? Has he not suffered enough for your mad schemes?!"

"His suffering is not without reason, foolish boy! He willingly embraced all that the mighty Edorias blessed him with!"

Arton gasped, narrowly avoiding a slash that came his way. He increased the distance between them with a back-step, "That name! You have been counseling with the dark one. His poisonous words have rotted your mind!"

"He opened my mind to the truth of this cruel world and its even crueler puppeteers! Edorias is the

only being capable of standing up against the powerful tyrants that rule it all. It is time they pay for what they did to our family!”

“What was that? What did you say?!” Arton gasped as he saw his father lunge forwards, smashing his blade down with brutish force. The prince had no time to properly dodge, so he put his sword up in an attempt to block the deadly strike.

“I lost everything! I have nothing else to live for! But I can’t let them win, Arton. I can’t let them do as they want. I thought about undoing myself, but to even think they’ll continue making us dance for their joy and merry...! No! Enough!”

“You have to stop this, father!” Arton saw an opening in Graom’s aggressive offensive and delivered a knee to his stomach. The blow sent Graom reeling back, gasping for air, “I don’t care what personal business you have with the gods, but it has to stop! You’re destroying everything and everyone for the sake of a war no one wants to be a part of!” Arton pounded his fist against Graom’s temple and then bashed him down with the pommel of his sword. Graom fell to the combination attack, dropping his sword. “I’m taking my brother back, and I’ll deal with you later.”

“N-no...” Graom wheezed, too woozy from the beating to properly sit back up. “You don’t understand,” the king mumbled as Arton walked past him and sheathed his sword, picking Kruon up and removing him from the glyph’s center. “You don’t know anything...!”

“What don’t I know?!” Arton snapped angrily as he walked back, heading over to his father. “You’ve gone senile, impossible to deal with! Your irrational bouts of lunacy have almost cost this kingdom and everyone in it their lives! You were about to sacrifice your own son! And for what...?!”

“For Nizara...” Graom sobbed, making Arton’s steely gaze suddenly soften.

“M-mother...?” the prince stammered, “What does she have to do with the gods?”

A frustrated, growling Graom put a hand on his face, pounding the floor with a closed fist. “He took her away from me.”

“The dragon?” Arton closed his eyes, frowning in disbelief. To him, this wasn’t the first time to hear of his father ranting about the undue circumstances of the past. His eyes opened widely once Graom began to tell a different story than he was used to. In this new version, his mother had not been killed by a dragon, but transformed into one via a ritual. The result of which had given the former queen of Laylor extraordinary mystical powers, but also the responsibility to guard the whole world against strife and evil. “This... this isn’t...” Arton felt his legs shake in response to the unbelievable tale.

Graom continued. “I decided to stay with her for a year. Nizara wanted to remain in the forest to commune with the spirits and learn of her new abilities. At first, I would help her. She was finally happy. So strong and powerful, and she was ready to make a difference for the world at large. I just wanted us to return home to you and Kruon, to live our peaceful life together. But Nizara... Nizara betrayed me!” the king cried, “She couldn’t stay with me. As her powers became more and more spectacular and developed, so too did her responsibilities grow. Every passing day I saw her less and less as she left to intervene with matters I could not even come close to understanding. Sometimes I would not hear of her for weeks, up to an entire month! It was for the good of the entire world. But what about her family, Arton? What about us? What about... me?!” he screamed out in rage. “She was the only person who made me happy, and I couldn’t... I couldn’t be with her

anymore! The gods had taken her to be her slave, my Nizara was gone!”

Arton still couldn't believe. It sounded like a fantastic tale straight out of fiction, yet he had never seen his father speak with such unbridled emotion and honesty before.

“I had to get revenge,” Graom suddenly stopped sobbing. “They had to pay. The god who tricked me into offering my wife to them.”

“Father, you said she chose of her own free will!” Arton tried, but Graom wasn't listening.

“She was cornered by that faceless bastard, she had no choice but to accept her own role and give up her own happiness for the sake of the world. Her! The most angelical, self-less human being I've ever seen! Such a beautiful woman, tarnished by the greed of those higher beings! That dragon was not my Nizara. That dragon was the monster who had destroyed Nizara! That is why...”

“Father...?” the prince asked, focusing his eyes on Graom.

“That is why when Edorias appeared before me, promising me a way to destroy all the gods binding this world to their selfish will, I accepted the mist. I would do anything it took to remove them!” Graom explained, “I had to start with that beast who called itself my wife. And that is why I had Kruon form the dragon-slayers. He was so enraged that he would not hesitate to put the dragon responsible for his mother's death down with his own hands!”

“No! Nooooo!” Arton screamed, falling to his knees. It was all he could do not to drop the unconscious Kruon to the floor. “You... you made him kill mother! You monster! Did he know...? Oh gods, please tell me he didn't know!”

