# BEGINNING AFTER by TurtleMe



VOLUME FOUR

# THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

## TURTLEME

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## AN UNFAMILIAR BURDEN

I WILLED a hole in the earth below us. After carefully placing Alea's cold, lifeless body into the center, I slowly covered her, then used her weapon as a makeshift gravestone.

The Widow's Crypt... It seemed an unfit place to lay one of the Six Lances to rest. Yet what else could be done? I wasn't yet sure I myself could escape the dungeon, and I couldn't stomach the thought of leaving Alea and her soldiers down here to rot.

I buried Alea's fallen comrades as well. The cave—which must once have been beautiful, layered with a glossy bed of grass and a pond that glittered like shattered glass—now looked like a national landmark of the fallen; the crude mounds of dirt and weapons for grave markers gave the place an eerie ambience.

After finishing up the makeshift graves, I dragged my reluctant legs back to where I had buried Alea. Kneeling, I placed my hand on the mounded earth that covered the once-famous Lance. She had been considered the pinnacle of power here, no doubt respected and feared by many. However, to me she was simply a girl—a lonely girl, regretful of the fact that she'd never had someone to love and to love her in return.

As I looked at her in her final moments, a sense of dread had dawned in me. She was in almost exactly the same position as I had been in my past life, but she might not be as lucky as I was, to be reborn into a different world. Given

my immediate reincarnation after my previous life had ended, I hadn't even had the chance to reflect on how I had lived. With her last breaths, Alea had broken down and cried, sobbing that she didn't want to die like this.

"Damn it."

I rubbed my eyes as tears began streaming freely down my face, indignant on her behalf at her life's ending.

I sent out another mental transmission to Sylvie and sighed in defeat when I didn't get a reply. Slumping back down against the jagged wall of the cave, I reviewed everything the fallen Lance had told me. From the information she had gathered, I was able to make a couple of speculations.

First, there was more than just one black-horned demon. How many, I wasn't sure. My only hope was that they weren't numerous. If one of them could easily kill a Lance or gravely injure a dragon like Sylvia, then I was out of my league.

Second, they were definitely after something. I wasn't sure what, but my mind kept wandering back to the egg Sylvie had come from, which the demon had called a "gem." If they really were after Sylvie, then avoiding them indefinitely wasn't going to be possible.

Third, there was going to be a war in Dicathen. This continent would be in danger and we definitely weren't prepared. Something about what Alea said —how the demon had told her that there would be a war—made me feel sure that the black-horned demons weren't from this continent. Was the new continent, the one we had just discovered, filled with these demons? I shuddered at that thought.

Yet, if there truly was a race of super-powered beings aligned against us, why would they be sneaking around our dungeons and infecting the mana beasts instead of marching across Dicathen and annihilating us? They were obviously uncertain whether they could take on the whole continent, so they were going about it discreetly—at least for now.

How long had the demons prepared for this war? When would they bring

their attacks to the surface? Was war inevitable? Was waiting the only thing I could do—all that we could do?

A sharp pain in my hands made me realize how hard I was clenching my fists. I relaxed them, then watched the drops of blood running down my forearm.

I was slowly learning, and Alea's death had reinforced the realization, just how much I valued my relationships—with my family, with Tess, and with my friends. In my past life I hadn't had anyone I would have given my life for to protect. I had that now, but I didn't have the strength to protect them—not against what was about to come.

Despite all my potential, I had grown complacent. That needed to change.

I recalled the message Sylvia had given me after she teleported me into Elshire Forest. The words still rang clearly in my head: I would hear from her again once my core passed the white stage.

That was the most certain method I currently knew of to get some reliable answers. However, I was still unable to break past the threshold of dark yellow stage. After yellow was silver, and then white. I still had a ways to go. A ferocious roar sounded, echoing off the cavern walls. '*Papa!*'

My head jerked up. The roar was soon followed by a loud crash coming from where I had fallen. Picking myself up, I dashed toward Sylvie's voice, stopping in front of a cloud of dust and calling out to her.

I'm here, Sylv! Are you okay? I covered my face with my arms as the dust cloud instantly blew away, revealing my precious bond in her full glory.

Sylvie's natural dragon form had become even more fearsome than when I last saw it, at the Dire Tombs. If she had looked crudely fierce back then, the feeling I got now was more akin to awe. Her scales were no longer glossy; they were now a dignified matte black. Her two horns had grown even longer, extending past her snout, and another pair of horns protruded underneath them. She appeared as majestic as she did deadly. The spikes that used to run down her back were gone, making her seem more refined. Her

gem-like, iridescent yellow eyes pierced through me. Could it truly be that this magnificent creature still referred to me as 'Papa'?

'Papa! You're okay!'

She lifted me up from the ground with the force of her lick, dispelling the bewildered awe that had held me in place.

"You got bigger again, Sylv!" I beamed a childish smile and hugged the snout of my dragon, and Sylvie let out a deep purr as she rubbed herself against me. For just a moment, I was able to forget everything I'd just been through.

Lifting me off the ground with her snout, she placed me on her broad, muscular back.

'Hold on, Papa! Let's get out of here.' She gave a powerful snap of her wings, a raging gust formed underneath us, and we were propelled into the air. Though I hardly noticed in the moment, the sudden force didn't affect my body, and I rode comfortably on the back of my dragon.

During the flight back up, Sylvie and I caught up on everything that had happened while we were separated. She didn't really understand everything about the demons and the upcoming war, but she did get the sense that whatever was about to happen wasn't good.

'Don't worry. Whatever happens, I'll be with you!' Sylvie's innocent response left me chuckling.

Like a narration from a children's book, she told me a bit about what she'd been up to—mostly fighting beasts and consuming beast cores. I needed to be there with Sylvie the next time she trained, I thought; I was curious as to what she was capable of. Sylvie didn't really know the distinction between the various levels of mana beasts, so I was left pondering just how powerful she actually was.

"I know, I know." I patted the hard scales on Sylvie's neck, but we left off our conversation as my bond navigated out of the impossibly long shaft and

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Hmph! I'm really strong.'

back into the first floor of the dungeon.

As we landed in front of the ruined staircase leading up to the surface, I glanced back at the hundreds of minion snarler corpses. Sylvie transformed into her fox form and leapt to the top of my head, taking a couple of spins before perching comfortably in my hair.

Augmenting mana into my body, I lightly jumped from one broken stair to the next, careful not to collapse the fragile remains of the staircase. The wellworn steps, once ivory smooth, were now cracked and treacherous.

A full moon greeted us as we reached the surface. As I had expected, there was no one here. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that everyone else had escaped safely.

I had to hurry; it was a several-hour trek to the nearest teleportation gate. First, however, I released a pulse of wind around me to make sure there wasn't anyone hiding nearby. Satisfied I wasn't being watched, I retrieved the seal from my dimension ring, and was about to put it on. An image of Alea flashed into my mind and I paused, studying the seal carefully. Then I took out the black fragment of the demon's horn—the horn of the demon that had killed her—and considered it as well.

My mind made up, I took a deep breath and put the seal back into my dimension ring. No more hiding.

A churning sensation stirred within my stomach. I had bigger things to worry about now. Fitting in, hiding the truth of my power—that wasn't important anymore. This demon-horn shard would be my constant reminder of that.

'What's that, Papa?' Sylvie's head popped up, and she reached for the black shard with a paw.

"It's my goal, Sylvie," I said, determination steeling my body and calming my mind. Patting my bond's furry little head, I began my trip back.

The guard in charge of the teleportation gate looked startled to see me. He must have had orders to be on the lookout for me, because, as soon as he

verified my identity, he hurriedly began making multiple calls using the artifact he had on hand. Then he quickly ushered me through the gate.

I arrived back at Xyrus feeling a little queasy, but was glad to see that there was a driver waiting for me at the teleportation gate. He tipped his hat with a sympathetic smile and opened the door for me.

My mind wandered; I kept thinking of the future. For the first time in either of my lives, I felt the pressure of keeping my loved ones safe—I'd never felt that, even when I was a king. The weight of a country I'd had no affection for in my previous life couldn't compare to the few lives I would give everything for in this one.

We reached Helstea Manor and I bid the driver good day, but I stopped in front of the giant double doors. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to knock on the doors to my own home. Sylvia *kyu*ed softly and nuzzled me.

What would my family's reaction be? It seemed like every time I went out, all I did was worry them.

Taking a seat on the top of the stairs, I let out a sharp, bitter sigh. Looking up at the night sky, I could see the faint colorations that supposedly signaled the coming of the festival. The sky turning blue, yellow, red, and green indicated when the Aurora Constellate would begin. My eyes focused on a solitary cloud, slow-dancing above me without a care in the world. What an envious position to be in.

"Son?"

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't even heard the door open behind me.

"Hi, Dad. I'm back." I gave him a weak smile.

"Why didn't you come in? We heard from the teleportation gatekeeper that you'd arrived at Xyrus." My father took a seat next to me when I didn't respond. "Your mother will be fine, Art," he said warmly, gently patting my back.

"I worried you guys again, didn't I? It feels like that's all I'm really good for nowadays." I gave a humorless laugh, knots churning in my chest.

I turned to look at my father and saw him gazing up at the sky, like I had been doing just moments before.

"She really loves the Aurora Constellate. You may not see it, but your mother is strong, Arthur, even stronger than me. If you think all you've given us are worries, then you're wrong. Both you and your sister have given your mother and I so much more than we could have hoped for.

"I know you're not like the normal children your age; hell, I've known that since you were born. I don't know what sort of destiny you'll be caught up in, but I don't think it'll be anything you can't handle." The skin around his eyes wrinkled as he gave me a reassuring smile.

I stayed silent, unable to form the right words.

"I don't want you to feel like you're being a burden on us. All this guilt that you're feeling right now, the weight that you're probably feeling—I want you to come to us so we can be there for you. I don't ever want you to feel like you can't come home, that you aren't welcome. As long as you have the use of your two legs, I expect you to come home whenever you can and let us love you. That is *our* right as your parents. Okay?" My father ran his fingers through his trim, auburn hair in a gesture that revealed how unaccustomed he was to saying things like this. Just like that, I felt the weight that had been accumulating inside me disperse.

"Got it, Dad." I managed a more sincere smile this time, and he responded with his signature foolish grin.

"Come on, let's go home. Inside, a more ferocious beast than anything you've ever faced awaits," he whispered darkly, and we broke into a fit of laughter.

## **COURSE OF BREAKTHROUGH**

WHEN WE STEPPED inside the house, the temperature seemed to suddenly drop. In contrast to the icy atmosphere, though, my mother's gaze was fiery as it pierced me from the top of the stairs. The corners of her eyes were filled with tears and she struggled to keep them from rolling down her cheeks.

"Hello, Mother. I'm... back?" A cold sweat permeated my pores as a pressure akin to an S-class mana beast weighed down on my very soul.

I had to admit, I wasn't looking so sharp. My body was a canvas of nicks and scratches, and my hair probably looked like it had been struck by lightning repeatedly, as if one strike wasn't to its satisfaction. The entire back of my uniform was missing, sandpapered away as I had fallen down the hole.

"Arthur Leywin..." My mother's voice dripped with frost.

Before she had the chance to say anything more, a familiar voice instantly broke the tension in the room.

"Brother!" My baby sister bolted down the stairs past Mother, stumbling on the way down, and leapt into my chest. Her arms immediately wrapped around me, clinging with the strength of a python on steroids.

"Erk! Ellie, it hurts..." My voice came out raspy as I gently patted my sister's head.

"A teacher came and said you... you were lost," Ellie managed in between sniffles.

With an almost incoherent string of words, my sister rubbed her face against

my chest, as if wanting to burrow inside me.

Sylvie, her ears drooping, licked my sister's cheek consolingly.

"I know. I'm sorry for worrying you... again." I looked up at my mother as I said this, my voice dropping to a rough whisper.

I could tell by her expression that she was torn, trying to decide whether to scold me or just be happy.

Maybe she would do both.

My father took this moment to walk over to my mother and gently lead her down the stairs, comforting her.

"There's a time to be angry, honey, but now isn't it. Look, it's your son. He's back." My father's soothing voice eased the tension between my mother's brows. As her expression softened, so did her will.

Breaking down in sobs, she wrapped her arms around me from the side. This triggered a chain reaction, causing my sister—who was still hugging me as well—to begin bawling her eyes out yet again.

My mother's sobs made her words almost indiscernible; she seemed to switch between cursing God to thanking him.

"It's not fair... Why is my son the one who keeps getting so hurt? Thank God, you're safe!"

I caught my father's eye, and he gave me a reassuring half-smile as he gently patted my bawling sister and mother on their backs. They were both angrily thumping me with their trembling fists as they wept. Their blows weren't meant to hurt, but each shaking strike seemed to gnaw away at me; the guilt ate at my insides as I stood there, motionless, biting my quivering lower lip.

It felt like an hour before they calmed down. Somewhere in the middle of our scene, I spotted Lilia's mother, Tabitha, peeking from upstairs. I could tell she wanted to come down and comfort my mother and sister, but her husband Vincent pulled her back, giving me a meaningful nod.

Eventually, we got ourselves situated in the living room. My sister's breathing was still erratic to the point of worry, her arms wrapped around

Sylvie. My mother had regained her composure, however, and her swollen eyes probed for any serious wounds before she placed a gentle hand on my chest.

"... And let Heaven and Earth heal." As she ended her chant, a soft white glow enveloped my body.

Almost immediately, I felt a soothing warmth covering every wound, even the ones I hadn't known I had.

As the healing glow dissipated, along with my injuries, I looked at my mother's face, tense with concentration.

I wanted to ask.

Why could she use her healing powers now?

How had she been able to heal Dad when he had been struck by the mage on our journey to Xyrus? I still remembered her desperately healing my father as he ordered me to take my mother and run, just before I'd fallen off the cliff.

But I bit my tongue and forced a smile. My father was right; I should wait for her to tell me on her own.

My mother let out a sigh before taking her hand off my chest. She stared at me, then gave me one more firm, wordless hug.

We eventually began talking about what had happened. My father took a brief moment to tell me about Professor Glory's visit, how she had informed them about what had happened to me then hurried back to the academy. Meanwhile, my sister sat wordlessly on the couch, curled up with Sylvie, staring at one particular spot on the ground in front of her.

When it was my turn I tried not to make a big deal of what had transpired, for my mother's sake. I skimmed over the fight with the minion crawlers, telling them there had 'just been a bit more' than we'd expected.

Both my parents gave me a look that told me they didn't believe it was that simple. They knew me too well.

How much was I supposed to tell them?

My mind drifted toward the fragment of the demon's horn that floated inside

the dimension ring I was twisting with my thumb.

The scene flashed through my mind with vivid clarity, as if plastered to my brain: the dismembered corpses... the river of blood... Alea...

Taking a deep breath, I told them the full story. All of it—right up to the part where I crashed to the cavern floor.

I'd never understood why those old stiffs from the Council in my previous world used to say 'ignorance is bliss,' until now. But I knew nothing good would come of them knowing everything I'd witnessed at the bottom of that dungeon.

My mother's hoarse voice broke the silence that followed my story.

"When Professor Glory came in yesterday—well, in the middle of the night—she was wounded and tired, but from her expression, I knew she wasn't even thinking about that. She said that you stayed behind with her to save the class. She told me you were a hero. But you know what? I didn't care." Her voice barely made it to a whisper and she trembled slightly.

"More than being some hero, I just wanted my son to come home—without being half-dead every time. What if one of these days..." My mother couldn't finish her sentence as tears began streaming down her face once more. Finally, her voice choked, she managed to say, "Art, you're only twelve—why does it feel like I've almost lost you so many times already?"

Words failed to form as I stared blankly at a mole on my mother's arm. How was I supposed to respond? Her question felt like a trap with no safe answer. "Hency that's anough?" My father reached for Mather's hand and graned it

"Honey, that's enough." My father reached for Mother's hand and grasped it tenderly.

I realized that, just as I was growing, my parents were changing as well. My father's once immature, haughty side had been molded into a responsible and gentle demeanor. He was still the same joke-cracking father, but he had a layer of depth now, which had most likely come from raising my sister.

My mother had always been more mature, but through the years she'd also become a bit more refined. Associating with the Helstea House and with

Tabitha and Vincent's friends had made her more elegant and self-possessed, but right now, she seemed nearly broken by the tumult of emotions my near-death had stirred within her.

I didn't blame her. I would probably be tempted to lock Ellie indoors if she ever came home even half as wounded as I had today.

The rest of the conversation went by a bit more comfortably. Apparently deciding that things seemed to have settled, Tabitha and Vincent came down. I hadn't seen them in quite a while, so we all took some time to catch up.

Soon, Ellie was nodding off to sleep, and I carried her to her room, Sylvie still clutched in her arms. Even in her sleep, my sister sniffled from crying so much. Through the entire night, she hadn't said a word. I knew this episode had been traumatic for her. A professor had actually visited them, after all, to tell them I was missing.

I tried to imagine what my mother's reaction must have been to seeing Professor Glory on the front door. If not for the ring my mother wore telling her that, at the very least, I hadn't died, she probably would've fainted. Yet the ring might actually have made things worse for my mother in this case. All she could do was stare at it, waiting for it to notify her that her son had died. What kind of mother wouldn't be distraught after going through that? In my room, I slipped out of my tattered uniform and washed up. I planted my face directly under the current of the warm, gushing water, wishing it could wash away what had occurred earlier in the dungeon. Alea's last moments kept replaying in my mind, a constant reminder of how weak I was. The image broke as two short knocks sounded against my door.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure," I replied.

My father entered, closing the door behind him before taking a seat next to me on my bed.

"Arthur, don't mind too much what your mother said tonight. She may have said she didn't want a hero, but we are both proud of what you did back there

in the dungeon. Knowing that my son isn't someone who would abandon his allies is something I take pride in, and I want you to know it."

I always knew when my father was serious because he would call me by my full name instead of my nickname, Art.

"I don't know what really happened back there in the dungeon and I won't ask, but just know that I'll support you, whatever you decide to do."

I struggled to swallow the knot that formed in my throat upon hearing my father's last sentence. It was supposed to be an encouraging statement, but all I felt was a sour taste in my mouth.

Without giving me a chance to respond, my father stood up and ruffled my hair. Opening the door to my room, he turned his head and gave me a goofy grin before walking out.

I didn't immediately go to sleep when he closed the door behind him. Instead, I sat cross-legged and started to do something I hadn't done seriously in a long time—train.

The dark yellow core inside the pit of my sternum had cracks all over it, signaling that I was about to break through soon.

The various noises of the night were drowned out as I keenly focused on the activity going on inside me. Wind, earth, fire, water—these were the basic elemental attributes that mana contained, but that was it: they were merely attributes.

When mana circulated inside the core and throughout the body, it wasn't anything other than simple mana. Like the ki in my old world, it was formless, attributeless, and pure, but over time it adapted to its surroundings and developed attributes. For example, in northern regions where there was much more snow and water, magic pertaining to those elements would become stronger due to the attributes of the mana. Depending on a person's environment, the mana slowly changed and developed attributes to be stronger there. Everyone had their own personal strengths—elements to

which they were naturally more sensitive and better able to manifest and shape the pure, attributeless mana into. Although a mage specializing in water can always utilize pure mana, she benefits from having access to an abundance of water-attribute mana in the atmosphere, more easily utilizing it to fuel her magic. At the same time, she would be at a noticeable disadvantage if taken somewhere devoid of water-attribute mana, such as a desert.

As mages, we exerted our will to absorb, purify, and guide mana into different shapes and forms that we called "spells."

The purer our mana core was, the stronger our ability to manipulate the mana that existed inside us. As to how well one utilized that mana, that would depend on how creative and skillful the mage was in battle.

As with the other Lances, Alea had most likely been a white core mage, capable of causing widespread devastation if she truly wished. Yet she had been easily defeated and killed by that black-horned demon.

Every pore in my body strained to absorb the surrounding mana, and the mana already inside my core swirled fiercely. I imagined the sound of the outer layer of my core cracking as the bright yellow underneath the crumbling outer shell was revealed.

Letting out a deep breath, I stood up and opened my eyes to stare intently at my hands. I willed mana out of my body and it began circulating around me.

With an unsatisfied click of my tongue, I sat back down and began cultivating once more. It took me almost the entire night to break through, even though I had already been on the brink.

How much more would I have to train to be on par with those demons? If even a white core mage had to give her life to merely chip off a fragment of the demon's horn, what stage did I have to get to?

And what would happen after breaking past the white core stage?

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## A CONFUSING DAY

I DECIDED to stay home for one more day before heading back to school. I'd be back next week for the Aurora Constellate anyway, but Mother and Ellie seemed to have developed some sort of conviction that I was going to somehow get hurt every time I left home.

I knew I had obligations to fulfill elsewhere, but I was determined to spend time with my family, namely my mother and sister. Father left for work at dawn after checking up on me, so it would just be me and the girls. Tabitha decided to tag along and, after a rather brief discussion, they decided to go shopping. It was clear to me that they wouldn't take no for an answer.

I decided I could at least use that chance to take a detour, afterward, to Xyrus Academy. I knew everyone was safe, according to what Professor Glory had told my parents, but I didn't want to keep them in the dark any longer than necessary about what had happened to me. I was also a bit worried about Tess's assimilation.

As we meandered from store to store—so many stores that I lost count—my mind wandered to the fact that I had no noteworthy equipment besides my sword, and I began to contemplate getting new equipment. Most of my childhood had been spent in the Kingdom of Elenoir—more specifically, inside the castle. Even when I had gone shopping with the ladies, we went directly to the fashion district where nothing had appealed to me. There'd been some items with protective capabilities, either from their material or

from runes etched into them, but nothing powerful enough to catch my interest.

"Aunt Helstea, are there stores where I can buy something to help me train faster?" I asked as we headed into a store that exclusively sold scarves.

"Hmm? You mean elixirs? Of course." Tabitha gave me a confused look, as if I had asked some sort of trick question.

I hadn't used the elixirs in this world, but if they were anything like the drugs available to desperate practitioners in my old world, then I didn't want to go anywhere near them. Then again, if it meant not having to stay here any longer...

"There's actually a small elixir and medicine shop around the corner if you want to go take a look while we shop for some scarves?"

That was all I needed to hear. I carefully dropped the bags I'd been assigned to carry and bolted strategically out of the store.

"Thank you! I'll meet you in front of the store," I shouted on my way out.

"Kyuu!" 'Don't leave me!'

I saw Sylvie extend a paw toward me in a desperate attempt to escape Ellie's firm hold, but I just gave her a look of condolence before running off.

Your sacrifice will not be in vain, I thought, sending her a mental salute.

When I turned the corner as Tabitha had instructed, my face crumpled up in bewilderment.

This was a store?

The corner led me into a narrow alleyway, probably used by thugs to mug unsuspecting passersby. At the end of the narrow alleyway was a dingy shack that even rats would find too revolting to live in. The wooden planks making up the store looked like they had been painted with moss and fungus, and musty, stale air emanated out, drifting toward me. At least it complemented the sickly green weeds that crept out from underneath the floorboards as if even they didn't want to be stuck there.

## WINDSOM'S POTIONS AND MEDICINES

I had to tilt my head to read the etched title on the angled sign, which was barely attached, dangling by a single nail.

Did they really sell potions and medicines there? I would be less surprised if they sold bottled diseases and poisons.

"Spare some change, lad?" A haggard voice startled me out of my stupefied state.

Beside me sat a pale old man with a hand stretched out toward me, palm up.

I immediately took a step back, instinctively layering my body with mana.

How had I not sensed this old man, who was almost right next to me?

"You look like you've seen a ghost, lad. I'm but a mere aged man asking for some change." The old man's face wrinkled as he revealed a pearly white smile that didn't match his ragged state.

"Ah, yeah, sure." I reached into my pocket for a copper coin, using the opportunity to take a closer look at him.

He looked up at me with milky eyes from under a thick, uncombed bed of pepper-tinted hair, which fell to his slightly hunched shoulders. The old man's wizened face, though, didn't come off as weak and weary, but intelligent and bright. I could tell that this man had probably been very handsome in his youth, which made me feel all the more disheartened at seeing him end up like this.

"Many thanks, lad." His gnarled hands nimbly grabbed the coin out of my hand with a speed that surprised me.

Between his middle and index fingers was a coin that was silver instead of copper.

Shit! I gave him a silver coin by mistake. That's a hundred copper coins!

"Wait—I meant to give you this..." I reached into my pocket again and made sure that this time the coin in my hand was indeed copper. But when I looked back up, the old man was gone.

"What the..." I stood there, utterly bewildered for the third time in five minutes.

## My money...

After letting a helpless sigh escape my lips, I took a step toward Windsom's potion shack. I reached for the handle of the wooden door, which seemed likely to break upon contact, but I felt a concentration of mana from the copper doorknob.

Coating my hand in mana, I wrapped my fingers around the knob, preparing to turn it. A stiff jolt coursed through my hand and up my arm. Thankfully, the mana protecting my hand helped me resist the urge to pull away, and I forcefully twisted the knob, opening the door.

As soon as the door unlocked, the shock stopped as well. Pushing open the creaking door, I was welcomed by a whiff of something indescribably horrendous. The stench was so strong that it immediately triggered a coughing fit.

"Oh, a customer! What can I do for you?" a familiar voice welcomed me.

"You!" Slouched behind a rickety counter was the same old, homeless man who had disappeared after taking my silver coin!

He gazed at me with an innocent expression. "What brings you in here?"

"Can I just have my coin back?" I asked through gritted teeth. "I need that money for something important. Besides, you said you were homeless." I stuck my hand out expectantly.

"No, no... I said I was but a mere aged man. Based on the environment where you met me and my appearance and demeanor, you *assumed* I was homeless." He wagged his finger at me in a scolding manner, as if I were the one in the wrong. "How about this, you can pick one item here for free as a thank you for the present," he continued in a magnanimous manner while twiddling my silver coin between his fingers mockingly.

My brows twitched in annoyance, but I calmed myself down and quickly took a scan around the sorry excuse of a store.

"Is there even anything in here *worth* a silver coin?" My voice came out with a twinge of frustration in it.

"Of course! I don't give this chance to just anyone, you know. You simply have to choose carefully." The old man's eyes gave off the excited twinkle of a second-rate gambler with a winning hand.

I rubbed my temples, but it did little to calm the boiling rage stirring up inside of me.

You must respect the elderly, Arthur.

You must respect the elderly...

By this time, my nose had become accustomed to the mysterious stench, which was powerful enough to drive even the most ferocious mana beasts away. Taking a look through the dust-caked shelves, I became more and more amazed at the fact that this place was even still standing.

"Don't you ever clean this place, old man?" I asked as I slid my finger along one of the shelves. I could probably have built a snowman out of the dust I collected.

"Are you asking an aged man like myself to do manual labor?" He gasped sarcastically, putting on a horrified expression.

"Never mind." I rolled my eyes at him. I couldn't gauge the man, and that made it all the harder for me to trust him.

Making my way past the half-open boxes blocking the path, I went toward the shelves near the back of the store.

While scanning through the various vials and containers filled with murky liquids and colored pills, I was startled by a small movement from something sitting on the top of the shelf.

Damn it, what was with this place? I couldn't sense anything in here until it was right in front of my nose.

The figure became clearer as I focused on it; it was a cat, almost pitch black. The only parts of its body that wasn't black were the tufts of white fur in front of its ears, but that wasn't what caught my attention. It was the cat's captivating eyes—eyes that seemed to hold the universe inside them. They looked like mirrored night skies sprinkled with bright twinkling stars and

white, vertical-slitted pupils glowing like crescent moons.

I stared into the cat's bewitching eyes, and it peered back down at me from the top of the shelf with an obvious sense of superiority before turning its back and walking away.

Shaking my head, I returned my attention to the various bottles and containers, then noticed a small black box.

I picked up the plain box—roughly the size of a small jewelry box—and tried to open it. With a slight click, the hinge released to reveal a gemstone ring inside. I brought the ring closer to my face when the 'gem' embedded into the ring suddenly squirted something toward me.

Instantly, I whipped my head to the side so the stream of clear liquid missed and landed behind me.

"Tch... you dodged it." I turned back to see the old man grumbling while still fiddling with my silver coin.

"What was that?" I asked, a bit shaken.

"Just water," the old man said.

At this point, I felt that if I stayed any longer I might lose my sanity. First, the shocking doorknob; now this squirting ring. This old man sure loved his pranks—even his cat looked down on me.

But I was determined. If I could get anything inside the store for free, I was going to be sure to get the most valuable item.

I must've spent at least an hour just combing through elixirs I didn't need. Why would a twelve-year-old want an elixir for hair growth?

"Kyu!" 'Papa! I'm here!'

A white blur whizzed past the door, which had been left open, and landed on my head.

"Kuu!" 'Papa, you left me!' Sylvie puffed as she smacked my forehead with her paw.

You survived, comrade! I smiled, rubbing her tiny head.

"Old man, I can't find anything I—" I began, but the stricken expression on

the old man's face made me stop. This time he was the one who looked like he'd seen a ghost. His already-pale face became whiter and his milky eyes, sagging down with old age, looked like full moons.

"We finally found..."

"You okay, old man?" I waved my hand in front of him. The shop owner shook his head and let out a cough.

"Yes, I'm quite all right." His voice quavered.

"Anyway, old man, I can't find anything worth taking back with me. Can't you just give me back my money?" I grumbled as I took one last look around the store.

"You really don't have an eye for anything." He walked out from behind his counter and strolled to one of the shelves in the front corner of the store. "Ah, here we are." Without even looking back, he tossed me a small ball about the size of a marble. It was layered in dust but when I wiped it clean, it was clear with specks of different colors floating inside it.

"What is this?" I asked as I brought the orb closer to my face to study it—carefully, in case it sprayed me with water, or worse.

"Don't worry, it's something you're going to need. Now scat. Teasing you bores me." He shooed me off.

"Okay, okay," I said, and walked out of the store.

As I strolled out of the narrow alleyway, taking one last look back at the old shack, I spotted the black cat gazing at me, and then Sylvie, before turning away as if it had lost interest.

Thinking little of it, I reached the intersection out of the alley and saw my mother and sister seated at a table with Tabitha.

"Hi, Brother!" Ellie waved, holding a drink with her other hand.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Mother asked, setting down her own refreshment.

"I... think?" I scratched my head. I put the clear orb inside my dimension ring to study it later, but I didn't think it was anything special.

"Oh really? That store is famous for having quite the variety of elixirs and medicines to help with training. Most of the students in Xyrus go there to shop for their training materials." Tabitha got up, gathering the shopping bags from the floor.

"What? That shabby old place?" I replied, surprised that a bunch of rich snobby brats would go out of their way to shop at a rundown shack.

"Shabby? What are you talking about?" My mother and sister rose too, handing me their bags nonchalantly.

We walked toward the alleyway, and Tabitha pointed at the shop when she turned the corner.

"I wouldn't say it's shabby," she said, sounding confused.

"Really? If that's not shabby then I don't know—"

My jaw dropped, along with the shopping bags I was carrying.

In place of the previous narrow alleyway leading toward a worn-down shack was a marble-paved road stretching toward a three-story building with a gold sign that read:

## XYRUS ELIXIRS

### ONE FALLEN

THROUGHOUT THE REST of the shopping trip, I was in a daze as my thoughts lingered on the transformed alleyway.

Was I already becoming senile?

"Mom, Aunt Tabitha... Do streets in Xyrus—er—move on their own?" The statement sounded crazy, I thought, even though it came from my own lips.

"Huh? Moving streets?" I could almost see the question marks appear over their heads as they gazed quizzically at me.

"Ah... Never mind." I let out a sigh as I looked back at the street where Xyrus Elixirs now stood.

"Did something happen at the elixir store, Arthur?" Tabitha asked.

"You didn't cause trouble in there, did you?" my mother added.

"Do you assume I cause trouble every time I'm away, Mother?"

"Of course," my mother and my sister responded in unison. *Ouch*.

I clutched at my chest as I put on a hurt expression, getting a laugh out of everyone.

The rest of the shopping trip went by uneventfully, without any other occurrences that broke the laws of matter or physics. My new disciplinary committee uniform had to be ordered from school since it was different from the rest of the school's outfits, so there was nothing else I needed to buy.

After hours of shopping, we had a staggering amount of clothes filling the numerous bags—probably enough to open up a small store of our own. Fortunately, the driver came by every hour or so to relieve us of the bulk of our purchases.

Of that pile, the only clothing that belonged to me was a set of sleepwear I'd found too comfortable not to buy. Supposedly it was made from the undercoat of cloudsilk deer. The salesman had attempted to explain how the fiber diameter related to the softness of the fabric, and the natural qualities of the wool made it resistant to water, burns, stains, and sharp objects, but the details has been lost on me as I reveled in the feeling of the cloudsilk fabric against my skin.

As we walked back through the streets, we enjoyed the sight of a Xyrus sunset. The sun slowly sank below the edge of the floating city, casting the buildings around us into cool evening shadows.

When we reached the carriage waiting for us on the other end of the shopping district, I noticed that there was a separate wagon attached to the back, holding all the clothes and accessories we—they—had bought.

"Mom, I'm going to stop by Xyrus before heading back home," I said after placing the last of the bags I was holding onto the wagon.

"Why? Is something wrong?" A jolt of panic flashed in my mother's eyes.

"No," I said with a chuckle. "I just thought it wouldn't be good to keep everyone wondering if I was dead or alive."

"Ahh, just that. Go on, then—of course you should tell everyone you're back safe and sound. Just don't make any other detours on the way back," my mother responded, pinching my nose as she gave me a stern look.

"Gotcha," I replied, my voice sounding nasally.

Sylvie and I watched as everyone climbed into the carriage and left. Waving to my sister, who was yelling that I had to be back in time for dinner, I turned and headed toward Xyrus Academy.

Xyrus Academy wasn't too far from the shopping district. As I walked, true sunset began somewhere on the unseen horizon, and the blue sky bloomed with gold and orange as we made our way toward Director Goodsky's office, which was on the top floor of a towering structure that afforded her a view of the entire campus.

As I neared the academy towers, my mind begin to wander back to things I didn't want to think about. I willed mana into my body and jumped up to the roof of a nearby building. As I surged over the rooftops from one building to the next, the view around me became an indistinct blur—the only thing clearly visible was Sylvie, who was racing alongside me, enjoying the breeze. It still wasn't enough to cleanse the unwanted images from my mind.

The scene of Alea's last moments kept flashing through my memory. How she, in all her glory and might, had still been afraid of dying... dying alone. What if it had not been Alea, but Tess who I held in my arms as she took her last breath?

I shivered at the thought.

How was she doing? Was she well? Had her assimilation gone through all right? What if something had gone wrong?

No. You can't think like that, Arthur. Positive thoughts...

Gritting my teeth, I willed more mana into my body and sped up.

Without the seal inhibiting me, I felt the deep influence of mana surrounding everything. I ran faster—as fast as I could possibly go, as if running away from my own thoughts.

I practiced utilizing mana to push myself beyond my limits; explosive blasts beneath my feet propelled me into the air and gusts of wind carried me great lengths forward so that I nearly flew over the rooftops.

I'd noticed it before, but now I saw it even more strongly: The more my mana core evolved, the more sensitive I became to mana. I could even go as far as to say I was becoming more integrated with the mana around me.

I thought back to when I'd first met Virion. I wasn't nearly as sensitive to

mana back then, but I had still seen how the mana around him would fluctuate and move to accommodate his presence. Even though both Virion and Director Goodsky were wind-attribute mages, the ways they influenced the mana around them were vastly different.

