BEGINNING AFTER THE END by TurtleMe

ASCENSION

VOLUME EIGHT

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THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

- VOLUME 8 - Ascension

-AUTHOR-TurtleMe

[TurtleMe]

254 HELLO DARKNESS

Darkness. Complete, utter darkness.

I was floating, hovering in a field of reflectionless black.

There was nothing else—no sound, taste, smell, touch...

It was peaceful at first. I felt like I was both nothing and everything at the same time. I was a tiny speck in a vast universe, yet nothing else existed aside from me.

As time passed, though, I recalled more of what I was. I was a human... I had hands, feet, a body...

I tried curling my fingers and toes. I tried flaring my nostrils, opening my mouth. I couldn't feel anything. There wasn't even the sensation of breath in my lungs or the beating of my heart.

Fear took hold quickly, but even that was ambiguous, with no physiological signs to indicate my panic.

My panic... I was more than hands and feet... I had a name... I was Grey, King Grey... but I was also General Arthur Leywin, the Lance, son of Alice and... and Reynolds...

Names spun in my mind, names like Ellie, Tessia, Virion... Sylvie...

No. I recoiled from the names, pulling away instinctively like a hand from a flame, unprepared for the pain associated with them.

I tried everything to ground myself to something. I gnashed my teeth like an animal. I clawed at the endless emptiness around me as if I might rip the blinding cover from my eyes. I screamed soundlessly into the void.

Despite my efforts, I didn't seem capable of enforcing my will upon the world around me. I simply existed.

And I grew more and more angry with each subjective second that passed.

Insanity effervesced, bubbling out to every corner of my consciousness. Like my fear, though, the madness was without substance. None of the symptoms of insanity could be materialized within the nothingness around me, the nothingness that contained me.

Fear, anxiety, and paranoia gripped my insides—if I even had insides—boiling away all thought, but even the madness and terror couldn't exist for long in the void, and as all emotion bled out of me, I felt one all-consuming sensation.

Boredom.

Time flowed. I could sense it like I could sense my own consciousness, but I had no reference for the time that moved passed me. Had I been in this disembodied state of non-existence for an instant or an eternity?

It was only when I felt a slight prickle on my arm—yes, my arm—that I jolted out of my stupor.

I had felt something. A few moments later, I felt another prickle, this time spreading across my chest. Those pinpoints of sensation soon escalated into sharp, piercing pains, and I welcomed each increasingly agonizing round of burning pain that stabbed at every millimeter of my body; the pain was proof that I existed outside my consciousness.

The void faded into gray light, nearly imperceptible at first, then grew brighter and more solid as my vision returned, then condensed into a single white light, beckoning me, and I realized that I had experienced something like this once before.

Then it clicked.

A wave of panic overtook me as I approached the light.

No. No! Please don't tell me I'm reincarnating again.

My eyes shot open; my blurry gaze was level with the ground, my cheek pressed flat against a smooth, hard floor.

I tried to move, to reassure myself that I was not once again a newborn. I couldn't start over again, not now. There was too much left to do, so many people I had to protect.

I struggled to even lift my head, the surges of pain still racking my body.

The fleshy construct felt foreign to me, heavy and stiff like wearing a suit of armor designed for a much larger man.

I pried open my lips and forced a note from my throat. "Ah... ahhh."

My own clear, familiar baritone rang in my ears, easing some of the panic.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed. It was like trying to swallow a scorpion, but it revealed something important.

Teeth! I have teeth!

Though I didn't know where I was, why I felt like I had been knitted together from wet tissue, or what the hell had happened in that pocket dimension, at least I hadn't been reborn as an infant. Again.

Trying to lift my arms proved just as difficult as if I had been, however. I might as well have been trying to uproot one of the centuries-old trees in Elshire Forest, because my body wouldn't budge. Every motion resulted in another wave of pain, like dozens of tiny demons were pummeling me with spiked maces that had been lit on fire.

After several attempts to push myself up from the floor—and passing out several times from the pain that came after—I gave up, gazing around the room in angry, defeated silence.

I was in a large circular hall. Smooth white pillars held the ceiling up. A warm ethereal light glowed brightly from sconces along the walls, spaced out evenly every few feet. Familiar but indecipherable runes were etched in between each sconce.

I pried my gaze away from the lights and focused on the ground—or more specifically, what was on the ground.

Blood. Lots of it.

But the blood was dried brown and caked in the corners where the floor met the walls. Still unable to move, I couldn't investigate closely, but it seemed like this was some sort of grounds for injured people—or injured beasts.

Vulnerable as I was, the thought of a bloodthirsty mana beast standing behind me caused a painful tremor to shiver through my body. Since I hadn't already been eaten, though, I had to assume I was safe for the moment.

I tried moving again to little avail. I still felt like I was in some sort of shell, as if this body wasn't my own.

My eyes were drawn back to the details of the walls, ground, and pillars. Due to my limited field of vision, however, there wasn't much that I could make out, and when I ran out of distractions, unwanted and painful memories began to resurface.

I remembered my fight against Nico, who had reincarnated into Elijah's body—or perhaps Elijah had always been Nico. Once, a very long time ago, he had told me how his memories before arriving in the kingdom of Darv were all a blur.

I remembered Tess sacrificing herself because I couldn't win against Cadell, the Scythe who had killed Sylvia.

I remembered harnessing aether to create not only a pocket dimension but a teleportation gate using the medallion crafted by the ancient mages. I had known by then that I wasn't going to survive. My body had continued to function only due to Sylvia's dragon will and aether keeping me alive, but I had realized that, once I withdrew Realmheart, I would suffer the full impact of my exploitation of mana and aether, and that the backlash would cause my feeble human body to crumble.

I remembered my last moments with Sylvie, before she pushed me into the unstable portal. My memory of those moments in the pocket dimension was so clear that I could almost see Sylvie in front of me now. I closed my eyes, but that only made the memory feel more vivid, more real.

Tears bled out from between my tightly closed eyelids and slid down my cheeks, finally dripping onto the bloody floor beneath me. Despite myself, the memory of Sylvie disappearing right in front of me replayed over and over.

From the bond that we shared, I knew that she had used a powerful aether art to sacrifice her own physical body to save me.

I hated her for sacrificing herself.

But more than that, I hated myself.

I had been so caught up in trying to handle everything my way—to save Tess, to get my vengeance against Cadell, to confront and defeat Nico—that I took for granted that anything could ever happen to Sylvie, the only one who stood by me through it all.

I had assumed she'd always be with me.

Now, she was gone.

My stomach lurched and my chest tightened as I held back a dry sob. I squeezed my eyes shut, grinding my teeth to try and contain myself.

But I couldn't. I had lost Sylvie, even though I was supposed to protect her, even though she had been entrusted to me as an egg so that I could keep her safe from the Vritra... I had lost her trying to save everyone else.

I heaved, my shoulders convulsing as I let out guttural sobs that echoed mockingly across the room. "I'm... sorry. I-I'm so sorry... Sylv."

I lost myself for a while, sprawled on the cold stone floor, wallowing in grief and self-pity. In that moment, I wanted to stay that way, consigned to the purgatory of my fear and doubt and grief, but I was abruptly jolted out of my melancholy by the sensation of pin-pricks running up my entire body. It felt as if millions of insects were crawling all over me, beneath my skin.

A second wave came, stronger and more painful.

On the third wave, it felt like the millions of bugs underneath my skin erupted out of me, and I lost consciousness.

By the time I pried open my eyes and felt the cool stickiness of saliva pooled underneath my cheek, I knew I had been out for a while.

Peeling my face off of the wet floor, I rolled over onto my back.

I felt a brief moment of elation at the fact that I could actually move, but this was interrupted by an overwhelming sense of thirst.

Swallowing what little saliva I had left to moisten my dry throat, I pushed myself up onto my elbows. The motion felt off and my body was stiff and alien, but I was still excited about my new range of motion.

Sitting on the ground, I was immediately distracted again by the sight of my own hands.

"Strange..."

My hands were pale—almost white—and there wasn't a single flaw on them. The calluses on my palms, accumulated through years of wielding a sword, were gone. The scars on my knuckles were gone. Even the scars on my wrist that I had received from the toxic witch—the first retainer I had fought—were gone, replaced by smooth, unmarked skin.

It seemed like Sylvie had done much more than heal my wounds from abusing Realmheart Physique.

My arms were still toned with the muscles I had accumulated over years of training, but they were thinner. My hands also looked smaller and my fingers more delicate.

When my gaze shifted down to my forearms, more specifically my left forearm, I felt a sharp pang across my chest.

The mark was gone.

Panic rose in me once more as I began frantically turning my arm to see if it was on the other side somehow, but it wasn't. The mark that I had received after forming my bond with Sylvie had completely vanished alongside all of the scars and calluses.

"Before you get all weepy, look to your right," a clear, cynical voice said from nearby.

Turning to my right, I saw a translucent, rainbow-colored stone the size of my palm. My eyes widened, and I dove toward the colorful stone and grabbed it.

"I-is this...?"

"Yup. It's your bond," the voice said curtly.

A black will-o-wisp the size of my fist floated into view. Within the ball of dark light, two bright sparks glinted like eyes and a black slash below them made me think of a mouth twisted into a wry smile.

I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could continue, the will-o-wisp darted closer to me. It dipped, as if bowing.

"Behold, master. I—Regis, the mighty weapon gifted to you by the asuras so long ago—have finally manifested in all my glory!" the dark orb declared before... letting out a sigh. "Honestly, I wish you'd have been conscious for it. It was pretty damn impressive."

255 THE NEXT MESSAGE

Confusion gave way to surprise, then to anger.

"Why...?" I ground out through clenched teeth.

"Why what?" The will-o-wisp's light dimmed, and it twisted slightly in the air, like a dog tilting its head in confusion. I found the simplicity, the sentience of the expression infuriating.

"Why?!" I roared, funneling all my frustration, anger, and fear into the dry scream, feeling it tearing at my dehydrated throat but caring little in the moment. I lunged forward, taking a slow and painful swing at the black ball of flames.

My hand passed directly through the will-o-wisp, and I didn't have the strength to halt my forward momentum. I toppled forward, slamming my face hard on the smooth, cold floor.

"Hey, keep your hands to yourself, buddy!" the will-o-wisp snapped. "That is a major infringement of my bodily autonomy."

Heaving myself back up into a sitting position, I let my rage seethe and bubble within me as I stared at the spot on my left palm that Regis had come from.

"Why? Why the hell are you here *now*? After years of draining my mana, but doing nothing useful, why appear now?" I turned my glare on the black flame. "If you had come out earlier, I could've won. I could've saved everyone!" My voice cracked as I thought of my loved ones back on Dicathen, my vision blurring as tears welled up in my eyes.

"Well aren't you a ray of sunshine. The asuras would die trying to fight over a sentient weapon like me, yet here you are, moping about—"

"I needed you," I said, the words hissing past my lips in a bare whisper, tears dripping to the rust-red ground as I clawed at the smooth floor.

The will-o-wisp shook from side to side as if shaking its head, but remained silent. A small bubble of guilt bloomed somewhere deep in my stomach, but it wasn't my own. It was clearly Regis's feeling of guilt at not having been there, and the sting of my rebuke. I sighed. I was angry at Regis, but I also knew I was just using him as an excuse for my own failures.

As my tears ran dry, I became more aware of the burning in my parched throat. I needed to find something to drink.

"There's a pool of clean water here," Regis said. "Drink something before you cry yourself into a mummy."

I hesitated, distrustful of both the will-o-wisp and the water, but also angry at myself, angry at the dark place in my heart that was telling me to curl up in the corner and wait for the end. What was the point? I had failed, and had lost everything. Again. Then the small iridescent egg glistened in the corner of my eye.

"Yes, that's it. You can do it! Do it for that rock!" Regis said, bobbing up and down excitedly.

Pushing aside all of the emotions that weighed down on my body, I dragged myself in the direction Regis led me.

My milky, pale arms looked foreign to me as I crawled across the room. I still felt like I was in a full suit of armor despite being almost bare.

"Come on, that's a big strong boy now, almost there," Regis taunted, hovering around me like a fly I couldn't swat.

"Shut... up..." I wheezed, my lungs aching with the effort.

I focused my attention on the marble fountain beckoning to me, the water running so clearly and silently from the top that it looked like glass.

It required a herculean effort to pull myself up over the rounded base that held the water, but, still thinking of Sylvie, I heaved until, shaking and sweating, I could see down into the clear water. I immediately buried my head inside.

It felt like I had slammed my face into a wall of ice. I opened my mouth and gulped it all in, the water crisp and cool as it rushed down my throat.

I continued to swallow mouthfuls of water until I couldn't hold my breath any longer.

"Gah!" As I pulled my head out, gasping for breath, a curtain of beige covered my vision.

I brushed my hair out of my eyes, then grabbed a strand and stared at it incredulously. Regis chortled behind me.

"You're acting like a pup seeing its own tail for the first time."

Ignoring him, I looked down, seeing my reflection for the first time since waking up. My eyes widened.

The face staring back from the icy depths looked a lot like me, only a bit older, with sharper features and skin the same milky white as my arms.

The red scar around my throat, which I had also received from the retainer I faced at the Battle of Slore, was no longer there, showing only a smooth, long neck and Adam's apple.

But what shocked me the most were the changes in my hair and eyes. My eyes were a piercing gold and the color seemed to have been completely washed out of my once-auburn hair. My head of deep reddish-brown was now a pale wheat color, even lighter than Sylvie's hair in her human form.

My chest tightened at the sight of my reflection, my own hair and eyes now a constant reminder of my bond's sacrifice. This was accompanied by a pang of loss, however, like I'd become yet another step removed from my loved ones. The features I'd inherited from my parents were gone.

"I don't understand. What—" Searing pain ignited inside me, as if my mana core had suddenly caught on fire, and a scream burst from my throat.

My vision doubled and became hazy, then I heard a voice. It was one that I hadn't heard in a long time, but one I could never forget.

"Hello, Art, this is Sylvia."

My heart pounded against my ribs as excitement rose up to replace the burning pain in my core. "S-Sylvia?"

"I'm recording this at the same time as my first message to you, but I suspect that, for you, it has been quite some time since you've heard my voice. I suppose I should say that it has been a while."

I let out a laugh as I felt fresh tears stream down my cheeks.

"I'm conflicted to know that you're hearing this message. On the one hand, I'm proud that you've been able to get to where you are now. But the fact that you've had to push yourself to this point means that life has not been easy for you, perhaps even more difficult than your previous one."

Her tone had grown somber, her words heavy.

"Having gotten to this stage means that you've had to fight for your life against foes much stronger than you, and that could only be Agrona and the Vritra that serve him."

I bristled at the mention of Agrona's name, but Sylvia's voice only seemed sad... almost heartbroken.

"A war between Agrona and the asuras is inevitable, and Dicathen will likely be caught in the middle of it. There is much to tell you, but there is a limit to the amount of information I can store without it being traceable, so I shall be succinct.

"With my daughter as your bond and the fact that you are reborn, my father will most likely have taken extreme measures to bring you in, offering you training and guidance in exchange for using your talents in the war. And through your exposure to my people, you've certainly received a very one-sided story."

Again, Sylvia's voice was tinged with sadness.

"The tension between the Vritra and the other asuran clans is not as simple as you've been told. Unlike fairy tales and bedtime stories for children, life does not always have a good and bad side—only 'my side' and 'their side.'

"Agrona can't be forgiven for all of the atrocities he has committed over the centuries, but neither can the other asuras—myself included."

Confusion overwhelmed my thoughts, and my mind spun, trying to make sense of what Sylvia was saying, but I pulled myself back into the moment as she began speaking again, afraid to miss a single word.

"Agrona, who had always been fascinated by the lives of lessers, uncovered the ruins of a civilization of mages—mages that had learned to harness aether.

"It was Agrona who discovered why these ancient mages had fallen despite their technological and magical advancements. Centuries ago, the Indrath Clan had committed genocide against these ancient mages."

That doesn't make any sense! Why would the Indrath Clan kill off a—my question was interrupted as Sylvia's message continued.

"The Indrath Clan had been distinguished as leaders among the other asuran clans and were revered as beings closest to true gods, not just for our strength, but because our control over aether could not be replicated by any others. So when one of the emissaries from the Indrath Clan discovered a reclusive civilization of lessers that were able to harness these aetheric powers, the dragons grew resentful.

"Fearing that their power and authority could be questioned, the elders ordered for the... elimination... of the lessers. From what I've been told, unlike our clan, which had developed and trained our aether arts for battle, these ancient mages had only sought to improve life through technological advancements."

Sylvia paused, letting silence linger in my mind as I imagined the inevitable results of a battle between the Indrath Clan and a civilization of peaceful lessers.

"This act of genocide has been kept as the Indrath Clan's darkest secret, kept from the other asura and even many of our own clansfolk. The mages' technology has been concealed and studied, but because of how elaborate their underground cities are, and because of the great pains they took to lock their knowledge away from the asuras, we were never sure if we had truly discovered all that they had hidden.

"Agrona found one of these concealed ruins and threatened to expose the Indrath Clan for their wrongdoings, claiming that they had violated the noblesse oblige that we asuras held over lessers. You can imagine how my clan elders reacted to this. Knowing that Agrona loved to disguise himself and sneak off to

Dicathen and Alacrya for his research, they accused him of having intimate relations with lessers, then exiled him to Alacrya."

I shook my head. It was difficult to imagine Kordri, or Myre, or Aldir participating in such petty political turmoil, but when I thought of the cold, overwhelming presence of Lord Indrath, I found that I wasn't really surprised at all.

"My biggest regret will always be allowing my family to completely destroy the life of my betrothed... and my unborn child's father."

Does this mean that—

"Signs of my pregnancy showed only a few months after Agrona had been exiled. A new member of the Indrath Clan being born was rare, and should have been a celebrated occasion, but I knew that neither my clan nor any of the clans of the Great Eight would approve of me having this child, and so when I learned one night that my father was planning an assassination for Agrona in Alacrya, I tried to reach Agrona first.

"I confess that I was young and foolish, Arthur. Rebelling against my parents for depriving me of the man I thought I loved, I found Agrona in Alacrya before the unit my father had sent after him could. The man I found was not the coy and charming knowledge-seeker I had fallen in love with, though, but a man driven mad by the betrayal of his clansmen... and his love—me.

"He and his loyal Vritra Clan followers had scoured through the buried texts of the ancient mages and tried to build upon their work in a different direction, using the lessers as test subjects. I do not know what his end plans are aside from conquering Epheotus, but he has been investigating an element—an edict, higher than what aether encompasses, above that of time, space, and life.

"Fate."

The word 'Fate' immediately brought to mind one person: Elder Rinia. She was not only a diviner but someone who could control aether. She had expressed adamantly that she was not related to the ancient mages but...

My brain hurt from trying to make sense of all the information Sylvia had left for me.

"Fate ties into not only the life we live in now but lives elsewhere and elsewhen."

My breath hitched.

"I'm sure this sounds familiar to you. Fate, after all, is the core component to reincarnation. Agrona believed that the vessel was the key component in forceful application of reincarnation, which is why I could not risk you falling into Agrona's hands. My true knowledge in this is limited, though, and I am being drawn off course. I'm sorry, Arthur, I do not have much longer.

"After finding out that I carried a child of both basilisk and dragon lineage, Agrona kept me imprisoned until I gave birth. Of course, I couldn't let my child be subject to his cruel experiments, so I locked her in a pocket dimension that I created within the stone.

"Though I did not discover the scope of Agrona's plans before my escape, I did learn that there are four ruins built by the ancient mages that neither he nor any other asuras are able to cross into. I have imprinted within this message the locations of these four ruins. Agrona had been breeding lessers and sending them into the ruins to learn more about what is down there. He can't be the one to discover these secrets, whatever they may be.

"What I am leaving you with is not some grand quest. That was never my intention. But if you are in a situation where you are lost or feel weak and outnumbered, perhaps the answer Agrona is looking for is the answer you are as well.

"Take care of my daughter and yourself. Goodbye, little one."

Just like that, Sylvia's voice faded, leaving me stunned. There had been too many revelations to make sense of all at once. Indrath and the others... They had lied to me. They had used me. They had hidden the fact that Sylvie was Agrona's daughter... all to cover up their secret.

Lord Indrath was a genocidal maniac... but was he worse than Agrona? If I had to make a choice, could I side with Agrona despite everything he had done?

No. But I didn't have to forgive Indrath either. It was his fault Sylvia had died alone in a cave. It was his fault that Agrona had been allowed to overtake Alacrya, to experiment on the people there, and to go to war with Dicathen.

Damn it! Damn it all!

It was only when Regis floated out of my chest that I was jolted from my thoughts.

"Well, that was a lot to take in," the black will-o-wisp said.

I stared at it. "You were able to hear all that?"

"Why else would I want to literally be *inside* you?" Regis's bright eyes rolled within his incorporeal body. "Now, I've got some good news and bad news—well, two pretty good news and one really bad news. What do you want to hear first?"

I hobbled back to the iridescent stone and picked it up. Within was Sylvia's daughter, my bond, who she had entrusted me to take care of.

"Let's just start with the good news," Regis said, hovering in front of me. "Based on what I discovered while you were lying over there half-dead, I think we're actually in one of the hidden ruins of the ancient mages the old dragon lady mentioned."

I pried my gaze off of the stone in my hand and looked up. "Are you sure?"

"Yup, take a look at the door on the opposite end of this room. Along with the dried blood and drinkable water fountain, I'd say that this is some sort of waiting grounds for whatever horrendous challenges that the ancient mages built to keep outsiders from whatever knowledge is stored at the bottom."

I studied the metal door, which was etched with runes along the frame, then glanced at Regis.

"Yeah, you might be right," I admitted blandly.

Regis gasped. "Regis has gained master's approval! Regis is worthy!"

Ignoring this, I looked back down at the small stone in my hand.

"The second good news you've probably guessed, but I confirmed that Sylvie is alive by taking a peek inside."

"You went inside here?" I asked, holding up the stone.

"I was curious," Regis said, bobbing in what could only have been a shrug. "Anyway, your bond used a high-level vivum art to give you some of her asuran body in order to save you..."

Regis's eyes turned sharp. "Which leads me to the bad news. I don't think you were able to hear Sylvia's message because you've ascended past the white core stage. In fact, your core is damaged beyond recognition."

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"Damaged? No, that's not..." My voice trailed off as I felt the internal condition of my body.

Regis was right. When I tried to spread mana throughout my body, an act as natural as breathing for a Lance, there was only a slight tingle.

Changing tactics, I tried to gather ambient mana. This time, I couldn't feel anything at all—no blanket of warmth like before, when mana once rushed inside me and coalesced in my core.

"No," I muttered, heaving my heavy body up onto my feet.

I threw a jab, attempting to channel mana from my core through the necessary parts of my body needed to carry out a punch. It felt painfully slow.

"Arthur..." Regis said, floating up in front of my face.

Ignoring him, I pivoted and kicked forward. I stumbled and fell, unable to even keep my balance.

Pushing myself up, I tried moving my body again. It reminded me of my time as a toddler in this world: my brain knew how to move, but my body just wouldn't listen.

I fell, and I fell again, each time more infuriating and embarrassing than the last.

After a particularly bad stumble when my face hit the smooth floor, my arms unable to even react in time to cushion my fall, I stayed on the ground.

"What the *hell* is wrong with me!" I howled in frustration, rubbing at my already bruising cheek.

All of that hard work—years upon years of training and refining my core, learning to control all of the elements effectively—all gone.

I pounded my head on the ground, barely feeling anything more than a dull throb despite how hard the floor shook, and screamed in helpless frustration.

Whether I had calmed myself or had just run out of energy, I didn't know, but I found myself staring at Sylvie's stone. I imagined her curled up in her fox form inside the stone, warm and snug and sleeping, waiting for me to rescue her.

She had sacrificed her life for me and was reduced back to this state. She was the one that paid the price for all my stupid choices.

If I can't get things together for myself, I need to do it for her. At the very least, I owe her that.

I got up and silently made my way back to the water fountain. Cupping my hands, I brought the cold water to my mouth and drank. After quenching my thirst, I splashed some water on my face and washed off the remnants of dried blood from the floor before taking a hard look at my reflection.

A slightly older and sharper-faced Arthur looked back at me with piercing gold eyes. My hair reminded me of bleached sand as it flowed just past my shoulder in waves. It was as if my new physical body was a tribute to her. I was glad that I was still Arthur, but, looking into my golden eyes, I felt appreciation for the opportunity to share these features, even as I felt the sharp guilt that I did so only because of Sylvie's sacrifice.

What would Ellie say when she saw me, I wondered. Would I hear her exclaim "Brother!" or would she look at me like I was a stranger? Mom would look into my golden eyes and her heart would break, knowing my father's deep blue eyes were gone. Would Tessia still... love me?

You have to figure out some way to get back to them to know for sure, I reminded myself.

Ripping a thin strip of cloth from my tattered pants, I tied my hair back.

"What do we do now?" I asked, turning to Regis.

The will-o-wisp's shining eyes quirked like someone cocking an eyebrow. "You realize you're asking advice from a weapon, right?"

I remained silent, staring at him until he sighed and rolled his eyes.

"You're a bag of laughs," he grumbled as he floated toward me. "Well, it's not like we have much of a choice, seeing as there is only one way out of this room."

"So we just go through the door?" I confirmed, already heading to the large metal door.

"Hold it, Goldilocks," he began. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"What do you mean?" I asked before the familiar term registered in my brain. "And how do you know who Goldilocks is?"

"I'm made from you, remember? All of the things you know, whether from this life or your past life, has influenced what I am right now," he answered. "So really, if you're ever annoyed with me, remember that you're just annoyed at yourself."

"I don't remember ever being this sardonic or derisive," I retorted.

"Well... to be more specific, I guess I'm an amalgamation of you, Sylvia, your bond, and that Vritra retainer, Uto," the floating black fire explained. "Those were the primary sources of mana I manifested from, anyway."

That explains a lot, I thought, looking at Regis in a new light.

"Anyway," he droned, "You're not in a state where you should be going through any sort of door haphazardly, especially if this entire place was meant to keep people out."

"Yeah, I know," I cut in. "My core is pretty messed up and my body feels like it's made of lead or something, but it's not like we can just stay here."

"Disregarding your injured core for a moment, do you remember when I said that Sylvie used some pretty heavy aether voodoo on you to keep your body from basically destroying itself?"

I nodded my head. "Mhm."

"Well, perhaps the one good thing that came out of all of this—aside from myself, of course—is your new body," Regis explained. "Your body, while not being completely draconic, is pretty damn close."

My eyes widened and I immediately lowered my head, looking down at my arms and torso. Aside from the color of my hair and eyes changing, the features of my face becoming a little sharper and my skin becoming paler, it didn't feel any different from my human body—actually, it felt worse.

"I'm not sure how much pain you actually remember feeling," Regis said, as if reading my thoughts, "but you nearly died during this 'metamorphosis.' It'll take some time and a lot of effort to temper your body."

"How do I temper this new body of mine, and what happens after I'm able to?" I asked.

"Beats the hell out of me," Regis said, bobbing in a way I equated to a shrug. "I'm not some floating encyclopedia, chief."

"So you just want me to wait here and hope that my body will get better?" I snapped. "What about you? You're supposed to be a powerful weapon tailored for me, can't I use you to get out of here, or is floating around and talking the only thing you know how to do?"

"Oh, yeah, cause being sharp and sword-shaped really served your last weapon well," Regis snapped back, the black flames flaring angrily. "You know, I've been nothing but helpful after you practically killed yourself. Your Highness should show a little more appreciation."

"I wouldn't have had to go so far if you had manifested during the battle with Nico and Cadell, but I guess it wouldn't have mattered if you did come out then. It's not like you could've been any help!"

"Boo-friggin-hoo! The only reason you are alive and sane right now is because of me!"

"Bullshit," I said, unwilling to believe the will-o-wisp.

"What do you think would have happened if I hadn't taken the mana from Uto's horn, genius?"

Thinking back to the moment the acclorite had absorbed most of the mana that was stored in the broken horn, I got even more annoyed. "You want me to thank you for stealing most of the mana from Uto's horn—mana that would've helped make me stronger?"

"If it hadn't been for me taking most of it, you would've been driven mad," Regis answered. "And for all that trouble, I get to be born, live, and probably die inside of some ancient death trap while the black sludge that is Uto's mana boils around inside of me, my one and only companion an ungrateful moron."

Fuming, I didn't respond.

Time seemed to stop for a moment as we remained silent until Regis spoke up glumly. "I don't know what I am. Maybe I was forced out of you before I could fully develop, but I'm not sure what sort of weapon I am, and it's been driving me crazy."

I sank down on the ground and let out a sigh. "Looks like we're both pretty messed up right now."

"True, but you dug yourself into the hole you're in right now. I was forced into it," Regis said, but his tone was light, joking, and the flames of his body fluttered calmly.

I let out a laugh. "You're right."

Taking out the stone that Sylvie was slumbering inside of, I stared at it longingly. I missed Sylvie. She would've known what to do with everything I'd been told.

If the Indrath Clan was capable of committing genocide just because they felt their authority was being threatened, the asuras were no better than Agrona and the Vritra Clan.

Sylvia said that four ruins, made by the ancient mages and protected somehow from the asuras, held the key to wielding Fate... whatever that meant. Fate was an abstract, a way that people made sense of the world around them. Was there really such a thing as Fate, an edict of aether like aevum, spatium, or vivum? What would it even do? How would you utilize such a power?

Does it even matter now? What can I do? My mana core is destroyed to the point where, even if I can start using mana again, I don't think it can ever get to the same heights as before. My body may be draconic now, but I don't even know what that fully means, and the weapon that I've been waiting for...

"Get down!" Regis hissed, suddenly flying into my body.

'Stay up against the wall and act dead, or at least unconscious!'

I backed up against the wall and fell to the ground just in time to see a column of blue light appear in the center of the room.

Letting my bangs cover my face, I kept my eyes open despite Regis's insistence.

As the pillar of blue dimmed, I was able to make out the silhouettes of three figures. My heartbeat quickened, excited to see other people here, but Regis berated me, telling me not to even think about getting up.

The light completely faded, leaving only the three figures standing in the center of the room—two males and one female.

The larger of the two men was clad in a mixture of plated and leather armor that did nothing to hide his bulging muscles. He carried a spiked mace in each hand, both dripping with blood that matched the color of his short crimson hair.

The slimmer man was built like an athlete, with broad shoulders and toned arms underneath a brushed-silver suit of armor.

The woman had red eyes that shone like crystals underneath a curtain of midnight blue—almost navy—hair, and it was she who spotted me first.

After she turned to study me, it only took a moment for the two men beside her to notice me as well, and when they did, they didn't react nearly as subtly as the woman had.

The larger one swung his mace, splattering blood on the ground as he approached me, while the second man drew a longsword out of thin air and positioned himself between me and the girl. His sharp eyes narrowed and a soft vibration hummed from his blade.

I shut my eyes, afraid that they'd see that I was awake.

Shit, what do we do, Regis?

'Stay down! You're no match for anyone right now.'

He's going to kill me!

'Wait! Don't move until I tell you!'

I peeked open an eye to see the hulking man towering over me.

'Not yet!' Regis hissed in my head.

Speaking up from behind her companion, the woman said, "Leave her."

'Pfft! She thinks you're a girl!' Regis thought, snickering in my mind.

Shut up.

"She might be a threat to us in the lower levels, Lady Caera," the large man warned. "There are those who would feign weakness to make us lower our guard."

"Have some pity on her, Taegen. The fact that neither of you were able to sense her immediately means that her mana core is broken," the woman answered. "She won't be a threat. Let's move. We'll rest in the next sanctuary room."

Taegen let out a dissatisfied grunt before turning around, following after the other two.

I let out a mental breath of relief as I began to relax, then I saw it: All three of their outfits had been purposely designed to expose their spines, covered only by chainmail or a thin mesh that I could clearly see through. And running down all three backs, along their spines, were the same kind of runes I had seen on so many Alacryan mages.

Anger flared within my chest, and immediately, the man named Taegen whirled around to face me.

I took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled, forcing myself to be calm and still, for my heartbeat to slow, and for my mind to settle into the blank, emotionless state I had adopted so often as King Grey.

Time seemed to crawl by as the Alacryan studied me, confused.

"Let's go!" the other man called out to Taegen, and the crimson-haired warrior turned back.

I must've waited for over thirty minutes, even after they had left through the door, before I got up.

"Wow, now that got my little black heart pumping!" Regis exclaimed, shooting out of my body. "It's a good thing that gorgeous woman has a heart as large as her—"

"Regis!" I snapped.

The will-o-wisp bobbed around, flickering with delight. "Well, someone is upset that they were called a girl..."

"No, I'm—"

"You can check your pants if you want. You're still physiologically a male," Regis cut in.

"Why are Alacryans here?" I asked, changing the topic.

"I would assume that, as Sylvia said in her message, they are here scouting out these ruins that asuras apparently can't go into."

A feeling of dread washed over me. "Does that mean we're somewhere below Alacrya now?"

"Beats me, but if those ancient mages were able to tinker with aether to such an extent that even Agrona wants to know their secrets, I'm guessing that we could be anywhere in the world. The room that we're in right now could be somewhere at the bottom of the ocean, and that door could be a portal that takes us to the other side of the world!"

Closing my eyes, I envisioned the locations of the four ancient ruins that Sylvia had imparted to me. It wasn't some sort of internal map laid out for me to visualize; it was more like an artificial memory that had been embedded into my brain. It confirmed for me what Regis had said earlier: we were inside one of the four ancient ruins.

What it didn't tell me was where this ruin was located in the world.

"So what's the plan, m'lady?" Regis chimed.

I kept my eyes shut and took a deep breath. Relying on the habits I had developed throughout my lifetime as Grey, I bottled up the emotions gnawing at me, tucking away the stray thoughts that lay scattered about in my head and tightly packing and storing the feelings of panic and dread that encroached on my mind. I was left with a simmering anger to give me strength, and the cool and comforting numbness necessary to think ahead.

Whatever was on the other side of that door, those three had likely taken down or cleared through most of it. I couldn't waste an opportunity like this.

I opened my eyes with newfound resolve and turned to Regis. "Let's go."

257 LEFT BEHIND

ELEANOR LEYWIN

The little stream in our underground town built by the ancient mages was burbling away happily. It was lucky, I thought. It was able to simply exist, running among the rocks and singing its bubbly little song. Even when Boo swiped a glitterfish out of the water, it wasn't like the stream experienced the loss of the fish. It didn't have a heart to be broken.

But I did—and it was. Everywhere I looked I was constantly reminded of my family's legacy of failure, loss, and death.

I was reminded of our failure in every tired, hopeless face, and in every sad, knowing look I got from the others.

Even if they had their own losses, they still treated my mother and me like glass—like glass trophies. It was like we were something to beam at, to keep out where everyone could see, but could not interact with... to treat like we still mattered, even though we were just relics of better times, when the great Arthur Leywin still protected Dicathen.

When my brother and Sylvie disappeared, it was like the last piece of solid ground in the world had slipped away from under our feet, and now we were all slowly sinking into the dark waters of despair.

Or that's how Kathyln put it, anyway.

It was weird. I'd have thought the death of her parents would have been a little more important to her than my brother's disappearance, but I guess I shouldn't have been surprised; everyone always loved Arthur the Lance, Arthur the general, Arthur the hero.

But I had loved Arthur the brother, Arthur the friend... when he was around, anyway.

My mother had faded into the background, happy to smile sadly and say "thank you" whenever someone offered their condolences. At best, she offered the occasional bit of healing to some injured refugee that the soldiers dragged back down into the shelter.

I think she had been so close to the edge of despair already that when Arthur didn't return from rescuing Tessia, she lost hope for everything else. It hurt to admit, but if not for me, I think she'd have just curled up and gone to sleep, then never opened her eyes again.

Picking up a flat, smooth rock, I tossed it up in the air and caught it again.

How long had it been since Arthur and I had stood here on the bank of this underground stream and he had taught me how to skip stones across the water? Days? Weeks? I might as well have died and been reborn since then.

Letting out a scoff, I hurled the stone violently at the surface of the water where it splashed in a satisfying sort of way.

Boo, who had taken his catch and lumbered off to find a soft, mossy place to eat, lifted his head to gaze seriously at me. The dark spots above his eyes came together, which always made him look grumpy.

"Sorry Boo. I'm fine." Though I wasn't sure he believed me, the giant bear-like mana beast snorted and went back to his meal.

"With an arm like that, have you considered throwing rocks at our enemies instead of shooting arrows?"

I turned, startled, but relaxed when I realized it was only Helen Shard, leader of what was left of the Twin Horns. Helen had been my mentor in the castle, teaching and helping me improve my ability to fire arrows of pure mana from my bow.

It had been a huge relief when she had arrived at the refuge with Durden and Angela Rose, and she had been quick to take up the role of my mentor again.

She seemed to have some sort of magical sense of when I was slipping into "a mood," as she put it, because she always turned up to support me.

I flicked my hair in the girlish way I knew annoyed her and looked back at the stream. "I was trying to catch a fish for mom's dinner."

From the corner of my eye I saw her raise a brow, smirking. "A fish? With a rock?"

"Shooting one with my bow would be too easy," I said haughtily, turning my nose up slightly and putting my chin forward, the very picture of an overconfident, self-assured child. Helen had always pushed me to be different from the noble children in the castle, and it aggravated her to no end when I acted like them.

Turning serious, Helen gestured toward the water. "Let's see it then."

Returning her serious look, I picked up my bow from where it rested against a nearby boulder and inspected the clear water. Every thirty seconds or so, a dimly glowing fish would swim slowly past, heading down the stream.

My brother had explained once that things you see in the water aren't quite where they appear to be because the water bends the light. With this in mind, I drew back the string of the bow and conjured a thin arrow of mana. Then I waited.

A wobbly blue line in the gloomy stream told me a fish was coming. I waited until it passed into the wide, shallow part of the stream where I was standing, then prepared to take the shot. At the last instant, I tethered the arrow to me with a thread of pure mana, then let it fly.

The beam of white light slipped into the water with the tiniest *plop*, and the fish jerked, sending up a splash. I yanked at the tether, causing the arrow to jump out of the water and fly back to my hand, the glitterfish neatly impaled through the gills.

Helen began to clap slowly, shaking her head and letting her mouth hang open as if in awe. "Incredible, Eleanor, simply incredible." She then marched toward me, pulled the glitterfish off the arrow, gave it a single hard *crack* against one of the large rocks lining the edges of the stream, saluted me with the dead fish, and turned to walk away.

"Hey, that's mine!"

"Consider it payment for a lesson well learned," she said over her shoulder, not breaking her stride. "With a talent like yours, it *surely* won't be any trouble catching another?"

Half irritated, half amused, I turned back to the water, feeling better. I decided that I might as well shoot a few more fish and take them home to Mom for dinner.

As I drew my bow again, though, movement on the other side of the stream caught my attention and I instinctively aimed in that direction.

"Oh!"

It took a second for my eyes to focus in the dim light, but when they did I immediately cancelled my spell, and the glowing white arrow fizzled and faded away.

"Sorry, Tessia."

After an awkward pause, her eyes probing me like she was trying to read my mind, Tessia continued her walk down the steep edge on the other side of the stream. It was a little deeper on that side, and there was an ancient hunk of petrified log embedded in the ground that made a perfect bench on which to sit and cool one's feet in the water.

"Sorry," Tessia said quietly, her gaze turned downward to the stream. "I didn't realize anyone was here when I decided to come take a dip."

But you got here, saw me, and decided to help yourself anyway.

"It's fine," I said in the tone of voice that told her it wasn't fine at all. "I was just leaving anyway."

Slinging my bow over my shoulder and gesturing to Boo, I turned to walk back up the embankment, but my heartbeat quickened with each step I took, pumping anger and resentment through me until I just wanted to stop and scream.

Tessia hadn't been out and about much since Arthur disappeared. I'd seen her a couple of times, but this was the first time I'd been close enough to talk to her, and I realized suddenly that I was overflowing with things I wanted to say to her.

Nothing you say here is going to change anything, Ellie, I told myself through gritted teeth. Shouting and cursing at Tessia isn't going to undo—

I spun on my heels and met Tessia's eye. "It's your fault he's gone, I hope you know that."

She flinched but remained silent, infuriating me even more.

"It's your fault, and you'll never, ever be able to fix it." My voice grew louder as I persisted. "He was our best chance to ever have a life outside of this cave again, but he was also a big, fat idiot who couldn't just let you go! You should have known that!"

My voice constricted as I rubbed away an angry tear with the back of my hand. "W-why didn't you just stay here? Why?"

The elven princess clenched her jaw as her gaze fell, but when she spoke, she was frustratingly calm. "I couldn't, Ellie. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Maybe, if I knew then how it was going to end... but they were my parents." After a beat of silence, Tessia looked up at me, her turquoise eyes glimmering with tears. "Tell me, honestly, what would you have done?"

I wanted to grab her by her stupid, pretty silver hair and shove her headfirst into the water. She had run away from the shelter, defying both logic and the pleas of my brother and Virion, and forced Arthur to go after her. Because of her selfishness, Sylvie and Arthur had vanished.

Boo growled and stood up, sensing my anger. His presence gave me courage.

"I'd have listened!" I shouted, not even sure it was true.

"Then maybe you're wiser than me, Ellie—and that's why I need you... and maybe you need me as well." Tessia's bright eyes locked onto mine, her gaze imploring and hopeful, but conflicted.

"I don't need you," I hissed.

A frown flickered across her face. "Don't you think I notice how they treat you? Like you're a child, like you don't have anything to add? Like you only have value in your connection to Arthur? Don't you think I

know how that feels?" Tessia rose to her feet, her jaw clenched, her expression somewhere between stoicism and desperation. "I hear what the others whisper about me behind my back, Ellie, and many don't bother to hide their doubts, but say it openly for all to hear.

"But you're different... you're so much more than a hero's sister and I want to prove that to everyone. I'm not asking you to forgive me—I could never ask that of you after what I did. I know that if I hadn't run away, Arthur might still be here with us, but nothing I can do now will bring him back, and—"

"You don't get to just accept it and move on, *princess*. Arthur shouldn't have saved you! You should be dead, and he should be here, with me!"

She smiled at me, sad and beautiful and infuriating. "I've thought the same thing. Over and over and over. If Arthur was here, now... and I was dead..." Tessia paused, took a deep breath, and forced the sad smile back on her face. "But he's not. No matter how much I wished he hadn't, Arthur sacrificed himself for me. And the price he paid for that is something that I will *never* be able to repay."

Practically shaking with rage, hot tears starting to run down my cheeks, I opened my mouth to tell her off, to curse at her, to empty my anger into her, but the words died in my throat. I wanted to hate her *so much*, but I just couldn't.

I couldn't hate her, because Arthur had loved her. He had loved her so much that he had traded his life for hers. That's what she meant. Her life was my brother's last act of heroism.

It's not fair, I thought. *Why'd you do it, Arthur? Why did you leave me for her—again?*

Tessia waded carefully across the shallow stream and walked up to me. She hooked the chain she wore around her neck with her thumb and pulled a pendant out from under her shirt, holding it up to me.

"Arthur gave me this, Ellie." It was a small, silver leaf pendant. "He gave me this, and a promise."

Caught off guard, my voice squeaked slightly as I practically whispered, "What promise?"

"A promise only one of us could keep, it turns out. So I'm going to live, Ellie. I'm going to live for Arthur, do you understand?"

I stared as Tessia stroked the pendant like it was a newborn. The elven princess was a powerful mage on the cusp of being a white core, a beast tamer capable of leveling mountains... yet, her narrow shoulders and her thin, pale arms seemed so delicate.

Then those same thin arms were around me, and my face was pressed into her shoulder, my tears soaking into her shirt. I broke. I let the sadness and anger and fear and loneliness pour out of me, my entire body shaking as I sobbed.

"We'll get through this," Tessia repeated quietly, her hand caressing the back of my head. "And we need to be strong, because even if these people curse me and belittle you, they need us. Both of us."

"It just feels so pointless now, so hopeless," I said breathily, my crying nearly exhausted.

Squeezing me tighter, Tessia said, "That's how I felt too. Grandpa Virion held me and let me cry until I passed out, then when I woke up I kept crying. I lost my parents, I lost Arthur, and I lost hope. But Grandpa Virion wouldn't let me give up, and I won't let you either."

I pushed away from Tessia and wiped the tears from my face with my sleeve. "What are we going to do?"

Tessia looked over my shoulder to the center of the hidden village. "Dicathen may be lost, but it's not gone. And if that means we need to train or we need to fight, we're going to do whatever we can to get it back." The elven princess looked at me, brows furrowed in determination. "No more sitting on the sidelines."

258 A HEALTHY APPETITE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Preparations didn't take very long. I tore off what was left of my tattered shirt, revealing milky white skin with little muscle definition.

Great, I thought. One more thing I worked so hard for, gone in an instant.

My pants were mostly intact thanks to the leather cuisses. Taking off the thick sheets of leather that had been protecting my thighs, I created a makeshift vest by tearing off pieces of the leather with my teeth and using strips of my shirt to tie them together around my waist and over my shoulder.

With the remaining strips of fabric, I created a mask to cover my mouth and nose, then wrapped the rest around my hands.

"Why the mask? Are you just trying to complete your ninja ensemble?" Regis asked, floating up and down as if inspecting me.

I curled and uncurled my fingers, which were wrapped up to the second knuckle by the cloth. "The Alacryans that passed by had different types of armor, most likely made to fit their fighting styles, but all three had masks around their necks, and, unlike ourselves, they seemed to know what they were getting themselves into."

"Oh, I didn't notice," Regis said.

"I wonder why?" I asked, rolling my eyes.

"Yes, okay, I concede the point," Regis replied. "Tell you what, you be the perceptive one, I'll be the charming, attractive, intelligent one."

This is going to be a long journey...

After going through a series of movements and martial art forms to loosen my clumsy new body, I walked up to the large metal door feeling even less prepared than I had felt before readying myself.

Every time I moved, there was an almost tangible resistance. It felt like the air around me was congealing, pushing back against me so I had to force my way through it. Had moving without mana always been so difficult?

I placed my hands on the rune-covered door and let out a sigh. "Are you ready?"

Regis's dark fire blazed. "Let's go."

The door opened easily at my touch, revealing a long, dark corridor on the other side.

Looking at Regis, I jerked my head towards the door.

"What? Why me?" the will-o-wisp asked, bobbing in quick, agitated motions.

"Because. You're incorporeal," I said flatly.

Regis did as I said, though he let out a string of curses to make sure I knew how he felt about it. As he approached the other side of the door, Regis jerked to a stop all of a sudden.

"Ouch! That actually hurt," he said, more confused than in pain.

"What's going on?" I asked, carefully waving my hand in the area where Regis got hurt. Unlike Regis, though, I was able to go through.

"Ouch! Stop that!" Regis said, his form quivering.

I did it once more, and Regis yelped in pain again, glaring at me.

"Just wanted to make sure." I gave him a content smirk.

"I don't think this is just an entryway to another room," Regis grumbled. "This is the same kind of pain I get if I move too far from you, but this is a lot more sudden and, well, painful."

"This must be some kind of portal," I replied, looking at the room on the other side of the door. "Wait." I turned to look at Regis. "Why did you try to leave me?"

The little fireball bobbed up and down, shrugging. "I'm a sentient being. I wanted to know what my limit was, and it's not like I was born inherently loyal to you."

I shook my head. "I'd be a lot more upset if you were actually useful as a weapon."

"Touché."

"We don't know what's going to happen when we cross through the portal. You better, you know..." I trailed off, but Regis only continued to look at me expectantly, clearly not picking up on my meaning. "You better... get inside me."

Regis's fiery form flared as he snorted with laughter. "At least buy me a drink first!"

Glaring at him, I reached out toward the portal again.

"Okay, okay, no need to resort to torture, you madman. I'm coming."

Once Regis had flown into me, I stepped up to the doorway. My heart thumped against my ribcage. I had no idea what we would face outside of this sanctuary, but we were as ready as we could be.

"Here goes nothing," I said aloud to no one, then stepped through. There was a hum and a click from the door closing behind us, then silence.

The marble floor underneath my feet was flawlessly smooth, but unlike the circular room we were in before, this one was a long straight hallway with a ceiling that arched high above our heads, ending with another rune-covered metal door on the other side. Two rows of sconces lined the patterned walls, illuminating the hallway in a warm, natural light. To either side were giant marble statues depicting men and women armed with swords, spears, wands, bows, and even what appeared to be archaic firearms.

Apparently, Regis was just as surprised as I was. 'Are those...'

"Guns? I think so."

My gaze shifted away from the stone statues for a moment, landing on the door straight ahead, roughly three hundred feet or so. Regis floated free of my body and drifted a few feet ahead of me.

"So we just... walk past these giant stone statues and go to the door on the other side. That's not ominous at all," Regis muttered.

Rather than walking straight ahead, I moved to the wall to my right, searching for any sort of hidden side exit. After searching both walls, I let out a sigh and looked down the middle aisle again between the rows of stone statues.

"You don't suppose these statues will start moving and try to kill us once we get near them, right?"

"There's only one way to find out," Regis said, perching himself on my shoulder. "Onward to victory, m'lady!"

Walking cautiously, each footfall careful and quiet, I began moving up the hallway, my gaze shifting from one statue to the next, watchful for any signs of life or movement.

"Are you scared or what?" Regis whispered by my ear, snickering softly. "You're creeping along like a teenage boy sneaking out of his girlfriend's bedroom."

Not looking at my companion, I whispered, "Hey, what happens to you if I die?"

Regis stopped laughing. "What?"

"Do you become free, or do you die as well?"

"I never really thought about it, but..." Regis went silent, and I could sense his uncertainty as he pondered my question. "The foundation of this form comes from the acclorite that was placed into your body, but my life force is tied to you, so if you die, I suppose—"

"You go back to being a hunk of rock?" I finished, scanning the statues now surrounding us. We'd traveled a quarter of the length of the hallway, and so far there had been no sign of hostility. "That's nice to know."

"Are you smiling?" Regis was staring at me with his unblinking, star-bright eyes.

"I'm just glad to know that we're in this together," I said, swatting him away.

"You're dark, you know that? And that's coming from someone partially made of Uto."

Ignoring him, I continued searching for any signs that the statues were a danger to us. We had only taken a few more steps when my vision began to narrow, blurring out everything but the statues in front of me.

"Well, I'll be. No stone statues came to life and started attacking us," Regis said as he floated closer to a statue holding what looked like a shotgun.

Suddenly the room shook and the lights from the sconces dimmed eerily.

I looked forward at the exit, still over two hundred feet away. The aetheric runes carved on the door had changed, and the handle that used to be there was gone. We wouldn't be able to escape that way.

For a moment, I stood paralyzed. Clearly I would have to complete some trial in order to progress, but without mana, would I be strong enough?

Knowing the answer, I whirled back around and bolted for the door we had come from; I had no idea if we would be allowed back into the sanctuary, but it was either that or face whatever was about to happen.

I had only taken about ten steps when the statues around me began cracking open like ghastly eggs. Large fragments of stone broke off and fell to the floor... and as more and more of the statues began crumbling, I could make out more of what was inside them.