“That would have only made him hesitate. I needed him to produce mist, exacerbate his violence. All for the sake of making him into the perfect killing machine!” Graom's explanation wasn't making it any easier for the despairing prince. “And now that the mighty Edorias has channeled all of his hatred... even if you removed him from the sigil, Arton...”

Arton was too shocked by the revelation to react properly as the king began to step up, walking towards the center of the summoning circle. “Stop...!” Arton pleaded, his energy sapped by the emotional outburst. He looked at Kruon with pity; having been used, molded into a merciless hunter all for the sake of his father's twisted ambitions. How could he ever face him again and not tell him the truth?!

Graom took the chance his son was too distracted to intervene anymore, “...I will still be able to finish the Calling! Oh great and mighty Edorias...”

Arton cried out, “No...! Father! This madness... Stop this madness!”

“...descend upon us! My son's burning rage, the anger of this malcontent world is yours! And I, your humble servant, offer my flesh and blood, as well as my own wrath, to be your vessel!” The prince could only watch as every word that slipped out of his father's lips seemed to darken the throne room more and more. The windows above shattered as dark purple mist began to seep inside. Like extremities made of gaseous vapor, the mist began to snap around Graom, completely binding him. The king looked up with one last smile as a single tear escaped his eye.

As Graom was completely consumed by the mist, Arton averted his gaze. He embraced Kruon tightly to shield him from the upcoming shockwave of energy that burst out of the dark pillar which

had appeared at the center of the summoning sigil. The roof of the castle was blown apart by the great amount of pressure generated. Arton shut his eyes as he expected to be blown off by the second, dome-shaped shock-wave that began expanding out of the center, but instead he heard a loud, heavy stomp in front of him. Arton opened his eyes to see the welcome sight of his friend Ciel having arrived just in the nick of time to protect him from the incoming shockwave by shielding him and Kruon with her wings.

“Ciel!” Arton spoke, gladdened by the sudden arrival. “I thought you were in Alur! How did you...?”

“Hard to miss the giant cloud of doom floating above your house, Arton!” Ciel quickly responded, unfurling her wings when it was safe, revealing that she was in her Amazonian, battle form. In this form, Ciel stood tall, thick and muscular. Draconic, yet donning a suit of protective armor endowed with a part of her own power. She was using it better maneuver and survive the ill effects of the mist. “Is... is that your...?”

Arton looked at the center of the sigil, where the mist tornado was gathering all of the miasma in one place, turning bigger and bigger. “My father is in there. Although it’s safe to say that he’s gone now. It’s... for the best,” the prince murmured with his head hanging low. Ciel’s expression mellowed and she had to hold back a whimper.

“I’m sorry, Arton,” said a distraught Ciel, “The castle isn’t safe anymore. I can’t both protect you and your brother and hold this thing back. You have to leave.”

“I know, I understand. I don’t want my brother caught up in this nightmare any longer, either.” Arton stood up, “Plus I don’t think I’m going to be of any help in this. I’ll evacuate the people below while you do your thing!”

“Leave it to me!” Ciel pounded her chest and gave Arton an encouraging nod. The prince smiled.

“Please be careful. You can count on me to jump in the second things get rough. Good luck!” Arton couldn’t believe he would lie to her at this time. He felt useless and certainly not up to confronting whatever was going to come out of that magic circle. All he could think about right now was getting his brother to safety. No, he hadn’t lied. He would return. But for now, he had to rely on her power.

With the two princes gone, the goddess was left alone to face the massive twister. Ciel looked at the gigantic disaster swallowing up its surroundings, tearing them apart and spitting them back out as rubble and debris. The castle wasn’t going to last much longer.

Ciel hoped this wasn’t going to be the case for her own self.

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With Arton gone, Ciel felt a lot less brave before the insurmountable amount of evil power before her. “I said to leave it to me, but I have no idea where to even begin!” the dragoness whimpered in her head as she assumed a defensive stance, hoping to catch any surprise offensive before it did any damage.

“Haaa...” a coarse, forceful gasp resonated from within the miasma tornado. Ciel locked eyes with the epicenter of the growing disaster, shaking in her metal boots as she saw the entirety of the throne room unravel like yarn ball. The structure was collapsing as power in the center of the tornado grew and became more focused. “How fortuitous! The Guardian herself, saving me the

trouble of hunting her down!” the voice was heavy with arrogance and confidence, as if the wild, toxic wind itself was speaking to Ciel.

“King Graom?” Ciel braced herself to avoid the violent gusts of wind to hit her. The floor beneath her started to give, so she had to leap into the air and keep herself aloft with her wings.