For Director Goodsky, the mana formed light breezes of wind that danced around her; for Virion, it was the opposite. The mana affected the air around Gramps by completely expelling any wind in his vicinity. It wasn't usually noticeable, but when he switched into fighting mode, it felt like even the air was afraid to move near him.

If that sort of phenomenon occurred naturally around a silver core mage, what might happen when they broke through to the white stage?

With a twinge of regret, I realized Alea was the only white core mage I'd met in person so far. Yet, because her mana core had been completely shattered by the black spike piercing her, even the mana had disregarded her, as if she were no longer loved by nature.

"Kyu!" 'We're almost here!'

Sylvie's chirpy voice snapped me out of my thoughts as I focused my gaze onto the light coming from the window of Director Goodsky's office.

Sylvie, come over here.

My bond jumped into my arms as I prepared to take off. The academy ground had a barrier that repelled anything with a mana core or beast core that wasn't permitted to enter. I had my DC uniform in my dimension ring, along with the knife that we used for our authorization, so I wouldn't set off the alarm; Sylvie, on the other hand, might, if she wasn't attached to me.

I concentrated the mana from my core and willed it to take the form of wind underneath the soles of my feet. Then I leaped off the edge of the roof of the building I was on with as much strength as I could muster.

I felt the building shudder beneath me as a whirlwind sprung up and propelled me higher. I must've been about a hundred yards in the air when I realized that, given my trajectory and the speed at which I was traveling, I

probably wasn't going to make it all the way to the next building. "Hold on, Sylv!"

The anxiety faded and excitement boiled within me as I yelled over the rushing wind. I felt Sylvie's paws clinging to my shirt, and held her tighter as well.

Biting my lip with concentration, I drove all my unwanted thoughts away. Then, shifting my bodyweight so that my feet were right underneath me, I turned in midair and released a roundhouse kick.

The skill I activated—Draft Step—was the one I'd used against Theo. It allowed me to accelerate or change direction by using an opposing force of wind to push against my feet. Of course, this time it consumed a lot more mana, as I was basically changing direction mid-air and at a much greater speed, but I got the outcome I had hoped for.

With the boost in speed I got from Draft Step, I was once again on course, headed straight toward the rooftop of the building Director Goodsky's office was in.

Whether I was drunk from the adrenaline rush or just trying to forcefully rid myself of the depressing memories that lingered at the back of my mind, I couldn't help but let out a soul-cleansing roar. Though I'd flown through the air on Sylvie's back when she rescued me from the depths of Widow's Crypt, this was a very different sensation.

I belatedly realized that I hadn't quite planned my landing, and I noisily crashed against several unidentified objects. Despite destroying some of the roof, I somehow managed to land on my feet.

"Kyu!" 'That was fun! Let's do that again!'

Sylvie hopped in circles around me, chirping for a second round.

Patting the dust from my clothes, I looked up.

From the edge of the building, I could see something I'd never experienced, not even in my past life.

Xyrus was a floating city; I seemed to constantly forget this fact. From up

here I was able to see the edge of the city, with isolated clouds floating nearby. I stood there, mesmerized, as the rays from the setting sun hit the clouds at an angle that made them appear fiery red. Contrasting against the sun-kissed sky below was a curtain of serene purple—the atmosphere.

"Kyu..." Sylvie propped her head up on the ledge as she gazed silently as well.

The word 'breathtaking' wasn't just an expression in this case. It was as if Xyrus City were floating on an endless sea of soft marigold that blended harmoniously with the starry night above. The view, which seemed like something out of a fairy tale, was only made possible by the city's high elevation.

I took a metal necklace from my dimension ring and fiddled with it mindlessly as I stood there leaning against the ledge of the building. For those few moments, I was almost able to forget about what happened back in the dungeon; for that brief period of time, the world seemed at peace.

"Quite the view, isn't it?" a familiar voice said from behind me.

"It is," I replied without turning back.

"It's my most treasured spot, you know. I come here often when I want to rest my mind," she said softly.

"Mm."

"I see you made quite the landing. I'll have to have Tricia come clean all this up."

"I apologize for that. I'll help as well."

"I heard your battle cry. I suspect the whole school will be wondering what happened."

I gave a stifled laugh and waited for Goodsky to come stand next to us, but instead, she stayed where she was.

"You're not going to ask me how I'm still alive?" I asked, my eyes never straying from the view of the horizon.

"It didn't seem like the right time to ask. I'm just glad you are alive and

well." Goodsky's voice was quiet, almost delicate.

"I'm well?" I asked myself under my breath. Then, "Am I well?" I repeated, loud enough for her to hear, a tinge of sadness evident in my tone.

I looked down at the necklace I held. It was a small, bloodstained slate of metal attached to a crude chain. Engraved on that slate was a picture of six lances forming a circle; underneath the insignia were the initials A.T.

Tracing the letters with my thumb, I considered how much the pendant looked like the "dog tags" worn by soldiers during ancient times in my old world to identify them in case their corpses were mangled past the point of recognition.

"What exactly happened down there, Arthur?" Director Goodsky's voice was hesitant.

Turning to face her with the best half-smile I could muster, I tossed the tag over to her.

"This was what happened," I replied as Goodsky let out a soft gasp, one hand covering her mouth while the other held the necklace.

## A WILL'S LAST BREATH

## CYNTHIA GOODSKY

The Council had handed these simple adamantine tags, engraved with the owner's initials, to each of the Six Lances. The concept had actually been thought up by the Lances themselves.

They had explained to the Council that they needed something made of an almost indestructible material so that even if their bodies were obliterated, the necklace would still be intact and could be used as identification. It would be a *memento mori* for them—a grim reminder that they could die at any time.

I distinctly remembered that the Council had joked—their relaxed manner a sharp contrast to the solemn faces of the Six Lances—and asked if there was anything even capable of destroying their bodies past the point of recognition. I recalled chuckling alongside them, even though I knew...

Even though I knew that there *were* beings capable of wiping the crowned Lances off the face of this planet.

But why... why was I seeing this tag so soon? It was too early—they shouldn't be moving this early. I had estimated it would take at least another fifteen to twenty years before they began making their moves.

I'd thought I had time.

I thought we had time...

"Director?" Arthur's inquisitive voice shook me out of my daze.

"Ah, yes... Arthur, do you mind if I hold on to this? It's safe to assume that

the Council will want this back." I took careful notice of the tone of my voice to make sure I aroused no suspicion from Arthur. The boy was abnormally sharp.

"Things are changing, aren't they." It was supposed to be a question, but by the tone of Arthur's voice, it sounded like a statement with conviction.

Was it wise for me to tell him? Or did he already know something?

"Yes, but it isn't something for you to worry about. Not yet, at least." I knew my smile and comforting words wouldn't reach him. "Arthur, you may forget sometimes—hell, even I tend to forget at times—but you are still a child. A strong child with limitless potential, yes, but a child nevertheless. Let us adults shoulder the burden for now; your time will come, whether you wish for it or not." As I said this, I realized this message was more for myself than for Arthur.

Yes, he was a child. It wouldn't be fair for him to become involved in the affairs of the Continent... but if he already knew...

"Did you perhaps... see whatever Alea fought against?" I had to choose my words carefully to make sure my question didn't give anything away.

"No, I didn't." The answer was said with full confidence, but for some reason his words made me suspicious.

However, there was no use in suspecting the boy. It wouldn't make sense for him to hide anything about an event like this.

Still... I was glad he didn't seem to have figured anything out.

"I see. Well, enough about this topic. You must be worried about how everyone is doing." I gave a soft, relieved smile as I said this.

### ARTHUR LEYWIN

The director's response somehow left a bad taste in my mouth. She sounded almost relieved by my words.

"Yeah, how is everyone doing?" In the end, I decided to move on. There was no point in being suspicious of everyone around me. I would just assume she had avoided asking about the details for my sake.

"As you may have already deduced, your classmates weren't very badly injured. We sent them to the guild infirmary hall to be cared for, and thankfully, most were able to come to school today. Professor Glory was actually the most wounded, but she refused healing until all her students were treated. I heard she even paid a visit to your family to notify them of your disappearance after transporting everyone back."

"That's good, that's good. And... how is Tess doing?" I inquired.

Goodsky's face wrinkled a bit, and she displayed an obvious hesitation. "Tess... Tess is okay," she replied. I could tell she was choosing her words carefully.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I raised a brow, probing for a more detailed response while an uneasy feeling started to stir within me.

"There were some... complications in the final stages of her assimilation." She spoke quietly. "Virion is currently looking after her, but she has yet to awaken."

"Complications?" My voice came out a bit fiercer than I intended it to be.

"You need to understand that the final leg of assimilation is when the beast will struggles the hardest. Right now, Tessia and the elderwood guardian are fighting for control. Thus far, there has never been a case where the receiver of the will falls into a coma to this extent. Our theory is that there must be something peculiar about the beast will you gave her, Arthur," replied Goodsky earnestly.

Wait... was this my fault? Had I put Tess in danger? A flurry of thoughts raced through my mind as I tried to think of an explanation for why such a thing might have occurred.

There was something peculiar about the elderwood guardian. What was it? It was strong, but was it stronger than other S-class mana beasts? Since it had been my first time fighting one, I wouldn't know.

*Peculiar...?* 

My mind flashed back to the dungeon, and more specifically, to what Alea

had told me. She had mentioned that the black-horned demons were causing the monsters to mutate and grow stronger.

Was that what had happened? Had I given Tess a potentially corrupted beast core? No, I couldn't have. I remembered Alea explaining how the beast core of the serpent she defeated had mysteriously disappeared. Shouldn't that have happened to the elderwood guardian's beast core as well, then, if it was tainted?

"Arthur? Are you okay?" Director Goodsky's concerned voice stirred me from the deep abyss of my thoughts.

"Yeah, just thinking," I said as I stared blankly at the night view of the city.

"In any case, Virion is currently looking after her in your training room. Would you like to go visit them now?" Director Goodsky gave me a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Go on ahead, then, because even I have not been updated on the situation. Virion has not let anyone in, but I feel like you'd be an exception. I must make a trip to the Council to inform them of what happened." When she mentioned the Council, Goodsky suddenly looked infinitely older.

"Is it okay for the Council to meet without Grandpa Virion present?" I asked. Director Goodsky shook her head before replying, "Virion is in no state to be bothered with this matter, not while his precious granddaughter is unconscious. And besides, him being there with Tess is the only reason Alduin and Merial can stand to be away from their daughter and remain with the Council."

"I see. Well, I hope you keep me informed on this matter." I made my way to the door.

"My only concern is that you may have to be a lot more involved this time than you'd wish to be." Director Goodsky heaved a sigh, then a gust of wind enveloped her and whisked her away. As I made my way down, riding the elevator, I felt Sylvie bristle. 'I feel Mama.'

I walked slowly toward the training room that had been assigned to me, my feet seeming to weigh a lot more than they should. I didn't know how I'd react if Tess were injured. I decided it wasn't necessary to visit everyone else right away—I knew they were all safe.

'I said, "I feel Mama!" Sylvie thumped my forehead with her paw.

"I know!" I waved her paw away before turning my focus back to the giant double-door entrance I was approaching. "Ouch." The skin under my dimension ring suddenly burned, as if something wanted to come out of the ring.

Ignoring it—I had more pressing matters to deal with—I placed both palms on the surface of the door and pushed it inward.

When the door swung open, an unfamiliar, sinister aura visibly surged forward in an attempt to trap me. This dark fog felt like thousands of thorny vines as it coiled around my arms and legs.

"Who's th—Arthur?" I heard Grandpa Virion's husky voice boom from within a noticeably dark wave. It seemed to be emanating from a particular focal point.

"Yeah, it's me, Gramps! What's going on?" I yelled, over what sounded like the crashing of an ocean's waves against a cliff.

"God, am I glad you're still alive, brat. I'm becoming somewhat thankful for your cockroach-like tenacity. Come over here, I need your help!"

Still confused by what was happening, I chose to ignore Gramps' slightly insulting metaphor and walked carefully toward him. The aura grew stronger; something was making small tears in my clothing—and in my skin, which was starting to bleed.

Willing mana to shield both Sylvie and myself, I made my way toward the source of the aura, using Grandpa Virion's hazy figure as a guide. Each step felt like I was pushing against a reinforced wall. As I got closer, I could

faintly make out a figure lying in front of Gramps—the source of this aura.

By the time I finally reached Grandpa Virion, I was wincing from the searing pain caused by my dimension ring; the pain had grown more intense as I'd drawn near. Gramps wasn't in good shape; his pale face was drenched in sweat as he tried his best to suppress the oppressive aura emanating from the figure at his feet, but to little avail.

I took a closer look, and what I saw made my eyes widen in surprise.

"What in the... *Tess?*"

Tendrils of vines completely enclosed the figure I assumed was Tess. The thick, dark aura had made it difficult for me to make out what it was from a distance.

"How much time has passed on the outside, brat? I think I've been holding in this foul aura for a day or so—since she came back from the dungeon." He gave me a weary chuckle.

"What's happening to her, Gramps?" I didn't remember anything like this happening back when I was assimilating Sylvia's dragon will.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. Typically, the purpose of assimilation is to enable the host's body to gradually withstand and control the beast will's power, but in this case, it seems to be the opposite. I'm beginning to worry that this beast's will is trying to take over Tess's body." Grandpa Virion's shaking voice was filled with unease.

"How is that possible? I've never heard of anything like that happening." My brows furrowed as I searched my mind for a possible cause. My thoughts kept going back to the mana beasts that had been corrupted by the black-horned demons.

"I'm not so sure. I feel like that elderwood guardian you fought might've been mutated." I could tell by Virion's hoarse voice that he was most likely at his breaking point.

I moved forward, ready to take over for Gramps, still ignoring the burning sensation from my ring, though it was growing ever more painful.

It happened even before my hands touched the surface of the cocoon Tess was in.

I recognized the sound of flesh tearing and instantly, instinctively shifted my body in hopes of dodging in time.

Sylvie's and Virion's voices were muffled against the pounding of my eardrums.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Kyu!" 'Papa!'

<sup>&</sup>quot;Arthur!"

# ORDER OF POWER

A BLOODSTAIN BEGAN SPREADING over my shredded shirt—the spear of twisted vines that had aimed straight for my heart had caught me in the side when I dodged.

My heart pounded with a force strong enough to break free of my ribcage at the thought of death looming before me. *I almost died*. This sensation felt different from the other near-death experiences I'd had; it was almost instantaneous. I could've died in that split second—and what would have happened to Tess and Grandpa Virion if I had?

Another tendril shot out at me. Barely dodging it again, I grimaced at the feeling of blood trickling down my cheek. A mad laugh died on my lips as I took in our situation. Grandpa Virion's hands were literally on the cocoon, but as soon as I got near her, a flurry of spear-like vines automatically locked onto me for the kill. I knew that, deep down, Tess was still mad at me.

I parried the next dark, spear-like tendril before things became even worse. The cocoon wrapped around Tess began expanding as an uncountable number of vines surfaced from the ground beneath her.

"Kuu!" I heard Sylvie chirp near Gramps. 'Papa, you're okay!'

Grandpa Virion's shoulders loosened as he let out a sigh of relief. "I thought you were done for, brat. What's happening now?"

"Yeah, that was... a little too close for comfort, and I honestly have no clue what's happening now, Gramps. Maybe your granddaughter doesn't like me

so much anymore." I managed to shoot him a smirk, making him chuckle despite the situation we were in.

Another thick layer of vines intertwined around the ones already forming Tess's cocoon, and dozens of tendrils began positioning themselves to, once again, shoot at me. *Just me*.

"Kuu..." 'What do we do?'

Perched next to Grandpa, Sylvie tilted her head in confusion. The 'enemy' was her 'mama.'

I want you to stay with Grandpa Virion. She's only aiming at me.

After dodging the discharge of tendrils, I moved away from Gramps and Sylvie. Gramps was drained of all his mana after suppressing the dark aura for almost two days straight, while Sylvie was better off not interfering until I knew exactly what the implications would be.

What's more, 'Tess' was becoming more creative in her attacks; her next wave of tendrils was laced with sharp thorns. With each new onslaught from the spears of vines, I became more convinced that the beast will was dead set on trying to kill only me. And it wasn't helping that my ring was burning to an almost unbearable degree.

Could it be that the elderwood guardian's dying will was hoping to take revenge on me, since I was the one who defeated him down in the dungeon? I hoped I would live long enough to find out if that really was the case.

Frustrated, I withdrew my sword from my dimension ring—but something else came out with it.

As Dawn's Ballad appeared in my hand, a small shining orb shot out of the ring toward the cocoon.

It was the marble-sized orb that homeless storekeeper had given me! Sparkling with an array of colors, it bolted toward the enlarging cocoon.

What the hell?

Grandpa Virion noticed it, too, but he only gazed at me in confusion, probably thinking I had done it intentionally.

Streaks of light escaped from the crevices between the vines as the orb sank into the cocoon. Before we even had the chance to wonder what was going on, there was an explosion from within the cocoon—strong enough that it threw Virion and Sylvie, who were closest, several yards away. As the debris from the explosion subsided, the cocoon revealed a menacing, naked, blackhaired Tess.

The orb sank into her stomach where her mana core was, and Tess's sickly complexion returned to normal... no, better than normal. Her now-flawless, pearly skin seemed literally radiant, and her black hair shifted back to its original gunmetal silver hue.

Her physical appearance wasn't the only thing that changed. As the orb disappeared into her abdomen, Tess's unconscious body was completely surrounded by an aura I had never seen before—distinctly different from the usual mana existent in the atmosphere, in an almost mystical way.

She was enveloped by a scorching flame comprised of brilliant emerald gems that lifted her unconscious body off the ground. Millions of green, leaf-shaped embers made up this unique aura. As the emerald aura grew, the once-black vines turned a serene jade green. Even as the mesmerizing aura expanded, for some reason, I didn't fear it. Then, before it reached any of us, the aura shrank back and dissipated.

As Tess' figure fell, I jumped up and, retrieving my adventurer's coat from the dimension ring, swiftly wrapped it around her bare body as I held her in my arms.

The dark aura that had filled the training room was completely gone—and more importantly, Tess was safe.

"Mmm... not now, Arthur. Too soon," Tess mumbled with a sleepy, playful smile.

Relief washing over me, I laughed. I laughed whole-heartedly at Tess's sleep talk and just at the fact that she was okay.

"Tessia!" Grandpa Virion came running, Sylvie dangling from his long white

hair.

"She's okay, Gramps. She's just sleeping now." I set her down and fell onto my butt as all my remaining strength left me.

Both Sylvie and Gramps began meticulously inspecting the slumbering Tess, then they heaved a sigh of relief as well.

"She is okay." Gramps slumped down beside to me while Sylvie curled up next to Tess. For a brief moment, we just stared blankly at the other end of the training grounds, too tired to even think.

"While I'd normally smack you for getting an eyeful of my granddaughter's bare body, I'll take into account the circumstances and let this one go," Gramps said tiredly.

"Praise be to your benevolence," I huffed, falling back on the soft, grass-like moss.

He shifted his softening gaze back toward Tessia. "I'm glad you're okay, brat. This girl would've been devastated if you hadn't made it." He paused.

"And... thank you. For saving my granddaughter back at the dungeon, and now." Virion's voice grew quiet as he said this.

"What makes you think I saved her, Gramps?" I replied without getting up, using my hands to support my head.

"Call it a grandfather's intuition. With your abilities, I know that if you were only thinking of yourself, you wouldn't end up in dangerous situations like these. So again, thank you." The sincerity in his voice was confirmed as his eyes met mine.

"Ugh, forget it. Don't get so serious like that all of a sudden; you're scaring me." I rolled to one side, my back facing Grandpa Virion.

"So when did you get back? Your family knows you're alive, right?" Gramps replied.

"Of course. I got home last night and spent some time with my family earlier today."

Silence hovered between us for a few seconds before I spoke again.

"Gramps, I'm sorry. I... I should've rushed back. I just assumed she'd be fine once she woke up, since she had finished the last leg of assimilation with her beast will back at the dungeon. If I'd known things could go wrong like this, I would've rushed here as soon as I got back." I turned to look at Virion, almost pleadingly.

Back when I was assimilating with Sylvia's beast will, Virion had explained to me that there was one final wave of struggle from the beast will before the assimilation was completely over, had told me that was normal...

I should've prepared for the worst. I almost lost her today.

The thought scared me—more than I would have ever believed possible in my past life.

"Your parents probably had their fair shares of worries raising you, huh?" Unexpectedly, Grandpa Virion gave a soft chortle.

"What? Yeah, I guess," I responded, thrown off by his sudden question.

"You did good in going to your family first. Tessia has her family to take care of her. She's not alone, you know. You probably thought of this when you decided to spend the day with them. Your family probably needed you to be there for them as well, since you gave them such a scare. Don't forget that. Don't be sorry for spending that much-needed time with your family." Grandpa Virion patted my back consolingly.

I didn't know what to say. I was thankful that he knew me well enough to not need an explanation, or an excuse.

Again, a tranquil silence hung over us until I finally got around to asking the question that had been clawing at the back of my mind.

"Hey, Gramps, how much do you know about the Six Lances?" I asked, keeping my gaze focused on Sylvie, who had fallen asleep curled up next to Tess.

"The Six Lances? Why the sudden curiosity?" Virion asked after a while. I didn't answer.

Accepting my silence, he responded tactfully. "What exactly do you want to

know about them?"

After a bit of thought, I started off with a simple question. "How strong are they?"

He let out a slow breath. "Brat, let me start by asking you this: How strong do you imagine white core mages to be?"

My brows furrowed as I began calculating how many mages it would take to defeat a single white core mage. It took roughly twenty solid-yellow-core mages to hold off a single silver core mage, but would it take fewer silver core mages than that to beat a white core mage, or was the power level increase exponential?

"I'm not really sure, Gramps," I finally said, defeated.

"To make it easier for you, we'll use myself as a unit of measurement. I don't ever recall explicitly telling you this, but I'm a mid-silver core mage. It would take about ten of me to keep one mid-white core mage at bay, and that's being optimistic." Grandpa Virion let out a chortle.

"Ten of you..." I muttered under my breath.

"Now, Cynthia is high-silver. Even being generous, it would take around six or seven of her to keep one mid-white-core at bay." He shrugged as he spoke. I couldn't imagine my current self being able to defeat that many Virions or Goodskys. Perhaps if I were to release the second phase of my dragon's will, I might be barely able to contend with three Grandpa Virions—however, the backlash would be tremendous.

"I don't get it. Where did these abnormally strong figures come from, and why haven't they decided to just take control of a kingdom? I mean, with their strength, it's not like any king or queen can give them much of a fight. What's been keeping the royal family in power when there are white core mages capable of slaughtering them and their armies with ease?" I asked, trying to make sense of this world's government system.

"You have an excellent point. You're right: By strength alone, the Six Lances—or any white core mage, for that matter—could probably wipe out a

kingdom on their own." He glanced over at Tess to make sure she was still sleeping.

"Before I say anything more, this will need to be kept an absolute secret from Tessia. I want her to stay ignorant of these rather... dark matters, at least until she's older." Grandpa Virion had a tender smile on his face as he looked at his granddaughter.

I nodded. "Mm. I'll keep it a secret."

"I'll explain where they came from after, but as to the strength of each of the Six Lances... They are now stronger than regular white core mages, but before being knighted, most of them were actually only silver core mages." Gramps spoke with a faraway, peaceful expression.

"Huh? That makes no sense," I began.

"Brat, how do you think the royal families, without any major powerhouses in line for the throne, have stayed in power since the formation of the three kingdoms?" His peaceful expression disappeared as he peered at me, his face clearly depicting his mixed feelings.

He continued, "This is classified information, known only to the royal families of each race, but I'm telling you because, somehow, I know you'll need this information in the future. And I know you'll be able to handle it." He let out a heavy sigh that seemed to contain a bit of his very soul.

"Do you believe in deities?"

#### **MANIFEST DESTINIES**

THE WORLD OF MY PAST, the world where I lived as a king, still came regularly to mind. It had been a life of isolation for me, but it wasn't as if I'd loathed every moment of my near-forty years there. I had especially enjoyed visiting the orphanages and playing with the children. Of course, most of the boys considered sword-fighting and ki training forms of play, so whenever I went, I ended up spending hours teaching them.

I remembered one day rather explicitly, when a boy in the orphanage, Jacob, asked me a question.

"Brother Grey, do you believe in God?" he had asked, looking up as he tugged on my sleeve.

I'd never believed in God, or any of the higher beings some of the people believed in. How could there be a god in a world where your level of martial strength determined how you could live your life? Parents who birthed physically weak or crippled babies were considered failures, often humiliated and ridiculed by others. And those babies, even if they did live past adolescence, would never be able to amount to anything. They would have about as much recognition as a fly buzzing in someone's face: annoying, useless, better off dead.

No matter how beautiful and charismatic a woman was, she would only amount to a high-class prostitute if she didn't have enough strength to at least be considered 'mediocre' amongst practitioners. Even those old bastards in the council, who sat on their asses all day and used everyone like pawns, had once been grand fighters and famous figures.

How could a god exist in a world like that? Even if a god or deity had existed in my previous world, he certainly wasn't very merciful or loving, let alone fair.

When Jacob had asked me if I believed in God, I couldn't answer. These children believed, like I once did, that there was a higher power watching over them... protecting them.

And now, in this world, I was being asked a similar question, but by someone much older than me.

Did I believe in deities, some sort of higher powers—above us and unreachable?

Finally I answered, "I'm not sure. *Do* deities exist?" The words 'in this world?' almost slipped from my mouth.

Grandpa Virion let out a hearty laugh. "I've been asking that question all my life, but I've started to think that... they might."

"What made you change your mind?" I tilted my head in curiosity.

"Her." Virion pointed his finger—at Tess, I thought, but then I realized it was the sleeping Sylvie he was directing his gaze at.

"Wait—Sylvie? You think *Sylvie* is a deity?" Almost choking on my spit, I directed my gaze back at Gramps.

"Boy, deities are not what the religious books say about gods. Deities are beings that are able to ascend from what we consider their mortal bodies and fully harmonize with mana. Dragons—at least, from what I've read about them—are beings that can naturally become deities. They can't be classified as just S-class or SS-class mana beasts; if you compare it to mana cores, a deity would be at the level one would reach after breaking out of white core stage." Grandpa Virion looked down at his hands as he said this, letting out a scoff.

"Here we are—elves, humans, and dwarves alike—at most, barely able to tap

into the power of a white stage mana core. Yet, beings may still exist that can easily level mountains and flood valleys." Again, Grandpa Virion had that faraway look.

He closed his eyes for a while before slowly opening them again, his gaze shifting toward me.

"You've read about the war between the three races, as well as the most recent war between the humans and elves, but even compared to those two wars, this continent was much more chaotic and dangerous in ancient times. The three races were nomadic back then, always on the run from mana beasts. The humans, elves, and dwarves all travelled separately due to clashes in their cultures, but whenever any of the races met, they were on fairly good terms. They had to be; they exchanged information and traded raw resources that they picked up along the way. This is now known as the Beast Era, when the mana beasts were rampant and ruled the continent."

"I don't understand." My brows furrowed in confusion. "Why didn't they use magic to drive the mana beasts away? I could understand maybe avoiding Aclass mana beasts and up, but I don't see why they were so helpless."

"It's not that they didn't, it's that they *couldn't*. Have you ever noticed the painting in the main hall of the Royal Palace in Elenoir?" he asked, suddenly switching topics.

"You mean that enormous painting in the living room? I noticed it at first but I couldn't really make sense of it so I just disregarded it." I laughed awkwardly, scratching my head.

"Every one of the three Royal Palaces has a painting similar to that one. It's a depiction of a powerful deity gifting us with the tools to overcome the mana beasts and put an end to the Beast Era."

I couldn't tell how Virion was feeling as he said all this; his expression was a mixture of complex emotions. But no matter how ridiculous it sounded to me, Gramps didn't seem to be saying this lightheartedly, so I stayed quiet and let him continue.

"This deity appeared to three people, who were the forefathers of what are now the three royal families. He bestowed our ancestors with six artifacts, which were distributed among the three individuals who were chosen by the deity to become kings. For the humans, the head of the Glayder family received two; the head of the dwarf family of the Greysunders received two; and lastly, for the elves, the ancestor of my Eralith family also received two." Virion smirked as he looked at my expression.

"Huh? Why would this so-called 'deity' just give the three races these treasures?" I sputtered incredulously, not able to hold it in.

"Let me get to that, brat," he reprimanded me. "Remember, this was ages before I was born. This knowledge has been passed down from king to king and my guess is that information may have been exaggerated or skewed in certain directions along the way, but this is what I've been taught. The three kings weren't meant to use the artifacts themselves, but were instead meant to bestow them on their two most powerful subjects under a soul oath through a sort of knighting ceremony. The three races were meant to use the power of the artifacts to protect themselves, as well as to gain the upper hand in dominating the mana beasts and other monsters of the time," he explained.

"I would assume that giving the three races super powerful artifacts just begs for chaos and war, rather than protection. I'm not so sure about the elves, but in humans, at least, greed isn't exactly a rare thing," I said, shaking my head. "Well, funny you say that—because that's what happened. The artifacts did indeed allow the elves, humans, and dwarves to work together during that period to further expand their areas of dominance. A lot of the mana beasts were either killed or driven off to what is now known as the Beast Glades, putting an end to the Beast Era. However, shortly thereafter, greed did get ahold of the three kings and their subjects. In addition to the incredible power the artifacts gave to their wielders, they gave them insights on how to utilize the source of the energy that makes up the world, which we now call mana.

"The users of the artifacts taught this to those they deemed capable, thus

giving rise to the very first batch of mages. Drunk on power, they let the concept of harmony dwindle and soon there was internal strife due to greed." Virion looked at me with a pained smile before continuing. "The three pairs of artifacts had different attributes—the distinct specialization we see today between the three races is supposedly due to the way the artifacts were distributed. The dwarves reasoned that because they were the beings closest to the earth, they should naturally be the rulers of the continent. We elves believed that, being closest to all living things, we should be the rulers of the continent, while the humans, who were able to train and utilize all four major elements, assumed that the deity naturally wanted to make them the rulers of the continent."

Virion looked back at Tess to make sure she was still asleep.

"The first war, which lasted longer than the time it took to drive the mana beasts into the Beast Glades, was what led to the segregation of the three races, as well as the formation of the three kingdoms. The second war, which you're more familiar with, happened between the humans and the elves. So," he said, testing me, "going back to the question of where the Six Lances came from, can you take a guess?"

"Wait... so those artifacts that were bestowed upon your ancestors by the 'deity' were given to the Six Lances?" My mind raced as pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. "And the artifacts are the reason they were able to rise past the silver core stage and become white core mages, as well as why they aren't able to go against the Council—they're soul-bound, just like the previous users who were tied to the first kings," I exclaimed, amazed by the revelation. Everything clicked.

"So the Lances, after they were deemed worthy, were given the artifact and made to take the soul oath that bound their lives to the kings?" I asked. "Does that mean the candidates were brought up from each of the royal families, or were they just found?"

"The candidates were nurtured very closely to the royal families," Grandpa

Virion said, a distant look on his face. "They were secretly raised to each wield an artifact. However, it wasn't until the discovery of the other continent that the three races decided they needed to unify."

"One last question. So were the artifacts given to other figures in the past as well? How come we've never heard of them?" I was sitting up by this point, thoroughly focused on the conversation and leaning forward as if it were possible to receive information faster this way.

"Yes, but this is the first time it has been made public. There have always been wielders of the artifacts, protecting the kings and their families from the shadows. It is only now, after the unification of the continent, that we decided to publicize the wielders. Of course, no one else knows that their strength comes from the power of the artifacts. If that secret were to be let out, it would most likely cause a coup d'état; the greed of silver core mages desperate to surpass their limits is not to be looked down upon. Who knows to what extent some might go—maybe even destroying the entire royal bloodline in hopes of being the new masters of the artifacts." Virion paused again before turning to stare at Sylvie.

"I imagine your bond has the capacity to become a deity. I'm not sure how long that would take, or if we'd even be alive when it happens, but, Arthur, you need to get stronger. Call it an old elf's intuition but I feel like changes are going to happen soon—enormous changes. I just hope I'm wrong." I'd never seen Grandpa Virion look so worried.

My mind flashed to the message that Sylvia had left within me after teleporting me to Elshire Forest—how I would hear from her again when I reached the stage past white core. I was beginning to think that maybe these so-called deities weren't as fictional as I had believed them to be.

"Mmmm... what's going on? Why am I sleeping on the ground?"

#### **GOOD TO SEE YOU**

#### VIRION ERALITH

What in the world just happened? What was that bizarre aura around Tessia? What did the boy do, anyway?

I had barely been able to see the orb shoot out before it got sucked into my granddaughter's body. It had seemed sort of like an elixir, but I wasn't really able to tell. I was just glad that she was safe.

I almost felt bad for the boy; he had just crawled back up to the surface after falling into an underground dungeon—gods know how deep—and now he had to deal with all this.

Our conversation turned to the Six Lances and the artifacts, and I had to wonder—was I doing the right thing, revealing all this information to Arthur? There was a bitter taste on my tongue after I finished explaining everything to the boy.

I sometimes forgot that he was actually younger than Tessia. It was odd, though. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but more and more, my instincts told me that, despite his monstrous ability in mana manipulation and latent potential as a mage, his cognitive acuteness, his mental capacity—which did not belong to a prepubescent child, and which would, I suspected, make this brat fearsome in the future—despite all this, currently, his level of power had not caught up to his intellect.

"Mmmm... what's going on? Why am I sleeping on the ground?"

My ears perked up immediately at the sound of my granddaughter's feeble voice.

"Grandpa? Where am... Art!"

My arms were already stretched out wide, ready to embrace my one and only beloved granddaughter, but oddly enough, instead of coming into her grandfather's arms, she bolted away from me and toward the boy.

My granddaughter... you're going the wrong way.

"Arthur! You're alive!" Tessia flew into his arms so fast that she almost knocked the boy back down onto the ground.

Meanwhile, my arms stayed outstretched.

Maybe the passing breeze would accept my embrace...

# **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

Tess's faint voice reached my ears and her teary eyes locked onto mine. She bit her lower lip to keep herself from breaking down, and I stood there at a loss. A wave of emotions, some of which I hadn't even known I could feel, washed over me.

"Arthur! You're alive!" Her face was already buried in my chest as she finished her sentence.

"Yeah," I said, gently petting her hair, "I'm alive."

I turned to Virion, and I swore I could almost see his petrified body crumbling to bits, his lonely arms outstretched. His head turned like a badly oiled robot, revealing his gaze—which was anything but mechanical.

Traitor. Grandpa should still come first. You're dead to me, brat—the thoughts might as well have been tattooed across his forehead, so forcefully was his foul mood leaking out.

Giving Grandpa Virion a sympathetic smile, I looked back down at Tess, who was still in my arms. Only when my old coat, which had been wrapped around her body, slipped slightly off her bare shoulder did I remember that she was completely naked underneath.

"Kyu!"

Sylvie was bouncing up and down, trying to get Tess's attention, but to no avail. Tess clung to me like glue.

"The last thing I remember was you handing me over to someone. I can only recall bits and pieces of what happened after that, because I was in too much pain. B-but I heard fragments of conversations about how you didn't make it out," she said, her arms still clinging to me like an infant koala. The way she looked up at me with those tear-filled eyes made me almost lose myself.