Sinewy humanoid creatures, scabrous flesh covering patches of their exposed muscles and bones, squirmed within the coffin-like statues, apparently awakened by whatever magic controlled this place. They did not carry the weapons depicted in their statues, but the weapons were instead grafted to them, or grown from them, elongated bones and exposed muscle fibers twisting into the shape of spears, swords, and other implements of death.

It was like some lunatic had ripped apart a very large man and then tried to piece him back together again but had done much of it inside out.

The first of these patched-together creatures to fully hatch out of its stone encasement—a statue of a man wielding a bow and arrow—let out a guttural screech from its crooked mouth and leapt from the podium the statue was on, sending shivers throughout my entire body.

"Well, at least technically the statues aren't trying to kill us," Regis mumbled.

I raced toward the door back to the sanctuary, less than a hundred feet away. However, after just a few steps, I heard the heavy thrum of a bowstring.

I dove to the side and rolled, narrowly managing to avoid the bone arrow that carved a fissure in the ground from the force of its impact.

Scrambling to my feet, I glanced back just as the creature snapped off one of its long, spiked vertebrae and nocked it on the gut string of its bow.

"Axe monster finished hatching as well!" Regis called out from above, just a few feet away.

Caught off guard by Regis's warning, I turned toward the second chimera, which had wide-bladed battle axes in place of arms. This brief moment of distraction turned out to be a near-fatal mistake.

A burst of pain erupted from my side and I was sent flying back from the impact. Letting out a hoarse cough, I looked down to see an arrow of bone protruding from just below my rib cage.

I crawled to my knees. My brain pounded against my skull as blood surged through my body. My vision narrowed again, blurring out everything but what I needed to focus on. I'd had this feeling in battle before, but nothing as extreme as this.

I threw myself backwards, narrowly avoiding one massive axe. Just as the axe-armed monstrosity was about to cleave me in two with its other arm, a black shadow whizzed by.

Regis hovered in front of its sunken eyes, obstructing its vision and allowing me the opportunity to limp away.

I only made it another few steps, though, before a searing pain bloomed from my left leg.

Stifling a scream, I toppled forward, twisting awkwardly to avoid landing on the first arrow and pushing it further into my stomach.

"Arthur! There are more hatching!"

"I know!" I said through gritted teeth. A grunt of pain escaped me as I snapped the shaft off of the bone arrow inside my body, and I nearly passed out as I did the same with the arrow on my leg.

My vision pulsed yet again, as if my body was trying to forcefully expel my soul. What little color there was within the dimly lit hall faded, revealing soft purple auras around the animated monsters. The same purple haze surrounded the two broken arrow shafts in my hand.

Aether.

These chimera-like monsters were sheathed in aether. I didn't know why I could suddenly see it, but there would only be time to puzzle over it if I survived.

The aether tingled against the palm of my hand, and I *felt* the energy within it, like I was absorbing it through my skin. A wild idea flashed through my mind. With no plan and little hope for surviving this battle, I leaned forward and bit down on the aetheric aura surrounding one arrow, consuming the aether like meat from a bone.

"What in the unholy hell are you doing?" Regis cried out.

My veins burned as the aether from the arrow flowed through me, filling me with a strength that I hadn't felt since waking up with a new body. Eagerly, I devoured the aetheric fire from the second arrow as well, and the aether moved into my core, then split, moving warmly down to my stomach and my left leg.

I watched with shocked fascination as the wounds in my leg and side began to knit back together. As the flesh closed around the wounds, the bloody arrowheads were forced out of my body, falling with two heavy *thuds* onto the stone floor.

As quickly as it had come, the sensation of power faded, but I was whole, the pain was gone, and I was able to stand without trembling.

The ground shook as a third chimera smashed free of its statue-coffin. It leapt off its podium and galloped toward me at a breakneck pace, its huge, sword-shaped arm held in front of it like a lance.

Controlling my breathing, I let my enhanced senses pick out the details.

The bow chimera released another arrow with a sharp twang, but this time I was able to actually see the path of the bone arrow piercing through the air. Dodging it, I steadied myself to face the charging chimera's sword.

It swung its pale white broadsword in a brilliant arc that just missed carving through my hip.

My heartbeat quickened as I considered my options. With my body healed, it seemed likely that I could reach the door, but now I saw that path for the trap it was. I would return to the sanctuary having gained nothing. But if I could claim more of that aether...

Lunging forward as the chimera's large blade skidded on the smooth marble surface with a screech, I grabbed its arm and bit down, consuming the purple aura surrounding it.

The chimera let out a mournful wail, revealing a mouthful of needle-pointed teeth. It flailed wildly, but I clung on, focusing entirely on consuming the purple-tinged aura surrounding the chimera's sword-shaped arm.

As I absorbed the aether, I felt my strength growing.

An explosion resounded from the walls of the hall and the entire room shook madly, allowing the chimera to throw me off. It followed this with a kick to my ribs, and I slid across the marble and slammed against the wall, coughing up blood and a couple of teeth.

"Arthur!" I heard in the distance as my consciousness faded in and out.

Marching towards me was an army of chimeras, each wielding a different weapon grown from bone and muscle.

Another explosion shook the room, much closer this time, and the ground in front of me burst into shards of marble and flesh.

A guttural scream tore out of my throat as a pool of blood and pulp formed just where my left leg had been. Vaguely, I saw that the chimera holding what looked like a gun had the hollowed bone pointed right at me.

Dragging my body across the floor as the chimeras approached, no longer charging but marching slowly toward me—almost as if they were taunting me, letting me ferment in the knowledge of my own demise—I reached for the door to the sanctuary.

I had to claw my way up the door to reach the handle, teetering on my one leg, but it wouldn't budge.

"Come on!" I pleaded, yanking at the metal handle futilely.

From behind me, Regis let out a long, defeated sigh. "My life sucked."

I heard the hum of the bow string before my body was slammed against the door and a piercing pain erupted within my left shoulder.

Gritting through the pain, I kept myself from falling by pressing myself against the wall and grabbing hold of the handle for support.

That's when I saw it. Amongst the aetheric runes and symbols etched onto this door, there was a single series that I recognized from when I had watched Elder Rinia activating the teleportation gate in the ancient mage's hideout.

Pressing myself harder against the wall, I used my good hand to trace the aetheric runes.

Nothing happened.

"Damn it! Please!" I pleaded, trying again.

I screamed as another arrow pierced my lower back, dangerously close to my spine. I gripped the handle again, wobbling on my leg, nearly collapsing, when I saw it: there was a faint purple aura around Regis, just like the chimeras.

My eyes widened. "Regis, quick, come here!"

"Okay, but you're not going to eat me, right?" Regis said, uncertain.

"Hurry!" I hissed. "Get in my hand!"

The black will-o-wisp darted into my right hand, and I almost cheered in delight when my hand took on a delicate purple aura.

Quickly, I traced through the runes again, shifting it ever-so-slightly so that its function of opening was enabled.

Wobbling again as the door unlocked with a hum, my field of view spun and I saw, behind me, the gunwielding chimera pointing his explosive appendage directly at my chest, a thick cloud of purple light gathered at the nozzle.

Prying the door open just enough for me to squeeze through, I lurched back inside the sanctuary just as the door shuddered from the force of the chimera's shotgun blast.

259 ROUND TWO

I toppled forward, collapsing hard on the cold marble floor of the sanctuary, a pool of dark crimson spreading around me.

Struggling against the numbing grasp that threatened to rip my consciousness from me, I crawled away from the door, desperate to get as far from those monstrosities as possible.

"Arthur," Regis muttered, his voice soft.

All my focus was bent on trying to keep myself alive through the throbbing pain; hot pins were driving through my mind and body with every beat of my heart. I tried not to hear the exposed bone of my leg grinding across the sanctuary floor or feel the arrows tearing at my insides with each movement.

Reaching a shaking hand over my shoulder, I gripped the shaft of one of the bone arrows lodged in my back.

I stifled a scream and tears rolled down my face. Without mana to protect my body, even touching the arrow sent spikes of burning agony through my back.

Letting out a guttural yell like a war cry, I snapped the shaft off. A wave of nausea overcame me and I threw up on the ground. With nothing in my stomach, I heaved water and stomach acid until all I could do was gag.

Shaking, no longer able to see through the tears and sweat in my eyes, I brought the bone shaft up to my mouth.

"You're not going to—oh, yup, you sure are."

Regis regarded me with a grimace but I didn't care. The aetheric aura was pure nourishment for me, and I already felt strength returning to my body.

I snapped off the other shaft lodged in my side, barely able to keep myself from throwing up again. I consumed the aetheric essence from that as well, and as the flood of power helped to clear my mind, one thought came through with agonizing clarity.

How the hell am I going to get out of here with one leg?

The pool of crimson that had spread beneath me began to dry, a good sign that I wasn't actively bleeding anymore.

Once I had polished off both arrows, I dragged myself to the fountain. After gulping down several mouthfuls of the clear, cold water, my body grew limp and eyelids heavy, so I leaned back against the side of the marble fountain and let the darkness overcome me.

I was jolted out of my slumber in a fit of coughs, as if I had been drowning in my sleep. I clutched at my chest, gasping for air. As I shifted, pulling away from the side of the fountain where I'd been leaning, the puncture wounds in my back ached, reminding me that they were still there.

Suddenly, Regis shot out of my chest.

"What... the hell... are you doing?" I asked, trying to catch by breath.

"I swear that wasn't me. Okay, maybe it was a little me," Regis replied, a reddish glow emanating from his dully glowing flames.

I shot him a glare that sent him retreating back a few more feet.

"I'll tell you what I found out while you were sleeping, but first, check out your body!"

I looked down, prepared for the worst. I had been shot three times in the back and once on my left leg before that same leg had been blown apart by a shotgun blast. I had expected to see awful scars, the stump of a leg, perhaps the red rot of infection already taken hold in the wounds...

When my gaze reached my legs, I couldn't help but let out a sharp breath. There it was, my left leg—bare from the thigh down but completely intact and without a scratch. I touched, prodded, and pinched it to make it sure it was real, to make sure it was mine.

"Neat, huh! You're like some sort of weird starfish or spider or something," Regis said excitedly.

I let out a laugh, unable to contain my relief. "You can't think of a better life form to compare me to?"

"Well, I was going to say lizard, but they can only regrow their tails and that's not technically—"

"Okay, I get it," I chuckled, studying my leg closely. "I get healing a few gashes and puncture wounds, but my left leg was completely blown off. Do you have any idea how I was able to do that?"

"I was getting to that," Regis said. "I don't know how you got the idea of *eating* the aether coming from those monsters, but that saved you—no, it more than saved you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your physiology right now is neither human nor asura. It's something in between because of the sacrificial aether art Sylvie used on you. The problem you had, once you became conscious, was that your mana core is damaged beyond repair. Unlike a lesser, without a functioning—and rather powerful—mana core, you can't sustain this body."

"That doesn't make any sense. How would my own body not be able to support... my body?" I gestured vaguely down at myself, unsure how to more accurately express my question.

"If you think about why asuras are so innately powerful, it's because, unlike lessers, their bodies are reliant on mana to operate. From the moment asuras are born, their mana cores are constantly being taxed just to sustain their physical bodies—their very lives. If an asura's mana core breaks, their whole body would slowly collapse."

I grimaced. "Okay, so since I don't have a mana core, my body is slowly shutting down?"

"It was, until you savagely started eating the aether from those chimera-creatures like some starving zombie," Regis explained. "After that, your body began to sustain itself a little better."

I looked down at my hands and feet, marveling at how different this body was compared to my old one. It wasn't just my exterior appearance that had changed.

"And more exciting still... remember when you were like, 'Regis, get in my hand!'?" Regis said in a voice annoyingly similar to mine. "Well, you thought that it was the aether from me that you were manipulating, right? It was actually the aether you already had inside your body. For some reason, when I went into your hand, all of that aether you had consumed—which had been spread throughout your body—came toward me."

"Interesting... Wait, does that mean you can basically siphon aether out of my body and use it for yourself?" I asked suspiciously.

"Maybe," Regis answered before hurriedly continuing. "But I didn't! Okay, maybe a little, but only once I knew your life wasn't in danger! Until then, I went inside your leg and made sure all of the aether you had left in your body was focused on regenerating it."

I looked at the will-o-wisp, and it was like I was seeing him for the first time. I had to admit, without his intervention I would have been in much worse shape. I even began to wonder if he wasn't as bad as I had made him out to be.

"Honestly, you're damn lucky I was here and that I'm not confident in continuing to exist after you snuff it."

Ah. There he is, I thought, amused despite myself.

"So you said that the aether I consume is spread around my body, momentarily nourishing and strengthening me before it's all used up, correct?" I asked.

"Yup. From what I can gather, the aether tries to keep you at an optimal state, so it prioritizes recovering wounds first, which is probably why you don't feel that much stronger."

"Good. And I'm guessing that if you consume the aether in my body, you'll get stronger too, in some way or another?"

"That's what it feels like right now, didn't you notice?"

I raised a brow. "Notice what?"

"My horns!"

I stared at him, searching through the flickering fire until I found the two little nubs poking up out of the black flames.

"You have horns now," I said, deadpan.

"Damn right! I can feel myself growing into my true power!" Regis flared as his bright eyes shined, and I could feel his exaltation, his unwieldy pride.

"That's... great. Cool horns. I'm glad to hear you're coming into your true power or whatever, because"—I pointed at the metal door a few feet away—"we're going to go back out there and try to harvest as much aetheric essence as possible, either from the arrows or from those chimeras themselves, and come back here."

Regis's body dimmed again suddenly and he flew down until he was inches in front of my face. "Seriously? To what end?"

"So I can get strong enough to kill them all," I said matter-of-factly.

Crossing through the door and walking up to the triggering point in the hallway wasn't any easier the second time. The fact that we knew what was coming actually made the anticipation worse, but at least I was feeling a little stronger and lighter on my feet due to the aether I'd consumed.

With a rumble and explosion of stone fragments, the bow-wielding chimera broke loose from its statue first—the same as last time.

I broke into a sprint back toward the door to the sanctuary; I couldn't allow myself to get surrounded or cut off from our exit.

The goal was simple: consume as much aether from the chimeras as I could while sustaining as few injuries as possible. The fewer injuries I had, the more the aether that I consumed would go into strengthening my body.

"So," Regis said as we fled from the sound of more statues shattering behind us. "We split the aether fifty-fifty?"

"Really, you want to talk about this now?" I scoffed. "Eighty-twenty, after my wounds have been healed."

Regis huffed. "Stingy-ass."

"Maybe if you become an actual weapon of some sort after getting stronger, I can allocate some more to you," I replied, looking back over my shoulder.

The two of us parted ways as the chimera leapt off its podium and landed with a *thud*. Locking its beady eyes on me, it unhinged its jaw, displaying a mouth full of needle-like teeth, and let out a monstrous wail that sent chills down my spine.

Maintaining my balance in this body while moving any faster than a brisk walk required a significant amount of focus on my part. It was now nearly as difficult to lightly jog as it had once been for me to literally fly through the air.

Still, I managed to get close enough to the sanctuary door to feel comfortable. Whirling around to face the chimera, I watched carefully as it ripped off one of its spiked vertebrae and nocked it.

The chimera released its attack, launching the bone arrow with another piercing howl that tore through the air.

I rolled out of the way, not trusting myself to attempt a more subtle movement. As the arrow struck the wall, the entire room trembled, and before I could even gather myself, the chimera already had two more arrows ready to fire from its bow.

It didn't do that last time, I thought, an unnamed worry prickling at the back of my mind.

Thankfully, Regis had reached the chimera by this time and was dancing crazily around its face.

The arrows missed their mark, allowing me some time to snap off the shafts of the arrows, which had both stuck in the stone wall. I consumed the aetheric essence from one of the arrows, but the other I stashed for later use.

Before I could feel good about things going to plan, the second chimera broke loose. Then the third, and a fourth... and a fifth.

"They're breaking out faster this time!" Regis roared, still keeping the first chimera occupied.

Cursing inwardly, I shifted my gaze between the three grotesque figures racing toward me like frenzied animals and the entrance back to the sanctuary.

I buried the temptation of leaving this soon. I wasn't injured, and I had consumed a bit of aether, but that was nowhere near enough now. My initial plan of harvesting a few arrows at a time to slowly get stronger had gone down the drain now that there was the possibility of the chimeras breaking free faster each time.

I wasn't strong enough to beat them this round, and I needed to get a lot stronger for the next round, or I had no hope of getting past this floor, let alone the entire dungeon.

The first chimera to reach me was wielding a whip that appeared to be made from the spine of a large serpent. The whip left a blurred afterimage in the air as the chimera launched a barrage of swipes, sweeps, and strikes, each of which carved divots into the stone and splintered the ground around me.

Hardened battle instincts and decades of fighting knowledge made up for my limited strength and control over my body. I ducked, rolled, and weaved through the spiked whip, but I was just barely holding on even before the other two chimeras reached us.

Regis did his best to occupy the bow-wielding and shotgun-wielding chimera while I moved forward with the next step of the plan.

I had to wait for just the right moment, but when one chimera swung its sword in a downward cut that would have sliced me in two, I slid to the side, staying as close as I dared while avoiding the blade, which struck the ground with such force that it lodged deeply into the marble.

I clung to the chimera's arm, tearing at the aetheric essence radiating out from the monster with my teeth. The chimera wrenched its sword free of the floor and shoved me away, but I had consumed enough aether to quickly heal the minor scrapes and bruises I'd taken so far, with enough left over to provide me an instant boost in strength.

I rolled under the point of a spear, thrust at me from behind by the third chimera, and twisted around as I leapt back to my feet, right next to the chimera's arm. Grabbing the spear with one hand and the chimera's arm with the other, I began to consume its aether.

Strength infused my limbs, and when the chimera punched forward with its other arm, I didn't immediately crumple under the weight of the blow, although I was shoved away from the creature, breaking my hold on it. Even though I successfully brought up one arm to block the strike, I still felt as though I'd jumped in front of a battering ram.

I couldn't help but flinch as an explosion rocked the hall. Thankfully, the shotgun blast was directed elsewhere. Regis was doing his part.

Stepping away from the slashing sword and then pirouetting past another thrust of the spear, my gaze flashed across the archer-chimera, which had three arrows ready to fire and a clear line of sight toward me.

Cursing, I dove toward the swordsman, slamming into it hard enough to knock it back on its heels. I let the natural course of our momentum twist us around until my back was exposed to the archer, taking advantage of the moment to draw in more of the sword-wielding chimera's aether. It thrust its blade downward just as I heard the deadly *thrum* of arrows being loosed. I threw myself between the chimera's legs an instant before the arrows impacted it, causing it to stumble back and trip over me before crashing into the chimera with the whip.

I watched in excitement as the chimera writhed in pain, feeling truly hopeful for the first time. Then the blunt end of the other chimera's spear struck me.

Barely managing to guard the blow with my arms, I let out a gasp as I felt bones break from the impact.

"Arthur!" I heard Regis yell as I flew back and hit the wall with such force that I felt something more than just the wall crack behind me.

I collapsed on the floor, blood pooling underneath me even faster than when I lost a leg, my consciousness wavering.

Contorting my body, I used my teeth to clumsily pry out the broken arrow I had saved and began swallowing the aetheric essence.

The bones of my left arm shifted back into place, and I was able to move it, but my right arm was shattered beyond use. With my strength slowly returning, I managed to pull myself up off the floor.

The door to the sanctuary was just a few steps to my left, and the temptation to just go back grew stronger. I weighed my options, trying to figure out the best way for me to survive, when a beastly roar captured my attention.

The sword-wielding chimera and the archer were fighting... against each other. This seemed to have drawn the attention of the chimera with the shotgun, who was stomping toward them despite Regis's intervention.

The other two chimeras, however, had realized that I was still alive and were charging toward me. A few minutes ago, I would've accepted this as my death, but now a new plan had solidified in my mind.

My eyes locked onto the lead chimera, which ran just ahead of its spear-wielding companion, and, with a sharp breath, I dashed toward it.

The chimera brandished its skeletal whip, slinging the deadly weapon around its head as it charged. Just before it was within range, I turned sharply to my right—nearly tripping in the process—veering instead toward the chimera with the spear.

I only have one shot at this.

Not wanting its prey to get away, the first chimera struck its whip at me with a sharp *crack*.

Now!

I raised the bone shaft like a shield and blocked the tail end of the whip, causing it to curl around the arrow.

Come on...

Now with the tail end of the whip in my grasp, I dove down just below the spear-chimera's midsection swing and used the whip as a tripwire.

The chimera toppled forward and smashed into the wall with a thunderous crash, tearing the shaft out of my hand and sending me sprawling. Panicked, I rolled away, expecting the whip to come scything toward me at any moment, but the chimera wielding it had been pulled off its feet by the impact as well.

The two chimeras were scuffling in their attempts to heave their large bodies from the ground, both entangled in the long whip and growling, shoving, and pulling at one another as they tried to free themselves.

Success!

With those two momentarily distracted, all that was left was for the last stage of my plan.

The shotgun-chimera was slow to reload its gun, but each attack made a crater in the wall or floor of the hall. I was thankful that Regis had been able to blind it enough to minimize the threat it posed while I dealt with the others.

Now, I needed to take advantage of that threat.

"Regis! Keep its eyes covered but steer its gun toward me!" I barked, positioning myself in front of the scuffling chimera.

Unlike before, my companion didn't question the command. Regis unlatched himself from the shotgunchimera's face just enough to keep its vision mostly obscured.

Enraged, the chimera swung its gun at Regis, who was zipping around its face.

"Now!" I roared.

Regis flew towards me and I found myself staring down the barrel of the chimera's shotgun once more.

This time, however, it was on purpose.

Timing it up until the very last moment, I leaped out of the way just as the chimera fired, letting the bullets rain down on the other two.

I gritted my teeth as pain shot up my shattered arm and back, afraid to turn and look, but when I did I was astonished by the sight before me.

The shotgun had punched holes right through both the spear- and whip-wielding chimeras—both of whom were lying limp.

The plan had worked better than I expected.

With no time to lose, I ran to the two chimeras, still partially tangled in the long whip, and dragged them toward the door.

A feral roar ripped out from the shotgun-chimera's throat, getting the attention of the archer and swordsman, still fighting each other further down the hall. They regarded each other for a moment, then their beady eyes landed on me.

Crap.

I heaved even harder, dragging the heavy corpses across the pock-marked stone floor as fast as my tired, broken body would allow.

"Regis!" I called out, not able to see the floating black fireball anywhere.

"Here," Regis groaned, manifesting just beside me. "I didn't know that it would take so long for me to form back after being obliterated." Lazily, the will-o-wisp fluttered into my hand, attracting my aether so we could open the door.

An arrow whizzed past, barely grazing my leg. I let out a roar, mustering every last bit of my strength into pulling the giant chimeras.

The bow string *twanged* again. Without the strength and time to do much else, I pivoted my body so the arrow would strike my right shoulder, sacrificing my debilitated arm to keep the rest of my body able.

A piercing pain burned through me and I almost fell back from the force of the blow, but I managed to stay on my feet.

The sword-chimera was nearly on me by the time we reached the door, but I was able to activate the aether runes to allow our escape.

I hauled the two chimeras through the portal with a mighty heave, but my heart pounded against my cracked ribs when I saw the spine-whip slowly untangling itself from around the two chimeras, making it impossible to pull them both at the same time.

Barely managing to pull the whip-chimera fully through the portal, I scrambled forward and began dragging the spear-chimera as well, but as the whip's hold on the spear-chimera loosened, I felt a strong force pulling it back.

"No!" I roared, watching the chimera slip back through the portal as the swordsman pulled it from the other side.

"We need to close the door!" Regis shouted, shooting out of my hand.

"Damn it!" I cursed, slamming the large metal door closed.

260 VICTORY

My entire body shuddered as I let out a deep breath. Taking a moment to let the aether move through me, I looked over my asuran body. Despite the horrific injuries I'd sustained from the chimera, there wasn't a scar or blemish on me; the perfectly defined muscles of my arms, torso, and legs looked like they had been painted on, rather than acquired through hard work.

A faint aura of purple enveloped me, slowly dimming as more and more aether dissipated from my body. Even though the aether left me, however, I realized a feeling of strength remained.

It was a feeling that differed from when I had enhanced my old body with mana. It was even different from how I felt after unlocking the third stage of Sylvia's dragon will in my fight against Nico.

The strength pumping through me didn't feel borrowed or artificially implanted; it felt like it was *mine*.

Approaching the nearby wall of the sanctuary, I squeezed my hand into a fist. Even my own eyes could not properly track my hand as it struck the wall with a deafening explosion.

The wall quivered and dust dislodged from the ceiling and drifted down to the ground like falling ash. Although barely a crack had formed in the stone, I was still content; I knew that the force of my blow had been enough to easily punch a large hole through even the thick metal gates of the Wall.

I looked down to see the wound on my fist already closing and healing itself. Turning around, I silently thanked the corpse of the giant chimera, now reduced to a pile of withered bones since the aetheric essence holding it together had been absorbed.

"Well look at that! You look a bit more like a man—at least, your body does, that is," Regis said, studying me.

"And you still look like a blob of ink," I replied, swatting him away.

I expected my hand to simply pass through him like it had before, but this time I felt some resistance upon contact.

"Woah."

Regis's eyes lit up and bounced around within his ethereal form in an expression that made me think of a lewd old man waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Did you get a good feel for *my* muscles?"

I wiped my hand on my pants. "Gross."

Regis laughed, zipping around through the air as if he were flying for the first time.

I shook my head. "We should leave now. I can feel the aetheric essence leaving my body by the second, and I need as much as possible if we're going to kill all of those chimeras."

"You're right," my companion replied confidently. "Let's do this."

Taking one last deep breath to calm myself, I pushed open the door.

My body tensed and my heart pounded against my ribs. Even though my mind knew I stood a much better chance against the chimeras now, fear and pain had been deeply ingrained into my body by my two previous battles.

"Third time and this place is still creepy," Regis groused.

We proceeded cautiously up the hall, trying to make out any differences from the last time we came here. I had hoped that the whip chimera that we had killed and taken back to the sanctuary wouldn't be here, but its statue remained intact, looking somehow even scarier than before.

"I'm curious how the party before us got through," I wondered aloud, my head still turning left and right as I scanned our surroundings. "How strong are those three?"

Regis bobbed in a shrug. "Hopefully we'll never have to find out."

As I approached the activation point, I checked to make sure that Sylvie's egg was tucked tightly beneath my leather vest. I took a deep breath, then another step. The room rumbled.

Unlike the previous two times, there was no gradual crumbling of the statues, no time spent prying themselves free from their encasements. The chimeras simply burst out of the statues and glared around the room, ready to attack.

"So I was right," I sighed. "They do break out faster each time."

Regis rolled his eyes. "I'd clap slowly, applauding you for your *incredible* foresight but—y'know—no hands."

In unison, the chimeras leaped from their podiums and let out a series of shrill screeches.

I got into a fighting stance, my trained eyes taking in the positions and weapons of the twelve chimeras surrounding us.

I focused on the three chimeras wielding long-ranged weapons: a bow, a shotgun, and dual crossbows.

"I know the rough timing of the shotgun chimera. Keep the one with the crossbows occupied!" I ordered as I leapt forward and drove my fist into a chimera wielding two maces, each made from the skull of a giant ape-like beast.

The chimera stumbled a few steps back from the force of the blow. It screeched in pain, but was able to make a desperate swing with one of its maces.

I ducked and released a wide hook straight into its exposed ribcage. It buckled and let out another wail, but before I could capitalize on its injuries, an arrow caught me in my leg, going straight through my thigh.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I tackled the mace-wielding chimera onto its back, then focused on the other chimeras fast approaching.

Keeping the position of the shotgun- and bow-chimeras always in mind, I dashed toward my next opponent.

Each step I took, each punch I threw, I could feel more of the aether that I had gathered being spent. Even though I consumed aether mid-battle from the chimeras, I was expending it much faster than I could absorb it, and I had only managed to kill three.

Making sure that my breathing remained controlled and my movements sharp and unwasted, I relied on the same tactics I had used before. I was able to make two chimeras kill each other, but after that the shotgun chimera took command of its forces, ending their infighting with a guttural war cry.

Meanwhile, Regis continued to occupy the crossbow chimera. Based on the speed at which its weapons reloaded and the power each bone bolt contained, I had made the right choice in sending Regis to blind it.

Still, as I killed each chimera, an uneasiness crept up my spine and into my stomach.

The entire hallway was littered with fragments of stone from the crumbled statues and the divots dug up from the ensuing battle. I had used over half of the aether I had gathered, and the remaining chimeras were stronger than the ones I had killed.

"It's never easy, is it," I muttered under my breath, my eyes focused on a chimera with serrated daggers for hands.

Another idea began to form as my gaze shifted from the dagger-chimera to the sword-chimera.

Among the rubble and corpses, I scooped up two intact arrows, then locked onto the chimera wielding twin daggers.

Before I engaged, I hurled one arrow like a javelin toward the swordsman, where it sank deep into its arm, causing the monstrosity to snarl and prepare to attack.

With no time to relax, I dipped and weaved through the flurry of swings from the lanky dagger-chimera. My mind brought up scenes from almost ten years ago, when I had sparred against Jasmine on a daily basis while starting my time as an adventurer.

Unlike the way Jasmine seemed to almost dance with her daggers, however, this chimera's techniques were crude, relying entirely on its long reach and ridiculous strength and speed.

Whoever made these *things* might have imbued them with the physical prowess of an S-class mana beast, but their intellect and technique were subpar.

I continued twisting and dodging, almost like I was dancing myself, always just out of reach from the dagger-wielding chimera. I used it like a shield, its manic assault forcing the other chimeras back, preventing them from engaging me directly without hitting it, or without it cutting them to ribbons.

Growing more and more frustrated by its inability to even touch me, the chimera let out sharp screeches, swinging its daggers until a rather desperate overhead swing dug one of its blades a bit too deeply into the ground.

Finally with an opportunity in place, I jumped forward, kicking the chimera's arm with enough force to snap it like a stick. It roared and reeled back, ripping the knitted flesh and exposed muscles like tissue paper; the severed arm, ending in a curved dagger, lay at my feet.

I could sense the others closing in. I dug my toe under the severed arm and kicked it up into my hands, wielding it in front of me like a longsword. The familiar stance filled me with a newfound confidence.

Spinning, I deflected a sword thrust, then rolled backwards away from a descending axe, only to come face to face with the now one-armed chimera.

It dove at me with an enraged howl, its remaining dagger flashing toward me with the speed and strength to slice me in two.

All it took was one step to avoid the desperate strike from the one-armed chimera and a pivot to dodge a shotgun blast before I swung my new sword. With that single swing, its severed, bug-like head rolled on the floor.

Smirking, I looked around at the remaining chimera. "I finally got a weapon."

"Oh bite me!" Regis hollered from across the room.

The soft purple glow surrounding the chimera's dagger-arm dimmed after just that one swing, and I knew that this weapon wouldn't last much longer.

Knowing I would need it before long, I quickly severed the other dagger from the headless chimera's arm before squaring up against a thrust of the swordsman's blade.

I deflected the strike, allowing the momentum to spin me in place, my own sword carving through the creature's leg before plunging into its throat. It crashed to the ground next to the headless chimera, dead.

Four more seconds until the shotgun chimera is finished reloading.

I dashed past a chimera wielding a lance and shield—one of the stronger ones—and I aimed my sword at an old friend of mine.

The whip-chimera let out a shrill cry as I stabbed my sword into its gut and carved a line straight through its torso.

Discarding the severed appendage, which had begun to crumble apart, I ran for the other dagger, rolled under a barrage of crossbow bolts, and came back to my feet with the blade ready. I prepared to rush the closest chimera when an earth-shattering roar exploded from behind me.

I whirled around, prepared to dodge or block whatever was coming—except there was no charge or attack. The shotgun chimera had let out a thundering cry, but it wasn't pointing its shotgun at me. It was standing tall with its arms spread wide.

It let out another roar, even louder this time, and the remaining chimeras, those that were still alive, began barreling toward their leader.

Even the crossbow-chimera rushed toward the sound of its leader's cry, ignoring Regis and leaving the two of us confused and wary.

"What in hell's name is going on now," Regis groaned, floating by my side.

Every fiber of my body, every combat instinct I'd earned over my two lifetimes of training, screamed at me to run away. Unfortunately, the shotgun chimera was standing in front of the door to the sanctuary and the rest were quickly gathering to him, cutting off our escape.

Spinning on my heels, I rushed to the metal door at the far end of the hall, which would lead us to the next level of this godforsaken dungeon, and yanked at the rune-covered handle.

It didn't budge.

Cursing, I scanned every inch of the door, looking for any familiar aetheric runes that I could alter like the door to the sanctuary.

"Uhh... Arthur?"

"What?" I snapped, my eyes darting left and right, trying to find something that would get this thing to open.

"They're... piling on top of each other," Regis said.

Despite my instincts demanding that I get out of there, I couldn't resist.

My eyes widened in horror at what I saw.

The chimeras weren't simply piling on top of one another. They were devouring each other.

"It's intoxicating to watch," Regis mumbled, eyes wide. "Maybe they'll just end up killing each other like that."

"I don't think so." The aetheric essence enveloping their bodies grew thicker as they continued to eat each other, fusing into a pile of flesh and bone.

I turned to the door, not wanting to stick around for what was to come. Unfortunately, the door wouldn't budge, and, unlike the door to the sanctuary, there were no runes that I could decipher.

I slammed my fists against the door in frustration before turning back toward the monstrosity I would have to face.

Luckily, they were still in the middle of whatever metamorphoses they were undergoing.

Picking up the dagger beside me, I dashed toward the pile of chimeras. *If I can't run away from them, I'll just have to try and do as much damage as I can before it fully forms.*

I swung and stabbed the large serrated dagger in areas where the aetheric essence had gathered the most, but was rewarded only with the occasional wail of pain or momentary spasm, and the chimeras continued devouring each other. "Come on. Just die already!"

Suddenly, another sharp chill ran down my spine as a pair of gleaming red eyes shot open.

A split second later, a blast of purple energy erupted from the mass of chimera bodies and hit me like a lead wall.

The concussive force spread, blasting both Regis and I into the air. I hit the ground like a sack of potatoes and tumbled across the floor. Barely holding onto my consciousness, I anchored myself to the ground, gripping one of the divots to keep myself from rolling further.

Regis tottered toward me. "Well that friggin' hurt."

"That hurt you too?"

That's not good.

My mind whirled as I tried to think of a plan to kill that hunk of bone and flesh when an earthly roar tore through my mind like fangs through flesh. I looked up, afraid of what my eyes would see.

And what I saw was worse than what I had imagined.

Like one of the old retro arcade shooting games I had played with Nico and Cecilia in my past life, the creatures had merged into their final form.

The monstrosity, which was nearly a hundred feet away, towered over the second row of sconces. It had three heads and stood on six legs that jutted out from the bottom of its lanky torso.

"It's gotta be twenty feet tall!" Regis said, his flames dimming meekly.

While it only had two arms, one of them was a combination of the shotgun and crossbows merged together, with long spines jutting from its forearms. The other arm was composed of the whip with a spiked sickle at the end that screeched against the ground as the creature skittered toward us.

The thought of luring it away from the door and escaping back to the sanctuary crossed my mind briefly, but what I feared more than facing this monster was doing this all over again.

Clearing my thoughts from unnecessary distractions—like Regis begging us to go back—I tightened my grip around the bone handle of the dagger and propelled myself forward.

The fused chimera responded by aiming the barrel of its gun at me. I could see two of the spiked vertebrae on its forearm load into the chamber and the aetheric essence coalescing until it was visible to even the naked eye.

Waiting until the last second, I pivoted, veering right just in time to see the two bolts fire, each surrounded by a concentrated blast of aether.

What I didn't expect, however, was for the monster's attack to carry the force of a missile.

I was thrown flat against the corridor wall and pelted with debris as a wave of purple energy blasted out from the point of impact. Several of my ribs cracked and my vision blurred. I could feel my brain threatening to shut off, but I knew if I passed out then I would die.

Regis hovered in front of me, his expression serious, but I couldn't hear his voice over the sharp ringing in my ears.

My eyes trailed back on the fused chimera, afraid to leave it out of my sight for even a second longer. Somewhat clumsily, I picked up the dagger, which had fallen a few feet away, and stumbled forward, focusing entirely on the flow of aether around its body.

I knew it would take the monster a while to charge up enough aether to repeat that attack; its blaster arm dangled lifelessly by its side and the aetheric essence around it dissipated into purple smoke. I needed to make sure that it wouldn't be able to fire off another aether missile.

But the blaster wasn't its only weapon. The monster swung its chain sickle at a speed that created gales of wind and deep gouges in the marble floor; I shuddered to think what that weapon would do to me if the chimera landed a blow.

I was forced to perform at a speed that far surpassed what a normal human could ever achieve. Even I was surprised as I sidestepped, swiveled, and pivoted just enough to dodge the whirlwind weapon. My eyes constantly followed it, pinpointing the direction the sickle would come from based on the slightest twitch of movement made by the fused chimera.

The flow of aether around its whip arm and around its legs was familiar, allowing me to make use of my knowledge of reading mana flow. With my enhanced body, experience, and reflexes, I managed to dismember two of its six legs before the monster's blaster had finished charging.

It's now or never, I determined, ducking under another swipe from the sickled end of the whip.

I stepped forward, turning the serrated blade up and preparing to step inside the next hissing strike from the whip, expecting the creature to come overhead with the scythe. Thus I found myself caught out of position when it twisted and drew the whip upwards instead, forcing me to throw myself backwards, but not fast enough.

I watched as the serrated dagger, and the arm holding it, dropped to the ground in a spray of blood. It looked strange and unfamiliar lying on the floor at my feet, as if my mind couldn't quite accept that it was *my* arm.

"Arthur!" Regis's cry snapped me out of the momentary daze and I immediately lunged forward, grabbed the dagger from my own severed arm, and attacked.

The chimera thrust its blaster arm forward, preparing to unleash another explosive blast. The blade in my hand flashed, and the chimera shrieked in pain as aetheric essence splattered from its severed blaster arm along with part of its shoulder.

"Arm for an arm," I muttered grimly as I reached down and consumed the aether leaking from the chimera's detached appendage.

Power flowed through me, and despite its effects being momentary, there was enough aether in my body to test something that I had seen from the chimera itself.

"Regis, get in my hand," I ordered.

My companion, although worried, flew into my hand, and this time, I could feel the aether coalescing in my fist.

I knew that aether wasn't supposed to be manipulated—only beckoned, or 'influenced' as the Indrath Clan put it—but what if there was a way to force it into submission, to make it beckon to *my* will?

The chimera, disoriented and defensive, backed away, using its long whip to create space between us. This worked in my favor, however, as I was able to kneel down and draw the aether from one of the other chimera corpses lying on the ground, hoping it would be enough to regrow my missing limb.

I let the aether in my body gravitate to my fist, drawn there by Regis, focusing on the feeling—memorizing it.

As more and more aether condensed in my left hand, a thin layer of black coated my flesh like a smoky glove.

I felt my pace slowing as the aether powering my body flowed into my hand.

'I feel like I'm going to burst here. What exactly did you have in mind?' Regis said, his voice echoing in my mind.

"Just hold it in until I say so," I said through gritted teeth. It felt like I was walking deeper and deeper into a pit of tar as my body became more difficult to control, but I was almost to the chimera.

However, before I could get close enough, the chimera's three heads whirled to face me. Rather than attack me, though, it shuffled back warily, all six of its eyes concentrated on my hand.

Almost there!

My hand felt like it was being squeezed by two boulders as more and more aether coalesced inside it, but before I could get in range to unleash it, the entire hall quivered and the sconces flickered off.

I could feel the aether in the atmosphere tremble as a baleful aura spread from where the chimera stood, its six eyes now glowing purple.

It's using aether to manifest some sort of debilitating aura.

Whether it was because of my asuran body or because of my mental strength from living two lives, the aetheric intent had little effect, however.

Gritting through the intensifying pain radiating from the stub of my cloven arm, I dashed forward.

The chimera let out a hysterical screech and began wildly swinging its whip.

Concentrating on the flow of aether to determine the path of its attack, I stepped back, just out of reach, then lunged forward after the whip hissed through the air just in front of my nose.

"Now!" I roared, barely able to swing my arm.

My aether clad fist landed right underneath its three heads, and I released the pent-up aether. The pressure within me exploded outward with a sound like a hurricane wind as a blast of black and purple energy erupted directly into the chimera's chest.

It felt like every ounce of strength had been sapped clean from my body as I lay sprawled on the ground just beside the remains of the fused chimera.

My eyelids grew heavy as I succumbed to the dark grasp of unconsciousness, but a loud cry suddenly snapped me awake.

"Hah! Screw you, I am a weapon!" Regis whooped in glee.

Despite the near-death experience and the fact that I was still missing an arm, I joined him, letting out a hoarse laugh.

Pulling myself painfully up to my feet, I inspected the fused chimera's remains. I couldn't tell whether I had used space or life aether, but I had managed to create a crater in its chest and disintegrate most of its heads.

"Good job," I said to my companion. Behind us, there was a soft *click* from the door leading to the next stage.

"So, pretty boy, did you want to consume this hunk of bone and move onto the next room?" Regis asked with renewed confidence.

"Not quite," I said, my voice sounding tired and distant as I hobbled toward the fused chimera corpse. "You know how you said that even asuras have mana cores that sustain and power their bodies?"

"Yeah?" Regis tilted his head. "But your mana core is broken."

It had occurred to me when Regis was pulling the aether flowing inside of me to my hand, but the idea hadn't fully coalesced until that moment, with such a massive store of aether lying in a heap in front of me.

"Yup." I looked back at him, images of the purple clad chimeras ingrained in my head. "So what if I tried forming an aether core?"

261 THE CORE

"This is crazy. It's not going to work."

"It might if you stop your relentless badgering," I said, flexing the fingers of my newly regenerated arm.

Regis zipped up to my face. "Oh, I'm sorry. Is my genuine concern that you might *blow yourself up* bothering you?"

I swatted him away. "Yes."

My floating companion's smoky black form sizzled in anger. "Why are you even attempting this anyway? You just demolished the hidden boss of this level with a punch! I think you're strong enough."

"I can't rely on sustaining my body by constantly eating aetheric essence off of monsters."

"So your plan is just to form your own power source? Geez, I wonder why the wise and powerful dragons of the Indrath Clan haven't thought of something like that... oh wait, they have!"

"Yes, I remember the story. The elders of the Indrath Clan attempted to form a core out of pure aether within the body of an infant clan member that was born without a core. You literally just told me."

"And what did we learn from that story?" Regis asked, as if he were speaking to an infant himself.

I sighed. "That the baby was met with a grisly death."

"So why are you still trying to do this?" Regis seethed.

"Because I have no other choice if I want to get stronger. I don't want to rely on temporary power boosts—that I can't even control—from consuming another life form's aetheric essence. You saw how fast it depletes from my body even when I'm not fighting."

"That's no reason to kill yourself over this!"

"Regis." I stared coldly into the will-o-wisp's shining eyes. "I'm sure you know this from being fed my memories, but I've barely been able to fight against Agrona's retainers, and Scythes are in a whole other league. I'm not just looking to survive this hellish dungeon or ruin—whatever this place is. I may have the body of an asura, but unless I have some hope of growing as strong as the asuras, I might as well stay

down here forever and consign my family to death at the hands of the Alacryans, because leaving here without the strength to fight back just means giving the enemy another chance at beating me back down."

Regis remained silent as he studied me, his expression a mixture of frustration and concern.

Eventually, he let out a sigh. "Fine. Aside from the fact that you can physically *eat* aether, what makes you think that your attempt will be any different from what the asuras did?"

"You're forgetting that I was responsible for forming my own mana core when I was three. I'll figure something out."

The first step of my plan was to spend some time closely studying the chimera.

I studied how the aetheric essence had become bound to the chimera corpse; despite the fact that the chimera couldn't control or manipulate aether, there was no leakage of the essence.

Utilizing my unique perception of the aether around me, I also conducted a series of experiments on the corpse.

Because it had been killed, the aether didn't actively try to regenerate the broken parts of the chimera corpse. Instead, it seemed to be keeping the bone and flesh in an almost suspended state.

Injuries that I inflicted on the corpse postmortem weren't regenerated, and while there was some loss of aetheric essence from the wound, there was no leakage beyond that.

"Regis, try going inside the chimera and absorbing the aether directly," I said, not taking my eyes off the corpse.

"Well, I wasn't able to when it was alive, but I haven't tried it on a dead chimera," Regis replied, floating toward the giant body.

Rather than sink inside the surface of the corpse, however, he bounced off.

Regis let out a pained grunt from the impact before turning to me. "Happy?"

"Not particularly."

Having failed to gain any useful insights from this, I moved on to the next step, hoping I'd learn more.

Closing my eyes, I sensed the aether flowing in my body just as I had done when I was first trying to form my mana core.

The entirety of my mental faculties was focused on observing how aether moved within me—how it interacted with my muscles, bones, and organs, and how it dissipated from the surface of my skin constantly.

Next, I focused on the shattered pieces of my mana core. I couldn't gather or produce mana, and Sylvia's dragon will was no longer there. That meant that I had no way of using Static Void or Realmheart Physique, but the fragmented shell of my mana core was still inside me.

Worse yet, the aether was slowly dissolving the broken pieces of my mana core, seeing them as imperfections in my body that needed to be discarded as they no longer served any purpose.

Realizing that all of the painstaking years of work refining and strengthening my mana core would soon disappear sent a sharp pain through my chest, and it took all my mental fortitude to keep from slipping into despair.

That's when it struck me: The aether saw the broken shards of my mana core as an injury. Because they didn't serve a function anymore, it was trying to remove them from my body.

But what if it thought that they did?

My eyes shot open, and I scrambled to my feet to study the fused chimera once more, this time from a different angle.

The act of fusing the chimera bodies together was neither regenerating nor healing, but the fact that the aether determined that this course of action was the best choice told me something.

With my plan slowly solidifying, I went back to meditating, a slight grin on my face. I already knew that I couldn't actively manipulate the aether within me, just like how the chimeras couldn't control the aether that powered their bodies. But I had a few theories.

First, I purposely injured myself to study how the aether behaved and interacted within my body while paying close attention to my thoughts. My actions would have been considered insane to any passing witnesses, but there was no one besides Regis to see, and I wouldn't have cared anyway.

I had learned something pivotal when I launched the final attack against the fused chimera despite the stub of my arm bleeding profusely.

It took a few dozen times of injuring myself to actually confirm my hypothesis, but eventually, it was clear that intent influenced the movement of the aetheric essence within me.

It was nowhere near as potent or immediate as my ability to manipulate mana had been, but if I thought that regenerating a certain part of my body took precedence over another part, the aether responded to my desire. Still, the fact that aether could be influenced to do something as crazy as fusing multiple bodies together meant that the chimeras' intent had a very real impact on it.

What if I can somehow trick the aetheric essence to fuse together the shattered remains of my mana core instead of getting rid of it, and then have it build a new core over my broken one?

There were two problems: First, the aetheric essence was too dispersed within my body to focus on just my core. Second, it might just slowly eat away at the broken remains of my mana core rather than try to fuse them together.

But still, it could work... no, it *had* to work.

Almost as soon as my thoughts solidified into an actual idea, I already knew what I had to do.

I just didn't like the answer.

The only reason my plan had even a chance of working was because I could do something that not even dragons of the Indrath Clan could do.

Letting out a deep breath, I reached in my vest and pulled out the small, iridescent stone stored there.

I'll definitely survive, Sylv. I'll bring you back out here. Just hold on.

Resolving myself, I got to work immediately, rapidly consuming the aetheric essence from the fused chimera corpse.

Even after my body had been suffused with aetheric essence and a purple aura began exuding from my skin, I kept absorbing aether, making sure I was consuming it much faster than the aether could deplete from my body.

"I don't think stress eating is the way to handle this, m'lady," Regis said, snickering.

Ignoring him, I continued despite a crushing pain growing within my body. It felt like every muscle, bone, and organ in my body were being pumped with fluid to the point of bursting.

But it wasn't enough. I needed as much aetheric essence as possible if my plan was going to work.

"Seriously, Arthur. You're... sort of bleeding from your body."

Just a bit more.

Unable to withstand the growing pain any longer, I pried myself away from the chimera corpse and sat down.

Regis was right; it looked like I was sweating blood as beads of red trailed down my body. My vision spun and pulsated, and I could feel my heart beating madly against my chest.

Controlling my breathing in order to keep myself from passing out, I seized one of the bone arrows—I had gathered a few earlier in preparation—and pressed it to my side, directly below my ribcage.

"Regis. On my mark, position yourself right where my mana core used to be, then leave as soon as I tell you, okay?"

Regis stared down at the sharp arrow in my hands. "What are you planning on doing with that?"

"*Okay?*" I repeated through gritted teeth, barely able to breathe.

Regis let out a groan. "Okay."

With that, I plunged the arrow deep into my sternum, into the small space just between my liver and stomach where the mana core was held. And just for good measure, I twisted the arrow.

"What the f—"

"Now!" I snapped, keeping my eyes closed in concentration.

Pulling the arrow out of my body, I clasped my hands over my wound as Regis flew inside me.

Immediately, like millions of tiny insects crawling inside every inch of my body, I felt all of the aether held within me coalescing around Regis—and my wound.

Just as the aether was about to reach my mana core, attracted twofold by the black will-o-wisp and my fatal injury, I barked at him to leave.

A black shadow zipped out of me almost instantaneously and all the aether that had gathered within the vicinity condensed together to heal the wound.

I focused my intent on forming a solid core around the coalescing aether where my old mana core used to be, using every mental trick I'd ever learned to maintain the state of meditation, of absolute focus.

My thought was this: unlike even dragons, I was able to absorb aether directly into my body; I had Regis, who naturally attracted the aether within me; the remains of my mana core still existed inside me; and I could influence the aether to a certain extent.

Having made it this far, I proceeded to the most important step.

The concept of time escaped me as the battle between my will and the aether gathered around the fragmented parts of my mana core raged on.

I needed to not only trick the aether to restore the mana core rather than to break it down, but I also needed it to rebuild my broken mana core *around* the compressed orb of aether.

If forming my mana core for the first time when I was a toddler had been difficult, this was next to impossible. Even a slight twitch of internal movement or leak of intent could cause the condensed orb of aetheric essence to break down my mana core until it was completely cleansed from my body. I wouldn't get a second chance.

It felt like every experience, every tribulation that I had gone through, was to prepare me for this moment. I was being tested to my utmost limit. The wound in my side was agony, the raging ball of godly power sitting within me like a bubble of molten gold, and my task was akin to holding that molten gold in shape with my bare hands, waiting for it to cool. My concentration was absolute.

Finally, as the last bits of my old mana core were restored, encasing the condensed aether within, my world erupted into a sea of purple.

By the time I came to, my head felt like it had been split in two, and my breathing was ragged. Prying my eyelids open, I was greeted by the sight of a smirking Regis in front of the familiar backdrop of the battle-scarred walls of the chimera hallway.

"Welcome back, sleeping beauty," Regis chuckled.

I pushed myself off my back, sitting up. "What happened?"