“The fool was never good at following directions. Ironical, considering all of his misery was borne out of being commanded!” the tornado boomed with laughter, making Ciel flinch in terror. She realized she wasn’t dealing with a human being. “Perhaps now I can finally show this pitiful kingdom how a proper ruler administers life! Let it be known that Edorias the dark god once more roams the earth!”

“Edorias, huh?” Ciel felt queasy as more of Laylor castle became destroyed, its once mighty façade simply falling before the pressure of Edorias’ power. She only wished Arton had been able to hurry everybody inside, and nearby, to safety. “I don’t suppose I can ask that you leave in peace and stop driving people out of their homes.”

“You jest little whelp, but I can see it in your eyes. Your fear is as palpable to me as the certainty of who this world belongs to!” Edorias declared with a mighty roar. The mighty bellow was followed by a series of expansive shockwaves sent as an omni-directional attack. Ciel focused on her defense, feeling the mist-harnessed energy strike her body, doing damage and draining her stamina.

“Gyaaaahhh!” the dragoness, ever since her ascension, had never once suffered any serious injury or wound. Her bulk, scales and the nigh-unlimited power her goddess status conferred her ensured she was always in tip top shape. Other than the feeling of nausea and tiredness she got from being exposed to the mist, she had almost forgotten what it was like to be at the mercy of a much stronger opponent. Even with Kruon in his monster form she had been able to avoid being hit for the most part, but now she truly was feeling pain, spreading over her body like a burning electrical jolt. The onslaught of attacks quickly overcame the goddess, weakening and striking her repeatedly and without mercy. In the end, her guard was broken and she received a direct assault that sent her flying down into the first floor of the castle.

By now, Laylor castle’s walls had completely disintegrated. It didn’t matter if furniture or surfaces were composed of metal, concrete, wood. All of it was undone, corroded until it was completely eaten away. After Edorias’ opening attack, Ciel crashed into the castle’s reception, now a flat, broken surface. The dragoness groaned, then began to scream in pain, holding by the collar of her armor. Her chest was burning, as if her very heart was being squeezed from within. “Gaahh! The mist...! The mist is burning me!” she wailed in desperation. The attacks she had absorbed had left her completely exposed to the evil miasma which was doing its own number on her body.

“Yes! Suffer, little Guardian!” Edorias cackled maniacally, “Your agony gives me strength!” he taunted even as Ciel was unable to properly listen thanks to the pain coursing through her being, “Your pride as a dragon must be destroying your self-esteem right now. You thought that with all of your power you were going to stand a chance against the very source of the poison that has been weakening you for months! Nothing more than a foolish, tiny lizard who thought herself higher than her position! The impunity with which you came to face me insults the great Edorias, and for that I shall condense an eternity of suffering in slow torture!”

“Gak! Ahhhh! Nnnaaaaagh!” Ciel cried out in pain, rolling on the floor as if she was being burnt alive. She clutched her own neck, scratching at her scales, coughing and tearing up as her world became agony itself. The castle had been completely devoured by the dark purple miasma; the only reason she was still alive was thanks to her overwhelming strength and power. But what was going

to happen to the people of Laylor if this mist continued to spread? Nobody was going to be safe! If Edorias had his way, it wasn't going to be long before the whole continent, and the world, was affected! Ciel couldn't permit this to happen.

Every muscle in Ciel's burly body tensed, causing her armor to push out and crack. She clenched her fangs together, balling her hand claws into fists as she knelt up and slammed both fists into the floor. She had to endure the pain if she was to do anything about the dark god. Her current suffering was not going to be even a fraction of the combined pain every creature, not just humans, would feel if this situation worsened any further. Ciel had no choice but to isolate herself and Edorias to prevent as much collateral damage as she could.

It would cripple her further, but she saw no other way. Soldiering through the indescribable pain, Ciel did what she could to clear her thoughts, focusing on the shape of a sphere. A small amount of light gathered at her mid-section, and a transparent bubble began to grow out, enveloping her body to shield her from the mist. This let her regain enough of her strength to allow her to stand back up. "Your gumption amuses me, little Guardian! But you won't be able to..." Edorias' taunt was interrupted as Ciel suddenly expanded the sphere of light outside of her personal space. The second bubble grew larger and larger, collecting mist and keeping it within the land that Laylor castle used to be in. The bubble of sky-blue light pulled the tornado of miasma down, trapping Edorias and Ciel, as well as all the mist he had produced, inside.

"You fool!" Edorias admonished as the tornado started to shrink in size. "You did not trap me and the mist in your paltry little dome." From within the tornado of miasma, a guttural squelch preceded the appearance of nine pointy tendrils. A pair of huge, glossy black hands slammed themselves down, shattering what little remained of the castle floor. As the tornado began to dissipate, Ciel could see the monster's appearance. Standing at over 15ft. tall even hunched over, a thick, muscle-bound beast made of shadow and evil towered before Ciel.