"I'll fill you in on what happened, but for now"—I peeled her off of me, wrapping her tighter in the only piece of clothing covering her—"let's get you decent, princess."

"What are you talking—" was all she managed to say before looking down, her eyes widening in horror.

Tess let out a scream that shook the room. Without even a moment to react, Grandpa Virion, Sylvie, and I were knocked back by a surge of mana that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

I managed to recover in time, landing on my feet. I looked to the side and saw that Virion and Sylvie were both uninjured—surprised, but unharmed.

Not even caring about the throbbing pain in my chest, I stared slack-jawed at the sight before us.

Tess was at the epicenter of a storm of translucent emerald green vines, dozens of yards in length, all snapping and whipping around chaotically. Even more strangely, they appeared to be an extension of the bright green aura surrounding Tess, who was now curled up in the fetal position.

"Th-this... A mana formation of this magnitude... It shouldn't be possible for her!" Grandpa Virion stood there, gaping.

"You have got to be kidding me," I mumbled to myself.

Cupping my hands, I yelled out, "Tess! You need to calm down!"

"Shut up, shut up! Go away! I can't believe you didn't tell me I was n-naked!" she screamed, her eyes still shut tightly in embarrassment. Those semi-transparent tendrils apparently responded to her emotions, because they

were swaying even more fiercely now.

"Haven't you learned that telling a screaming girl to calm down never actually calms her down?" Grandpa Virion said, shaking his head.

Of course... I'm the ignorant one, I guess.

What good is having been a king? What good does all that do, Arthur, if you can't even quell the anger of a thirteen-year-old girl?

"Tess! It's your grandfather. Open your eyes!" Virion shouted.

"Huh?" Tess peeked out from one eye, finally realizing what was happening.

"What's going on? What is all this?" Flustered, she looked to us for help.

"Try to control your emotions. They're making your mana flow go out of control," I tried to explain in a more reasonable tone.

Tess looked to Virion, who was nodding in agreement with me.

Realization dawned on her, and Tess closed her eyes and began meditating, and the translucent emerald vines slowly dissipated, fading out of sight.

As soon as the vines, which seemed to have been made up of pure mana, disappeared, the three of us rushed to where Tess was curled up.

"Quick, Gramps, check her mana core." I was going off a hunch, a little scared to hear the truth.

"That's just what I was about to do, brat." Virion rolled up his sleeves and imbued his palms with mana.

"Wait! Art, turn around." Tess was obviously out of breath, but she was also aware that something was different with her body.

With a sigh, I began, "I already saw everyth—"

"Now!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Former king? More like whipped dog," I mumbled to myself as I turned my back to them.

"I-It can't be... What in the world?" Virion's voice was trembling.

"What is it? What stage is her core at, Gramps? Dark yellow? Don't tell me she's at solid yellow like me." I was itching to turn around.

"Half a step away from initial silver—she almost broke through into the initial silver stage," he mumbled in reply, falling back on his bum in disbelief.

"What?" I whipped my head back, and Tess pulled the coat around her even more tightly.

Ignoring Tess's glare and protests, I put my hand on her abdomen—over the coat, of course.

He was right. Even when sensing directly, I couldn't determine the extent of her mana core, which meant she was at a higher level than I was. She had broken through out of light orange and into the dark yellow stage not too long ago. That meant she skipped nearly all of yellow, advancing to the edge of silver.

This news was astonishing—hard for me to swallow. I took my body's composition for granted; because I was a quadra-elemental mage, it was a lot easier for me to break through, but it had become distinctly harder to get past bottlenecks once I reached the dark yellow stage. Not to mention the fact that I broke through at age three—much earlier than everyone else.

The "gifted" students in Xyrus Academy had ten years to pass the final exam in order to graduate. There was no set stage that a student's core had to reach in this time, but on average, alumni tended to be around light orange stage by the time they graduated. After reaching that stage, they would be given a seat among the upper echelon practically anywhere they went.

Even the most talented dual-elemental mages should take exponentially longer to make breakthroughs, if at all, but Tess had just shattered that common assumption and skipped straight to the threshold of breaking into the initial silver stage. That was potentially a couple of decades' worth of cultivation, condensed into a mere fortnight.

The absurdity of it all...

"What the hell did you give her, Arthur?" Virion asked seriously. "I've never heard of a beast will tempering a mana core. Or did it perhaps have

something to do with that orb you threw at her?"

"Grandpa, is this a joke? Am I really a half-step from silver? And what orb?" Tess interrupted, puzzled by our conversation.

"I thought it was just some kind of elixir." I was at a loss for words.

What the hell was that vanishing elixir shop?

"Arthur, if there was ever an elixir that could do what that orb did just now, wars would break loose in hopes of winning it." Grandpa Virion shook his head, still in shock as he reviewed everything he'd just told me. "Where did you get that orb from, anyway?"

Oh, you know, from a homeless-looking fellow who owned a disappearing elixir shop...

I laughed nervously. "I got it for a silver coin, Gramps."

Virion gawked at me incredulously. By his expression, he might have been less surprised if I'd told him I stole if from a god.

"I don't exactly know myself. I got it from a peddler, kind of, but that's as much as I know." I let out another small, awkward laugh.

"Tell me what's going on. You guys weren't actually being serious, right?" Tess immediately began focusing on her mana core. "No way... M-my mana core is light yellow now—and it already has so many cracks on it," she said, her voice trembling.

"Honey, you're actually a peak light yellow core mage now," Grandpa Virion said, almost whispering.

Tess's eyes rolled back as she fainted, her body slumping against Sylvie's back as my bond moved just in time to catch her.

"This girl just can't stay awake," I grumbled as I positioned her more comfortably on the grass floor.

"She's sure to be exhausted after having gone through all this. Her body was under constant stress, and breaking through more than three stages at once will have taken a toll on her mind as well. I guess the realization was the tipping point." We gazed at her for a few moments, each of us lost in our

thoughts. Then he said, "I'm going to take her through the gate, back to Elenoir. She needs some rest, and I'm sure my son and daughter-in-law are still worried. I'm kind of looking forward to how they'll react to this." He sighed. "Imagine—Princess Tessia, a silver core mage at the age of thirteen," he boasted with a wide grin on his face. "Do you want to come with me?"

"I'll pass on that. I know Tess is safe, and she knows I'm safe as well; that'll have to do for now. We'll catch up when she returns to school," I replied.

"Mm. I have a meeting with the Council that I've been avoiding, so I won't get to see you for a while. Get some rest, boy." Grandpa Virion threw me a wink and walked out of the training room with Tess in his arms.

She's at a higher level than me now...

My mind kept going back to the homeless man and his elixir shop. Was the orb he had given me really the reason she'd been able to break through like that? I couldn't see any other explanation.

"Kyu." 'Papa, I'm hungry!' Sylvie hopped back onto the top of my head and thumped my forehead in complaint.

"Me too, Sylv. But before we go back, let's visit your Uncle Elijah," I replied, rubbing my bond's ears.

"Kuu..." 'But, food...'

I had an eerie sense of déjà vu, but this scene wasn't nearly as heartwarming.

"There, there. Yes, I'm still alive. You can't get rid of me that easily," I said soothingly, patting my best friend's head.

"I know," he sniffled. "You're like a cockroach."

This brat...

I peeled him off of me—again, very similarly to the scene from just thirty minutes ago, but the person in front of me this time had a string of mucus hanging out of his right nostril, the other end of the slippery secretion attaching itself to my shirt.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Arthur!" Elijah roared as he nearly head-butted me.

A friend... my best friend. In Elijah, I now had an entity in this life that I'd wanted so badly in my previous one: a person I could let loose and be a child with again, no matter how old or grand I was before.

"It's good to see your disgusting face again, pal." I grinned at him, patting him on the shoulder and laughing.

# **ALLIES?**

#### CYNTHIA GOODSKY

Standing before a set of heavy iron doors, I took a deep breath. Beyond this entrance were the six former kings and queens of Sapin, Elenoir, and Darv. I was apprehensive—not because of their titles, but more the fact that they were ultimately the ones who would shape—or destroy—the future of Dicathen.

Even with an augmented hearing spell, I was unable to clearly make out what was being discussed on the other side, leaving me to wonder what their course of action might be.

What was I to tell them?

What was I *able* to tell them? I truly had to be meticulous in the words and actions I used.

I'd only gotten a glimpse of the consequences I would face if I didn't abide by the curse's restrictions, and I knew there was no way around it.

It just wasn't worth it... not at this point.

Was there really no way to avoid this? Was I to just sit and watch this peaceful continent that I'd grown to love crumble, without being able to do anything?

It couldn't be helped; I'd deviated too far from what I was originally supposed to do. I couldn't reveal my secret, so I had established myself—and built Xyrus Academy up to what it was today—for the sake of Dicathen, that

we might have some hope...

It'd been too long since the time of war, though. Students wanted to be strong—not to protect and fight for what was right, but for their own conceited pride. It'd been an ongoing struggle to not only shape up the level of magic on this continent, but also instill proper values.

The only thing I could do for the country now was prepare the next generation, as well as get rid of anything that might hinder their plans. I'd been personally removing more and more of the spies being sent out from my homeland.

They were getting impatient; I could tell by some of the toxic traces affecting the dungeons that they were beginning their next phase.

It was becoming difficult for me to keep up the pace, though. I could tell Arthur, in particular, was becoming rather suspicious. I had been careless in exposing the wound I'd received from one of the affected mana beasts.

I just wasn't sure anymore...

Was I doing the right thing? Would all my efforts even give us a chance? I had thought so, once, but I wasn't so optimistic anymore.

The two mages standing guard on either side of the door were carefully observing me, probably wondering why I wasn't going in. One was at the initial silver core stage while the other, slightly thinner mage was at mid-silver. On this continent, they would be considered the elite, the best of the best—but *only* this continent.

I signaled to the guards that I was ready to go inside so they could inform the Council.

"You may enter," the knights announced, opening the doors fully.

"—and I said we can't just be lying here on our asses waiting for more deaths! Alduin, Merial, why aren't you saying anything? One of your Lances is dead!"

Dawsid Greysunders, former king of the dwarves, was standing with his finger pointed at Alduin Eralith, former king of the elves, who was seated with his arms crossed and eyes closed.

"Calm yourself, Dawsid. Before we rashly try to hunt down whomever or whatever killed Alea, we need more information. This might be somehow linked to the communication failures with the *Dicatheous*. What if, as we suspected, the unknown continent is involved and we end up—ah, Director Goodsky. We received your transmission; please, have a seat." Blaine Glayder, the former king of the humans, stretched his arm to direct me to a nearby empty seat.

"Yes, but it seems that my message was unnecessary," I responded, taking a small bow before sitting down. King Greysunders also reluctantly took a seat, in a chair that seemed a bit too big for him.

"Yes, Alduin was alerted almost immediately after Alea passed; unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how she was killed. Do you happen to know anything, Director Cynthia?" asked Merial Eralith, former queen of the elves and the mother of my only disciple.

I should have realized they might've already known, thanks to those bestowed artifacts.

"I apologize. Truth be told, I was not the one who found her body." Taking out the adamantium tag that had belonged to Alea, I handed it over to Lady Eralith.

"Who was it who found her body? We need to bring that person here." Glaundera Greysunders, former queen of the dwarves, slammed her palms on the table.

"That... may be a bit troublesome," I said hesitantly. "You see, the person who found her body was one of my students, and that was only by accident."

"No matter! Just bring the student here. We need as much detail about this disaster as possible so we can start slowly unfolding it to the public," Lady Greysunders replied.

I shook my head. "I assure you, the student does not know any more than what we might be able to guess. He simply stumbled onto the scene after the

battle was long over."

King Eralith spoke up solemnly. "Are you sure he wasn't hiding anything from you?"

"This student is but a child who recently enrolled. He has no reason to hide any details from me. I fear he would only feel intimidated if we brought him here, possibly leading him to make up details in order to gain the Council's favor," I lied.

I didn't want to involve Arthur in all this. Not yet. He wasn't ready.

"Cynthia offers a valid point. There's no use interrogating a student who might make up facts to feel like a hero. Besides, she already questioned him," said Priscilla Glayder, former queen of the humans, defending me.

"Yes. I was even able to find the scene of Ale—of Code Aureate's death," I hurriedly replied. Maybe they would be able to find something. Indirectly helping them like this might prove to be fruitful.

The plan, as it had been explained to me I had come here, seemed to have been hastened for some reason, but I knew for a fact that it would still take years before the first course came to fruition. Until then, I had to somehow—indirectly—help them prepare for what was coming. Hopefully, I had enough time.

"All right. Then the next course of action is settled." King Glayder motioned for a secretary to approach. "Dispatch our best tracking mages. We'll have them find any sort of evidence the perpetrator might've left. In the meantime, what is the current status of the remaining Lances?"

"Yes, Your Highness, our best trackers are already assembled and ready. As for the Lances, Codes Zero, Ohmwrecker, and Balrog were the first to arrive. We've received word that Code Thunderlord and Code Phantasm entered the premises not too long ago," the secretary hurriedly announced, his head bowed.

"Good. We'll update them soon. Until then, make sure not a single word gets out that one of the Lances was killed." King Glayder finished his statement while looking at me.

The Council waited for me to respond. "Rest assured, the student is not the type to let this information out easily. I will make sure he knows it is of utmost importance that he keeps the information a secret," I answered.

As I was escorted out, Lady Eralith followed along, then pulled me aside, away from everyone's view. "Director Cynthia. How's my Tessia? I've yet to hear back from my father-in-law." Her voice quaked with concern.

I shook my head. "I was not updated on the situation either. However, both Arthur and Virion are looking after Tessia. She should be okay, Merial."

"I hope so. I've barely been able to focus on anything, I've been so worried about Tessia's condition. Let me know as soon as you're updated. This way, at least Alduin and I will have the peace of mind to focus on this mess," she said, handing me a sound transmission scroll.

Sound transmission devices were exceedingly costly, so few people had access to one, but the Council always had these in stock to send and receive information quickly.

"I'll be sure to tell you as soon as I find out." I gave her a reassuring smile before letting her go back to the meeting hall.

Interlude: Voices

Five silhouettes stood waiting in a dimly lit chamber, their figures hidden in shadow.

"So Alea's dead already?" The voice was male, proper, its tone deeply condescending.

"Bairon, watch your tone," said an icy, authoritative woman's voice.

"It can't be helped that I'm irritated; her dying so pathetically is trampling on the Lances' name," the man scoffed.

A sweet, child-like voice interrupted the others. "Poor Alea. Mica feels bad for her."

"Me too. I'll miss sharing cream puffs with Alea," sighed a third woman, who spoke with a warm, feminine tone.

- "It's improper to pity General Alea. She died a Lance's death, after all," a gruff voice admonished.
- "Well, Mica can't help it. Alea's death was a pitiful one, old man," the child-like voice pouted.
- "Nevertheless, it would be wise of you to behave according to your age and not your infantile appearance," he replied calmly.
- "Olfred, you jerk!"
- "Now, now, don't pick on our cute Mica," the feminine voice chastised.
- "A-Aya, you're suffocating Mica!"
- "Stop acting like hyperactive children. We are the strongest mages in this country; this shouldn't faze us," grumbled the first man's voice.
- "Oh my, Bairon's cranky again today."
- "Enough," commanded the icy voice. "What did the Council say our next course of action was?"
- "They are still discussing. It seems that, unlike our king, the human and elf leaders care only for their own," the gruff voice rumbled.
- "Mica disagrees. King Greysunders is pretty selfish too."
- "It's common sense that, as the king with the most influence throughout the continent, King Glayder should take into account the elves' and dwarves' wellbeing."
- "Mica thinks Bairon should stop acting like he's our leader."
- "And *I* think you should know your place. You have neither the background nor strength to talk that way to the next head of the Wykes—"
- "Everyone, let's all get along. Let's not make Varay mad," the feminine voice coaxed gently.
- "Sorry..."
- "Bah..."

# **MEANWHILE**

#### ARTHUR LEYWIN

"Hey, Art, I thought we were heading to your house... Where're we going?" Elijah asked, noticing we'd taken a different turn on the way back to Helstea Manor.

"There's a place I need to stop by first. Don't worry, it'll just be a short detour," I answered, quickening my pace even with Sylvie on my head.

Elijah broke into a jog behind me. "Wait up!"

When we reached the destination, I let out a disappointed breath, my shoulders drooping. "I thought so," I mumbled to myself.

"Xyrus Elixirs? Did you need to buy something from here? It's almost midnight; of course it's closed." Elijah cupped his hand over his eyes as he peered through the front glass door, hoping to spot someone inside.

"It's nothing. Let's head back home," I replied. As I turned away from the building, a shiny object, caught in a crevice of the aged alley leading to Xyrus Elixirs, caught my attention.

I kneeled down to retrieve it and my eyes narrowed. It was an orb similar to the one I'd used on Tess, but instead of rainbow speckles, there were golden flakes floating within. Attached to the marble-sized orb was a crudely written note:

# Your little princess will probably need this

"What are you staring at?" Elijah leaned over my shoulder to see.

I crumpled up the piece of parchment and quickly shoved the orb inside my dimension ring. "Let's head back home, Elijah. I'll need to tell my family that I might have to miss a couple more days of school. Go back to the academy tomorrow and tell everyone that I'm okay." I patted his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile in response to his concerned expression.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you about everything after." Elijah seemed to accept that, giving me a cheerful nod and asking no more questions.

# **KATHYLN GLAYDER**

When I found out from my brother what had happened down at the dungeon, I was shocked. I almost wanted to blame him—to blame Professor Glory, to blame *someone*—but I knew it wasn't anyone's fault.

I kept reassuring myself that Arthur was going to be okay. He was just that type of person. No matter what the situation, he would always return with that lazy smile on his face—a smile that, for some reason, calmed me.

"You're being foolish, Kathyln," I berated myself as I walked down the marble street to the disciplinary committee room. My thoughts lingered on Arthur as I imagined how it might have been had I been there. I could have heroically saved him; he would have looked at me with an expression of gratitude and... I shook my head, trying to snap out of my delusions. "No, no. It's not my job to look after him. Besides, he already has the student council president."

A few faint giggles from students passing nearby sent blood rushing up to my cheeks as I veered in another direction. I was being foolish, I knew, but it felt like my thoughts would be clear to anyone just by looking at my face.

I'm confident he'll be okay, I thought, trying to convince myself. I'm sure of it.

"Gah!" I blurted in frustration, then quickly covered my mouth, surprised that I'd let out such a barbaric sound. After quickly looking around the alleyway where I stood—I had discovered a shortcut to the disciplinary committee

room—I exhaled a sharp breath of relief: I was alone.

Maybe all this daydreaming was from the stress I felt these days as a disciplinary committee officer. I had assumed things would stay quiet after the formation of the committee—I had briefly wondered if we were even needed—but recently some unusual circumstances had been brought to our attention.

Claire Bladeheart, our leader, had pulled each of us aside a few days ago. She explained several small 'accidents' that had occurred around campus and implied that the motives behind these incidents might have had something to do with Arthur.

I wanted to rebut her claims, but I decided to hear her out. Claire had been secretly gathering information with Kai, who specialized in stealth. From what they'd learned, it seemed there was a radical group dissatisfied with the direction the academy had been taking recently. The group comprised only humans, and the few faces Kai had been able to catch a glimpse of were all from high-ranking noble families.

One particular noble he had spotted was Charles Ravenpor. His father was on rather close terms with mine, but strictly for business. Father always grumbled in dissatisfaction after meetings with Mr. Ravenpor because of how ill-mannered and self-centered he was.

I envied Claire's unwavering confidence that Arthur was still alive, but she was relieved that Arthur wasn't here at the moment as he was supposedly one of the main reasons this radical cult-like group had formed. A large faction from the group thought Arthur didn't belong in this academy because of his "humble" background. The fact that he was a professor, in addition to having the privilege of taking upper division classes, further fueled the built-in hatred of some of the royal students.

We weren't allowed to confront them yet because of the lack of evidence—and the fact that they hadn't really done anything wrong yet—but it appeared that even some professors of the academy supported them. We had to be

careful not to act rashly.

A few days ago, though, some of the radical group members had begun to act. Denton, one of my classmates in Arth—Professor Leywin's class, was the victim. He had initially been one of those who strongly opposed Professor Leywin teaching a class that was so important in building foundations. However, he'd warmed up to him—and he looked up to him now.

Three days ago, Denton had been found hanging from a statue behind the disciplinary committee building—not far from the alley where I stood now, in fact. He had been left there, battered and naked, hung upside down for all the passing students to see. There had been a note covering his privates instructing him to drop out of the "plebeian's class" if he didn't want this to happen again.

Claire had learned that the group had dragged Denton to one of the narrow alleys between the back buildings and beaten him up. She said they'd wanted to "teach" him how to properly use mana, since they didn't really think Arthur was good enough to nurture the "potential" Denton had. He'd ended up becoming a target dummy for various spells when he resisted. Director Goodsky's assistant, Tricia, and Professor Glory had rescued him, pulling him down and making sure he was okay.

Director Goodsky was still away, so Tricia, acting on her behalf, had been trying to quell the anger from the elven and dwarven parents who thought this was a case of racial discrimination, since the victim was an elf.

Needless to say, Denton was taking a break from school for the time being.

Why was this happening? What was the point? What good did dividing students like this do? Did these students have such low self-esteem that they needed to bring down anyone they thought was better than them to feel better about themselves? Why was it that the more power and privilege someone had, the greedier they became?

Was it naive of me to wish everyone would just work together for the good of all?

To top it off, a dark and gloomy atmosphere had clung to the disciplinary committee room since the accident with Arthur. Claire and my brother hadn't spoken at first, each of them blaming themselves, while everyone remained frustrated because our options were so limited. Now everyone was on high alert; all the disciplinary committee upperclassmen were out for surveillance during the morning and afternoon, while Feyrith and I took watch in the evening, with one of the upperclassmen helping us out instead of going to class.

Kai tried to learn their meeting spots, but as soon as he had a lead the locations always changed. It seemed they were one step ahead of us, constantly moving on to someplace new.

The professors were useless. Most of them were all talk in front of the unhappy elven and dwarven parents, saying they'd do their best to find the culprit, but they weren't able to take direct action, since the human parents were also upset about their children being accused of racial discrimination. In the end, the professors were too involved in their little game of tug-of-war to be of much help. They tried so hard to be on both sides that they ended up being on neither.

That was the problem with a school so heavily funded by the parents of the students. The only one who had the authority to oppose them directly and openly was Director Goodsky, and she was nowhere to be seen. In a way, her disappearance had allowed this radical group to openly create a disturbance, because she wasn't here to stop them.

I finally made it to the disciplinary committee room and walked up the stairs, Claire's voice getting louder the closer I got.

"Things are escalating faster than we thought. I had a feeling that this would be the case—the group is trying to create as much of an uproar as possible before Director Goodsky gets back; then they'll probably go into hiding—temporarily, at least," Claire announced, leaning forward with her arms on the table. The dark bags underneath her eyes told me she hadn't rested since

getting back.

Everyone acknowledged me with a nod, too frustrated to verbally greet me as I took my seat. I couldn't help but notice it—the chair where Arthur usually sat, empty. But now wasn't the time to brood. I turned my attention back to the group as my brother began to speak.

"I talked to multiple professors about the situation like you asked, but it seems you were right. None of them were willing to actively help in finding the crux of the problem. They're turning a blind eye to all this because of our 'lack of evidence,'" my brother reported through gritted teeth, running his fingers through his hair.

"We already know one member of the group, so why not just take that rat out and interrogate him? I doubt he has the balls to last even a couple of minutes before spilling out some secrets," grunted Doradrea as she leaned back in her chair.

"Already tried that, but Charles Ravenpor is never by himself these days; he's always surrounded by at least five lackeys. It'll be impossible to take any discreet action with them there. Besides, we need to think about our actions from the entire academy's perspective. No matter what we could get away with, it wouldn't look good if we just took a student in without a proper reason," Kai argued, shaking his head.

Theodore pounded his fist on the table, tipping over a cup of water. "What the hell is the point of having something like the disciplinary committee if we can't do anything in cases like this?"

"It can't be helped. We know too little about what this group is planning, and more importantly, we don't know what they're capable of. We have too little information on them." Claire sighed as she sat back down.

"We need to wait for Director Goodsky to come back," I said.

"Of course that would be the best thing to do, but we have no idea when she'll be back," Claire responded. "We don't even know where she is."

"If only Arthur were here," I mumbled aloud.

I immediately regretted it, as my brother's expression became crestfallen. He and Claire had both been at the dungeon where Arthur had been injured, and they were trying to stay strong. My brother told me Professor Glory was planning to go back down with a reconnaissance team to look for Arthur. She said there was a high probability that he was still alive if he had survived the fall, because all the mana beasts in the dungeon were most likely on the first floor.

"Kat, I'm sorry, but we just can't factor in Arthur on this." My brother tried his best to smile, but it was clearly faked.

"He'll come soon." I realized I had accidentally said the words aloud when everyone, even Theodore, gave me a pained look.

"Umm, excuse me?"

Every one of the disciplinary committee members, including myself, whipped our heads around at the unexpected voice coming from the first floor of the room.

It was Arthur's best friend, Elijah.

"Ah, you're Arthur's friend, right?" Claire immediately softened her expression, and she motioned him upstairs.

"Yes, I'm sorry for intruding. I got to school a bit later than I expected but it's great that you guys are all here. Listen, I know you're all worried about Ar—"

His voice was cut off by a series of thunderous explosions that shook the reinforced walls of the building.

# **MEANWHILE II**

#### KATHYLN GLAYDER

At the sound of the explosions, we all bolted up from our seats and immediately headed outside. I cringed, tightening my fists in both frustration and disappointment upon seeing the disastrous scene laid out before us. Behind me, I could hear Claire muttering a string of curses under her breath. There was a thick cloud of smoke rising from an area near the center of campus.

Half of the recently-constructed Tri-Union Hall building was in flames while the other half was crumbling down, collapsing beneath its own weight. Students were evacuating, while some capable staff members and professors nearby were rushing into the building to look for anyone who was stranded or stuck.

"I should've known they would target that building at some point." Theodore swore aloud as he stomped his foot into the ground.

We hurriedly made our way to the site.

The Tri-Union Hall served as both a museum of and a monument to the alliance between the three races. My mother had argued heavily to persuade the rest of the Council to erect this building, and although they all came around to her point of view, she had been the happiest of them by far when it had finally been built.

Equality had always been important to my mother. I had been lectured as a

child once by my home instructor for refusing to participate in class with some of the other nobles' children. My mother had thought it was a good idea for me to make friends while I was learning, but that hadn't worked out as smoothly as she had hoped. I'd ended up throwing a tantrum on the first day, saying I didn't want to make friends with them because they weren't princesses like me.

Ignoring the carefully chosen words of discipline from the home instructor, I had stormed off to my room and slammed the door shut, refusing to come out.

Later that afternoon, after the other noble children and the home instructor had left, my mother had knocked on the door, even though there was no lock. She sat down on the bed next to me and ran her fingers gently through my hair. I couldn't remember how I had responded, but what she'd said to me left such a lasting impression, even as a six-year-old, that I could still recall almost her exact words:

"My little Kathyln, I know you think you did nothing wrong. Everyone gets angry and fights for what they believe in. What I want you to know, my little baby, is that before you are a princess, you are a person. It doesn't matter if someone is a king, a servant, a powerful mage, an elf, or a dwarf. A person is a person.

"Everyone is different and that is what makes everyone special in their own ways. Don't hate someone for something they can't change. What if people didn't like you because you have round ears or because you have beautiful white skin? Or a perky little nose?" She proceeded to tickle me in each of the parts she mentioned, leaving me in a fit of giggles.

My mother was sensible and smart, and not in the least bit cold like her appearance sometimes implied. She cared for everyone as people, not as humans, elves, or dwarves. She disciplined my brother and me heavily for any type of discrimination, whether it was by social class or race.

The Tri-Union Hall was an extension of that. It was intended, she'd

explained, to be both a symbol and a place for the three races to learn about the differences in each other's cultures.

Now that it had been made a target, my suspicions immediately went to the same radical group that had been recently fostering discord.

I strained my eyes, holding back my tears.

Claire ordered Kai to alert the rest of the professors and staff. She sent Feyrith and me to help the mages who were trying to put out the fire before it brought down the whole building, and I saw his expression turn from angry to dejected.

I almost wanted to apologize, as if it were my fault. Doradrea didn't seem to be taking the event to heart, but I could tell Feyrith wasn't as emotionally strong. I wanted him to know that not all humans thought like this, but somehow the words got caught in my throat. I was never good at expressing my thoughts like my mother... or Arthur.

As we hurried to support the professors heading into the collapsing building, I spotted the student council—minus the president—making their way toward the scene as well.

Earth- and wind-attribute mages kept the building from collapsing, while the water-attribute mages were working to put out the fire. I hadn't used water-attribute spells as frequently since I had begun exploring my deviant abilities to manipulate ice-attribute mana, but I was still familiar enough with the spells to recognize them even at a distance. A few other student mages were already chanting spells in harmony by the time we got there. Without even taking the time to exchange hellos, we all got to work.

"Everyone, step aside!" Looking behind me, I saw a couple of professors rushing toward us, their wands already unsheathed.

After a few moments of mute chanting, Professor Malkinheim—who taught an upper division magic warfare class—conjured a thick cloud of mist around the whole building.

The other professor, someone I didn't recognize, used the moisture from

Professor Malkinheim's mist cloud to evoke multiple water streams. Just these two spells, from two professors, were easily three times the size of the meticulously prepared spells that had been conjured by more than ten students. Within minutes, the monstrous fire was out and other professors were chanting spells to raise earthen support beams to hold up the crumbling portion of the building.

As expected of professors, they were on a different level.

This train of thought reminded me of the time Arthur had completely overwhelmed Professor Geist before taking over his class. Just how strong was Arthur, then? What would he do in this situation?

Shaking my head, I reprimanded myself for thinking of Arthur again. Why did he pop into my mind so often? I needed to stay strong for when he came back.

He is going to come back, right?

I had begun chanting again when I spotted a group of students hastily making their way from the scene. I thought nothing of it at first—until I got a glimpse of one of the students in the group. It was Charles Ravenpor.

Even from this distance, I could see him nervously glancing around as he made his escape. When his eyes met mine, he averted his gaze and quickened his pace.

Before I had the chance to do anything, Theodore, who had been helping an injured student, spotted him as well. Without even a word, he augmented his body and furiously dashed toward Charles.

"Someone help!" Charles shrieked, but the group surrounding him did nothing to aid him. Instead, they acted frightened and confused as Theodore grabbed him easily and picked him up by the collar, nearly choking him.

Keeping my wand at the ready, I followed behind my brother, who was also rushing toward Theodore and Charles.

"We need to ask you a couple of questions. If you would so kindly cut the crap and come with us," growled Theodore as he dragged the flailing Charles

away.

I didn't usually condone Theodore's rash behavior, but this time—excuse my crude thoughts—I was hoping he would be a bit rougher with Charles. A small part of me, a very tiny part, wanted to stoop down to their level and use the same barbaric antics the radical group had used to make a statement.

However, before Theodore had the chance to do anything else, a voice interrupted us.

"What's the meaning of this?" barked Professor Malkinheim as he blocked Theodore's path.

Professor Malkinheim had a scrawny build, his main features being a balding head and a beak-like nose. You could tell the professor was self-conscious of his lack of hair by the way he combed back the hairs growing on the side of his head to try and cover up the bald spot on his crown.

He wouldn't physically be able to hold down someone Theodore's size, but he had his needle-thin wand pointed directly at the thickly-built DC officer.

"I should be asking you the same thing, Professor," Theodore snarled, as Charles, helplessly lying on the ground, looked on with a pleading expression on his face.

"I wasn't aware that the prestigious disciplinary committee officers were mere thugs who would assault students," Professor Malkinheim scolded, his wand remaining fixed on Theodore.

"Innocent? Ha! This weasel has been seen multiple times with the radical group you're having such a hard time capturing. It can hardly be anything short of guilt by association. Are you protecting a criminal right now?" I could tell Theodore was at his last nerve as the ground underneath him started crumbling from his gravity-infused mana.

"Someone save me from this brute! I'm innocent! I s-swear!" Charles, still on the ground, trapped in Theodore's grasp, whimpered as the ground underneath him started giving out as well.

"Theodore, I understand how you feel, but this isn't the right way to do

things. Taking in a student without any evidence other than your suspicions will lead to repercussions from parents, and maybe even the Council. Please, we can't afford to be rash right now." The voice came from another professor who'd helped extinguish the flames; she got in between Professor Malkinheim and Theodore, trying to quell the tension.

"Professor Genert is right. Theodore, we can't get out of line right now. There is too much at stake for us to be reckless. Besides, there are more important things to do at the moment. We need to make sure no one was left inside that building," Curtis said, his face a mixture of frustration and helplessness.

Wordlessly, Theodore threw the quivering Charles Ravenpor back toward his groupies and shot Professor Malkinheim one last threatening look before walking away. The professor shook his head in disgust, then headed off in the other direction, yelling at the students who were standing around watching to disperse.

I glanced toward Charles Ravenpor, who was being carried away by his friends. His disheveled bangs covered most of his face, but there was an unmistakable smirk plastered below his nose.

# **MEANWHILE III**

# **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

"Do you really have to leave again? You just got here." My mother heaved a sigh as she looked at me from the other side of the dining table.

"Brother, you're going away again? Are you going to almost die again?" my sister asked with a straight face, making her question sting all the more. I could still tell she was pouting by the way her cheek puffed out slightly more than usual, despite her best efforts at keeping a poker face.

"Eleanor! Don't say such things to your brother," my mother chastised as she pinched my sister's cheek.

"Arthur, I consider you grown up now. I know your decisions were made in consideration of your family. I support your decision to go, since it's for the sake of your love," my father affirmed as he gave me a thumbs-up, the corners of his lips curling upward.

"Oh God, Dad, please stop." I groaned with frustration at being taken for some kind of hormone-deluded pubescent who had just been caught with a girlfriend.

A giggle escaped from my mother's lips. She tried to quickly cover her mouth and resume a serious face, but it was already too late.

I could feel my face burning so I just looked down, shaking my head, uncertain which was worse: my parents worrying about me, or them teasing me like this.

Meanwhile, Elijah quietly sat next to me, wide-eyed, sucking his lips in to make sure he didn't laugh as well; his expression seemed to be saying, 'I'm not doing anything wrong. Nope!' making me sigh all the harder.

"Kyu!" 'Papa will be fine! I'm going to protect him this time.' Sylvie hopped up and down on top of the table.

"It's only going to take a couple of days, and I'll be with Grandpa Virion. Besides, next week is the Aurora Constellate, so I'll be back home for a while. As I said in the beginning, this matter is serious," I said, trying to convince my parents, who were already lost in their own imaginations.

"Well, we can't keep babying you forever. You *are* growing up, I guess, in more ways than one. Just remember that it's better to take things slow, Art. Though I'm sure you'll at least do better than your father," my mother mused as she looked helplessly at my father—who was caught off guard by this surprise attack and looked at me imploringly, as if he'd just been stabbed.

I gave them a wry smile before turning to Elijah.

"Don't worry, I'll let everyone know you're still alive and coming back soon," Elijah responded, putting his hand on my shoulder while giving me a rather dubious thumbs-up.

"I will be back soon," I reiterated, letting out a doubtful breath.

I stood up, giving each of them a final hug, which had become sort of a customary thing to do in our family. Sylvie, caught in my sister's grasp, struggled to break free.