"Well, after you committed seppuku and sat completely still for about a full day, your body suddenly combusted into purple flames. Then you passed out for another two days," Regis explained, grinning maniacally. "But you did it, you sick, sadistic bastard!"

My core!

Taking a moment, I concentrated internally, getting a feel for the state of my body.

Regis was right, I had done it. I had successfully forged a new core. The color struck me as odd—it was closer to a red color, like magenta—but it still held the ethereal purple sheen of aether.

I had done what even the asuras of the Indrath Clan couldn't do.

I had forged an aether core.

262 FORBIDDEN FRUIT

The purplish-red core thrummed with life inside me, wishing to be unleashed.

A wild grin spread across my face, and I was impatient to try out my new powers—whatever they were—but there was one thing I had to test first.

Taking a deep breath, I meditated. Focusing on my newly forged core and the ambient aether surrounding us, I slowed my breath.

Force of habit made me assume that the breathing technique I had utilized to gather ambient mana could be applied to absorbing aether. That wasn't the case, but concentrating on my aether core in a way that felt like I was flexing it, the way one flexes a muscle, caused a change to stir outside my body.

Almost immediately, the effects were made clear.

"What? What is it?" Regis asked impatiently.

I opened my eyes, looking at the will-o-wisp with a smirk. "I can gather ambient aether into my core."

Regis's bobbed excitedly, his bright eyes flaring. "Seriously?"

"Consuming the aether from these chimeras directly is definitely faster and more potent, but at least now I'm not dependent on consistently running into beasts fueled by aether. Even if the monsters here are filled with aether, who knows if I'd be able to find any more outside of this dungeon." I flexed my core again, thrilled by the sensation of aether being drawn toward it.

Regis nodded. "That's good. Now I don't need to worry about you dropping dead because you couldn't get a meal."

"Aww, are you worrying about your master?" I teased.

"Of course I'm worried about you. As far as we know, if you get yourself dusted down here, I go poof too. And, let's be honest, you don't exactly make good choices when it comes to your health."

"I'm so glad to know you care," I said, rolling my eyes. "Anyway, keep testing! We need to know exactly what your limits are before we go on to the next stage."

Concentrating on my core once more, I released a bit of aether and focused on my hand. As soon as the aether left my core, it spread throughout my body, directionless.

Furrowing my brows, I tried again, visualizing the aether flowing through my mana channels.

"Crap," I muttered, realizing the problem. Out of desperation, I tried yet again, but was met with the same result: the short, concentrated burst of aether that I had expelled from my newly forged core was distributed evenly throughout my body.

"What's with the thunderous eyebrows?" Regis asked, watching me carefully. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"I can't control the distribution of the aether from my core." I could feel the aether strengthening my body, but the amount left by the time it reached my hand, where I actually wanted it, was just a small fraction of what I released.

Regis frowned in confusion. "But what about your mana chan—ohh... I see the problem."

Straightening up, I looked at my companion and smiled. "Just one more mountain to climb. I'll have to figure out another way to direct the flow of aether."

Regis bobbed in a shrug, flying toward the unlocked exit. "Nothing we can do but move forward, then."

"Wait. Let's go back to the sanctuary."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"If I'm not able to control the aether inside me, then I should at least strengthen my core, and even if it gets harder here, we know what to expect on this floor," I explained.

"Ugh..." Regis groaned as he wobbled his way toward me. "I'm going to be haunted by visions of these skinless monsters every time I close my eyes for the rest of my life, you know that?"

"You don't have eyelids, Regis," I said flatly.

"It's a figure of speech!" he snapped.

Chuckling, I opened the door back into the sanctuary. I made some minor preparations while we were there. Ripping my pants from my knees down, I fixed up a sash to safely store Sylvie's stone and wore it across my shoulder. Then, I made a crude waterskin out of what was left of my leather vest. After making sure water didn't leak from it, we went back into the hallway.

"Why aren't they waking up?" Regis said as we reached the center of the chimera room.

The long hallway had returned to its pristine state when we had gone into the sanctuary, but no matter how many times I walked back and forth past the statues, they didn't budge.

Regis flew up to the statue of the warrior wielding a sword. "Are they broken?"

"Maybe?" I walked up to one of them and pulled back my fist.

Not daring to use more than a tenth of the aether in my core, I struck one of the statues, sending splintering cracks throughout its leg.

Not bad, I thought. Ounce for ounce—or whatever unit of measurement was used—aether was much more potent and efficient than mana. Still, I wasn't satisfied.

"Hey, Regis. Occupy my hand again," I ordered, holding out my right palm. "I want to test something."

"Okay, but we should really come up with a name for this."

"Why?"

"Well, it'd be better than having you shout out, 'Regis, enter my hand!' That's pretty much the worst battle cry I've ever heard."

Closing my eyes, I wondered if Wren, the asuran craftsman who *gifted* me the acclorite that eventually became Regis, had known what it would become. He had claimed not to at the time, but now I couldn't help but wonder. He'd always been a bit sadistic. "Fine. Why don't you give that some thought while you're sitting around in my hand being useful?"

"As you command, oh master," Regis grumbled before flying into my palm, coating my entire hand in a layer of smoky black.

Immediately, I felt the aether that I had released beforehand gravitate toward Regis. After the rest of the aether in my body had coalesced in my right fist, I punched a different statue.

The impact cracked the statue, but there was no expulsion of aether like when I had used this same move against the fused chimera.

'I don't have enough aether to release it as an attack,' Regis said.

I gritted my teeth. "Fine. Tell me when."

I released more aether from my core, and it was immediately pulled toward my right fist. After nearly half of the aether from my core had been consumed, the smoky black glove surrounding my hand began glowing with the same reddish-purple color as my core.

'Now!' Regis barked.

I jabbed my fist into the statue in front of me, releasing a torrent of black and magenta energy from my hand and demolishing both the statue and the wall behind it in a concussive wave that distorted the very air around me.

Regis fell out of my hand, dazed. "I can probably use that move like one more time."

"Same here," I replied. "That used only slightly less than half of the aether in my core."

"Well, it definitely seemed to do the trick," he noted, studying the aftermath of our attack.

Without the chimeras coming, it made little sense to remain there for any longer, so after spending the next half hour replenishing my aether core, we walked toward the door that would lead us to the next floor.

"Let's go." I pushed open the tall metal door and stepped through.

I was welcomed by a hot gust of humid air that clung uncomfortably to my skin. However, the mild discomfort of the atmosphere was immediately washed from my mind by the scene ahead of me.

"Holy mother of mothers..." Regis mumbled as he, too, surveyed our surroundings.

We had stepped into what could only be described as a jungle, except that many of the trees were shockingly white, with leaves that glowed in various shades of purple. Strangely, the trees weren't only growing out from the ground but also on the ceiling of the enormous cavern.

Despite the jungle's alien beauty, my attention was quickly pulled away as the door we had come from began fading out of existence. Shocked, I hurriedly reached for the metal handle, but it was too late. My hand slipped through and I was left grasping at the air.

"Shit."

Looking back to the white trees, my mind raced. What terrors hid within this jungle? Would they be as bad as the chimeras? Or worse?

I had—wrongly, it appeared—assumed Regis and I would be able to return to the sanctuary room as needed. Had we simply been lucky that the sanctuary room connected directly to the chimeras' hall?

My eyes continuously scanned the area, my body tense in preparation of unexpected dangers. "Well, it doesn't seem like we can go back the way we came from. Come on, it's a bit too open out here for my comfort."

The two of us ventured deeper into the ethereal jungle, taking note of every oddity, of which there were many. We found thick, pale vines that connected the trees on the ground to the trees growing on the ceiling. Hundreds of blue globules filled the air, some floating up, others floating down.

My senses were on full alert as we continued walking carefully through the dense array of otherworldly trees. From time to time, I'd see shadows flit from tree to tree at a speed that exceeded some S-class mana beasts in Dicathen.

Despite how calm and quiet things appeared, I couldn't help but feel restless, waiting for the moment when something in the forest would try to kill me.

Regis, on the other hand, was enjoying the scenery, flying up over the canopy of trees that blocked much of my view.

"I can't see much except for these two-tailed monkey creatures climbing up and down the vines," Regis noted. "Oh! And you know those floating blue orbs? I think they're made of water. I saw a few of the monkey things hanging from the vines and drinking from them."

I nodded, but maintained a constant lookout for anything potentially dangerous.

"Will you ease up? Compared to the last floor, this place practically seems like paradise," Regis said. "All it needs is a hot spring full of beautiful women and we're set!"

"It's easy enough for you to relax, you're incorporeal," I retorted, continuing to walk carefully, aether coursing within my body just in case.

Unlike the straightforward hallway we had come from, this jungle didn't seem like it had any sort of predatory monsters of any kind, nothing that we had to beat in order to move on.

"Over there! It was a different color and a little smaller, but I saw some of those monkeys eating whatever that is," Regis said, gesturing toward a pear-shaped fruit hanging from a branch above us.

I gave my companion a skeptical look as he floated above me, near the fruit.

"Hey, I'm not the one that has to eat," Regis groused, offended by my lack of trust.

My initial impulse was to avoid the risk. After all, who knew how different the monkey creatures' anatomies were from mine. However, the longer I stared at it, the more my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten since waking up in this god-forsaken dungeon. What's more, the orange fruit was enveloped in a sheen of purple, suggesting that it might contain aether.

With my newly-forged aether core revitalizing this body, I knew that I didn't need to eat nearly as much as before, but eventually, I would have to find food, and the temptation staring me right in the face got the best of me.

I easily jumped up to the first branch, then scrambled to the next, quickly ascending the tree. To my surprise, the branches didn't even bend under my weight, making it easy to reach the glistening orange fruit.

Just as I was about to reach for it, something caught my eye: there was a subtle distortion in the area around it that made me immediately pull my hand back.

And that's when I noticed the giant mouth rimmed with rows of serrated teeth clamping shut around the fruit, right where my hand would've been had I not pulled back. Strangely, I could still see the fruit inside the monster's mouth.

I leaped back to a farther branch, bracing myself for its next attack. However, the monster merely parted its puffy lips once more and everything but the fruit it used as a lure became transparent.

"Oops. My bad," Regis said with an uncomfortable chuckle.

"From now on, you're checking everything first."

My annoyance, however, was clouded by my greed for that fruit. It wasn't just a lure; I had felt my aether core quiver in excitement when I had been near it.

"Wait, why are you going back?" Regis asked, seeing me hop back toward the branch that the fruit hung from.

"I'm going to try and get that fruit."

Slowly, my outstretched fingers approached the area where I knew the transparent teeth would snap shut. The instant I sensed movement, I whipped my hand away, just barely avoiding the monster's bite.

It shut faster this time, I noted.

With its mouth now clamped shut, I struck at its transparent body, hoping to at least knock it unconscious. However, rather than hit it, my hand slipped right through. Losing my balance, I fell and had to catch myself on a lower branch, but by the time I climbed back up, the creature had opened its mouth once more.

"Nice one," Regis said, the dark slash across his face turned up in a smirk. "You're making the same face you did when you first tried to hit me."

My eyes widened in realization. "You're right."

The next time, the mouth closed even faster. The serrated teeth left several gashes on my arm because I hadn't been able to pull back fast enough, but this time, as I struck at the transparent beast, I released more aether from my core, enough for a purplish-red sheen to envelop my body.

There was a slight give, as if my hand was passing through a layer of some viscous liquid, but beneath that was its actual body, which shuddered like rippling water.

The transparent beast let out a shrill scream, a demonic fusion of alarm bell and squealing infant that made me lose balance again from pure shock.

I managed to hold on to the tree, but Regis had been knocked unconscious, his incorporeal form floating featherlike to the branch at my feet, his flames wavering like he might go out.

I struck the squealing creature once more, and its soft body went limp.

Prying open its mouth, I reached inside and pulled out the fruit. It was soft and warm to the touch.

"What a weird creature," I mused, staring once more at the deadly flytrap beast.

Squatting down, I checked on Regis, who was stirring awake.

"What happened?" the black orb asked, his voice shaky.

I held the orange pear out to Regis with a smile. "I got it."

Regis made a show of studying the fruit, though I could sense his embarrassment at having fainted. "I wonder if it's edible."

"There's only one way to find out." I sniffed the fruit, then nibbled on the outer edge of it, taking only a very small bite just in case it was poisonous. Though I expected my asuran body could handle something like poison better than my old human form, I still had to be cautious. I didn't truly know my limits yet.

The fruit was sour. Not bad, necessarily, but it tasted sort of like a more flavorful lemon peel. Then, as soon as I swallowed, I felt the change in my body.

I buckled in pain as my insides twisted, my body quivering uncontrollably so I had to slump to the ground and lay huddled in fetal position as my aether core slowly absorbed the energy from the piece of fruit.

"Arthur!" Regis called out, his voice distant and muffled, but my attention, what little I could manifest, was focused behind him, past the tree line.

Heavy, rapid footsteps grew louder as the ethereal trees—whose branches remained unbowed beneath my weight—swayed fiercely in a path leading straight toward us.

263 LAW OF THE WILD

"There's something coming," I grunted, barely able to get back to my feet.

Regis turned around and his smoky black body went pale. "Oh, shit."

My heart pounded as the rapid footfalls grew louder; it sounded like an entire horde of creatures was charging toward us through the jungle. I hobbled as fast as my body would let me, fighting to even stay upright through the strain of processing the fruit I'd just consumed. There was no way I could fight whatever was barreling toward us in my current state.

Thankfully, we managed to find a dip in the ground by a large tree nearby. The exposed roots gnarled together, weaving in and out of the ground to provide us with a covert shelter to hide in.

My heart pounded as I listened to what sounded like a stampede charging back and forth through the area we had narrowly escaped from, doubtless searching for us.

My mind whirled, trying to think of the reason why we had suddenly attracted the attention of... whatever was out there. I couldn't see how eating the fruit could have—

That transparent flytrap... it let out that horrible scream just before it died.

And that's when everything clicked.

All of the organisms here—the two-tailed monkeys, the flytrap monsters—had adapted to make as little noise as possible in order to survive whatever was currently hunting me through the surrounding jungle.

"Sensitive to sound," I mouthed, pointing to my ear. Regis nodded and the two of us waited for the noise of stomping feet in the underbrush to pass.

By now, the constant series of rapid footfalls had grown so close that the ground itself shook under me. A series of loud, clicking, chittering noises followed, and I suddenly felt the pressure being emitted by our hunter. It was significantly stronger than even the fused chimera.

Whatever it was, I was confident it was one creature from the emission of raw power. One very large beast.

Steadying my breathing, I remained frozen as the grating sound of rusted gears clacking together grew closer. Regis flew inside me, afraid of being seen despite his incorporeal state.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I sensed something approaching our hidden shelter. The rapid chittering grew even louder until I was able to see it.

The chimeras had been fairly horrifying to look at, but this creature was something straight out of a demon's nightmare.

With the overall frame of a millipede—except the size and girth of a bullet train—the creature writhed past me, its countless spindly legs spanning twice my height. I was able to make out the serrated pincers on its head as it passed by, but most of the smaller details were lost on me. I was distracted by the fact that the millipede was almost transparent.

Tinged in a soft purple hue that blended with the glowing leaves, the giant millipede looked more gelatinous than solid, like it was missing its hard shell. However, seeing how not even the sharp, unyielding branches of the ethereal trees made a scratch against the creature's hide, I knew it wouldn't be easy to kill.

The millipede continued to crawl around us, searching for its prey. Despite its tremendous size and length, it moved with such nimbleness and flexibility that, even as it moved on to a different area, there were no broken limbs or upturned earth to show that a giant beast had passed through.

Still, I could hear it nearby. Its steps continued to shake the ground, keeping me from trying to leave my cramped refuge.

Time dragged as we anxiously waited for the millipede to leave when there was a change to the pattern of its noises. The beast's rapid steps began to slow, then became a rhythmic thumping of its many legs.

'What's going on now?' Regis asked.

I'm not sure, I responded, sorely tempted to take a peek.

It didn't take long to realize that I wouldn't have been alive if I had moved. Shortly after, a series of pained cries rent the humid jungle air.

I could only assume that the beast had used some form of echolocation to find anything nearby that had moved.

When the rhythmic stomping halted, Regis, who couldn't be detected by echolocation, hesitantly left my body and floated up out of our hole in the ground.

"It's okay, you can come out. It's... it's eating," Regis whispered.

Steeling myself, I pushed past the burning sensation still eating at my core and poked my head out of the shelter. The millipede had curled itself around a massive tree, which had, up until a moment ago, been home to a family of two-tailed monkeys.

It was a bloodbath. A larger monkey, drenched in its own blood, was being swallowed, while a smaller monkey pounded desperately, but ineffectually, on the millipede's head with a rock. An instant later, the millipede's head twisted sharply, throwing its attacker into the air, and quick as a snake it snapped the little monkey up, swallowing it rock and all.

Ignoring the gore—a sight that I had grown much too accustomed to—I studied the millipede. Pulsating circular depressions covered its back, but aside from the dagger-like pincers and its sharp legs, I couldn't see any other form of attack.

"Please tell me you're not thinking of fighting that thing," Regis whispered, hovering an inch away from my ear.

"Not if I don't have to."

It didn't take long for over half of the dozen two-tailed monkeys to be consumed, after which the other half gave up and escaped, throwing down their sticks and rocks in order to flee up the vines before disappearing into the trees hanging from the cavern ceiling.

Several minutes later, when the millipede eventually uncurled itself from the giant tree and began slithering away, I couldn't help staring at the monkeys inside the beast's body.

While the organic material was withering—as if the aether was being sucked out of the bodies—a slight glow began enveloping the rocks that the millipede had consumed along with it.

Later, after having traveled a few hours in the *opposite* direction of where the millipede had gone upon finishing its meal, I was finally able to spend some time absorbing the rest of the fruit.

While the first bite had been an agonizing experience that very well could've gotten me killed, the subsequent bites made it seem like it was all worth it.

I started off with small nibbles, afraid that I'd be met with another wave of pain from the surge of aether. Instead, I experienced an overwhelming sensation of heat spreading throughout my body and coalescing back in my core. After that, I hungrily tore into the fruit and my core devoured the aetheric essence.

After polishing off the fruit, I was fascinated to discover that the aether in my body had lost some of its reddish tint—and that was before my body had completely absorbed all of the aetheric essence.

I didn't know exactly what the change in color meant, but I knew I had gotten stronger.

I found it difficult to keep track of time, which ceased to have any meaning. With little need to sleep and no sun overhead, my internal clock had become all but useless.

As we continued searching for the exit, my mind kept circling back to our encounter with the translucent millipede. More specifically, how the beast's insides had completely absorbed the aether from the monkeys it had devoured, and how a coat of aether seemed to be forming around the stone.

"—thur!" Regis snapped.

"What?" I hissed, surprised.

"I was *saying*..." Regis stressed, his large white eyes narrowing. "That we need to think of a battle phrase for our combo attack!"

I raised one eyebrow. "Our... combo attack?"

"Yeah!" he said, much too loudly. I sent him a glare, and he continued more quietly. "You know, when I go inside your hand and make your fist turn all smoky black and purple. In the heat of a battle, you're going to need something more concise to say. You told me to give it some thought, and I have some ideas I think you're going to love."

My initial reaction was to dismiss his silly idea, but there was some merit to what Regis was suggesting. Besides, I knew if I didn't let him get it out of his system, he'd just keep going back to the idea.

"Fine," I grumbled. "What did you have in mind?"

Regis's eyes widened in surprise. "Seriously? I thought you were going to be a grouch about it."

Shooting him a glare, I enveloped my body in aether as I raised a hand to smack him.

"Okay okay!" Regis said, flitting out of arm's reach. "How about Aether Explosion Punch!"

"No," I said flatly, turning away to continue searching our surroundings for any sign of an exit.

"Aetheric Void Buster?"

"No."

"Shadow Death Imp—"

"No," I cut him off. "Where are you even coming up with these ridiculous names?"

"Your early memories as Grey playing those arcade games come to mind," Regis responded simply. "Ooh! How about—"

"No."

"Fine fine fine. I'll be serious. What about something simple, like Fist Style or... Fist Form?"

I thought about it for a minute before making a suggestion of my own. "How about Gauntlet Form?"

"Yes!" Regis exclaimed, trembling with excitement. "That's what I'm talking about!"

"Too loud!" I snapped, instinctively turning to look behind us for any signs of movement.

"Relax. I saw that gigantic bug go back to its hole near the center of this floor or zone or whatever. We're hours away from it."

"You saw its den?" I asked, caught by surprise.

"Yeah, while you were absorbing the fruit. It wasn't that hard to find with how much aetheric essence that place was giving off," Regis explained. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why? You're not thinking of trying to fight that thing, right?"

"Let's just search for the exit," I said dismissively. Meanwhile, the gears in my brain continued to turn.

Subjective hours passed uneventfully as we combed through the ethereal forest. We ran into a few more flytrap beasts, their fruit tempting me every time we passed by them.

Knowing the trick now, I was able to kill them quickly and silently, avoiding drawing the giant millipede's attention a second time. None of the other fruits seemed nearly as potent as the first one I had consumed, but I was happy for the extra aether regardless.

We rested intermittently, mainly so that I could sit down and concentrate on my aether core. I wracked my brain trying to think of how to form new channels throughout my body so that I could more freely control the aether inside me.

After hours of deliberation and testing with nothing to show for it, I pulled out the translucent stone which held Sylvie. It had become a habit for me to stare mindlessly at it whenever things got tough or I was feeling overwhelmed. I felt at risk of forgetting why I was here, and thinking about Sylvie helped remind me that there was a world out there, and I needed to get back to it.

I had Regis go inside of the stone every now and then to see if there were any developments within—if Sylvie was getting better at all—but nothing had changed.

But this time was different. Whether it was because my core had gotten stronger, or something had happened within the stone, I couldn't be sure, but as I held the stone in my hands, I could feel something pulling at the aether within me, drawing it through me and toward the stone.

Do you need aether, Sylv? Is that how I get you out of there? As I thought this, I pushed the aether from my core.

It only took a few minutes until my entire aether core had been drained, leaving me weak and shivering.

Regis, returning from inspecting the perimeter, flew to my side. "Hey! What happened?"

I held up my hand. "I—I'm fine."

Regis waited expectantly, and I could feel his distress.

"I'm more than fine." A smile formed on my face as I stared down at the translucent stone, which seemed just a little brighter than before. "Thanks to Sylv, I think I found a way to control the aether inside me."

"That's great! I got some good news too," Regis said, flaring brightly. "I think I found the exit from this floor!"

I tucked the small stone back in my vest. "No. We can't leave yet."

"What? Why?" Regis asked incredulously. "I recognize that look. You've got some crazy idea that's going to get us killed, don't you?"

"No. Well, I certainly hope not, anyway."

My thoughts went back to the millipede and the way it created a shell of aether around everything that it couldn't digest. If Regis was right, he had seen the aether signature radiating from its den from miles away.

If my thoughts were correct, then even at the risk of my life—

No. I had already decided that I needed to risk my life in order to overcome the challenges that I would face when I got out of here.

I turned to Regis and spoke with iron in my voice. "We're going to kill that millipede."

264 MOTHER LODE

When Sylvie's stone had drawn the aether from me, it had taken every last drop from my core. However, only a fraction of that aether had been absorbed, spiraling down a designated path inside, while the rest was filtered out. The aether that *was* able to reach Sylvie, who was comatose within, was too little to amount to anything.

That's when I realized that Sylvie's stone didn't act like a battery that I needed to slowly charge, like I had first assumed. No, it was more like a strainer that I needed to fill with aether faster than it could spill back out.

The fact that Sylvie's stone wouldn't accept most of the aether I tried to give it, even after I had consumed the fruit, meant that my aether core was flawed. Not "flawed" per se, but just like how mana cores started out with natural impurities from the body that limited the output and storage of mana, my aether core was filled with impurities. This was hindering the capacity that could be stored within and keeping me from utilizing the full capabilities of aether.

Great.

If I wanted to be able to make aether flow the way it did inside Sylvie's stone, I needed the aether in my core to become much purer. And if I wanted to bring Sylvie back, I needed to be able to unleash that purer aether much more quickly and in a much larger volume than I currently was able to. *And* I had to be able to do it all at once, which meant I couldn't spend time absorbing aether in between.

This was why, a few hours later, I found myself standing just outside of the giant millipede's den, clad in nothing but a flimsy leather vest and shredded cloth pants.

"It's not too late to back out," Regis whispered into my ear.

I knew what it meant if I couldn't kill it, but the possibility of impending death was a sobering reminder that reconfirmed my priorities. Getting out of the ruin wasn't actually my top priority. Even if I was able to make it out right at that moment, I was actually weaker than I had been when I fought against Nico and the Scythe, Cadell.

My priority had to be getting stronger, which—thankfully—aligned with getting Sylvie back as well. Killing the millipede would be a big step forward in working toward that goal.

Meeting Regis's gaze, I started down the incline into the den. "Let's go."

As we traversed deeper inside the giant hole that spiraled down into the ground, it strangely grew brighter instead of fading into darkness. There was a faint purple sheen that clung to the ground, walls, and ceiling of the winding tunnel.

Regis scouted ahead, flying back to me every several yards to relay what he could see.

As I took a sip from my water sack, I saw the black will-o-wisp coming back out of the corner of my eye. I picked up my pace, treading lightly on the ground, hoping to hear something other than "more rocks" from my companion.

'There's something up ahead,' Regis stated quietly after flying into my chest.

If you make the "rocks" joke one more time, I am going to hit you, I replied.

'Just go.' My companion sighed before floating back out to lead the way.

The tunnel split into two paths, but Regis directed me to the slightly wider one on the left side. It was wider in diameter, and also brighter. It only took a few minutes to reach what Regis wanted me to see.

Strewn all over the ground were clusters of crystals... aether crystals.

'See?' Regis said eagerly. 'More rocks!'

I stifled a groan, afraid any sound might draw the giant aether beast.

Go scout ahead, would you?

Regis bobbed out of my body and floated away, shaking with quiet laughter.

My brows furrowed in confusion as I inspected the glowing purple crystals, littered in front of me like trash. I quietly picked up a fist-sized crystal and consumed the essence from it until the purple glow subsided.

Not as potent as the fruit from earlier, but still fairly concentrated, I noted.

After consuming one more fist-sized crystal to top off my aether core, I stored a couple smaller crystals in my pockets before moving forward. I could always come back for the rest after my fight was over.

As we continued deeper into the millipede's territory, the tunnel gradually became brighter until a brilliant purple light shone at the very end, so bright that I couldn't make out the room beyond.

Regis and I exchanged a tense glance before continuing. My heart pounded against my chest and my palms grew clammy at the thought of fighting against the giant millipede. Being this close to the aether beast in its own home, my body could sense the pressure radiating from it.

Taking deep, calming breaths and steadying my gait, I walked forward, stepping into the blinding purple light.

Let's do this.

I tensed, alert for any sudden movements, but it took several rapid beats of my heart for the glare to subside. The tunnel opened into a massive cavern with a domed ceiling. The entire expanse was bathed in a sea of purple emanating from the mountains of glimmering crystals piled upon one another.

Despite practically salivating over the scores of aether crystals—some larger than my entire body—my attention was forced onto something a little more immediate: the giant millipede.

Instinctually, I stepped back and raised my arms to guard against what was to come. Even Regis cowered behind my shoulder as we gazed upon the towering figure of the aether beast.

It was hunched over in a tall arch while its entire body convulsed. Then, just as I was beginning to think it might explode, a waterfall of aether crystals gushed out the back end to form a small hill alongside the other mountains of crystals.

It was like a scene straight out of a fairytale—except instead of a giant dragon guarding its mountain of treasure, it was a millipede guarding its mountains of... excrement?

"Pfft!" Regis stifled a laugh that echoed throughout the giant cavern, drawing my attention and—to our horror—the attention of the giant millipede.

"Move!" I roared, abandoning all thoughts of stealth as the creature spun with horrifying speed and charged across the cavern, its scythe-like mandibles snapping hungrily.

I dashed right. Regis flew to the left.

"I'm sorry, Arthur, but you basically ate this bug's crap!" Regis guffawed. His voice echoed around the cave: "Crap! Crap. Crap..."

I rolled my eyes. Fortunately for me, my companion's shouting was also drawing the attention of the millipede, which gave me time to position myself toward its flank.

Releasing aether from my core, I pushed myself off the ground with such strength that a crater formed beneath my feet, closing the distance to the millipede in an instant. I smashed my aether-clad fist into its side with a resounding *thud*.

The millipede buckled from the impact, but the wave of pain that surged up my arm suggested I might have done as much damage to myself as to my target.

Landing deftly back on the ground, I crossed the span of the cavern in a sprint as the millipede turned away from Regis and chased after me instead.

As the millipede got closer, I held my right hand over my head and clenched it into a fist—a signal that Regis and I had devised to confuse the sound-sensitive aether beast.

Immediately, Regis screamed out, "Over here, you crystal-sharding bug!"

The millipede slid to a stop and whirled around toward the source of the noise. With the beast distracted, I wrapped my body in a thick layer of aether and went back on the offensive, hoping for a different outcome from this attack.

My surroundings blurred as I approached the millipede. Its pincers snapped at the air as it tried to devour the will-o-wisp that dipped and bobbed around its head. I aimed for the joints where one of its many legs was attached to its body, and this time there was a satisfying *crunch* as my fist dug into its leg.

The giant leg snapped off and fell on the ground, and a gel-like fluid, tinted in purple, gushed out from the injury. The aether beast let out a shrill cry before turning its attention back to me.

I raised my fist again and Regis let out another cry to get its attention. The millipede hesitated, its many legs stamping in place like an angry child throwing a tantrum, then it shot off after Regis, giving me some time to absorb more aether from the abundant crystals scattered all around us.

"How does that crap taste, Arthur?" Regis teased as he zigzagged through the air, the millipede snaking back and forth to follow him.

I raised my hand again, sticking up a specific finger. This one wasn't a signal.

The gears in my brain spun as I refilled my aether core. I had developed my core enough that I could use Gauntlet Form three times, but Regis hadn't been able to strengthen himself fast enough to match me, and wasn't able to withstand the burden of three uses. We had decided to test the beast's defenses without resorting to using Gauntlet Form, just to make sure we didn't waste our shot.

I continued to search for weaknesses while Regis frantically avoided the millipede's snapping jaws. Even after I managed to break off two more of its countless legs and delivered several powerful strikes to the open wounds where the legs were attached to its body, I hadn't managed to do any lasting damage.

If anything, the millipede just seemed to be getting angrier and more vicious.

While my supply of aether was abundant thanks to the crystals hoarded in this cavern, my stamina was slowly diminishing.

I guess we have no choice.

Inflicting damage to the millipede's body hardly did anything to slow it down, so the only option was to aim for its head. The problem was that its head was where the serrated pincers were, and it also seemed to be the area most heavily armored by its translucent purple exoskeleton.

I knew I'd need to land two attacks using Gauntlet Form in the same spot if there was any hope of cracking the millipede's dense exoskeleton, which meant I couldn't afford to miss.

Leaping off of one of its legs, I landed on the millipede's back and began running up the smooth flesh toward its head. Getting onto its back wasn't a challenge, but staying on as it reeled like a wild stallion proved to be much more difficult.

I danced and weaved around the giant millipede's contorting trunk as it used its legs to try and skewer me or knock me off. Its attention was still focused on trying to catch Regis, however, and I was able to avoid the sharp legs that stabbed at me from both sides.

The uneven terrain from the countless tergites that segmented the beast's trunk, combined with the rolling, bucking motion as the millipede tried to fling me off, provided me with a challenge I hadn't faced in a while.

I missed flying.

As I neared the millipede's head, a layer of aether flowed over my body like a purple shell. Holding my right arm up, I clenched and unclenched my hand into a fist: the signal for Regis to fly back to me.

Regis let out another yell to catch the millipede's attention before narrowly avoiding the beast's mandibles and flying up into my hand.

The aether spread throughout my body was immediately pulled toward my dominant hand. To further strengthen the blow, I opened my core and let the aether stored there swirl out and be pulled through me by Regis's gravitational effect.

Rushing forward while doing my best to maintain what little control I had over the flow of aether, I reached the joint where its head connected to its trunk.

Gauntlet Form, I recited to Regis.

Reeling back my smoky-black fist, I slammed it down into the beast. The deafening crash of thunder resounded throughout the cavern, shaking loose several piles of the aether-infused rocks, which tumbled across the floor beneath the millipede's stamping feet. Its head crashed down into the ground to form a crater the size of a small house.

A network of lightning-patterned cracks branched out from where my fist connected, and the entire top of the millipede's head caved in from the force, but I wasn't entirely confident it'd been enough.

Regis wobbled out of my hand, his expression strained and his flames flickering weakly.

I unleashed another wave of aether throughout my body. Experience spanning two lifetimes and countless battles taught me...

Confirm the kill.

My body erupted in a veil of purple as I struck down at the epicenter of the shattered crater atop the millipede's head. Another splintering crack echoed through the cavern, and the millipede's body jerked and went limp.

Even with aether coating my hand, my right fist was a bloodied mess as I pulled it out from the millipede's head.

My breath was coming in short, ragged gasps as I stood over the beast and contemplated whether to hit it one more time. The millipede remained lifeless on its belly, its head resting in the crater created by the impact of my attack.

"Is it... dead?" Regis asked, his voice hoarse.

As I turned to my companion to answer, the surface beneath my feet was swept from under me, and I was flung off the giant beast. Tumbling through the air, I watched helplessly as the serrated mandibles snapped shut over Regis.

The black orb vanished down the millipede's enormous gullet. My companion was gone.

Quickly reorienting myself, I landed on my feet and immediately swiveled on my heel—barely managing to avoid a barrage of sharp legs raining down from above.

The millipede reared up, towering over me, and unleashed a torrent of strikes using its hundreds of legs. Each time it stabbed down, a foot-long hole was left in the ground, but despite the dire situation, I couldn't help but divide my concentration between dodging its legs and looking out for Regis.

Regis was incorporeal, capable of going through most objects, but I couldn't see my companion at all. My panic deepened as I continued to dart between the millipede's legs with no sign of the black will-o-wisp.

In my distraction, a sweeping swing of a scythe-like leg struck me in the shoulder, throwing me across the room. My feet skidded over the uneven stone, and I nearly fell when my heel came down on a small, glowing rock, but I kept my balance and reoriented myself to defend against the next attack.

From the new angle, I was finally able to make out the dark form of my companion drifting through the millipede's insides, exactly like I'd seen the two-tailed monkeys through its transparent body. His flames had dimmed, and he looked extremely grumpy.

Damn it.

I needed Regis to launch an attack strong enough to kill this giant bug. Without him, would I be able to win?

A sharp pain jolted through me as one of the millipede's sharp legs left a long gash on my arm. This sobered me enough to collect myself.

Even without my arsenal of elemental magic, I had not only trained with the sword extensively in my previous life, but I had trained in combat with asuras.

I forced myself to remember my many battles against Kordri—the oppressive aura that he emanated so casually, the movements that seemed both slow and fast.

Asuras. They were my opponents.

If I needed to rely on Regis for every strong opponent I faced, I wouldn't even be able to beat the Scythes, let alone the asuras behind them.

Letting out a sharp breath, I thought back to Kordri's words. He had said that hand-to-hand combat was the most versatile and adaptive form of fighting. Much of our training together had been designed to work around the limitations of my human body.

But I wasn't so human anymore.

My legs blurred as I continuously danced around the piercing strikes of the millipede's legs, my focus heightened so that all I saw, all I thought about, was my opponent, and how I was going to beat it.

I had to accept that I wasn't human anymore, and that I was no longer limited by a lesser body. If I was going to escape this place, if I was going to go toe-to-toe with the most powerful beings in this world, I needed to push myself to my utmost limit.

And then I needed to push even further.

The more I continued dodging, the more unnecessary movements I began to shave off. My body began remembering the asura's lessons, too many of which I had cast aside over the years—relying on mana instead.

The battle was long and drawn out, but I fell into a pattern, treating it more like a training session than a life-and-death encounter. I stepped and hacked, stepped and hacked, making each motion precise and

effortless. Each blow broke one of the sharp legs or cracked the thick exoskeleton until the millipede began to slow, its remaining legs no longer able to support swift movement of its massive bulk.

Without being able to control the flow of aether, I couldn't do enough damage with my bare hands to land a killing blow to the millipede. Instead, I decided to use the same method I had used against the chimeras.

Let's hope this works.

Because the millipede's legs were too large for me to hold as a weapon, I had to break the sharp tip from one for me to be able to use it.

The millipede let out a shrill wail, a screeching noise like the whistle of a train crossed with the chirping of a cricket, and clamored awkwardly toward me on its remaining legs.

Wielding the translucent purple leg like a lance, I tested out my new weapon. Its aetheric conductivity wasn't as strong as the chimeras' weapons, but it would be sufficient. It had to be.

Dodging the serrated mandibles, I waited and looked for an opening.

I had to land a clean hit on the wound at the back of its head where I had struck with Gauntlet Form, but that wasn't as easy as it sounded. The beast flailed its head like a deranged bull, only lowering it to try and snap me in two.

Twice I missed my target, scraping the exterior shell of its head as it struck at me like a snake. Without Regis to draw its attention, it was constantly attentive to my location, rhythmically thumping its remaining legs on the ground to find my location.

How do I get it to stop? I pondered, running circles around it as I absorbed more aether from the crystals lying about.

My mind spun until the memory of when the chimeras had first fused together popped into my head. It had been able to release a concussive aura that threw Regis and me across the hall, nearly knocking me unconscious.

I wasn't uncertain if I could replicate its effects, but I was running out of time—and aether—and my options were limited.

Gauging the amount of aether I had left in my core, I guessed that I could spend about seventy percent on trying to stun the beast, and the rest on landing the killing blow.

"Please, let this work," I mumbled as I began releasing the aether from my core. My aura flared purple at the sudden discharge of aether, but I didn't stop there. I allowed the aether within me to tear through the thin threshold that was my body, unleashing itself in a translucent dome of purple energy.

Immediately, my legs felt heavy from the exertion, but the effect was more than I had hoped for.

In contrast to the concussive force that the fused chimera had released, my attack felt more like the manifestation of an aura—similar to Kordri's King's Force. Even I wasn't completely unaffected as the very air grew heavy around me.

The millipede stiffened from the effects of my attack and slumped to the ground. Tightening my grip around the impromptu weapon in my hand, I rushed forward, holding tightly to the remaining sliver of aether left within me.

Veering right to avoid the millipede's sluggish attempt at pincering me, I used its own mandibles as a foothold to launch myself high up into the air.

Combining the speed of my fall with the force of my swing, I drove the makeshift lance deep into the epicenter of the crater created by my Gauntlet Form attack, right on the back of the aether beast's head. The satisfying crunch of the millipede's exoskeleton shattering was followed by the sensation of penetrating flesh.

The giant millipede let out a pained roar, a noise so guttural and raw that it made my ears ring, and its body crashed onto the ground.

After taking a crystal from my pocket and consuming its aether, I struck the broken end of the millipede's leg once more, driving it deeper into the aether beast's head.

My body felt like lead and my core ached, totally depleted. But I felt good—better than I had in a long time.

"Stay down," I huffed, collapsing on top of the giant beast.

265 **PURGE**

"Ugh, what is this? What happened?" Regis groaned as he slithered out from the backside of the millipede corpse covered in translucent ooze.

I stifled a laugh. "I didn't know millipede feces could talk."

Regis's expression darkened as he looked at where he came from. "Oh crap..."

"Yup, exactly!" I laughed drunkenly, nearly overcome with exhaustion and flush with success at having won.

After the giant millipede had died and its organs began to fail, I was able to see Regis slowly being pushed out toward the beast's backside. Rather than trying to break its outer shell to pry Regis out from within, I let nature run its course.

"Anyway, welcome back," I said with a broad smile, patting some of the ooze off of my companion. "How do you feel?"

Regis lowered his gaze. For a split second, I was worried he might pass out, but he looked back at me with his mouth curled up into a grin and the dark flames dancing around him. "...Like crap."

Despite how exhausted and miserable we both were, everything seemed a little better as we laughed at our own childish jokes.

With the giant millipede dead, it felt like I had reached another new milestone in growth.

After a short break, we began reaping the rewards of our victory. Rather than the hills of aether crystals inside the cavern, I focused my attention on the millipede.

It only took a fleeting glance to realize that the aether beast corpse was the highest and most potent source of aether in the entire cavern. Climbing on top of the giant millipede, I got to work consuming the aether from its body.

As my aether core developed, so did the rate of absorption. Still, considering how massive the beast was, and how dense the aether within it, absorbing it all took several sittings.

While the process of absorbing aether was fairly straightforward with my newly-forged core, it took more than a third of the aetheric essence from the millipede in order to test out the next step of my development.

Luckily, I had more than enough material to work with, so I was able to experiment and tweak the process—enhancing its efficiency and building my body towards eventually being able to do something even asuras of the Indrath Clan can't do: manipulate aether directly.

Since there wasn't exactly a manual for what I was doing, I broke down the process into three stages and named them *absorption*, *tempering*, and lastly, the *purging stage*.

After absorbing aether, I found that filling my core to the point where it was nearly overflowing—and very painful—forced the aether inside me to more quickly condense and refine itself.

The purging stage, however, was the most important, and required my utmost concentration. All at once, I needed to expel nearly all of the aether I had crammed into my core. While the surge of aether was spreading throughout my body, I needed to trace the paths that that aether used to move, and then slowly guide the rest of the aether to use those same paths.

Every time I purged the aether from my core I was slowly training it to travel through more efficient "passages" within my body, rather than just spread aimlessly.

I focused on training the passages within my arms first. I realized that, while my technique and experience were able to make up for the loss of speed, they couldn't make up for my loss of power.

The main problem was how widely the aether was distributed within my body when I released it from my core. I wasn't able to create enough force to do major damage without nearly exhausting most of my aether unless I used Gauntlet Form.

Without solving the problem of aether loss, I couldn't hope to move forward, so Regis and I stayed put. Several days passed as I repeated the process of absorbing aether from the millipede corpse, tempered it within my core, then quickly purged it.

Progress was incremental, but after consuming nearly eighty percent of the millipede's aetheric essence, I finally felt like the time spent had been worth it.

Holding my hands out in front of me, I released aether from my core. I let it simply distribute evenly throughout my body while trying to feel the aether passages strengthen inside my arm.

Then I did it again, but I focused more aether on my arms. This time, I could feel around a ten percent increase in aether to my arms compared to the rest of my body.

A smile crept onto my face as I looked down at my hands, clenching and unclenching them.

"You look like you've just discovered fire. What are you all excited about?" Regis asked as he floated toward me.

"Can you sense something different?" I answered back, spreading my arms. I let the aether distribute evenly around my body at first.

"The aether around you became a bit less pink," he noted, not impressed.

"Not that." I smiled as I coalesced more aether into my arms. "This."

Regis's white eyes bulged. "You can control aether now?"

The faint shroud of aether around me dissipated as I relaxed. "Not completely, but it's a big step forward."

"Looks like eating all of that millipede dung paid off." Regis snickered, the flames around his body flaring with mirth.

"I was consuming the aether from the millipede's body, not its crap," I started. "...not yet, at least."

"Well, I have some good news on that front," Regis said mysteriously.

I raised a brow. "Oh? What is it?"

"Nuh uh uhh," Regis chimed. "I'll tell you after I've had my twenty percent share of aether from the giant millipede."

"Fine. I saved about a quarter of the aetheric essence for you anyway," I replied. I met my companion's eyes and grinned mischievously. "For being eaten and expelled from the giant beast's rectum, your master bestows upon you a five percent raise."

"This one is *unworthy*!" Regis exclaimed, his wide white eyes rolling in his shadowy body.

After finishing off the last of the millipede's aetheric essence, reducing its corpse to a hazy gray color, Regis was easily able to withstand Gauntlet Form three times without hurting himself.

I had expected more, but Regis was content with his growth—especially the growth of his horns, which were now about as long as the first joint of my pinky finger.

"Why do you care so much about how big your horns are?" I asked.

"Why do human males care so much about how big their genitals are?" he quipped back.

I stared down then looked back up at Regis. "Sorry I asked."

I followed Regis through the massive cavern, which was about the length of a city block, and he led me past a particularly large hill of aether crystals. After we had reached the peak, the hill dipped to form a crater where a particularly vibrant pile of aether crystals had been gathered around four large spheres, each one a slightly different shade of milky purple.

"Don't tell me those are—"

"Yup," Regis finished. "I don't know how, but that giant millipede had her some babies."

"But that's not what's important," he continued, floating down into the crater. "Look at those crystals surrounding the eggs."

Sliding down the side of the bowl of aether crystals that functioned as the millipede's birthing bed, I focused my gaze on the vibrant set of crystals, which were glowing much more brightly than all the other crystals in the cavern.

When I saw what was held inside the crystals, I realized that my initial theory about what was happening to the rock that the millipede had swallowed, when it was gorging itself on two-tailed monkeys, had been correct.

Trapped within the aether crystals, which were much larger and brighter than the other crystals, were various pieces of equipment, weapons, and other items.

From the way the suits of armor and clothing were positioned within the man-sized crystals, it was evident to me that there were once living people inside each of them. Just like how I had seen the monkey being consumed and its very life sucked out of its body, these people probably had met the same fate after being swallowed whole, leaving behind only their possessions.

It was a cruel way for anyone to die, but at this moment, I couldn't help but be overcome by greed. I looked down, examining the torn strips of cloth and leather that I had been passing off as clothes, and then back up at the various pieces of armor and equipment gleaming within the crystals.

"Look at your eyes, all sparkling," Regis teased as he scanned the aether crystals himself. "Lucky for us, it seems like mama bug feasted on quite a few mages."

"Have some respect for the dead," I scolded.

"All of my respect disappeared when I popped out of that bug's anus," Regis replied, chortling.

I was itching to get my hands on some of the equipment trapped within the aether crystals, but there was something more important I needed to take care of first.

Using Gauntlet Form, Regis and I destroyed all but the last millipede egg before absorbing the aetheric essence from them.

"Why are you leaving one alive?" Regis asked.

"There's a pretty delicate ecosystem within this floor. I don't want to completely destroy that," I replied, moving on to the first large crystal.

It took several hours to absorb enough aether from the crystals in order to break through to the items within, but the thought of having something more to wear than what I had ripped apart and tied together kept me going.

Unfortunately, while the man-sized crystals that contained equipment numbered over a dozen, most of them weren't usable by the time I had broken through the crystalline shell they had been stored in.

What was left, however, were a handful of masterfully crafted items that no doubt belonged to powerful mages and warriors, or—at the very least—rich ones.

I looked at the weapons first.

There was a golden spear with red runes running down its shaft, an unstrung longbow, a longsword with a gem imbedded on its pommel and a crack running down the length of the blade, and a staff with a shattered gem in the tip.

Regis frowned as he hovered over the weapons strewn on the ground in front of me. "Well that's anticlimactic."

Remaining hopeful, I picked up the longsword first. It was perfectly balanced and felt good in my hands, but when I imbued aether into the sword, the crack that ran down its blade grew bigger and began to splinter.

I struck the ground. Smaller aether crystals splashed away from the impact, and the sword shattered into pieces. Shaking my head, I tossed the handle of the broken blade away.

Next, I picked up the spear. Imbuing aether into this one had a particular effect: the runes began glowing purple.

Regis's eyes widened. "Ooh! Do we have a winn—"

The spear exploded into pieces in my hands, hurling me several feet back and charring my leather vest.

"I guess I spoke too soon," Regis concluded.

"Damn it," I cursed, gathering myself and walking back to the small pile of equipment.

The remaining weapons didn't fare much better. The runes on the bow indicated that it used mana to create a string and fire arrows, making it completely useless for me, while the staff with the shattered gem proved to be even less stable than the exploding spear. At least the spear would've taken someone by surprise had I used it on an enemy...

I moved on to the rest of the items I had taken out of the aether crystals. Unfortunately, I faced the same problem wearing the plate armor that I had with using the weapons. Because all of the higher-tier pieces of armor were forged to better conduct mana, aether caused them to quickly break down or even explode.

What I was left with was clothing made from fine cloth or leather.

"Looking good, princess," Regis teased as he circled around me.

My new outfit consisted of a loose white long-sleeved shirt that I tucked into a pair of bracers crafted from thick, blackened leather. Over it, I put on a gorget that was made from the same material as the bracers. Despite my rather lean frame, it fit well, resting snug over my shoulders and coming up to my chin.

After some testing, I realized that the shirt and the leather pieces of armor were surprisingly durable. They didn't have any runes or indications that they were artifacts, so I didn't need to worry about my clothes bursting apart from a bad reaction with aether. Always a good thing.

Along with a pair of pants, some soft leather shoes, and a sturdy bag that was able to securely hold Sylvie's stone and my water pouch, the last item held a bit of sentimental value to me. It was a rather elegant cloak lined with a soft white fur around its hood.

It was slash-resistant and incredibly warm, but I liked it simply because of its color. While it was white with fur on the inside, the outer cloth was a soft teal color. It reminded me of Dawn's Ballad, but more than that, it reminded me of the simpler times when I first found Dawn's Ballad in the back corner of the Helstea Auction House.

Putting on the cloak, which came down just above my knees, I found the weight of it to be pleasant. I swirled the cloak dramatically and realized there was something hidden inside its inner lining. Fishing around, I found a hidden pocket and pulled the item carefully out.

"I thought you'd gone through all of the weapons," Regis said, studying the dagger in my hand.

"I thought so too," I muttered, entranced by the small weapon for some reason.

The sleek, brushed-silver handle was just long enough for me to hold it in one hand, my fingers fitting perfectly into a series of slight grooves. Attached to the end of the handle was a ring—most likely for my index finger, if I chose to wield it blade down.

Gripping the handle tightly, I pulled it out of its sheath, revealing a flawless white blade with an insignia of a hexagon with three parallel streaks inside it carved near the base.

"Woah. What is that made of?" Regis asked, studying the glistening white blade.

I held it close in front of me. "It looks like some kind of... bone?"

"Are bones usually that shiny and white though? It looks almost crystalline."

"This is my first time seeing something like this too," I confessed, unable to take my eyes off of it.

"Try it out. Imbue some aether into it," Regis said impatiently.

I was afraid to; I didn't want to damage it. But when I did, to my surprise, it was able to withstand and even conduct a small portion of the aether.

"Do you think the person who had this knife knew how to wield aether too?" Regis asked, astonished at the sight of the faint purple aura leaking from its white blade.

"I don't think so," I replied. "Most likely, this dagger is just made from something that was able to wield aether—maybe from some beast found in this dungeon."

Regis's mouth curved up into a sinister smile. "Wicked."

I looked back at the last millipede egg, wondering if I should feel any guilt over killing its three siblings. I had definitely lost something while down here. A part of me was scared and wanted to latch onto whatever remaining shred of humanity I had left, but a larger part of me knew that in order to survive here, in order to reach my goal, I couldn't falter.

"Ready to go?" Regis asked.

"Just a minute." Gathering my hair, which had grown far past my shoulders, I tied it loosely near the base of my neck. Gripping the ponytail, I cut it off just past the knot, letting the locks of pale wheat hair fall to the ground.

Regis nodded in approval. "I'll admit, that was pretty manly."

I took one last look at the putrid remains of the giant millipede, then turned towards the tunnel back up to the jungle. "Let's go."