Edorias sported two curved horns, one on each side of his head, while his face was a mouth-less, skull-shaped form. The nine tendrils sported from several spots in his body; two came out of his back, two out of his shoulders, two out of each arm, and the final one that served as a tail. The beast's clawed feet cracked the ground, owing it to his massive weight. "...you trapped yourself in here with *me*!" the creature roared.

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Arton had been unable to catch a break. Ever since he got everyone out of the castle, the dreaded mist had followed them out without stop. This particular kind of mist seemed to be very deadly, causing injuries to everyone it came in contact with, devastating the houses, and even the magic catalysts of Upper Laylor. Fortunately for the time-constrained evacuation, the snobby nobles of Laylor's high society didn't need to be convinced about leaving for Ground Laylor.

The young prince counted his blessings when he was finally at the kingdom's wall, with every last citizen gathered together. It didn't matter if they were high or low class anymore. Both the rich and poor were interested in surviving, and cooperation wasn't just an option anymore, but a necessity if they wanted to live.

"Sir, everyone is accounted for!" the lieutenant of the Royal Guard reported, receiving a nod from Arton. "Forgive my impertinence, milord, but you've been carrying Lord Kruon since we left the castle. Would you like to place him on a stretcher? I can make one available!"

Arton looked down at the sleeping Kruon, finding it amusing how peaceful he looked like, having

no idea of what was happening in his kingdom. The younger prince gave the lieutenant another nod and with his help, deposited his older brother down into the comfort of the stretcher. "But still..." Arton stopped to think out loud as he looked back to the destroyed castle, "...I'm concerned about this dangerous poison."

"It seems to have stopped and retracted, sir, perhaps the hex causing it has dissipated?" one of the magic consultants chipped in to the conversation. The prince looked skeptical.

"Perhaps. But I don't want anybody to risk it and get near. If anything, we want to keep at least a hundred yards away from the maximum radius of the affected areas. Get everyone organized, we have to stay on the move!" Arton barked out. Even if it meant abandoning the walls of the kingdom, he had to ensure the survivability of every innocent. As his soldiers left to guide families outside of Laylor, Arton turned to gaze at the castle, realizing that the mist had not merely pulled back, but concentrated in a single point. He looked far out and cringed to the light blue sphere which looked like a balloon stuffed with the thick of the toxin. "Ciel..." the anxious Arton lamented as he found himself in doubt on whether he should go or not. His people needed his leadership, but at the same time, one of his best friends was fighting for their survival!

The prince did not have to struggle with making a choice for long, as all of a sudden Xander's voice perked him up. "Your majesty...! Majesty...!" Arton turned around to see the mage being held back by the guards that had been ordered to keep everyone from getting any closer to the mist. A second, strangely dressed person was being held back as well.

"Keep your grubby paws off me. I say, where are the manners, you uneducated brute?!" Gary complained as he struggled to keep the men off him, having no intention of harming them.

"Unhand that man, he is my friend!" Arton commanded while looking at Xander. The guards responded and saluted, before they too pounced the One with Time, attempting to bring the tall deity down.

"W-wait!" Xander panicked, shaking the strange sheathed blade he had brought with him. Arton had never seen Xander hold up a sword; he was so weak that he had to use both of his hands to keep the object aloft. "He's with me. He's harmless!" Arton trusted Xander, so he nodded in the direction of his guards, who promptly let the peculiar being go. "Thank you, Lord Arton!"

"Hmph, the nerve!" Gary straightened his suit and hat, lighting a cigarette, "Why I ought to have shown you impudent lads a lesson in fisticuffs, if that is what you wished...!"

"Xander, what are you doing here? I thought you were in Alur. You look... very pale." Arton looked at the panting mage, who almost collapsed approaching the prince.

"We... we've been running non-stop... to get to Laylor in time..." Xander panted with every fragment of a sentence he could make out. "Why didn't you teleport us here, Mr. Gary?"

"Why, you ask? The mist is permeating the very soil we're standing on, lad," the One with Time responded rather casually, "It's imperative I keep my strength. Plus a bit of cardio never hurt the old body, my man, ha ha!"

"R-right..." Xander lamented his poor choice for a question. He returned his attention to Arton, "Never mind that. Your majesty, we're to help! Mr. Gary and I just finished developing a weapon that can physically harm the mist. We must give this to Her Eminence, post-haste!"

Arton looked at the item that Xander was holding curiously. "Is this another of your enchantments, Xander?"

"H-half of it is my magic power, yes," Xander almost stumbled on his words as he struggled to properly breathe, still exhausted after the mad sprint he had to make from Alur. "Could you explain it to him, Mr. Gary?"