I took a quick glance at both my mother and sister, making sure they still wore the Phoenix Wyrm necklaces—just in case. The white-gold chains twinkled around their necks, reassuring me. I said one last goodbye to them all and headed for the carriage waiting for me outside, Sylvie scampering behind me.

Inside the carriage, I began fiddling with the gold-speckled orb, trying to glean as much information about it as I could.

No matter how many times I tried imbuing mana into the orb, though, there

wasn't any sort of response or reaction. It was almost as if it were just what it appeared to be—a marble.

Frustrated, I put the orb back inside my ring. The ride to the teleportation gate would probably be my last chance to get some sleep for a while, so I tried to make the most of it.

It is necessary, King Grey...

It is of utmost importance to bring stability to our country...

To show the people of our country, your country, that you are our king and that you fight for us, it is necessary to kill her...

Kill her, King Grey, so that the world will know not to trifle with your country...

Kill her...

I shot up from the carriage seat, gasping for breath. The sound of my pounding heart hammered all the way up into my skull and the cold air that leaked inside the carriage chilled my sweat-covered forehead. It took me a moment to realize I had only been dreaming. Sinking back down into my seat, I wiped the cold sweat off my brow as Sylvie, who must have fallen off of my lap when I woke up, jumped back onto it with a worried gaze.

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that would help me get rid of the disturbing memory. I felt Sylvie's rough tongue on the back of my hand.

"It's okay, Sylv. I'm fine," I assured her, petting her ears.

Why did that memory have to come up now...

Unable to fall back asleep, I talked to Sylvie to pass the time. It started off as small conversations about the time she had spent training by herself, then shifted to teaching her about the various objects and scenery we passed on the remainder of the carriage ride. Over the past few months, Sylvie's mental capacities had been rapidly growing. Her knowledge and maturity had long since passed a human's of a comparable age.

While we conversed, I thought about how different my relationship with Sylvie was compared to the few other beast tamers I'd seen. All of them had a relationship based around utilizing each other for battle. Even Curtis and his world lion—having seen them in duels, I could tell the two of them spent many hours training together.

Hopefully I could do the same with Sylvie soon.

When we arrived at our destination, the moon was still high overhead, illuminating the warmly-lit floating city of Xyrus. The guard stationed in front of the gate leading to Elenoir Kingdom hurried over to us, his left hand gripping the pommel of the sword strapped to his waist.

"State your reason for passage and a form of verification," the rugged guard demanded, but his hand eased off his sword when he saw that I was just a kid.

His voice sounded vaguely familiar, and not just in a he-had-a-common-voice sort of way, but I couldn't place it. Shrugging that nagging thought off and pushing it toward the back of my mind, I stayed focused on the situation at hand.

I was uncertain what to say, but then I remembered I still had the silver compass Virion had given me when I was a child. It bore the insignia of the Eralith family, so maybe it could be used as verification.

Wordlessly, I stuck my hand in my pocket to hide it from the guard's view. I took the compass from my ring and showed it to him.

The guard raised his brow as if in surprise, but didn't say anything as he handed me back the compass and motioned me forward.

The runes around the portal entrance glowed and began humming in a low pitch, and the guard jogged back to us.

"This way please," he said sternly.

"Thank you." I nodded, following him.

The humming coming from the portal intensified as the ancient magic runes opened the portal. I looked back to see the guard giving me an exaggerated bow.

As my right foot entered the portal and I felt the familiar sensation of my

body getting sucked in, the guard looked up.

The rugged-looking guard with scars etched on his face was gone. In his place was the old man from the elixir store.

He gave me a wink and a cheeky grin as he said, "Have a safe trip, lad."

### CYNTHIA GOODSKY

I reached a clearing in the woods and detected the faint mumbling of chants with my enhanced hearing.

Suddenly, dozens of nearly-transparent blades of compressed air whizzed toward me at a frightening speed—a Wind Cutter spell.

Of course—it was only natural that all these spies would be wind mages.

I held my ground and waited for the wind blades to reach me before releasing a sound barrier. Then, unscathed, I resumed walking while I finished my second spell.

The unlucky birds and rodents in the vicinity fell victim to my Pulse Field spell, dropping dead from the trees where they were hiding. Along with the animals, a few unprepared spies were also affected, falling from their own hiding places as they clutched their ears in agony. I made note of all their locations.

Before I had the chance to send out another spell, I was forced to dodge a needle that had managed to avoid my senses until the last second. A quick glance down showed that the projectile was coated with poison.

"Avier, take the ones to my right," I stated in a monotone.

'Aye,' my bond confirmed through mental transmission.

Avier descended from the moonlit sky, and before long, I could hear the brief groans and howling of the spies who had become prey.

A pity that their cries for help would never be answered...

For my part, I had to control myself to keep at least a few of them alive and functioning so I could get some information out of them.

In the end, only one managed to survive long enough to be questioned. It was simple enough to torture him after destroying his mana core. Without magic

protecting him, his body was simply too frail. I began crushing his bones from the inside after giving him the chance to answer my questions; still he would not relent.

"Hah! You think I'll tell a *traitor* anything? You've made a big mistake," he gasped between wails of pain. "They're slowly regaining their former strength. You assumed this continent had decades left—pfft! The people of this continent... will have less than ten years before the war begins." He smirked and spat a glob of blood at my face.

My jaws clenched at this confirmation of my fears. Pushing down my frustration, I placed my hand on the injured spy's head.

Choking on the blood accumulating in his mouth, he croaked, "Long live the \_\_\_".

But his voice was cut short. Liquid brain matter began leaking from his ears and blood dripped from his other orifices as the sound pulse I inflicted inside his skull pulped his brain.

Leaving his lifeless body on the ground, I turned back with a sigh. Then I hastily made my way to my next destination, careful to avoid the corpses scattered on the forest floor.

"Do you mind cleaning up the mess, Avier?" I said apologetically.

"Human meat is too stringy for my taste, but I suppose I can manage it, yes." As my bond spoke, his owl-like body began to glow, and he transformed into his wyvern form.

The moonlight illuminated the woods and the crunch of bones echoed loudly as Avier feasted on yet another batch of spies from my homeland.

The night had been fruitless. I let out a disappointed breath as I wiped the blood off my face and changed my attire. My years on this continent had made me too soft. The apathy I had built up toward death and torture was gone—I had a sour taste in my mouth, just from killing a few brainwashed soldiers.

But even so, this had been too easy.

Were they just a diversion?

Leaving my bond behind, I departed, hoping my suspicions weren't correct.

#### AT LAST

#### **ELIJAH KNIGHT**

By the time the Tri-Union building site was under control, and the DC officers and student council got out of their meeting with the professors, it was already late at night. I took that chance to tell them what I hadn't been able to earlier—that Arthur was alive and safe.

"Yes! I knew it! I knew he'd survive." Claire had sunk down in her chair as she covered her face with her arms, probably to hide the stray tears sliding down her cheeks.

Curtis let out a huge breath of relief as he leaned back against the wall, but it was Princess Kathyln's reaction that caught me off guard.

For once, I could visibly see her face brighten as she studied me to make sure I wasn't lying. Her chocolate-colored eyes seemed to almost twinkle as a rare smile formed on her lips.

"Thank God," she muttered over and over under her breath when I confirmed the information with an awkward nod.

"As expected of my—sniff—rival. Mhmm." The elf who kept insisting he was Arthur's rival had a smug look on his face, as if he were the one who had saved Arthur or something, but the tears forming in the corner of his eyes betrayed his expression.

"Heh. I knew the twerp wouldn't die from just a fall," scoffed the bear leaning back on his chair. Theodore tried to play it off casually, but the halfgrin he was trying to hold back told everyone that he was quite relieved.

Kai—I thought that was his name—responded very indifferently, with a smile that seemed superficial.

"Looks like I'll get my duel after all." The dwarf nodded contentedly.

*Ugh, I'm recalling some unpleasant memories of home again.* 

It was clear that they were all relieved—they didn't seem to mind that it would be a bit longer before he would be back to help out with the situation at hand. Just the opposite, in fact. It felt like they wanted this whole fiasco taken care of before Arthur and Tessia got back.

That was odd. I felt like, if our director didn't get back in time, Arthur would be the best person to handle this mess—even more so than the professors.

Luckily no one had died in the Tri-Union Hall disaster; only a few students were mildly injured. An emitter, brought over from the Adventurer's Guild, had healed them, and they'd been taken to the treatment ward. Before their parents were allowed to visit, the students had been asked to give their accounts of what had happened inside.

The atmosphere within the academy had taken a turn for the worse; there was a clear divide between the students now. The newly-admitted elves and dwarves were furious, generalizing that all humans were racist brutes, while the prideful human students had no intention of taking the blame for the actions of others.

The few human students who did feel bad for what had happened ended up being ostracized by both sides. In the end, they just took a neutral stance, too afraid to say anything. At this point the situation was too volatile; everyone was trying to find someone else to blame.

It was weird how people acted more recklessly when they banded together, as if they drew strength from each other. Both sides had become more vocal after the fire was put out, and they had almost gotten physical until the professors told them all to disperse.

The whole thing had made me restless. I ended up stopping by the training

room Arthur had given me access to. I normally didn't use it, but since neither Arthur nor Tessia were here, I decided it would be okay.

The guard eyed me suspiciously, but the front desk lady, Chloe, was kind enough to personally escort me to the room.

I let out a deep breath and felt my mana core tremble with the excitement of being let loose.

Unlike Arthur, I'd been learning a lot since I had come to this academy; a lot of the practical aspects of magic seemed to work differently for me than for others.

One thing I had noticed was that meditating didn't do much for me. My mana core developed and strengthened at its own pace; my conscious efforts to refine more mana from the atmosphere didn't seem to help.

I had broken through into the light-orange stage without any real effort, but I just couldn't seem to make any gains after that.

I clenched my hands into fists and then released, repeating this motion until my hands felt as if they weren't my own.

I activated the Earthen Spear spell, feeling the mana flowing through and around me. Immediately a rock spike shot up from the ground a few yards in front of me.

I cast the spell again, this time with more mana imbued into it. Two thick spears of earth shot up at an angle in front of me. To be honest, even casting with the name of the spell was unnecessary for me. It had just become a habit so I could keep a firm vision of what I wanted to evoke, but I thought that with a little more practice, I could probably cast multiple streams of spells, instantly and simultaneously.

I case a Stone Barrage spell next, and the ground underneath me crumbled as chunks of earth began levitating. After a few moments of concentration, I willed the rocks to shoot forward.

Only four of the ten rocks I shot actually hit the tree that I had targeted, though, which was a bit disappointing.

If I couldn't meditate to strengthen my mana core like everyone else, I might as well get better at controlling the spells I had at hand.

I had learned in my Mana Utilization class exactly what it meant to have an affinity toward a certain element. If a mage had a weak affinity to fire, that mage would have to be a lot more precise in conjuring the spell, which also meant that the vocal incantation of the spell needed to be longer. Each verse that we chanted of an incantation shaped the type of phenomenon we wanted to occur. For the Rock Bullet spell, a mage with little affinity would need to have a verse for each step he took: beginning with the shape of the rock, the density, where it would originate from; if you added in a spin to the bullet you would need to have a verse for that as well, and you couldn't forget the initial trajectory of the spell, or whether you wanted the rock bullet strengthened so that it would pierce the target, or weakened to explode upon impact. It could all add up to a pretty long chant.

But all these factors of a spell could easily be simply imagined by a mage who had great affinity to the element. Most mages stuck with the element they had the highest affinity toward, to best utilize their mana and mental capacity.

For me, the earth below me felt like an extension of my body; maybe it was because I grew up with dwarves, but I always had this nagging thought in the back of my mind that even among them I wasn't normal. I didn't mean 'not normal' in a genius sort of way, like Arthur was, but in a freak-of-nature sort of way.

Although I guess Arthur was sort of a freak of nature in his own way...

It was an odd little train of thought. Those facts about my body—my 'gift,' you might say—and my disposition weren't top-secret stuff, but I didn't explicitly tell anyone either. I had considered telling Arthur about the differences in my body, but the timing was never right, and it just didn't seem urgent enough to make a special effort to pull him aside and tell him.

It was good, in a way, because I felt like maybe, just maybe—if I could learn

to control my innate talents, if I trained hard enough—I could someday catch up to Arthur.

Oh, sure, he was a solid yellow quadra-elemental mage with a dragon's will, and he somehow had freakishly superb skills in close combat, but hey—a guy could dream, right?

I conjured more spells, half to practice and half to relieve the pent-up frustration. I wanted to catch up to Arthur, not because I wanted to be better than him, but because I wanted to help him. He seemed to always be facing his own battles. As his best friend, I wanted to have his back, whether in good times or in war. I didn't know what sort of things he was going through, but if I was going to be around him, I needed to be stronger.

# ARTHUR LEYWIN

I wanted to turn back, but it was too late; I was already inside the portal. The trip through the transportation device was never more than a few moments of unpleasant dizziness, but this time, it seemed to last for an unnaturally long time.

"Kuu..." Sylvie, stuck to my head like glue, began trembling. 'It feels wrong, Papa,' she transmitted, her inner thoughts laced with worry.

The journey through the transportation gate was like fast-forwarding to your destination. You stood on a platform and a blur of different colors raced by as the background got lighter and lighter, until you disappeared into the light, then exited out the other end. It was a peculiar sensation and hard to describe in words—but this time, it was different.

The space around us distorted into a blur of colors as usual, but instead of getting brighter, the color around us drained. Everything became dimmer and darker, until it was pitch black.

'Papa, I'm scared.' I could feel Sylvie trembling on my head—the only way I knew my bond was still there.

Sylvie had never told me she was scared before. There were times she had been on guard, or alert, but she was never frightened.

The sensation of travelling through the gate—which normally made me nauseous—also ceased, so I tensely augmented a ball of flame above my palm.

"What the hell..." It was bizarre. The ball of fire, which should have given me at least some sort of vision, didn't do anything. Almost like coloring a red ball on a black piece of paper, it had no effect on the pitch-black darkness.

An unsettling feeling loomed over me. I crumpled to my knees and instantly augmented my body with mana.

I was frightened.

What sort of monster was here, its malicious intent thick enough to make me fall to my knees?

I couldn't stop shivering. For the first time in a long while, I felt like a child —an actual, helpless child in front of the boogeyman.

"Who's there?" I tried my best to roar but my shaking voice betrayed me.

Just then, a pair of eyes came into view out of nowhere. I knew exactly whom this pair of eyes belonged to. I was sure of it—yet the knowledge didn't comfort me or help me at all.

The glowing white eyes, speckled with stars—which had so captivated me the first time I saw them—grew closer. An authoritative voice, devoid of emotion, pierced through me, as if he were speaking directly into my ear.

"At last. We finally have a bit of privacy to peacefully converse."

# **BENEFACTOR**

## **LUCAS WYKES**

"And what the hell is this supposed to be?" I raised an eyebrow, looking around the dimly lit room, which reminded me of some crudely-built wine cellar.

That poor excuse of a mage from the Ravenpor House had brought me here, telling me it would be something I'd be interested in.

I normally would've blasted the sod away for talking to me so arrogantly, as if he were doing me a favor, but I had been quite curious, especially after the explosion at the Tri-Union Hall earlier that day.

"Welcome to one of the many humble dwellings where we hold our meetings," said a coarse voice. I was surrounded by at least sixty hooded figures, but only one wore a mask—the one who sat lazily in the middle, addressing me.

It was a plain white mask with two small eyeholes and a smile crudely drawn where the mouth should be. The mask was basic enough, but the simply drawn smile gave off a sinister feel.

Charles Ravenpor, standing next to me, had put on his own hooded robe. Now he went down on one knee, and bowed his head.

"My lord, I have brought Lucas Wykes as you asked," he said in a careful, hushed tone.

"Ahh, the famous Mr. Wykes, here in the flesh," he laughed, ignoring

Charles. "So glad you could join us for our little... crusade."

I looked around. "I'm not here to join anything. I came here out of curiosity, but I'm not impressed. Who are you supposed to be, anyway? You don't seem to be a student. Don't tell me you're a professor," I scoffed.

"How dare you! You should be grateful we even considered letting a mutt like you join us," hissed one of the hooded figures to my right.

"A mutt?" I echoed, feeling the muscles of my neck tighten.

I soundlessly prepared a spell for the ingrate who dared to mock me, but before I could finish the chant, the man behind the smiling mask snapped his fingers.

Suddenly, the hooded snob who had called me a mutt let out a shrill howl as he combusted into flames.

My eyes widened. Even for instant casting, that was fast... frighteningly so.

"Now, now. That wasn't a very courteous thing to say to our newest member, was it?" the masked man said from his earthen throne. The fire had already destroyed the boy's robe, and was burning his skin.

"F-forgive me! I was wrong. I apologize! P-please," he begged, trying desperately to crawl toward the masked man. The other hooded figures seemed too scared to do anything to help him.

Turning away from the boy still screaming in pain, I faced the masked man. "Before I decide whether I want to join this little cult of yours, what is it you're trying to accomplish, and why do you need me?"

I couldn't sense his mana core, which meant that we weren't on the same level.

"Circumstances prevent me from personally acting for now, so I need some capable mages to execute my plans. You see, I hate leaving loose ends," he explained, propping his head up with one arm.

"Now—with your director's absence—is the optimal time to act. By the time she comes back, it will all be too late," he continued. He snapped his fingers again and the fire suddenly disappeared, leaving the boy twitching from the

pain.

"As for what I hope to do, let's just say that my goals coincide with this group's, so I thought it'd be nice to kill two birds with one stone. Everyone here is a dissatisfied human noble who once took pride in the fact that this academy was meant for only the purest of lineage. While you may be a special exception to this case, I would still like to have you on board," he said. "The 'accept all' motto this academy now embraces makes me want to vomit. Don't you agree, Mr. Wykes?"

As he said this, the hooded figures all nodded fiercely in agreement. I could tell by his tone that he was smirking behind his mask.

"Whether they make you want to barf or not doesn't matter to me. Why should I waste my time and energy on bugs I could squish at any time? The peasants who were able to worm their way into this academy aren't any better than the low-class adventurer thugs blindly flailing around with their weapons. Even the nobles brought up in the most pampered conditions aren't worth crap to me. If this is all you have to say, then I have no reason to lower myself, to let myself be put on some leash and take commands from you," I snapped at him, turning my back.

"Lucas, what a hurtful thing to say. How could you ever compare yourself to some sort of dog tied to a leash?" He covered his mouth with his hands, feigning surprise. "It seems what I've heard is true—that you are a rather prideful mage who looks down on people of low birth. Did your friend, Arthur Leywin, not prove you wrong in this respect?" The coarse voice taunted me, making me stop in my tracks.

I whipped my head around. "What did you—"

"It doesn't take a genius to see that, although you were hailed as a prodigy in the field of magic and have been pampered with elixirs and strengthening methods since your awakening, you are no match for the child, Arthur Leywin," he shrugged, holding up one hand.

I could feel my fists tighten in frustration, but he cut me off before I could

refute his claims.

"The sad thing is, he was never even trying. I bet even you had a nagging suspicion that he had always been holding back." He erupted into a fit of laughter.

"Who do you think you are?" I growled.

My body was already glowing as mana spilled out of my core, ready to fire at him, but I held back. Some throbbing sense was telling me to not mess with him, that it was... hopeless.

No! I'm Lucas Wykes of the Wykes Family!

But who the hell was he? And why did he talk like he had been here the whole time, watching over us?

"I told you. I am but a mere benefactor who came here for the betterment of this land." As he said this, he rose lazily and gave an exaggerated bow with his arms outstretched. Sitting back down on his crude throne, he continued, "Mr. Wykes, I believe that, even if our views aren't the same, we could have some sort of mutual benefit in this."

"Go on," I said through gritted teeth.

He began to explain, seeming to ignore the fact that I was still completely surrounded by fire attribute mana, dangerously close to releasing it. "Soon, I will be able to personally take part in this—and when I do, I will completely shatter the frail bonds holding the three races together. However, until that time comes, I need your strength to make things run smoothly."

"How do you personally plan on splitting up the three races, and why would you think that doing this would benefit me in any way? Besides, the Council and the Lances aren't just for decoration, you know," I argued.

"The Council has tied itself in a knot worrying about... other things at the moment, and I've taken extra precautions to make sure your director is busy chasing her own tail. The stage is set, Mr. Wykes, so let me ask you this—how would you like to obtain the necessary power to defeat the ever-so-cautious Arthur Leywin, even if he were to fight you at his full strength?" He

raised his hand, beckoning me toward him.

"How do you know about Arthur?" I pried, growing more cautious.

The man in the mask shrugged. "It's obvious that I'd do at least *some* research on my lovely recruits. So how about it... the power to defeat even your beloved Arthur?"

I remained silent, unable to make heads or tails out of this unusual character.

"If you agree, I promise that you will have access to a level of power you never thought possible," he continued.

I looked at the hooded figures. They were clearly interested as well, but stayed quiet—probably due to the fear of becoming the next victim of the masked man's 'discipline.'

This was too good to be true.

"If what you say is true, and he has been cautiously hiding his, how are you going to get him to fight me at his best?" I scoffed, unwilling to believe.

"Quite simple, actually. It is a task I need to accomplish anyway, so it works out nicely. Arthur is only human and he places great importance on his family and his friends, and particularly so to one person," he said, raising his index finger. The sinister smile on the mask most likely matched his own expression, I thought.

"Tessia Eralith..." I whispered, unable to hide the smirk on my face.

"Yes! Tessia Eralith. An elf. In this sacred Xyrus Academy, an *elf* is the leader of the students. Do you think this is right?" he bellowed at everyone, his voice echoing in the small dungeon.

"No!" the hooded figures all roared in unison.

"She may not be here yet but I believe she will be soon, and most likely with Arthur. Don't you think that, maybe, a bit of elf princess blood being shed will get your ol'-buddy-ol'-pal Arthur riled up?" he sneered, his hands igniting in flames.

I never cared for the elf princess, aside from thinking that she suited my tastes. I had let her be, since she hadn't even matured yet, but it did seem like

something was going on between her and Arthur. Who did he think he was, anyway, to think he deserved someone like the princess of the elven kingdom?

He was just a lowly peasant.

As I began playing through the possible scenarios in my head, I felt my lips slowly curling upward as I imagined his precious little lover's life in my grasp, and Arthur begging me to stop. The brat who always thought he was better than I was, on his knees. I wondered if he'd lose his sanity if I were to slowly bleed her in front of him.

I licked my lips in anticipation. "Why the hell not."

# A GREATER SCALE

# **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

"At last, we finally have a bit of privacy to peacefully converse," the voice rang in my ear.

As soon as it spoke, the space around us began warping. Sylvie's trembling became so severe that I couldn't keep her perched on my head and had to hold her firmly in my arms.

Suddenly, in the midst of the chaos forming around us, we were in a blank white room.

I stared dumbly around at my surroundings, but couldn't find the words to express my confusion. Unable to muster even a voice to curse in surprise, I just waited.

In this white cube, it was only me, a quivering Sylvie, and the source of the all-too-familiar speckled pair of eyes.

The cat took in a deep breath and released it slowly.

Did it just sigh at me?

As I knelt, clutching my bond, the cat I had seen at Windsom's Potions and Elixirs shook its head.

It really was the same cat I had seen. The peculiarly eye-catching creature was sitting in a poised manner, its tail swaying hypnotically as its eyes locked onto mine. As the cat's gaze bored deeper into me, I began feeling like some sort of raw material being appraised by a veteran merchant deciding whether

to buy me or not.

I snapped out of my daze and began looking around for the old man. Just as I opened my mouth to speak, the cat began glowing with a golden-white light that spread over its entire body.

I shut my mouth and waited for the surprises to end. For some reason, I felt like no matter what I did at this point, I couldn't stop whatever was about to happen. It was an instinctual reaction that I just couldn't ignore.

While the aura and demeanor of this cat were heavy and oppressive, I knew it didn't want to hurt me. If it had, I would've been dead already.

The golden-white light began to change its shape and enlarge, morphing from the form of a cat to that of a human. Then, as if made of glass, the sparkling human-shaped glow shattered into fragments of light, revealing someone I didn't recognize.

"Greetings. I go by Windsom," the man sniffed deprecatingly.

The man who had transformed from a cat spoke with an elegance that matched his appearance. On top of his sculpted face was a bed of short platinum blond hair, neatly swept to the side. His deep-set eyes, which had not changed appearance from when he was a cat, almost touched his brows, which appeared to be permanently furrowed. There was a sense of nobility in his gaze as he continued to stare at me.

He was neither burly nor muscular, but his square shoulders—underneath a military-like uniform he'd conjured after transforming—told me he was a warrior, a fighter like myself.

His thin lips tightened and he let out another sigh of disapproval through his sharp nose. Peering down at Sylvie and me, he announced matter-of-factly, "I felt this form would be more appropriate for our conversation."

I opened my mouth to say something, but I held back. If he was Windsom, then who was the old man who'd stolen my money? I had originally thought he was the owner of the elixir store—was that just my own incorrect assumption? And if so, who was the old man—Windsom's attendant?

Composing myself, I set Sylvie down and stood up.

I dusted off my clothes and responded, "Before we continue, I'd like to confirm a few things."

Windsom tilted his head to the side, thrown off by my sudden sharp and decisive tone.

"Since you lured me here for a reason—with Tessia as bait—is it safe to assume she's all right?" I asked, taking the glittering marble ball from my dimension ring.

After a slight pause, he replied, nodding. "Yes, the elf princess is fine. I had already taken precautionary measures before you made your way here. She should be recuperating nicely with her grandfather back in Zestier. That, on the other hand"—Windsom pointed at the marble resting on my palm—"is for you to keep."

It was my turn to be surprised.

"For me?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you know how hard it is to acquire an elixir pearl of that quality? I had not anticipated you using it on the elf princess. In fact, it was too strong for her, which was why I had to use yet another precious elixir to keep her body from... well, exploding." He let out another deep breath and regarded me with the arrogance of a noble discussing politics with an ignorant bumpkin.

"Excuse me? Exploding?" I sputtered.

Taking a couple of steps toward me, he interrupted, "Well, without it, she would've been dead by now, so I suppose it wasn't a complete waste. Still, don't give that one away—take the time to absorb the elixir pearl with your bond."

Sylvie tilted her head in confusion, looking at the marble in my hand. Her shivering had stopped after Windsom controlled the pressure he was releasing.

I shook my head. "Shouldn't it be common courtesy to tell me exactly what is

going on? Who or what exactly are you? Why did you bring me here?"

"Patience really isn't a strong suit of yours, is it? Very well, if I were to introduce myself in a way you could comprehend, it would sound a little something like this: I come from the land of asuras, and am what you lesser races call a 'deity." Windsom's eyes remain unwavering as he spoke.

"Deity? *The* deities that supposedly blessed the three races with artifacts that allowed them to eventually use magic?"

"Yes, yes," he said, nodding impatiently. "Keep in mind that what I'm about to tell you dates back centuries, and any form of records or accounts that may have existed were destroyed, though few were ever written in the first place. It is in our best interest to keep it this way.

"The knowledge you have is only what the former elf king shared with you— a deity blessing the three races with a set of artifacts that allowed later generations to learn what you now call 'magic.' But that was just the outcome of what happened prior—something no one on this land knows about," Windsom continued. His back was ramrod straight as he spoke, as if he were lecturing a class.

I stayed silent, waiting for him to continue.

"As you have recently discovered, there exists another continent in this world. The two bodies of land which make up the two ends of this world have always been protected and watched over by us. We asuras are and have been governed by a doctrine—a *noblesse oblige* of sorts, to put it simply—since the beginning of our existence. We are not to lay a hand on the lesser races inhabiting the land below; we must be sure to act only in times when the two continents fall out of balance or if either of them is on the brink of extinction." He sighed and turned his back toward us. "That is, until we found out this sacred rule had been broken.

"I can imagine the multitude of questions you must have, but the information I'm sharing with you is all you will need to know at this point. We have time, but not much of it, and telling you too much now will only distract you."

Not much time? It will only distract me?

These words only flooded my mind with even more questions, but I took a deep breath and signaled for him to carry on. Sylvie, meanwhile, kept looking back and forth between the two of us in confusion.

He gave a nod and continued. "Despite how you may refer to us—as deities—we are far from gods. That is, we're far closer to you than you think. Much of the economy in both Dicathen and Alacrya originally mimicked the systems of my land—Epheotus, the land of asuras."

Epheotus and Alacrya...

"Of course, while Epheotus isn't nearly as large as either of the surface continents, there are many similarities between them, specifically in how the society works. Epheotus, too, was once divided into three factions, each made up of multiple clans. Boiling it down quite a bit, the ruling clan of each faction had their own priorities, and the other clans followed the faction whose ideals aligned most closely with their own. Though the details may have been different, each clan of asuras still held to the paramount creed that we were not to raise a hand against the lesser races. However, after Agrona came into power as leader of the Vritra Clan, things quickly changed."

The name Vritra rang in my mind like thunder. So Vritra wasn't the name of the black-horned demon, but the name of its clan?

"What was this Agrona like, and what happened to the Vritra Clan?" I leaned forward in anticipation.

Windsom paused for a moment, as if to gather his thoughts. "The Vritra Clan had always been an anomaly. It's simplest to imagine them as scientists of sorts. While their innate magic is unique and versatile, it was never as powerful as the other clans' mana arts. However, with their genius minds and insatiable curiosity, they were always one of the most influential clans."

"If they'd always been one of the stronger clans, how come things changed so much when the Vritra Clan came into power?" I queried.

"A clan being strong and a clan becoming a leader of a faction are two

different things," he clarified. "Again, think of the Vritra Clan as scientists, as researchers. The clan had very little interest in anything other than gaining knowledge and insight on utilizing mana. Like people living in an ivory tower, they were secluded knowledge-seekers, pursuing only what they could not yet comprehend. The previous head of the clan was even more fervent in his quest to overcome the impossible. However, Agrona, he was different. He was charismatic and intelligent, but also arrogant and power-hungry. He believed that the asuras had never been meant to watch over the lesser races, but rather to rule over them as their gods."

Windsom's face tensed as he continued speaking. "After Agrona began leading the Vritra Clan, however, their strength increased abruptly—and unnaturally. No one could figure out how Agrona had advanced the Vritra Clan's mana power in such a short time. Eventually, through their rise in power, they were able to rally more clans to share his ideals, and the Vritra Clan soon led a faction on par with either of the other two factions.

"It was only later that we learned that Agrona and a few other of the Vritra Clan had secretly been making trips to the continent of Alacrya. While it wasn't forbidden for us to go down to Dicathen or Alacrya, as long as we concealed ourselves, their movements and behaviors were extremely suspicious. After the other two factions found out about this, they sent out scouts to figure out what the Vritra were up to." I could see Windsom's knuckles whiten as he clenched his fists.

"Agrona and the Vritra Clan had been torturing the lesser races, experimenting on their bodies to find different ways to enhance their own abilities."

Scenes from my past flashed through my mind at this. The various dungeons becoming corrupted, the traces of the black-horned demons that kept appearing—it all clicked together at Windsom's last statement.

"To be brutally honest, this information was enlightening and all, but what does this have to do with me? Why tell me all this? I can't imagine what

could make a deity—or asura or whatever you are—single me out to reveal something as important as this."

"You're right. Aside from your own abilities, which are barely noteworthy by our standards, there really shouldn't be a reason to tell you this. The only reason I do so is because of your ties to us," he answered, pointing down. "Kyu?"

I subconsciously stepped in front of Sylvie to protect her.

"We've been searching for Lady Sylvia for years with no success, and when we finally find traces of her mana, it leads us to a little boy with her exact mana signature. Even more shocking, he holds in his hands a deity. Arthur, you are currently bonded with the child of my master's only daughter, and the granddaughter of the most powerful individual in the leading faction of Epheotus."

### **LINEAGE**

THE FACT that this was all somehow connected to Sylvia didn't surprise me. If anything, it just confirmed everything I had presumed until now.

But... Lady Sylvia...

The daughter of the most powerful individual in a land of deities...

Even with my status as a king in my previous life, a figure of such stature would be someone I could only kneel down in submission to.

A dry lump caught in my throat as I stared down at my bond. Of course, the possibility of Sylvie being the actual child of Sylvia had always been there, but due to the circumstances—that is, her being chased by the black-horned demons, the Vritra Clan—I had never been able to confirm it. The fact that Sylvie's appearance was vastly different from her mother's also didn't help.

Grandpa Virion's voice suddenly popped into my mind. He was the one who had confirmed that Sylvie was a dragon. I thought back over what he'd told me and what I'd read; while I knew dragons were extraordinarily rare and powerful, nothing had mentioned them being higher beings, let alone asuras.

"So, the dragons that were written about in past texts—they were actually deities?" I inquired.

Windsom faced me, letting out an impatient sigh. "No. While there are lesser races that have descended from the asuras, it is rather offensive to compare us. I will put aside the biology lesson for another time, but there are general facts you do need to know. While there are special exceptions due to innate

differences in each clan, in most cases, deities have three main forms. The humanoid form that I am in currently, a draconic form which is most likely the form that Lady Sylvia had used to pass down her will to you, and a third form which integrates both humanoid and draconic aspects."

"Then you're saying that Sylvie has a human form?" I pointed a finger at my bond in disbelief.

"Yes, but Lady Sylvia must have cast a seal on her own daughter, because the mana signature that she is producing is nothing like what it should be. Arthur, how did you come to meet her?"

"Before Sylvia was killed—well, taken away by the black-horned demons—she gave me a stone that turned out to be, apparently, an egg." Explaining this brought back some unpleasant memories.

"Black-horned demons?" Windsom tilted his head.

"It's how I describe them because of their appearance. From what you told me just now, though, they seem to be what you call the Vritra Clan."

"Indeed, the Vritra Clan is known for their prominent onyx horns. While this was one of the most probable outcomes, it also means that there is very little hope that she is alive. Arthur, Lady Sylvia undoubtedly put a seal on her child in hopes that the Vritra Clan would not be able to find her." For once, there was a twinge of emotion on Windsom's face that wasn't annoyance. I could see sadness glaze his eyes as he took a moment to gather himself.

"Does that mean deities are usually born in a humanoid form?" I asked.

"Yes. Our draconic form uses up a lot of mana, so we spend most of our time in our humanoid form. However, just as I can shift into the form of a smaller animal, Lady Sylvia's daughter seems to be in that form to conserve energy."

"You keep referring to her as Lady Sylvia's daughter," I pointed out, "but she has a name. It's Sylvie. I named her after Sylvia. Is it possible for Sylvie to turn into her humanoid form now?"

Windsom merely shook his head before responding. "Most likely not. The humanoid form is the most natural for us, so if Lady Sylvia's—if Lady Sylvie

were able to transform into this form, she would've done so already."

There was a torrent of questions flooding my mind now that I knew for a fact that Sylvie was an asura. Imagining her in a human form was hard enough, but what did it mean for us, since we were bonded? Did asuras bond to each other in Epheotus? Although Sylvie was the one who had initiated the bond, it wasn't something I could imagine doing with someone who looked like a human.

I knew Windsom would say something along the lines of, 'I'll only tell you what is necessary for you to know right now,' so I pushed those thoughts aside and pressed on.

"Since Sylvia, as the daughter of a very important figure to you deities, gave her will to me, that makes me automatically involved in the upcoming fight that you guys are most likely going to have with the Vritra Clan and Co., right? And the fact that Sylvie, the granddaughter of the so-called very important figure, is bonded to me raises another question: Are you planning on taking her back to Epheotus?" My eyes narrowed as I tried to read Windsom's expression.