266 A QUIET STRENGTH

ELEANOR LEYWIN

I met my mother's gaze and tried not to roll my eyes.

She let out a sigh. "Oh, don't you give me that look. You're too young..."

Forcing what I hoped was an understanding but slightly incredulous smile, I said, "Mom, you can't seriously think we'll be safer if we just hide down here and let others fight for us than if we join them? The council needs every soldier they can get—"

"Ellie," she said in her mother-knows-best voice, "we've done our fighting, and we've paid our price. Your father... Arthur..." Tears welled up in her eyes, but she didn't wipe them away. "Down here, we have some semblance of peace, and we have more time together. *Time*, Ellie. That's all I want... time with you."

This wasn't about me, I knew. It was about Arthur. He'd never been home, never been around. Our parents had so little time with him, not that it was entirely his fault.

He hadn't asked to be stuck in the elven kingdom for years, though it had been his choice to run away and become an adventurer almost as soon as he'd returned. It had been his choice to join the academy and live on his own, and he'd agreed to go off with that Windsom guy, disappearing again just when we—his family—needed him the most.

When he came back from the land of the deities, he became a Lance and fought a war. Then he was gone.

"Life down here is barely a life at all, Mom. It just feels like we're stuck in that moment when an enemy's sword is at your neck and your whole life flashes by."

My mother smiled ruefully and looked away. "You've been spending too much time with Tessia."

"Kathyln's words, actually," I said, wrapping my arms around my mother and resting my head on her shoulder. "She's pretty poetic—when you can get her to talk."

We stayed like that for a while, my mother's hand running through my hair. When I pulled away, there was a hesitation on her part, as if she didn't want to let me go. But then, I supposed she didn't.

"It's just a council meeting, Mom." I gave her a serious look. "You should be going to them, too."

My mother shook her head and walked to the little table where we ate our dinners. Then she sat at the table and ran her hand across it, almost like she was petting an animal. I think it made her feel more *normal* to do something as everyday as sitting at the dinner table and arguing with her daughter.

"I just don't understand why they need you there," she said, circling back around to where our argument had started. "Surely Virion and Bairon can handle making decisions without the input of a thirteen year old girl."

I held back a sigh, knowing I was treading on thin ice to get her to agree. "Like I said, Tessia has asked for me to tag along."

"I guess I'll need to have a word with *Princess* Tessia about spending so much time with you." I opened my mouth to beg her not to embarrass me, but she held up a hand, cutting me off. "I just... you know how I feel about her..."

"Mom, I know Arthur died to save her," I snapped, fists clenched. I'd had the same argument with myself so many times I couldn't bear to have it again with her. "But have you thought that maybe Arthur would've died in Elshire forest when he was four years old if he hadn't met her and Commander Virion?"

A look of anger flashed across my mother's face before her lips quivered in one of sorrow. We stared at each other for several long seconds, both unable to form our next words, but our standoff was interrupted by a snort from Boo, who had a bed in the downstairs landing of our little two-story shelter.

"Tessia must be here. I'm going." I turned, crossed the dining room, and headed down the stairs. I could feel my mother's eyes burning into my back, and a sense of guilt bubbled up within my stomach for snapping at her.

I stopped and turned, still just able to see her over the railing. "I'm sorry, Mom. I love you."

She took a deep breath, smiled sadly, and said, "I love you too, El."

"Are you sure about this?" I was embarrassed by how timid and childlike my own voice sounded, but I couldn't overcome my nervousness. *Maybe Mom was right*, I thought.

"Of course. You are Eleanor Leywin," Tessia answered firmly. We were winding through the occupied area of our little town toward the large central complex we'd started referring to as City Hall. "Your parents are heroes, your brother was a general—and I'm a princess. Even if they wouldn't normally let you attend the council meetings, Grandpa won't kick you out if I've asked for you."

I bit my lip to keep from saying anything else, following Tessia in silence. Since our fight by the stream, Tessia and I had been spending a lot of time together. I wasn't sure how to feel about it at first; a part of

me still wanted to be mad at her, to hate her even, but I was starting to understand why Arthur had loved her.

It wasn't just the way Tessia looked or how she was so refined. She had this quiet strength to her that I couldn't really describe.

Whenever we passed anyone in the streets, Tessia would meet their eyes and greet them warmly, whether they looked at her like she was a princess or a traitor. She treated them all like they were important.

I watched her face out of the corner of my eye, noticing how she always kept her chin up, her eyes forward. She was beautiful *and* regal.

Her looks were probably another reason Arthur fell for her, I thought, running the tips of my fingers over my cheek, wondering if anyone thought I was beautiful.

Then a human soldier stepped out into the road in front of us, forcing us to stop. The man had horrible burn scars all across his face and up into his hairline. He glared at Tessia, then spit onto the ground and walked past.

Though Tessia didn't even flinch, my nervousness returned, bubbling in the pit of my stomach and making my heartbeat flutter.

"I wish I could have brought Boo," I said under my breath.

Tessia grinned. "Showing up at the council meeting with a giant bear might make more of a statement than we're shooting for today, Ellie."

We fell into silence as we walked, and I gazed around the underground town for the hundredth time.

The buildings looked like they'd been molded instead of built, reminding me of a little clay dollhouse the Helsteas had given me when I was a girl. Most were made from the same gray and red stone of the cavern, with highlights of petrified wood and a dull, copper colored metal. Each building was a little different than the rest, and they were all beautiful.

Elder Rinia had told me she thought the ancient mages had shaped them using lost aether arts, literally molding the stone and wood like clay. She had moved into a little cave in the tunnels outside of town, because some of the other refugees we'd brought in didn't like her, but I still went to visit her sometimes.

I liked to try and tease news of her visions out of her, but she'd gone pretty quiet after Arthur disappeared. I was sure she knew more than she'd say, but I don't think most of the survivors would have listened to her anyway. Once rumor spread that she had known what was going to happen, people turned against her.

I didn't care what they said though. Rinia had saved Tessia, my mother, and me. Without her, we'd have all been dragged to Alacrya and probably tortured and killed. Whatever her reasons for keeping her visions to herself, I trusted the old seer.

"You ready?" Tessia asked, drawing me out of my thoughts. We were standing at the steps of City Hall.

I nodded, then followed her through the heavy leather drape that covered the doorway. Two elven soldiers stood guard inside. While I didn't know them well, I'd heard of Albold's and Lenna's contributions in the war.

They bowed to Tessia, keeping their eyes on the ground as we walked past. The few elves that had made it to the refuge still treated her like a princess from what I'd seen. Kathyln didn't get quite the same royal treatment from the humans, but it didn't seem to bother her.

Tessia led me down the entry hall and through a large, arched doorway. The square room took up half of City Hall's first floor, and was dominated by a huge, round table made of petrified wood. A rough map of Dicathen had been laid out on the table and covered with little figures that I could only guess represented Alacryan soldiers.

The rest of the room was cold and lifeless, for the same reason our hidden refuge didn't even have a name: we were afraid to get comfortable. We didn't *want* to get comfortable, because that meant giving up.

Several people, all powerful or important—or both—were already gathered around the modest table, which took up only a small portion of the large stone room.

Virion sat directly across from the door, watching us carefully as we walked in. During my time in the castle, I had seen the old elf many times, though I hadn't gotten to know him very well. He'd always seemed jolly and sort of *above* everything, like a figure of myth, but now he just looked tired.

General Bairon sat to Virion's left. He was saying something to the commander, but his gaze followed me coldly as I stepped into the room.

To Virion's right, Kathyln's brother, Curtis, was exactly the opposite of General Bairon and his stiff posture. Prince Curtis sat back comfortably in his chair, a slightly bored look on his face as he listened to the general speak. He beamed at Tessia when he saw us, then shot me a welcoming smile. He'd let his mahogany hair grow out so that it framed his strong, handsome face. I blushed and looked away.

Kathyln sat next to her brother, her intense eyes on the map, so focused that she didn't seem to notice our arrival.

Across from her, Madam Astera was also listening to whatever General Bairon was saying. Her face was wrinkled into a look of concern.

Finally, Helen leaned against the wall behind Madam Astera, her focus entirely on Bairon. She wore a similarly worried look, but when she glanced up and caught my eye, she smiled.

"Oh, just what we need," she said, throwing her hands up and rolling her eyes theatrically before shooting me a teasing wink. "Another princess on the council."

I flushed even deeper as everyone turned to look at me. Not everyone looked happy to see me.

Virion stared at Tessia, his eyes flicking to me for an instant. She nodded in return. He then turned his gaze on me, but his expression was unreadable. I wasn't sure what unspoken conversation they'd just had, but I could guess that Tessia hadn't told anyone she was bringing me.

"This, then, would be everyone called for this meeting," Virion said gruffly, and the room fell instantly silent. "Please, sit down, and we'll begin."

Chairs scraped across the stone floor as everyone took their places. Curtis even took his feet off the table, gazing seriously at Virion. Helen squeezed my shoulder as she took a seat next to me.

Bairon was the first to speak, and though he leaned toward Virion as though his words were for the commander's ears only, he spoke loud enough for all of us to hear. "Even with her lineage, are you sure we should be including a twelve year old girl, who is largely untested in battle, in this council's deliberations?"

I opened my mouth to say that I was almost *fourteen*, but the Lance kept speaking, now turning to face the rest of the group. "Though we live in a time when all must involve themselves in our daily survival, I do not think it is sensible to start bringing children to council meetings." The general met my eye, and I did my best not to look away or to let him know how uncomfortable I was, though I found myself wishing again that I had Boo behind me to give me courage. "The Leywins don't have anything else to prove in this war, and it is beyond reason to expect Eleanor to shoulder her brother's burdens."

I couldn't tell if he was being dismissive or kind. Arthur had always hated Bairon, but the Lance seemed almost guilty when he mentioned my brother.

"Ellie is here at my request," Tessia said firmly, her cool gaze unflinching as she met the Lance's eve.

"Enough." Virion, who had closed his eyes while Bairon spoke, suddenly slammed his hand on the table, making me jump in my seat. "We aren't here to deliberate who gets to be in the room."

The commander waited until it was clear there would be no more interruptions, then leaned forward, his palms pressing into the table so hard that his knuckles went white. "We've received news from Elenoir."

Beside me, Tessia tensed. I reached out and squeezed her hand under the table. "We finally have some understanding of what the Alacryans intend for the elven kingdom, and for the elves that have been captured there.

"Elenoir is apparently being carved up into holds and gifted to noble Alacryan houses, or 'bloods', to use their own term. The captured elves are being..." Virion trailed off, glaring down at Elenoir, represented on the map.

When he began speaking again, there was a deathly chill in his voice that gave me goosebumps on my arms and the back of my neck. "The surviving elves in Elenoir are being enslaved and gifted to the Alacryan nobles to provide grunt labor for the Alacryan war effort. Elshire is to be harvested and burned as fuel for the Alacryans' forges."

The table was silent for quite awhile after Virion's words. Tessia was still as a statue. I felt like the rest of the council was somehow intruding on a private moment.

"This," Virion continued, "leads me to the purpose of today's council meeting. Our scouts in Elshire have also discovered that several dozen elven prisoners are going to be transported from Zestier to the southern holds in the next few days.

"It is my intention that we send an assault force to waylay the prisoner caravan, free the captured elves, and bring them back here."

Virion's words hung heavily in the air. The old elf peered around the table, meeting each of our eyes in turn, even mine. He didn't talk loudly or emotionally, but his words shook my very bones.

So this is the power of absolute authority, I thought.

"I'll lead the assault force," Tessia said suddenly, her voice nearly as sharp and heavy with authority as Virion's. My breath caught in my chest as a physical pressure washed out of the elven princess, pressing down on me like the heavy air before a storm.

Bairon flinched ever so slightly in surprise before he shook his head, leaning forward over the table as he said, "No disrespect, Lady Tessia, but I think this mission requires a more experienced leader. We'll only get one shot at this, and there won't be anyone to back up our assault force if things go badly."

Despite keeping her expression firm, I noticed Tessia blushing slightly and the pressure she emitted lessened as well. "General Bairon, you may be a Lance, but you're also human, and you can't navigate the forest the way an elf can. No disrespect, of course." Bairon scowled, but leaned back in his chair and let her continue. "No one here knows the area like I do, except for Grandpa Virion, and we can't risk him in the field. This is my home, these are my people. I will lead the assault force."

Virion nodded firmly. "Thank you, Tessia. I had hoped you would consent to leading the mission." Next to me, Tessia seemed momentarily caught off guard by her grandfather's words, but she was quick to hide her surprise.

One of the things Tessia and I had in common was that we both felt like we were treated like fragile things people were afraid might break. She hadn't been allowed to leave the underground town since

she'd ran away to find her parents. I couldn't help but wonder why Virion was suddenly sending her out now.

The pressure lifted like someone had pulled a blanket off my face. I could tell the others had felt it too, as the whole room seemed to take a breath all at once.

"That's decided then. Now, let's talk details."

What followed was nearly three hours of discussion regarding the mission to rescue the elven prisoners. I mostly kept quiet during the conversation, but it was fascinating and intimidating to listen to these experienced soldiers and leaders discuss strategy. I imagined Arthur would have had a lot to say if he were there in my place.

But he's not, so I'll do my best, I thought with a nod to myself.

It was halfway through the meeting before I had the courage to stand up and tell the council that I wanted to join the mission.

"Well of course you're coming," Tessia said. "That's why I brought you."

"Are you sure about this?" Curtis asked, his chocolate brown eyes searching my face. Suddenly my stomach was full of butterflies. Why does he have to be so damn handsome...

I steeled my nerves and returned Curtis's penetrating gaze, trying to sound mature and brave as I said, "I've had private training from some of the best warriors and mages in Dicathen and I fought at the Wall when the horde attacked. I'm ready to help!"

Kathyln stared at me with that unreadable expression she always had. Madam Astera was inspecting me with a disarming, almost silly grin plastered on her face. Helen gave me a matronly smile.

Virion only nodded, looking, if anything, even more tired than when the meeting started. "So be it then. But you're telling your mother."

The rest of the meeting passed quickly, while I did my best to keep up with the conversation. They decided who would be a part of the assault force—Tessia, Kathyln, Curtis, Helen, and about a dozen other hand-picked soldiers—and started planning a strategy for a trap to catch the Alacryan soldiers escorting the prisoners off guard.

Near the end of the council meeting, Kathyln, who had been nearly as quiet as I had, spoke up. "Commander Virion, perhaps I've missed something, but even if we're able to flawlessly execute this plan, I don't see how we're going to bring this many refugees back at once."

Virion leaned back, regarding Kathyln critically. "We've been... investigating the medallions, trying to expand their potential, and I believe we've discovered..." Virion trailed off, uncharacteristically hesitant.

"Well, we haven't verified anything yet, but by the time the prisoners are moved, you'll have a way to bring them back. I promise it."

When the meeting was over, I stood up from the table to leave, but Virion waved me back. "Ellie, a word please."

I stared at him, unsure how to respond. What could he want from me? The others seemed equally caught off guard.

General Bairon froze halfway from his seat and looked to Virion, but the old elf only responded with a subtle shake of his head, and Bairon stood stiffly and busied himself with helping Madam Astera out of her own seat.

Helen patted me on the shoulder as she walked by, beaming at me with pride. "We should delve into the tunnels and hunt cave rats before you leave. It'd be good practice."

I smiled nervously and nodded.

"Want me to wait for you outside?" Tessia asked. Curtis was lingering behind her unnoticed, as if he wanted to speak to her.

"No thanks," I answered. "I'll be fine."

Not sure whether I should sit back down or stay standing, I leaned awkwardly against the table, pretending to study the map of Dicathen while the rest of the council made their slow way out of the room.

Virion waited until we were alone. He opened his mouth as if to start issuing orders, but then he looked at me, really looked at me, and his expression softened. "You handled yourself well today. Your brother would be proud of the strong young woman you've become."

I fidgeted awkwardly, not sure what to say.

"I'm also glad to see you and Tessia together. It's good, you know, having someone who understands what you're going through."

When I still didn't respond, he coughed and said, "Right, thank you for your assistance with this matter. It's somewhat sensitive, but I believe you're uniquely suited to the task."

He looked at me expectantly, so I said, "Yes, of course. Whatever you need, Commander Virion."

Virion sighed, and it was like someone had let the air out of him as he shrank in his chair. "I would like you to go to Rinia. See what she has to say about our mission. No need to be subtle, she'll know why you're there."

I was aware that Virion and Rinia had fallen out since moving into the underground shelter. She'd told me so, though she hadn't been specific about it.

"Of course. Is—is there anything specific you want me to ask?"

"Just see what she has to say. That'll be all." The commander dismissed me with a wave of his hand, turning his gaze back to the tactical map.

I left the room and headed back down the hall toward the exit, but the male elf standing guard stepped toward me, forcing me to stop.

"Uh, can I help you?" I asked defensively, though I wasn't sure why he made me nervous. My brain felt like mush after listening to planning and strategy for hours on end.

The elf, Albold, raised his hands, making it clear he meant me no harm. "Sorry, Ellie... Eleanor. I know we've never really talked, but I just wanted to give you my condolences. For Arthur. I've met and even talked to him before back when he was..." Albold ran a hand through his hair and smiled awkwardly. "I'm sorry, this is difficult."

The anger flared within me. I tried to smother it, but after Virion's attempt at grandfatherly kindness, my feelings were a little raw. "Thank you," I said stiffly, not meeting Albold's eyes. Brushing past the elf, I shoved aside the leather hanging and practically ran down the handful of steps that led into the City Hall.

Gritting my teeth, I started to run through the narrow streets, taking the quickest path back to our shelter.

Why does everyone think I want to hear their stupid condolences? I thought. I knew that they meant well and that it was childish to push away their kindness—of course I knew that—but at this point, it just felt like they were picking at my scab, not letting it heal.

Then I thought about the elves being held prisoner in Elenoir, and wondered how many of them were Albold's family and friends. Had he lost siblings in the war? A father? I didn't know, because instead of listening to him, I'd acted like a little kid and ran away.

You're not a little kid anymore, Ellie. You don't get to act like one.

I forced myself to slow to a walk and rubbed the tears from my eyes. I would calmly walk home, get Boo, and head out into the tunnels to Rinia's.

267 THE BRIDGE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"Stop screaming!" I snapped over my shoulder at Regis, who was doing his best to follow me through an endless meadow of glowing white wildflowers and tall blue grass.

"Then tell them to stop chasing us!" Regis howled, a little trail of fire billowing out behind him like a cape.

Behind us were hundreds, if not thousands, of rodents, each the size of a puma, with glowing purple claws... and all of them were incredibly pissed off at us.

"I told you not to go poking around those giant holes!"

Regis sped past me, afraid of getting scratched by those purple claws again. "How was I supposed to know that thousands of giant rats were living in them!"

I leapt over a rock that was mostly hidden in the grass. "What exactly were you expecting then? Giant snakes?"

Instead of responding, Regis veered hard to the right to avoid a slash from the gleaming purple claws of a rat-creature that burst out of the grass right beside us. I kicked out as the creature followed him, lifting it off the ground and sending it squealing out of sight.

"Regis, Gauntlet Form!"

An aura of black and purple flared from my right fist as I whirled around, skidding to a stop. The army of giant rodents was rapidly approaching.

Once I had enough aether to attack, I slammed my fist into the ground, releasing an explosive blast that distorted the very air around us and sending a lethal shockwave through the approaching horde. Several dozen of the aetheric rats fell dead, but hundreds more ran right past the corpses.

I hooked my index finger in the ring attached to the pommel of the dagger, unsheathing it in a brilliant white arc. With my aether focused on my arms, I became a cyclone of blade and fists, cutting, stabbing, and striking every giant rodent within range.

Wielding a dagger was difficult at first. Despite the similarity in shape to a sword, the style of fighting required to effectively use a dagger was vastly different, and something I'd only briefly trained in as King Grey.

It was fun though. Utilizing the ring at the bottom of the hilt, I was able to hook my finger through it, freeing up my hand to strike or parry with a palm. The shorter length of the dagger meant that strikes and slashes were faster and more concise, allowing for sharper and more unpredictable movement.

All around me, the beautiful blue grass was flattened and stained rusty red with blood, and the corpses of the giant, purple-clawed rodents began to pile up in gruesome hills.

Despite the carnage, the aether-rats kept pouring in, forcing Regis and I to turn and start running again or risk being overwhelmed. As if we were running a gory marathon, we kept up this cycle of running to thin out the horde, then stopping to deal sudden death to the pack's frontrunners. Meanwhile, the vast field of tall blue grass stretched on like some endless, surreal ocean.

My body was more than up to the challenge of the endless run, and the aether-clawed rodents posed little threat to me in small groups, but after several hours I began to worry. Unlike the chimeras and the millipede, the rodents' bodies didn't contain a drop of aether. Only their claws were coated in a dense layer of aether, which made them dangerous to even Regis, but there was very little benefit in killing them since I was using more aether than I was regenerating.

"Over there!" Regis shouted as he veered slightly to the right and picked up speed.

I saw it too. Far in the distance, there was an all-too-familiar teleportation gate glowing brightly, beckoning us. It was only after we drew near it that we realized reaching it wasn't going to be as easy as just sprinting the rest of the way.

Separating us from the gate was a chasm at least thirty yards wide. It stretched out to the left and right with no end in sight, so it didn't seem like going around was an option.

"What do we do?" Regis asked as the wheels in my mind turned. Behind us, the horde of more than a thousand rodents, hell bent on killing us, approached with zeal, perfectly ready to throw themselves to their deaths for the chance at a meal.

Pumping out more aether from my core, I forced myself to run faster in order to gain some distance from the horde of rodents. As we got closer, I realized there were two columns poking up out of the grass on each side of the chasm.

"I think there's a bridge there!" I said, pointing to the two columns, now just a hundred yards or so ahead. Once we were on the bridge, we'd be more or less safe from the horde, as the rodents would have to fight each other to even get between the pillars.

Seconds later, I skidded to a stop just in front of the pillars, which were about three shoulder-widths apart, and cursed.

A thick, rune-inscribed chain was connected to each of the columns, but rather than stretching across the chasm, it trailed down into the crevice below. At the bottom, there was a stream of glowing red, and by the heat radiating up from the depths, I knew that it was lava.

"Well... there was a bridge." Regis gazed dejectedly down into the abyss. "I wonder what did this?"

"Not what. Who." I seethed, punching the tree-sized pillar of stone out of sheer frustration before turning back to face the army of rodents. The damage was purposeful and, seeing as we weren't the only one to journey through these lands, it was easy to deduce that the Alacryans who passed by before us had done this.

"Please don't tell me you're going to try and kill *all* of those creatures," Regis groaned.

"Not exactly." I gave my companion an appraising look. "I have a plan, but you're not going to like it."

Regis stared at me, deadpan. "Have you ever come up with a plan that I liked?"

I hid behind one of the columns, replenishing my core using a handful of rodent claws that I had severed and stored in my bag. Regis was flying toward me like a fiery cannon ball, and he was screaming. Just behind him was the horde of aetheric rodents, desperately clambering atop one another and swiping savagely at the will-o-wisp.

"I hate you!" Regis howled as he drew near.

I waited until he was about a foot from the cliff before releasing the same aetheric aura that I had used to immobilize the giant millipede.

The frontline rodents were struck dumb, their bodies tumbling uncontrolled as the aura crushed down on them. Most were already too close to the edge, and they slid off and plummeted down into the lava river by the dozens.

The air around me grew heavy as the aetheric aura spread, and wave after wave of rodents crashed into one another, unable to even try to save themselves from falling off the cliff.

Meanwhile, Regis hovered in the air just above the chasm, inviting the giant rodents in the back—those not yet aware of the cliff—to try and kill him. My companion laughed maniacally as he watched the stunned rodents whirl and tumble to their deaths below.

"Come on, you pea-brained rats! Try and touch me with those manicured claws of yours now, bitches! Hahahaha!"

"Now!" I roared as the final wave of giant rodents approached the cliff. Regis shot upward as if he'd been launched from a catapult, and dozens of aetheric rats clambered atop one another in a desperate attempt to reach him. In seconds, the shifting tower of flesh and fur was nearly twice the height of the columns.

I used most of my aether to burst forward, pushing off the column for maximum speed.

With aether shrouding my body, I stepped on the heads of the crazed rodents, climbing on top of them to get as high up as possible. Trying to avoid looking at the river of lava below, my eyes scanned the far side of the cliff for the safest place to land, but in the end the shortest route across was a straight line.

With one foot on a rat's pointed, snarling face and the other planted firmly on the backside of another, I leapt off the crest of the rodent pile.

I tried not to think about what would happen if I didn't make the jump. I doubted that even my vivumenhanced healing abilities would be able to regenerate me faster than the lava would eat away at my body.

At the last second, I felt something latch onto my leg, just above my ankle. My own forward momentum ripped me away from the snapping claws or teeth that had grabbed him, but it was just enough to throw off the entire trajectory of my attempted leap.

"You're not going to make it!" Regis screamed as I flew out over the deep crevasse. I seemed to be moving incredibly slowly as I watched the far wall approach, but Regis was right. I was on course to hit the far wall about twenty feet below the cliff top.

With my dagger in my hand, I summoned the remaining sliver of aether to reinforce both my arm and the dagger before driving it into the face of the cliff. The blade sheered through the hard stone, burying the dagger up to its handle, and I jerked to a stop with such force that I couldn't believe the blade didn't snap off.

All around me the air was distorted, rippling from the waves of heat emanating from the stream of lava drawing closer.

'Gauntlet Form!' Regis shouted in my mind as he joined with me, having crossed the chasm easily behind me.

I don't have enough aether! I growled mentally, unsure what to do next. Despite myself, I glanced down just in time to watch a handful of huge rats splash into the lava, their screeches cutting out with sudden finality.

'Use my aether!'

My hand started glowing black and purple as Regis released his aether into my body.

With no time to waste, I unleashed the aether coalesced into my fist, striking downward rather than straight at the rocky cliffside.

The impact created a large crater in the cliffside, but I had struck too close to where the blade was lodged in the stone, and it tore free, sending me plummeting downward. I was freefalling for only a second, however, before I managed to snag my fingers over the edge of the depression that I had created.

My sweat-slick fingers slipped across the powdery rock, and I nearly lost my grip, but a jutting fang of stone saved me.

Clinging for dear life, I scrambled awkwardly at the cliffside with my toes and knees until I was able to throw one leg up over the ledge and pull myself up. I rolled away from the ledge and lay curled up in the small cave that I had created with Gauntlet Form.

"We made it!" Regis cheered as he popped out of my chest. My companion seemed slightly shrunken, but I was having a hard time focusing on him as I struggled to breathe. The air was thick in the little cave, but I didn't think it was just the heat. Too tired and hot to figure out why, I was tempted to let sleep overtake me, but I knew that falling unconscious this close to the molten river spelled certain death.

"Thanks for saving me," I said to Regis.

The little black orb bobbed nonchalantly. "I'm not very keen on finding out what happens to me if you die. Just promise me a bigger chunk of aether next time and we'll call it even."

I nodded wearily before getting back to the matter at hand.

Even without strengthening my body with aether, I knew I could climb the cliff, and common sense dictated that I should get as far away as possible from this river of lava, or I risked being baked alive like the countless puma-sized rodents I'd watched vanish below the slow-moving orange glow. Still, a little rest couldn't hurt...

"So, you all rested up? Ready to climb up out of here?" Regis asked cheerfully only a moment later. My companion was happily watching the dumber rodents continue to jump into the chasm as they chased after us, only to fall to their fiery deaths.

I rolled to my side and watched one of the beasts cartwheel through the air then disappear under the lava with a thick *plop*.

Glimmering purple sparkles within the lava caught my eye, and I used a little aether to strengthen my sight: floating slowly down the molten stream were hundreds of aether-clad claws.

"No. Not yet," I said distractedly, scanning the inside of the crater I was in. Then a wide grin slowly spread over my face as yet another brilliant plan snapped into place.

"Tell me the truth, Arthur. You're a masochist, aren't you?"

"No, I don't particularly enjoy feeling pain, Regis," I stated, lowering my toes.

"Oh so you're just dunking yourself in lava for shits and giggles?"

I stopped. "Do you mind? I kind of need to concentrate if I don't want my body to melt."

Regis rolled his eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry for trying to dissuade you from skinny dipping in lava."

"Apology accepted, now shut up." I took a deep breath. Even after hours of testing the theory behind what I was about to do and dozens of limited attempts, it was nerve-wracking to actually submerge myself into the molten river.

Dipping my entire body into the stream of lava, I immediately felt a scorching, but tolerable, heat coursing through me as I pumped aether from my core to keep from burning alive.

It was an odd feeling, but it didn't take long for me to confirm the benefits of my magma bath. I had been right, except it had gone far beyond even my starry-eyed expectations.

Seeing the glowing purple claws of the rodents had been the clue I needed, though I hadn't come to the point of actually acting on it without some additional confirmation.

Just like how the last level had its own unique ecosystem, so did this one. When I had consumed the aether from the rodents' claws, I realized that they were only coated in aether. Their natural claws—while sharp and near-indestructible—were just black. Seeing how their bodies weren't able to innately wield aether like the chimeras, two-tailed monkeys, or the millipede, I assumed that they had acquired the aetheric coating around their claws by some other means.

Their species lived underground, using their sharp claws to dig tunnels, so I speculated that there was something in the ground that was rich in aether, and that they dug through it in order to layer their claws with aether.

After hours of using the white-bladed dagger and aether to dig and punch deeper into the cave, Regis and I had found it...

An aether crystal.

The one that we found was about seven feet in diameter and extremely dense with aether, making it a stronger source for me to absorb energy from than even the millipede had been.

It was the presence of the massive aether crystal that made the ludicrous thought growing in the back of my mind possible. I needed a way to push tremendous amounts of aether through my body all at once. There was a limit to how quickly I could temper and purge aether without some kind of catalyst. Like defending my body against a consistent, fatal bombardment of flesh-melting lava.

With no way of knowing if my body would fare as well as the rodent claws, I did the only thing any wise and intelligent person would do: I tested myself.

After several hours of melting my fingers, waiting for them to regenerate by absorbing power from the aether crystal, and then doing it again while adjusting the input of my aether, I had finally come to where I was now: buck naked, standing next to the shallow edge of the molten river.

But it had worked. My body felt as if it was going through the tempering and purging stages of my patented aether refinement process over and over again every second.

Because of how much aether I needed to expel constantly in order to keep my body from burning, I could only stay inside the river for about a minute at a time at first. Each time, though, I lasted a little longer.

"Wow. Five minutes," Regis acknowledged, his entire form bobbing up and down as he nodded vigorously. "New record."

I stared at the aether crystal, which had dulled into a hazy gray color. "Just in time. I think it's about time we leave."

"Really?" Regis's eyes sparkled like a puppy whose owner had just tossed it a big, juicy steak. I felt a little sorry for my floating companion; after the rodents had finally given up on trying to chase us across the ravine, Regis hadn't had anything to watch except my naked body going in and out of the lava.

Nodding, I started to put my clothes back on. After adjusting my darkened leather bracers and gorget, and equipping my bag and the white dagger, which I had grown quite fond of, I draped the teal, fur-lined cloak over my shoulders. "You ready?"

"Hell yes," Regis declared, zig-zagging through the air around me. He floated out over the chasm, then stopped abruptly. "But before that... was it worth it?"

I let aether erupt from my core. Rather than seeing the thin sheen of magenta cover my entire body, however, my aether burned a brilliant purple, all traces of the reddish hue now gone. What really surprised Regis though, was the fact that almost all of the aether had coalesced into my right fist.

My lips curved into a smirk as the dark shadow of Regis's mouth fell open. "You tell me."

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The time spent tempering my body in the molten stream proved well worth it. I could easily focus on pushing aether to specific points in my body, strengthening my arms and legs with nearly as much precision as I could manage back when I had a mana core. My newly heightened control over aether made the climb back up to the cliff top a breeze.

Despite the excruciating pain, I was tempted to stay longer in that fiery river, but I had gotten lucky in finding such a large aether crystal nearby. Without a huge reserve of aether, I would have had to rely on my own ability to absorb aether from the atmosphere, and wouldn't have been able to make such drastic improvements in that short amount of time.

There were a couple things I wanted to do before crossing through the teleportation gate, however. First, I looked for a source of fresh water. I had accidentally managed to excavate a thin vein of water down within the cave while looking for an aether crystal, so I was sure there was water nearby. Even though I didn't need to drink nearly as much water with my asuran body, I didn't like the idea of moving forward without a full waterskin, just in case.

"Found it!" Regis shouted, just a few dozen yards ahead.

The glistening pool was almost entirely hidden by the tall grass, which leaned over the banks and even touched the surface in places. The water was crystal clear.

Wasting no time, I gulped down several mouthfuls of water and refilled my pouch, then stripped off my clothes and jumped in.

My body shivered at the cold touch of water on my skin, but the sensation was blissful. After thoroughly washing myself, I couldn't help but study my appearance in the reflective surface of the pond.

The pair of eyes that gazed back at me in the water shone like two spheres of golden amber tinged with radials of blue—evidence of my former eye color, maybe. Locks of pale wheat hair draped over my face, emphasizing the solemn expression I bore as I stared at myself. I still looked like Arthur, but I couldn't help but search for small differences that might prove otherwise. In the end, I think I was just discontent that the most obvious traits that I had inherited from my mother and father were now gone.

Stop thinking like that. You should be grateful to Sylvie you're alive, I reprimanded myself.

"Are you done checking yourself out?" Regis teased.

Turning back, I shot him a withering glare. His bright eyes lit up in surprise and he floated back several feet.

"Easy. It was a joke," my companion muttered.

I let out a sigh and ran my hand through my wet hair. "I know."

After getting out of the water, I got dressed, but left off the leather armor and teal cloak. I wanted to get adjusted to the changes in my fire-tempered body, and to do that, I needed to see exactly what I was capable of and what my limits were.

Without a proper punching bag, I struck at the air and occasionally the ground, my fists moving with such speed and force that the tall blue grass waved and danced as if a sudden wind was blowing through the plains. After a few minutes of this, I thought about how I had cracked the wall back in the sanctuary zone with a single punch, and wondered how my power level now compared.

As I thought this, I realized I did have a punching bag I could test out, of a sort. Grabbing up my gear, I started back toward the chasm, where the two pillars protruded from the tall grass.

Imbuing my hand with aether—just enough to land a solid blow—I jabbed out at the pillar. The stone cracked and a plate-sized chunk fell away, but it was still stable.

"Not bad," I said to myself.

Pushing more aether into my fist, I jabbed again. My fist went through the stone like a battering ram, causing an explosion of rubble and dust to fly out into the canyon. The pillar teetered, then tipped and fell sideways, crashing to the ground like a fallen tree.

Though the results were impressive, what I really wanted to test was if I could achieve the same results Regis and I could with Gauntlet Form.

Lining myself up with the second pillar, I pushed all the aether I could into my right fist, which represented the maximum force I could achieve at my current level of power. Hurling a haymaker punch at the pillar, I braced for the impact.

The stone exploded again as my fist blasted through it, and the pillar toppled away from me, tumbling out of sight into the ravine. Despite all the extra aether I had used, the damage done by the punch was only slightly better than before.

Even though Regis used my own aether as fuel to unleash Gauntlet Form, I wasn't able to duplicate that effect even on my own. I was stronger—tougher—and the regenerative properties were heightened with so much aether coalesced in one place, but a highly imbued punch wasn't as destructive as I had hoped it would be.

Still, because I was able to more freely control my aether, Regis and I were able to utilize Gauntlet Form much more instantaneously and effectively.

One crucial limitation, I realized, was the speed at which aether travelled inside me.

Whether it was because my aether passages weren't completely formed, or because I was still trying to treat aether as if it were mana, it took a few seconds of concentration in order to siphon aether into the desired location within my body.

I still have a long way to go until I'm able to use advanced techniques like Burst Step. Still, I couldn't help but get a little excited. This body would be able to bear the burden of Burst Step and much more if I could only master aether.

Before we headed back to where the teleportation gate stood, I took out the translucent stone that held Sylvie inside.

"Let's hope my aether is pure enough for you now, Sylv," I muttered as I pushed aether into the stone. A shroud of purple enveloped the stone as I felt nearly all of my aether being drained from my core.

This time, much more of my aether reached Sylvie, but the result was the same. While I had gotten stronger, at this point, I was dropping buckets in a pond, rather than cups. I really did have a long way to go.

After my core had replenished, we made our way back to the towering teleportation gate and stood in front of the undulating portal.

I turned to Regis. "Ready?"

He let out a scoff. "Let's see what fresh slice of hell awaits us next."

The two of us stepped through, both excited and anxious about what we'd have to face on the other side.

Despite our preparation, and even anticipation, for something unpredictable and bizarre, we were still stunned silent as the bright white light finally gave away to a serene spectrum of colors. Despite having the accumulation of two lifetimes of experience across two different worlds, I had no frame of reference to understand exactly what I was seeing.

"Well this is new," Regis muttered.

Glowing platforms the size of small houses were suspended in the air, each one a different color, rising like steps as they stretched on into the endless distance, one after another. Each platform was connected to the next by a single set of glowing stairs that seemed to be made of the same unknown material as the platforms themselves.

The sky, if I could even call it that, seemed frozen in a perpetual state of twilight, shimmering with a glossy purple hue.

Like in the jungle, the teleportation gate faded away behind us, leaving nothing behind but the field of floating platforms and the expanse of the shimmering purple sky. No sun or moon, no obvious source of light or even a horizon... There was just nothing.

"At least there's only one way to go, right?" I said, kneeling down to inspect the platform we were standing on. It glowed soft white and was smooth to the touch.

Regis rolled his eyes. "Woohoo."

I walked carefully toward the set of glowing stairs leading to the next platform, wary of any traps. Thankfully, I managed to reach the stairs without anyone or anything trying to kill me.

Climbing the stairs, I stopped just in front of the next platform, which glowed in various shades of red. After Regis and I exchanged a wary glance, I stepped on the platform.

Immediately, the staircase behind me faded away, forcing me to fully commit to the platform. Once both feet were planted on the glowing red floor, the entire platform began to elongate, stretching to about quadruple its original length. Something *pulled* at my insides, forcing me to stumble and almost fall.

My breathing faltered as wisps of purple energy leaked from my skin, drifting away like mist. Even after I closed off my aether core, I could feel the aether escape, slowly draining both my body and my core.

Regis was in worse shape. He drifted to the floor, his entire form flickering and growing noticeably smaller by the second.

Mechanically, I reached out and grabbed him, allowing him to sink into my hand.

'Thanks,' Regis said without a shred of his usual blend of sarcasm and condescension.

Meanwhile, I was starting to panic as more and more aether was being siphoned out of my core and leaking from the surface of my body.

I began hurriedly crossing to the other side of the platform, where the stairs to the next level awaited. The rate that my aether was being sucked out of me increased the closer I got. By the time I was halfway across the platform, my steps were faltering and my breath was coming in shallow bursts.

Thinking on my feet, I began concentrating aether to my right arm. With all of my remaining aether coalesced in one place, it felt like it wasn't being drawn out of me as quickly.

Better than nothing, I thought.

I was nearly at the stairs... just a few more steps and I'd be free of the suffocating red platform... but I stopped in my tracks.

'Uhh, the exit is right there,' my companion thought, his concerned voice echoing in my head.

"I... know," I said through gritted teeth, still frozen in place. The way the aether moved through my body while under the effect of the platform felt different. Like the river of lava, the aether-draining platform provided an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Rather than panicking at the sensation of aether escaping from my grasp, I focused every ounce of concentration into moving the aether from my entire arm to my hand, then to the center of my palm, until I could feel the aether about to burst.

That's when I felt like something had changed inside me, as if my aether passages had dispersed and risen to the surface of my skin. A layer of purple clung tightly to my right palm, and rune-like marks extended out to my fingers like an aetheric glove.

Suddenly, my hand began to burn.

'Arthur! You're going to destroy your hand!' Regis cried, panicking. 'Hold on! I'll absorb some of your aether!'

"No, don't!" I groaned. I let whatever anomaly was happening within this platform help me drain the aether coalescing in the center of my palm. Better yet, I let it help guide my channels.

Letting out a roar against the pain gnawing at my hand, I pushed out.

A deep thrum rippled through the air, followed by a devastating torrent of violet flames erupting from the center of my palm.

I gripped my right arm with my left hand to help stabilize it, and to keep my arm from ripping out of its socket.

The sound of my own voice was washed away by the deafening blast as I struggled to stay conscious.

My ears rang, and most of the red platform, which had seemed ethereal and indestructible, had been obliterated.

I fell to my knees and cradled my right arm; all of my fingers had been broken and bent out of place from the impact, and the bones of my right arm were fractured from my wrist to my shoulder.

Without a shred of aether left in my body, I could already feel it starting to fail.

"—thur! Arthur!"

I saw a blurry Regis buzzing around my face and shouting my name. When I didn't respond, he shot into my chest. Almost immediately, I could feel Regis injecting his own aether into my core, supplying me with most of what he had accumulated since manifesting in the sanctuary room.

Strength flowing through me once more, I staggered off the red platform and climbed the stairs using my hand and feet.

"Regis, are you okay?" I asked, my voice thick with exhaustion and worry.

Regis remained inside me. I could feel he was still alive, but he remained quiet. Even his emotions seemed tampered, cut off from me.

Finally, my companion stirred and let out a groan.

'You really are a fucking masochist,' he grumbled weakly.

We stared at the glowing orange platform in front of us.

Regis was no larger than the size of my palm, and his horns had shrunk to imperceptible nubs hidden in the dark flames.

We had stopped to rest on the floating stairs, but it turned out that we weren't able to stay on them indefinitely. After a while, the stair we were on began to tremble before fizzling out of existence, forcing us to move to the next one, which did the same thing. Eventually, we were forced to the last stair before the platform, my arm still mostly broken.

"Remember, I can't use Gauntlet Form right now," Regis warned, hovering just over my shoulder.

"I know."

"And don't even think about using whatever it was you used on that last platform! I mean, what the hell were you even thinking?"

"I told you. I need to risk my life if I want to stand a chance against asuras," I stated. Despite my injury and close call, the risk had been worth it. I could feel the change in my body, could see the possibilities of what I would be able to do once my body was strong enough to handle it.

"If it wasn't for me, you would've died doing that dragon's fart technique!" Regis yelled, scowling. Then he sighed and let out a deep breath. "Fine. It was pretty cool. Just don't do it again until we're someplace safe, yeah?"

"It was a calculated risk... but I agree," I answered before stepping onto the orange platform. As soon as my foot touched the floor, the entire platform began glowing brighter and started pulsating softly while the stairs leading to the next platform retracted.

"That didn't happen on the last platform." Regis looked grimly toward the stairs.

However, even as Regis was talking, I sensed something and moved my body accordingly. I spun on my front foot, pivoting to the right and grabbing the space in front of me with my left hand.

A slight prickle on my cheek told me that I wasn't able to dodge completely, but the fact that I was able to react at all to the humanoid beast that had attacked me had likely saved my life.

Aside from the fact that it was deadly fast, it seemed to be completely invisible. Even though I was able to see aether, the beast simply looked like a faint blur of purple with two bladed arms and four legs.

"Regis." I tightened my grip around the bladed beast's arm as it struggled to pry itself free. "Be careful."

My companion's eyes widened at what he saw and he hid behind me.

With my right hand out of commission, I tried throwing the beast off of the platform, but it hit an invisible wall.

Imbuing aether into my left arm, I unsheathed my dagger and lunged at the humanoid beast, striking just underneath its chin and severing its head from its neck.

The entire platform shook from the impact, and the headless beast slumped to the ground. Not even a trace of blood leaked from the gaping wound.

As soon as the beast died, details formed underneath its camouflaging shroud of aether.

"How'd you even see this thing?" Regis asked as he hovered over what could only be described as some sort of reptilian centaur. It had a humanoid torso growing out of a flat, low body, like a giant salamander. Both arms were chimera-like fusions of flesh and blade.

I touched my cheek, wiping a bead of blood from the wound that had already healed. "I didn't really see it, but I could sense the aether. I didn't know what it was, exactly, just reacted to it."

Regis just bobbed in a shrug, but my mind started to spin, trying to think of what could've changed. I'd been able to see aether since the chimera hallway, but I'd known something was there before I could even see the aether. Maybe by forging my aether passages, the aether was further acclimating to my body internally, strengthening my nerves to enhance my perception and reflexes.

The sight of the reptilian centaur fading into nothingness snapped me back to reality. Soon after, the platform dimmed to its usual color, and the stairs extended again, connecting this platform to the one after.

Regis tilted his head. "I guess... that's it?"

We crossed the platform carefully, making sure there weren't any more invisible threats, but we didn't leave immediately. After I deemed it safe, we took some more time to heal.

After a few hours of concentrated absorption of aether, I was back to full health and was even able to give Regis some aether. It wasn't enough to return him to his previous strength, but he was at least able to use Gauntlet Form once.

"Let's go," I stated, curling and uncurling my healed right hand.

Reaching the end of the platform, we climbed the flight of stairs, much more confident than last time.

The next platform was bathed in deep blue light, and when I carefully touched the floor with my foot, rather than pulsating like the previous platform, tiles shimmered into view, segmenting the entire area into smaller squares, each the span of my arms.

"Ooh, not ominous at all," Regis said sarcastically, looking at the squares. "Too bad you can't just float over them like me."

"You make it sound like your life isn't tied to mine," I shot back with a smirk.

Regis's expression fell as he muttered weakly, "We don't know that for sure..."

"Let's not find out," I chuckled before focusing on the task at hand.

I got low and tapped lightly on the square just ahead, watchful for any more invisible beasts sneaking up on me.

Nothing happened, but when I placed both feet on the same square, the entire platform trembled before it suddenly spun ninety degrees. I was now on the left side of the square rather than the front side.

"Woah," Regis muttered.

I carefully stepped on the square to my left, the one that was closer to the stairs leading up to the next platform. However, as soon as both feet were planted, the entire platform rotated counterclockwise, moving me away from the exit again.

"It's a... puzzle," I said, stepping on another square. "Like some sort of two-dimensional Rubik's Cube."

The platform turned counterclockwise again, and the more I tried to get closer to the stairs, the farther away I was led.

Minutes easily bled into hours as we stepped, failed, and retraced our steps before starting again.

"Forward, left, left, forward, right—no I think it was left?" Regis muttered.

"Shut up! You're making this harder," I snapped as I hopped through the memorized path until we were just three squares away from the staircase.

I stepped on the square adjacent to the one I was already on, spinning me clockwise, but the move after that led to a dead route.

"Damn it," I cursed, tracing back my path a few steps to hopefully find a different path.

"Can't you just jump this distance?" Regis asked, his gaze shifting from me to the stairs.

I stared blankly at my companion. "Is that allowed?"

"You can get to the stairs easily from here," he replied. "And generally, the stairs have always been safe."

I thought for a moment and realized we could be stuck here for hours—if not days—on this giant spinning chessboard.

Imbuing aether into my legs, I jumped.

The distance was easy to clear, but as I descended toward the flight of stairs, a shadow suddenly loomed over me.

It was the entire platform.

My eyes widened as the blue platform flipped. I was no longer standing on top of the platform; I was underneath it, falling into the endless sky.

"Arthur!" Regis cried, falling alongside me despite his ability to fly.

I flailed my arms desperately in the air, scrambling to grab hold of *something* in the purple void. I tried to gather aether once more in my palm but to no avail—I didn't have nearly enough to launch an explosive attack like earlier.

There was nothing either of us could do as we plummeted downward and the platform grew farther and farther away, until it finally faded out of sight.

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Panic began bubbling up in the pit of my stomach as the platform disappeared from view. The idea of simply falling forever, tumbling through an endless sky until my body consumed the last of my aether and began to eat itself from the inside and I withered to nothing, powerless to do anything but keep falling... it was, perhaps, the most horrific ending I could consider, not least so because there was nothing I could do about it.

I remembered the helpless void that I had trapped myself in before waking up in this dungeon. The sheer numbness and darkness that had swallowed my mind and soul sent chills down my spine at the mere recollection of it. This time, it seemed unlikely I would simply wake up somewhere else...

The impact of something hard slamming into my back snapped me out of my existential terror. An otherworldly surface glowed a soft white underneath me. As my mind tried to process what had happened, there was a dull *thump* from behind me.

"Sonova—"

"Regis! Are you okay?"

My companion swaggered back up into the air, hovering a few feet above the glowing white platform. "I don't know... but for someone incorporeal, a lot of shit sure can touch me in this godforsaken place," Regis groused.

I cracked a smile, happy to see my companion complain... and even happier to have solid ground beneath me. We had landed on another platform. Only one set of stairs led away, and it ended in a familiar red glow.

I stared dumbfounded at the view ahead, struck with a sudden sense of déjà vu. "Regis. Please tell me you're thinking the same thing I am."

"I'm trying not to think at all," Regis grumbled. "This place makes my head hurt. I'll let you do all the thinking, oh mighty Master." With that, my companion, weapon of ages, flicked his flames, much like how Ellie swished her hair when she was upset with me, and vanished into my hand.

Letting out a sigh, I stepped onto the platform. Almost immediately, I felt the sensation of aether being sucked out of me as the glowing red platform stretched out in length, just as it had before.

"I'm not even surprised," I muttered, trudging forward.

I coalesced aether into my left hand this time, limiting the rate at which aether left my body as I neared the staircase.

'Easy,' Regis scoffed.

I stopped a few steps short of the staircase.

'Wait, no. Please don't tell me...'

"Where else am I going to find an environment that naturally pulls aether out of me?" I asked, smirking. "Besides, didn't you *just* say it was easy?"

Despite my previous experience launching a destructive blast of aether from the palm of my hand, the second time wasn't any easier. In fact, because I had focused primarily on gathering aether into my right hand, I had an even harder time with my left.

Needless to say, I walked up the staircase to the next platform with a shattered left hand, a near-empty aether core... and a big smile on my face.

Regis flew just ahead of me. My companion had shrunken yet again, and his flames blazed angrily. He was muttering a constant string of unintelligible curses.

I knew there could be dangerous psychological repercussions to the sort of self-harm I had been forced to engage in since waking up in the dungeon. I wasn't a masochist, whatever Regis thought, but I couldn't afford to spend a decade mastering aether the way I had done with mana. I needed to find every shortcut, no matter how dangerous, or I'd never get strong enough to save my family and release Sylvie from the rainbow-colored stone.

Shaking away these introspective thoughts, I stepped onto the orange platform. I dodged the invisible reptile-centaur beast once more, but rather than making the mistake of killing it and letting it disappear, I pinned it down and absorbed its aether first.

An additional benefit to expanding my aether passages was that I was no longer limited to consuming aether using my mouth. I could now absorb directly through my hands, retaining a little dignity and poise.

Stepping up onto the blue platform, recovered and brimming with energy, I patiently solved the spinning platform puzzle. Having already navigated most of the puzzle, it was much simpler the second time. The key was keeping myself calm and not letting my frustration overwhelm my sense of caution.

My heart finally calmed after stepping onto the staircase leading to the next platform. The memory of the ground flipping out from beneath me and sending me down into the void had been seared into my mind, and I was glad to temper that fear with success.