"That blade is no more than a conduit for power. It'll channel through the lass and amplify its strikes," the One with Time explained as he took a pip out of his smoke. Arton appeared confused.

"A conduit for power? But what is its source?" the prince asked.

"An eye for an eye," the cryptic deity replied, making Arton doubt the plan. "Now, I do hate to be the one rushing things, your highness. However, should we not bring this to Ciel?"

Arton looked down at Xander who was offering the sheathed blade and took it in his hands. He decided that this was not the time for an interrogation. If things out here were bad, he couldn't imagine what Ciel was going through inside of that dome. This was the first real bit of help they had received, and Xander seemed to trust the faceless man. "Let's go!"

The One with Time nodded and ran after Arton, while Xander slowly lagged behind. "G-great... more running...!" the mage lamented as he trotted behind.

Once the trio had made it to the dome, they could see absolutely nothing inside. The entirety of the dome was black as night, with that sickly shade of purple tinting its insides. Arton and Xander put an arm over their mouth and nose to block out the foul smell that had contaminated the area. "We're safe out here, but..." Arton hesitated. He had seen what the miasma had done to the crops and even to houses. What chance did they have if they stepped inside?

"Mr. Gary can't go inside. The mist would weaken him, and we need him to be as healthy as possible!" Xander explained. Arton didn't really understand what he was talking about, but they were running out of time. He couldn't ask his friend to go inside; he had to do it himself.

"I'll deliver it," Arton gripped the sword tightly in his grip, preparing to enter. He stopped Xander, who was going to follow him in.

"No, Xander. It's too dangerous. You have to stay outside."

"But your majesty! The toxin will tear you apart. But with my healing magic, perhaps I..."

"Out of the question," Arton shook his head. His friend Ciel was already fighting where she was the weakest at, where she couldn't use the full range of her power, because of his family. There was no chance that Arton would endanger another friend out of selfishness. "This is not up for debate, Xander. Promise me that you'll stay out and, if we fail, you'll tell everyone to run as far away from Layor as they can."

Xander groaned, unable to win the argument. "At least... At least let me endow you with my strongest regeneration spell. I have no practical way to shield you from the mist, but at least I can give you time to enter and get out without succumbing!" Arton nodded.

"Do it quick." The spell was applied without delay. A little yellowish aura began to coat Arton, who suddenly felt invigorated. "Alright, I'm off. I hope your plan works!" And with that, Xander and

Gary watched as Arton stepped through the isolating dome, disappearing into the dangerous curtain of mist.

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“Where is that bravery?!” Edorias laughed as he slammed Ciel up and down with the four tentacles shooting out of his arms.

“Uwaagh!” Ciel groaned as she felt her body going limp bit by bit, overwhelmed by pain. Yet she couldn’t allow herself to pass out. She couldn’t let the monster win. But she had no way to escape. Battle wasn’t her forte.

“Where is that confidence?!” taunted the dark god as he held Ciel aloft and stabbed her sides with his free tendrils, breaking her armor and wounding her flesh. “Are you not the Guardian? The one meant to protect the world? You can’t even protect yourself, lizard!”

“Nngh...” Ciel groaned, blood dripping down the rim of her snout as she forbade herself from screaming. She didn’t want to give Edorias the pleasure of hearing her scream again. He had been beating her up for the past hour, but to Ciel it had felt like she had endured years’ worth of pain. She had lost a lot of blood, and her armor was slowly disappearing as her body reclaimed the power to heal itself.

“Release this puny little prison, whelp!” Edorias demanded as he finally let go, smashing Ciel against the shattered floor, “You’ve lost. You lie before me without any chance at survival. I could destroy you any second I wanted. I could make your little protection surrounding us vanish. But no; I want you to do it yourself. I want you to release my glorious gift to the world. As your final act as goddess before I end your pitiful existence, I want you to release me into the world!” he laughed.

Ciel said nothing in reply. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open. She continued to slip and fall every time she tried to stand back up. She truly had no way of winning. The battle had ended. But she couldn’t do what he wanted. She would die before she gave up. The dome was going to stay, and if she could buy the world just a couple more seconds by stalling until she expired, then she would have no regrets. “I want to have nothing to regret when I see you again, Nizara...” Ciel’s fond memories of the first friend she had ever made came rushing back.

“Ciel...!”

A familiar voice made her ears twitch. At first, Ciel thought she was hallucinating from the sheer amount of pain she had to force herself to endure, but it wasn’t long before the continuous shouts for her name snapped her back to reality. “That voice... Arton!” she exclaimed.

“What is this? What manner of fool would venture into my domain with such little protection?!” Edorias seemed amused with the appearance of the comparatively little prince.