"Yes. Dumbing it down quite a bit, that is the essence of what I explained to you. You may or may not have figured out just how mysterious and strong Lady Sylvia's powers are. Even if you were able to unlock some of the mana arts that only she could use, I doubt you were able to tap into a fraction of her true abilities. Arthur, even asuras would drool in greed at the thought of receiving Lady Sylvia's powers. Even she wasn't able to fully control them, but her powers had—have the potential to outstrip her father's." There was a look of longing and respect in the asura's eyes as he explained all this.

"As for taking Lady Sylvie back to Epheotus, while that was indeed our immediate preference, we have decided on a different route. Arthur, we will be entering into war with the Fallen Clans—the forces led by Agrona and his Vritra Clan—soon. During the last war, both sides sustained immense casualties and had no choice but to settle for a truce. Agrona agreed not to

touch Dicathen, but in return, we had to give up the continent of Alacrya to him.

"While our forces may be stronger in terms of raw power, there are too many unpredictable factors regarding the Vritra, considering the experiments they have had time to carry out during this period. The truce is faltering as the Fallen Clans continue to grow their troops. We have already found signs of Agrona's spies on this continent. While the upper echelons of Epheotus would never verbally admit it, we need help, and your future potential can play a crucial role in this. As long as you agree to be our ally, Arthur Leywin, there will be no need to separate you from Lady Sylvie."

Even though Windsom was asking me for a favor, the way he looked me dead in the eye made me feel like he was presenting me a role of the highest honor.

He had me. There really wasn't much of an option for me. If I turned him down, he would forcefully take Sylvie away and Dicathen would still most likely end up becoming war-torn. My family and friends would be in danger whether or not I allied myself with the asuras.

He was basically implying that I was going to be involved in this war one way or another. My only choice was how directly I wanted to fight against our mutual enemies.

"Since this war involves the entirety of the continent anyway, I would be an ally to you whether or not I agree today. Rather, what you are asking is if I will be a pawn under your control."

"I can't disagree with your statement. You're wise for your age, Arthur," Windsom smirked. "I take it by your answer that you agree to our proposal. This war will change the entire balance of this world. If Agrona and his forces are able to take over this continent as well as all its resources, there will come a time when even Epheotus will be in danger. That being said, we will need to prepare you. Your mana core is rather well-developed for your age, which is a good sign. But training you will have to come after you're

able to at least reach the white stage. With the resources we will provide and your comprehension skills, I can't imagine it will take too long. After that, we will need to take both you and Lady Sylvie to Epheotus to train under the most optimal cond—"

"Hold on, I'm going to Epheotus? Your home? The land of asuras?" I nearly shouted, flabbergasted.

"Of course. Do you think my master will stand idly by now, knowing he has a granddaughter? Arthur, you are the last one to have seen Lady Sylvia. On top of that, she has passed her mana signature on to you. You may not realize what that means but to us asuras, it would be like pulling out your own mana core and giving it away. If she was forced into a state where she had no choice but to do this, we must assume she has passed away."

I didn't answer.

"There isn't much I can help you with directly for now, except provide you with some resources to strengthen your mana core. During this time, I also have things to investigate and prepare for. I will continue to drop by from time to time and check up on you—though whether or not I let you know I'm there will be at my discretion."

"Okay, since it seems this meeting is coming to a close, can I just ask you one thing?" I held my hand out to stop him.

"Yes, you may."

"How come it took so long for you to find me? If her mana signature basically transferred onto mine, wouldn't either you or the Vritra Clan have pinpointed me pretty easily?"

"Because of that." Windsom pointed at my arm. "When she first passed on her will, or mana signature, to you, it didn't show right away. You probably went through a phase where you had to get your body accustomed to it, right?"

I just nodded at this.

"I'm not sure how long afterward her daughter was released from her seal,

but when your body adapted and you put one of Lady Sylvia's feathers around your bond insignia, it hid the presence of her will. I'm not sure what made you think to cover the mark with her feather—"

"It was to hide the insignia mark," I immediately replied.

"Nevertheless, you did well." Windsom shook his head. "Now let me take you to where you were actually going. I'm sure I don't need to remind you to keep this between us, do I?"

I felt the power radiating from him once again, strong enough to take my breath away. I shook my head, unable to speak, and Sylvie and I wordlessly followed the asura as the room we were in began distorting once more.

## **WINDSOM**

I let out a strained breath as I watched the child and his bond go through the gate.

Each time I saw her, a mixture of emotions boiled up inside of me, making it difficult to stay calm. I wondered how Master would feel when he saw her. I could imagine how conflicted he might feel, seeing the child of his precious daughter and the man who had done that to her...

There would come a time when we would have to tell Arthur everything about his bond—about Lady Sylvia's daughter and the lineage she held.

# **ELVEN KINGDOM**

## **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

"Ugh..."

I stumbled coming out of the teleportation gate and pressed my fingers firmly against my temples to keep my head from popping.

Sylvie scampered next to me, happy to be out in the open again.

"Kyu!" She had a big stretch on the grass before looking up at me, signaling that she was ready.

'That man was scary, Papa,' Sylvie's voice rang in my mind.

"Yeah, he didn't really come off as easygoing to me either," I responded.

The place we had landed was a familiar one. It was near the area where Tess had first brought us to get into the Kingdom of Elenoir. Of course, this time, we were going to have to knock on the front gates like most people, but it wasn't too much of a problem to get inside the kingdom now that the three races were more or less in harmony.

Every time I thought of the word 'race' I could hear Windsom saying in his annoyingly serious voice how we were the 'lesser races.'

As much as it irked me, he wasn't wrong. Even I could see the innate differences between him and me, and from what he let on, it didn't seem like he was the strongest of asuras either.

"Well, I guess now you know who your mother is, at least."

"Kyu?" 'Mama? Aren't we going to see Mama right now?'

"No, not that Mama. I mean, Tess isn't your mother! Sheesh!" I exclaimed. Sylvie only tilted her head as she looked at me in confusion before scampering around again, leaving me feeling disoriented.

As we made our way to the front gate, following alongside the outer walls of the kingdom, we passed the occasional carriages and wagons followed by people either guarding them, or transporting the goods inside.

The economy was rapidly changing since the union of the three kingdoms. Opening up borders so that merchants could travel and trade with each other had led to a lot of goods becoming available in all three kingdoms for the first time. Once we reached the entrance into Elenoir, there was a line of people—some riding horses or mana beasts, others in carriages—waiting to go inside. Sylvie hopped on my head as I got to the end of the line beside a group of what looked like mercenaries, most likely trying to sell the raw material they had managed to obtain.

"Ey! Looky at the li'l brat! Why you so far from your mama, li'l boy? You lost?" hooted a rather tall man as he bent down to peer at me. He was thin, almost emaciated, and wearing leather armor too large for him.

"Roger, you're going to make the boy cry with that ugly face of yours." A girl who looked to be in her early twenties jumped off the end of the carriage where she was sitting and pulled Roger back.

"There's nothin' wrong with my face!" Roger lashed out at his female cohort.

"Besides, this brat looks to be some sort of rich noble kid! I betcha if we bring him back to his parents, they'll reward us big time!"

"You haven't said anything. Are you lost, boy?" asked another man, one who looked to be in his early thirties, with a body built like it was meant to wrestle elephants. He pushed aside the drooling Roger, who was staring at me like I was a money bag.

"No, sir, I'm not lost. I have some business here," I replied.

"Business here, my ass! Don't go trying to sound all snooty-tooty. I bet you just ran away from your momma. Duke, let's just grab this twerp and take

him to the Guild Hall." Roger smirked as he slowly made his way toward me. I let out a sigh as I contemplated whether it was worth the effort to shove this bag of bones into the ground.

Sylvie, who was perched on top of my head again, stood up, baring her teeth at the malnourished mercenary.

I couldn't believe these fools were actually thinking of basically kidnapping a child here in the open. My stance remained the same, but I imbued a thin layer of mana around my body just in case.

"Roger, Duke. Leave the boy alone," a hoarse voice came from inside the carriage.

"It's the boss." Roger froze in his tracks with a reluctant expression.

"Tch. Let's head back to the carriage, Roger." Duke gave me one last curious glance before turning his broad back to me.

I just rolled my eyes and stayed in line, keeping an eye on them as they left.

After a moment of reluctance at possibly letting a runaway child into their kingdom, the guards' doubts were erased when I showed them the Xyrus Academy crest. I thought showing the royal family's crest might attract a bit too much attention for my tastes. Before entering, however, the elven guards did give me a stern warning that the use of magic was prohibited in all but the most extreme cases.

I hadn't had time to explore much while I was being trained by Gramps, so seeing all this was new to me. The city we had entered was bustling with an almost chaotic mixture of people from all around the continent, laughing and haggling around different stands and small shops. The elven kingdom of Elenoir was different from the human kingdom of Sapin; the entire kingdom was walled off, and the cities were more like giant districts rather than separate settlements.

The royal family's tree-castle was located in the farthest city of the kingdom, so it took me a couple of hours of traveling via a small transport carriage, to get there.

The driver dropped us off at the border just before the castle, since they wouldn't allow just anyone to go directly inside. A major difference from the last time I had come here was that there were now guards around the perimeter of the castle as well. While I'm sure they'd always had guards and security, they hadn't been so blatantly placed to ward off intruders as they were now—again, most likely an outcome of the kingdom opening its doors to the other races.

"Little boy, I think you're a bit lost," a burly elf warned, holding his hand up for me to stop. He looked at me curiously, then his gaze rested on Sylvie, who was now next to my foot.

"No, I know exactly where I am. If you'd be so kind as to let me through, it'd be much appreciated," I replied. I didn't give the guard a second glance, just pulled out the compass Grandpa Virion had given me—the one with the royal family's crest.

"How do you have this?" The burly guard squinted his eyes in suspicion as the other guards gathered around me.

"I thought it would be obvious that having this compass means a member of the royal family entrusted it to me," I said, letting just a hint of annoyance seep into my voice.

When was the last time I had gotten a smooth passage? From the teleportation portal to the mercenaries, and now this.

"This brat. Is he being sarcastic with us?" another guard growled.

I let out a deep breath. "Just please inform either Princess Tessia or Elder Virion that a boy named Arthur Leywin is here to see them. They'll know who I am." I took a few steps back and leaned against one of the stone statues in front of the manor.

All of a sudden a loud *BOOM!* pierced the air as part of the castle exploded and chunks of the building rained down on us.

"What the hell is—"

The other guards jumped out of the way to avoid the debris, but the one who

had questioned me didn't have enough to time react after turning around.

I heard him grunt as he focused mana into his body, positioning himself between me and a falling piece of the castle wall.

While his attitude was crude, I guess he wasn't a bad person.

With the currents of mana already flowing inside of me, I conjured a gale to circle around us, instantly encasing us in a dome of wind—a Wind Barrier spell.

The debris most likely wouldn't have killed any of the trained guards, but even with mana augmenting their bodies, it wouldn't have been a pretty sight. I kept my spell active, noticing the gaping face of the first guard as his gaze shifted back and forth between me and the wind barrier.

Then a familiar figure jumped backward down from the ledge of the explosion site, landing just next to us.

"Everyone all right down—Ah! Arthur, good to see you again, brat! Sorry for this, but you're going to need to give me a hand." Grandpa Virion returned his focus to the site of the explosion, and I dispersed my spell.

"Gramps, what's going on? Was there an intruder?"

"Bah! You think I'd be having this much trouble if it was just an intruder?" Virion snapped in frustration.

"Then what—"

Another explosion sounded from the site.

"Grandpa! Stop this thing! I can't control it!"

In the giant hole in the mansion, Tess appeared, surrounded by dozens of emerald green tendrils made of mana.

Of course.

I cursed under my breath. My first thought was to blame Windsom; he was supposed to have cured her of the beast will that was trying to take over her body. When I paid attention, however, since Tess was still conscious and quite rowdy, I deduced that she probably couldn't control the mana she released even while awake and aware.

"That aura is pretty frightening. Those tentacle-like vines protect Tess as well as attacking anything within range. Even if I try cutting them, more tendrils take their place. I'll support you from the back, boy. Try to reach Tess. My techniques aren't really useful for anything other than assassinating, and right now, we need a way to overpower this aura."

I gave Virion an affirming nod and took a step forward, concentrating more mana around me.

"Elder Virion. We can assist as well! Please instruct us on—"

"No! You would be useless against her. Just clear the area and make sure no one comes near." Grandpa Virion waved his hand without turning back.

I took a peek at the baffled guards. When I'd checked their mana core levels earlier, they had seemed to be around the solid to light orange stage, which would be considered top tier at their ages.

"But Elder, the child is—"

"Go. Now! I don't have time for this," Grandpa Virion growled.

The elite guards, who had probably never been called useless in their lives, muttered in confusion and looked at me like some strange and potentially dangerous mana beast before clearing the way.

"You know, Gramps, they probably still could've helped."

"The fewer people who know about my granddaughter's powers, the better. At least at this point. Now focus, brat," he breathed, keeping his gaze on Tess.

"Aye aye, sir," I smirked.

"Let's go!"

At Grandpa Virion's signal, we made a break for Tessia, who was on the edge of the mansion.

I augmented my legs with wind-attribute mana and waited until a condensed gale formed underneath my feet before launching off from the ground.

Even though Tess's back was to us, the tendrils responded as soon as we got close. Immediately, the erratically swaying vines straightened up and shot at

us.

"Keep going! I'll cover you!" Grandpa Virion shouted from behind me.

Although I couldn't see him, it was obvious just by the change in his voice that Grandpa Virion had initiated the first phase of his beast will.

The two of us hacked our way closer and closer to Tess, who was struggling to gain control over the emerald green aura surrounding her.

I stuck using wind spells, afraid that the aura would conduct any lightning attribute spells. Since we were in a mostly wooded environment, I also held back on any fire spells.

The tendrils dissipated as soon as our wind blades severed them, another batch immediately taking their place.

It wasn't working.

I took a deep breath, relying on Grandpa Virion to cover me for a few seconds.

After finishing my chant, I felt a sizeable drain on my mana, along with a slight tingling sensation coursing throughout my body as I cast Thunderclap Impulse.

The tendrils, which were evidently growing in number, appeared to be overwhelming us in slow motion. I had a moment to take a glance back, and even Grandpa Virion's attacks had slowed down enough that I could see his movements.

I dodged the tendrils, not wanting to waste mana on other spells until I reached Tessia. Every step forward at this point involved me dodging at least five tendrils, until I finally came within arm's length of the troublesome princess.

Grabbing her by the waist, I prepared my final spell.

Tess squealed in surprise. "Arthur?"

Before I had the chance to respond, the tentacles suddenly retracted, gathering around the two of us before flinging us through the hole made by the explosion and away from the mansion. With my Thunderclap Impulse

spell still active, I was able to react in time to grab hold of her before the two of us skyrocketed up into the air.

Tessia's scream echoed loud enough that the whole kingdom could probably hear.

"Hold on tight!"

Locking my arms around her, I surrounded her in a layer of protective mana before casting my next spell—Absolute Zero.

It took a lot longer to cast my spell without using the second phase of my dragon will. I had to fight to maintain my concentration as the layer of frost slowly spread out around us, freezing the tendrils that were trying desperately to separate me from Tess.

"Break!" I roared before aiming a kick at the tendrils, now completely frozen, shattering them into countless shards of shimmering little diamonds.

It had been a gamble to try and freeze the tendrils Tess manifested, and, as expected, my spell wasn't strong enough to completely freeze everything. But I was able to cut the tendrils off from their power source—Tess.

Tess had a glazed look in her eyes as she hung onto my neck, seeming mesmerized by the thousands of ice shards reflecting the amber lights of the city as they fell.

Then our eyes met and Tess immediately blushed. I gave her a playful wink in response.

"Hi there."

# WINDING DOWN

## **TESSIA ERALITH**

Tell me I'm dreaming...

The last thing I remembered was trying to release the first phase of my beast will. Grandpa had been really surprised after he checked my mana core, saying that my body was somehow already fully integrated with the elderwood guardian's beast will.

I didn't really understand why Grandpa had been so surprised, but I remembered Arthur taking a few years to fully integrate with his.

Does this mean I'm catching up to him?

No. We were just kids at that time, but he'd been able to smoothly integrate. Grandpa told me how amazing that was.

It wasn't fair.

Every time Grandpa talked about Arthur, all he had were words of praise. If it had been any other person, I would be jealous.

But it's okay; he's mine anyway.

Well, not yet...

But soon, he will be.

...Hopefully.

Stupid Arthur! I'd wanted to impress him by being able to control the beast will he had given me. So much for that—I had completely failed, and even destroyed part of the castle. Mother and Father weren't going to be too happy

when they saw that.

And then he had shown up...

Arthur just *had* to make his appearance at the worst possible time.

Now he's holding me like some I'm some sort of damsel in distress! I had to admit, begrudgingly, that I was in a sorry state. I couldn't look him in the face. I knew if I did, I'd start blushing.

Don't look, Tess! Don't look! Don't—

But I looked.

"Hi there." Arthur gave me a charming wink of his blue eyes.

I could feel my face burning like an oil-dipped candle, but I couldn't seem to peel my eyes away from his gaze until we landed.

"Sh-shouldn't you put me down now?" I managed to stammer out, giving it my all to keep my voice from cracking.

There was a twinkle in his eyes and he smiled playfully as he put me down. I knew he was enjoying my embarrassment.

*Ugh*...

"Are you okay, Tess?" Grandpa caught up to Arthur and me. He was sweating and had minor injuries from where my beast will's aura had hit him, but otherwise, thankfully, he looked fine.

"Yes, Grandpa. Sorry for causing this mess." I lowered my gaze and noticed that Arthur's right leg was bleeding through his pants.

Oh no! He's hurt! I really messed up this time...

Before I even had the chance to apologize, a stinging pain suddenly struck, just above my brows.

"Oww! Wha—" I stared wide-eyed at Arthur, who had just flicked my forehead.

"I'm just glad our troublesome princess isn't hurt. Right, Gramps?" Arthur said comfortingly.

Even though he was teasing me, his worried gaze made me feel warm inside.

"Yes, my troublesome little granddaughter is fine. That's all that matters.

Who cares if she destroyed half of a historic mansion that's been in our family for generations," Grandpa smirked.

I felt like I'd shrunk to half my size from embarrassment, as both my grandfather and Arthur broke out into laughter.

# **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

It took a while for Tess to be able to look me in the eye after I'd set her down. As soon as Gramps called the guards back, we left the manor under their careful watch. While the royal family's mansion was still standing strong—aside from the gaping hole in the corner—Virion arranged for us to be taken to an inn for security reasons. It would be easier for the guards to keep an eye out for any potential harm.

"I should let my son know about what happened in case he and Merial come back early from the meeting. They'll probably assume the worst." Gramps let out a deep sigh and rubbed his temples. We were sitting on a leather couch in a private lounge on the first floor of the Spiral Ivy Inn.

I couldn't lie: It was an enjoyable sight inside. Since it was just around dinner time, the inn was filled with indistinguishable babble and the clatter of plates and utensils. Once the patrons saw us, though, it was as if someone had muted the entire inn. The employees and customers dropped everything, including their jaws, and stared at us with baffled faces. They seemed stunned to witness the former king of Elenoir appear, disheveled, with his granddaughter and an unknown human child.

Fortunately, the inn manager quickly raced out and beat back all the nearby elves and merchants who were courageous enough to begin thronging around us. Then he escorted us to the VIP lounge. Tess sank down on the couch and almost immediately dozed off.

"I must apologize for this, Elder Virion. We weren't expecting a visit from someone of your status or we would surely have made accommodations." The manager's posture was subservient, his head somewhat lowered and one hand cupping the other. "May I ask what brings you to our humble inn?" he

continued.

"The manor is a bit... messy at the moment. We're fine here for now; just prepare a room for us to stay." Gramps waved the manager away. You could almost see a tail fiercely wagging as the ever-attentive manager nodded at Virion's instructions, like a puppy that had just gotten a treat from its master. I got myself settled on the couch facing Virion's and laid Sylvie down. She had fallen asleep and had been quietly snoring in my arms well before we'd arrived. "So what happened back there, Gramps?"

"You won't believe this, brat. I examined her mana core the other day and guess what—her body was already fully integrated with the elderwood guardian's beast will!" Virion leaned forward. The excitement in his sharp eyes contrasted with his voice; he spoke softly so as not to wake Tess up.

"You can't be serious. How can her body be fully integrated with an S-class beast—" I stopped mid-sentence, remembering what Windsom had said. Were the orbs he had given Tess responsible for this unprecedented phenomenon?

"What's wrong?" Virion raised a brow.

"No, it's nothing. I was just thinking. Gramps, is that why Tess tried to release the first phase of her beast will?"

Virion laughed wryly at this, scratching his cleanly-shaven chin. "We both got a little ahead of ourselves, thinking that Tess would be able to control her powers because her body was already integrated."

While integration between the beast will and the host was essential for the host's body to fully adapt to a mana beast's will—especially if the beast was at a higher stage than the host—it was also a training process of sorts. Through the integration process, you became accustomed to how the beast will might affect your body and how you could control its powers, even if it was just a little bit.

Tessia had been able to skip this long and arduous process—though that may not have been the best thing, as it had prevented her from learning what effect the beast will could have on her when released.

"It's fine now that everything has been settled, but Tess needs to be more careful when using her beast will. It could be dangerous for her and everyone around her if things escalate like they did today." I sank back into my seat, taking a long look at the sleeping princess.

Virion grunted. "I was thinking the same thing. Maybe it would be best to get a seal to suppress her mana until she's able to better control her beast will. But I worry that she won't be able to protect herself while her seal is on—it's a shame there's no specific seal for beast wills. And even if it was removable, she would be practically defenseless without mana protecting her for any period of time," Virion said with a sigh.

"You could always give her some sort of protective artifact. And if that's not enough to give you peace of mind, I'll be there too, Gramps. I won't let anything happen to your precious granddaughter."

"Oh, I'm sure you'd protect Tessia even if she wasn't my granddaughter." He shot me a teasing wink.

We talked a bit more about the potential powers Tessia's beast will might have, until we were both too tired to continue. Tessia stirred awake every now and then, but Sylvie was so deeply asleep that the only indication my bond was still alive was the rhythmic expanding and contracting of her belly. The innkeeper came to escort us to our rooms, and we found ourselves in a luxurious suite on the uppermost level of the inn, with more than enough bedrooms for us. The rooms were lavishly decorated with ornaments and trinkets, and the walls were intricately laid out with vines, giving the place a

Virion got Tess settled in one of the rooms, then returned to the living room and poured himself a drink from a decanter that had been set out on the table —some sort of liquor, I assumed.

After wishing him a good night, I headed to my room and tossed Sylvie onto the bed. She kept sleeping, unfazed, while I changed into the loose silk robe

very fairy-like ambience.

hung on a hook behind the door. I took a deep breath and let my mind run through the day's events. After the intense happenings recently, I finally had some time to consolidate my thoughts. I indulged myself in something I too often forgot to do since I'd been born again into this world: I began to strategize.

When I wasn't training and working on improving my strength, I was constantly coming up with different methods of handling my problems. It was essential to have a backup plan in case things went wrong, and another backup for when Plan B also went horribly awry. I hated to admit it, but there were times I caught myself regressing in the way I handled things. As the world around me became some sort of exaggerated fairy tale, my mindset also turned into that of an immature, shallow, child-like protagonist.

Streams of if-then scenarios played out in my mind as I thought back to what I had discussed with Windsom. If things were really happening as the asura claimed, then I needed to prepare in advance. Training my mana core would be the easy part. I was more worried about what I'd have to leave behind—at least temporarily—while I started training.

Before I left, I'd have to make sure that my family—and Elijah, Tess, and Grandpa Virion—would all be protected enough that when the war started, they would be relatively safe even if I was not there.

I thought about my sister, Eleanor. She was still making progress toward her awakening, but it would still be a year or two before she'd be able to start learning magic. She and Mother had the protective charms I gave them, but they were just for that one, life-threatening situation. The charm wouldn't save her repeatedly.

I ran through different options and finally an idea dawned on me. It might be beneficial at this point to find a bond for Ellie, but it couldn't just be any bond or there wouldn't be any meaning to it. The mana beast needed to be strong enough and protective enough that it could protect my sister's life... and maybe occasionally discourage any weak-willed boys audacious enough

to try and woo her.

My lip curled up as I began picturing it. The more I thought about it, the more I came to like the idea.

It's normal for a caring brother to get his younger sister a pet that could potentially maul anyone that gets within three feet of her... right?

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### A WILL'S UNWILLINGNESS

TESS DIDN'T WAKE up until well into the afternoon of the next day. Virion had left in the morning to deal with the damage to their home, and left a note on the other side of my door telling me to take care of Tess until he got things sorted out. It might have sounded serious if not for the winking face he drew at the bottom of the note. I wondered what was going on inside his crooked head.

"Grandpa?"

I was meditating on the living room floor, Sylvie sleeping on my lap, when Tess came out rubbing her half-opened eyes, bedhead ablaze.

"A-Art? Where's Grandpa?" Flustered at the realization I wasn't Virion, Tess quickly turned around, frantically patting down her hair.

"Good morning—or rather, good afternoon." Smiling, I got up and handed her a glass of water. "Your grandfather went back to your house this morning to get everything sorted out."

"Oh. Maybe I should go too. I'm the one who's responsible for all this, after all."

"There's nothing either one of us could do. Don't worry too much for now. Virion and your parents will probably be back here later tonight. We'll go back to my house in Xyrus after making sure everything is okay, since we have school tomorrow," I explained.

"Still, there must be something I could help out—wait, what? I'm going to

your house?" She'd had her hands glued to the side of her head, but now she reeled back in surprise, flinging her hands out and unleashing her bedhead in all its glory.

"Yup. Virion asked me yesterday. It'll be easier that way, and probably more comfortable than staying at this inn."

"I think my heart would be a lot more comfortable staying here."

"Well, none of your family will be able to be here with you, so I'm sure Virion would feel a lot more reassured if you stayed with my family until we get to the dorms," I rebutted.

She remained quiet for a moment before timidly nodding in consent. Even with her hair reminding me of an unkempt lion's mane, she was still somehow cute.

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. "Pardon me, but your complimentary breakfast has arrived."

"Kyu!"

Sylvie woke up and bolted toward the door. She waited impatiently while the innkeeper brought in a cart full of food, then settled in to eat.

After finishing her breakfast, the princess sat down next to me on the living room floor where I was training. She petted Sylvie, who made herself comfortable on Tess's lap.

"So cute," Tess cooed as she rubbed my formidable draconic asura's belly.

"Tess, what did it feel like when you activated the first phase of your beast will?" I asked.

"Umm, it felt like a sudden surge of power spilled out and surrounded me. Then, all of a sudden, I couldn't really move my body," Tess explained. "It felt like I was trapped in someone else's body, but I wasn't really scared, for some reason."

"Mmm." I nodded.

The beast will wouldn't attack its host, so it made sense that Tess hadn't been afraid. It didn't make sense, though, for the beast will to have such a strong

sense of defiance. Even if she had skipped the integration stage, Tess's body had still fully fused with the beast will. The will might be difficult to control and to use properly, but it shouldn't have gotten so far out of hand. Ironic as it sounded, it seemed the beast will had its own... well, had its own will.

I kneeled down in front of her and said, "I want you to rouse the elderwood guardian's beast will."

"What? Is that safe?" Tess looked at me, her eyes widening.

"It should be; you're not going to initiate the first phase. Just get a sense for the beast will inside of your mana core, and let it stream out into the rest of your body. That way, I'll be able to sense more clearly what's going on." I scooted in until I was an arm's length from Tess, making her shuffle away.

Wasn't it she who had so boldly initiated a kiss last time? Why was she being so shy now?

"I'm going to have to place my hand on your abdomen, Tess. Don't move," I sighed, inching closer.

"You make it sound like touching a girl's belly isn't anything serious," Tess frowned.

"It's not if it's for the sake of training."

She gave me an unreadable look but didn't scoot away when I shuffled close enough to touch her.

As she began meditating, I placed the palm of my hand on her abdomen. I closed my eyes and began examining her mana core. Soon enough, as Tess began to release the innate mana from the beast will, a stream of emerald-green particles of mana flooded over the golden-gray specks of wood- and wind-attribute mana circulating inside her body.

Tess had a strained look on her face and beads of sweat rolled down her cheeks. Small sparks of mana began bursting out of her body, and I could tell she was doing her best not to release the beast will's power—which clearly wanted to break loose.

"Tessia, it's okay. Stop now!" I urged.

As the princess began trying to recall the beast will back into her mana core, she began convulsing. I put my hand back to her stomach to try and sense what was going on inside of her body.

I was shocked.

The elderwood guardian's beast will, which occupied Tess's mana core and was integrated with the rest of her body, was fighting back, trying to take control over the rest of Tess's innate mana.

What was going on? How could the beast will go against the host's will like this? This was different from Tess actually manifesting the first phase of her beast will and having that get out of control. The beast will's mana particles were still inside her body.

A rather crude comparison popped into my mind. People of this world didn't really suffer from this, but in my old world, non-practitioners who couldn't reinforce their body with ki suffered from diseases and illnesses. While there were horrible diseases that aged the body twice as fast as normal or burned the organs from the inside, the scariest disease had probably been the Drackins virus. This virus spread through the nerves and made the victim lose control of their limbs and, eventually, their mind. The virus couldn't infect practitioners so it was contained fairly quickly, but even so, the epidemic had lasted a year and caused over three hundred thousand fatalities.

The phenomenon Tess was experiencing seemed akin to that virus. Similar to how the Drackins virus affected its victims, the beast will's mana particles were weakening the mana formed by her own mana core. This was vastly different from normal beast wills that integrated and reinforced the host's body. On the bright side, it didn't seem to be taking over Tess's body and mind at this stage, but it was still eerily comparable.

As the internal battle between Tess's innate mana and her beast will ensued, I could sense the mana levels in her core slowly dwindling. The beast will was clearly less rampant than it had been when we were at the training grounds back in Xyrus Academy; whether or not that was due to Windsom's help, I

couldn't be sure. However, I doubt even Windsom had predicted that the elderwood guardian's beast will I had acquired would be such an unpredictable outlier.

As Tess continued to fight, trying to contain the beast will—which wasn't even fully released—I gathered some mana into her body as well. I made sure to incorporate all four elemental attributes so it wouldn't be rejected before transferring it directly to her mana core. While I didn't give Tess as much mana as I'd given Prince Curtis down in the dungeon, I still felt a tangible drain from my core.

Meanwhile, Sylvie circled warily around us, knowing something was wrong. She tilted her head and peeked around me, trying to get a better view of what was going on, until Tess collapsed on her back, her chest rising and falling from her shortness of breath.

"Well, that didn't go quite as planned," I huffed, leaning back on my arms.

"Tell—tell me about it. I don't get what's wrong, though. It feels like I'm holding onto a gate, trying to keep some sort of rabid monster caged inside from breaking free."

I gave a wry laugh at the accuracy of the metaphor. Tess's mana core was quite literally serving as the "cage" that kept the rabid beast will from getting loose.

With a pile of questions still unanswered, we decided not to disturb the elderwood guardian's beast will for the time being. We were either going to have to find an unconventional way for her to gain control over this power, or make her stronger in order to properly keep the beast will in check.

Grandpa Virion, along with Tessia's parents, Alduin and Merial Eralith, arrived at the inn later in the evening. Needless to say, the former king and queen of the elves were relieved to see for themselves that their daughter was safe.

The five of us—and Sylvie, who was curled up on my lap—situated ourselves on the couches before approaching the topic of what was to come.

We briefly discussed what exactly had happened at the castle, but when Tess tried to chime in, Virion cut her off and explained in her stead. Gramps downplayed the whole thing, saying that part of the explosion was actually his fault and that he had been trying to test the limits of Tess's beast will. I was perplexed as to why he might have been hiding the truth, but when our eyes met, his gaze told me that he would explain later.

Finally it was decided that while Eralith Castle was being rebuilt, the family, minus Tess, would stay with Rinia.

Now there was a name I hadn't heard in a long time. I owed a lot to the granny with the extremely rare gift of foresight. She was the one who had allowed me to make contact with my parents when I'd first arrived at the Kingdom of Elenoir after rescuing Tess.

"Arthur, why don't we go together to Rinia's house before you and Tessia set out for Xyrus? The journey is a bit far since she's moved, but I'm sure she'd appreciate it if you came by and said hello," Merial chimed in. "She is going to be very surprised at how much you've grown."

"I'd like that," I responded with a nostalgic smile.

"Ooh, I haven't seen Grandma Rinia in a long time either." Tess leaned forward, her eyes glittering with excitement at the prospect of a visit to the old seer.

"While you're at it, it would be a good idea to have her get a good read on you," Virion said, shooting me a look. He dropped his eyes and gazed at the ground as he pondered the idea.

Alduin nodded in agreement, saying, "Yes, I think so too. I remember you saying how interested Rinia was in Arthur's future, Father."

And so it was decided that, before leaving for Xyrus early in the afternoon, we'd stop by Grandma Rinia's house—or cottage, to be more precise.

With that settled, our talk turned to the sleeping arrangements. I would be sleeping in the same bed as Grandpa Virion, while Tess and her parents slept in the other room. I was fine with it, but sharing sleeping quarters with the

royal family of the elves would have put anyone else on pins and needles. I still wanted to sleep in the living room, for comfort's sake, but Gramps refused, saying that only through sharing tight quarters could men truly bond. That, and bathing together in the nude, I'd heard.

Elves had some weird customs.

#### A STROLL

#### ARTHUR LEYWIN

As we made our trip to Rinia's cottage, I felt a sense of awe at the perfect spring morning. It was one of those scenes that you couldn't help but appreciate. It was just past dawn and the morning air was still cool and crisp. On both sides of the road, bright morning dew on the moss-covered rocks sparkled in the rays of the sun that peeked through the old trees towering over us.

The carriage we were riding in moved easily over the even, marble-like paths, which had been smoothed by centuries of use. Sylvie was a ball of excitement, and I had to grab her by the tail a couple of times to keep her from jumping out of the carriage to catch the passing butterflies and birds.

"Arthur, I must say, your bond continues to intrigue me." Alduin Eralith raised an amused brow as Sylvie promptly shot out and grabbed a passing bird with her teeth.

"Now, now—leave the boy and his pet alone," Virion chided his son with a wagging finger. "In such a vast and mysterious land as ours, you can't be so surprised at things like this."

"I'd normally agree with you, Grandfather, but Arthur's bond is unique compared to all the other mana beasts I've seen. Even though it's an infant, its gaze twinkles with intelligence." Merial leaned in closer to Sylvie, who was still chewing on the bird she had taken down.

"Don't forget that Sylvie is super cute, too!" Sylvie let out a satisfied belch just as Tess picked her up and hugged her.

Virion howled with laughter. "I can't help but worry that my granddaughter will one day choose her precious bond not by its strength but by its appearance," he cackled, and everyone snickered in agreement—except the princess. Tess started pouting and refused to talk to anyone else, keeping her eyes glued to the window before eventually falling asleep.

The trip was fairly long, even with a mana beast pulling the carriage. Tess and Merial soon fell asleep leaning against each other, Tess's head against her mother's shoulder and Merial's head resting on her daughter's.