"Please let this next one be the exit," Regis prayed, his horns practically drooping. I shared my companion's anxiety. The surreal nature of the puzzle zone was much more taxing than the straightforward fight for survival we'd faced in the jungle and endless plains of blue grass.

The platform was about twice as big as those we'd already crossed, and emitted an ominous black light.

I pushed aside my worries, my hand subconsciously reaching for the bag carrying Sylvie's stone. Despite the state she was in, my bond had become an anchor for me, a constant reminder of what my goals were.

Steeling myself, I stepped onto the black platform with Regis following close behind. As soon as my feet were both planted on the glowing black surface, the entire platform began to thrum deeply.

I scanned my surroundings, my senses on full alert. The thrumming grew louder, then louder again, a deafening vibration that shook my bones and made my temples ache. Just as I thought I couldn't possibly listen to it for another second, hundreds of black wires shot out from all four edges of the square platform, crisscrossing each other to form a fence-like enclosure that stretched high above us. The hum died down until it was a barely perceptible tinnitus-like ringing at the edge of my perception.

Regis looked up and around. "That can't be good."

I stepped toward the center of the platform, a thick layer of aether shrouding my body. The fact that we were blocked from moving forward meant that we needed to solve some sort of puzzle... or kill something.

As if reading my thoughts, the ground a few yards in front of me rippled, and a large mound of glowing black began growing from the platform.

The expanse of purple sky surrounding us darkened as a towering figure took form before us.

I gazed up at the shadowy giant: the bipedal creature was at least five times my height and looked like it was wearing a full set of armor crafted from the same shadowy material as the rest of its body, along with a great helm featuring two horns curling upward.

As it stepped toward us, causing the entire platform to tremble, I said the only thing appropriate for the situation: "Look, Regis. It's your dad."

My companion regarded me for moment, deadpan. "I liked you better when you were depressed."

The glowing black floor shook furiously as the shadowy sentinel's fist came crashing down, impacting where I had stood only an instant before. Its movements were slow, and I dodged the blow easily, but I knew that getting hit even once could spell death.

"Regis." I held out my hand. "Gauntlet Form."

Regis flew into my hand and I siphoned aether through him, side-stepped a low sweep of the golem's arm, then drove my smoky-black fist into the golem's leg.

The impact made a noise like rocks being crushed in a quarry, but the golem only stumbled back a step.

The tight grip I felt around my core reminded me that the number of times I could use Gauntlet Form was limited, but it seemed like even a hundred such blows wouldn't be able to kill the giant beast.

The golem let out a deafening roar, apparently pissed that I had managed to give it a bruise.

I grimaced as I clenched my shadow-clad fist once more. "Again!"

Channeling even more of my aether through Regis, I let the destructive power build. The smoky-black aura began to spread, slowly climbing up my arm.

The power ached as aether continued to coalesce in my hand and arm. Something jolted through me, a foreign sensation like a spark flying from a flint and steel, and I lost my concentration for half a second.

The sentry struck. The force of the blow threw me off the ground, and I slammed against the black fence, feeling the tearing sensation of my ribs breaking.

Coughing out a mouthful of blood, I rolled onto my back to see Regis staring at me. The aether that had been collected to my hand was gone, redistributed throughout my body, and already beginning to heal my wounds.

"What the hell happened? Are you okay?" the shadowy black ball asked before turning away. "Watch out!"

I rolled out of the way, narrowly avoiding the giant golem as it tried to stomp on me.

Jumping clumsily to my feet, I looked at Regis. "Was that you?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, frustrated. "Did you get hit in the head? I'm not sure if you've noticed, but there's a giant shadow golem trying to kill us."

"I got hit everywhere," I retorted, regarding Regis. I frowned as I looked at my companion. "The feeling... that spark... never mind."

With my body healed and my sense of self-preservation forcing me to be a bit more wary of those huge fists, the giant golem and I began playing a game of cat and mouse. I was hesitant to make another attempt to use Gauntlet Form until I understood what had happened, forcing me to try and attack its weak points.

Turns out, it didn't have any. Its faceless head was just as hard as its armored crotch and chest.

With my primary weapon out of service and the golem much too strong for me to defeat with just punches and kicks, I did the only thing I could think to do. Keeping my distance, I began coalescing aether into the center of my palm.

As a thin layer of purple spread outward from the center of my hand, I hoped that my limited pool of aether would reduce the recoil of the aether blast.

But as I prepared to unleash the destructive blast of aether, I couldn't help but question its capability. Though it was the wrong moment and time for introspection, I wondered how the raw blast of energy stemmed from aether.

Like mana, did aether have a pure, affinity-less form, or was this power—like the strengthening of my body—a branch of *vivum*? But Lady Myre had explained *vivum* as the influence over all living components.

That's when it hit me.

I had been on the right track with both Gauntlet Form and the aetheric blast, but they were merely a part of the bigger picture.

Suddenly, the spark-like sensation jumped up my arm again, and an unbearable pain enveloped my hand. I looked down to see what looked like runes forming on the backs of my hands. They lingered for less than a second before disappearing from view. However, I could *feel* the runes travelling up my arm, like a white-hot ball of iron, following in the path of the spark as they trailed down my back and legs before finally settling at the base of my spine.

Despite my growing tolerance for pain, this nearly caused me to faint. Still, a warm glow radiated up through my torso that reassured me that, whatever had just happened, it wasn't going to immediately kill me.

"—thur!"

I snapped out of my reverie at the sound of Regis's voice right beside me, and remembered that I had been in the middle of a fight against a towering shadow golem.

I dipped my head and prepared for an impact that never came.

"Arthur, look," Regis stated.

Raising my head, I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The black sentinel, whose figure towered over thirty feet high, was slowly backing away from me.

It's scared.

Regis gaped, taking in the sight in disbelief.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I-I'm not sure." I looked down at my hands. There was nothing to see. However, when I coalesced aether into my hand, a warm sensation spread from my lower back, along with a flood of knowledge.

I staggered forward, nearly losing balance at the jarring sensation. It only lasted a split second, but I knew the knowledge now ingrained into my brain would last forever.

I muttered a single word under my breath, still looking at my empty hands.

"What?" Regis asked, floating down and staring at me. "Are you okay, Arthur?"

I could feel my lips curve up into a grin. "I'm better than okay. I understand now."

"Understand what?" Regis rebutted. "You're freaking me out, Arthur."

Lifting my cloak and shirt up, I showed Regis my lower back. "This."

My companion's eyes widened as he saw the silvery-white rune glowing on my spine, just above my hip. "Do you know what this rune says?"

Regis shook side to side as I let go of my cloak and shirt, covering my back.

"I do," I said, a wide, wild grin plastered on my face. "And so does that thing."

I approached the giant, shadowy knight, my gait calm and deliberate. The closer I got to the towering golem, the more I could see its form hunch, as if it was trying to make itself smaller in my presence.

It knew.

I was no longer the one trapped in here with this aetheric creature—it was now trapped in here with me, and it recognized the battle as lost.

Slowly raising my arm, I channeled aether into my right hand. The warm touch of the rune carved onto my back reassured me, and the aether manifested into a small flame that glistened like pure amethyst.

The amethyst flame sat in my palm like a newborn. There was no wild ferocity or scorching heat that emanated from this flame. It was cool, tranquil, and silent, like the breath of some transcendental god.

At the sight of the ethereal flame, the shadowy golem body began to tremble. Like a cornered rat, it lashed out, slamming down its massive arms to try and flatten me.

I raised my arm, meeting its giant fists with my right hand. The amethyst flames silently consumed both huge hands, dancing happily across the dark material of its body.

The shadowy beast bellowed in helpless rage, desperately flailing its handless arms at me.

Using its arm like a ramp, I rushed up it until I was standing atop its shoulder, then drove my flame-clad hand into its head.

"Farewell," I said softly as I watched its head deteriorate from the violet flames. I hopped to the ground and stood back as its body sank down into the black platform.

270 BRANCH OF DESTRUCTION

As the giant sentinel dissolved back into the black platform, it felt like, rather than calming down, my adrenaline rush from the battle was growing more intense. My breathing became shallow and I could feel my heartbeat quicken by the second. Blood pounded against my ears, dulling out everything except for the sounds of my own ragged breaths. It was an overbearing yet intoxicating sensation.

I was suddenly afraid that I might lose my mind.

I tried to withdraw the violet fire clad around my right hand, but it wouldn't be extinguished. The cool flames clung to my skin, throbbing, and the rune on my back felt like a scorching brand pressed against my spine.

I didn't know why this was happening, but it felt like either my body was rejecting the rune, or the rune was rejecting me. A scream tore from my throat as the violet flames grew stronger and more wild, engulfing my entire hand.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Regis frantically rushing toward me before disappearing into my body. It wasn't long after that darkness overcame me.

When I came to, the shimmering purple sky was the first thing to greet me. The second thing was the pain. My right hand felt like it had been marinated in a vat of acid, and a dull throb still lingered in my lower back.

The rune!

My eyes widened as I recalled what had happened to me. I pushed myself off my back, wincing at the pain of putting weight on my right hand, despite the fact that it appeared unscathed.

The platform I was on wasn't black anymore, but white, I noticed distantly.

"Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty."

My battle instincts flared at the sound of the gruff voice, and I whirled around, ripping the white dagger from its sheath with my left hand, only to find myself face-to-face with a shadowy entity in the form of a wolf.

It remained seated on its hind legs like a large dog, no threatening intent leaking from it. It looked like a very black wolf except for the glowing mane of violet fire that danced around its neck and shoulders, and

a pair of horns protruding out of its head, each twisting like a gnarled branch as they came to a sharp point behind its ears.

"Check me out. I'm majestic as fuck!" The wolf gave me a toothy grin, its shadowy tail wagging excitedly.

My jaw dropped. "Regis? What happened to me after I passed out? What happened to *you*? Why do you look like that?" I stared at him, unable to make sense of any of it.

"Easy, pleb," Regis said haughtily, holding up his giant black paw. "This one shall explain."

I shot him a glare, eliciting an uncomfortable cough from the shadowy wolf.

"After you killed that giant golem, that purple flame was trying to consume you. So I did what any loyal companion would do, and went into your body to save you."

"Loyal? Is that why you're a dog?" I quipped.

"I'm a *wolf*!" Regis emphasized, offended. "I don't know *why* I'm a wolf, and not some badass dragon or something, but this is what I came out as."

I set the dagger down beside me and leaned back on my left hand, letting my right rest in my lap. "So how did it happen?"

"Well, I felt this huge surge of aether fuse with me—"

"Fuse with your body?" I asked blankly, but then it finally dawned on me.

I expelled aether from my core, trying to siphon it through the rune on my lower back. Except there was no rune. I recalled the knowledge that had been ingrained into me upon forming the rune, but it felt like a blur, like trying to recall the events of a drunken night.

"It's gone," I mumbled. "I—I can't feel the rune anymore."

My eyes locked onto Regis in an icy glare. "You stole it."

"It's not like I expected this to happen," Regis retorted. "And besides, you were dying!"

I seethed, unable to believe that I'd finally made a real breakthrough and now it was just gone. Through clenched teeth, I said, "I had it under control."

Regis let out a scoff. "Sure. Writhing in pain and blacking out was all part of the master plan, right?"

"You don't understand! I need that power, Regis." I thrust my right hand out toward my companion, ignoring the burning pain. "Give it back!"

Regis bared his fangs. "You don't think I tried? After dragging your sorry ass off the black platform—you're welcome, by the way—I tried going back inside your body and giving it back to you, but I didn't even know how!"

My brows furrowed as I gestured again toward Regis. "Come here."

With a sigh, my companion relented. The solid wolf turned to smoke and shadow as he touched me, then drifted into my body, just as he had been able to when he was no more than a little black ball of fire.

As soon as his form entered my body, though, I felt the change. It started with a pressure building inside my ears, as if I was sinking deep underwater. Then a growing pain pressed against my temples as the knowledge of the rune in my mind and the actual rune now held within Regis connected. I recalled everything that I had learned as the warm touch of the rune spread from my lower back.

Destruction.

That was what the rune engraved on my back meant. Destruction, however, wasn't something tangible, so the aether residing within me had shaped it into something I was familiar with, something destructive: fire.

Through this formation of power, I had to question whether aether had some level of sentience. It had given me knowledge of what destruction meant, and how it was tied to *vivum*. Lady Myre had explained it as the influence over living components, but that was wrong. She'd understood only a part of it.

Vivum was more akin to the influence over... existence. And just as life was a part of existence, so were death, creation, and destruction.

I had barely touched the surface of Destruction, but even so, I had managed to gain more insight than Lady Myre—at least, based on what she had told me.

The fact that I had invoked this rune meant that I had a certain degree of mastery over what the rune meant. It was a rare projection of mastery over a specific edict of aether.

This made me question the differences between my newly-bestowed rune and the runes that once enveloped my body through Sylvia's dragon will. How were they, in turn, different from the runes that both Lady Myre and Sylvia possessed?

One difference was clear: the Indrath Clan, like all of the asuras, thought that the only way to obtain these runes was through the rare chance of inheriting them at birth.

Were the specific edicts of aether they could learn limited by the runes that they were born with? Were they given the knowledge and abilities that came along with each rune right away, or was each rune dormant until they could make the breakthrough themselves?

It seemed unlikely that they'd get the knowledge at birth, given how painful just obtaining one rune was. It seemed likely that even an asuran infant would die from the mental burden of dozens of runes instilling their brain with knowledge if it happened immediately upon their birth.

Hundreds of questions ran through my head. I had no way to answer most of them, but the acquisition of the Destruction rune and the parallel I had drawn with the runes I had witnessed in the past made me sure of two things: one, I needed to make more breakthroughs in aether arts to obtain more runes; and two, Agrona most likely gained insight from these runes in order to create his own versions to bestow onto his people. That was what the marks, crests, emblems, and regalias were—simplified mana adaptations of aetheric runes.

"Agrona," I said aloud, a boiling fury building up inside me. My hands ignited in the cool violet flames of Destruction, and I scanned the platform for something, anything, to let loose my rage on.

I needed to kill something. I *wanted* to kill something, just like Agrona had done to so many of my people. If it wasn't for him, the war would've never happened and Adam wouldn't have died. Buhnd wouldn't have died. My *father* wouldn't have died.

Something was eating away at me from the inside. I could feel it, like a worm digging through me. It took away a little part of me and left behind something else: a craving for chaos and destruction, a demand for blood and murder.

Destruction, I realized. The flames were hungry. They needed fuel to keep them alive. The rune *wanted* to be used—or maybe it was *I* who wanted to use the rune… it was hard to tell where Arthur stopped and Destruction started.

The purple fire danced over my flesh, cooling my burning right hand. It really was beautiful. If I let it, Destruction would dance over everything, consume *everything*.

Something in the back of my mind told me that was wrong, that I should douse the flames while I could. I tried, a little. My heart wasn't in it. I couldn't bring myself to make the flames go away.

And why should I? I asked myself. Destruction was mine now. It belonged to me. With it, I could burn the heart from my enemy's chest, turn the air in his lungs to fire, boil the blood in his veins. I pictured the amethyst flames spreading across all of Alacrya, erasing the continent from existence. Then Dicathen would be peaceful again, and my father's death avenged.

In my mind, I saw it all happening. When Alacrya had been returned to the ocean and the saltwater rushed in, Destruction drank it greedily, and the waves carried the purple flames everywhere, until the whole world was alight. I grinned.

The flames had spread up my arms and dripped from my hands to eat at the platform beneath me.

'Uh, Arthur?' a small voice said from within me. Voices in my head... Sylvie's, Regis's, King Grey's, Arthur Leywin's... My mother's voice. My father's. Ellie's voice was in my head, too, and she was wreathed in purple fire. She was pleading, asking me to stop, begging me to make it stop...

With the last trace of sanity left in me, I grabbed the dagger from the burning platform and plunged it into my thigh.

The fire flashed out. Little holes had been burned through the platform all around me. I fell back among the wreckage, focusing on the pain spreading from my leg, letting it clear my head. Regis popped out of my body and stood over me, his expression somewhat boorish in his canine form.

"You okay, princess?" Regis asked.

I got up slowly. I was still in a daze, and there were a thousand things on my mind, but I knew, regardless of intention, that if Regis hadn't absorbed the aetheric rune from me...

"Yeah, I'm okay now," I said with a pang of guilt. "And I'm sorry for accusing you of stealing it. You were right. If you hadn't, I would've died."

"It's okay. I know you feel pretty cruddy since you've been so hell-bent on getting stronger. I'm literally in your head, remember?" Regis's ears drooped. "And if it makes you feel better, even though the rune made my body is stronger, I can't use those purple flames like you used to kill that golem."

I nodded, suspecting that to be the case. Lowering my gaze, I stared at my hands, wondering what had gone wrong. I had gained insights into *vivum*, but I only had half of the whole piece, with Regis carrying the other half.

He didn't have the insight to use the power of Destruction as well as I could, and I didn't have the rune to use it by myself. And if I did continue using the rune, I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd go mad.

It was frustrating. Unlike the growth in my mana core and my ability to manipulate the elements, my growth in wielding aether wasn't linear or easily discernible. Obtaining this new, and powerful, ability was the first step in bridging the gap between me and the asuras, but I had only been given a taste before it was taken away from me.

But at least now I knew. If I could form a rune for a branch of Destruction, then I could form one for other branches. I could only hope that the aether would mold and shape itself to best suit me in the future.

Letting the wound on my leg close, I dusted myself off before shooting Regis a slight smile. "Come on. Let's see just how useful this new form of yours is."

Regis's ears perked up, his tail wagging excitedly as he shot me a toothy grin. "Try to keep up!"

Regis and I continued on, ascending higher through the glowing platforms. The endless expanse of purple sky shone overhead, ever steady, making it impossible to track how many hours had passed.

There were a few patterns we noticed as we ventured higher through the almost game-like zone.

The color of platforms remained the same: white, red, orange, blue, then black. Regis and I referred to this sequence of platforms as a single "set." This order never deviated, and each color corresponded to a specific challenge.

As far as we could deduce, the white platform was the only safe platform. The red platforms were meant to be some sort of test for either our mental or physical fortitude. While the first red platform had siphoned our aether, the latter ones imbued all sorts of interesting curses onto us when we stood on them, from insatiable hunger that could drive humans to eat one another, to lust, depression, and so on.

The orange platforms were rather straightforward as well. Each one conjured up enemies that Regis and I needed to kill in order to move on. The number and type of beasts varied and grew a bit stronger with each ascending set, but the rate at which Regis and I grew surpassed the rising difficulty of the stages.

The blue platforms were by far the most time-consuming. Each one was a puzzle of some sort: some had deadly traps, while others were meant to keep you in limbo for days to die of thirst and starvation. With my body needing very little sustenance apart from aether, this didn't really apply to us, but it was a large waste of time, regardless.

While the blue platforms took the most time, the black platforms were the most deadly and challenging. There was only one beast to fight, but each was on a level far higher than the ones seen on the orange platforms.

I had come out of each battle with wounds that would've crippled or killed a normal person, only to have them heal without a trace. My clothes were littered with tears and holes, but the black leather bracers and gorget, along with my teal cloak, managed to stay intact. I had also expected the white dagger I had obtained from the millipede lair to have broken down, but it held strong without a single chip or crack to blemish its pristine white blade.

While I wasn't able to unravel another aspect of aether to obtain a rune, the rate at which my aether passages grew increased as we navigated the zone. I could only assume that it had to do with the knowledge that had been instilled in my mind when I had received the Destruction rune.

Unfortunately, minute control over aether still felt impossible, like I was trying to mold air into a sculpture. It was imperative to have precise control over aether in order to enhance my speed. I had

grown somewhat confident in my resilience and power, but without the aid of both mana and elemental magic, my speed had deteriorated despite my stronger body and my ability to use aether.

The biggest change, however, was Regis. My black mutt—which he hated to be called—was no longer the cannon fodder he used to be. While he wasn't yet able to use the violet flames of Destruction, his speed, strength, and razor-sharp teeth and claws made him a formidable companion nonetheless. The only downside to this change was that he was now much more corporeal than he used to be—which meant he was susceptible to injury.

He didn't bleed, but since his entire body was made of aether, getting too hurt meant that he needed to be given more aether—my aether—and a lot of it.

"After we get out of here, remind me to whip you into shape," I huffed, resting on the giant head of a three-headed serpent I had just finished off. It was our seventh time on the black platform. "My little sister can fight better than you."

'Bite me,' Regis snapped, his discontent ringing in my head. 'I'm still getting used to this form. It's my first time having actual limbs you know.'

"Well, at this point you're more of a liability to my aether pool than you are an asset in battle," I said with a smirk.

Regis opted for silence, all out of excuses and witty comebacks.

He knew it as well. It was too dangerous to use Gauntlet Form, now enhanced by the violet flames of destruction, because of its escalating effects on my psyche, and the beasts that appeared on these platforms were too strong for him to fight back against with just teeth and claws.

Beneath me, the three-headed serpent began to dissolve back into the ground, the same as usual. I expected to see the customary set of stairs leading to the next platform, but instead of a platform waiting at the top of the translucent stairs, I saw a portal.

Looking at the shimmering gate of iridescent light felt like stumbling upon an unexpected oasis in an endless desert.

'Is that...'

"I think it is!" I rushed up the stairs, wanting nothing more than to escape the hellish purple void.

I thought anything we would have to face on the other side would be better than looping through the colored platforms again and again.

Through the portal, I could see a battle unfolding beneath an ominous crimson sky. Hordes of grotesque beasts warred against only a dozen or so humans... including three Alacryans whom I recognized.

271 FIRST ASCENT

As I stepped into the next zone, there were so many thoughts racing through my mind, so many questions I wanted to ask as I took in the sight. What was going on? Why were there so many mages gathered there? Were we even still in the dungeon?

My eyes were drawn to what I first thought was a red sun. Looking carefully though, the "sun" seemed to be sitting on top of a towering column, quite a distance away.

A monstrous screech pulled my gaze back to the scene just ahead.

With the vast field of uneven dirt being trampled by hundreds of monsters and the blood-red sky matching the pools of blood and pockets fire strewn across the battlefield, I couldn't help but wonder if this was what hell would be like.

During my journey through the dungeon, I had faced skeletal chimeras, giant aetheric millipedes, deadly shrews, and shadowy beasts of all shapes and sizes. However, none of them could quite compare to the sheer grotesqueness of these monsters.

Each one of the bipedal creatures had sickly white skin that was pulled tight over their skeletons and an oversized head resting between sharp shoulders, like a ghoulish infant. Their clawed hands and large mouths were dyed in red, and sharp fang-like spikes protruded out of their gangly bodies.

From the hundreds of monster corpses littering the field and the Alacryans coated in a layer of sweat, grime, and blood, it was easy to infer that they had been in battle for quite a while.

'Why can't we ever be fighting against a half-naked succubus or a seductive demoness of some kind? Why are they always so damned gross,' Regis lamented.

"Hey! Are you waiting for permission or something? Help us out!" a large female warrior clad in plate armor barked before unleashing a surge of blue fire from her golden halberd straight at a group of demonic babies.

Chittering screams filled the air as the fire washed over the monsters, but they were immediately replaced by another wave.

'What do we do?' Regis asked.

Stay hidden inside me for now, I replied. It seemed like the Alacryans and I had a common enemy for the moment, but revealing anything more about myself than I had to would be foolish at this point.

Careful to keep the aether flowing within my body, I unsheathed my white dagger and dashed forward.

The baby-headed demons were fast and relentless, and their skin was as tough as an iron hyrax, but with aether pumping through my limbs in powerful bursts, I tore through them, wave after wave.

Despite the remaining thirteen of us fighting a common enemy, it was obvious that teamwork only existed within isolated groups of preexisting teammates. Save for the trio that I had met before, there was one other trio while the rest fought in pairs, trying to stay alive rather than trying to help out the rest.

More streams of blue fire lit the red sky, but that wasn't the only magic on the battlefield. I could see giant earthen spikes erupt from the ground, bullets of water shimmering as they pierced through the monsters, and crescents of wind that bisected everything in their path.

They were spells I was all too familiar with, but each one was at a level that rivaled a veteran silver-core mage at the least. Even with all of these powerful mages mowing down the demonic infants, though, their numbers only seemed to increase.

'Where are they all coming from?' Regis wondered.

I wish I knew, I sent back as I pried my dagger out of the bulging black eye of a demonic infant.

"H-help!"

The pained cry rang out from just a few yards away. I turned to see five monsters pouncing on a warrior. He desperately tried to keep them at bay as he scrambled on his back, tucking himself under his shield like a turtle receding into its shell.

His left leg was broken and the monsters seemed to know it; more and more of them were gathering to finish off their prey.

My eyes locked with the warrior's.

"You! S-save me! Please!" he shouted, frantically lobbing a blast of fire that only served to attract more of the monsters.

I instinctively stepped forward to help the struggling mage, but, as the warrior was flipped over by a pair of demon-babies, I saw the black runes between the mesh gap of his armor.

Anger flared within me as memories of the war came back: if it wasn't for these Alacryans, my father and so many others wouldn't have died.

My eyes narrowed as any remaining shred of mercy I had dissipated. I turned away, ignoring his screams of pain and anger as he succumbed to his bloody end.

I cast even the thought of him aside as I continued my rampage, like a deadly storm leaving behind only corpses. The aether within each monster was scarce, but enough for me to discreetly absorb and sustain myself. Despite the situation I was in, surrounded by both monsters and Alacryans, I blurred out everything except for the enemies within my range.

It was as if I was fighting alone against the army of beasts approaching the Wall all over again. Except, this time, I didn't have elemental magic to help me.

It didn't matter though. At this point, my physical prowess had exceeded the capabilities of my human body, despite my abated speed. The few injuries that I did receive from the monsters regenerated long before I needed to worry about them.

The monsters must've had some level of intelligence because the packs began avoiding me. The thought of running away crossed my mind. I had no allies here—only the Alacryans that I had been fighting against. Who knew what these people would try to do if they discovered my real identity?

Before I could make up my mind, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, the three Alacryans who I had run into when I first woke up in this dungeon. They had become separated from the rest of the Alacryans and were surrounded by over a hundred monsters.

Perhaps due to the compassion the woman had shown me, I kept one eye on them as I fought. I couldn't help but be curious about them, powerful as they seemed to be.

Taegen, the crimson-haired mace wielder, fought more like a beast than a trained warrior—smashing, punching, kicking and throwing the beasts despite the injuries that he had sustained from the extended battle. The swordsman was more dignified, handling his mana-clad longsword with deft slices and stabs, his feet always moving, red claws cutting the air all around him but rarely landing a blow.

The woman that Taegen had referred to as Lady Caera was positioned in between the two warriors, who were obviously protecting her. She wielded a thin curved sword that was nearly as long as she was tall, with a blade the same color as her ruby eyes. As she sliced through monster after monster, I realized that her movements reminded me of... myself. They were sharp, efficient, and deadly without losing an inch of grace.

Even without her two protectors, she was able to hold her own against the waves of beasts that continued to assault them. A shimmering white aura surrounded her entire body as her movements blurred, drawing arcs with the blood of her enemies.

However, it wasn't hard to see that they were barely holding on. They were clearly running out of mana and their bodies were fatigued and injured.

'Despite the sight for sore eyes that is fair Lady Caera, I think it'd be a good idea to leave right about now,' Regis commented.

Yeah, I agreed, my eyes still glued to the three of them.

As I was about to turn away, however, Caera misstepped, tripping over a corpse and giving the wave of monsters a chance to pile on top of her like starving hyenas.

"No!" Taegen roared, pushing and throwing aside the horde of monsters practically climbing on top of him in an effort to reach her.

The other guy was in no better shape, unable to do more than to keep the monsters on his side from joining those already trying to devour the girl.

'Uh, Arthur? What the hell are you doing?'

I ignored my companion, willing aether through my legs and dashing as fast as my body would let me. My dagger blurred around me, cutting down every monster that stood in my way as I sprinted toward her.

Her words as I played dead in the sanctuary where I had woken up echoed in my head: "Have some pity on her, Taegen."

If she hadn't said those words—if she had heeded Taegen's prudent warning—I wouldn't be here now.

Afraid that I'd be too late, I took a risk that I normally wouldn't. Releasing aether throughout my body, I released my aetheric intent.

As the translucent aura surged around me, making the very air grow heavy, the demonic monsters reacted. Their pale, spiny bodies stiffened from the sudden pressure, and some of the closest ones collapsed unconscious.

Clearing off the monsters that had piled on top of Caera, I found her lying on the ground, bleeding and unconscious.

Without thinking, I bent down, leaning my ear over her face to try and hear her breathing.

'Wow. She's even prettier up close,' Regis said with a whistle.

Regis's voice brought me back to reality and I jerked away.

They were my enemies, the ones responsible for killing so many of my people. So why was I helping them? Why was I relieved that this girl was still alive?

"Step away from her," said a growling voice from behind me.

I stood up calmly, dusting my pants. "When she wakes up, tell her that we're even now."

"Even? Who do you think—"

I turned around to face the girl's two protectors, looking at each of them with a cold gaze.

"You're the girl that we saw half-dead in one of the sanctuaries," the brown-haired swordsman said with mild surprise.

The mace-wielder beside him, however, didn't react as calmly as his companion. He rushed forward with explosive speed, and his lightning-clad mace swung straight at my face.

Stepping forward, I dipped just underneath the path of his weapon and struck below his ribs, right at his liver, with all of my aether concentrated on my fist.

My counterattack didn't connect, though. In that split second, he had managed to bring his other hand up to block my strike.

Still, the force of my attack sent the crimson-haired warrior skidding back, a cloud of dust billowing up from his heels scraping across the rough ground. His expression turned from anger to surprise as he looked down at his hand, now a bloody mess from blocking my attack.

"I'm a guy," I corrected, shaking my throbbing hand. Even with all of my aether strengthening and protecting my hand, it still felt like I had punched a wall of diamond.

Taegen lifted his mace once more, his red face twisted in rage, but his sword-wielding companion held up an arm.

"My apologies for his crude behavior... and thank you for saving her," the swordsman said. As he lowered his head, I noticed his eyes linger over the teal cloak draped over my shoulders as if it was familiar to him.

At that moment, the sky suddenly changed. The once blood-stained sky cleared, becoming in an instant a beautiful expanse of blue, but something was missing. I scanned the horizon, briefly confused.

It was the giant red orb that I had mistaken for a sun. It was gone and so was the pillar holding it up.

"Finally!" someone cried in the distance.

I couldn't quite grasp what was going on, but the hundreds of corpses that had littered the desolate ground were gone along with the red sky.

The swordsman let out a sigh as he sheathed his longsword. "It looks like this wave has finally come to an end."

"This wave?" I asked. "Does that mean there's more?"

Going down on one knee, he handed the girl's sword to Taegen before gently picking her up. "Until we can get close enough to destroy the power source, these waves will continue."

"Power source?"

"That giant red moon that you saw in the sky," he explained.

"Apologies for the questions, but this is the last one," I said, surveying the mages setting up camp. "Why are there so many"—I caught myself about to say "Alacryans" and paused—"people here?"

The swordsman looked at me with a curious expression. "Why? Have you never come across a convergence zone on any of your ascents?"

My mind spun as I tried to make heads or tails out of his question before answering vaguely. "This is my first ascent."

The swordsman's eyes narrowed as he studied me. "Even if it is your first, thorough research is always done unless you're seeking death. And with your strength, it seems more plausible that you've had formal schooling. Where are you from?"

'Say you're from the outskirts of Vechor!' Regis insisted.

"I'm from the outskirts of Vechor," I said quickly.

"Then a talent such as you would've been reported to the capital. Unless coming back alive from your first ascent is your rite of passage," he said as if thinking aloud rather than directly talking to me. "Regardless. I must tend to Lady Caera before the next wave begins. I will relay your message to her."

The swordsman walked away with the crimson-haired warrior following close behind. A soft white aura enveloped his hand, spreading over Caera's wounds and stopping the bleeding.

After a few steps, the swordsman, still holding the girl, stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "It'll be about twelve hours before the next wave comes. It'd be best for you to rest a bit before moving forward with the rest of us."

I frowned. "Together?"

"You can go off on your own to see if you fare better. Several have. The fact that the red moon still rises means that they have all died." When I looked unsure, he added, "Destroying that is the only way out."

I watched as the swordsman walked off before thinking about what to do next.

Hey, how did you know the name of a city in Alacrya? I asked Regis.

'Not a city, but a dominion, which is another word for kingdom. And it's because of Uto's will. I don't know everything he does, but I do know some basic knowledge.'

And you never thought to tell me this?

'The knowledge I have hasn't been very applicable while fighting beasts,' Regis replied with a mental shrug.

Though I was annoyed to learn I'd had a fount of knowledge floating around behind me the entire time we'd been in the dungeon, I let it go. If it wasn't for Regis, the swordsman would've been a lot more suspicious than he already was.

I let out a sigh, rubbing my temples. Now wasn't the time to fight with friends. Through the short and rather tense conversation with the swordsman, it seemed that our suspicions were correct.

I was no longer anywhere near Dicathen.

The dungeon I had wound up in was somewhere under the very continent that I had been at war with.

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Surveying the battlefield, I watched to see what the rest of the Alacryans would do.

My gaze came to rest on a black-haired man in thin leather armor highlighted with greaves and bracers made out of a copper-colored metal. He was kneeling beside the corpse of the warrior who I had let die.

I had expected some sort of mock burial or at least a blanket thrown over the body, but instead, the black-haired warrior began rummaging through his stuff, looting every piece of equipment that hadn't been devoured or ripped up by the demonic monsters.

Even though I had been the one to let him die, I was repulsed by his *people's* behavior.

Shaking my head, I walked away, wanting to keep some distance between me and the Alacryans.

There were no hills, rocks, or any sort of natural formations in the extensive plains, so I just found a spot far enough away that I could still keep an eye on the Alacryans. I sat on the hard, uneven ground, anxiously twiddling a dried weed that tenaciously clung to the ground.

My eyes wandered around the six separate camps that were quickly going up.

Collapsible tents had been assembled and fires had been lit. One group already had a thick chunk of raw meat hanging over their fire, filling the air with the sweet and smoky aroma of meat mingled with heavy spices.

I was able to survive by absorbing aether, and I hadn't thought much about food since finding myself in the dungeon, being focused solely on surviving and growing stronger, but it was at that moment I was reminded of the wonders of food.

'Never thought I'd see a picnic down here. Wait, are you drooling?' Regis scoffed.

"Wha—no!" I exclaimed, wiping my chin and ignoring Regis's cackling.

It was only when a few of the Alacryans looked at me that I realized I had just spoken aloud.

Clearing my throat, I closed my eyes and began cycling aether throughout my body. I didn't need to eat and barely needed any sleep, so I might as well get some training done. Without the aid of aetheric materials like crystals or monster corpses, I couldn't utilize the three-step process I'd invented for

training my aether passages, so I opted for just subtle channeling of aether throughout specific parts of my body to slowly carve out more aether passages.

I wasn't worried about someone sneaking up on me. When Regis was inside me, he could see through my body to the outside world like "a slightly tinted glass container," as he put it. While it was a bit disturbing to think about first, I had long since grown used to it. Honestly, it was comforting to know that I had another pair of eyes capable of seeing behind me, even though most times I didn't need it.

'Someone's coming.'

I turned toward the sound of the obviously unmasked footsteps that were drawing closer.

Just a few yards away, a young woman with light brown hair that sat just above her shoulders was walking calmly toward me. Her thin frame was covered by a black mage's robe that she had left purposely untied. Underneath, she wore a black leather corset and very tight leather shorts. All in all, the outfit didn't leave much to the imagination, and I couldn't imagine why she wore such clothes into battle. Then I noticed the many eyes following her steady walk across the battlefield.

In each hand she carried a plate of flame-grilled meat and vegetables, still steaming.

"I come in peace," she said, holding up the plates.

'I like her already, Arthur,' Regis remarked with a sigh.

Holding in the urge to roll my eyes, I remained silent, keeping my guard up.

"I know you set yourself all the way over here for a reason, but I just wanted to express my gratitude," she continued, shooting me a shy smile. "If it wasn't for you killing so many carallians, I'm not sure if my team and I would've made it through."

I frowned, mentally linking the term carallians to those infant-headed demonic fiends. "I appreciate the gesture, but it's not necessary."

"I insist." The girl bent down to put the plates on the ground, then tucked her fallen bangs back behind her ear while she held my gaze. "My name is Daria Lehndert, by the way. If you're looking for a team, we have an extra simulet, and strong Strikers are always welcome... especially ones that are handsome."

'Oh man... the inner Uto in me is having some very naughty thoughts,' Regis muttered.

Do you know what a simulet is? I asked.

'The inner Uto is too busy thinking of other things to care what a simulet is.'

Get your mind out of the gutter, I snapped.

Regis let out a sigh. 'I think it's an artifact of some kind used by lessers. That's all I can muster up from Uto's knowledge bank. I don't think he particularly cared for what small things like these were.'

How frustrating. It wasn't like I could ask without arousing suspicion, and I wasn't close enough to any of these Alacryans to have these things come up naturally in conversation.

My eyes lingered on Daria's frame as she ambled back to her camp, trying to remember what sort of spells she had casted and what sort of abilities she had. Her robe covered whatever mark, crest, or emblem she must have had tracing her spine.

If only I was still able to see mana.

The aromatic wisps drifting up from the freshly grilled food must've reached my nostrils because I found myself staring at the two plates of food, one filled with cuts of grilled meat and the other with vegetables and potatoes.

My salivating mouth won the fight against my dignity as I walked over to where Daria had left the plates on the ground.

Screw it. It's not like I can get poisoned or anything, I thought as I stabbed the fork she had so kindly left into a cut of blackened meat before shoving it into my mouth.

Every bite contained pockets of flavor that burst in my mouth, rich and salty and savory. I had to resist the urge to pick the rest of the meat by hand and scarfing it down.

I took another bite alongside some greens, letting the mixture of flavors and textures mingle and harmonize before reluctantly swallowing it down.

My mind must've blanked out soon after because by the time I came to, nearly all of the meat and half of the greens were gone.

'I don't think I've ever seen you so happy,' Regis commented. 'It's kinda scary...'

Embarrassed, I let out a cough before slowly eating the rest.

The next person to come up to me was the warrior who had looted the dead Alacryan. He gave me a somber smile as he approached.

Despite my cautious glare, he sat down a few feet away and asked, "So how many teammates did you lose?"

"None," I replied curtly. "I came here alone."

The man's jaw visibly slackened. "You're a solo ascender?"

I remained silent.

"My name is Trider, by the way," the man said, leaning toward me and extending a hand. "And I guess I'm a quasi-solo ascender now, too, since my teammate died."

I didn't take it, and Trider eventually let his hand fall with an uncomfortable chuckle. "I guess ascending solo makes you a bit cautious, but that's okay. Anyway, I came here to see if you'd like a partner for the rest of this ascent. I'm not sure how far you're trying to go, but I plan on getting out in the next crossroad, so if you want to—"

"I refuse," I cut in.

"What? Oh, are you worried about splitting accolades? If that's the case, I think it'd be fair to separate and keep individually accolades from beasts we kill ourselves and split an even fifty-fifty for beasts we have to kill together."

"No thank you," I answered without missing a beat.

"That's an honorable arrangement," Trider said, a tinge of frustration in his voice.

Annoyed by his insistence, I lashed back with a cold tone. "The word 'honorable' has no meaning to a man who plunders his own teammate's body for equipment."

Trider flinched back, eyes wide in surprise and confusion. "You're... joking, right? Taking valuable equipment back home to the ascender's blood is what Warren would've wanted."

Suddenly, it felt like I had been the one to make a mistake. I tried to recover by shifting the conversation slightly. "That's not what I meant. It just didn't look right to leave his body out in the open to decay or be eaten by those carallians."

"Oh, you must be from Sehz-Clar." Trider chuckled stiffly. "No offense, but notions like that are why people from your dominions are called the soft souths. Everywhere else, leaving soldiers in the place of their death is an honor, especially within the Relictombs."

'My master is such a racist,' Regis teased, feigning disgust.

His joke was a cold splash to my face. I wanted to argue back that I didn't know, but it only seemed to prove the point of my ignorance. How many times as King Grey had I seen tensions between races and cultures tear people apart, always fueled by ignorance as much as it was by rage or indignance?

"I moved to Vechor because of that as well," I lied, trying to make sure my story stayed straight with what I told the swordsman. "But I guess my teachings from Sehz-Clar still linger."

"Really?" Trider looked at me in astonishment. "How were you able to—never mind, I guess an accomplished solo ascender would have no problems being accepted into Vechor." The Alacryan shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe me, which made me nervous. "I'm from Etril so we'd be on the opposite side of the continent once we get out."

"Seems like it," I agreed, even though I had no clue where I would end up once I left this dungeon. *The Relictombs*, I thought, glad to finally have a name for the endless series of tests and puzzles. As much as I didn't care to make small talk with any of these Alacryans, I realized I might be able to use the man's eagerness for conversation to my advantage. "If I can ask you a few questions as well...? Who are those three ascenders over there?"

Trider looked to where I was pointing. "Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing, especially after I saw you talking with the swordsman Striker. I'm not sure who they are, but if you look at the accolades they have, it's obvious they're not your normal ascenders. Especially that red sword the girl wields. Warren and I joined this convergence zone only two days ago, but supposedly, those three have been here for over a week now. It's no wonder that they're in such bad shape."

'Man, this guy talks a lot,' Regis thought, his boredom leaking through our connection.

It works in our favor though, I sent back.

"Anyway, I'll let you get back to your rest. The offer still stands—unless you've already accepted the offer from the Lehndert blood prodigy," he said with a hint of disappointment. "I wouldn't blame you if you did; she's a gifted Caster and pretty to boot."

After Trider walked back to his small camp, I continued training my aether passages for a few more hours. I was drawn out of the exercise by the noises of camps being packed up. The others started getting ready to go as if there was an agreement established beforehand. From what I could see, there was no leader, and only very limited organization among the separate teams, but they all seemed to understand what they needed to do.

I got up as well, wiping away the sweat on my brows with an extra shirt I carried in my bag. It was one of very few possessions I carried with me. When I put it back in the bag, I held Sylvie's stone in my hand for a moment. The cool, smooth surface helped remind me what I was trying to accomplish.

Taegen, Caera, and the swordsman left first, with Daria's group—the only other team of three—soon following after. Daria gave me a knowing stare, clearly expecting me to follow her, and when I didn't, her thin brows furrowed and she whipped her head away.

The only other person to travel by himself was Trider. I nodded to the man in acknowledgement before trailing behind the rest, most of whom travelled in pairs behind the two teams of three.

Our pace was that of a constant sprint as we tried to cover as much ground as possible while keeping our mana—or in my case, aether—usage minimal, preserving energy for when the next wave came. It

might've been possible for me to keep a nonstop pace toward the exit, but for everyone else, the few hours of rest had been crucial if we were to fight another wave.

As we ran in a line toward where the red sun had been, I could feel the stress build amongst the group, like a tea kettle heating to a boil.

When the sky turned red, the Alacryans' tensions culminated into explosions of mana as each one immediately readied for battle.

I decided to keep to myself, not joining either Trider or Daria, but Trider stayed near me when the sky shifted, maybe for protection, or maybe to prove himself to me.

The red sun—supposedly the power source of this zone—hung high above us, but it was closer this time, no farther than a day or two of travel.

Strength flowed through my limbs as aether cycled within me. My eyes scanned our surroundings, expecting to see a horde of monsters charging in from the horizon.

That wasn't the case.

The carallians rose from the ground like the undead rising from their graves, clawing themselves out of the cracked, dense dirt with their red claws all around us. Immediately, spells went off as the ascenders began their preemptive attacks, but I couldn't help but stare at the claws sprouting from the ground.

It wasn't just me.

The other ascenders froze when the first carallian managed to fully surface. Standing over ten feet tall, it was twice the size of the carallians we'd fought in the last wave, and it had an extra pair of arms. For a second, I thought perhaps it was just some kind of general or leader of the enemy force, but as more and more of the beasts ripped free of the earth, I grew certain that the entire enemy army had received a massive power boost. And judging by the stunned look on everyone's faces, it was obvious that this wasn't normal.

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I might not have thought much of the difference in size if it wasn't for the way the ascenders reacted to it. It wasn't just their expressions of shock, it was the way their horrified expressions turned to me as if I was somehow the cause.

Whether they truly thought that this was my fault or not, I wouldn't find out until after the battle. The steroid-infused carallians were popping out of the ground by the dozens, and it didn't seem like they'd stop and wait for us to finish a conversation first.

"Tri-layer Circle Formation!" shouted a clear voice from within the chaos.

The ascenders looked at one another, uncertain. I glanced around from face to face, looking for a cue that would tell me what the hell a Tri-layered Circle Formation was. The rest, however, had hesitation and reluctance written all over their faces.

"Now!" the speaker roared. It was an ascender from Daria's team.

His resolute voice cut through the ascenders, spurring them on to follow his command. Aside from Caera's team, the rest formed a loose, three-ringed circle centered around Daria and another ascender who was holding a golden wand.

Any idea what a Tri-layered Circle Formation is? I asked Regis.

'No clue.'

Going rogue like Caera, Taegen, and the brown-haired swordsman spelled defiance or ignorance, neither of which I wanted to portray at this point. I got into position between Trider and another melee ascender in the outermost ring, deducing that this formation was designed to keep Daria, who I knew was a Caster, and the lanky guy with the crooked nose protected.

The first wave of the aether-beasts crashed into our circle. Many died before they reached us, but many, many more threw themselves at us, intent on our immediate deaths.

I fought beside my enemies, hiding my strength to avoid drawing any more attention to myself. The carallians' strength mirrored their enlarged stature, yet their speed was unimpeded. I could already see the men and women around me struggling to fend off the violent attacks.

Crescents of white arched around me as my dagger flashed with deadly speed and accuracy. With aether augmenting my body, my kicks and strikes made me an impassable storm. I found the dagger to be a perfect weapon for this type of fighting. I swept it side-to-side, cutting down any carallian stupid enough to approach.

The Tri-layered Circle Formation constantly shifted to avoid the accumulation of carallian corpses, and it all seemed like it was going well until the first ascender was killed, opening a hole in the outer ring.

"Garth!" shouted a lean ascender positioned in the middle ring. He wielded a quarterstaff and had a dozen or so orbs of lightning floating around him.

Immediately, the Strikers on either side of the dead ascender seamlessly filled in the gap and we kept fighting. If I hadn't seen the different camps set up for each pair or trio of ascenders, I would've assumed that they were all a part of the same highly-trained unit by how well they worked together.

My attention then shifted to the inner circle of our formation. Despite my initial bias against Daria because of her coy attitude, it seemed her skills were top-notch. Her main arsenal consisted of conjuring spears of ice and explosions of wind around her enemies.

The Caster beside her only used fire magic, but he had a wider variety of spells under his belt, from hurling spheres of fire to waves of scorching heat capable of melting the carallians' tough hides. Both were precise with the strength and accuracy of their skills, careful of the ring of defensive ascenders focused on protecting them as well as the outer ring that fought to kill as many carallians as we could.

Spotting a carallian approaching, I kicked a corpse on the ground, sending it flying at my target while shoulder tossing another carallian that tried to pierce the outer ring to my right. I gripped the dagger hooked to my finger and drove it through the struggling monster's eye before absorbing the remaining aether from its corpse.

Despite the added strength, speed, limbs, and spikes that protruded out of the carallians' bodies, I actually found fighting them easier, because they carried more aether.

Suddenly, a pained cry drew my attention. Trider was pressing down on his side, blood seeping through between his fingers. Simultaneously, his free arm was blocking the jaws of a carallian from biting down on him.

Damn it.

Breaking rank, I dashed to Trider, slashing the back of the carallian's knees and stabbing the side of its throat in a single whirling motion.

Trider looked at me with a dazed and puzzled expression. "Why—"

"We can't have another gap in the outer circle," I snapped. "Stay alive."

He was an Alacryan. Why did I care whether he lived or died?

I tried reasoning with myself that it would be hard for me to get through this convergence zone without their help, but I knew that wasn't true.

Perhaps I thought that the more I interacted with these ascenders, the more I could learn about the Relictombs and about Alacrya itself. If I really did wind up in Alacrya after escaping the Relictombs, it made sense not to draw attention to myself in the heart of a continent I was at war with.

In the back of my mind, though, I knew I was starting to regard Trider and the rest of them less as my enemies and more as just people, people like the adventurers I'd fought beside in my youth, people that just wanted to get through this ordeal, the same as me.

I berated myself, unwilling to admit that I felt anything but animosity towards these Alacryans. I wanted to hate them—no, I needed to hate them. How else was I supposed to go back to Dicathen and fight a war against their brothers and sisters?

'You know, princess, even if you don't necessarily need them, getting their help and working together wouldn't hurt.'

You're wrong, I thought as I plunged my knife just below the jaw of a carallian. You have my memories of the war, Regis. These people killed my father! And you want me to work together with them? Help them?

I batted away the swipe of a clawed hand, then severed another hand before kicking straight outward, sending the carallian I was fighting tumbling backwards into three more of its kind.

'I know, but you don't need to force yourself to think of these people as your enemies. They're still just—'

"Shut up!" I roared aloud. They are my enemies. And no matter how sentient you are, you're still just a weapon. Remember that.

Regis grew silent, and the anger boiling in the pit of my stomach grew too.

Ignoring the strange looks from the mages around me, I discarded the facade of a warrior struggling to stay alive, venting my growing frustration and fury into the carallians' thin, horrible bodies. I swatted them aside, my rage leaking from me in a palpable aura... and then I fell from anger into the cold detachment I'd mastered in my previous life.

The carallians were simply an obstacle, and my mind set to work solving the problem. I focused on clean, quick movements, making each cut or thrust even more precise, more effortless than the last, honing my technique like one would hone the edge of a blade.

I concentrated on the feeling of cladding myself in aether, feeling the fundamental differences from when I had once done the same with mana.

It was difficult to describe, but aether was denser, yet more pliable and soft. So much so that it required less concentration to envelop my body in aether without it leaking or spreading. I also found that I could coalesce a far greater proportion of aether on specific body parts than I'd been able to with mana.

Yet, the difference in the outcome couldn't be ignored. The power my body received as aether siphoned through my limbs felt as if the strengthened muscles were mine and the protective layer of aether was my own thickened skin. It didn't feel borrowed like when I strengthened myself using mana.

In retrospect, my inability to use elemental magic would've hit me much harder if it hadn't been for my training with Kordri. Being taught to conserve mana, fighting with minimal movements and utmost efficiency while dealing the most possible damage, served me better in my asuran body than it had all throughout the war.

Memories of my time with the bald asura flooded back to me—all the times he had killed me in the soul realm while teaching me how to fight. His movements were fluid yet sharp, and the speed at which he was able to move was chilling. Add to that his King's Intent, which could literally squeeze the air out of a silver core mage's lungs, and it was clear why he was respected even amongst the asuras.

Back then, he had taught me how to fight to the utmost limits of a human, but what about now? Could I, with my new body and aether to strengthen it, reach even Kordri's levels? Could I surpass him?