Ciel turned around to look at Arton. The prince had suffered cuts and bruises all over his body, all of them a result of his short exposure to the miasma. The spell Xander had cast on him was not enough to keep an otherwise unprotected human unharmed, but it had kept him alive so far. “Arton...! By the heavens, no!”

“S-so... you’re... you’re the dark god...” Arton fell to one knee, unable to stay on his feet even with the regeneration spell keeping him awake.

“Bwahahaha! A fitting end for your family, all of you undone by the same mist, boy!” Edorias taunted the prince, turning away from Ciel to aim one of his spiked tentacles at the weakened prince, “Worry not, for Laylor has served me well. I shall make your death a quick, painless one!”

In that moment of desperation, of watching Arton sacrificing himself, Ciel gained a burst of energy. It wasn't nearly enough to undo all the damage she had suffered, but it let her quickly bounce off the floor and grab him before the spike on Edorias' tendril pierced Arton. She was fast enough to get out unscathed with the prince safely tucked in her arms. “Arton! Y-you returned...” Ciel gasped, starting to run away from the huge beast's attacks. “This place is too dangerous for you to stay in. I have to get you out!”

“C-Ciel, listen...!” Arton interrupted her as she approached the edge of the dome, “I won't be of any use to you. But you have to take this...” the prince explained, raising the mysterious sword up to the dragoness. “Xander and... this really strange man made it for you. It's the edge you need in this fight!”

Ciel gasped as she saw the sword in Arton's hand, “You risked your life to bring this to me! Arton...” the dragoness was ready to break down and cry, but she couldn't afford to let sentimentality ruin her chances at saving him. “I understand! I understand... I'll take this, I'll give it my all. Just... please don't come in again!”

Arton slowly nodded as Ciel took the sheathed weapon in her comparatively huge hand, before finally passing out from the pain. Ciel quickly jumped out of the dome.

“Your eminence!” Xander was the first one to greet Ciel as she rolled over and gently put Arton down. “By your grace! Arton!”

“Xander, there's no time. You have to treat him! He's badly hurt.” Ciel used the few seconds they had bought to breath and let her power replenish now that she wasn't inside of the mist. Edorias wasn't going to wait for her to return to full strength however.

The One with Time tipped his billycock at Ciel. “You've been marvelous so far, dear. I assure you will prevail.”

“Gary...” Ciel briefly looked at her fellow god. He had been a mentor to her, and this was truly the first time he had directly intervened to help. She looked down at the sword and carefully unsheathed it. Almost instantly, the little sword grew in size, becoming the perfect proportion for Ciel to grab onto and take swings with. “I'm sorry I didn't trust you. Thank you for the help.”

“Always at your service, lass,” Gary bowed respectfully, “Now give that brute a good what-for. And don't forget, Guardian. You're not alone in this. Those that you're protecting wish for you to succeed as much as you want to save them!”

Ciel didn't respond with words. She quickly leaned down and pecked the faceless deity where his cheek was supposed to be with her snout. A moment later, she jumped back into the dangerous dome. Gary bowed his head down and hid his face behind his hat.

“And that... is how a lady should behave.”

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“Have you said your good-byes, lizard?” Edorias greeted Ciel as she re-entered the dome. He

looked over the half-armored blonde, anthropomorphic dragoness holding a large sword in both hands. The dark god began to laugh, “A sword? You intend to face me with a sword now that your powers fail you? You amuse me!”

Ciel gripped the sword tightly. For some reason, she found that she could maintain her stance without breaking poise. The mist still hurt to stand in, but it wasn’t severely impairing her any longer. She looked down at the featureless blade; it looked like any old sword scaled up to a creature of Amazonian height like hers. She glared up at Edorias, as if telling him that it was over.

“You dare stare at my magnificence without reverence or fear? Unacceptable!” Edorias roared, his explosive anger followed by his eight main tentacles lashing out together at the goddess. Ciel was surprised when she saw the attack move slowly; a lot slower than she had initially perceived. As the tentacles approached almost in slow-motion, the dragoness confidently stepped out of the way and initiated a counter-attack. After a swift yet heavy hack, two of Edorias’ tentacles now lie in the floor, squirming like worms out of the dirt. “RRRRRAAAARGH!” the dark god roared out in pain as he felt two of his tendrils become severed, his target having moved out of the way. “Impossible! I’m invulnerable. The mist shields my body from all harm! What is that weapon?!”

Ciel looked between the sword and the monster. “It’s the end for you, Edorias.” Ciel began to move like a lightning bolt, striking from multiple angles, as if there were several copies of her dealing blows one after another, making Edorias flail and tumble backwards. In no time, all eight of the beast’s tendrils had been cut off. The dragoness didn’t know how she had gained the ability to sword-play or move so fast in spite of her bulk, but that was a question she would ask Gary later. She had to finish this fight before anything else happened.