Virion had been quiet until Merial and Tessia were both asleep, but then he spoke to me in a hushed voice. "I've told my son this already, Arthur, but we're not headed to any normal cottage. Rinia chose to isolate herself near the edge of the kingdom. She wouldn't tell me why, but last time I chose to make an unannounced visit, I almost died from the traps and defenses she had put up."

I raised a brow at Virion's serious tone. "Why would Elder Rinia need to protect herself to that extent?"

"My guess is as good as yours. I've told her that we're visiting this time, so it should be safe, but I want you to watch out for any signs of danger. The fact that she needed to set up all these precautions means there are people out there she needs to be cautious of."

My mind immediately went to her unique abilities as a deviant. No one but a handful of trusted people should've known about that, though.

I nodded solemnly. "Okay."

Grandpa Virion gave me an approving glance and turned to exchange a few words with his son. Eventually, we lapsed into silence, and before long Gramps also fell asleep, his arms crossed and head bobbing. That left only four of us awake—Sylvie, the driver, Tess's father, and myself.

Sylvie's front paws were against the window of the carriage in hopes of

catching more unlucky birds, and her tail wagged rhythmically. Alduin's aged face looked relaxed and he gazed vacantly at the scenes going by outside the carriage. Each of his wrinkles and creases came, I knew, from the burden of being a king, and now a leading figure of the continent.

"I feel like I've never had the chance to properly thank you," he said, his eyes still focused on the scenery outside.

"For what, sir?" I replied.

"For taking such good care of my daughter. From what she and my father tell me, Tessia made it out of some dangerous situations thanks to you." Alduin turned his head and looked at me for a moment before revealing a weary smile.

"It's nothing, sir. Tessia has helped me several times as well."

"Oh? Like how?" He tilted his head.

I had to think for a second before responding. "In keeping me sane at times."

"Not exactly what I expected a thirteen-year-old boy to say, but for some reason I can't help but see you as an adult." Alduin chuckled before shifting his gaze back outside.

"Your words are kind."

"I somehow feel utterly confident that you will be able to protect my daughter in my and my father's stead."

My eyes narrowed in thought as I tried to interpret his statement, but before I could say anything, Alduin just chuckled again and waved his hand dismissively.

"Don't mind me, Arthur. Just an overprotective father's thoughts running wild. But say—have you ever thought of one day marrying Tess?"

"Sir?" I said, taken aback by the sudden shift in the course of this conversation.

"I mean, sure, she's a bit rough around the edges, and Merial and I may have spoiled her a bit, but she's a good girl."

"I thought elves traditionally dated and married a lot later—"

"Ha! Tradition? Given how fast Dicathen is changing, there's no room for tradition," Alduin scoffed. He then bent forward, leaning his arms on his knees. "Arthur, do you like my daughter?"

There was a lingering silence as I chose my words carefully. Despite his amiable attitude and the casual atmosphere inside the carriage, Alduin was still the acting king of Elenoir. There was no denying that my attitude toward and care for the elven princess were different from anyone else's, but it wasn't possible for me to confidently act on those feelings at this stage. Acknowledging Tessia as a woman rather than a girl would mean breaking down the metaphorical wall that I had built so that the morals of my past life remained somewhat intact.

Locking gazes with Tessia's father, I answered carefully but steadily. "I do, but I also find myself unable to say for certain that I know what 'like' and 'love' actually mean. I hope the answer will come with time, but until then I'd like to improve myself before even thinking of asking for your daughter's hand in marriage."

"Good answer." The king nodded thoughtfully. "You have your head in the right place, despite the lack of years under your belt."

"More so than you when you were his age," a soft voice spoke up from beside Alduin.

"You were awake, dear?" the king asked, looking as if he'd been caught sneaking into the desserts cabinet.

"Just for the last bit of your little 'man talk," Merial said with a smile.

'I knew Papa liked Mama.' Sylvie's voice rang in my head, surprising me.

I turned to Tess, afraid that she might have overheard as well. Fortunately it seemed that, unlike her mother, Tessia was a rather heavy sleeper.

## **TESSIA ERALITH**

He admitted it! I wanted to shout out loud in excitement.

Arthur had finally said it! He said he liked me. Well... he'd said 'I do' after he was asked a direct question, but that was good enough.

Way to go, Dad!

Oh no—keep your eyes shut, Tess, keep your eyes shut. Slow down your breathing.

I wondered if he could hear how fast my heart was beating. *His hearing can't be that good*, I reassured myself. *Right?* 

I was so happy I'd woken up when I did. I hadn't intended to pretend to be asleep, but then I heard Father talking about me. At first I thought he was being cruel, saying I was "rough around the edges." Then he said I was spoiled.

What? I'm not spoiled!

It would have been embarrassing to wake up just then, so I kept my eyes closed. I couldn't have guessed that my father would ask Arthur if he liked me... or that Arthur would actually admit it.

He'd only said that once before, after I'd gotten angry at him. Then he had surprised me when he kissed me all of a sudden.

I could feel a giggle trying to escape. Oh no—don't smile, Tess.

My father's voice saved me. "We're here, Tess. Come on, now, wake up," he said, as he gently shook my shoulder.

"Mmm... We're here already?" I made my voice wispy, trying to sound like I had just woken up.

I couldn't meet Arthur's eyes when he turned his gaze to me, so instead I quickly got out of the carriage and stretched.

"Ahhh! That was a good nap," I said, a little more loudly than I needed to.

Sylvie hopped out of the carriage after me and stretched as well, opening her mouth in an audible yawn before darting her head around to take in her new surroundings.

I looked around too, but I was confused when I didn't see a cottage or any sort of sign that a person lived here. We were surrounded by trees and grass, with thick bushes that blocked any sort of path there might've been.

"Grandpa, are you sure we're in the right place?" I asked as I searched for

anything remotely resembling a house.

"We have to walk a bit further, but it's near here. Let's go." Grandpa took the lead, with Arthur following close behind, Mother next to me, and my father holding the rear.

Sylvie scampered alongside me, her head swiveling around in all different directions, as if she sensed something. It made me a bit nervous.

As we made our way deeper into the forest, we had to maneuver around everincreasing numbers of branches, and push our way through more and more curtains of vines. I wanted to ask if we were really going in the right direction but the determined, serious looks on everyone's faces made me swallow my complaints.

We hesitantly followed behind Arthur and Grandpa. Then, next to me, Mother looked over her shoulder and asked, "Honey, is something wrong? The atmosphere is a bit chilly..." Her voice trailed off.

"Mm? Ah, yes. Everything is fine. Just being cautious, is all." My father seemed to have snapped out of his thoughts at the sound of Mother's words.

"Stop." Arthur put up his hand up abruptly, his other hand gripping the hilt of his sword, which I hadn't even noticed he had until now. Beside him, Grandpa froze, tensing into a fighting stance as Father carefully inched his way forward.

I could hear it now, in the dead silence. A faint rustle of leaves that seemed to be coming closer to us.

Snap.

Grandpa's body whipped toward the direction of the sound.

I instinctively scooted toward Mother for protection. With my mana core unstable because of my beast will, I felt defenseless for the first time in a long while.

My mother was also wary. Both she and Father had their weapons out and at the ready. My mother's thin wand glimmered rose-gold, and my father's favorite saber was already unsheathed.

# Snap!

The sound was a lot closer this time—it seemed to be coming from our right. I unthinkingly glanced at Arthur and found his eyes on me, probably making sure I was all right. Sylvie was right next to him, her white fur standing on end, making her look bigger.

And then we all saw it. The curtain of vines to our right began rustling and a hunched figure stepped out of the shadows of the dense forest.

Everyone was on edge, ready to defend against whatever came out, but before anyone had the chance to move, a clear voice rang from the shadowed figure.

"What are you lot doing out here looking like fools? Come on, you are late!" The shadowy figure finally stepped into a ray of light that peeked through the trees, revealing an all-too-familiar face.

"Grandma Rinia!" I exclaimed in relief.

### A CURSED BLESSING

## **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

Supposedly, Grandma Rinia's cottage wasn't too much farther from where we were. After our brief greetings and a firm hug from the aged elf, we made our way to her dwelling place.

"You've grown into quite the handsome young lad, Arthur. If I were just a hundred years younger, I might've snatched you up for myself," Rinia teased. It should have been disturbing, to say the least, to hear this from a woman who was several decades older than me, but since it came from her, I just grinned back. "Well, I'd have to see how you looked when you were a hundred years younger."

"Hmph. Ask Virion how stunning I was! Men would swarm over me as soon as I was in their sights." Rinia flipped her braided hair over her shoulder.

"It's true, Arthur. My mother often told me how all the girls her age had been jealous of Aunt Rinia," Merial giggled.

"Bah! She was above average at best." Virion waved off the comments.

"Well, of course there was only one girl who ever caught Virion's eye..." Rinia's voice trailed off. By the look on her face, she seemed to regret having brought it up.

I looked around, completely lost. The gloomy forest seemed all the more dismal with the sudden change in the atmosphere. I glanced at Tess; she seemed uncomfortable, but more confused than depressed, like everyone else.

"I'm sorry, Virion. I was a bit insensitive." Rinia placed a hand on Virion's sunken shoulder.

"It's... It's fine. I should be the one who's sorry. I know how you felt as well," he said somberly.

We continued on our way, with only the crunching of fallen leaves and the snapping of twigs filling the silence. I kept my gaze focused on Sylvie, who was having a blast looking for forest life underneath the moss-covered rocks and logs. As I watched her tail wag furiously, I gave a small smile of contentment, despite the sullen atmosphere.

When I sneaked a quick peek at Gramps, my mind started itching with questions that I knew I shouldn't ask. Rinia seemed to see this and gently placed her hand on my shoulder, giving me a strained smile.

We stepped into a small clearing and the roaring sound of running water filled our ears. It was as if the trees surrounding this area had acted as a barrier, blocking off all the sound. We could now see a wide waterfall cascading down a white marble cliff into a small pool about six yards in diameter.

"Wow, I never knew a place like this existed," Tess said, gaping in awe.

"Father, isn't this where you used to take me when I was a child?" Alduin asked, looking around.

"I see you still remember. Yes, you used to love coming to this place." Virion gave a small smile as he reminisced.

"It's beautiful," Merial breathed.

It was beautiful, indeed.

Little sunlight was able to reach this small clearing, making the area seem even more surreal. The few thin rays of light that did peek through the thick treetops created spotlights, making the moss, grass, and all the plant life glimmer. The waterfall streamed smoothly down the white cliff, nothing disrupting the clear curtain of water.

"We're here," Rinia stated as she stepped forward. Wordlessly, we all

followed her.

I half-expected her to conjure a cottage from the ground. It wasn't as fancy as that, though. Instead Rinia raised her hands and chanted a few inaudible phrases, causing roots to lift from underneath the pond and form a makeshift bridge leading into the waterfall.

Stepping carefully on the grimy roots, Rinia took the lead, with us following close behind. She looked around, as if to make sure no one was spying on us. Apparently satisfied, she swept the waterfall to the side with a wave of her arm.

Rinia let out a sharp breath, then placed her hand on the cliff behind the waterfall, which now started to glow with unrecognizable runes.

Just like that, the white marble cliff opened up like a sliding door to reveal a passage deeper inside.

"Don't conjure up any light. We'll make our way through the dark," Rinia instructed, and I got the feeling she was speaking directly to me.

I lost track of how many turns we made, relying on Rinia's voice as our only guide.

"Left. Right. Right. Left."

Finally we could see a flickering light at the end of the umpteenth leg of the tunnel.

"Welcome to my little cottage."

In the sparse light, I could barely make out Rinia's faint smile.

By this time, I had no idea where we were, but the homey little hut—which couldn't have been any bigger than a single room in the Eralith family's castle—was welcoming to my eyes.

"Whew." Tessia sank down, finally able to relax.

"This—this is quite the place, Aunt Rinia." Alduin slid his hand against the wall of the cave sheltering the hut.

"Where are we?" I asked as I inspected our surroundings.

"Somewhere in the elf kingdom," was all she said as she made her way into

her hut.

Lit by a few dimly-shining orbs in the corners of the cave, the place Rinia called home reminded me of a dungeon used to hold the worst sort of criminals, not a place where a close friend of the royal family would reside.

"I'm sure you have your reasons, Aunt Rinia, but was it really necessary to shut yourself in a place like this?" Merial frowned as she eyed the hut Rinia had just entered.

"Just an old lady being overly cautious. Don't mind me. It's actually quite cozy once you get used to it." Rinia popped her head out from behind the sheet covering the hut's doorway.

"Can I see inside too?" Tess had Sylvie wrapped in her arms as she curiously eyed the interior of the hut.

"Of course! Everyone, come inside." Rinia waved us in.

We all looked at each other in doubt, but Virion just herded us all in, saying, "Come now, the place isn't going to eat you up. It's quite roomy inside, despite its appearance. Let's get something to drink. I'm famished."

We settled into the minimally-designed disaster shelter that was Rinia's new home, and I sank into the couch, leaning my head on my hand.

I must've nodded off, and when I woke up, everyone else was also asleep.

I rubbed my eyes and stood up. Rinia was the only one still awake, sipping on something that smelled like an herb tonic.

"They won't be awake for a while, Arthur. Let's have a talk," Rinia said simply, without even looking at me. She gestured for me to sit in the chair across from her as she sipped her tea.

"Well, seeing as how you seem to have drugged everyone but me, I'm guessing this is something only I can know?" My eyes narrowed, but I trusted Rinia. Besides, if she'd wanted to kill us I was sure that, with her powers, she already could've done so.

Without another word, I sat down and leaned back, waiting for the aged elf to speak.

"Despite the circumstances, you're quite composed, Arthur." Rinia's tone seemed to say she had expected this.

"I'm sure if you wanted the worst to happen, it would've happened already." I shrugged.

"Mm."

I was silent and waited for her to speak again.

"A logical assumption." She nodded. "Now, where do I begin?" she sighed.

"Well, let's begin with a small lesson on my powers as a diviner."

My ears perked up at this. Learning about a rare deviant form of magic didn't come often, as textbooks only held a limited amount of information about them.

Noticing the interest on my face, Rinia continued, "As you may know, unlike regular mages—who draw forth power from the mana particles in the atmosphere—deviants have to find their own source of power to fuel their magic."

I nodded.

"For example, your mother, an emitter, has the ability to heal herself and others in a way elemental recovery spells can't compare to."

I nodded at this as well. While limited, all of the basic elements had some form of first aid treatment spells—from healing water and wind to manipulation of herbs, to cauterization with fire and making poultices from earth. All in all, though, these recovery spells were still weak and couldn't compare to the type of healing emitters were capable of.

"Emitters have mana cores which naturally accumulate a special type of mana that is used to power their spells. Throughout my life, I've met quite a few deviants, each with unique properties to their magic. They all have one thing in common, though, which is different from an elemental deviant such as yourself: They each have their own pool of mana, which they use to power their magic." She looked a little distracted as she said this.

"It must be an inconvenience for them to be unable to draw in mana from the

atmosphere," I said.

"It sure is. I've interviewed many deviants, and they all told me how difficult it was to learn even basic elemental spells, since they did not have mana cores that could harness the mana particles in the atmosphere. However, their deviant powers made up for this handicap."

There was a moment of silence in which I could hear only the soft snoring of Sylvie in Tess's arms before Rinia spoke again.

"But for diviners, it's quite different. First of all, our powers can awaken at any point in our lives, as opposed to conventional mages and other deviants who awaken, at the earliest, in their prepubescent stages. Our powers mostly come in erratic bursts. In my case, blurred images of the future flash through my mind quite often. Sometimes they're useful, but most of the time, they are too vague and minute to make anything out of. These little flashes of the future don't expend any mana at all, actually."

I stayed silent, an eerie feeling creeping up on me.

"If you were to sense my mana core, you'd find it's actually quite normal, capable of harnessing and refining the mana particles in the atmosphere. This is why I'm adept at water-attribute magic myself," Rinia stated matter-of-factly. "Doesn't seem like a very useful power if I can't control it, now does it?" she continued.

"Then what about the spell you used to locate my parents and let me speak to them when I was little?" I questioned.

"Ah, that's a nifty little spell I made which involves focusing my unique powers as a diviner into a projected image. You see, Arthur, true divination is reading the future—knowing when and where something is going to happen." I was getting lost. "Then if that is your true power as a diviner, and you said your mana core doesn't power that magic, how do you—"

"With my own longevity," she spat. "We diviners shorten our own lifespans each time we choose to consciously look into the future. *That* is the true power of a diviner. Everything else is just useful little spells that can't be

considered anything more than hat tricks."

I sat there, wide-eyed, not knowing how to respond.

"We were talking earlier about Virion's only love and wife. She was another rare diviner, and was much more powerful than I was. Her unconscious divinations and prophecies would be much longer and more detailed than mine—and much more frequent, at that." Rinia's reminiscing smile faded as she spoke. "Coupled with her physical beauty and graceful temperament, she was the envy of every female elf of our generation. She was the pride of our kingdom, and the citizens idolized her.

"Things were looking perfect—she fell in love with Virion and the two got married in a beautiful ceremony. However, Fate wasn't as kind to her as everyone had thought."

I listened intently, hoping this story wasn't going to go in the direction I assumed it was.

"At this time, the war between the kingdoms of Sapin and Elenoir had begun to die down, and there was talk of a treaty in the air. However, the then-king of Sapin made a last-ditch effort to do as much damage to our kingdom as possible before the treaty was signed. He carried out a plan to eliminate the future heir to the throne."

"You mean—"

"Yes. Virion was the target of an assassination mission carried out by the king of the humans himself." Rinia spoke in almost a whisper. "Virion's wife was repeatedly tormented by visions of his death. Her unconscious prophecies told her little of how Virion would die, and every time she did something to try and change the future, the outcome only led to a different cause of death. Virion knew the toll of his wife using her powers, but she did so anyway behind his back, out of desperation to keep him from his inevitable death.

"Every time I use my powers to look into the future, I can feel the days, weeks, sometimes even months being drained out of my body. I could only

imagine how terrible it must have been for her to repeatedly use this cursed power for the one she loved."

I didn't know what to say. Even if I had been able to think of anything, it would have probably been insensitive, coming from someone who didn't know what it felt like.

Rinia's eyes glistened with the tears she had been holding back.

"In the end, she was able to keep Virion alive long enough for the peace treaty to be signed—but, having burned up so much of her lifespan to protect the man she loved, she died a few months later in his arms, her youthful, beautiful appearance replaced with an aged, sickly elder.

"Even now, it pains me to speak about her, Arthur. I miss her..." She looked up with tears streaming freely down her cheeks.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I miss my sister dearly."

#### THE START

HER WORDS RANG in my ears like a giant gong. They say the people with the widest smiles hide the most pain in their hearts. I shifted my gaze over to the sleeping Virion and remembered all the times he had joked around with his cheeky grin.

I'd had no idea of the pain he had gone through.

I felt like some pubescent teenager who thought the world hated him. I was ignorant of the fact that there were others who might be suffering from deeper pains than mine.

No words left my mouth after Rinia finished speaking. I could only focus on the ever-so-slight trembling of my fingers.

"The reason I bring this up isn't to elicit pity or sorrow from you. I tell you this so you'll realize the gravity of what I'm about to say next." There was a stern conviction in her voice that made me look back up.

Elder Rinia paused, as if readying her heart before she spoke. "I used my powers to intentionally look into your future, Arthur."

After all she had told me, this news weighed on me heavily. "What? Wh-why?" was all I could stammer out. Perhaps sensing my distress, Sylvie sleepily walked toward me and hopped onto my lap. She quickly fell asleep again. Rinia and I wore similar looks of bemusement.

"Seems your bond is immune to the herbs I gave her," Rinia chuckled.

"Yeah, she probably just fell asleep naturally," I replied with a half-grin.

"Well, to continue, even before the day I first met you when you were a child, I had been getting glimpses of your future—but never enough to make sense of it. It was odd to have so many visions of a specific person. That has never happened before." Rinia shifted in her seat.

"As you may already be aware, Arthur, things are changing on this continent. Dicathen is going through a new era. We've already experienced some of it with the unity of the three kingdoms and the unveiling of the Six Lances, but that's just the beginning. Through all the changes that are going to happen, you always seem to be in the center of them somehow, Arthur." The elderly diviner locked eyes with me.

"Then moving to this remote hideout..." I started to say.

She just gave me a slight nod. "With the knowledge I gained from looking into the future—your future—it seems I've made some enemies."

"What exactly is it that you learned from looking into my future?" I asked.

"Here's the tricky part," she sighed. "Telling you too much of what I saw can affect even the outcomes you want. On the other hand, telling you too little defeats the point of me looking into the future to find a better outcome."

"How do you feel though, Rinia? You gave up some of your life in order to see my future... Are you okay?" I said, frowning deeply.

"I'll be fine. I've lived long enough, anyway. I might as well use some of it to help the future." Rinia waved her hand dismissively. "I hate sounding like some old fortune teller, warning the hero to be careful and giving the sort of generic advice he can pick up from anyone, but it pains me to say that I can only do that much." I could tell she was trying to make light of the situation to ease my guilt.

"Arthur..." Rinia's tone became serious, almost foreboding. "You will face many hardships. Whichever future you decide, that will remain constant. You will have enemies and you will have obstructions in your path, but through all of that, what I can tell you is that you need to have an anchor, an end goal. What do you want to accomplish in your life? *That* will be what determines

your path."

This sounded more like a motivational speech than a prophecy, but, as if she had read my mind, Rinia continued.

"Stay grounded, Arthur. I'll leave you with these two things. One: People do bad things for good reasons, so don't just take them for what they do on the surface. Keep your mind sharp. Two: Often, the most dangerous enemy isn't the one on the throne, leading the forces, but the abandoned soldier who has nothing to lose. With that in mind, stay wary and don't be overconfident." Rinia's voice became a soft whisper as she delivered her warning, leaving an uncomfortable silence in the room.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you anything more. Just follow and trust your instincts. You are a particularly sharp fellow and I know you'll make the right choices—but sometimes, the right choice isn't always the best choice."

The talk with Rinia had left me with a rather bad taste in my mouth, as if I had just taken a spoonful of a bitter tonic—helpful and necessary, but bitter nonetheless.

She moved around the room waking everyone up, and I pretended to have been asleep as well. Rinia claimed she had added some herbs for relaxation to the tea, and that they must have been much stronger than she realized. No one seemed to mind, though. Rinia prepared us a light lunch from edible plants and mushrooms; I enjoyed it despite the absence of meat, but Sylvie seemed to disagree, judging by her reaction.

It was late in the afternoon when we finished eating and had to be on our way. Virion and Rinia excused themselves for several minutes to speak in private, but, by the way Gramps had looked at Tess, I could guess the topic of their conversation. When they returned, Rinia quietly gave Tess "a little present," saying only that it was something to "help tame the beast will inside her." Alduin and Merial seemed surprised, but thankful, and didn't ask any questions. I was sure it was the seal Gramps had mentioned earlier, but I

pretended to be distracted by Sylvie, who was sniffing in every corner of the cottage looking for something more palatable than mushrooms.

With that settled, Rinia led us away from her cottage, but we left by a different route than we had arrived. I had been surprised that Rinia's home was in the center of a mountainside cliff, but an even bigger revelation was the fact that, through a secret door and passage, she had her own teleportation gate.

Teleportation gates had been made in ancient times, supposedly with the help of the deities—or asuras, as I now knew them. It wasn't possible to make any more, and those that existed were generally under the stewardship of the three kingdoms; only the very powerful and very wealthy had private teleportation gates. It was a testament to Rinia's powers that she had managed to locate—and activate—one.

After saying our goodbyes, Tess, Sylvie, and I went through the gate. We stepped out, still feeling dizzy after the crossing, and were welcomed back to the edge of Xyrus City by guards pointing their spears at us.

When they saw who we were—teens wearing Xyrus Academy uniforms—they quickly lowered their weapons.

"We apologize. The portal you were coming through read as an unknown gate," one of the guards explained, "so we didn't know who or what would pop out from the other side. It's rare, but there have been times when mana beasts accidentally stumble through a teleportation gate somewhere deep in the Beast Glades." He seemed to be the leader, and he watched us with a studying gaze as he spoke.

"It's fine. We came from one of the other cities of Elenoir. The guard did say he was having troubles with the gate from time to time," I said with a shrug. With an understanding nod, the guards let us go. Since there was no carriage waiting for us, we walked to the nearest stop and found one to take us home. The sun was already setting and I could see the color distortion in the sky—the Aurora Constellate would soon be coming to its peak. It was a lot easier

to see it from the floating city than through the dense trees in Elenoir.

"Wow, the Aurora Constellate really is beautiful, no matter how many times you see it," Tess said in awe.

"Kyu!" 'The sky is colorful!' Sylvie sat at the edge of the carriage, her small head looking up with an appreciative gaze.

When we got back to Helstea Manor, Sylvie scurried up the stairs leading to the door and scratched at it. As Tess and I followed her up, the door opened, revealing someone I hadn't expected to see.

"Jasmine?" I gasped, stopping in my tracks.

"Long time no see," replied my mentor from my adventuring days. The only visible sign that she was happy to see me was the slight wrinkling around her eyes, and perhaps the barest twitch of her lips. To me, she might as well have been grinning ear to ear.

Before I had the chance to say anything more, the rest of the Twin Horns came out, one by one. They each grinned to see me, especially when they noticed I was with a girl.

"You've grown," Durden said, a warm smile on his wide, tanned face.

"Look who we have here! Mr. Hotshot bringing home a lady," cooed Adam Krensh, leaning against the doorframe and looking as much the wild vagabond as ever.

"Wow, look who's become more of a man." Helen Shard, the leader of the Twin Horns, still as charismatic as ever, winked at me.

They all stayed at the top of the stairs and waited for us to come up, but Angela hopped down the stairs herself and picked me up in a bear hug.

"Look how cute you've gotten!" she squealed as she waved me around. My legs dragged helplessly across the cement stairs, since she was too short to completely pick me up off the ground.

"Mmmfph mmmh!" My attempts to articulate words failed as she pulled me into a tight embrace.

"I-I think you should let go..." I heard Tess stammer as she tugged at my

uniform.

"Hello there! Aren't you the cutest little elf!" Angela Rose released me and picked up Tess, who let out a squeal of surprise.

My parents came out right behind them and greeted us with open arms. My sister Eleanor, on the other hand, was distracted cuddling with Sylvie, who had gone off and welcomed her first.

I was eager to catch up with the Twin Horns over dinner—I hadn't seen them in over a year—but I could tell Tess was kind of uncomfortable with all this. She already felt a bit out of place being in my home, but with unexpected guests that she'd never seen before, she seemed even more tense and awkward.

My mother and sister tried to make her comfortable, but she was being distant with everyone—even me, for some reason. Finally she announced, apologetically, that she had to go back to school right away for some student council work that she was sorely behind on.

"Are you really going back to the academy?" I asked.

"I've missed too much school, and work has probably piled up by now. But thank you for your hospitality—I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer." Tess made a curt bow and left the room, following the driver who had come to get her.

I went outside with her, uncertain whether I should accompany her.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I'll admit I was a bit uncomfortable in there, but that's not the main reason I'm going back. I really am behind on student council work and I feel bad since even Lilia is still at school. It wouldn't be right for me to be relaxing in her home while she's working, right?" Tess gave me a reassuring smile.

"You're right, of course. I'm just a little worried. Gramps said you needed to rest. Your mana core is still a bit unstable, even with the seal Rinia gave you before we left. I'd just feel more comfortable if I was nearby, in case something happened." I scratched my head, a rather doubtful feeling creeping up on me.

"I have no reason to use magic at the academy—for the time being anyway. Besides, you're coming back to school tomorrow. I think I'll be able to survive until then." She gave me a playful wink, dispelling her previous awkwardness.

"All right, but be careful." I lightly bonked her head, getting a light punch in the stomach in reply.

# **TESSIA ERALITH**

It was getting harder and harder to keep a straight face in front of Arthur. I felt like if I'd stayed and talked to him any longer, my face might have started burning like a candle.

My body felt out of sync because of my mana core, as if someone had tilted the world slightly—just enough to throw me off balance. I didn't mention it to Arthur, though, because he'd just get overly worried.

I closed my eyes for what seemed like only a few seconds, but when I opened them again I was already almost at the school gate.

I thanked the driver, who gave me a friendly nod in reply, tipping his hat before driving back toward Lilia's house.

I stepped through the barrier and entered the gate. As I did so, the atmosphere seemed to change drastically. My body tensed immediately, as if signaling my brain that there was danger nearby.

"Hoho! You're here... alone? This is going to be easier than I thought."

The throaty voice surprised me. I immediately whipped my head toward its source. "Lucas? Lucas Wykes?" I gaped.

It surely was Lucas, but something was off. Well, a lot of him was off. His skin was gray, first of all, and his body spasmed randomly, making him look more like a rabid monster than a student.

I wanted to move, but I couldn't. The pressure and bloodlust he was giving off wouldn't allow it. All I could do was shiver.

"I can't believe you're here alone—no I can't! It's nice seeing you again, princess. As beautiful as ever, yes you are." Lucas approached me with

jagged steps.

This wasn't Lucas anymore. The feeling I got from him was more like that of a deranged mana beast than his usual, egotistical self.

When he saw the expression on my face, he tilted his head and revealed a toothy grin. "Why don't you play with me until Arthur gets here?"

#### **COLLAPSE OF XYRUS**

#### ARTHUR LEYWIN

Tess leaving for school gave me a rather uneasy feeling, but we still enjoyed the night. Helstea Manor was in a festive mood, with barrels of liquor being brought up from the cellar by Vincent himself. Along with my father, Lilia's father was getting the most enjoyment out of this, and they had both been inebriated even before I got home.

The Twin Horns, it turned out, had made a detour on their series of expeditions in the Beast Glades to visit us during the Aurora Constellate. It meant a lot to my parents to be able to see their old comrades again, and share a drink or two as a toast to old times and embarrassing memories.

It was fascinating to witness everyone's alcohol-induced habits, since my mother and Tabitha didn't allow me to drink. After my father and Vincent, Adam Krensh was the next to become intoxicated, his flushed cheeks almost matching his fiery red hair. Adam was your typical loud and rowdy drunk, and had soon lost enough of his coordination that it seemed an infant might be able to wrestle him to the ground and win.

Angela Rose began to lose all sense of personal space as she conversed with me, her cheeks pressed to mine. It didn't help that every spoken word was accompanied by two or three hiccups, making it almost impossible to decipher what she was trying to say. Tabitha ended up having to peel her off me and escort the coquettish mage up the stairs by the back of her collar. I had a hard time containing my laughter.

Durden Walker soon became drunk as well. What surprised me the most was when he opened his eyes; the usual narrow slits became wider with a stern scowl. It didn't help that his eyebrows were slanted down, making his overall expression a mixture of intense focus and uncontainable surprise. He took on a gruff, commanding tone when speaking, and spouted training drills to one of the empty barrels of beer while participating in the exercises himself for an hour or so, before passing out.

I couldn't tell whether my former guardian, Jasmine Flamesworth, was drunk or not—until she came up, eyes glassy and unfocused, and started telling me over and over how much she thought of me and how worried she was as to whether or not I was adjusting to school well.

Eventually, everyone retired to their respective rooms. Mother towed my father, who was cradling a bottle of something that smelled like whiskey as if it were a newborn, back into their room, and Tabitha did the same for her husband. My sister had gone to bed quite a while ago, taking Sylvie with her, which left only Helen and me in the war zone that had once been a dining room.

"Quite the party, wasn't it? I'm sure this wasn't exactly how you pictured your reunion with us to go," Helen said, rolling her eyes.

I laughed in response. "With everything that's been going on these days, it was nice seeing everyone let loose."

"Your parents told us briefly about everything that's happened to you while we were gone. You seem to be doing a fairly good job of taking on your father's role of worrying your mother." The faint smirk curling on Helen's lips suggested she was reminiscing about the past.

"It seems to be the one skill that I keep getting better at without even trying." "If only it were like that for me with mana manipulation," Helen sighed, making us both laugh.

We moved to the living room while the maids began cleaning the dining

room. There, we sat with only a coffee table separating us and continued talking and catching each other up on what had happened in our respective lives.

I'd never talked to Helen for this long before, but it was comfortable. She spoke to me as if I were an adult, not someone who had barely hit his teens. She had an eloquent way of expressing herself that was unusual for an adventurer; she seemed equally suited to leading strategic meetings and fighting on the front lines.

"If you don't mind me asking, Arthur, what level is your mana core? I can't seem to sense your level anymore." Helen lifted her feet from the coffee table and leaned forward as she asked this.

"Solid yellow," I said bluntly. I didn't want to sugarcoat or try to downplay my level to someone as observant as Helen.

"I see. Congratulations, sincerely." Helen had a strange expression on her face—she was trying to hide her disappointment, but failing. She wasn't disappointed in me, but in herself, because although she more than twice my age, I had surpassed her by quite a bit.

"It seems you are made for bigger and better things, Arthur. With the discovery of the new continent and all, I suspect that this small academy will only be able to hold you for so long." She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "We should get some rest," she said, then gave me a firm pat on the shoulder and left.

I collapsed on my bed without the energy or will to even wash and lay there thinking about everything that had happened in my life. Was it just a coincidence that I'd been sent to, or actually born into, this world just as it was going through so much change?

Was I really some cliché protagonist from one of the bedtime fairy tales they always read to us at the orphanage? I scoffed at the thought of being a source of entertainment for a bored god as he toyed with my life in the name of my being 'the Chosen One.'

Was I in the hands of some god as a chess piece to make the world run as he saw fit? I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that would help me get rid of these thoughts. The thought of my fate being under someone else's control didn't sit right with me. Turning to my side, I chose to push these fears away. Life was already so unexpected—why make it more complicated?

### **ELIJAH KNIGHT**

"Get down!" I roared as I conjured an earthen wall between the mana beasts and the students behind me.

"Attention, renowned students of Xyrus Academy!" A high-pitched, grating voice echoed throughout the campus. "As you may all be aware, your institution is currently under attack by my little pets. No need to fear, for I am both just and merciful!" I watched as a dwarven student fell to the jaws of a discolored, black-fanged wolf—a B-class mana beast.

I conjured up a rock spear underneath the belly of the black-fanged wolf, but it still had enough time to take the student's life before collapsing. Gnashing my teeth, I turned away from the dimming gaze of the dwarf, whose pleading eyes had met mine just as he passed away. If not for my experience as an adventurer, I would've thrown up as the student's insides spilled from the fatal wound caused by the mana beast.

Instead, I calmed myself, using a brief meditation technique I had learned in class—it steadied the flow from my mana core—before scouting for any other students to save.

"Human students, as long as you raise both hands and swear your allegiance to me, the mana beasts will not attack you! Elves and dwarves, do not struggle—allow my pets to destroy your mana core and you will be free to leave!" The voice let out a deranged laugh that sent a shiver down my spine. Although the radical group had been escalating their terroristic activity, this was on a completely different level. It had happened so suddenly that there had been no way to prepare. As far as I could tell, this stage of their plan had been meticulously executed.

The once-clear barrier formation that kept any intruders, including mana beasts, from entering the campus had turned into a translucent red cage, making the sky look like it was dipped in blood and keeping everyone and everything from leaving. There was no place to escape to and no way to call for help.

I didn't know who the voice belonged to, but his motives were clear. He was willing to take human captives but wanted all nonhuman mages either dead or incapacitated. I could see pillars of smoke rising from several academy buildings where other fights were happening. From time to time, I locked eyes with other disciplinary committee members as they fought off mana beasts. We acknowledged each other, but we'd had no time to brief each other on the situation elsewhere.