My mind stayed sharp as these and other thoughts raced through my mind, not caring how much time had passed. I remained aware, yet I blocked out everything but the enemy. That was how I had been fighting since waking up in this hellhole: eat or be eaten. With my mana core shattered, I fought and trained on a daily basis not to be the latter.

The words I had spat at Regis threatened to resurface, but I buried them by concentrating on the sounds of the battle—the crunch and grinding of rocks as they stomped the ground, the subtle whistle of the wind as the carallians swung their gangly limbs.

Ducking below the snapping jaws of a carallian, I knocked it off its feet with a low, sweeping kick. As it scrambled to get back up, I refocused on another carallian barreling toward me.

Splitting aether between my back leg and the point of my elbow, I burst forward, pushing my supporting palm up against my fist to reinforce my strike. The sharp bones that protected the carallian's torso shattered upon impact, and my elbow dug into his midsection like a spearhead.

The carallian crumpled to the ground, and its spine snapped. As it convulsed on the ground, I shifted my head to the left to avoid the carallian I had tripped. Two well-placed thrusts later and both carallians had been added to my pile of corpses.

My eyes swept across the battlefield, looking for the next target for my blade. It was only when I couldn't find any more enemies that I finally noticed the sky had turned back to blue and the corpses strewn around me were slowly fading.

There were several ascender corpses mixed in with the fading carallians. Five ascenders had apparently died in this wave, a number that didn't mean much to me, but I was sure the teammates of the deceased didn't feel the same way.

Daria and Trider were two of the seven left standing. Daria was in fairly good shape aside from a few cuts on her legs and tears in her robe. Trider was cradling the stub of his bleeding left arm, face pale, his breath coming in heavy, panting gasps. Both wore odd expressions that I couldn't quite make out.

Was it fear? Anger? Something in between?

It didn't matter. These people were just as much my enemies as the carallians were. Even if they decided to attack me, I was confident I could defeat them easily.

Regis remained quiet. I kept my body clad in aether, and my grip tight around my dagger.

Despite my distracted state, decades of fighting and honing my instincts warned me as I felt, rather than saw, someone rapidly draw near.

Spinning on my heels, I grabbed my surprise attacker's wrist, pressing the tip of my blade against their throat.

I paused, surprise forcing me to hold my attack, and in that split second the hand holding my white dagger was in turn grabbed by a huge fist and I found myself face to face not only with Caera—whose wrist I had in my grasp—but also Taegen, who was attempting to restrain me, and the swordsman, whose humming blade was aimed at my exposed side.

"What is this?" I snarled, the anger I'd left behind hours ago boiling back up to the surface.

"Unhand her," Taegen ordered as he attempted to crush my hand within his own.

"She attacked me." Though I responded in a level tone, the aetheric pressure I emitted affected even Caera's protectors, and their expressions grew strained.

"I thought I was imagining things," Caera muttered. Her quivering red eyes were fixed on the white blade just a few inches away from her throat.

"But I was right..." Caera's eyes locked onto mine, her expression harsh. "Why do you have my brother's blade?"

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Caera regarded me with bloodshot eyes, and her voice was dangerously quiet as she said, "I asked you why you're wielding my brother's dagger."

"Answer, Effeminate One," Taegen commanded in his harsh growl.

I thought I heard Regis chortle in my head, but it could've easily been one of the other ascenders around us. Either way, I was growing impatient with the situation. Despite the temporary reprieve I had felt upon seeing other people in these desolate, beast-filled ruins, being with them had quickly become more of a hassle than a comfort.

"Would you like to test whether your blade is faster than mine, swordsman?" I challenged, turning to meet the brown-haired ascender's eye.

I felt Taegen trying to pry my hand away from Caera's throat, but I held firm, keeping my unflinching attention on the swordsman.

After a beat of hesitation, he dropped his sword and held up his hands. Taegen released his grip and reluctantly stepped back. Despite her position, Caera's gaze never faltered, as if she still expected an answer.

"I found it on one of the zones I encountered before arriving here," I answered.

Caer's face was a motley of expressions; she somehow seemed afraid, happy, crestfallen, and hopeful all at the same time. She opened her mouth to speak but hesitated, almost afraid at what she might hear.

My gaze flickered between Taegen and the swordsman. Their eyes told me they were still looking for an opportunity to strike, but I didn't mind. It was obvious that both were prioritizing Lady Caera's safety over anything else.

Letting out a breath, I spoke. "I'll tell you what I encountered in the zone I found this dagger in, and I'm even willing to part with it..." I said, letting the words linger, "but I want something in exchange."

Her response was rushed, the words tumbling out of her desperately. "We don't carry money in the Relictombs, and we've yet to find any accolades, but once we leave, if you come—"

I shook my head, cutting her off. "I don't need money or accolades. I just want some answers."

Caera's narrowed eyes peered into me, as if she were trying to see my intent shining back out of my own eyes, but in the end she only nodded. I released my grip on her wrist, sheathed the dagger, and gestured away from the other ascenders.

The four of us walked away out of earshot of the others, who looked on warily. Perhaps they worried Caera's team and I would kill each other, or maybe they were hoping for it. I still hadn't had the chance to clarify why this wave of carallians had been so much stronger.

"Shall we start?" I asked, calmly regarding the trio.

I could see Taegen's body bristle, the striations in his muscles literally stiffening as he prepared to defend Caera against anything I might throw at them.

Letting out a sigh, I took a seat on the hard ground.

The swordsman's eyes narrowed as he studied me. "You could've kept Lady Caera as hostage and simply forced answers from us. What keeps us from simply killing you now and taking what rightfully belongs to Highblood Denoir?"

"Arian, enough. We both have things we want from each other," Caera said curtly.

If Alacryans referred to family as "blood," then did "highblood" mean that Caera was from nobility? It made sense considering that she had two highly capable guards more than willing to risk their lives for her.

"The three of you seem too noble to do something as backhanded as that, unless Lady Caera was in danger," I said, giving them a knowing look. "Besides, I can assure you that killing me will by no means be 'simple'."

"We'll answer your questions to the best of our ability," Caera assured me, lowering herself to the ground as well. Even apart from her proper and refined swordplay, her movement and behavior made clear the fact that she had a very strict and proper training on behavior and etiquette.

I paused to think for a moment before speaking again. "I'll ask a series of questions, some that I already know and some that I genuinely want answers for. You will not know which is which. You can't ask why I am asking the questions I ask, and if you don't know the answer, simply say so."

Taegen dropped to the ground with both his arms and legs crossed and glared at me. "Make haste, Effeminate One. We're wasting our resting period before the next wave."

This time, I definitely heard Regis chortle.

"How many more zones do we have to cross until we're able to leave the Relictombs?" I asked.

"The number and difficulty varies depending on the ascender, since the Relictombs adjust to the abilities of the ascenders within their respective zones," Caera answered immediately.

"Then how are parties able to travel through zones together if everything changes depending on the individual ascender?"

"Simulets," answered the swordsman simply.

I let out a sigh. "How do 'simulets' work?"

Caera took over again. "If I recall correctly, the Caster from the Lehndert blood offered one to you. Team members each hold synched simulets, which ensure that any gates they travel through lead to the same zone, although the difficulty is still determined by the strength of the ascenders present."

I nodded before asking the next question. "Why do ascenders come into the Relictombs?"

Taegen shot up angrily. "Even unads know th—"

"Taegen." Caera's voice was sharp, and it was enough to make the large, muscle-clad mage promptly sit back on the ground with the rest of us.

"Only the strongest mages given the title of 'ascender' by your dominion's Scythe are allowed to explore the Relictombs. In turn, ascenders are able to gain treasures that would never be found on the surface called accolades. Furthermore, if a relic of the ancient mages is found and given to your Scythe, it is said that the ascender will be taken to the mighty Sovereigns themselves and be bestowed a powerful regalia," Caera explained.

"Right, the Vritra," I affirmed.

Caera's eyes narrowed into a sharp glare, but she didn't respond to my words.

I recalled some of my encounters with the Alacryans back in Dicathen. I couldn't only ask these basic questions. Thinking back to the noble Alacryan that I had questioned in the Forest of Elshire, I asked, "How influential is the—the Vale blood?"

Arian's gaze turned inquisitive as he answered. "Blood Vale is one of the few military bloods in Etril, so compared to the other named bloods in a dominion known mostly for its farms, they're influential. But in terms of influence in Alacrya as a whole? They're nowhere near any of the true highbloods."

The sudden mention of a specific family must've thrown them off, because they began answering my following questions more seriously.

Despite the conditions I had set for our conversation, I was limited in what I could ask in terms of learning more about Alacrya itself. Instead, I tried to learn more about the magic system that Agrona had

devised. These questions didn't seem to raise any flags to the three since I had some basic knowledge from my questioning of Steffen Vale.

Interestingly enough, their "mark-based system", as I so casually dubbed it, was largely a mystery to the Alacryans as well. Because of the awakening process that all children went through in order to become mages, the Alacryans thought that magic was given to them by the Vritra themselves, or "the Sovereigns" as they called them. Thus, non-mages—or "unads", which seemed to be the widely-accepted slang for unadorned—were widely discriminated against since they weren't *blessed* by the Sovereigns.

Just like Caera was afraid of hearing what happened to her brother, I was afraid to hear the answer to my next question.

Taking a steadying breath, I asked, "What was the last news you heard about the war going on with Dicathen and... how much time has passed since then?"

"The latest news, which was delivered to my estate right before we prepared for our ascent, was that Scythe Cadell had managed to conquer the Dicathians' sacred flying castle," Caera said with a hint of pride. "Taking into account the time flow within the Relictombs, I'd say it has been almost two weeks since then."

Almost two weeks. It hadn't been more than a week at most since I fought against Cadell and Nico. I had hoped for time to work differently within the Relictombs due to the abundance of aether, but I couldn't help but feel relieved knowing that, despite everything I had gone through, not much time had passed.

"Do you worry for a member of your blood out in the war, Effeminate One?" Taegen asked. "It is a shame that an ascender's exemption from the war does not extend to their blood, but know that it is an honor for them to serve."

I was a little taken aback by the sincerity of Taegen's words, and responded only with a nod.

Silence lingered for a time before I eventually stood up.

"Last questions," I said. "How far is the power source from here?"

"It's about another day's march at the pace we've been moving, and that's not including the time it'd take to fight another wave or two." Arian frowned. "You're not planning on going off alone, are you?"

"I've wasted enough time in this zone," I replied curtly.

"The effect your presence has in this zone speaks for your strength, Effeminate One," Taegen said as he stood up. "But even if you manage to survive the next wave by yourself, it'll be impossible for you to fight the guardian protecting the power source alone."

I tilted my head. "You know, the more you speak, the more I realize you're not the meathead I thought you were."

A vein in Taegen's forehead pulsed at my comment, but Arian responded with a stifled laugh. "Taegen indeed gets that a lot. It doesn't help that his temper is shorter than a husked boarling with its behind on fire."

Taegen stomped down on his comrade's foot, but Arian casually dodged the attempt.

Turning to Caera, I tossed her the dagger. "A deal is a deal."

Her lips curled up into a smile for a split second as she squeezed the dagger tightly. "What about my brother?"

"I didn't see your brother in that zone. However, there was a beast in there both large and powerful enough to eat ascenders whole, and judging by the pile of human-sized equipment left in its layer where I found that dagger and this cloak..." I let the sentence trail off, not having the heart to finish.

Her expression remained calm despite the news, but it was easy to see the emotions she was holding back. Her trembling hands gripped her brother's dagger with such strength that her pale fingers turned several shades lighter.

I stared out into the distance where the power source would be once the sky turned red again. As I prepared to leave, however, someone shouted at me, forcing me to pause.

Daria was running toward us with most of the other ascenders behind her. It was a nervous looking group that approached us.

"I knew it. You're thinking about going off on your own," she huffed, her thin brows furrowed together.

"Is that a problem?" I asked, hiding my annoyance.

"Don't you have any sense of responsibility? Because of your presence, the carallians have been augmented to such a degree that five of us died in that last wave! That's unprecedented in convergence zones!"

Caera stood up, storing the dagger in her dimension ring. "Even if he leaves, a part of the wave will follow after him, and if he dies the carallians will revert back to their previous form. Where exactly does the problem lie?"

"H-he should take responsibility and stay here to protect the rest of us until we get out of this zone!" Daria sputtered, her cheeks red with anger.

A few of the other ascenders nodded in agreement. Trider, I noticed, was just idly kicking a loose clump of dirt on the ground, pointedly not meeting anyone's eye.

"Don't you mean, he should stay here and protect you?" Caera asked scathingly.

Daria scoffed, then turned her cold gaze to me. "So this is why you didn't accept my offer. I didn't realize you were a dog of the Denoirs."

"Careful, Miss Lehndert," Arian said, standing up and patting the dust off his matte armor. "While exploiting your blood name is frowned upon in the Relictombs, everyone here should know that Lady Caera doesn't take lightly to insults, and the Denoirs are rather known for settling scores."

"Enough. I plan to reach the power source before the next wave begins." The dirt beneath my feet lifted from the ground in little eddies as I cycled aether through my limbs. The ascenders blanched and stepped away from me as they felt the pressure I was exuding. "Anyone who can keep up is free to follow me."

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"Wait!" Daria's honeyed voice called out as I turned to leave.

I looked back over my shoulder, locking eyes with the willful young Caster. "What is it?"

Daria flinched under my gaze but steeled herself and glared back at me. "Assuming that everyone here follows you, by the time we reach the power source, most of our mana will be too drained to face the guardian."

"So?"

"You don't seriously think you're strong enough to take on the guardian by yourself after sprinting a marathon, do you?" Daria snapped, stomping toward me. "You're going to need all of our help. Hell, even if you see all of us as dead weight, at least *you'll* need to be at full strength, right?"

I frowned down at her, and she glared up at me. "Just get to your point."

Her brows furrowed and she opened her mouth to talk back but stopped herself. "To be honest, I have no confidence in being able to get past whatever monstrosity is waiting for us after fighting against the last carallian wave."

Daria turned around to face the rest of the ascenders listening in.

"Therefore, I have a proposition, but I'll only do it if he accepts," she said, pointing back at me with a thumb over her shoulder. "I have a way that would allow all of us to travel while the burden of mana usage falls solely on Orid and me. We will get everyone there in top condition at the fastest possible speed, but our safety must be prioritized."

Immediately, a few ascenders started protesting. I let them bicker amongst themselves for a minute before I finally spoke up.

"I agree."

Judging by how many of the ascenders were willing to tail behind me, my usage of aether would be limited. And with my only weapon gone, it was safe to assume that this final stretch would be more tedious than the waves I'd already faced. The chance to travel the remaining distance without burning through my aether was worth staying with the group just a little bit longer.

Daria's large eyes glimmered as she beamed at me. "Great!"

I honestly didn't know what to expect. Daria seemed like a capable mage, and even if Alacryan mages weren't very flexible with their elemental manipulation, I had hoped for something... a little more impressive than what we got.

After making a big show of getting ready, Daria conjured what amounted to a large sled made entirely of ice with a tarp hanging off a tent pole as a makeshift mast.

"You expect all of us to ride this?" Taegen asked, towering over the ice sled.

"I've condensed the ice several times, so it's sturdier than it looks. I got the overall structural shape from the ocean riders, and I've tested it several times myself." Daria stood on top of the ice vehicle and glared out at the rest of us, looking for all the world like some buxom pirate captain standing at the prow of her ship.

Still unsure, I placed my hand on the surface of the ice and pushed down with enough force to make sure it could also hold my weight.

"Are you seriously questioning the integrity of my spell right now?" Daria threw back her mage robe, letting the luxurious cloth slide down her exposed back to reveal a series of tattoos. "I have four crests and two emblems, you jerk!"

I climbed onto the panel of ice, turning my back to her. "We've wasted a lot of time. Let's move."

One by one, the other six ascenders boarded the large sled until we were all squeezed together and nervously holding onto the railings as we waited for the sled to crack in half beneath our feet.

I was skeptical that Daria would be able to get the sled moving, but with an updraft taking some of the weight off of the sled and a sustained gust of wind directed at the mast, the eight of us began sailing over the barren plains.

Cool winds brushed past my cheeks as we began accelerating. Despite the weight of eight fully grown adults—nine, because Taegen was large enough to count as two people—the oversized sled never faltered or showed signs of breaking. I couldn't help but be impressed as Daria continuously managed the three spells in order to keep the sled moving. Her remaining teammate, Orid, used his earth magic to steer us and smooth particularly uneven parts of the ground that could potentially damage the sled, further enhancing our speed.

After about thirty minutes of travelling, the rest of the ascenders had grown confident enough in Daria that they began to relax and actually enjoy the ride.

I was sitting in the back of the sled, leaning forward against the rear railing, simply staring out at the vast expanse of unimpressive dirt and the clear blue sky. I had long since accepted the fact that I was looking up at a sky within an ancient ruin that was supposed to be deep underground.

I'd known for a long time—since visiting Epheotus—that aether was capable of many things that mana was not, but I hadn't truly understood what was achievable using its godly power. How could I have, though, when even the asuras didn't fully grasp its nature?

Which is why they destroyed the ancient mages who built this very dungeon, I thought, suddenly melancholy.

Eager to turn my thoughts to something less dark, I surreptitiously inspected the others. Aside from Daria and Orid, both of whom were concentrating on keeping us moving, the rest of the ascenders were quiet and distant. Caera's group was the only team left unscathed, and the weight of loss was heavy among the remaining ascenders.

The ascender named Keir, who wielded a quarterstaff and controlled motes of electricity to both defend and attack, was polishing his weapon. The unassuming looking man used a thin cloth to dig out the grime that had accumulated in the engravings of his wooden staff, which he handled with care.

Trider had his eyes closed, leaning back against the railing with his arms folded and legs crossed.

Arian was meditating, and, while I wasn't able to feel mana anymore, the pressure he gave off was obvious. Next to him, Caera was staring at the white dagger in her hand, still in its sheath. Her expression was difficult to read; she had an air of indifference as she studied the weapon that I was sure hid her real feelings.

Suddenly, a tear rolled down her cheek. She immediately wiped it with the back of her hand before suspiciously glancing around to see if anyone had seen.

Her eyes locked with mine, and, for a split second, I saw a flash of embarrassment pass over her face as she quickly turned away.

Clearing my throat, I turned around to face away from the group, resting my arms on the cold railing. I tried to find something else to occupy my mind, not willing to address the issue needling away at me, but that didn't last long.

Regis, I thought. *Are you still not talking to me?*

I waited for a response, feeling very strange. It wasn't every day you thought something in your head and then waited expectantly for an answer. When none came, I let out a sigh and continued to relay my thoughts, hoping that Regis was listening.

As if I was reading out of my own diary, I conveyed to Regis that, despite having more than an entire lifetime, my ability to properly express and communicate my emotions was passable on a good day. In battle, when it was just me and my sword, that didn't matter. I didn't have to communicate or convey my thoughts in a tactful manner. No, my swords were weapons, tools that I could utilize and take full advantage of in order to win a battle.

However, Regis was a weapon with sentience and an even bigger personality than I had. He was less a weapon and more a companion, one I truly relied on for some semblance of human interaction. I had tried to shove him in that cookie-cutter role that I had made for weapons, but that quickly failed as he became more and more of a friend to me... like Sylvie had been.

Regis's timing alone had made it hard for me not to compare him to Sylvie, who had sacrificed herself to keep me from destroying myself. A large part of why I wanted to get stronger was because I still hoped to bring Sylvie back from her comatose state, but with every dumb conversation and meaningless quibble with Regis I had, I grew more scared that she might feel replaced when she came back.

But you know what I'm afraid of the most? Even though I have the body of an asura and the ability to manipulate aether in a way that not even the Indrath Clan can, I'm afraid of growing close to you.

I paused, realizing that I had subconsciously placed my hand on the pouch carrying Sylvie's stone.

I've lost a lot, Regis. Adam, my father, Sylvie, and even Dawn's Ballad. My mother, sister, Tessia, Virion, they're all back in Dicathen and I have no clue how to return to them. Worst case, the Alacryans have found the bunker and they've all been captured... or killed. Not to be overdramatic, but it feels like the closer I become with someone, the harder it is for me to protect them.

I cracked a wry smile.

I'm beginning to remember more and more why I became the person who I was back in my previous life... and it's why I needed to just think of you as a weapon, Regis. Because it's easier for me that way, in case I lose you too.

I waited and hoped for a response, but it didn't come.

Instead, my internal monologue was broken by the shifting color of our surroundings. As if the very sky had been marred, crimson seeped out of invisible wounds in the blue and spread from horizon to horizon. The very air seemed thinner, and the tension that blanketed over us felt almost tangible. I could tell this wave was going to be different.

"The wave is here," Taegen said, standing up.

"We're not going to stop, so hold on!" Daria declared, increasing the strength of the wind blowing against the mast.

The sled sped on as the dirt field began to crack and split apart ahead of us. Fortunately, the obsidian structure, which stood even taller than castle watchtowers, was only a few miles away, the shimmering red sphere perched at its peak.

The last few miles, however, were undoubtedly going to be the hardest. Carallians were already emerging by the dozens from the ground ahead, creating a living barrier that blocked our path to the exit.

"Shields, prepare to clear a path for us," Arian barked. "We need to reach the tower before the guardian appears!"

Orid stopped focusing on the path ahead and instead conjured slabs of earth that began rotating around us.

The ride immediately turned rough without Orid's earth mana smoothing the path, but we clung on to the railing, and the sled seemed equal to the beating it was taking.

Keir's staff flashed, and orbs of electricity flew outward from him and began weaving in and out of the earthen shields.

"Let me take over the mast," Trider called out, hobbling toward Daria. "You'll have to maintain the updraft, but you're the only Caster left. Help the Shields."

Daria hesitated, looking over the wounded ascender, then nodded, releasing the bindings of ice anchoring her to the sled.

Sweating and pale, the Caster gave me a knowing glance. I inclined my head in acknowledgement. A deal was a deal.

Trider summoned bracers of wind and got to work. He pushed out with his fists aimed at the mast, keeping up the steady force that was pushing us across the ground.

Daria, free from her most strenuous obligation, called forth bursts of wind powerful enough to knock the enlarged carallians out of the way. The ones that she missed were either pushed aside by the panels of compressed earth or stunned by the orbs of electricity hovering around us.

Something was wrong. My body felt it. Judging by how anxious Taegen looked, his face in a fierce scowl and his gaze darting left and right as if searching for something, I knew I wasn't the only one.

The earth suddenly trembled, causing Keir to lose balance and let go of his spell.

"W-what's going on?" he shouted, trying to scramble back to his feet.

The earth shook once more, even stronger this time, followed by a bloodcurdling roar that reverberated up from the ground and vibrated through the sled so that hairline cracks formed in the bottom.

My hair stood on end and a familiar voice affirmed the very action I was about to take.

'Get out of here, Arthur!' Regis shouted, a wave of fear spreading from my companion into me.

But before I could make a move, the ground heaved and I felt a rush of vertigo as the entire sled rose into the air on a geyser of hard soil.

Keir, who had been trying to get back to his feet, was thrown off of the edge and slammed sideways by one of the panels of earth circling around us.

His body quickly receded from view as he fell off the rising ground, which carried us higher and higher into the red sky.

Another bestial roar resounded through the zone, unmuffled this time and loud enough to make me dizzy. Just ahead, a tower rose even faster and higher than our sled, so large and tall that it eclipsed the majority of the sky.

Then it looked at us. The tower casting its massive shadow over us was, in fact, a long, serpentine neck.

Resting on the top of the neck, which stretched over ten stories high, was the leathery head of a bat with a disproportionately large mouth and two piercing purple eyes, each larger than a carriage and boring down directly at us.

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Despite the initial shock of the colossal monster looming over us, it didn't take long for the ascenders to snap back to reality. Thanks to Regis's warning, I was able to react in time to fully dodge the wide tip of the beast's tail. Everyone else had been too focused on its grotesque face.

Time seemed to slow as I watched the beast's leathery tail snap down, shattering the sled like it was made of glass. Taegen barely reacted in time to push Caera out of the way, only to get crushed alongside Trider underneath the large tail. The shockwave of force generated by the impact sent everyone else tumbling away from the demolished sled.

'Let's go!' Regis urged.

My eyes shifted between Daria and Caera, both unconscious, both falling from the high ledge of earth that rested on the titanic beast's snake-like body.

Regis, get Daria!

A surge of anger, fear, and disgust rose up in me, only to fizzle out an instant later as my companion let out an audible groan in my mind. Despite the situation, a smile crept across my face as I watched Regis leap out of my body, his shadowy wolf form bolting toward the unconscious Daria.

Meanwhile, I released the limiter that I had imposed on myself, bursting forward in a shroud of aether as my eyes tracked across the battlefield, taking stock of the situation.

Daria's teammate, Orid, was nowhere to be seen. A pool of blood spread from underneath the leathery tail. Arian had managed to avoid being completely thrown off by imbedding his glowing sword into the side of the titan's body and hanging on for dear life. He hadn't escaped without injury however: the swordsman's face was smeared with blood, and his free arm hung limply at his side, waving freely in a way that suggested it had been badly broken.

I cleared the distance between me and the falling Caera, her face lost in a curtain of navy hair. I barely managed to grab her ankle as I hung off the cliff of the risen earth, wishing for the dozenth time that my mana core hadn't been broken.

How many more options would I have had if I was able to use mana? I could've flown safely out of harm's way, hell—I could've avoided this fight altogether.

Before I could even pull Caera and myself back up, however, I looked up to see the titan's huge violet eyes glaring down at me. Swirling within its unhinged jaw was a massive sphere of silvery mana aimed straight at us.

My heart pounded against my chest as I considered my options. Could I pull us up and run fast enough to dodge the attack? What would the width of the blast be? Would I be able to dodge it if I let Caera go? Or should I jump down the steep body of the beast onto solid land?

Cursing under my breath, I threw Caera up onto the titan's back and got my feet back under me just as the titan released its breath attack. I hadn't been gentle with the highblooded Alacryan, and she stirred awake from the impact of being thrown. The look she gave me was one of utter confusion when I suddenly scooped her up and slung her over my shoulder.

"W-what is the meaning of—" Her words cut off as a shrill hum vibrated through the air and the surrounding area was bathed in a bright white light.

I looked back to see the mana blast disintegrating everything in its path.

With no time to stop and check on Caera, I sprinted away from the blast, trying to maneuver us out of its path. We passed the shattered sled where Trider's remains lay amidst the wreckage caused by the titan's tail attack, but there was no sign of Taegen.

The destructive beam of pure mana continued to chase after us as I sprinted across the broken surface of the raised ground resting on top of the titan's body. We weren't going to make it. I was quick, but Caera was dead weight, and the blast was too wide and too fast for me to outmaneuver.

"Do something, or I'll have to leave you!" I shouted over my shoulder.

I felt Caera subconsciously tighten her grip around me, but she remained silent as we neared the far end of the rocky platform, the white light growing bright behind us.

"I don't—" The red-eyed ascender let out a scared yelp as I loosened my grip around her, threatening to drop her.

I knew from watching her fight against the carallians that she was hiding something. I was certain that she was suppressing her abilities in much the same way I'd hidden my own, and if she wouldn't go all out to keep herself alive, I wasn't about to sacrifice myself for her.

"Okay!" she relented, her mana-infused nails digging into my skin as she clung on for her life. "Just keep running."

"There's nowhere *to* run!" I retorted, the cliff edge drawing closer. Caera stayed silent, but I felt an ominous power building within her that I hadn't felt before.

With no choice but to trust her, I navigated away from the approaching blast of mana as the diminishing ground became even more unstable. Reaching the far edge of the titan's towering body, I concentrated all my aether into my legs and back and pushed off with all of my strength.

Without wind magic to redirect the air resistance, I could only grit my teeth and endure the thick wall of wind pushing back against our bodies as we sailed through the air.

As the menacing power continued to grow stronger around Caera, who was still slung over my shoulder, I looked back at the guardian. I thought that literally standing on the gigantic beast and seeing it up close would've prepared me for the sight, but I was wrong.

Despite all of the mana beasts I had encountered and fought over the years in Dicathen, it took me several moments to trace the full length of the writhing, snake-like form, and it was difficult to fathom that the creature was one, single entity—my brain just didn't want to believe that there could be something so truly enormous in the world.

The creature was about as tall as the tower holding the power source, but the black edifice looked miniscule in comparison to the overall length and girth of the titan.

From a distance, the colossal monster reminded me of an enormous, coiling dragon. It was just missing the wings. Both its long tail and neck were attached to a leathery torso that could easily be mistaken for a small mountain from up close. Supporting its weight were six legs, each as thick as its neck.

"Caera!" I roared as the shimmering beam passed just below and behind us, but the huge, amethyst pools of the titan's eyes were following our flight, and the beam's trajectory shifted as we began descending; we were going to fall straight through it.

At the height from which we had jumped, I had no confidence in surviving the impact from the fall, let alone the titan's breath attack steadily approaching us.

Twisting my body in midair so I was fully facing the monster, I began concentrating all of my aether into the palm of my right hand. I knew even the beam of pure aether, my most potent attack, wouldn't be enough to counter the titan's mana beam, but I had little choice. Caera remained completely still and silent as she hung over my shoulder.

Just as the two of us were about to be swept into the destructive tidal surge of mana, and just as I was about to release my own attack, Caera wriggled around in my grasp. She hooked one arm around my neck to keep herself stable as she withdrew her curved sword from a dimension ring.

I stopped my attack just in time to witness a flaming black aura wrap over the crimson blade as she swung down.

Her once-red blade extended into a flaming black crescent that cut through the shining white cone of mana, severing it and creating a path just wide enough for us to fall through before the black flame failed

and faded away. Judging by how the path of the monster's attack continued up, I could tell that it would be hard for it to change its direction back downward, giving us a momentary reprieve.

Caera slumped, her left arm still slung around my neck as she put away her sword.

"I won't be able to do that again," she said, her voice barely audible over the rush of wind.

My mind was a jumble of thoughts and questions, but I didn't have the time or wherewithal to puzzle through the nature of those familiar black flames. Instead, my gaze turned to the ground, which was rapidly rushing up to meet us.

Regis, where are you? I asked, unsure if our connection would even let us communicate when Regis wasn't in my body.

Relief flooded through me when I heard his familiar voice sound in my head. 'I got Daria and used the guardian's tail to get down to the ground, but I don't think I can make it to where you are in time!'

My plan had been to use Gauntlet Form to mitigate some of the impact from the fall, but that only worked if Regis could reach me.

There was no other choice but to use the aetheric beam. While using it to counter the monster's breath attack had been nothing more than a fool's hope, using the force of the blast could counter the speed of our fall enough so that the impact wouldn't kill us both.

Of course, by using the aether-beam, I also risked draining all of my aether reserves and dying if Regis wasn't close enough to get here in time...

Pushing aside the doubt clouding my mind, I focused on the aether art that I was about to cast.

It seemed like Caera had caught on that I was about to do something, and she clung to me even tighter.

My aether reserves had increased since my first two attempts at the aetheric beam, but because of the repercussions it caused and being in such a dangerous zone, I'd had no opportunity to test the attack again.

Letting out a deep breath that got lost in the wind, I concentrated a majority of my aether into fortifying my arms, shoulders, chest, and spine so that my body could withstand the burden.

The purple, rune-like marks extended out from my palms and spread through my fingers.

The hardest part of the maneuver was in the timing. If I fired the blast too early, we would pick up speed again before slamming into the ground and likely dying. If I fired too late, the blast wouldn't dampen our speed enough before we slammed into the broken surface, likely dying. So I aimed both my palms down at the ground, shoulder-width apart, and waited.

Caera's fingernails clawed into my shoulder as she watched the ground rise up, but I held back my spell.

Finally, just fifty feet above the ground, I unleashed the aetheric blast.

A deep, forge-fire roar accompanied the eruption of a torrent of violet flames from my palms and into the ground. I immediately felt my shoulders and back protest, but I held firm, unwilling to let my body fail me.

The platform that had first allowed me to unlock this ability had naturally forced out the aether from my body. Now that I was no longer impacted by that effect, the control that I had over how much aether to expend was much greater.

My fingers forced the aetheric blast to remain aimed forward rather than just exploding out. Even with my body strengthened by aether, I knew that my arms had already begun to fracture, and my aether reserves were depleting at a terrifying pace.

Still, we were slowing down. I began decreasing the output of aether, and the noise that it caused subsided somewhat, and I realized Caera was screaming as she clung to me like a baby koala.

"Brace yourself for impact!" I roared as I turned to face the sky, making sure that I'd be the one to land first as we crashed into the ground while cladding both of us in as much aether I could afford.

By the time I came to, I knew that I hadn't been unconscious for long by the clouds of dirt and dust still rising from the crater that I had made upon impact.

My body felt like it had been ripped apart, welded back together, and then ripped apart again. It took all of my mental fortitude to keep from passing out from the pain only seconds after waking, but Caera seemed to have fared better.

She was still unconscious, but she had been able to supplement my aetheric shield with the use of her own mana to protect her body from fatal harm.

What little aether I had in reserve immediately went to work repairing my broken body, but I couldn't afford to lay in the dirt and just wait.

The ground shuddered beneath me, growing stronger with each deep *thud*: the guardian was approaching.

"Arthur!" a husky voice growled from the edge of the crater. It was Regis. Daria was riding on his back.

"Regis," I gurgled before coughing out a mouthful of blood.

Daria gasped as she slid off Regis's back. "Merciful Vritra, how is he still alive?"

The two of them ran toward me, and before either Regis or I could do anything, Daria had withdrawn a glass vial from her dimension ring and held it against my mouth.

"Drink this," Daria said as she leaned in closer and raised my head. "An emblem Instiller made this. It uses the mana in your body to heal your wounds."

"Can't," I managed to choke out around the mouth of the bottle. "Won't... work."

Her thin brows furrowed in confusion before a look of realization washed over her. "Oh, you can't."

Relieved that she understood, I closed my eyes and rested my head against her warm hand.

Regis, I need some of your aether if I'm going to be able to—

My thoughts were interrupted by the sensation of something silky soft pressing against my lips before a lukewarm liquid entered my mouth. My eyes shot open to see Daria's mouth locked against mine, her eyes shut and cheeks red.

Without the strength to even lift my arms, and her strong hands resisting my attempt to twist my face away, I was forced to swallow whatever contents were in that vial.

Daria finally pulled away, her composure slipping away as her face turned bright crimson. "I-I had no choice since you didn't have the strength to swallow."

Little pockets of pain exploded inside me with each cough that I forced out. "Y-you... the vial wouldn't..."

"As my master is so eloquently trying to explain, it wasn't that he couldn't swallow the elixir that you so generously mouth-fed him, but that it wouldn't work on him," Regis explained calmly, an annoyingly amused expression on his lupine face.

I shot the black and purple wolf the most piercingly cold glare that I could muster. With a snarky grin, Regis trotted past Daria, who looked on in puzzlement, and dove into my body.

A cool rush of energy spread from my core and I could feel my rate of recovery increase.

'You get a free kiss along with my recovery services.' Regis snickered. 'I'd say you owe me.'

Bite me, I responded sharply, but it felt good to be annoyed by him again instead of suffering through the long hours of stony, brooding silence.

With Regis's help, I recovered enough to get back on my feet, unable to ignore the shaking earth any longer.

'Don't you die on me, princess,' Regis sent, his voice weak.

Rest up, buddy. I looked down at Caera, whose injuries were slowly fading due to the effects of the elixir Daria had just fed her. She didn't seem like she was going to be in any shape to keep fighting against the titanic guardian, though.

Reaching down, I unclasped the buckle that held the leather sheath and dagger by her waist, then strapped it on before climbing up the edge of the crater. "Keep her safe. I have some questions I need to ask her."

"Where are you going?" Daria asked. "You're not thinking of actually fighting that thing, right?"

"No," I responded. "I'm thinking of killing it."

277 BACK TO BASICS

Ahead, two ascenders were fighting against the towering, bat-headed dragon creature. From a distance, they looked like fanged mice scurrying desperately around a giant orc. I knew without looking who the two were—Taegen and Arian were the only ones capable of staying alive and keeping the titan occupied for this long.

I rushed toward the colossal guardian, tearing divots into the barren ground as I gained speed. My hand gripped tightly around the curved handle of the white dagger; compared to the size of the monster I was facing, this dagger couldn't even serve as its toothpick, but having it in my hand helped to give me the confidence I needed.

Expending most of the aether from my core in one quick aetheric blast had the same benefit as going through the three stages of refining my core and aether channels—albeit with the added risk of death.

I could feel the complex, minute differences in the way the aether flowed through my body.

Using aether for the first time after forging my new core had felt like I was trying to regulate the direction and speed of the aether's flow using a kitchen strainer. Now, however, I felt like I had a proper floodgate installed, and the aqueducts leading to various points throughout my body were slowly being tunneled and constructed.

I was physically stronger and sturdier than ever, but I knew it wasn't enough to face off against the Scythes. Not yet.

My entire arsenal had been taken from me, and I was given a single, ethereal weapon in return. I was finally learning how to wield it. To make up for the versatility I had lost in mana, I needed to be able to utilize aether at a level far above not only the Indrath Clan, but also the ancient mages.

Every fight is just another test, I thought as I watched the titan slam a foot the size of a house down on Arian, just missing the nimble ascender. Some tests are just harder than others...

The colossal beast was the first to notice my presence. Its bat-like face whipped toward me and let out a furious shriek that rippled visibly through the air. Its maw lunged downward, as if it intended to swallow me whole.

As I channeled aether to my legs, accelerating to meet the beast head on, I was surprised by how much more naturally the action came. Everything but the beast's snarling face became a blur as I sped toward it.

I leaped from the ground, spinning to gain momentum for my attack. Even the guardian wasn't prepared for the sudden increase in my speed, and it tried to pull its head back up and out of my reach.

It wasn't fast enough.

The dagger turned into a shimmering streak of white and purple as it pierced through the side of the ugly, folded nose. The sound of thunder erupted from the impact, sending out shockwaves of force that kicked up a storm of dust and debris all around us. The titan's head whipped to the side, causing it to stagger to the side and creating an opening for Arian to charge up and unleash a flurry of golden crescents. Taegen, who was now adorned in an intricate earthen armor, hammered away at the thick legs like a blacksmith shaping iron.

The barrage of golden arcs and the devastating mace strikes were barely able to draw blood, but it *was* enough to sweep the beast's legs from right under its body.

With an enraged roar, the titan crashed on its side, shattering the ground and sending out a wave of tremors that nearly toppled the very tower it was trying to protect.

Both Taegen and Arian had to fall back or risk being crushed under the titan's body, something I doubted even the most powerful mages could survive.

"Effeminate One! Is Lady Caera safe?" Taegen yelled, the tall ascender scowling around the battlefield hoping to lay eyes on her.

"She's recovering at a safe distance with Daria!" I shouted back, my gaze fixed on the giant beast, now trying to get back up to its feet.

"Looks like we're in your debt," Arian replied, his voice quiet but oddly clear despite his distance and the noise coming from the titan.

Judging by the powerful vibrations that pulsated from his sword, and those golden crescents, it seemed that his magic focused on specific subsets of wind and gravity affinities, which would have been a very rare combination on Dicathen.

Taegen surprised me even more, as his magic didn't stop at just the earthen armor. Every step he took seemed to manipulate not only his own armor but the earth around him. Even as he swung his mace, chunks of the ground would envelop his weapon, molding around it to form a larger mace.

I didn't waste the opportunity either, landing several more attacks at the titan's face in order to prevent it from getting back up for as long as possible.

Despite its colossal size, however, the beast was surprisingly deft, and was able to recover by pushing off the ground with its long tail. As soon as it was back up on all six of its feet, it whirled both its neck and tail like a whip, gouging huge troughs from the ground and launching shards of earth all around it in an attempt to keep us at a distance.

I weaved through chunks of dirt the size of carriages as I attempted to stay within striking range. With my aether core nearly empty, I had to rely on my physical strength and speed.

The problem was the beast's size: it was so large that no amount of stabbing or hitting was going to do any significant damage unless I found a weak spot—if one even existed.

A loud crash sounded over the chaos, and the beast buckled. Just as I thought the blow might have done some real damage, its tail lashed out. Taegen, looking more like a golem than a human, was smacked away like a dung fly. He crashed into the ground and vanished under a thick cloud of dust and debris.

Reaching its front left leg, where Arian had previously launched his attack, I found some deep gashes in the thick hide. Seeing my opening, I kicked off the ground and plunged my aether-infused dagger into a particularly deep wound in the three-story-tall leg.

Pinkish blood spilled everywhere, covering me almost entirely. A giant shadow blocked out the red sky and I whirled, prepared to meet the titan head on. The mouth gaped open like a cave, the teeth within like rows upon rows of stalactites and stalagmites. Aether rippled over my flesh, though I wasn't sure it would be enough to survive a bite from the titan.

A swirling sphere of mana struck just above the beast's jaw, interrupting the attack as its head twisted around to snarl at the attacker. Arian was several yards away, his body giving off a tremendous aura.

The swordsman's expression darkened as he prepared to face the colossal monster, and an idea came to my mind.

"How much stronger of an attack can you launch?" I yelled. The beast kept its head high, keeping both of us in its field of view... as if it was trying to decide which one to kill first.

"Perhaps five times the strength, but I would need more time to prepare," Arian answered, his voice as clear as if he were standing right beside me. "Why do you ask?"

"You'll have to trust me on this!" I shouted before turning my attention back to the beast.

I unleashed a flurry of strikes with my small blade, dancing within the titan's six giant legs as I dodged and cut, spun and stabbed, the dagger driving into those gashes again and again in an attempt to keep the colossal beast's attention solely on me.

The earth shook with each step it took, and the wind whipped like a hurricane whenever its tail lashed out. It stomped around drunkenly, trying in vain to crush me. My focus was largely on actively limiting my output of aether, controlling it as efficiently as I could, waiting for the perfect time.

"I'm ready," Arian said from afar, his figure no larger than a white crow from where I was.

A flash of gold suddenly filled my vision, and a second later a deafening explosion thundered across the battlefield.

Arian had unleashed a giant blast of cutting force directly at the beast, enveloping its entire head in a bright golden surge of light.

I leaned forward, crossing my arms in front of me to keep from being blown away by the attack.

It wasn't just Caera. Her guards were also hiding their strength while in the convergence zone, I realized.

Despite the dire situation we were in, I couldn't help but think to myself how little a chance Dicathen truly had in winning the war. Had Arian, Taegen, and the ascenders all joined their people to fight against us, the war would've been over much faster.

The beast's head snapped back on its long neck from the force of Arian's attack. Like an angry toddler throwing a temper tantrum, the guardian attacked the closest thing it could find: me.

I needed its attention focused elsewhere, and it had to be mad enough to use its breath attack again, but in its rage it had locked onto me and redoubled its efforts to crush me beneath foot or tail. Its mad stamping caused a storm of dust to rise up, obscuring my vision and allowing the full force of the tail to strike me from behind moments later.

The world turned white as blinding pain spread throughout my body. By the time I came to, I was on the ground, several dozens of yards away from the titan. This had likely saved my life, as all six enormous feet were still stomping on the ground, making the earth quake.

I pushed myself up, a groan escaping my throat. My vision blurred and the world seemed to be tilting a bit, but overall, I was fine.

'Still barely a scratch on Mr. Big-and-nasty, huh,' Regis chimed in.

"You're awake," I managed to say before letting out a ragged cough. "Can you help?"

'No. I haven't been absorbing aether from your body to heal, since I knew you'd be fighting,' Regis replied.

"Damn."

'There is one alternative, though.' Regis was nervous about something, I could feel it.

My brows furrowed as I continued watching Arian and Taegen, who had managed to return to the battle, bombard the guardian. "What is it?"

Regis hesitated. 'The Destruction rune. Just your aether reserves should be enough.'

Anger and fear rose up in me at the thought of Destruction's dire effect on my psyche. "No."

For once, Regis didn't push me. He remained quiet as I let the last scrapes and bruises on my body heal. I wanted to use the Destruction rune more than anyone, but the last attempt had led me to stabbing myself to keep from descending into a state of madness—and I had barely used its powers.

There was also the added problem of witnesses. Both Arian and Taegen would see, and even if Caera was able to use the corrupt flames, I'm sure a purple fire capable of destroying a nine-story-high beast would raise some questions.

As I returned to the battlefield, a low thrum sounded from the titan—more specifically, its mouth.

It was going to use its breath attack again!

Arian had retreated to a safe distance, drinking several vials of elixir in an attempt to recover.

Meanwhile, the titan was focused on Taegen, whose giant stone-clad hands were scooping up equally giant pieces of earth, condensing them like snowballs, and launching them at its legs, which were now covered in deep wounds, though this didn't seem to hamper its ability to move.

Its fang-lined maw was spread even wider than before, and I could feel the fluctuations in the air. Even without the ability to sense mana, I knew what would soon be coming.

I needed to get below the beast's head before it released that beam attack.

Except the only non-elemental ability I could use to move quickly enough was one that I had only tried with mana. Back in the forests of Epheotus, my body couldn't withstand the burden of it, and even if it could now, I wasn't able to manipulate mana.

Taking a sharp breath, I focused on the internal state of my body as I sprinted toward the beast. I tried to feel every muscle in my leg, back, hip, and core move in a predetermined manner and a set order, to push my body to move a certain way.

I wanted to enhance every step of this process, imbuing power into each and every micromovement of muscles, tendons, and joints in order to far surpass the limits of even asuras.

I wanted to use Burst Step.

Derived from the pantheon's use of a single explosive step, the Burst Step that I had developed, merging the fundamental theory of mana manipulation with my knowledge of human anatomy, meant going from a standstill position to an explosive dash in a single instant, almost as if, to the unsuspecting eye, I was teleporting directly from one place to another.

Albeit still linear and incomplete, I had surpassed the original technique used by the asuras with Burst Step. The real question at this moment was, could I even replicate the technique with aether, or would I tear my body apart trying?

With my newly formed passages within my body, I timed the strength, location, and flow of aether, at least trying to replicate the explosiveness in speed even if I had to forgo starting from a standstill position.

Aether stimulated my muscles, nerves, tendons—every component of my biology that let me walk, run, and sprint. I wasn't entirely ready for the sensation of jolting forward, the world around me turning to a brown and red blur, as if it was being pulled away right from under me.

My position and timing were both ideal. In the space of a single breath, I had cleared the distance and was standing directly below the titan's jaws as a shimmering sphere of energy formed between its teeth.

I should've been happy. Hell, I should've been ecstatic. With enough practice, I would be able to fully use Burst Step to my heart's content.

But I wasn't satisfied. I felt like I was missing something—the same feeling as a word lost on the tip of the tongue. Touching upon the basis of Burst Step, seeing the world pulled from under me as I used this technique, made me feel like I was on the cusp of something greater. Except I didn't know what.

With no time to ponder, I coalesced the remaining aether into the center of my palm and pushed out a condensed blast of violet energy that slammed the beast's lower jaw shut just as it was about to release its devastating breath attack.

As if it had been orchestrated beforehand, a giant boulder hurtled from the sky an instant later, crashing into the titan's head and helping to pin its mouth shut. It took me a moment to realize the boulder was actually Taegen, who had molded his entire armor into the head of his mace to form a giant earthen sphere.

With its mouth pinned shut, the beast's breath attack imploded.

A muted *thud* resounded across the broken fields of dirt, and the shockwave generated within the beast's mouth from the implosion was enough to send Taegen hurtling through the air like a cannonball. Even Arian was knocked off his feet.

Since I couldn't let up on the aetheric blast until I knew it worked, I had no time to react to the explosion, and was blasted into a crater in the ground for the second time in only a few minutes.

While drained and in pain, I knew that the beast was still alive by how it struggled to regain its balance despite the clouds of smoke billowing from its head. A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I stared up at the wobbling titan. I was out of options.

I patted the dagger strapped to my side, reassuring myself it was there in case I needed to drive it into my leg again.

'Regis. Let's do it,' I said. A simple grunt of affirmation was all I got before a tsunami of knowledge, insight, and—most of all—power, washed over me. The dancing amethyst flame flared around my hand like a glove, eagerly awaiting my instructions.

Hoping that Caera's guards were too disoriented to pay any attention to me, I thrust my hand upwards, and the cold fire leapt from me to the wounded titan. In mere moments, the beast was engulfed, helpless against this manifestation of Destruction itself.

I could feel the fire eating, greedily taking everything it could get. It was hungry, so hungry even the colossal meal of the titan couldn't sate it. I didn't dare withdraw it, though, until I was sure the guardian was dead. I wasn't quite sure why I wanted to stop the fire, except that I had wanted to do it before I unleashed Destruction. I had been worried about the flames spreading... eating... eating everything.

The aetheric fire was consuming something else, too. Something within me. I was too weak and too tired to think about it. It wouldn't matter anyway. Not if I just let the fire go where it wished, consume what it wished.

It was there, on the edge of sanity, that I found the word stuck on the tip of my tongue. A sense of epiphany came to me, momentarily clearing my mind. I knew what was missing in Burst Step.

Then the purple flames winked out, and darkness overtook me.

278 YOUR NAME

When my eyes strained open, I was looking up at a domed ceiling, dimly lit by a flickering orange light. That was all I was able to take in before my body reminded me why I had fallen unconscious in the first place. I felt like I was being wrung like a damp towel, like my body had been twisted into a knot and was now slowly trying to unravel itself. The pain of it pushed the air completely out of my lungs

My vision spun and it took me several minutes to even realize that there were other people present. They were talking, but the words seemed far away.

"—anything we can do?"

"Princess will be fine. He just needs some space."

"Talking Wolf is right, Lady Caera. Since elixirs don't work on Effeminate One, all we can do is wait."

"Am I the crazy one here? How have you so calmly accepted the fact that we're conversing with a wolf made of shadows and purple fire?"

"You were screaming at me to save you just fine back in the convergence zone, Miss Booty Shorts. I don't see why you're so baffled by it now."

"B-Booty Shorts? What are you even—"

"It was fairly obvious that Effeminate One was always cautious. It comes as no surprise that he's been hiding some of his abilities."

With the room stable and my wounds only debilitatingly painful now, I managed to prop myself up on my elbows. "I thought I told you to stop calling me Effeminate One."

"Ah, it seems you're fully conscious now," Arian replied. He, Taegen, Daria, Caera, and Regis were sitting around a small fire with a black pot simmering above it. "You've had a few seizures like this before so we assumed you'd fall back to sleep again."

"Where am I?" I asked, trying to sit up. Regis helped by pushing my back with his head.

"You can relax," Caera answered, her expression a conflicted mix of wariness and sympathy. "We're in a sanctuary room."

I inspected the highblooded Alacryan, feeling like I was looking at her for the first time. Her navy blue hair was tangled and discolored with dirt and blood. There were dark smudges down her cheek and across her forehead, and her lower lip had been split open and not yet healed. Her scarlet eyes locked with mine, and I saw again the black fire running along her blade.

Black fire just like Cadell and Nico had used.

Swallowing back the emotions I had come to associate with those flames—pain, loss, regret, and anger—I said, "So that giant beast guarding the tower..."

Arian shot me a confident smile. "It seems like your plan to let the beast's breath attack explode in its mouth worked."

"Effeminate One's plan would've failed if I hadn't assisted," Taegen added, snorting. "Although I didn't think it would actually work."