Meanwhile, outside of the dome, Xander was watching bursts of light explode within the mist. Every time the blade struck true, the mist was purified. The blade wasn’t merely cutting Edorias, it was literally destroying the mist that it came in contact with, taking care of the source of his power at the same time as Ciel swung at him. “She’s doing it... she’s winning! Mr. Gary, the sword was a success, we...!” Xander turned away from Arton, who he had been mending, and noticed the One with Time lose his balance and fall down, dropping his cane. “Mr. Gary!”

“It’s quite alright, lad. Don’t shout. I don’t want Ciel to distract herself,” the deity spoke with laborious breathing, holding by his midsection as his whole body started phasing in and out, making him look briefly transparent.

“S-so this is what you meant...” Xander felt his heart choking his throat, “An eye for an eye...”

Every swing caused the One with Time to fade as he transferred his own life force into the blade Ciel was wielding. He had known it from the start; once Edorias appeared in the mortal world; there would be no stopping him. An immortal can’t be defeated unless it’s by the hand of another immortal. “Do it, Ciel. Finish him off...!” the faceless deity groaned in pain.

Edorias was on his proverbial last legs. The dark god couldn’t fight back. The combined strength of the dragon goddess coupled with that unusually sharp blade kept him from unleashing his wrath upon his opponent. “This cannot be! This is impossible! I can’t be killed! I am the manifestation of human wrath, their greed and all of their follies. Guardian! Do you honestly think they will turn better if you do me away with that blade?!”

“I know they already have,” Ciel replied as she approached Edorias, his body seething mist like blood from every cut spot. “Because this sword I’m holding is more than just a tool or weapon! It represents all the good they can accomplish when they try! Maybe you were born out of them,

Edorias, but no matter how powerful or eternal you think you are, if they want you gone, then that is what's going to happen!"

"You innocent, naïve fool!" Edorias called out, "Mankind does not deserve your blessing, it does not deserve your guardianship. Don't you know why the gods are in charge and they aren't? It's because they use and deceive each other. The gods don't trust them, and thus why they hold them down and stir them like cattle! I am their deliverance. If you truly want to protect them, you should let me live. Put that sword away. I shall destroy every other god, truly granting them freedom!"

"The world belongs to everybody," Ciel frowned, "It isn't just for men or just for gods, Edorias. Your extremist beliefs aren't welcome. I believe that we can all coexist, and that every man, woman, animal or god can learn about each other, and find that there is a potential for peace so long as we don't give up on it!"

"No! The wrath... the wrath consumes it all. The rage must be allowed to flow. I will destroy you first!" Edorias roared out, surprising Ciel with a lash from his spiked tail. Unable to step away in time, the blow impacted against the right side of her head, leaving a bloody gash. Ciel had turned her head just in time to avoid being impaled at the forehead. She cut the tail down before it managed a follow-up. "Grrraaaah! No... no! I was meant to rule, I was meant to bring about the chaos this world needs!"

"The world doesn't need you, Edorias," Ciel silently spoke as she grabbed her sword tightly, blood dripping from the wound on the side of her head. She lifted the blade over her head and channeled its energies for one last blow.

"It doesn't need you either, Guardian! You... you will see..." Edorias laughed again, finally falling silent once Ciel plunged the blade down into the monster's heart. There was a brief moment of silence before the massive monster stopped struggling. The mist in the light dome was completely gone. Edorias very slowly started to dissipate along with the sword in Ciel's hands.

The goddess fell to her knees, exhausted. The dome started to disappear as she reclaimed bits of her power. She was almost completely spent. Her arms extended to each side and she began to channel all of her remaining power. Edorias had almost completely wiped Layor out. With the mist gone, Ciel was able to release a mighty reconstruction spell that began to put everything back together, fixing the kingdom to its former state. Layorians did not deserve to be without home.

As light bathed the kingdom to restore it, Ciel felt herself lose her prodigious bulk. What remained of her battle armor melted into her body and she finally was left in the same form she had started her journey as. A tiny, feral light-blue dragon smaller than even a human child. The goddess would need a lot of rest to recover her spent energies, but for now, in this compact form, she could at least move.

Ciel turned around and ran out of the castle, worried about Arton. Her heart was gladdened to see a surprised Xander still taking care of Arton, who seemed like he would live and recover, but then she froze in place when she saw Gary collapsed on the ground, his body almost invisible. "Gary...! Gary!" the little dragoness cried out as she jumped next to him. "Gary! What happened? What's going on?!"

"Ahhh... lass, is that you? I can't see anymore." The One with Time laughed a little, "Not that I ever had good eyes."