There were obviously traitors in the academy. Some of the professors were now being held off by other professors while cloaked figures, as well as the mana beasts, were brutalizing the students.

I'd seen many mana beasts while I was an adventurer, but these were strange. They had different coloration—or lack of color, to be more exact. Except for their matching red eyes, all the mana beasts that flooded Xyrus Academy looked as if their colors had been drained, leaving them different hues of gray.

I couldn't tell how long it had been since the invasion had started, but there was no sign of help arriving. It was as if we were closed off from the rest of Xyrus.

I trudged on through the campus quad, past bodies lying limply on the ground, pools of blood forming around them. This academy was supposed to be a safe haven for the future mages of Dicathen. What pissed me off more than anything was that there hadn't been proper security measures in place for this type of scenario. Had the Council not thought there would be unrest after the unification of the Three Kingdoms?

I was about to follow a cloaked figure into one of the alchemy labs when a

throaty growl caught my attention. I reacted quickly enough to avoid a thorned growler's snapping jaws, but unfortunately, I couldn't avoid its pounce. It hammered me into the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

The giant, furry, lizard-shaped mana beast's saliva drenched my uniform as it growled at me. Its red eyes were staring at me, as if waiting for me to do something.

"Screw off!" I grunted, conjuring a pillar from the ground and launching the six-foot long mana beast in the air. It flipped around agilely to regain its balance and landed ready to pounce again.

Before I had the chance to do anything more, a sword came sailing through the air, skewering the thorned growler's head to the ground. The mana beast squirmed helplessly for a couple of seconds before its body collapsed, lifeless.

"Thanks," I grunted, too tired for pleasant formalities. Curtis Glayder climbed down from his perch on the top of a nearby statue to retrieve his weapon, his bond, a world lion, following briskly behind him.

"No problem. You should get somewhere safe until we get reinforcements. It's too dangerous out here in the open," he said with a nod.

"I'll be fine. I'm not just going to hide; there are too many enemies for you guys to handle. I can still help." Standing up, I noticed my arm was bleeding. I checked the wound the growler had given me, then bandaged it with a torn sleeve as I turned to continue following the cloaked figure.

Suddenly, a sound like thunder boomed through campus, so loud it could only have been amplified with mana. I couldn't even hear myself scream as Curtis and I reeled in pain. The ear-numbing ring from the watchtower's bell didn't just reverberate in my chest—I felt it in my feet as the whole earth shook from it.

#### **BIRD'S CAGE**

## **ELIJAH KNIGHT**

As the ear-splitting sound of the tower bell faded to a dull ring, the owner of the same grating voice, who I assumed was the cause of all this, cleared his throat before speaking.

"Testing... Ah, perfect!" His voice was coming from the same bell tower, near the center of campus. "Students and faculty members of Xyrus Academy —I would like to welcome you all to join us for the final ceremony. I advise every one of you to make your way toward the bell tower, as this is something you won't want to miss! Don't worry, my little pets won't bite anymore—I promise."

Curtis and I gave each other a quick glance and a nod. "Get on, quick!" From atop his world lion, Grawder, Curtis beckoned with an outstretched left arm. Grawder let out a dissatisfied grunt, but otherwise kept to himself as I hopped onto his back behind Curtis. We immediately headed toward the bell tower. I began to circulate mana toward my deeper wounds in hopes of easing some of the injuries.

As we got closer to the bell tower, I could see flashes of spells going off in the vicinity.

"What do you think is going on?" Curtis asked anxiously. Through the ringing in my ears, the pounding of my heart, the urgency screaming inside me to help however I could, I had a single, strange thought: Who would have

believed that this handsome, powerful prince would ever be asking me for support in that fearful tone?

Stupid, I thought. Pull yourself together, Elijah.

"Some of the students and professors are firing spells at the bell tower," I replied. It was stating the obvious, but I didn't know what else to say.

"It looks like there's some sort of barrier surrounding it," Curtis pointed out as a translucent wall flickered when a spell hit it.

It wasn't long before we came into full view of what was happening for the 'main event.' There was a large stone platform that hadn't been there before, most likely erected by magic. The once flawless marble floor around the bell tower, which marked the center of the academy, was cracked and splintered, and crimson blood pooled thickly in places. Various species of discolored mana beasts had gathered around the platform. They waited patiently, almost robotically, ignoring the frightened students just outside the barrier.

Several of the academy's faculty members had gathered together. Each of them focused on casting their own spell as lights and auras manifested around them.

With a flash of color, four different elemental spells surged toward the barrier. I could make out a giant earthen spear and a condensed blast of fire alongside arcs of lightning and blades of wind—all converging into a single point on the shield surrounding the bell tower.

Despite the combined efforts of the four professors, the barrier only fizzed harmlessly before eating up all the spells. The leaves on the trees inside the barrier showed no sign of even the slightest rustle, proving how impenetrable this barrier was.

There was a large crowd of both students and faculty members in front of the bell tower, injured and scared. The professors continued their fruitless attempts at breaking through the protective field, but no one seemed to know what else to do.

"Stay here while I try to find the rest of the DC members," Curtis instructed,

pushing me off near the front of the barrier. Before I could say anything, Grawder raced away with his master riding on his back, leaving me anxiously waiting for something to happen.

The disheveled students that made up the crowd were all anxiously exchanging stories and questions with their friends and peers about the disaster that had fallen upon them. Some were crying, while other students had already passed that phase and were waiting with hardened, red-eyed expressions. I could only wait as well. With the cage keeping us from leaving the academy grounds and the mana beasts ready to jump and devour any who disobeyed, I could see the hope in everyone's eyes flickering away. We were prisoners of this massacre, awaiting our sentence.

Although most of the students in the crowd seemed only lightly injured and battered—indicating that they'd caved in rather quickly—there were a few fighters whose injuries were more serious. Fortunately, some of the professors were adept in the field of healing. While they couldn't compare to Emitters, they were still able to save a few lives.

"Well, it seems everyone alive has made it to the grand finale of today's show! I thank you all for coming!" The high-pitched tenor had a piercing quality that made everyone turn their attention back toward the bell tower.

He appeared, as if manifesting out of the shadows: the source of the jarring voice that sounded like rusted nails scraping against a chalkboard. He wore a gaudy red robe, decorated with an unreasonable amount of jewelry, reminding me of some distant son of a king—a figure so down the line of power that his only defining aspect was his inherited wealth. On his face was a creepy mask which didn't match his attire. It was a simple white mask with two slits for his eyes and a crudely-drawn, jagged smile the color of blood. Behind his mask was a head of crimson hair that flowed past his shoulder blades.

Although he had his hands behind his back, it looked like he was holding something, but I couldn't make out what it was because of his shadow.

At the sight of the bold figure, the crowd's murmuring ceased, creating an eerie atmosphere. A deafening silence descended upon the crowd as all eyes fell on the mysterious masked man, and we waited in both curiosity and fear to see what he would do next.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.* The sound of small droplets splashing on the ground echoed through the entire space, further adding to the uneasy suspense.

All of a sudden an earthen spear barreled directly toward the masked man. Unfortunately, its trajectory ended abruptly as it smashed into the protective shield, shattering into pieces. The crowd stirred, some groaning in defeat, others cursing in defiance.

The man's shoulders bobbed up and down as he tried to contain his laughter. Then it broke free, and his manic howling echoed throughout the area, somehow drowning out all other voices.

I could see a mixture of emotions in the students' and professors' faces: fear, anger, desperation, confusion, frustration, and helplessness. They were all stunned into silence by the abrupt laughter.

Then the masked man tossed the object he had been holding behind his back onto the ground.

With a dull, wet thud, the spherical object rolled into view, close enough for the people in the front to see.

It was a—

It was a head—a real head.

It wasn't the sound of water I had heard—it was blood dripping from the severed head.

I stared blankly for a few seconds before my mind began to process what was going on. Then a wave of nausea hit me like a club.

I threw up, then did it again. The acidic stench of last night's dinner made me gag until I was left with only dry heaves and watery eyes.

I finally composed myself, but I could see students as well as professors either looking away, pale-faced, or clutching their stomachs as they, too,

vomited on the ground.

I didn't want to look again, but my eyes were drawn back to the decapitated head. I steeled myself to look, and realized it was a dwarf's head. She looked vaguely familiar, but hair covered part of her face.

It was so white.

I was drawn to the gore. I could see the bone of her spine jutting out from the severed neck. My mind was screaming to turn away, but my eyes stayed fixed on the gruesome sight as everything else blurred out of focus.

The man's disturbing laughter continued, his whole body shaking in delight, and then a booming howl caught everyone's attention.

"No! Doradrea!" Theodore was roaring, charging furiously toward the masked man and knocking aside the students who weren't quick enough to get out the way of his one-man stampede.

"Doradrea!" Theodore screamed, his voice cracking as he hammered his fists against the translucent barrier.

There were only two sounds that could be heard: the delighted laughter coming from the masked man, and Theodore's thunderous pounding against the barrier.

BOOM!

This madman had murdered one of the disciplinary committee members.

BOOM!

He had murdered one of Arthur's friends.

BOOM!

A crater began to form underneath Theodore, the marble floor around him crumbling and caving under the pressure of his sustained gravitational magic. He continued smashing against the barrier, blood streaming down his arms as he broke his own bones with the force of his blows. Despite that, the fury never left Theodore's eyes, and his icy gaze never left the masked man.

"Come out here and fight me, you coward!" Theodore howled, a deranged look shrouding his eyes.

Suddenly, the masked man stopped laughing. He removed his mask, revealing a face that was narrow and sharp, with skin that glowed in a hue of gray. In spite of his sharply attractive features, it was hard to miss the crazy, almost psychotic expression that seemed to have been permanently ingrained into his being. His face was wrinkled in a scowl and he tilted his head to the side, as if he were confused by Theodore's last statement.

"Coward? Me?" The masked figure began walking toward Theodore with the easy arrogance of someone who knew that everything in the world existed for his taking. Each of his steps seemed to drive a nail into the minds of everyone present.

"Yes, you! Stop hiding behind this barrier and fight me!" Theodore growled back, blood dripping from his broken hands.

"Coward? Me? The mighty and reborn Draneeve... hiding?" Draneeve, as he named himself, blinked out of view and reappeared in front of Theodore. His speed was so great that Theodore didn't even have time to react as Draneeve pulled him through the barrier and threw him easily onto the erected platform.

Caught off guard, Theodore landed heavily on his back. He squirmed to his knees, having trouble putting weight on his crippled hands.

Again, Draneeve moved with a sudden flash of speed and squatted down to face Theodore. "Why don't you fight me now?" A sinister smirk was carved across the red-haired man's face.

With a desperate yell, Theodore jumped up, bringing his leg down to execute a heel kick toward Draneeve's shoulder.

The blow connected with an earthshaking crash. The platform splintered and a cloud of dust formed—it was obvious that Theodore had imbued enough mana into his leg to crumble a building.

There were a few cheers from the students as we all waited for the dust to clear. I, too, hoped that the attack was enough to warrant the cheering, but I suspected it wouldn't be that easy.

A howl of pain coming from the cloud of debris made the crowd fall mute, and we waited with bated breath. None of us were prepared for what we saw when the dust cleared.

It was no secret to anyone here that Theodore was a deviant, capable of using mana to manipulate gravity. The stone platform had shattered like glass, so we knew Theodore hadn't held back during his attack. What we had not expected was to see Theodore's leg still positioned atop Draneeve's shoulder where it had landed. Draneeve was unruffled, holding Theodore upright by the scruff of his shirt. Theodore's leg, however, was unnaturally bent, and the bone had torn through the skin of his calf.

We all stood there with our mouths agape. Even the professors were baffled by the clear difference in strength between the two. Theodore's strength was such that even the professors would have done everything they could to dodge an attack from him, yet this mysterious man had taken it head-on and come out unscathed despite the damage done to the arena floor below them.

"Come on! The great Draneeve isn't hiding. Let's fight!" The smirk never left his face as he slammed Theodore to the ground like a rag doll.

"I'm fighting you like you wanted, right? You even got blood on my favorite robe!" Draneeve spat as he continued to beat Theodore into a stupor. Theodore was no longer even recognizable—Draneeve was pummeling him into a bloody, broken mess. The rest of us could do nothing but watch as our fellow schoolmate was tortured right in front of our eyes.

"...cker," Theodore managed to croak before vomiting out blood.

"Hmm? What was that?" Draneeve landed another solid kick to Theodore's side, the loud crack of a broken bone accompanying it.

Lifting his battered head, Theodore looked straight up into his assailant's eyes with a gaze of pure hatred and disdain. Then he spat a mouthful of blood at Draneeve's foot.

I could see veins popping out on Draneeve's forehead, but he simply took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his red hair, peering down in disdain

at the bloody mess that was Theodore as if he were a squashed insect.

"I see you still have a bit of fight left in you. It is too bad, though—you seem to be on the verge of dying from blood loss. Let me help you with that."

A horrific, gurgling scream was all I could hear as Theodore combusted into crimson flames at the snap of Draneeve's fingers.

That was all he did... snap his fingers.

He snapped them again, extinguishing the flames to reveal a charred and smoking carcass.

I realized that my fingers were slippery with blood from my nails digging into the flesh of my palms. I was useless at this point. Even if I succeeded in breaking through the barrier, wouldn't I just end up like Theodore?

"See? I helped him. He's not bleeding anymore, right?" Draneeve's cackling laugh echoed through the area as he began clapping for himself in amusement.

Looking around at the stunned faces, he just shook his head. "Oh poo. You're no fun at all. Relax, I left him alive for now."

I peeled my eyes away from Theodore's ruined body to see Curtis being held back by the other members of the disciplinary committee. Claire, a trail of tears streaming down her anguished face, was trying to cover his mouth with her hand. The princess Kathyln was holding onto her brother's arm; her head was down and I couldn't see her expression. I didn't see the elf, Feyrith, or the other member, the mysterious one with the narrow eyes.

"Now! I apologize to you all for the delay. Without further ado, we will now commence with our main event." He shifted and called, "Bring them out!"

Draneeve waved his arm like a conductor, and the frozen mana beasts stirred and sat up as a line of figures, hooded and robed, came out of the bell tower, each dragging a student with them.

My mind jerked to a stop when I saw her.

I felt like I was suddenly swimming in thick syrup and my hand pressed hard against the barrier. I fell to my knees and just stared out in front of me, in a

daze.

Being dragged by her hair—her face battered and bruised, her clothes torn and messy—was Tessia.

#### **CHOSEN ONES**

### **CLAIRE BLADEHEART**

I held onto Curtis, clasping my hand over his mouth in desperation. My vision blurred as tears continued to well up and stream down my cheeks.

We couldn't—*I* couldn't do anything.

The disciplinary committee members were in charge of preserving the safety and order of Xyrus Academy. I had been handpicked by Director Goodsky herself to take on this vital duty, and with the exception of Arthur, the task of choosing—and leading—the members had been mine.

I was their leader, yet I had let all this happen. I'd let in a spy.

I'd been ignorant of the fact that all our movements were being leaked to the enemy.

I was responsible for the state Theodore was in right now. Even if he made it out of this alive, he would never be able to walk on his own two feet again.

I was responsible for Feyrith getting captured.

I was responsible for the death of Doradrea Oreguard.

I should have noticed sooner that the radical group had seemed to know of our every move and effortlessly slipped past us each time we tried to corner them. I guess I had believed that my team members would, without a doubt, be loyal.

Because of my naive assumptions, we had been the first to be attacked. It had happened last night, just as the soft, dim light of dawn peeked out over the

horizon. We had been busy preparing for the full-scale battle that we knew would come eventually, finalizing the emergency evacuation plan and constructing makeshift safe houses out of basements and old classrooms where the students could barricade themselves in.

We had all agreed that this might be going a bit overboard, but I now realized it hadn't even been close to enough.

Restless, everyone had decided to let off some steam by training. It had been Kai's idea. He'd suggested that we enlarge the area of the training barrier so everyone could practice without the sounds of spells and colliding weapons startling the students, who were all on edge already.

We had never enlarged the training barrier before, but I didn't see anything wrong with his suggestion. I'd let Kai supervise the barrier while the rest of us trained inside it.

When the barrier formed, it took on a reddish sheen, quite different from its normal appearance. Thinking back on it, I realized that the training barrier Kai had erected was a miniature version of the cage which now surrounded the entire academy.

That was when the attack had begun. Kai had let them in; it was as simple as that. That sly bastard had given away all our plans to the radicals while feeding us false information.

Kai had his hands full keeping the barrier up so no one outside could hear the sounds of battle. We were outnumbered three to one, yet we were on the verge of winning. The radical group's mages were strong, but my team members were stronger. We would have broken free and warned the school... but *he* had to show up.

As soon as he stepped into the barrier, whatever advantage we had had disappeared. I just couldn't believe he'd been a part of this—no, I'm lying. It was definitely possible for him to be a part of this. What I couldn't believe was that it had taken me so long to realize it.

He single-handedly turned the tides. He was a gifted mage before; if it

weren't for his twisted and conceited personality, I would've definitely wanted him to join the disciplinary committee. He was talented, but a lot of his breakthroughs came from the overuse of elixirs and other synthetic drugs, which would result in dire consequences later. This was the rumor, anyway.

But he was on another level. The mana fluctuation around him was comparable to that of a professor's—no, beyond even that. It was odd though. The abundant mana surrounding him was erratic, chaotic; there was so much mana being forcibly generated that it overflowed. I wasn't sure if that was the cause, but even the color of his skin and hair had taken on a different tint.

That much mana was unnatural for someone who had barely reached the age where most humans began to awaken. It reminded me of Arthur; I couldn't even be sure which of them was stronger anymore, but I knew for certain that whatever had led him to this state wasn't anything natural.

Needless to say, we weren't much of a match for him. Chantless casting, multicasting, an endless well of mana—even if he had been alone, he could probably have held his own against all of us together.

How was it possible for him to have become this strong?

"You call yourself a student of this academy? Of all people, I would've assumed your pride wouldn't allow you to be the pet of some crazy terrorist group, Lucas," I spat out in disdain. "But I guess I was wrong."

I could see that I had hit a nerve as his smug expression darkened, but before he got reckless—as I had hoped he would—Kai intervened. He had ignored our angry shouts demanding the reason for his betrayal, but now he opened his mouth to keep Lucas in check.

"Lucas, *he* wants this done quick and clean. Don't forget the mission," the narrow-eyed augmenter said curtly, his face tensed in concentration as he worked to keep the barrier up.

By that point, I knew it was impossible to get out by trying to beat him; we had to create an opening in the barrier.

As we battled, we intentionally aimed our spells at a single point on the

inside of the barrier. They didn't notice our focus, but the magical cage was a lot stronger than we had anticipated.

After defeating three of them, Feyrith was the first to be captured and pulled. By then we had managed to crack the surface of the barrier, a gap large enough for us to fit through. But not all of us were able to escape. Doradrea stayed to hold the gap, stalling the radicals long enough for the rest of us to escape.

But it didn't feel like we had escaped. No—it felt like we had been set free. Lucas had stood there with a smirk etched onto his face, looking down on me like an insect he was releasing because he didn't want to trouble himself with the mess.

By the time we made it out, it was already too late. Our battle had been lengthy, and during that time, the entire academy had been locked into a cage and was now under attack by both the radical mages and wild mana beasts.

Director Cynthia had not returned, and by the time we found any of the student council members, some of them had been assaulted as well, although they seemed to be in better shape than us. Clive seemed especially grateful that the student council president was still not back from her trip. The student council secretary—Lilia, I believe—asked me worriedly if Arthur was okay and was relieved to find out he wasn't inside the academy.

We quickly became demoralized—some of the students we had tried so hard to fight for simply gave in and sided with the enemy.

But I couldn't blame them.

It was we who had failed in our job to protect them.

Curtis's thrashing settled, but I could still feel him trembling with rage. I removed my hand from his mouth and noticed that there was blood; it was his. He had been biting his lips so hard, he'd bitten into them.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Please, Curtis... please." I was begging, choking back a sob. "Please, stop. You can't." I bit my lower lip. "Please..."

"I'll kill him..." I heard Curtis mutter, his voice shaking.

"Curtis, please... just wait. I can't have you charging out like Theodore. We can't lose you too." I tried to keep a firm tone as I spoke, but I didn't sound convincing even to myself.

"Wait? Are we supposed to just wait while we let him kill Theodore and Feyrith? Huh? Like he killed Doradrea?" he spat out in a growl, his voice pitched low and quiet.

My chest contracted from the venom in Curtis's words, but before I could say anything else, a sharp sound stopped me.

Curtis held onto his left cheek, stunned.

Kathyln's eyes were red and swollen, her long lashes still wet with tears. Her face was a knot of grief and frustration, her usual impassive expression nowhere to be seen. Her hand was still held up in front of her, from having just slapped her brother.

The blow wasn't loud, nor was it that strong, but I could tell by Curtis's reaction that the light slap from his sister struck deeper and harder than any bludgeon could have.

"Brother. We need to think of a way to save them. We need to make a plan to protect everyone here. We need to stop that monster, but we can't do any of that if you're like this... or if you're dead." Kathyln's gaze was unrelenting, her every word piercing through not just Curtis, but me as well.

She was right—we needed to get our act together. We needed to think of a plan.

I looked around the crowd in front of the bell tower and behind us, trying to think of a way to escape to Director Cynthia's quarters in the hope that there was something there that could help us. But robed figures stood guard and the mana beasts were tensed, ready to pounce onto anyone who tried to make a run for it.

Then they brought the captives out. Feyrith was among them, beaten and unconscious.

Everyone stared solemnly while the row of robed figures, each holding onto their respective prisoners, silently trudged out. From this distance, it took me a few seconds to realize that one of them was the student council president.

#### **ELIJAH KNIGHT**

The scene played out in slow motion for me.

I rubbed my eyes just to be sure, but no matter how many times I rubbed and blinked, her figure wouldn't change. Though disheveled and matted with dirt and blood, there was no mistaking that distinct gunmetal hair.

My mind raced as a part of me wrestled to figure out what had happened, how she appeared here, while another part of me was still in denial. She wasn't supposed to be here. She was supposed to be with Arthur.

Whispers and mutters began to erupt as the students and faculty members alike realized that one of the prisoners was the student council president, and the other a member of the disciplinary committee.

"Shhhhh." Draneeve waved his hand theatrically for us to settle down before continuing. "I'm sure you are all just dying to know what is going on, but before I explain, I'd like to introduce myself."

He took a few steps forward and straightened his robe, combing his hair back with his fingers. "As you have heard, I go by Draneeve."

He paused dramatically, as if expecting a round of applause. When nothing happened, he just shrugged and continued.

"I know that, at this moment, you may see me as some sort of bad guy. I wouldn't be surprised, what with the attacks and the deaths, but I assure you, I am on your side."

That ridiculous statement caused an uproar and jeers and shouts reverberated through the crowd.

"Silence."

His voice couldn't have been louder than a low growl, but the weight of that one word, and the immediate pressure following it, seemed to crush the air from our lungs and everyone fell silent.

"My name is Draneeve and I have come to save you all." Draneeve spread his arms in a grandiose manner, his robe fluttering with the wind. I had to admit he looked pretty impressive.

No one said a word, too afraid of what he might do; we simply waited for him to continue speaking.

"You see, I come from a faraway land. This land is a cruel, cruel place for the weak. Yes, I am talking about you—all of you. Those of you gathered here are considered the elite, whose backgrounds and potentials make you the future of this continent, but from where I come from, you—are—trash." Draneeve's last words were spat out in a mocking staccato.

"That being said, I have made the long and tiresome journey to prepare those I deem worthy, so that when my lord becomes this continent's new ruler, you will have a place in his kingdom and not be tossed aside like the trash you currently are."

I glanced back to see everyone just looking around, confused. By the expressions on some of their faces, they were in disbelief. Not just surprised; they sincerely looked like they thought this whole thing couldn't possibly be real.

"To those who stand in front of me today, congratulations on being chosen as honored pawns of the new ruler of this land. Lukiyah, step forth and show them a glimpse of the newfound powers that have been bestowed on you." 'Lukiyah?'

*No...* It couldn't be...

The figure that had been holding Tess by her hair stepped forth, dragging her with him. I bit my lip, struggling to keep calm. Underneath his hood, he seemed to be looking for someone before he stopped. I could feel his eyes on me, and I stood transfixed as he removed the hood of his robe.

My suspicions were confirmed. It was Lucas Wykes.

His eyes seemed to be laughing as he continued to stare at me. Slowly, the corners of his lips curved into a vicious grin as he tugged Tessia up by her

hair, just enough so her neck was next to his face.

Lucas's mocking gaze never left mine as he ran his tongue slowly, gratingly up her neck to her ear, only to stop and wink at me.

Any sort of inhibition controlling my rage disappeared at that instant, leaving me with just enough sanity to shout out, "Lucas, you son of a bitch! How dare you!"

My vision reddened as my mind began to go numb. Suddenly, as if some inner force was pushing my consciousness out, my body felt like it wasn't mine anymore... like I was an entirely different person, simply watching my body from behind.

A voice echoed in my head. 'Kill.'

I had never felt a sensation like this before, but I knew that whatever was controlling my body knew how to use my powers better than I could myself. 'Kill.'

It was a peculiar feeling, one that I knew wasn't normal. It felt like the monster I had been trying to keep locked away had switched places with me. My vision distorted, pulsing with what I assumed to be adrenaline. I couldn't hear anything besides the beating of my heart. My body seemed like a shell, controlled like a puppet by someone who wasn't me.

'Kill.' The voice was getting stronger.

What the hell was happening to me?

Black spikes ruptured from the earth around me, injuring some of the students who couldn't move out of the way fast enough.

I felt the need to apologize but my attention was fixed on Lucas.

'Kill, kill, kill!' My mind felt like it was going to split open from the pain.

I walked rather unsteadily toward the ingrate who couldn't be described with mere profanity. As I approached the barrier, I worried whether or not I would be able to break through, but it turned out to be an unnecessary concern. Some sort of black plasma suddenly engulfed my hand, and, like butter thrown into a hot pan, the barrier hissed and melted at my touch.

I nearly burst out with wild laughter at Lucas's surprised expression, but the look on Draneeve's face was far more unexpected. His gray face paled, twisting and contorting in a way that I could only interpret as fear. He held his hands out in a placating manner, as if trying to calm me down. At that moment, the mana beasts all sprang out to attack me, dozens of them, but it was futile. With a flick of my wrist, black spikes shot from the ground, skewering the discolored mana beasts in mid-leap.

Was this me? I had never seen magic like this before. It was unnatural—almost evil in a way—as if it was a power meant solely for killing and destroying.

I ignored the dead mana beasts and slowly drew nearer to Lucas, who glared at me with furrowed brows and a tinge of unease around his eyes. The other robed figures released their prisoners and seemed about to collectively rush toward me but, for some reason, Draneeve stopped them. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but he seemed to be pleading, and his hands constantly moved in calming gestures.

Suddenly, a sharp pain seared into me like a burning blade, making my body go rigid. In some way I couldn't understand, I knew I was reaching my limits. *No. Not yet.* I knew I couldn't control my body, but at this point, I desperately wanted to at least kill Lucas.

I began staggering, each step becoming more unsteady than the last.

Almost

My hand rose, and a black spike as long as my arm shot toward Lucas. It didn't kill him as I had hoped, but the projectile's speed was enough that Lucas couldn't completely dodge it.

He tumbled back from the force of the blow. I could barely make out the black spike sticking out of his right shoulder.

Just one more...

My vision dimmed and my body stilled; I was losing consciousness. I looked once more at Draneeve, who seemed even more confused now. Just before

my consciousness completely faded into the darkness, I thought I saw him. I may have been only hallucinating, or it may have been just my wishful thinking, but I thought I saw my friend.

I thought I saw Arthur.

#### ARRIVAL

# **CLAIRE BLADEHEART**

Humility. Loyalty. Resoluteness. Courage.

These words had been instilled in me before I even understood what they meant. These were the four qualities necessary to have a heart as sharp as a sword. This was the creed of the Bladeheart family.

Ignorant as I was as a child, I had truly believed I would be able to follow this sacred doctrine upon which my family was built, no matter what the circumstances.

How truly ignorant I was.

This was the thought that clawed at my mind, making my heart ache as I stood helplessly watching—simply watching.

Simply watching as Theodore was beaten and burned into an unrecognizable state.

Simply watching as Elijah, despite being unaided, fearlessly tried to defy a figure so powerful I could only submit and hope—hope that I'd somehow make it out alive.

Even with my eyes fixed on the scene, I had trouble registering what exactly was occurring, much less believing it to be real.

What all the student mages here could not hope to do, what all the professors had failed to accomplish, Elijah, single-handedly, had achieved.

I had never considered him anything more than Arthur's silly friend. He had

given me the impression of being easy-going, almost ditzy at times, but not at that moment. After he had cursed aloud at Lucas, his demeanor had shifted and become unrecognizable.

As thoughtless and downright mad as he may have been, Elijah displayed the courage and strength that I couldn't.

As if his enraged cry had released his soul, Elijah's body seemed almost lifeless. His shoulders slumped and his head was hunched forward. I looked away when a sudden blast of black metallic spikes shot out of the ground. I thought he had already died; then I realized it wasn't Draneeve or any of his henchmen who had invoked the mysterious spell.

Elijah had cast it.

The spell he had used was unusual, almost unnatural, but it was when he placed his palm on the surface of the barrier—when a black flame-magic began coiling around his hand, melting the transparent barrier as if it were butter—that a cold chill ran down my spine.

Seeing that mysterious magic so easily destroy something that not even all the professors combined had been able to scratch, I felt hope. Maybe he would be able to end this.

In that moment, alongside that feeling of hope, I felt an almost tangible contempt for myself.

I looked down and realized my hand had unconsciously gripped the hilt of my sword. I scoffed at myself. What use was this sword of mine if fear rendered me unable to even take a step forward?

Looking back up, I fixed my eyes on Elijah. He swayed as he walked, staggering drunkenly, as if he wasn't really in control of himself. Anyone who tried to oppose him was intercepted by a black spike. The speed at which each spell was cast shouldn't have been possible. They couldn't even be called spells, but more of an automatic defense mechanism.

I had never heard of anything like this before, much less seen with my own eyes a magic so unnatural, so sinister—so evil.

But most confusing of all was how Draneeve was behaving toward Elijah. Elijah was killing his mana beasts left and right; he had already killed three of the robed underlings. Draneeve should have been angry—downright furious at him for thwarting his plans—but instead he looked... afraid.

I was only able to make out bits of Draneeve's words to Elijah, who was simply ignoring the mastermind of this disaster and making his way toward Lucas.

Draneeve kept repeating that he "didn't know." I also thought I heard him refer to Elijah as "sir"—but no, that couldn't be right.

When his attempts to distract Elijah proved futile, Draneeve started barking orders at his robed lackeys, telling them not to lay a hand on Elijah. It was a strange sight—our fellow student was trying to kill Draneeve's allies yet he was ordering them not to fight back.

The other students were baffled, not quite sure what to make of all this. Some were voicing their doubts as to whether he was actually on our side, perhaps suspecting that Elijah was in league with Draneeve. But then he collapsed on the ground, his final attempt at killing Lucas ultimately unsuccessful.

At first, Elijah's sudden outrage, and his display of cryptic powers, had left us too shocked to move. Then some of the professors composed themselves enough to realize that the fracture Elijah had made in the barrier gave us a chance to fight back.

This thought had already crossed my mind. I knew that with all the mana beasts either dead or badly injured, and Draneeve distracted by Elijah, now was the perfect opportunity to retaliate.

I knew this, yet my feet stayed nailed to the ground beneath me. I knew it, but I was still afraid...

"Students, clear the way!" A small group of professors, led by a burly mage wielding a glowing staff, pressed through the crowd toward the hole in the barrier. The students shuffled out of the way without protest. For many, the images of Doradrea's severed head and Theodore's lifeless body were burnt

in their minds, leaving them too discouraged to join in the battle. But some students still gathered the courage to try and join the professors.

Clive was one of them. I spotted him rushing forward, his hands already wielding his bow and arrow, but a professor in the back stopped him and turned him away.

"Fools," I whispered under my breath. It was still hopeless. Did the professors think they could now somehow beat Draneeve? They should know better than us. Was it their sense of duty that was driving them to their deaths like this? Or was it their pride, preventing them from being rational?

Was being courageous akin to dying a fool's death? Was that what the Bladeheart creed demanded of me?

Kathyln must've heard me. She turned to me, her eyes red and lips quivering, hoping for an answer.

But I didn't have one. I knew my limits. I knew only a fraction of what my enemies were capable of, and even that was enough to rob me of the confidence to unsheathe my sword.

It was like a scene from one of the stories my mother had often read to me before sending me to bed. I watched as the professors marched toward the breach in the barrier, like heroes on an expedition to save the princess from the evil magician.

I could see the burly battle mage, whose class I had taken last semester, in the lead. Behind him was the spell formations professor who taught underclassmen. Following a few steps behind was a professor I didn't recognize, with a crooked wooden staff, then Professor Glory. She caught my eye and gave me a firm, solemn nod before taking a second sword from her dimension ring.

The look she gave me sent chills down my spine. It was one I had never actually seen before, but I instinctively knew it was the look of someone accepting her death.

The Bladeheart creed clawed its way up into my mind.

Humility. Loyalty. Resoluteness. Courage.

#### Damn it.

A mixture of emotions rose within me: frustration for lacking the resolve and loyalty a Bladeheart should display for her academy; shame at lacking the courage to fight alongside them; and disgust at my pride for being ignorant enough to believe I had what it took to be a leader of the disciplinary committee... to be a Bladeheart.

I shook my head, hoping to clear my dark thoughts. Living through this would give me another chance to redeem myself, would it not? I couldn't be courageous, loyal, resolute, and humble if I was dead.

I turned my attention back to Draneeve, who had kneeled next to Elijah. He seemed to be checking for signs that Elijah was still alive—carefully, almost tenderly, like a royal attendant would for his king. Our professors, prized throughout the entire continent for their skill as mages, were summarily ignored while he barked out orders to his subordinates.

Finally Draneeve rose, carrying Elijah's limp body in his arms, and began walking toward the back of the stone platform. Several robed men were there, fumbling with what looked like an oddly-shaped anvil.

"Lukiyah. Change of plans. You will take care of the fools approaching, and dispose of this—" He glanced down at the captured students, his eyes stopping at our student council president, and finished, "—trash. I will be heading back first. I expect you to follow us through the gate promptly." The pompous expression Draneeve had once worn was nowhere to be seen.

"Why are you bringing *that* along wi—" Lucas's question ended in a gasp as his eyes bulged out. The arrogance on his face was gone in an instant as he crumpled to his knees, sweat dripping down his face.

"You are but a mere tool. You will do as I say, no questions asked. If you display this sort of ignorance again, there will be consequences." Draneeve's voice was commanding and sharp, different from how it had been when he'd first revealed himself.

Lucas struggled to remain calm, and he clawed at his heart until Draneeve kicked him, toppling him over onto his side.

"Say it!" he growled.

Even from here, I could see Lucas's jaw clench angrily, but he convulsed and repeated through gritted teeth, "I—am—but—a mere—tool."

"It is ready, my lord," announced one of the robed mages near the anvil.

Draneeve snorted derisively, then walked away, leaving Lucas heaving, trying to compose himself before getting up.