So they didn't find out. The shockwave from the beast's breath attack must've been strong enough to knock Taegen and Arian unconscious while I utilized the rune of Destruction to destroy the titan.

Since the carallians in the convergence zone disintegrated upon dying, they must've assumed the same thing had happened to that colossal beast.

The others seemed curious, even suspicious, but I was relieved that they hadn't witnessed my use of Destruction aether.

"We all have questions for you, but I think it's best to get your strength up," Daria said softly as she handed me a bowl filled with steaming stew. "I heard you're from the south, but you've tasted it yourself. The Lehndert blood is famous for our cooking. These dishes aren't only delicious, but they have restorative properties, too."

"This particular member of the Lehndert blood seems to be particularly stingy, however," Taegen muttered. "Restricting everyone to only two servings per person..."

Daria hissed at Taegen, shooting him a glare. "That's because you started eating straight out of the pot using the ladle as a spoon!"

"We still have our own rations, Taegen," Lady Caera said as she calmly withdrew something from her dimension ring. It looked like a moist brown brick with chunks of dried fruit sprinkled in it.

"...Thank you, Lady Caera." The towering mass of red hair and muscles let out a disgruntled sigh before he bit into the ration bar.

Despite the fact that my body technically didn't need to eat, my hands automatically reached for the bowl. I let the warmth spread from the bowl and into my palms before taking a sip.

The broth was both rich and hearty, and I immediately felt refreshed. It made me think of days spent watching snow fall through a cabin window with a warm fire at your back and the homey aroma of a cooking pot over the fire. My expression must've given away my thoughts, because I looked up to see Daria with a smirk, Caera inspecting me with intrigue, and Taegen staring longingly at the bowl in my hands.

"The power of Lehndert cuisine triumphs again," Daria said happily. "I didn't think it was possible for you to have any expression aside from annoyed or deadpan."

Regis curled up beside me, his purple flames licking coolly at my arm. "He's a softie once you get to know him."

After finishing my second bowl of stew, I finally felt ready to continue the conversation. "While your actions were unnecessary, I thank you for taking care of me while I was unconscious."

I patted Regis. "Let's go."

"Wait, you're just going to leave now that you've had some rest and a meal?" Daria asked, jumping to her feet.

I regarded the brown-haired ascender. Her mage robes were pulled tightly around her, and the coquettishness she had displayed on our first meeting had vanished. "Is there a reason why we should continue travelling together?"

"You're powerful—freakishly so—and it's obvious that you haven't revealed all of your abilities," Daria answered. "But there are only one or two zones left until the next exit portal comes up. Let's work together and guarantee we all get back home safely. I've already agreed to team up with Lady Caera's team."

Despite not meaning to, Daria had just revealed two incredibly important facts. First, that there are multiple exits, and second, that they had already passed an exit portal—or several—before reaching the convergence zone. This meant that I must've landed somewhere in the middle of the Relictombs.

Standing up, I gathered all of my belongings. Noticing that the dagger was still strapped to me, I unbuckled it from my waist and handed it to Caera. "I had to borrow it for the last battle. Here."

She received the dagger without a word, her expression going carefully blank. It was only when I turned to walk away that she spoke.

"Stop," she said. There was a weight in her voice that she hadn't used before.

I looked back over my shoulder in time to catch the dagger she threw back at me. "You'll need those once you get out of the Relictombs."

I glanced down at the dagger in my hand. There was a golden coin tied to the strap that wasn't there before. A design of feathered wings spread from a wreathed shield was etched delicately onto the face of the medallion.

"Lady Caera!" Taegen started, but the navy-haired ascender raised a hand and his mouth snapped shut.

"What makes you think I'll need these?" I asked, my gaze on Caera, who had turned away and was pouring a steaming liquid into her metal cup.

"It'll be the easiest way to prove yourself without having to reveal your identity in front of all of the kingdom officials waiting for ascenders that come out of the Relictombs." Caera took a sip before looking at me seriously. "Just say you're a nomadic ascender contracted under the Denoir Blood."

I hadn't considered the possibility of people waiting outside of the Relictombs. It was easy to forget that this wasn't just some dungeon that adventurers could go in and out as they pleased. One of the fundamental purposes for the Relictombs was to retrieve lost artifacts of the ancient mages, so of course there would be officials to make sure items leaving the Relictombs were carefully regulated.

"What about the dagger? I thought this was your brother's?" I loosened the medallion tied to the dagger strap, prepared to hand it back to her.

"It is. Which is why I expect you to return it eventually, along with the medallion," Caera replied. "The Denoir estate will be easy to find once you get to the capital in the central dominion."

"Central dominion?" My brows furrowed. "I have no plans to—"

"Then do you wish for me to take back the dagger and medallion?"

I clutched the golden coin in my hand. "What makes you think I'll return it once I'm out of the Relictombs?"

"The Denoir blood has always had a great eye for people," she stated simply. "You know a secret of mine and I know one of yours. I won't try to force you to come with us, but I do hope that we can meet again and share a conversation under better circumstances."

"Wait, you're just going to let him leave?" Daria stood up. "I still have a simulet that you can hold onto. Once we're out of here—together—Blood Lehndert can provide you with anything you want. I said this before, but we really are always looking for powerful Strikers."

"And you also called him handsome," Regis added.

Daria flushed and pierced my companion with a glare. "Yes, I did. And usually, throwing in a few compliments and exposing some skin works."

"Thank you for the offer, but I'll have to refuse," I said to Daria. "As for the medallion and dagger: I'll return them."

I met the eyes of both Taegen and Arian. While Lady Caera's guards seemed a bit reluctant for me to leave, they just gave me a nod.

I made my way toward the end of the sanctuary where a closed door awaited. Opening it revealed a shimmering portal that I knew would take me to a different than the others.

"Your name," Caera called over the crackling flames.

Turning back, I could see Caera had stood and taken a couple of steps after me. "I don't need to know what blood you're from, but at least a name..."

It was a simple question that I found difficult to answer. Despite the changes in my appearance, going with Arthur wouldn't be smart: too many Alacryans would have heard of the Lance with that name during the war.

At the same time, I didn't want the name I would go by now to be a mere moniker to stay hidden. My motive wasn't to stay in hiding. Not for long, anyway.

I needed some time under the radar while I got stronger, but this wouldn't be the same as calling myself Note while I was posing as the masked adventurer.

No. I wanted my name to be a statement that no one else but my relatives, Agrona, and the asuras would know of. And my goal was that, by the time Agrona heard this name and connected it to me, that I would be a foe powerful enough to stand up against his empire.

"My name is Grey," I answered, walking through the portal.

Regis and I were on full alert as we stepped into the next zone, expecting to be attacked by an army of aether-fueled beasts. I dared to hope that the door would remain, like it had in the first sanctuary. I had been able to unlock that door with my limited knowledge of aetheric runes in order to rest and challenge the level multiple times.

However, we were met with dead silence and a corridor about two shoulder-widths wide, brightly lit by panels of light running along the top of the walls. I turned back to see that the portal we had come through was gone, leaving me with only one path.

"Well, this is eerie," Regis noted, the dim light of black and purple flames reflecting off the smooth walls as he walked beside me.

"Yeah." My eyes darted left and right, never resting in one place as adrenaline rushed through me. It was quiet and calm, but there was something about the sterile white light and the immaculately smooth white walls that put me on edge.

As we walked, however, I must've triggered something, because runes suddenly lit up on the walls on either side of me, and the corridor lights faded from white to purple.

An indescribable force suddenly pulled us forward, and we skidded across the tiled floor until we were both standing in front of a massive gate made of what looked like black crystal. The white hallway was gone, and only the gate remained.

Air suddenly returned to my lungs, which made me realize I had been holding my breath. Indigo runes glowed subtly on the face of the glassy black gates, throbbing like a pulse.

In my head, a drab, emotionless voice said, 'Welcome, descendant. Please enter.'

Having shared telepathic communications with both Sylvie and Regis, I was accustomed to voices speaking in my head, but this was different. It didn't feel like someone or something was speaking in my mind; it felt like I had suddenly thought the words to myself.

"Did you hear that voice too?" I asked Regis.

He tilted his head. "I heard something, but the voice was too muffled for me to make out the words."

"Get inside me, just in case."

The shadowy form of my companion disappeared as he vanished inside of my body.

I looked around one more time. There was no corridor behind me now, only three white walls, the white ceiling, white-tiled floor, and the solid crystalline gate. The runes pulsed brightly, painting the white room pink.

I stepped in front of the gate and cautiously reached for the handle.

When the tips of my fingers grazed the surface, however, a warm, almost familiar, touch enveloped me, and my hand sank through the seemingly solid crystal.

I hesitated to walk further in, but I couldn't help but be drawn to whatever was on the other side. Stepping forward, I went yet again through a portal that would deliver me into the unknown.

The crystalline gate clicked and whirred as if it were made from millions of solid, tiny moving pieces and was making way for me to slip through. The last thing I saw was the black crystal flowing like water over my eyes.

Then everything went dark.

279 BEING OF AETHER

Traveling within this weird and otherworldly dungeon, I had grown accustomed to meeting the unexpected at each turn. The Relictombs didn't abide by the conventions of either of the worlds I had lived in, and mentally preparing myself for that was all I could do to stay above the crippling anxiety lurking within me.

The innumerable black and purple crystals parted before me, rolling away from each other in geometric patterns both alien and familiar, though I couldn't make sense of why. Revealed behind them was a more immediately familiar scene.

It was the very picture of the messy laboratory—even messier than Gideon's. The room was fairly large, but felt cramped with the dozen or so tables shoved into it, each one buried under an array of beakers and test tubes, funnels and crucibles, and other equally cliché and unremarkable accoutrements. Lining the walls in the hexagonal room were tall glass shelves filled with little curiosities, but I knew they were just a distraction.

The shelves lined only five walls; the sixth was entirely occupied by a portal, but unlike most portals, which shimmered in an array of multicolored lights, this portal looked more like a thin screen of glass. On the other side, I could clearly see two guards clad in black plate armor in an otherwise empty room.

"Huh. You'd think with an entrance like that, it would lead to something... more," Regis, now back in his shadow-wolf form, said from behind me. "At least we'll finally be out of here."

I held up my hand, my eyes darting around the room. "The voice in my head referred to me as 'descendant'. Maybe... maybe the Relictombs thinks I'm one of the ancient mages because I can use aether?"

"Either that or the ancient mages were all pretty princesses," Regis quipped. "But yeah, that makes sense too."

"There has to be something more to this place," I said as my eyes continued to search every corner of the room. "I'm guessing it wouldn't have let me in here otherwise."

"Wait." Regis narrowed his sharp eyes. "Is that why you didn't want to go back with the other ascenders? You expected something like this to happen?"

"Somewhat," I said while walking through the aisles of metal tables. "There are too many variables that I can't account for, like finding Caera's brother in the jungle zone with the aetheric millipede, or the way

that golem behaved back in the platform room. But what's certain is that my presence has an influence on all of these zones, so it's reasonable to assume that whoever built the Relictombs only wanted beings inclined toward aether, like them, to get this far."

"Then how have all these Alacryans been able to bring relics of the past to the Vritra?" Regis asked.

I paused, thinking for a moment before shaking my head. "It's hard to say for sure. Maybe the Relictombs are focused on just keeping asuras out. Or it can just be degradation. The Relictombs might be powerful enough to still keep asuras out, but nothing can last forever, especially something as intricate as this place.

"Anyway, this room shouldn't be something as simple as an easy way out." I turned toward my companion. "Do you know what these relics look like? Anything in your Uto memories?"

"Aside from the massive amounts of aether held within, they can look like anything, from a book, to an artifact, to a bone," he answered. "Why? Hey, you don't suppose there is an artifact hidden in here, do you?"

"Maybe. There is definitely some reason we were brought here though." Pausing, I gazed thoughtfully at an untidy pile of narrow glass vials, one of which hung dangerously off the side of a table. Then it hit me. "Books!"

Hopping up and placing his front paws on one of the tables, Regis said, "Nope, definitely no books here."

"Exactly. No books, no scrolls, no journals, no notebooks. Every mad science lab I've ever seen has been covered with things like that."

Regis continued to search through the lab, hoping to find some sort of clue as to where we were, but I took a different approach.

Focusing, I steadied myself, forcing the anxiety down and away from my mind to let me think clearly, then carefully scanned the room again, watchful for even a hint of purple aura. But there was nothing. Even with my enhanced vision, I couldn't sense anything made of aether here aside from the portal.

Had I read too deeply into it? Was this place simply just an easier route to get out of the Relictombs, like Regis said?

I considered leaving—Regis was already waiting impatiently by the portal, his shadowy tail thumping the ground—when the words the voice had said echoed in my head once more.

It had referred to me as a 'descendant', so maybe just trying to detect aether in this room wasn't enough.

I unleashed an aetheric aura, bathing the room in a suffocating pressure.

Regis stiffened and bared his teeth, and I sensed his confusion as he glared around, looking for an enemy. Then the room started changing. As if everything that I saw, smelled, and felt within this room had been nothing more than an illusion, it all started fading away... including the floor.

I began to fall, and then just stopped. It felt like I had jerked awake from a falling dream as my feet suddenly found themselves firmly planted on a floor that didn't exist a moment ago.

I heard Regis let out a startled gasp, but my eyes were focused on the construct in front of me: a pedestal that stood ten feet high with aetheric runes carved around it. Four revolving halos of glowing stones, covered with the same intricate runes, gyrated smoothly past one another without ever touching.

Floating just above the pedestal, at the center of the gyrating halos of stone, was a small, glistening crystal. It put off a brilliant lavender light, but, while it appeared rather valuable, the amount of the aether it radiated was miniscule. However, there was *something* in this room that held an unfathomable amount of aether.

Regis, although his perception toward aether wasn't nearly as sensitive as mine, felt it too; his hackles were raised, and the purple mane of fire around his head blazed in agitation.

Looking around, I realized how deteriorated the state of this room was. Unlike the illusion of the lab that we had fallen from, the rune-covered stone walls were cracked and chipped, some holes large enough for a man to fall through, and rubble littered the floor all around the central construct.

I grew tense, even fearful, as I tracked the source of the aether. It wasn't coming from any one spot; it was constantly moving, and though I could feel it, I couldn't see any sign of a purple aether aura.

"Who's there!" I roared, my eyes trying to follow the unseen mass of aether.

Suddenly, I sensed it rapidly approaching from the other side of the room. Unable to tell how large this invisible force was, I shrouded myself in aether and threw a punch at where I thought the center of the mass was.

My punch should've either gone through the aether, striking nothing but air, hit something and sent it flying, or injured my own hand arm from the recoil. Strangely, none of those things happened.

My fist definitely hit something solid, but it was as if the force behind my attack had been completely nullified.

And manifesting in front of me, with its hand wrapped around my fist, was a humanoid figure, opaque purple in color with short-cropped hair of a similar hue. Tattoos of interlocking runes ran over almost the entire surface of its body, even its cheeks and forehead, leaving only its eyes, nose, mouth, and chin bare.

"So you *can* sense me," it said, its violet eyes gazing at me with intense curiosity.

I pulled my hand back and stepped away. Regis appeared beside me, teeth bared.

The being studied me, brows furrowed, eyes glowing. "You have an aether core, yet no spellforms to protect your body."

"Spellforms?" I asked, exchanging a confused glance with Regis.

"I see. A human descendant with the body of an asura—a dragon no less. What an unprecedented anomaly you are."

The being looked down at Regis, who flinched from its gaze. Intrigue gave way to puzzlement on the being's face. "You carry an edict for destruction, yet the knowledge remains in the descendant's mind."

"I keep hearing that word, 'descendant.' What do you mean?" I asked, unnerved by the being's ability to see so clearly that which Regis and I didn't even fully understand.

"Descendant of the djinn, the people of life."

"Hold on. The djinn?" I glanced at Regis, wondering if the name might be held within Uto's memories somewhere, but the shadow wolf just shook his head.

The entity looked into the distance, its face grim. "So the dragons have taken even our name from us, stealing it out of the histories and burning it on the funeral pyre of our people. I should not be surprised."

"What do the dragons have to do with any of this?" My mind jumped to Sylvie's stone, and I backed up a step and tensed for another attack. If this being was an enemy of the asura...

"Peace. Time enough for both answers and a test of your abilities. I have waited a long time, yet what was brought to me is something even I didn't know was possible." The being waved its arm and I found myself in an impossibly large enclosure surrounded by a dome of translucent purple. The entity, which had been right in front of me, now stood several yards away, and Regis was gone.

"What did you do with Regis?" I growled, scanning the enclosure for my companion.

"The pup is safe. This is a trial of *your* skills after all." The being stepped toward me. "I know you've undergone many challenges thus far, but I sincerely hope that you pass this final trial."

"You're right. Ever since being thrown into this godforsaken dungeon, all I've done is face trials." The edge of my mouth curled into a smirk as anger leaked into my voice. "At least, unlike the other monstrosities this place conjured up, you have the sentience to give me some answers."

"And that I will," it said as a spear of aether manifested into its hand. "Given that you prove your worth, of course."

I had failed to protect Dicathen, and in doing so had been hurt so badly that my bond had to sacrifice herself to keep me alive. I had awoken in the middle of a sprawling, otherworldly deathtrap to find that both my loved ones and those to blame for the danger Dicathen faced were far out of my reach. I had carved my way through countless bloodthirsty monsters to reach this point, and now I found myself standing before a creature claiming to be my final test before I could have answers.

'Prove your worth,' my ass.

I burst forward, brandishing the white dagger in my hand. My blade was met with the shaft of the purple spear, and, once again, the force of my attack was nullified. This was very different from the ability to alter the gravitational pull that Cylrit, Seris's retainer, had used against me. There was no delay or recoil, nothing that I could use against it.

My attack just stopped.

Stepping into my opponent, I followed up with a strike to its sternum, channeling aether in quick bursts through my arm, like I had done with Burst Step, to maximize strength and speed.

Again, my attack stopped just as it should have hit below its ribcage.

However, I had noticed something. The runes marking almost every inch of its body glowed slightly as it channeled aether through them.

The two of us soon fell into a flurry of attacks, with me on the offensive. Using my dagger like an extension of my right hand, I slashed, lunged, kicked, and punched, but the being matched every one of my attacks with a perfect defense.

Dodging a barrage of thrusts from the glowing spear, which moved too fast to see, I used my left palm to redirect the being's last strike downward to my right and used the momentum to launch a reverse roundhouse stab at its head.

As I expected, the runes near its temple glowed as my attack approached, and the tip of my dagger simply remained suspended just above its right ear.

It swung the spear in a wide arc, putting some distance between us before lunging forward at me once more. While this momentum-nullifying defense was beyond frustrating, I had to admit that the entity's technique with the spear was astounding.

The shaft of its weapon swayed and bent as if it were made of wood, curving and springing in the air with every stab and swipe, as if the spear had come alive.

However, my martial capabilities were nothing to scoff at either, and my asuran physique only supplemented two lifetimes of training. I wove, parried, and redirected each attack until we were both at a stalemate.

At least, that's what I wanted him to think.

I had realized that the nullifying defense mechanism wasn't automatic. The way the being's eyes followed the movement of my dagger to block proved it.

The entity aimed for my left collarbone as its spear rushed toward me. Rather than sidestep out of its path, I dipped my left shoulder forward and grabbed the shaft with my left hand. While pulling the entity's spear toward me, I imbued aether into the dagger in my right hand.

Again, the runes glowed and I could already sense the accumulation of aether protecting my opponent's stomach.

Rather than strike at its stomach, though, I brought my right leg forward and stabbed *past* him, hooking my right arm right below the being's armpit.

It never saw the shoulder throw coming. I released a pulse of aetheric intent to further disarm my opponent before twisting and slamming it into the ground.

Concentrating aether into the palm of my hand, I prepared to unleash a destructive blast at the prone entity, but he was no longer lying on the ground right in front of me, and was instead now a dozen yards away.

"Damn," I said under my breath.

The entity calmly stood back up, its expression a bit more serious. "Very good. I must admit that I'm embarrassed that I did not see that throw coming. Perhaps I have lost a step over the years. It has been a very long time indeed since anyone, djinn or otherwise, has undergone this test."

Brows furrowed in concentration, it stabbed its spear forward. I sidestepped, expecting the spear to stretch forward and reach me—my opponent was a user of aether, after all—but the tip of the weapon disappeared and a sharp pain exploded in my shoulder.

The spearhead had sprung out of a portal just beside me.

Expect the unexpected, I reminded myself.

Relying on my body to recover the wound, I imbued aether into my legs once more and rushed toward the tattooed humanoid. Except, I wasn't getting any closer to it, no matter how far and fast I sprinted.

The entity stabbed forward once more into a small portal in front of it, but this time I was able to dodge the attack thanks to a slight delay between the fluctuation of aether and the spear emerging from the portal.

"Your technique and physical prowess are superb, but your utilization of aether is inexpert and lacking refinement," it stated conversationally as it prepared to stab forward once more.

Lowering my head, I hid my grin, letting aether flow freely from my core, triggering a reaction from the ambient aether around me.

I welcomed both the familiar surge of warmth spreading from my lower back and the knowledge that flooded into my head.

Then, I stepped forward.

That single, divine step brought me behind the entity, aether crackling from my body in branches of violet lightning.

"Is this refined enough for you?" I asked as my dagger dug deep into the entity's back.

280 THE CRYSTAL

The dome of translucent purple shimmered out of existence, and I found myself back in the hidden chamber. The entity that I had just fought was nowhere to be found. I was barely able to remain standing as the mental and physical strain of my new rune shivered through me like cold claws.

Regis came bounding toward me, his expression one of shocked concern. "What the hell happened? You got another rune!"

"Where is it?" I asked through gritted teeth, my eyes searching for any sign of the purple figure.

"It?" Regis echoed in confusion. "You were just standing there—totally blank—for a few seconds, then this purple lightning started crackling around you."

"I have never seen aether manifest in such a way before."

My head snapped up and Regis whirled around toward the source of the voice, but it wasn't coming from the entity I had just fought. It echoed out of the crystal floating atop the pedestal.

"Forgive me for the confusion. As I no longer have a physical form, the test was performed within your mind," the crystal said, each word accompanied by a pulse of radiant light.

My brows furrowed. "So that entire fight... it didn't really happen?"

"The mind is a powerful tool that even asuras rarely exercise, choosing instead to hone their bodies and cores," the crystal replied. "But you seem to be different—in more than one sense."

"Princess here is a bit of an oddball," Regis agreed, nodding his head, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth.

Even I had to admit that my situation was anything but normal. However, I had many questions and wanted to move forward. "So what happens now? Have I passed your 'final trial' or is there something more?"

"The fact that we are speaking means that you have passed," the crystal answered. "That sparring session was as much to satiate my curiosity and boredom as complete the trial, and you have done a splendid job on all counts."

Whether it was the Indrath Clan or the Vritra Clan, asuras and these higher entities seemed to love satisfying their boredom without any care for those on the receiving end.

"To think that you would be able to receive a rune, and of the spatium edict no less," the crystal continued. "Tell me. How are you able to control the flow of aether within your body with such precision? Is it the asura's physique that aids you?"

My eyes narrowed. "I have no reason or incentive to answer."

Regis looked at me with a flash of panic. "Ar—Grey. What are you doing? Don't disrespect the talking crystal."

"No. Your master is prudent," the crystal said to Regis before addressing me. "No need to hide who you are here, Arthur Leywin. I have been in your mind. Earlier, you indicated that you wanted answers. What is stored within this aetheric remnant is something that I believe you'll want. All I ask is that you satiate my curiosity for a few more minutes."

"You said that I had passed your trial. Am I not already entitled to whatever it is you're going to give me, regardless of whether or not I answer you?" I rebutted, wary of any promises this talking crystal might make. Everything in this place had been a trap or a trial, everything had tried to kill me, and I had no way of knowing the true intent of this entity.

The crystal paused, its glowing surface dimming for a few seconds, then it spoke again. "Very well. I can grant you one additional small boon from my people."

"Who are your people? Were you one of the ancient mages?"

"We have... had a name. We were the djinn, and while we are what the asuras considered 'lessers', our aether arts allowed us to reshape the world. Still, I have never seen anything like what you have displayed today. Please. Tell me your story."

Exchanging another glance with Regis, I let out a sigh and began telling the talking magic crystal about my journey since arriving within the Relictombs. I told it about the chimera and how I formed my aether core, about how I had forged aether channels by dunking myself in molten lava, about learning the Destruction rune while navigating the platform puzzle, and finally about what lay ahead once I eventually got out of the Relictombs. I did, however, omit any of my relations to the Indrath Clan, for obvious reasons.

"Fascinating! To think you were not only able to forge an aether core, but also forcefully temper your own internal conduits to control its output. Truly, this is a feat that could only be done with the physique of an asura," the crystal said, its lights pulsating excitedly.

"That's what those runes covering your body are for, right? They're used so you can control the flow of aether," I said, confirming a theory I had formed while fighting the crystal's projection.

"Correct. Though the djinn mastered spellform in order to draw in and manipulate aether, true mastery and the organic appearance of godrunes—such as that branch of spatium you just received—only come through major insight."

"So this godrune signifies that I've gained insight into a certain aspect of aether, right? By who, or what?" I asked. "Is there a higher deity above the asuras that is bestowing these?"

"That information is not stored within this remnant," the crystal answered. "But aether is all around us, and can work in ways that are impossible to imagine. The path of obtaining authority over aether is different for everyone, and yours—by far—is the most different."

"How so?" Regis asked.

"Our people were limited by our physical bodies. We struggled not with gaining insight, but rather in figuring out ways to allow our fragile bodies to handle the burden of aether.

"I may be speculating, but I believe your new rune took on the appearance of lightning not because it *is* lightning, but because that was how you conceptualized the abstract nature of that specific branch of aether," the crystal went on.

"So the dragons of the Indrath Clan weren't able to control aether like your people could, or like I am able to?" I asked. "They have the physique and aptitude to handle aether but not the knowledge and insights to conceptualize aether as their own, right?"

I felt the hair on my neck stand up as a heavy pressure spilled out from the crystal. "Those *beasts!* Their greed for our knowledge, and fear that we might overtake their position as the true wielders of aether, led them to not only kill our people, but to take prisoner many of our most powerful mages, whom they tortured in a fruitless attempt to learn the secret of our abilities."

My eyes widened at the crystal's sudden outburst. I didn't know how much of what it said to believe, but if this was all true, then the Indrath Clan wasn't so different from Agrona and the Vritra Clan.

I wanted to argue—to say that not all dragons were like that. Sylvia and Lady Myre were some of the kindest people I had met, and they had taught me so much, but the thought of Sylvia brought on new suspicions. Based on her last message, it seemed as if even she had come to despise her clan. Were her own golden runes a byproduct of the Indrath Clans' findings from these ancient mages?

Biting back my arguments, I nodded solemnly.

The crystal seemed to be studying me. It was silent for several long moments before it spoke again. "My apologies for my outburst. It wasn't only my knowledge that was stored in this remnant but my emotions as well. As you have surmised, the Indrath Clan—along with many other asuras, fooled into believing that we were a threat bent on destroying the world—succeeded in their genocide, but not in their pursuit of our knowledge."

"Because of these Relictombs that you built to keep asuras away?" I asked.

"Relictombs?"

"That's what the people who delve down here call this place," I clarified.

"How fitting. Yes. This place is the work of hundreds of mages adept in wielding aether of different edicts. Time, space, and life all work differently here, and this place, the... Relictombs, as you name it, has continued to grow and evolve since its inception," the crystal said with a hint of pride. "While our civilization was being ransacked and burned, we created an ecosystem separate from that of the rest of this world, one that cannot be touched by asuras."

"I don't understand how any of that was possible though. With hundreds of aether mages, how did you lose?" I asked, more confused than before. "And also, how was it possible for your people to create a place where only lesser beings were allowed when the Indrath Clan—limited as it was—still had the ability to influence aether?"

"That is not for me to tell," the crystal said. "I will say only that we were able to do so thanks to the efforts of many spatium mages."

Frustration flared in the pit of my stomach. Regis, sensing it, hit my leg lightly with his tail.

"Fine," I said, recognizing a losing battle when I saw one. "What about the lesser beings scouring this place, looting everything they can in hopes of getting stronger and finding pieces of knowledge that you have stored here? So they can bring it back to the asuras they serve?"

"As you've witnessed firsthand, we have devised safeguards for those contingencies to—"

"Well those safeguards are slowly failing," I cut in. "It may hold for some time, but, like I said, an asura of the Vritra Clan is already close to gaining insights into what your people knew about aether by using lesser beings to explore these ruins for him."

"You must gain insights into aether faster then. Compared to the asura, who is not even capable of traversing this plane, your unique physique and understanding gives you an advantage," the crystal answered.

"It's not enough. Agrona has had hundreds—if not thousands—of years as a head start!"

The crystal dimmed. "But despite all of that, this Agrona sees you as a threat, yes?"

I frowned. "Well, yes. But—"

"Then there is hope. It means that there is a realistic possibility of you succeeding."

My frustration boiled up again. Talking to this rock wasn't getting me anywhere. What had its answers provided except for more questions?

"My job is neither to guide you nor to reassure you. It is also not within my power to control the outcome of Fate, merely to tip it in our favor," the rock said, as if sensing my frustration. "And it is why you will be receiving these..."

Suddenly, the halos of stone revolving around the crystal halted and a flash of purple light enveloped me before I had the chance to react.

A slight tingle radiated up my right forearm and down my spine, but even that lasted only for a second. The light dimmed and the first thing I noticed was a black rune drawn on the inside of my forearm. "What is this?"

"That..." the crystal said, "is an extradimensional storage engraved directly onto your arm. You mentioned your regenerative abilities to me, so this rune will stay with you even if your arm is cut off, as long as it is eventually regrown."

"So no one can steal anything stored inside there?" Regis asked, pulling my arm down with his paw so he could get a better look.

"Exactly," the crystal replied. "This does limit the space within the rune, but it will fit a crate's worth of anything inorganic or dead."

My eyes studied the complex geometric shapes that made up the rune running down my arm. "This—"

"You also told me that this asura you're fighting against has created a civilization of mages with basic spellforms running down their backs to aid them in magic. In order for you to better assimilate, I have engraved some useless runes down your back that roughly describes your aetheric spells as a rare subtype of pure mana," the crystal explained. "I'm not sure how well these Alacryans are able to read spellform, but it should allow you to use your basic aetheric abilities without attracting attention."

"Wow. You're totally an Alacryan now," Regis teased, using his paw to lift up the back of my shirt.

Shooting my companion a glare, I swatted his paw away.

"Take caution. If you use an edict of aether, the godrune will shine above these faux runes," the crystal warned.

I nodded in understanding, suddenly guilty at my expression of frustration toward the entity. "Thank you, truly. Both these gifts will help tremendously."

"Don't thank me just yet. The real artifact is within the extradimensional storage rune on your arm. It holds the insights needed to unlock another godrune."

My eyes widened as I hastily withdrew the single item from the storage: a small cuboid stone that rested in the palm of my hand. Aside from its shape and deceivingly heavy weight, it was unremarkable.

Still, I was excited at the prospect of unlocking another godrune without blindly trying to gain insight.

"Will this teach me how to create an aetheric weapon like you were able to do? Or maybe negate impact?"

The crystal brightened. "No. This will be something far more worthwhile if you are able to decipher it."

"Decipher?" Regis asked. "So that rock isn't just going to give Arthur a godrune?"

"If that were possible, I'm sure that the Indrath or Vritra Clans would have long since taken control over the edict of Fate," the crystal replied. "No. This is but a mind's compass into gaining insights, and it's one that even I was not able to fully unravel while still alive."

"Is it not possible for me to trade this artifact with another that would give me the ability I mentioned before?" I asked. "Learning to manifest a weapon or being able to negate physical attacks would be tremendously helpful in the fight to come."

"These two edicts are minor branches that I believe you can gain insights to on your own," the crystal stated. "On the other hand, that artifact holds an edict capable of aiding you in your exploration of the Relictombs, and also to help you turn the tides in your upcoming battle."

I placed the artifact back into the pocket dimension, along with the bag that had Sylvie's stone in it. "Fine, but you just said that even you weren't able to decipher this artifact. If you could at least help me gain insight into manifesting an aether—"

Suddenly, we were back in the laboratory, the two of us standing in front of the glass-like portal.

"Did you really have to haggle with an ancient, sentient aether crystal?" Regis said, shaking his head.

"I was able to get a few additional perks because of that, wasn't I?"

For all the trials of the Relictombs, for the knowledge and tools I had gained, the thought of crossing the threshold of the portal, of stepping out into Alacrya, was daunting. Even after everything I had gone through since arriving in the Relictombs, I didn't feel anywhere closer to being able to face Agrona. In fact, I still felt weaker now than I had before my mana core was ruined. Still, Agrona wouldn't stop until he succeeded in gaining insight into Fate, and I owed it to my family, Tess, Virion—everyone else I cared about—to keep trying.

At least I had received some tangible tasks I needed to accomplish.

"Damn," I said as a thought came to my mind.

"Language!" Regis said, his wolf's maw split into a grin.

"The crystal thing never told me what it meant by 'descendant."

"Well, maybe if you wouldn't have haggled so much, there would have been time for that." Regarding me seriously, Regis asked, "How were you able to gain insight into another edict of aether, by the way? Seeing that lightning coming out of you was a bit of a shock." My companion let out a bark of laughter. "Get it? A bit of a—"

"Burst Step," I answered with a smirk. "Turns out that the technique I developed a few years back was the first step into gaining insight into this specific edict."

Regis tilted his head. "Pun intended?"

I frowned. "What pun?"

"Step... never mind." Regis let out a sigh. "So, what changed from the original Burst Step?"

While difficult to explain using words, I described the sensation that I had felt when using Burst Step against the titanic beast guarding the portal out of the convergence zone. Instead of stimulating just the parts of my body needed to take that "step," I channeled aether throughout my body. Different from when I used aether to strengthen myself, the knowledge that I had gained insight into guided me. It was almost like tuning the frequency of aether into a specific channel for a split second, allowing me to cut through space to a predetermined location.

Regis looked more confused than before I explained it. Without the insights that I had gained at that moment, I probably would've had the same look. After gaining insights into both the edict of Destruction and this specific branch of space, I could see why Indrath's attempts at gaining insights into aether through torturing the ancient mages—the djinn—were fruitless.

It's not that they didn't explain, it's that they *couldn't*. Even this latest edict was different from when I had fully used Sylvia's dragon will. Back when I was able to use this pseudo-Burst Step, I was "folding" space and taking a physical step through that fold in order to cross an impossible distance.

This, while having a similar outcome, was different. I wasn't manipulating the space around me, but manipulating my body into this aetheric vibration capable of slipping through space at a near-instant speed.

"So it's like Burst Step 2.0," Regis said.

"It's not true teleportation, but I'd say it's on a much higher level than Burst Step."

Regis's tail began to wag. "So like... Divine Step?"

I let out a sigh. "Must you give a name to everything? Don't you think it sort of belittles the technique?"

"Only if the name sucks," he responded. "Hmm... Asura Step?"

I raised a brow. "Our enemies, the ones we have to beat, are asuras."

"You're right," he said, then his eyes lit up. "Ooh! God Step."

I thought for a moment before a smile crept up on my face. "God Step... I like it."

"Great!" Regis suddenly jumped, disappearing into my back. 'Are you ready for Alacrya, princess?'

Taking a deep breath, I faced the portal, staring into the scene on the other side. I needed to take it one step at a time. Starting with this one.

"Of course."

281 MAERIN

I stepped through the portal, not really knowing what to expect on the other side.

What I didn't expect—with my experience with the Alacryans both in Dicathen as well as in the Relictombs—was for the two guards standing on either side of me to literally jump in surprise and let out screams of terror.

Regis chortled in amusement, but I honestly wasn't sure what to make of the situation.

The guard on my right, a rather plump man wearing plate armor that obviously couldn't contain his wide girth, managed to muster up what little training he had in order to at least point his trembling spear at me. It only took his skinnier companion a second longer to follow suit.

"W-who goes there?" quavered the skinnier guard.

I was still considering how best to answer when the rounder guard spoke.

"Did you—are—a-are you coming from the *R-Relictombs*?" he sputtered, his head shifting left and right.

'Don't bother answering these stooges. Just kill them,' Regis groaned.

Ignoring the voice in my head urging me to kill the bumbling pair, an action that would almost certainly result in me being hunted down and executed, I looked at the rounder guard, who flinched under my gaze, and answered, "Yes."

The guard to my left let out an audible gasp. It was becoming more and more challenging not to roll my eyes.

"E-esteemed ascender," the guard on my right stammered, bowing as much as his potbelly would allow him to before raising his head. "Allow this one to guide you to Maerin Town's chief."

He gestured for me to follow after him, and the other one trailed close behind. Pushing aside the idle thought that maybe one of them should've stayed behind to guard the portal, I instead turned my attention to the sights around me.

Like the men guarding it, the hall I'd arrived in was rather dull. While not large—no bigger than the size of a modest house in Ashber—it had features that obviously displayed its importance. A line of pillars

towered over us on both sides, holding sconces of actual fire on each one. Upon closer inspection, I could see intricate carvings of a basilisk in its humanoid form being revered by genuflecting men and women. Each pillar told a brief story, all leading to the same message of worship toward the basilisks.

They made my stomach curdle.

I followed the guards, both of whom kept casting nervous glances over the shoulders at me every ten seconds, through the smooth marbled floors in peace until we reached the exit. Light seeped in between and around the two ironbark doors, and I was suddenly keenly aware of my longing to see the sun.

The doors opened with a screech and groan, and I was bathed in rays of sunlight. A knot formed in my stomach and I found myself struggling to hold back tears. The warm touch of the sun enveloped me like a mother's embrace.

"Uhh... esteemed ascend—"

"Shhh! He must be cultivating insight or something!"

I closed my eyes for just a moment, gathering myself before stepping through the blanket of light that spilled over me like warmed honey.

As my eyes adjusted, I was able to take in my surroundings. The little village was equal to the hall I'd just left and the guards who watched over it. That is to say, the entire place was rather unimpressive.

Single-story houses of brick and mortar were arrayed uniformly on either side of a cobblestone road about three carriages wide. Civilians could be seen going about their day-to-day tasks, from hanging laundry on a clothesline to tending to their gardens while children ran around swinging wooden swords wrapped in cloth. There was even a child drawing random scribbles on his friend's back using coal.

It wasn't long before I noticed a stench reminiscent of a back alley outhouse emanating from somewhere behind us.

"Please bear with the odor until we reach the town proper, esteemed ascender," the thin man said, noticing me wrinkle my nose. "We're at the edge of the town, so the smell from the outskirts seeps through the walls if the wind blows wrong."

I turned around to see a wall over twenty feet high behind the edifice we had just walked out of.

"What's on the other side?" I asked out of simple curiosity.

"The vagrants and parasites that were evicted from Maerin Town for either not paying their taxes or committing a crime are all congregated there. Our benevolent chief allowed them to stay in that area and even take jobs from residents within the town, if the need arises," the rotund guard explained. "That also includes *nightly* jobs as well, if esteemed—ow!"

The thinner guard had smacked his companion in the shin with his spear. "Stop being an idiot, Chumo! Do you think an ascender has so few options that he would resort to bedding those foul wenches?"

The two digressed into a heated argument, elbowing each other and whispering insults as if they didn't think I would notice.

'I wonder if this skit was something they rehearsed,' Regis pondered, obviously amused.

It was interesting to see that, unlike the ascenders I had met in the Relictombs, these two stooges didn't have gaps in their armor to reveal the marks or crests lining their spine.

Perhaps flaunting their markings was something only higher-tier mages did to show their status?

Many of the civilians we passed by were staring at me. Some had the decency to pretend like they were doing something else, but most just blatantly stopped and gawked.

Some of the men sized me up, instinctually puffing up their chests even while their heads lowered in respect.

A group of town girls who couldn't have been much older than my sister blushed after making eye contact, then burst out in a fit of giggles behind us. A woman my mother's age met my eye unabashedly, adjusted her blouse to accentuate her chest, and gave me an exaggerated, lusty smile.

"See, Chumo! Look at everyone just drooling over our esteemed ascender. He has the pick of the lot," said the thinner guard, who I started mentally referring to as "Not-Chumo."

"How far is the town chief's office?" I asked, casting a cold glare at the both of them.

"J-just a few blocks, right at the heart of the town proper!" Chumo answered, visibly shrinking under my gaze.

Houses soon gave way to storefronts as we got closer to the heart of the town. I couldn't help but reminisce about my time living in Ashber. Although Maerin Town was much larger and more developed than Ashber had been, it had a more peaceful ambience compared to the cities of Dicathen that I had grown used to.

We reached a place where the cobblestone road suddenly branched off into four separate roads—one main, and three smaller paths that each led to an estate-like structure. Each one was focused around a single large building, but the estates were isolated, surrounded by wide fields and what looked like training grounds.

"What are these buildings for?" I asked. Those three buildings were the only multi-leveled structures I'd seen so far, so I assumed they carried some importance.

"Ah! These three schools are the pride of Maerin Town!" Chumo puffed. "The one to our left is where our children who have received their first mark as a Shield attend, while the larger building is for Casters and the black-roofed one is for our future Strikers!"

"Our instructors are all very capable, with crests themselves," Not-Chumo chimed in. "And the head instructor from our Striker school has two crests, and once taught in an actual city!"

"Speaking of, you came at a great time, esteemed ascender," Chumo said. "Not only is bestowment day tomorrow, but in a few days, students from our neighboring towns will gather here for our annual exhibition!"

While the 'bestowment day' sounded interesting, I didn't want to waste too much time in this backwater town. My priority was to get a map of where we were after speaking with the town chief.

"I wonder if any of our Strikers have a shot at winning the tournament," Chumo muttered to Not-Chumo.

"Draster, the chief's kid, probably has the best shot, right? I heard he just tested into the third stage of base-tier," Not-Chumo replied.

"Yeah, but there's that little monster from Cromer Town that just tested into the fourth stage of base-tier, and at the age of fifteen!"

"Damn. And I heard an elder from one of Aramoor's academies is actually going to spectate this time to see if there are any potentials to take back as a candidate."

The two continued their gossiping, completely carefree, as we neared what looked like the town square. The number of people in the street quickly inflated. The smoothly-paved center of the town was surrounded by storefront and eateries, and several vendors stood next to wooden carts loaded with goods for trade. Some were filled with food while others carried leather goods or simple clothing. Nothing caught my interest.

What did catch my eye was the coliseum, which dwarfed the single-storied establishments around it. By the number of soldiers—actual, able-bodied guards that displayed some semblance of strength—guarding the large bowl-shaped structure, I could guess the level of importance it carried.

Civilians in carriages and carts pulled by horses and mana beasts lined up in front of the main entrance, waiting to get inside. From the materials they hauled in the many carts, it seemed like they were there to prepare for this upcoming exhibition.

'It seems like this esteemed ascender is interested in the upcoming events,' Regis noted.

Maybe a little, I admitted. The idea of seeing how the Alacryans trained and fought was certainly of interest to me. There was a part of me that was just excited by the idea of competition, though, and the lively air surrounding the coliseum was infectious.

"-scender?"

I turned to see my two escorts waiting for me.

"It's this way, esteemed ascender," Not-Chumo said, gesturing me toward a domed building with a long portico supported by columns similar in design to the ones in the edifice that housed the portal.

Once inside, I was guided to the front counter of an otherwise empty building. Behind it, an obviously bored young woman was fiddling with her brown hair, which had been tied back tightly in a bun.

Chumo leaned his elbow on the counter. "Hey, Loreni."

"Skipping work again for a snack, Chumo?" Loreni asked, not bothering to look up. "Be careful. That's how you two got stuck guarding the descension chamber to begin with, wasn't it? Honest to Vritra, I don't know why the old man bothers placing guards there when there hasn't been an ascender come out from that portal in years. If it were me—"

"Uhh, Loreni?" Not-Chumo chimed in, nervously glancing between me and the girl, who had now moved on to picking dirt from underneath her nails.

Loreni finally looked, glaring at the guards with clear annoyance. "Wha—Oh!" Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed as she stood up and smoothed out her blouse. "W-who is... this?"

"He's an ascender," Chumo whispered, leaning in closer.

I didn't think the girl's eyes could open any wider, but they did. "Oh my! Please accept my humble apologies for my rudeness, esteemed ascender. W-we don't get many ascenders here, so I had no reason to assume that they'd be—oh, I should stop talking now. Are you here to meet the town chief? Of course you are, that was a silly question. Right this way!"

Loreni guided me through a corridor, often peeking back before nervously turning away while the two guards snickered behind me. We arrived in the town chief's office, modestly decorated with a desk and two leather couches separated by an oval tea table.

"Chief Mason, our town's leader, will be here shortly. Please make yourself comfortable while I get you something to drink!" Loreni exclaimed as she bowed. Her agitated movements were so halting that her bun burst, sending her auburn hair cascading around her face in a tangle. She quickly gathered it up, but her face had turned as red as a strawberry.

The poor girl dipped her head once more and practically ran out of the room while Chumo and Not-Chumo stood guard outside the door. Loreni stopped just long enough to whisper a few choice profanities at the two guards, and I burst out with an unexpected laugh.

'It's been a while since you laughed,' Regis mused.

It's been a while since I've been around so many idiots, I quipped. Regis mentally nodded in agreement.

Taking a moment to open the window behind me, I basked in the gentle breeze that flowed through it, carrying in the chatter and sounds from the town square. Laughter, both young and old, chimed like melodic bells that nearly lulled me to sleep.

As I lounged back on one of the couches and listened to the mundane babble of the town, my mind replayed all that I had gone through: Fighting not only to live, but to grow stronger from the moment I had woken up. I had lost Sylvie and was separated from my loved ones with no way of knowing how they were doing. But in this brief moment, I was at peace as it finally dawned upon me...

I had made it out of those hellish Relictombs.

282 BLOOD OF THE ANCIENTS

ELEANOR LEYWIN

I heard the creatures skittering through the darkness before I saw them. The dim light artifact I carried only lit up about ten feet around me, enough to walk without twisting my ankle but not enough to show me what was coming.

There were three, maybe four of them, and they were still at least fifty feet down the tunnel.

Cave rats.

We'd first discovered them when exploring the tunnels around the refuge. The beasts hadn't posed much of a threat to the refugee shelter, in fact they'd even been really useful since we could eat them. They didn't taste great, but without them, bringing enough protein into our refuge would have been a lot more difficult. Still, people had to be careful, because the cave rats could be dangerous for someone traveling on their own.

Thankfully, I had Boo with me, so I wasn't too worried about one pack of cave rats.

The mana beasts were about the size of wolves and moved in packs like wolves too. From what we could tell, they were the dominant predator in these tunnels, surviving off the smaller vermin.

I swung my bow off of my shoulder and drew the string, conjuring an arrow into it. Boo huffed, but we'd practiced this before. He would stay behind me, out of the line of fire, until the enemy got close, then I could fall back while he charged forward.

The scratching of the cave rats' claws on the rough stone floor of the tunnel suddenly quickened, but I waited until I saw the first pair of eyes glowing red in the reflected light of my little lantern stone.

The string hummed as the beam of white light flew into the dark. A second arrow had been conjured and nocked by the time the first found its mark right between the lead rat's eyes.

The beast tumbled end over end, just a shadow at the edge of my vision. My second arrow sped past it, *thudding* into another cave rat I couldn't see yet.

The third beast sprinted past its dead companions, trundling heavily like a little bear, but it didn't make it much closer before one of my arrows struck it in the joint between the neck and the shoulder. Its legs gave out and it slid forward on its chest, wheezing horribly.

I put it out of its misery with a final arrow through the skull.

The tunnel was silent except for the soft sound of my own breath and Boo's deep snorting behind me.

"Sorry boy," I said with a smirk. "I promise I'll leave some for you next—"

Movement from above drew my attention: a fourth cave rat was using its hard claws to creep slowly across the tunnel ceiling. It was shrunken and mangey, its mottled black-and-gray fur sticking out wildly.

Moving slowly, I set my hand to the bowstring and began to draw back, but the creature reacted much more quickly than its dead companions. It dropped to the ground, spinning in the air to land on its gnarled little feet, then opened its grotesque mouth and hissed, spewing out a cloud of greenish gas.

I loosed my arrow, but the cave rat—if it even was a cave rat—leapt to the side, spun, and bolted down the hallway, quickly moving beyond the range of my faint light source.

Stumbling backwards to escape the fumes, I sent another arrow speeding down the tunnel after it, hoping to hit it blindly, but the arrow only impacted against stone and then fizzled out.

Boo roared and barrelled past me, tearing through the dark after the strange cave rat, ready to tear it apart.

The tunnel smelled sweet and putrid, like rotting fruit, making my eyes run and my nose burn. I stepped back further and waited, a cold shiver running up my back. What the hell was that? I wondered, rubbing away the goosebumps that had appeared on my arms.

After less than a minute, Boo came lumbering back down the tunnel. From the absence of fresh blood on his muzzle, it was clear that he hadn't caught the creature. I didn't like the idea of that creature hiding somewhere out of sight, clinging from the ceiling like a bat, watching me... I shivered again.

"Let's get moving, Boo," I said resting my hand on his thick, shaggy fur. Then, to reassure myself, I repeated the mantra that Helen had taught me: "Eyes up and bow steady. Never falter and always ready."

Moving quickly and quietly, I held my breath as I passed through the foul mist that still hung in the air. The dead cave rats lay in twisted lumps on the floor, and would soon enough draw more of them in from the surrounding tunnels. I'd have to be cautious on my way back to the underground town.

I looked at every jutting protrusion of rock on the ceiling and walls, and on two different occasions I shot an arrow at what turned out to be loose stones that had fallen from the roof, but in the dim edges of my light they had looked like cave rats lying in wait.

Each twist and turn of the path leading to Elder Rinia's little cavern made my heart beat more and more as I crept around the blind corners, bow at the ready, waiting for the mangy beast to jump on me from above or breathe out its noxious fumes.

Finally, I saw the steady glow of the light artifact that hung over the crack in the wall that served as Elder Rinia's door. Letting out a deep breath of relief, I realized that the burning in my nose had moved down into my throat and lungs, and that it was painful to breathe.

The gas...

Rushing forward, I slipped through the crack and burst into the small cavern that Elder Rinia had claimed as her home.

Boo grunted from behind me; he usually didn't mind waiting out in the tunnel while I talked to Rinia, but he could sense my distress. I heard him pawing at the narrow opening behind me, as if he could claw his way through to help me.

The old seer was sitting in a wicker chair with her feet held to a weak little fire that burned within a natural alcove along the far wall of the cave.

She turned as I stumbled through her door, one brow raised. "Ellie, dear, what are you—" Elder Rinia stood up with surprising swiftness, peering at me with concern. "But what's happened, little one?"

I tried to speak, but could only sputter. "I—I—c-can't—"

The old seer was next to me in an instant, her rough fingers prodding at my neck, my lips, pushing me head back to peer into my nostrils, prying my mouth open to stare down my throat.

My panic only grew as Elder Rinia *tsked*, then rushed over to a tall cabinet that was pressed against the rough wall of the cave and began pushing aside the clutter of items within. "Where is it? Where *is* it!"