"Sh-shut up! You're... you're wounded! Something happened! Xander, please help!" Ciel

screamed, but the mage couldn't find it in his heart to respond; Gary had already explained it to him.

"Hush, my dear," Gary softly spoke. With one hand over his chest, he put the other forwards, trying to feel for Ciel's cheek. "You're so small. It's almost unbelievable that you just defeated the dark god."

Ciel started tearing up. She didn't need any sort of sensorial power or even an explanation. The One with Time was dying. "Gary, why? I thought you were immortal. You've been around for so long... I... I learned so much from you, and I want you to keep teaching me! I'll help! I'll heal you. I...!"

"Lass," Gary coughed, "You have to stop. My time is finally up, and I've never felt this good in years."

"But...!" Ciel interjected, grabbing his hand tightly in her tiny little paws. Xander couldn't help himself, overwhelmed by sadness, and silently sobbed.

"I just want to set your mind at ease before I go. Lass, the reason I couldn't warn you about this all ahead of time was because I was bound by a contract. I was meant to help King Graom and could not directly interfere. I... I used you to bring about this folly to an end."

"I don't care!" Ciel screamed loudly, "I don't care, Gary. I knew you must've had your reasons, you've always been unclear about things, sarcastic and mean, but I knew you were looking out for me, for all of us!" she sobbed, "I'll hate you if you go. Don't... just... don't go...!"

"Ciel..." Gary sighed, "Blimey, you're getting me all emotional. Meetings are fleeting, my dear. Their importance isn't how long or short they are, but that they happened at all. Don't hold onto this grief for long, 'lest it consumes your heart. Do remember, there are a lot of people here that depend on you, but being the Guardian does not mean your life should go without happiness and amusement. Relish the bonds you create and enjoy the life that this world has given you. And... do give yourself a vacation from time to time."

Ciel hiccupped between sobs, nodding without response. She felt Gary's body warm up as it began glowing, shining brighter until sparkles started to fly off his fading body. "Gary, I understand. But I still will miss you..."

"...odd. I was starting to get used to the name..." the One with Time laid back peacefully. In the next few moments, his body had completely faded away. Ciel broke down to cry her loudest.

The victory had secured a brighter future for the world, and at the cost of the god who once thought mankind was completely worthless. The One with Time was happy to have been proved wrong, and the happiest that his friend had forgiven him. Ciel mourned him and did what she could to help in the coming days, assisting in reparations that her spell had not fully fixed and providing healing. The people of Laylor were grateful for their savior, credited as divine intervention by the Dragon Goddess, as Arton and Xander told the masses. Faith and peace had been restored to the once blackened kingdom of Laylor.

And so, time came to pass...

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Arton had been crowned king of Laylor. Even after his initial reluctance to take the place of his

father, he was favored by the general population and quickly became the benevolent ruler that the once troubled kingdom had been in need of. King Arton was young, but his radical new ideas to redesign the kingdom to cater to all of its people's needs were welcomed and did enhance the people's happiness. Inspired by his defunct mother's ideals, Arton cut down the barriers between Ground and Upper Laylor, letting nobles and commoners mingle and give them all equal access to magic catalysts, ensuring that prosperity could be enjoyed by all.

Xander left the battlefield of Laylor, retiring to Alur to continue his studies and started to take up light daily jogging to keep his constitution up. He disliked it, but figured it would be a necessity in case of any new emergency.

Kruon did wake up one day of summer, and when he learned his brother had taken the throne, he was initially confused. He felt like he had been lost in a nightmare for the longest time of his life. The days of his cruelty were a hazy memory. Arton, unable to keep secrets from his brother, slowly brought him up to speed. As a result of learning the truth behind his mother's death, Kruon decided to leave Laylor in a journey to Alur. This time not to bring war, but simply to take the road into the Goddess' Grove, where the altar of the Dragon Goddess was. He needed solace and Arton understood this. Kruon would one day come to terms with his own actions and return to Laylor to rule alongside his younger brother, becoming the new captain of the Royal Guard. The path of his redemption, in his opinion, was going to be endless, but with his brother supporting him, Kruon truly believed in showing everyone he could do better.

Ciel felt lonely in Crystal Falls whenever she went there for her privacy. Tea time just wasn't the same anymore. The goddess enjoyed it when Arton made time to visit her clinic in Laylor, and she liked to surprise Xander in Alur every so often. She welcomed the peace and quiet, but something was lacking. Ciel returned to Gary's last few words. She smiled to herself as she considered the possibility of visiting other worlds that might need her. Perhaps that was what she needed; a vacation.

And so, the sky dragon Ciel, Guardian Goddess, left the world in search for new adventures. She wanted to honor her friend's memory and have fun!

The End.