We all just stood there watching. Even the professors, brave enough to march toward the figure so powerful that he played with a disciplinary committee member like he was a ragdoll, seemed stunned that he had crumpled a mage to his knees with just a thought.

Professor Glory was the first to realize that something was amiss. She pointed toward Draneeve, who was heading for the now-glowing anvil, and cried out, "We can't let him leave!"

The four professors rushed for the hole in the barrier, but a pillar of fire as thick as a grown man's torso shot up in front of them.

Lucas's face was still lined with pain as he looked at the four professors. The desperate expression on his face was gone, though, and he walked confidently toward them, conjuring a second pillar of flame with his other hand.

It was already too late. Draneeve and a group of his robed lackeys had vanished, taking Elijah with them and leaving behind the glowing anvilshaped object.

"Lucas! How dare a student of this academy be involved in such acts of terrorism?" Professor Glory roared, imbuing mana into both of her swords. The rest of the professors also raised their weapons, the burly battle mage already muttering a spell.

A manic grin spread across Lucas's face and he started cackling, sounding more like a rabid animal than a man. "How dare I? You think you are anywhere near the level I am at now? How dare *you!* How dare you speak to me as if you are my equal? You are merely bugs that need to be squashed." As Lucas spoke, the mana around him began swirling even faster, and dark veins appeared on his thin, gray arms.

Thus the fight began. The glimmer of hope I'd had, now that Draneeve had disappeared, faded as I watched my professors being tossed around. The spells Lucas used weren't special, but the amount of mana he exhibited and the control he demonstrated was truly terrifying.

It was a basic principle of multicasting that each spell used in conjunction with another would be weaker and harder to control. Even casting two spells at once meant essentially splitting your consciousness, since you had to mold and manipulate the mana differently. A few professors were rumored to be able to cast four spells, but even Professor Glory could only initiate three spells in such a high-pressure situation.

Yet Lucas was easily casting six spells. He was surrounded by a flaming sphere that shielded him from any of the professors' magic, and four offensive spells had already knocked out the spell formations professor. A six-foot flaming knight was fighting with Professor Glory—who stood as the vanguard—and keeping her from protecting her teammates. It was astonishing to watch as Lucas easily and cruelly overwhelmed the combined efforts of four professors.

"What are we standing here for? We need to help them!" Curtis's voice stirred me from my daze. His clear eyes, filled with rage and impatience, peered deep into me.

He was right; it was my duty.

I was the leader of the disciplinary committee.

I shifted my gaze to the bell tower, to Feyrith and Tessia, and the other captured students. I saw Theodore; he might still be alive. We could still save him if we acted now.

Lucas was occupied with the professors, and only a few of the robed lackeys

had stayed behind. It was my duty. Yet why couldn't I move? Was my body so deeply entangled in the vine of fear?

Then a pained cry drew my attention.

It was Professor Glory.

She was lying on the ground, grasping at her side as a puddle of blood slowly spread beneath her.

I remembered how she had looked at me before crossing the barrier: Her eyes had told me she knew she could die, but it wasn't a look of resignation; rather one of determination. She was definitely afraid, but she was doing what she could in hopes of giving the other students here a chance to live.

"You're right." I tore through the shackles that had bound me to that spot and took a step forward. Unsheathing my sword, I locked eyes with Curtis as he leapt atop Grawder. He gave me a firm nod, his eyes reflecting the same determination that Professor Glory had shown.

Before going through the barrier, I looked for Clive and a few other students who I knew would be capable enough to be of assistance.

The rogue mages who had blocked our escape had already gone through to aid Lucas, so with the two Glayder siblings riding on Grawder and Clive beside me, we chased after them.

"Don't!" Professor Glory had barely managed to croak the words, her eyes wide in fear, before we were attacked. These figures were somehow completely covered under their robes—even their faces hidden by unnatural shadows. I blocked an earthen spike with my blade just as another enemy slammed into me from behind, knocking me down.

As I rolled away, I lashed out at the robed man with my sword, slicing him where his throat should be. And I felt it—the sensation of my blade on flesh. Yet the man neither stopped nor recoiled. His gray hands reached out for me, mana surrounding them.

Just then, Curtis's bond tackled him from the side, knocking him away. Kathyln cast a spell to immobilize the enemy, then asked, "Are you okay, Claire?" as she extended a hand to help me up.

Before I could answer, I heard a shrill howl from where the professors were fighting Lucas. It was the large battle mage who had led the charge of professors. The flame guardian Lucas had conjured was gripping his throat, holding him suspended in midair. His neck was steaming, and the smell of burnt skin filled the air.

Despite his large frame and muscular arms, the burly mage struggled to free himself. His screams became more and more hoarse, eventually being reduced to throaty gasps. He kicked and thrashed wildly at the fiery knight Lucas had summoned. I knew I would never forget the look on his face as his body fell limp.

I tore my eyes away when the professor's body caught fire, burning through his clothes and skin as he was cooked alive for everyone to see.

I had to push away my desire to run. Had I made the wrong choice? I knew that professor. I remembered him showing me a picture he had taken with his three-year-old daughter. I had told him it was a waste of money—getting a portrait would've been much cheaper—but he had just grinned stupidly, cradling the picture as if it were actually his child.

What would happen to his family now?

I felt the urge to vomit, but I was able to hold firm. Still, I was dazed enough to almost be struck squarely in the chest when another robed man launched a fireball at me. I barely managed to parry the spell.

It was chaos. The professors who weren't fighting against Lucas were trying their best to lead the remaining students away from the area. Over by the bell tower, Clive was lifting Tessia from the ground, but then was knocked away by one of the injured mana beasts. The few other students I'd brought with me from Professor Glory's class were doing their best against the five remaining robed mages.

To my right were the three surviving professors, including Professor Glory. She was badly injured, her bloody right hand pressed against her side, her free hand barely able to hold onto her sword. About a dozen yards away, Lucas stood at the center of a storm of spells, seemingly untouchable.

Gritting my teeth, I ran toward Clive. I knew what Professor Glory would have wanted me to do. I had to save the students while the professors were keeping Lucas busy.

Gathering mana into my weapon as I picked up speed, I began muttering a chant. A swirling cone of fire gathered around my blade as I speared the discolored grizzly wolf that had Clive pinned down, then helped him back up. I opened my mouth to speak, but something slammed into me, jerking me into the air.

Clive's eyes widened and I saw his lips mouth my name, but, strangely, I couldn't hear a sound.

It wasn't just him; I couldn't hear any sounds.

Then I saw it—a stone spike protruding from my stomach.

Dropping my sword, I reached down and touched it. There was blood—my blood.

The sounds came back in a barrage of shouts and screams that hammered at my ears.

My eyes darted back and forth from my bloody hands to the spike coming out of my abdomen. I wanted to turn around to see what had happened, but I realized my feet were dangling in the air.

I closed my eyes; perhaps I was hallucinating. When I opened them and looked once more, the reality dawned on me—I was dying.

I saw Curtis rushing toward me, shoving the stunned Clive out of his way.

"Claire!" I saw Curtis's mouth form the word, but it sounded muffled, almost as if I were hearing him call from a different room.

Everything was moving slowly. I watched Kathyln jump off Grawder and dash toward me, both of her hands covering her mouth in shock. Her voice was the same inaudible, muffled noise, differing from Curtis's voice only in pitch.

I tried to speak, but all I could manage was a wet gurgle.

I thought of my father: his firm gaze, his eyes drooping slightly from age. He had been the one who had taught me the importance of what the Bladeheart name represented. Would he be proud if he saw me now?

Just as I felt everything fading, I heard it—a blood-curdling roar piercing through the heavens. It was a deep, rumbling thunder that shook the ground, and the spike that was lodged through me vibrated along with it.

Even at the brink of death, I still somehow felt fear—not the sort of fear that had kept me from moving earlier, but one that made my body want to instinctively bow in reverence.

In this state of near-death, I thought for a moment that I had somehow hallucinated this sound, but then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it: The unmistakable figure of a winged beast, one that every adventurer—every person—had hoped to catch a glimpse of.

A dragon.

It was nothing remotely close to any of the drawings my mother had shown me in books to scare me as a child. No, this dragon made those look cute by comparison.

It was about the size of a small house, with two horns protruding from each side of its sharp head and iridescent eyes that could freeze even a veteran adventurer. It was a manifestation of both sovereignty and ferocity. Most of the books I had read as a child described a dragon's scales as precious, shiny jewels, but this dragon's scales were such a rich, opaque black that they seemed to make its shadow look gray in comparison.

As impressive and awe-inspiring as the dragon was, though, my heart began to truly tremble in fear when I saw the boy below it.

The unmistakable auburn hair and familiar uniform... Each step he took displaying the subtlest, faintest, yet most unshakable confidence I had ever seen.

And seeping from him, surrounding him like an aura, was a blatant rage, so

fierce and violent that, uncontained, I felt sure it would burn me to ashes. The very air seemed to warp around him, and the earth beneath him crumbled under his might.

I gasped out a choked laugh at how foolish I had been for comparing him to Lucas. As my senses dimmed, my one regret was not being able to see Lucas's expression of defeat in the end.

## THE CALM BEFORE

## LUCAS WYKES

Staring down at the professors as they struggled to stand back up—the very mages that I strove to be like—it was clear to me that their lives were in my hands. With my newfound powers, these so-called "elites" were now nothing more than ants to me.

Amplified cognitive processing capabilities for higher levels of spell casting.

A nearly unlimited pool of mana for me to access and utilize.

Heightened reflexes, along with enhanced physical prowess and dexterity.

The elixir Draneeve had given me had fulfilled its purpose. Just as he had promised, it truly brought forth my full potential.

From an early age, it had been obvious that I was a gifted mage. However, my older brother Bairon outshone me, and my accomplishments had never satisfied my family's expectations. I had spent my childhood chasing after his insurmountable shadow, but no longer—now I had finally surpassed him.

Having easily wiped out the distinguished professors of this academy, I believed I had actually transcended the realm of mortals, incomparable to even the highest of human, elven, and dwarven mages.

So why did I suddenly like an icy claw had gripped my innards, twisting and freezing my insides?

The palpable pressure in the air seemed to make the force of gravity in the vicinity stronger as he approached.

Beads of cold sweat began forming, seeping into my clothes. I instinctively took a step back.

Was I afraid?

That was impossible. With my newfound powers, I was invincible. I was all-powerful. I was perfect.

"Welcome to the party, Arthur. You're just in time," I jeered, satisfied with the calm timbre of my voice.

He said nothing, just continued walking toward me at a deliberately slow pace.

My gaze shifted from Arthur to the obsidian dragon behind him. I had read in a book that the dragon race had already been hunted into extinction. Normally the sight of the large, fearsome creature would have petrified me, but at this point, compared to the terrifying intensity emanating from Arthur, his dragon seemed no more threatening than a common lizard.

His steps never faltered, never swayed, as he approached the bell tower. I couldn't make out the expression on his face; his eyes were covered by his hair.

The field was deathly silent. Even the senseless mana beasts that Draneeve controlled instinctively knew to prostrate themselves in submission.

"Impressive pet. Did you think it could help you now? Look around you. All this—it was done by me! Those professors who were so highly regarded? I stepped on them like disease-ridden pests," I chuckled, taking a few steps toward the boy I had once regarded as my equal.

The dragon behind him let out a deafening roar. The surrounding audience winced in fear, but I didn't.

No. As much as I hated to admit it, it wasn't the dragon causing this feeling of unease; it was Arthur.

Unaffected by my taunts, he wordlessly made his way toward me.

Some of the students had already defeated Draneeve's minions; only a few mana beasts remained on my side. However, they were petrified with fear—

though whether that was due to Arthur or the dragon, I had no way of knowing.

As he got closer, it dawned on me... He wasn't even looking at me. His gaze had never been directed at me.

I was stunned. My feet stayed glued to the ground as he simply strode past, ignoring me and everyone else here.

How dare he! I could easily crush him right now; he should be pleading, begging for me to spare him and his friends.

But instead, he had the audacity to treat me like I was invisible.

My clenched fists turned white.

Arthur passed by everyone else, disregarding his dead or dying peers and friends, then kneeled down in front of the elf princess. His dragon craned its neck down toward her as well, and for that long breath of a moment, there was only silence.

I knew exactly what to do, and my lips curled up into a smirk. Let's see him ignore this.

"She was crying for you, you know," I taunted.

No reaction.

"Oh sure, she stayed strong at first. That made it all the more satisfying to see her break down," I chuckled.

His shoulders twitched.

His dragon looked back at me, its eyes piercing me with a ferocity that might have frightened me once.

"You see, I wanted to play with your little elf princess some more, but Draneeve told me not to lay a hand on her. I was going to disobey at first but then an idea struck me—what better way to break you than to have you lie helplessly on the ground as you watch me cripple the girl you care for so much?" My laughter echoed throughout the academy as everyone watched, unable to muster up the courage to even utter a word.

The dragon let out a grunt and looked like it was about to charge at me, then

it abruptly froze.

My face twitched in rage as Arthur wordlessly gazed at his little elf lover.

"Arthur Leywin! You dare ignore me?" I roared. "You think you're so much better than me? Let's see you go easy on me now! I'll break every bone in your body so you can only cry helplessly as I desecrate Tessia right—"

The words caught in my throat as the ground underneath Arthur abruptly splintered and crumpled like a sheet of paper, making me stumble.

I regained my balance and looked back up at Arthur, whose back was still to me as he gently stroked the elf princess's head. I was suddenly hit with the same sensation as earlier—like the frigid, emotionless grip of a demon, twisting at my insides, wringing the air out of my lungs.

Air escaped my throat in choppy, shallow gasps, as if the wind had been knocked out of me.

I was unable to compose myself. I could feel my hands trembling. Then I realized it wasn't just my hands; my whole body shuddered uncontrollably from its very core.

What was happening to me? Why was I reacting this way toward some mere boy? He was no older than me, and I was more powerful than even the professors of this famed institution. It should have been impossible for him to be stronger than me, yet... what was this sense of—

He turned around.

I would never have thought something as simple as eye contact could be so terrifying, but then his pale blue eyes, sharp as a knife, met mine, and the remaining air in my lungs was sucked out.

And suddenly, I realized what I had been feeling the entire time, the word to describe the emotions I couldn't grasp.

No! I refuse to admit this!

I ignored the inaudible scream of protest deep in my mind, the one that was begging me to flee, to escape in the opposite direction from *him*.

"Oh, am I finally worthy of your attention?" I spat mockingly, struggling to

keep my voice from shaking.

"Lucas."

Arthur was a peasant, his background so banal that his entire existence would normally amount to less worth than a retired mule, while I had been born into the Wykes family, which birthed the most talented mages this continent had ever seen. Yet his voice rang with such authority that I almost kneeled on instinct.

"I thought of you as nothing more than a mere wasp I deemed unnecessary to kill," Arthur continued with a chill edge to his voice as he moved toward me. "But even the holiest of saints would swat a wasp down, without hesitation, if it dared to sting him." His emotionless eyes, empty and frozen, never broke contact with mine, and a tangible bloodlust gripped at my limbs like shackles. He was comparing me to a bug. No, he truly *saw me* as a bug. Yet any words of rebuttal or protest refused to leave my mouth.

*Why* ...

It wasn't supposed to be like this. My powers should now be greater than his. So why was this happening? He was just a boy, a year younger than me—how could he frighten me more than Draneeve did? How many legions of men and beasts had he murdered that he possessed such a suffocating, oppressive killing intent?

Even the very earth seemed heedful of Arthur, and the ground sank down with each step he took.

My heart pounded harder and harder against my ribcage, as if it wanted to break out and escape. My vision blurred and cold beads of sweat rolled down my forehead and into my eyes.

Tearing my gaze away from Arthur, I focused on Tessia. The dragon had curled up protectively around the elf princess, leaving me no opening to make use of her.

As Arthur silently advanced closer, I saw it. In his eyes was a raging tempest, hungry to create mayhem, just barely contained.

But I was Lucas Wykes, second-born of Otis Vayhur Wykes! Elite mages of Xyrus Academy had been brought to their knees by my overwhelming strength. Arthur was nothing but a lowly peasant—his only worth was having the luck to be born with a decent talent for magic!

My mind snapped into a state of desperation and frenzy as I fought down the burning desire to run. Him, scare me? Never. I would rather die than plead for my life.

## THE STORM

# **ARTHUR LEYWIN**

Tessia was all right. Bruises and scrapes were visible on her smooth, pale skin, but thankfully they were only surface wounds.

She was okay.

It seemed like she had been drugged with an anesthetic to keep her unconscious temporarily. Yes, that's better. This way, she won't have to be awake for all this...

She wouldn't have to witness what I was about to do.

Sylvie, protect Tess. I'll be enough to handle him, I reassured my bond.

This was my fault. I had been a fool to let Lucas live this long. This world had made me soft.

My head pounded as I walked toward Lucas.

Nothing else mattered. Not now. Not until I took care of the pest.

"S-stay back!" Lucas stammered, a crazed look visible in his eyes.

He prepared a spell as he retreated. I wondered if he realized that his spells were in fact eating away at his lifeforce. It didn't matter; I'd kill him before he drained himself.

"Hell's Rain!" he roared in desperation, releasing his spell.

Dozens of flaming spheres spread around him, levitating and growing increasingly larger every second.

He grinned madly as his body visibly withered under the burden of the spell.

The red, flaming spheres turned blue as he further refined his magic.

It seemed he was planning to take not just me, but half the school down with him.

'Papa...' Sylvie's worried voice echoed in my mind.

It's fine.

I could let him kill himself with his own spell right now, but he didn't deserve that; that would be too merciful a death for him. I needed him alive, at least until I got some answers.

I wanted to destroy him instantly, but the attack—this whole disaster—couldn't have been done by Lucas alone. Someone had to have forcibly overexerted his mana core to the point where, even if I didn't kill him now, he would probably die on his own.

Whatever he had taken had made it possible for him to convert his life force into mana, thus draining him of his vitality. The odd discoloration of his skin, the color of the mana beasts present—it was too much of a coincidence. I had to assume it had something to do with the Vritras.

"Judging by the look on your face, you don't know what's about to happen. Did you think you could come out of this alive?" Lucas hissed, drooling from one side of his mouth.

Then, "Die!" he spat, releasing his spell.

Dozens of the flaming blue orbs, each one capable of burning down a building, shot toward me like cannonballs.

I let out a breath and muttered, "Second phase."

My vision shifted into monochrome as I triggered Dragon's Awakening. The only colors I could register were the particles of ambient mana.

Absolute Zero.

Water attribute mana accumulated around me, heeding my commands. The very air seemed to freeze as a curtain of white flame erupted around me just before Lucas's spell bombarded me.

I didn't have much time left in my second phase before the recoil hit, and I

needed answers before that happened.

As the cloud of steam and debris began to clear, I could make out Lucas's figure, the deranged look on his face wiped clean and replaced by one of utter shock.

"How is that p-possible? No, it wasn't supposed to be like this. How are you suddenly able to use ice-attribute magic?" he babbled, as if he had just seen a ghost.

Unrelenting, Lucas began chanting another spell. I was surprised to see that, judging by the amount of mana gathered in his right hand, it was even more powerful than the one prior.

"Creation Form!" he spat with a confident smirk.

It was a type of spell I'd never seen before. As mana congregated, it manifested into a flaming blue spear. The mana particles hadn't simply formed the *shape* of a spear, but instead seemed to have transmuted into an *actual* burning spear.

"I hope you survive this one too. That way you can watch as I make your precious princess kiss my feet," he jeered, launching the flaming spear.

I shot out an arc of black lightning with my right hand as I caught the shaft of Lucas's spear with my left. I lurched back from the force and a cloud of steam arose with an audible hiss at the collision of fire and ice.

Lucas's shrill howl of pain pierced my eardrums. "My arm! It *hurts!*" he screamed.

I continued walking toward Lucas, who was pawing at the empty space where his left arm used to be.

"White Fire," I muttered, and my left hand ignited in a pearl-colored flame that ate up Lucas's burning spear.

I was less than a foot away from Lucas, who continued to back away from me. "Desecrate'? 'Kiss your feet'?" I recited through gritted teeth.

"This... this isn't fair! Lightning magic? You're a q-quadra-elemental..." Lucas's voice trailed off, his lips trembling as he stared in disbelief at my

lightning-clad arm.

"Yes, I am."

Lucas's bloodcurdling scream tore through the air as I gripped his remaining arm. The flame surrounding my left hand began to spread, slowly freezing his arm down to the very molecules.

I tightened my grip, and his arm shattered like glass.

Lucas stared at the crumbling shards of what used to be his left arm. "N-no...

How dare you! I'm Lucas Wykes!" he spat out as he fell weakly on his behind, his legs pushing away from me.

I kicked him to his back and he gave me a venomous glare, any trace of sanity gone. Placing my foot on his right leg, I pinned him down.

He wasn't human anymore. Not at this point.

"Downforce," I muttered.

Lucas screamed and spat out a mouthful of blood, his leg crumpled into a mess of crimson. Shattered bone fragments dotted the pool of red seeping through the cracks in the ground made by the increased gravitational force of my augmented foot.

Another bone-splitting crunch echoed through the atmosphere and a shrill howl of pain promptly followed as I did the same to his other leg.

I thought of how the Vritra had left Alea—limbless and slowly dying inside the depths of a dungeon. It was only fitting to do the same to someone so vile.

Picking Lucas up by the scruff of his uniform, I slapped his face to get his attention. "Who was responsible for all this?" I asked.

His glassy eyes met mine, and his expression deformed into a scowl before he spat blood at my face.

"You think you'll get any sort of answers from me?" he said with a deranged laugh. "I'll tell you this, though—that incompetent fool you call your best friend? He's gone. They took him away to who knows where. I'll bet he's dead already!" His laughter was cut off abruptly as I dropped him to the

ground with a thud.

I had been so worried about Tessia that it hadn't registered in my mind—Elijah had been caught up in this as well. I lifted my gaze and properly scanned my surroundings for the first time since I had arrived. I could see students and professors peering at me with unmistakable expressions of fear.

Yet, out of all those faces, Elijah's was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did they take him?" I roared, hoping someone—anyone—would answer.

"They went through there," a hoarse voice said—Clive. He pointed to an odd anvil-shaped contraption. An abnormal amount of mana particles fluctuated in and around it.

"Who was it that took him?"

"A mage. He called himself Draneeve," Clive replied, picking himself up.

Was it a portal? Were my suspicions correct? Had the mastermind behind this really come from Alacrya?

"It doesn't matter. He's probably dead, anyway. And the rest of you will be too, when *he* comes back!" Lucas snickered as blood pooled around his mutilated legs.

As I stood looking down at Lucas—a talented mage raised with the belief that his magical strength was the only measure of his self-worth, now glaring at me with neither guilt nor remorse for his actions and betrayal—I could almost pity him.

#### Almost.

Lucas could have truly tortured and crippled Tessia if I hadn't arrived in time. His earlier words still rang in my mind, haunting me with images of what might have happened if I hadn't made it in time.

I placed my foot between his mangled legs, on the only extremity left on his body aside from his head.

"W-what are you doing?" His voice was tinged with fear.

I looked him dead in the eye and responded with the only words that seemed

appropriate. "Taking measures to ensure your filth won't spread to the next generation."

His eyes widened at the impending realization, and the stubs of his arms flailed. He opened his mouth to say something, but I didn't let him speak.

"May your suffering last into your next life," I recited indifferently. "Downforce."

# **OUTCOME**

# ARTHUR LEYWIN

The firm, mana-imbued stamp of my foot against Lucas's pelvis created a cacophony of snapping bones, squelching flesh, and splintering gravel, accompanied by a shrill screech.

At this point, Lucas—an accomplice to so much havoc and death, the one who had driven me to this point—was now nothing more than a dying body. His mouth frothed, his eyes rolled back into his head, and he mumbled incoherently. I lifted my foot from the blood-soaked pomace of the one who had dared to harm those dear to me, and felt glad once again that Tess was asleep.

The disaster that had befallen us was over. The perpetrator who had killed three professors and was responsible for the deaths of many more was now fatally wounded, slowly dying.

Yet no one rejoiced. There was still fear in everyone's eyes—but where it had once been directed toward Lucas, it was now directed at me. A palpable tension radiated from everyone present, student and staff alike.

It had been a long time since I had received stares like these. I had relished it then, priding myself on my domineering strength, but now, the weight of their fear rested on my shoulders as a lonely burden, and I knew none of them would be able to look at me the same again.

A searing pain spread throughout my body; I was being forcibly reverted out

of Dragon's Awakening. My hair shortened as my long, silvery-white mane changed back to its normal length and auburn shade. The runes that ran down my arms and back faded and my vision returned to normal, although it was strained.

The recoil was less intense than it had been when I had gone up against the elderwood guardian. I didn't pass out this time, but I hadn't used my mana very efficiently. I had overexerted myself using gravity magic, trying to make a statement. I wouldn't have been able to access that type of magic without the help of my beast will, and I was beginning to feel the predictable repercussions.

I was barely able to keep from toppling over as I lifted my hand to deliver the final blow. A sudden piercing ringing sound interrupted me, drawing everyone's attention.

The red-tinted barrier that had surrounded the school shattered from above. Broken fragments of the barrier fluttered down, reflecting the vibrancy of the Aurora Constellate, which was almost in full bloom in the night sky. The bloodstained academy instantly turned into a scene from a fairy tale.

Descending amongst the shimmering rain of the shards of broken barrier were three figures. Even before I could see them clearly, the terrifying pressure they radiated told me exactly who they were.

The Lances.

A strained, gurgled gasp escaped from Lucas; he was trying to speak.

Looking down, I saw that his eyes were fixed on the Lances.

He spoke again, this time more distinctly. "B-brother..."

Before I could even process what he had said, a sudden surge of light struck me in the chest, smashing me straight into the bell tower with such force that I broke through the mana-enforced wall and became buried underneath the rubble.

Vomiting up blood, and what felt like my intestines, I tried pulling myself out, but my entire body seemed fused to the wall. Confused and disoriented, I

tried, with my blurred vision, to determine who had cast the spell.

It was one of the Lances. I wasn't able to make out more than an indistinct figure, but before he was able to fire another shot, I caught sight of Sylvie unleashing a blast of fire at him.

'Sylvie, no. You can't fight them,' I called out to her, my voice sounding weak even in my head, but it was too late. Her target blocked the blast like it was a toy ball before one of the other Lances trapped Sylvie in a dome of ice. Even though every bone in my body felt as if it were being sawed in half and my head pulsed like it had been punctured repeatedly, I was able to make a bit more sense of what was happening.

The Lance who had trapped Sylvie in the cage of ice was a woman with long white hair; from the looks of it, Sylvie wasn't able to melt it or break free. Despite the position I was in, I felt relieved that she had only been caged. It sure as hell beat the other options the Lance could've chosen.

Meanwhile, the Lance who had attacked me had kneeled down beside Lucas. He seemed to be fairly young—maybe in his late twenties—and even through my blurred vision I could see a very distinct resemblance to Lucas. From the straight, high-bridged nose up to his narrow, lofty gaze, the two looked nearly identical

The last, much older Lance didn't waste any time. He had gathered and organized the remaining students and professors, and was already interviewing some of the students, nodding in response to their accounts and turning his head to look at me.

Between my disorientation and how worried I was for Sylvie, it was only then that I began to piece it all together: Lucas had called out 'brother' to the Lance who had attacked me.

Before I could curse my own bad luck, the Lance—Lucas's brother—stormed toward me, his body releasing a torrent of yellow lightning.

"Death is not enough for the likes of you. To do something so atrocious to a Wykes, to my brother..." He didn't speak loudly. In fact, he almost sounded

calm, yet his voice carried an alarming clarity that felt as if he had spoken directly into my ear. A storm of electricity trailed around him, crackling and snapping at everything its path as he made his way toward me.

I tried to move my body, but as I struggled desperately, I realized I had been essentially crucified to the wall by what seemed like electromagnetism.

Despite the situation, I couldn't help but be impressed by the control he exerted over lightning. For him, there was no need to concentrate on manipulating mana into lightning like I had to. Lightning simply bent and danced to his will as if it were another limb on his body. Turning my gaze away from the lightning-clad Lance and toward Sylvie, who was still desperately trying to escape from the ice cage, I finally realized just what white core mages were capable of.

"Bairon, you are not to lay a hand on him," the older Lance ordered as he finished talking with one of the professors.

Bairon turned to look back at his comrade. "That boy tormented and humiliated my brother before killing him, Olfred, and you're saying that I am not to harm him? Do you wish to go against me as well?" The coils of lightning surrounding Bairon thickened, obliterating everything they touched. "The boy was the one who saved everyone here from *your* brother. And since when did you grow enough hair on your balls to think that you could challenge me?" the man named Olfred spat back.

I used this chance to try and shift back into second phase, hoping I could muster enough strength to at least escape, but it was useless. My body wasn't even able to gather mana.

Turning my attention back to the two Lances, I could tell that Bairon was visibly confused. Still, whether it was because of his pride or his doubt, he chose to persist.

"Do not test me, Olfred. I am in no mood to participate in your folly. My brother died in my arms; it is only just that I repay his killer in kind." He whipped his head around, glaring back at me with pure venom in his eyes.

Bairon began making his way toward me again when two coal-black knights erupted from the ground beside him, grabbing his arms.

"Olfred!" Bairon roared as he struggled in the grasp of the two knights, which seemed unaffected by the lightning surrounding him.

Bairon unleashed a shockwave, knocking away the two stone knights before he charged toward Olfred. Lightning manifested around his flattened hand, turning it into a crackling lance. Olfred had already turned his entire right arm into a gauntlet of lava, but just as the two were about to exchange blows, the female Lance appeared between them.

"Enough." Instantly, both Bairon and Olfred were trapped up to their necks in coffins of ice. There was no gradual decrease in temperature of the air or water in the atmosphere to trigger the freezing process. The space around the two Lances simply froze, and despite the gauntlet of lava surrounding Olfred's right arm, the ice didn't even hiss or steam.

"Bairon, you are not the one to make this decision. It is up to the Council to determine what to do with the boy... and the dragon," she said, her voice so emotionless that Kathyln suddenly seemed like the protagonist in a soap opera by comparison. Even as she stared at my giant, obsidian dragon, there was no reaction; she regarded Sylvie as something akin to a lamp post.

Assuming that the two men had cooled down, the female Lance dissipated the coffin of ice. Bairon whipped around and shot a bullet of lightning directly at me, which was immediately blocked by an ice wall conjured with a swift motion of her hand. The female Lance swung her arm fluidly toward Bairon's neck as a thin sword of ice manifested in her hand. She drew a crisp arc as she slashed, just deep enough to draw blood, and kept her blade pressed against Bairon's throat.

"Insubordination will not be tolerated," she said tersely as ice slowly spread from the tip of her blade onto his neck.

By this time, I had already given up on escaping. If I had ever thought that shifting into second phase might give me a chance to run away, I withdrew

that notion as I watched the female Lance manhandle the other two with frightening speed.

Bairon eventually relented, not missing the chance to give me one more deathly glare.

After less than an hour, the Lances had gathered enough information from the witnesses to piece together exactly what had happened. As a result, they allowed me the privilege of being unmagnetized by Bairon and, instead, having my legs and arms shackled together in cuffs of ice. I took the opportunity to tell the female Lance that the dragon was my bond, and was rewarded with the first change in expression I had seen from her: a slight lift of her left eyebrow. When Sylvie transformed back into her miniature fox form, she was freed from her ice cage and chained to my shackles.

Leaving me under the guard of one of Olfred's summoned knights, Bairon and the female Lance worked to completely destroy the barrier while the older Lance herded all the students and professors, with the help of his other ten summoned knights.

I had to admire the barrier that covered the school. It was very well-devised, allowing access but restricting anyone from going back out. Moreover, the Lances had to break the barrier first, which meant that it most likely restricted who was allowed to enter.

Eventually, after the two Lances completely destroyed the barrier, a team of mages sent by the Adventurers Guild and Mages Guild hurriedly made their way to the scene, promptly healing all those who needed immediate attention and taking away everyone who had been injured to a medical facility. Tess and the other captives were still unconscious.

It was chaos—the sobbing families of the students involved; people who seemed to be reporters, furiously scribbling into their notebooks; and noisy bystanders all gathered around the front gate of the academy, hoping to get a better glimpse of what had happened.

Fortunately, the two guilds had taken precautionary measures to make sure no one came too close to the academy. There were gates erected all around the campus to keep anyone from trespassing, with uniformed guards stationed every few yards.

Forced to stay behind until further instructions were given, I made sure to keep close to the female Lance so that Bairon had no way of launching another quick attack at me.

"Arthur!"

I whipped my head around to find the source of the familiar voice. After a few moments, I spotted my family waving at me from behind the gates. Even from this distance, I could see the look of concern that was visibly etched on my parents' faces. My father even tried to jump over the gate, only to be held back by one of the guards.

My sister was clutching my mother's sleeve, and I could tell she had been crying. Next to her were Vincent and Tabitha who, I assumed, were searching for their daughter.

"Am I allowed to talk to my family?" I asked the female Lance, my voice sounding much more feeble than I had expected.

Bairon immediately replied, "After what you did to my brother, you think you have the right to make requests like—"

"I'll take you to your family, boy," Olfred interrupted. I had barely enough strength in my limbs to manage an uncoordinated hobble, so Olfred made one of his knights carry me there. Being held over the shoulder like a sack of rice wasn't exactly the way I wanted to appear in front of the crowds of people, but I was in no position to say otherwise.

The summoned knight let me down surprisingly gently in front of my family. Olfred stood behind me, turning his back. Whether the gesture was made out of courtesy or out of caution, lest Bairon shoot at us both from the back, I didn't know.

There was a tense moment of silence as they stared at me, unable to find the

right words. I looked down at my body and I cursed under my breath. I had dried blood crusted around my mouth and on my clothes from when I had vomited. My clothes were in tatters and I wondered if I was as pale as I felt. All in all, I thought I probably looked like a homeless vampire who had just feasted on someone, then proceeded to dance in the pool of their blood.

"Hi, Mom, Dad. Hi, Ellie." I tried to smile, but that seemed to make them even more worried.

"Arthur, my baby, a-are you okay?" My mother stretched her arm through the fence and I gripped her hand.

"Son, what happened in there?" my father asked, worry creasing his brows.

"I'm fine, Mom. I've seen better days, but I'll be okay with a bit of rest. And even I don't know everything myself, Dad." I shook my head, tightening my grip on my mother's hand to reassure her.

I turned my gaze to Ellie, who was still looking at me with an expression that seemed to be undecided whether to be angry, sad, or relieved.

"Why are you cuffed?" my father spoke again, his eyes on the transparent shackles that bound my feet and hands to each other.

I didn't know how to respond. I didn't want to simply tell them I had killed someone and was probably going to be under investigation. My father might understand, but I didn't want to have to say it in front of Mother and Ellie.

As I was looking for the words to properly explain, I noticed the female Lance approaching with an open scroll in her hands. I shuffled my bound feet to face her.

Without making eye contact, she began reading aloud from the scroll. "By the power vested in me by the Council of Dicathen, I, General Varay of the Six Lances, do hereby announce: Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin, the Council has decreed that, due to your recent actions of excessive violence and the inconclusive circumstances involved, your mana core is to be restrained, your title as a mage is to be stripped, and you are to be incarcerated until further judgment…"

The crinkling sound as she rolled up the communication scroll echoed through my mind, clearly audible despite the massive crowd gathered around me. She finally looked up to meet my gaze. "...Effective immediately."