Then my breathing stopped being painful, because I stopped being able to breathe at all. I stumbled toward the old elf and fell to my knees, one hand raised toward her pleadingly. My lungs were on fire and it felt as if my eyes would burst from my skull.

"Hah!" Elder Rinia hooted from somewhere above me, though she sounded very far away. Then something shoved me roughly from the side and I toppled over, rolling onto my back.

A blurry face hovered over mine, and something cool was pressed against my lips. Thick, icy liquid filled my mouth and began to slide unaided down my throat, and it was like someone had cast a spell to freeze my insides solid.

The liquid, whatever it was, wriggled within my lungs and throat, but when I gasped, sucking in a lungful of frigid air, I was still able to breathe. The sensation of drowning in the slime was too much for my body, however, which immediately began to try and remove the cold ooze by forcing me to be sick.

Rolling over and pushing myself up on my hands and knees, I began to heave like a cat coughing up a hairball.

Bright blue sludge splattered against the ground between my hands, pooled thickly, congealed back together like patches of slime mold slithering across the stone, then shriveled, blackened, and was still.

I wiped spittle from my trembling lips and turned, horrified, to Elder Rinia.

The old seer smiled kindly and patted my back. "Alright, alright. Right as rain, now."

I sat back on my hands and took a deep breath. The air still felt as cold as a frosty winter morning and tasted slightly of peppermint. The burning pain and the lingering smell of rot were gone.

"What—what was that?" My eyes flicked toward the black goop, then back to her.

She turned and walked slowly back to her chair, settling into it carefully, suddenly the very picture of a frail old woman. "Frost snail blubber. Works a treat for burns. Doesn't last outside of its casing, though."

Scooting away from the pile of black ooze, I looked at Elder Rinia in disgust. "So you shoved slug snot down my throat? But I wasn't even burned... there was some sort of gas... I thought I'd been poisoned."

"Chemical burn," she said dismissively. "The elder who taught me was also a gifted healer. I don't have the ancients' blood, though, so I've had to make due with more mundane remedies."

I'd never heard Elder Rinia speak of her past or how she'd learned her magical arts before. For a moment the excitement of learning more about the mysterious seer was enough to put the cave rat and my near-death experience out of my mind. "Was that the same person who taught you about the runes and aether and stuff?"

"Aye. You could say they were singularly talented. It's taken me a lifetime to learn even a portion of what they knew..." Elder Rinia trailed off into thought.

She jumped, then smiled warmly when I said, "I can't imagine anyone more knowledgeable than you."

"Perhaps. It's truly unfortunate that the ancients' wisdom died with them..."

The ancient mages had built wonders that we still didn't fully understand: the floating city of Xyrus, the flying castle, the teleportation platforms that connected all of Dicathen. I'd read about them a little bit, but there wasn't very much that we knew for sure.

"By the way, Ellie, would you mind calling off that great beast of yours before he tears down my front door?" Elder Rinia asked in amusement.

"Oh, sorry!" Shaking slightly, I jumped up and ran back to the crack that led back to the tunnel. Boo was still scratching at the entrance; he had forced himself into the gap up to his shoulders, but that was as far as he could go.

He stopped when he saw me. "It's okay, Boo, I'm okay. You just rest now, I'll be back out after I've spoken with Elder Rinia, okay?"

My bond eyed me, then snorted and began scooting backwards, slowly dislodging himself from the narrow gap.

I patted his snout and went back into the cave, walking carefully around the black ooze to where Elder Rinia sat.

There was only one chair next to the fire, so I sat cross legged on the warm stone at Elder Rinia's feet, feeling more like a child than I had in years. Despite being there for a reason, something the old seer said had stuck in my head.

"What did you mean, you don't have the ancients' blood?"

Elder Rinia scoffed and looked at me appraisingly. "Caught that, did you? Me and my mouth." Her expression turned thoughtful, as if she were trying to decide how much she could tell me—a look I'd seen many times before on the old elf's wrinkled face—then she took a deep breath.

"This isn't something most know, but when I was a girl I was taught that emitters—healers—carry the blood of the ancient mages in their veins. This, in fact, is the source of their aberrant form of magic."

"So, does that mean that Mom is descended from ancient mages? That... that Arthur and I are?" I wasn't sure what that would mean. I wasn't even sure if I believed the old seer. It seemed fantastical, even silly, to consider it. The ancient mages were figures out of stories, like the asura.

But then, the asura were real enough. Arthur had even gone to their homeland to train...

Elder Rinia shook her head. "I'm afraid I've taken us quite off track. Perhaps we can speak more about these things later. For now, I think it would be best that you explain what exactly you ran into on your way here?"

She had told me as much as she was willing, I knew. I also knew there was no point in arguing with her or trying to wheedle more information out of her. No one understood the power of simple words better than a seer, and there would be no convincing her to tell me anything she didn't want to, so I scooted a little closer to the fire and began to tell her about the attack in the tunnels.

Elder Rinia leaned forward in her chair, her hands steepled together as she listened to my story about the cave rats and the strange, sickly mana beast that had nearly killed me with its breath attack.

When I was finished, she leaned back and let out a long sigh. "A blight hob."

"What?" I asked, having never heard of such a creature before.

"Wicked creatures that are able to disguise themselves in order to live among other mana beasts. Most mana beasts are just that, beasts, but blight hobs are full of hatred and cruelty. Thankfully, they're not particularly strong, though they possess a mean cleverness that makes them dangerous to underestimate."

"Sounds like something you'd raise and train to keep people away," I muttered grumpily.

"Only if you want to be throttled in your sleep," Elder Rinia said, laughing darkly. "But you're here to discuss something else, aren't you? And since you've nearly died in the process, you'd better get on with it."

Caught off guard, I opened my mouth, coughed dryly, then closed my mouth again. Since the cave rat attack, I hadn't even thought about Virion's request, and now I realized that I wasn't sure how to ask what I needed to know.

Nervous fear caused my palms to sweat and my mouth to go dry. Rinia was looking at me expectantly, but I couldn't seem to order the words in my mind.

"Well, spit it out, child," Elder Rinia said impatiently, though not unkindly. "Tell me all about Virion's grand plan and ask me for my wisdom, I know that's why you're here."

"If—if you know why I'm here, why do you need me to ask you?" I stared into the fire, pointedly avoiding the old seer's penetrating gaze. I tried to sound nonchalant, as if I was teasing her, but my words had come out whimpering, like a frightened puppy.

She sighed heavily. "My dear..." There was so much kindness and warmth and tiredness in her breathy voice that I couldn't help but turn around and meet her eye. "You've nothing to fear here. You're being shouldered with burdens you shouldn't have to bear, but you need to know you can."

I want to go fight Alacryans, but I can't even ask my friend a simple question without shaking, I thought angrily. I am not a child.

"Elder Rinia," I said seriously, wiping my sweaty palms on my trousers and clearing my throat, "we will be sending a group—an assault force—into Elenoir to rescue a caravan of elven prisoners who are being moved—transported—from Zestier into newly formed holds along the edge of the El-Elshire forest. Commander Virion asks that you share your wisdom and tell us anything you can about this-this mission."

Elder Rinia had closed her eyes as I spoke, nodding absently. I waited, watching her eyeballs dart around beneath her closed lids. I imagined that she was reading some secret book that only she could see.

Her eyes fluttered open and she leaned forward, resting her face in her hands. Her wrinkled knuckles went white as she pressed her fingertips to her temples. When she spoke, her voice was raspy and strained.

"Before I can give my blessing for you to join this expedition to Elenoir, I'm going to need you to do a little something for me."

Her answer surprised me. "I'm sorry, I don't mean any disrespect, Elder Rinia, but I didn't come here for your blessing."

The elder gave me a knowing smile as she rested her chin on her palm. "No, but you'll need it if you hope to accomplish your goal."

I bowed, acknowledging the truth of her words. "What—what do you want me to do?"

"You're going to hunt and kill the blight hob for me, child."

283 THE TOWN CHIEF

ARTHUR LEYWIN

The brief moment of peace that I had while waiting for the town chief didn't last very long. I lifted my head from the back of the couch as rapid footsteps approached, quickly growing louder until the door swung open.

I was a bit startled to see the figure standing in the doorway. He was a bear of a man with bulging lumps of muscles for arms and a long white beard that flowed down to his wide chest.

His almond-colored skin had gone a sickly, pale white, and sweat dripped down into his beard. The man immediately fell to his knees with a thud. "This one deserves to die for putting esteemed ascender through such inconveniences! Sembian and Chumorith are ignorant of the ways outside of this measly town and did not mean to offend esteemed ascender. Please forgive them, as I am the one to blame for their lack of wisdom."

The large elder whipped his head back. "Sembian! Chumorith! Get down on your—"

"It's fine," I cut in. "There is no reason for you to ask for forgiveness."

Locking eyes with the two guards, I allowed a small, teasing smile to play across my lips. "Their antics were... entertaining, especially after having just left the tribulations of the Relictombs."

I could literally see the chief's body deflate in relief, but he remained on his knees. "Thank you for your benevolence, esteemed ascender."

"Please, get up," I said, gesturing to the couch in front of me. "Chief Mason, right?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed. The big chief used his beard to wipe the sweat from his brow as he took a seat before me. When he didn't have the look of a man who had been consigned to a public execution, Chief Mason seemed an energetic and kindly man. His body had gone to seed, but once he must have been a formidable warrior, if his trunk-like arms were any indication.

I was interested to notice that, despite his position, the man still had dirt on his hands.

"Ah! My apologies for my unkempt state, I was helping out with the renovation of our coliseum. We're a little behind for the upcoming events," the chief explained, looking down at his hands.

"Your guards told me about the bestowment and exhibition coming up in the next few days," I replied.

"Yes! It's our town's turn to host the exhibition. If esteemed ascender wishes to attend, we can definitely set up an announcement and—"

"There's no need. I plan to leave soon," I interjected respectfully. "I would've left immediately, but there was something I needed anyway."

"Yes! I will be happy to help in any way I can." The town chief paused and gave me an embarrassed look. "But, I do need to verify esteemed ascender's license and belongings. It's not that I don't believe that you are an ascender, but as the chief in charge of overseeing this town's descension chamber, I'm required to verify any ascender that exits the portal. I'm sure you understand..."

I hesitated for a moment. While the fake markings I had received should pass inspection, I didn't have a license. Meanwhile, the town chief hurried to his desk where he retrieved what looked like an obsidian pocket watch.

Turning around, I lifted the teal cloak that I wore over my otherwise black outfit to show the chief the markings engraved over my spine.

Chief Mason inhaled sharply. "Amazing. I recognize some of it, but I've never seen such complicated markings, esteemed ascender. Three distinct imprints, and judging by the complexity of the top marking, it has to be an emblem."

"Please, stop referring to me as 'esteemed ascender'." Lowering my clothes, I sat back down. "As for my license, unfortunately, I lost my dimension ring carrying all my belongings in the Relictombs. But I do have this."

I took out the white dagger in its embroidered sheath. The Denoir medallion swung from its cord, catching the light.

"This..." The town chief's eyes bulged as he carefully held the dagger, acting for all the world like he held a newborn baby instead of an instrument of death. "If I'm not mistaken, this is Highblood Denoir's insignia. Is estee—are you an ascender under their blood?"

"Yes," I lied.

"This is more than enough verification of your status, esteemed ascender," the town chief said, handing the weapon back to me with both hands. "It's an honor to be in your presence."

"I may not be here for much longer, but please keep this information to yourself."

"Yes, of course!" The chief nodded furiously. "My inquirer shows that you have no relics on you, so you are clear in all sense!"

"Wait. So that artifact can sense relics?" I asked, leaning forward to get a closer look.

"It has a very limited range, but yes," the town chief said with a furrowed brow. "Have you never been checked by an inquirer after your ascents?"

I cleared my throat, feigning embarrassment. "To be honest, this was my first ascent. I made a blunder and lost the simulet that was in my ring, separating me from my team fairly early on."

"Oh no," the chief gasped. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and one hand combing through his beard unconsciously. "That's horrible. Thankfully, you came out alive."

"Yes. I got lucky to be close to a portal in the next zone," I said.

I explained my situation using as much Alacryan vocabulary as possible, nervous that my ignorance of little things, like the inquirer, could give me away. "But anyway. I know we're in a town called Maerin, but I'm not exactly sure where that is in Alacrya. Do you, by any chance, have a map you can part with so I can be on my way?"

"You're in luck! A travelling merchant came by with copied maps several weeks ago, so I actually do have some," Chief Mason said, going back to his desk. "Might I ask your destination?"

His innocent question left me stumped. I didn't have a specific destination in mind, aside from my obligation to return the dagger and medallion to Caera in the central dominion.

"Aha! Here it is." Chief Mason unrolled a large parchment that spilled over the oval tea table. On it was a piece of land that oddly resembled the side-view of a horned skull with its mouth open and a large curved bump protruding from the northern end. Alacrya was segmented into five parts with a thick line, separating the north, east, west, south, and center.

"How far is the journey to the central dominion?" I asked.

"Well, seeing as we're at the southern tip of the eastern dominion," he answered, pointing to a small dot on the map, "it would take around five months on foot, or about sixty or so days in a carriage."

My eyes widened and I glanced up from the map to meet the chief's eye. "That long?"

"This is the normal way, of course," the town chief replied. "There are teleportation gates available in the major cities. The price is hefty... but what am I saying, I'm sure you're familiar with all that. No doubt flashing around that dagger lets you move with ease, eh?"

I didn't want to show off the dagger too frequently in case I attracted unwanted attention, but it was nice to know it gave me some additional security if I got stuck somewhere.

Studying the map, I pointed to the city closest to the town we were in. "How far is Aramoor from here then?"

"It's just a short two weeks by carriage, if conditions permit," Chief Mason answered with a weary chuckle.

I let out a sigh. "We're... really on the outskirts, aren't we?"

"Aye. Truth be told, settlements with descension chambers that don't get used often, like ours, don't get dimension gates built for fast travel."

Piecing together what Loreni had said and what the chief confirmed, the portal I had stepped through only allowed ascenders to *leave* the Relictombs, not enter.

Wanting to understand more about how ascents and the Relictombs worked, I asked the town chief, "So does Aramoor have an ascension chamber?"

"Of course!" The bear of a man huffed. "Aramoor may be a small city in the outskirts of Etril, but even we have an ascension chamber!"

"I see..." I muttered, slightly taken aback. "My apologies. I rarely leave the central dominion."

The chief's eyes bulged. "Oh n-no offense taken, esteemed ascender. Please don't apologize! It is rare indeed for highbloods of the central dominion to travel this far out!"

With a polite smile, I went back to studying the map, glad that the chief's internalized fear of the ascenders was working in my favor. Without it, he would be a lot more suspicious about my questions, I was sure.

Despite my questions, the truth was that travelling to the central dominion wasn't necessary, at least not for some time. My true goal was to reach the next Relictombs. It didn't seem like the specific ascension chamber used to enter into the Relictombs determined where you ended up once inside, so my first stop would be Aramoor.

Travelling on foot would probably be faster than getting a horse, but it would still take over a week to get there, even running day and night.

As I was thinking over my options, Loreni entered and bowed to the two of us. "Excuse my intrusion. I've brought some tea and snacks."

"Perfect timing, Loreni," the chief said. "Our esteemed ascender's destination seems to be to Aramoor. Make some arrangements to prepare a horse and a guide for him."

"Of course!" Loreni placed the tray carefully onto the table and turned to leave when she abruptly stopped. "Ah!"

Both the chief and I raised our heads.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you both," Loreni whispered. "But perhaps the fastest and most comfortable way for esteemed ascender to get to Aramoor might be to just wait?"

The chief raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you've heard the rumors, Chief Mason, but I just got a confirmation letter today confirming that a representative from Stormcove Academy is actually visiting Maerin Town to spectate and maybe even recruit one of our student mages," Loreni explained.

"Ah!" Chief Mason snapped his finger in realization. "Stormcove Academy has a tempus warp!"

Just as I was about to ask Regis for some clarification on what a tempus warp was, the town chief turned to me excitedly.

"This is great news! If esteemed ascender stays until the representative from Stormcove Academy arrives, I'm sure they will be more than happy to take you back with them. This way, you can simply go through the temporary gate and arrive in Aramoor immediately."

I nodded calmly, though internally I was still trying to wrap my head around the idea of a school official in a small city having access to such powerful technology.

'It's probably not as powerful as the one that the Alacryan who invaded Xyrus Academy used to enter and escape with Elijah... or Nico... or whatever the hell his name now,' Regis suggested.

It was hard to swallow, but it made some sense that Agrona's people had access to this technology considering how long he'd been dabbling in aether. And as astonishing as it was that a mere representative of a school had access to such technology, it also gave me hope.

The person from Stormcove Academy might not have a tempus warp powerful enough for intercontinental teleportation, but someone higher up might. If I could acquire one, I could go home.

'Don't get your hopes up. If Uto's memories are any indication, Agrona is probably the only one that has access to something like that, and it's not like he'll just let anyone use it.'

Yeah. My life has never been that easy, I responded internally.

Standing up, I regarded both Loreni and Chief Mason. "Thank you both for your help. It seems like I'll need to rely on your hospitality for a few more days then."

The town chief bolted up to his feet, excitement radiating from his wrinkled face. "That's great! There are a few homes left vacant for important visitors! They're most likely shabby cottages compared to esteemed ascender's estate in the central dominion, but please feel free to use any one of them!"

"I'll be in your care then," I said with a faint smile. "And my name is Grey."

"Ascender Grey of Blood Denoir," the town chief muttered as both he and Loreni bowed before me. "It's an honor to meet you."

After handing me the map, the town chief had Loreni escort me to the villa where I would be staying for the next few days.

Unsurprisingly, Chumo and Sembi—I caught myself using his name instead of calling him "Not-Chumo" and suppressed a smile—had remained next to the doors, keeping guard. When the two tried to follow along to "protect" us, Loreni shot them down with a glare, whispering, "Protect who? Esteemed ascender's left pinky toe is enough to beat you two."

Leaving the two withering guards to console each other, Loreni led me out of the administration building.

"You keep staring at me," I mentioned, making Loreni stiffen.

"I—uh... my apologies, esteemed ascender," she stammered, her eyes on her feet.

"I know I'm an ascender, but do I look that different from the people you usually see?"

"It's actually my first time seeing an ascender in person," she admitted, keeping her gaze glued to the ground. "And a man as... pretty as you."

Regis let out a chortle.

"You didn't mistake me for a woman, right?" I asked, immediately feeling self-conscious of my new appearance, despite what a silly worry it was.

She blushed, eyes wide. "Oh no! Not at all. It's just that your eyes are so golden and features so sharp that it's... very different from the boorish men that hunt mana beasts for a living."

The mention of my eye color put a knot in my chest. I took a deep breath and tried to swallow the painful emotion.

Loreni must've noticed my change in expression. "I hope you haven't been offended by our behavior, Ascender Grey. Chief Mason is probably the only person in Maerin Town who has come across an ascender before, and while I have been taught the proper etiquette of talking to an ascender, Chumo and Sembi have not."

"Based on how you all behave around me, it seems like ascenders tend to be pretty vain," I noted, thinking about Chief Mason's terror when he first entered his office.

"O-oh no, I mean... our town is a very remote and insignificant part of the Etril, much less all of Alacrya. It's understandable that we don't amount to much in the eyes of the great ascenders," she explained, forcing a wary chuckle.

'Elite mages being asses to the less-adept? Not very hard to believe,' Regis chimed in.

We walked in relative silence for the rest of the short hike to the villa, which was on a gated path just off the edge of town proper. The dirt road led up to a secluded property surrounded by a ring of trees where three single-story houses faced each other, each with a grass lot divided by a tall white fence.

"This will be where you'll stay until the exhibition ends. That's in about six days. Chief Mason will notify the representative from Stormcove Academy of your presence and request them to take you along when they return to Aramoor," Loreni informed me as she opened the fence leading to the leftmost house. "There will be a guard stationed at the gate to the path leading up here, and an attendant will be sent your way to help you with anything you need."

"Thank you," I said, giving the girl a friendly smile.

She handed me the keys to the house. "Of course, esteemed ascender. Did you have any questions for me before I leave you to your rest?"

"Just one." I turned, looking past the high brick walls that surrounded the town. I could see several hills blanketed with trees. Based on the map, past those hills was the southeastern coast of Alacrya. "You mentioned mages hunting mana beasts for a living earlier. Is anyone allowed to hunt here?"

"Yes! This area is known for its high population of rocavids, a mana beast indigenous to this part of the country. Their hides are very popular for leatherwork, and their hooves are often used to make tools," she answered, like she was reading out of a manual. "Why do you ask?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, chagrined. "I lost most of my belongings during my last ascent, so I need some money."

Loreni's eyes widened. She was breathless with fear when she said, "The town chief can provide you with gold, esteemed ascender! There's no need for you to work!"

"It's okay," I said with a chuckle. "I also want to stretch my limbs from time to time."

"As you wish. If you'd like to go hunting, be aware that the beasts generally become more powerful as you travel north. I'd normally suggest caution, but..." Loreni trailed off, shrugging.

I nodded. "I'll keep that in mind. Now if you'll excuse me, I should wash up and get some rest."

The little villa, while modest and decorated minimally, was clean and comfortable. It had running water and the sort of indoor plumbing only found in cities in Dicathen, something I hadn't expected in such a remote place. It had everything I needed to rest somewhat comfortably after my long weeks facing the constant threat of death in the Relictombs.

"Finally, some fresh air," Regis said after he left my body. The shadow wolf stretched, then trotted around the one-bedroom villa, sniffing the gray leather couch and looking through the metal container inside the kitchen.

"I know you look like a dog, but is it necessary for you to act like one?" I teased, stripping off my clothes.

"Wolf," Regis corrected. "And no. But for some reason, with my transformation, my nose is super sensitive to aether, which is basically food for me."

"Good to know." I stepped into the shower, pumping the lever until cold water began pouring down the dispenser.

After washing myself and my clothes, I rifled through the closet of generic attire and picked out a pair of tan trousers and one of the few shirts that didn't have a gaping hole down the back.

This was the first time I had gotten the chance to look at myself clearly. The metal sheet that served as a mirror showed me a man that looked to be in his early twenties, thin yet toned with broad shoulders. Aside from the runes running down my back and the underside of my right forearm, I didn't have a scar or blemish on my athletic body.

The face that stared back at me still had traces of Arthur, but it was unnerving to see myself so changed. My eyes were still large, but their golden color made me think of the asuras, and my now wheat-colored hair, which fell just above my shoulder in still dripping locks, seemed to me almost gray and lifeless compared to my original auburn coloring.

Considering where I was, it was actually great that I had a new appearance; I didn't have to worry about someone recognizing me as the Lance that had killed thousands of Alacryan soldiers. But I couldn't help but worry about how everyone I knew would look at me. How would my mother and sister treat me when they saw me like this? How would Tess?

"Still not used to it?" Regis asked, sitting just behind me.

I put on the black shirt and walked away, combing my hair back with my hands. "No."

"You're still you, princess," he said, perhaps trying to comfort me. The shadow wolf followed me as I sank down on the couch, which faced the window overlooking the fenced yard.

"I know that." I let out a sigh. "I just hope that everyone else does too."

Anxious and impatient to progress in whatever way I could, I withdrew the relic from my new extradimensional storage rune.

The ancient mage had said this wasn't an edict or an artifact, but more of a guide that would help me unlock a specific edict of aether.

"He could've at least told me what branch it was," I muttered, studying the surface of the stone cube.

Seeing nothing significant on the surface of the stone, I imbued aether into it.

As soon as my aether touched the cube, a foreign aetheric substance from the cube reached back out to me, filling my vision like a blanket of glowing purple.

284 BOW'S BLIGHT

ELEANOR LEYWIN

I smirked at Elder Rinia. Her wry sense of humor was one of the things I really liked about her. While everyone else in the underground town walked around as if every day was one long funeral, the old seer could still find humor despite everything that had happened.

The smirk slowly slid off my face as Elder Rinia fixed me with a piercing, humorless stare.

"Wait, are you being serious?" I asked uncertainly.

"Serious as a..." Elder Rinia trailed off, her mouth opening slightly, her eyes rolling up toward the roof of the cave as she grasped for whatever she was trying to say. "Damn, I forgot the phrase—but yes, I am very serious.

"If you think you're ready for the dangers of battle, then prove it. The creature that haunts these tunnels is a genuine danger—to me, to you, and everyone else in the colony. Want my wisdom? Well, you're going to have to earn it, Ellie dear."

I again found myself not really sure what to say. Elder Rinia was an enigma; I couldn't even begin to guess at the reason behind her actions, so I had to assume that hunting down and killing this blight hob was important to the mission in Elenoir somehow.

The image of blue slime spilling out of my mouth and nose came to mind and I tasted peppermint again. *Or perhaps Rinia needs some part of the blight hob for her stores?*

"Do I need to bring any part of the beast back?" I asked.

Elder Rinia grinned slyly. "Clever girl. Yes, kill the creature and bring me its tongue as proof."

Nodding to myself, I realized that I was both excited and afraid. I thought about the battle at the Wall, how the thrill and adrenaline of the fight had clashed with the terror I felt as I watched the horde slaughter our soldiers on the battlefield...

It was always like that, I guessed. Even my brother must have been afraid sometimes, but I knew he'd been eager to fight—and to grow stronger—too.

He said he just wanted to be strong enough to protect his family, but if that was true, why did he sacrifice himself for Tessia?

I wasn't sure I'd ever understand.

"Now, there are a couple things you should know," Elder Rinia said, interrupting my thoughts. "The blight hob won't just stand around and try to fight you, especially not with that giant bear protecting you.

"If it can't sneak up on you, it'll try to lead you into a trap. Don't let it. If you can catch it lying in wait for you and put an arrow in its black little heart before it has a chance to move, that's your best bet.

"And whatever happens, don't let the thing breathe on you again. That was the last of my frost snail blubber for who knows how long."

"Shouldn't you know when you'll get more?" I asked. "Being a seer and all?" Despite my nervousness and my fear, a giddy energy was starting to wash over me, and I couldn't help the big, silly grin that appeared on my face.

Scowling, Elder Rinia said, "Why, you little—" then rocked herself to her feet and began to shoo me away. I hopped up and, still grinning, let her usher me toward the "door" of her cavern home. "Don't come back until you've learned some respect—and don't forget that tongue!"

Giggling, I slipped through the crack and out into the dark tunnel. My bond was a big, fuzzy shadow guarding the entrance. He turned his wide head to face me as I approached, and I ran my hand up his snout and between his eyes, giving him a scratch. Boo closed his eyes and huffed in pleasure.

"You ready for some action, big guy?" He grunted, a rumble from deep in his chest that would have been terrifying if he wasn't my bond. "We're going hunting."

We started our hunt by returning back to where we'd encountered the pack of cave rats. Two more of the creatures had already found the bodies and were busily cannibalizing the remains.

We approached in total darkness, the light artifact now hidden within a deep pocket of my loose trousers. I had decided it was safer to move in the dark than to give away our location with the lantern stone, relying instead on my mana-heightened hearing to guide us.

Still, Boo wasn't exactly stealthy, and the cave rats heard us coming. They puffed themselves up and hissed threateningly, protecting their meal, but they turned and fled when Boo charged them.

When I was sure they were gone, I pulled out the light artifact and held it up. "Boo, see if you can get the blight hob's scent from the roof." I pointed at the rough stone above our heads.

My bond stood on his hind legs, reaching his shiny black nose right up to the tunnel ceiling, and began to sniff around. After only a few seconds, he dropped back to all fours and lowered his wide snout to the floor, continuing his deep sniffing.

I followed as he led us away from the chewed-up corpses, moving slowly, his nose pressed to the ground.

After about a minute, Boo stopped and turned to look at me, his intelligent eyes shining green in the dim light of the lantern stone. He huffed, his sides expanding, then shook his shaggy hide like a wet dog.

He had the scent. "Okay, let's go get him, Boo."

My bond grunted, then took off, moving quickly now. I stowed the light artifact again and followed, my bow ready.

The blight hob had covered quite a bit of distance since it had attacked us. We followed its scent for an hour, then two, but we still hadn't caught sight of it.

The tunnels around our underground town were a winding, criss-crossing maze, and the blight hob moved as though it knew we were hunting for it. Based on what Elder Rinia had said, I wondered if the mana beast was paranoid, always creeping around as if something was stalking it.

I was walking just behind Boo, my right shoulder pressed against his left flank, so when he jerked to a stop I knew immediately.

The bear's entire body went rigid, his tough hide quivering slightly.

I waited, my fingers on the string of my bow, ready to draw in an instant.

From somewhere ahead, my mana-enhanced ears picked up the faint sound of claws scraping across stone. I listened intently, trying to figure out how many there were.

Eight, I thought nervously, wondering how many cave rats my bond could safely fight off. The pack was moving in our direction, but they were slow and unhurried, and they hadn't picked up on our scent yet.

It sounded like there was a gentle curve in the tunnel maybe fifty or sixty feet ahead. Deciding on a plan, I pressed down on Boo's back so that he crouched down in front of me, flattening himself against the hard earth so that I could see—and shoot—over him.

Drawing my bow, I conjured a brightly shining mana arrow, squinting against the sudden glare, then fired the arrow down the tunnel, where it lodged into the stone wall. I focused on keeping the arrow in place, its blazing light a beacon in the pitch-black dark.

The reaction was immediate. Farther down the tunnel, the pack of cave rats burst into a sprint, racing toward the light. Just before they came into sight, I conjured a second arrow and *pushed* mana through it, causing the arrow to swell and the air around it to shimmer.

At the same time, I let the brightly glowing arrow that had drawn in the mana beasts fade away, plunging the tunnel ahead into darkness. I listened carefully as the cave rats scrabbled around ahead of us, scratching at the walls and floor of the tunnel as they searched for the source of the light.

The string of my bow thrummed as I took my shot. The bulging, shimmering white arrow left a white trail behind it as it streaked down the tunnel, then exploded in midair right in the middle of the pack, sending the cave rats flying.

Boo shook with eagerness, ready to rush down the hall and finish them, but I couldn't be sure how many cave rats had survived, and I didn't want to risk my bond getting hurt for no reason.

I focused more mana into my ears and conjured another arrow, and when I heard the scuffling sound of a cave rat trying to pick itself up off the floor, I let the mana arrow fly. I was able to shoot faster than the pack could collect itself, and within moments the cave rats were completely silent.

When we were sure the threat had been dealt with, Boo stood up and *humphed* grumpily.

"Sorry, Boo. I'm just saving you for the real fight, okay?" My bond grumbled again, and I patted his thick fur. "Let's make sure we got them all."

I followed Boo down the tunnel, then waited as he sniffed at the cave rat corpses, nudging at them with his snout. When one hissed breathlessly, he *crunched* down on it with his powerful jaws, and though I didn't see it, I heard the mana beast's flesh tear and bones break as it gasped out its last breath.

With that out of the way, Boo found the blight hob's scent again and we moved on.

I hope we find the beast soon, I thought. The journey to Rinnia's and back should not have taken more than a couple of hours, and I'd already been gone longer than that. My mother would be worried...

It occurred to me at that moment that my mother would be furious if she knew what I was doing. I hadn't even discussed my participation in the coming mission to Elenoir with her, just said I was going to visit Rinia, then run off with Boo.

She hadn't even had time to pepper me with questions about the council meeting, which I knew she was curious about, even if she pretended not to want anything to do with the leadership—or survival—of our little colony.

That conversation was going to be hard enough; maybe it was better that she didn't find out about my solo hunt through the tunnels.

My ears twitched as I heard the tinkling sound of little pebbles bouncing down stone walls.

Too distracted to have been properly paying attention, I jerked my bow up, a forming arrow nocked against the string, and aimed at the ceiling, looking for the shrunken, mangy form in the subtle white glow of my mana.

I didn't even have time to decide if a shadowy shape protruding down from the roof was actually my prey or just a lump of stone before my left ankle twisted and slipped away from me.

A panicked scream burst out of my mouth as my left leg plunged into an unseen gap in the floor, then was cut short when the stone lip of the hole hit me in the ribs. I scrambled to catch hold of something, trying to use my left arm and right leg as leverage so I didn't slide any further down, but the wind had already been knocked out of me and I didn't have the strength to support myself.

Boo bellowed above me, but when he whirled around to help, he practically stepped on me, then one massive paw smacked against the back of my head, jarring me so that I folded up like a piece of parchment as I slipped farther into the hole.

My body jerked to a stop as my bow caught, braced across the mouth of the hole I'd slipped into to create a sort of handhold. Holding most of my bodyweight with just my left hand on the grip of my bow, I tried to disentangle my right leg, which was bent painfully so that my foot was next to my head.

That, it turns out, was a mistake.

As soon as I shimmied my leg free, my body slipped again, ripping my hand away from the bow and sending me into a tumbling fall down the narrow crack in the stone, bouncing painfully off the walls.

Realizing there was nothing else to do, I coated my entire body in mana and tucked my head into my arms to protect my skull. Moments later, the punishing walls vanished and I crashed noisily onto the stone floor of another tunnel.

Fireflies danced in the dark all around me—or were they stars? Little stars, twinkling like snowflakes...

A worried roar echoed through the tunnels, shaking the stone like an earthquake and jarring me back to reality. I realized with a fresh wave of panic that I wasn't breathing—that I couldn't breathe! The fall had knocked the wind out of me and I gasped for air, trying to fill my lungs.

Dust and small stones rained down around me as, somewhere above, my bond dug frantically at the crack connecting the two tunnels. I tried to say something, to make sure he knew I wasn't dead, but without breath I couldn't get the words out.

Then I received another shock as I heard the sound of wood rattling against stone: my bow, falling down the hole.

My head burst with pain and the stars seemed to explode all around me as I rolled out of the way just in time to avoid being bludgeoned by my own weapon, which hit the ground next to me and sprung away, clattering to rest several feet farther up the tunnel.

I took a deep, sucking breath and was finally able to get some air. For several seconds I just focused on breathing. The stars winked out, one by one, leaving me in darkness.

Finally, when I felt like I had the air for it, I yelled croakily for my bond. "Boo! It's—it's okay, big guy, I'm okay!"

The scraping of claws on stone stopped and a pitiful moan resounded from the tunnel above.

"You'll never make it down that fissure, Boo," I said, but then I had to stop to take several more shuddering breaths. Each one sent a stabbing pain through my side and pulsed in my head. "You're going to have to find another way."

Boo grunted nervously.

Rolling over, I pushed myself up with still shaking arms. A jolt of pain shot up my right ankle and into my knee, but when I tested its strength, the leg didn't give out.

Reaching up with one arm, I felt around in the air above me for the tunnel roof. Preparing myself for the backlash of pain, I infused my legs with mana and leapt upward, but I could just barely scrape the ceiling with the tips of my fingers.

"There's no way I can climb back up. I'm—I'm going to keep moving. You do the same. Try to find my scent, Boo!"

A dismayed, almost whining rumble.

"And be careful! The blight hob could be anywhere..."

I shivered as I realized the truth of my own words. Deciding that, without Boo's protection, it was too risky to walk blindly through the dark, I dug around in my pocket and pulled out the light artifact, which immediately spilled its warm, dim light around me, illuminating the tunnel.

It was nearly identical to the rest of the tunnels I'd seen down here: a rough tube about seven or eight feet wide and high. Tessia thought that some giant worm-like mana beast must have burrowed here a very long time ago, leaving the tunnels in its wake, but Mom thought they were lava tubes.

Dusting myself off, I walked gingerly to where my bow lay in the ground. A moan of pain escaped me as I bent over to pick up my fallen weapon.

I sound like an old lady! I laughed at myself, which only sent another wave of pain through my back, neck, and sides.

I had been nervous the bow would be ruined by the fall—or by being used as a lifeline to save *me* from the fall—but it was undamaged beyond a few scrapes and dings. I pulled the string back and held it, just to make sure the shaft wouldn't snap in half under pressure. It was stable.

"Well," I said quietly, "that could have been worse."

Then something hit me from behind.

I threw myself forward into a roll, jarring my shoulder painfully against the hard ground. Using my bow like a staff, I swung it around behind me as I came back up to my feet and felt it strike my attacker.

In the same motion, I twisted around and got my fingers on the bow string, preparing to draw and fire, but instead I had to jerk it up, holding it in front of me like a shield. Two gnarled, black-clawed hands grabbed the bow and shoved.

My feet went out from under me and I fell backwards, hitting the ground hard—again. The blight hob crawled on top of me, its rotten-fruit stench practically gagging me, and its slimy jaws leaned down toward my throat.

Infusing mana into my arms, I heaved forward, trying and failing to throw the blight hob away from me. The creature made a choking noise in its throat that reminded me of laughter, then sucked in a lungful of air.

It's going to use its breath attack!

Desperate, I conjured an arrow onto the bowstring so that it appeared between the blight hob and myself, then stopped trying to push the mana beast away from me. The blight hob, its claws still wrapped around the shaft of the bow, fell several inches, and my mana arrow impaled its shoulder.

A horrifying cry burst out of it, interrupting its attack, and the blight hob scurried backwards and away from me, clawing and biting at the mana arrow as it tried to dislodge it.

From the ground, I drew the bow and summoned a second arrow, but the shot went right over the blight hob's deformed, ratlike head and fizzled out when it hit the wall. A second shot missed by several inches as the blight hob leapt onto the wall and skittered, spider-like, onto the ceiling.

It jerked to a halt as a third arrow struck the stone just in front of it, then dropped from the roof to land an arm's length away.

It's too fast!

On the verge of panic, I fired another explosive arrow. The rippling bolt of mana soared over the blight hob's head, then exploded a couple of feet behind my target, flinging us both away.

I was flattened by the force of it, tumbling backwards in a sort of reverse somersault.

The blight hob bounced across the stone floor, stopping somewhere behind me and to my right.

A voice inside my head, which sounded a lot like Arthur's, was screaming for me to Get up!

Somehow, I'd kept hold of my bow. I was lying on top of if, face down against the rough floor of the tunnel. I tried to push myself up, but there wasn't any strength in my arms. Instead, I rolled painfully onto my side and levered myself up onto one elbow, then twisted to look around behind me for the mangey, skeletal mana beast.

It was recovering faster than I was, already dragging itself awkwardly along the ground toward me, its beady little eyes alive with hatred.

I heaved on my bow, trying to bring it up for one more shot, but one end was still lodged under my hip. I shifted, trying to pull it free, but it wasn't enough. I screamed with pain and fear as I rocked to the side and yanked again, and the bow finally slid free. I rolled up into a half-sitting position to better draw back the bowstring, but a scraggly hand with black talons for claws grabbed at the bow and tried to rip it out of my hands, causing me to tip back onto my side.

The blight hob's mouth fell snapping toward me. Mana burst through my arms as I wrenched my bow up so that the twisted and misshapen fangs buried into the wooden shaft instead of my exposed throat.

I watched with horror as the blight hob ripped and tore at my beautiful bow: the same bow that Emily Watsken had made me back when we all stayed at the castle together.

The horrible mana beast seemed almost delighted by the fact it was destroying something precious... so much so that it was entirely distracted from me for just a second.

The wood around the arrow shelf began to splinter and crack. The blight hob's front hands or paws, with their long, clawed toes, were still wrapped around the bow, but its back claws were digging and scratching wildly. When one caught my leg and tore my trousers, leaving a long, deep gash along my shin, I screamed again.

The beast's beady, dark eyes shifted, focusing back on my face. Its horrid, eel-like tongue lolled from his mouth, its rotten-fruit breath nearly gagging me.

My heart hammered in my throat as I realized I was about to die. All my training, all that time with Arthur and Sylvie shooting down blocks of stone and flaming bears and whirling disks of ice—what had it been for?

If only I could control the stone like Arthur, or shoot mana from my hands like Sylvie—

The thought had barely formed in my head when I realized what I needed to do. But I'd never tried to recreate the magic I'd seen Sylvie use so long ago.

I don't have time! Unless—

Using every ounce of strength I had, I pushed my bow up into the blight hob's jaw, shoving it deep into its gross mouth. The uneven teeth bore down into the wood until, with a single, final *crunch*, my bow snapped in half.

The blight hob grabbed one half of the shattered bow with both claws and began to gnaw at the end, chewing it like a wolf with a broken bone.

Without taking time to mourn for my treasured bow, I raised my freed left hand, then focused on condensing pure mana into my palm. Helen had always said I was unusually gifted at manipulating pure mana into the shape of my choice, and her words ringing in my head was what gave me the confidence to conjure a thin, broad-headed dart in my palm with little effort. The next part was harder.

Seeing the blazing white arrow begin to form in my palm, the blight hob scrambled backwards, releasing the ruins of my weapon. At the same time, I heard it sucking in a ragged, rattling breath as it prepared to breathe deadly fumes on me.

Imagining the string of my now useless bow behind the mana arrow glowing from my palm, I pictured all that force, that potential energy, stored in me, and I shaped the mana in my mind until I could feel it pushing back against my hand, a ball of force straining to be let free.

I held it, waiting for my target to make a move, afraid I'd only get one shot. Time seemed to crawl to a stop as we both froze, each of us waiting for the other to make a move.

Then a monstrous, wild roar tore through the tunnel, causing the blight hob to spin around, its deadly breath billowing out around it in a cloud instead of being directed at me.

In that instant, like a punch to my gut, I felt the world around me change.

The dim tunnel, lit only by my lighting artifact, which was half-hidden in a dip in the floor somewhere behind me, came sharply into focus. Every fissure and outcropping was suddenly as clear as if a bright, midnight-silver moon shone down on me.

My sense of smell seemed to change as well. I could not only smell the blight hob's fetid gas, but sense where and how fast its attack was spreading. I could smell the very sweat lining my own skin, the dust of the tunnel floor, and even Boo's subtle musk, even though I couldn't even see him yet.

As my senses became sharp and bestial, a ferocious courage overtook me, and I forgot my fear of death and failure. My hand was steady as I took aim, putting the how and why of my sudden transformation to the back of my mind as I focused on my newly-sharpened senses.

I let the bundle of force I'd gathered burst, flinging the mana arrow toward the blight hob as if it'd been shot from my bow. The glowing bolt hummed as it flew the few feet to my target, striking it just behind its shoulder and piercing deep into its chest.

The blight hob fell screeching to the ground, then tried to stand up, but fell down again. Hazy green mist seeped from its mouth as it stared wildly around, its eyes bulging and tongue lolling grotesquely.

As it went through its death throes, I scrambled backwards, getting as far as I could from the green cloud that was filling the hallway around it. The feeling of that gas burning my throat and lungs was still very fresh...

The sound of huffing and grunting, and of heavy, clawed feet sprinting across stone, came from the darkness on the other side of the gas cloud. Boo slid to a halt once he was close enough to see the blight hob's corpse and the deadly cloud that surrounded it.

"Hey big guy," I said tiredly, giving my bond a little wave. He reared back on his hind legs, stalking back and forth across the tunnel and huffing anxiously as he waited for the gas to disperse. "We did it, Boo."

He met my gaze, snorted, then settled down on his haunches.

The incredible clarity of my senses faded, and exhaustion crept into my sore muscles and tired mind, pushing away the weird, unnatural courage I had briefly felt in the process. It was like I'd suddenly discovered something that had always been inside me, but had now gone back to sleep. Something that felt a little like Boo.

Lying back, I rested numbly on the hard, rough stone. A sharp edge of rock was sticking into my hip, but I didn't care. My heart pounded against my ribs with the excitement of my discovery and victory over the blight hob, though the moment was bittersweet.

The loss of my shortbow—an irreplaceable weapon designed just for me—was a heavy price to pay for the blight hob's tongue.

It better be worth it.

285 ONE STEP FORWARD

ARTHUR LEYWIN

A sea of purple washed over me, and immediately I sensed my aether core slowly draining. Unsure what else to do, I pushed deeper into the cube. The further in I traveled—it felt like something between flying and swimming, though I knew I wasn't truly moving at all—the more difficult it became. As I wafted through the viscous purple space, it thickened until eventually it felt like I was pushing against a brick wall.

Despite being disconnected from my body, I could feel my breath coming up short and ragged, as if I was breathing through a wet cloth. Straining to push through this wall, I pumped more aether out of my core, pushing and pushing until, suddenly, I shifted through to... someplace else.

To describe the experience of my mind touching the surface of the cuboid relic into words would be an exercise in futility; I couldn't begin to explain the sheer complexity of the sensation. The closest comparison to come into my mind was once when, as King Grey, a traveling dignitary insisted on drinking together. The drink was a sort of tea made from the small, disc-like fruit of his homeland, and drinking it caused me to go into a fit of hallucinations. The aching sensation of my mind opening to stimuli it couldn't comprehend was very similar to the effect of being within the cube, but the aetherial world that I entered through the relic was far stranger.

Geometric shapes in seemingly random patterns floated around me in unnatural, contradictory rotations. I couldn't see an end to how far these polyhedrons went, but I could sense that there was a boundary within the chaos.

As more aether flowed out from my core and into this realm within the relic, the polyhedrons began to change. I was no longer just observing but actually affecting these geometric shapes, as if my aether was resonating with them, whatever they were.

I found myself lost in a trance as I tried to make heads or tails out of the patterns, movements, shapes, and sizes of all of these polyhedrons. Using the aether within me as metaphorical limbs, I combined, sorted, and categorized the polyhedrons in an effort to understand what the djinn's guidebook was trying to tell me.

Finally, when my aether reserves fell to around a tenth of my capacity, I was pulled out of the realm. As my consciousness returned, I found myself still seated on the couch, in the same position I had assumed when I started. The first thing I noticed was that the room—once brightly lit by the afternoon sun—was now almost completely dark.

Beside me, Regis lifted up his head. "You're finally done?"

I stared at the crescent moon. "How long have I been out?"

"About five or six hours, maybe. I... fell asleep."

"You need sleep?" I asked, surprised.

Regis's jaws stretched into a wide yawn before answering. "It's like a battery-saver mode. I consume less aether when I'm asleep so I can accumulate more ambient aether."

"What a peculiar dog you are."

"Shove it," he groused before hopping off the couch. "So did you learn anything from the cube?"

"I don't even know what I'm supposed to be learning." I sunk back into the couch and rubbed my face. "And the worst part is that I use up aether while trying to study this piece of rock, which is really going to limit the amount of time I can study it."

"Damn, and I thought learning this life-changing, reality-bending ability was going to be easy," Regis said sarcastically as he walked away.

I kicked him below the tail, getting a sharp yelp out of him.

"Never thought I'd miss the days when I was incorporeal," he grumbled. "So what's the plan now?"

I paused, thinking for a moment. "We have a few days to kill anyway, so we might as well learn a bit more about the locals. The bestowment event is tomorrow, and I wouldn't mind checking out the schools as well."

Regis looked at me silently, a slightly stunned expression on his wolfish face.

I frowned. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just that, I thought you'd be scratching off your skin trying to find some way to get to the next Relictombs or something," he muttered.

Sitting back up, I scratched my cheek and looked out the window, away from Regis. "I have been pretty edgy lately, haven't I?"

Regis shrugged, his mane of purple fire fluttering. "It's understandable. I don't have a family aside from you, but I'd be pretty nervous if I didn't know what was going on to the ones I cared about."

I glanced from the window to Regis, somewhat taken aback by his nonchalant mention of me as his family. It hadn't occurred to me that he didn't have anyone else except me. Even now that he had a more relatable physical form, did I still see Regis as nothing more than a weapon?

Regis's eyes narrowed. "What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Nothing, what are you staring at?" I got up from my seat and headed toward the door.

"Where are we going?" he asked, trotting along behind me.

"Didn't you hear what Loreni said earlier? There are a ton of mana beasts just outside the town." I shot my companion a smirk. "I haven't had the chance to really practice the limits of God Step."

"We get to stretch our legs a bit and earn some money." Regis mirrored my smirk. "Sounds good."

Regis and I breathed in the crisp night air, our feet crunching against the foliage as the two of us rushed through the woods. We had wanted to get farther away from the town in case someone spotted us using aether, but that hadn't stopped us from killing a few rocavids on the way. The rocavids were massive, deer-like mana beasts that had antlers not only on their heads, but down their spines and thick tails, which they used as deadly clubs.

Deadly for normal mages, anyway. The mana beasts never even had time to react as I sunk my dagger between their eyes. This kept the hides intact, which were the parts we wanted to sell.

Regis had a harder time keeping his kills clean, but between the two of us, it took less than an hour to hunt down half a dozen of the rocavids roaming around the dead of night. The only reason we stopped was because we ran out of space in my dimension rune.

"I thought the talking crystal said you can't put organic things into the rune on your arm," Regis commented as we neared a small clearing that led to the base of the hill.

"It seems like I can only put it in once it's dead," I answered, my eyes spotting a large boulder in the center of the clearing.

The boulder was a couple feet taller than me. Someone had painted a warning across it with ominous plashed of dried blood. The warning said: "Danger! High-level mana beasts ahead!"

We crossed over to the other side of the clearing, and the ground began to gradually slope up as we trekked up the hill. While my vision had been enhanced by my new physique, being unable to sense mana now made finding mana beasts a much more challenging task.

While I was able to augment my senses using aether, I'd been unable to find a way to utilize aether to sense non-aetheric beings and objects. On the other hand, not having any sort of mana signature coming from me or Regis meant that the stronger and more predatory wildlife here saw us as an easy meal, which brought them right to us.

The first mana beast that came after us was one I hadn't seen before in Dicathen. It reminded me of my sister's bond, Boo, if only he had four arms and a crocodile-like jaw with three rows of serrated teeth.

"This one's mine," I said, grinning at Regis.

With a gruesome snarl, the bear got charged at me, its six limbs pushing it forward with surprising speed. Putting away my dagger, I faced it head on.

While my aether reserves hadn't been fully restored, tonight's goal was merely to test out my new godrune. I didn't know what tier this mana beast would be classified under, but it would serve as a good guinea pig.

Aether surged out of my core, clinging to my skin. As the familiar warmth of the rune spread from my lower back, I focused on the location I would try to land.

The experience of initiating the aether art felt completely different from when I had first used it. My perception of the world around me changed, as if everything had been stretched in all directions. Particles of ambient aether joined together, creating intertwining streams of purple coursing in the air, fluid pathways that interconnected and branched off.

Taking a "step," I felt like my body was being carried by a jet stream as I rode the currents of aether. The problem was that there was no direct route to the location I had determined; I had to ride these currents of aether that branched off and connected to every inch of space that surrounded me. These streams didn't extend infinitely though. I could only see them in a radius of ten yards, which I assumed was how far I could currently use God Step.

Despite my current limits, the result was astounding. Although I didn't land quite as accurately as I would've liked, I had traveled ten yards in a blink of an eye.

The biggest difference between God Step and Burst Step, however, was the control of momentum. Since I was no longer bound by inertia upon reaching my destination, it really felt like I was on the cusp of accomplishing true teleportation.

Tendrils of violet lightning coiled around me as I appeared just beside the charging bear-like mana beast. It skidded to a stop, but by the time it turned around, my aether-clad fist had already sunk into its side.

The beast's giant body tumbled across the ground, crashing through several trees in its path.

Due to its thick, mana-coated fur, the bear survived the blow, but instead of charging again, it attempted to scuttle away, issuing a series of out low, pitiful whimpers. I focused, seeing the pathways again, feeling

them like a vibration in the aether, and took another step. This time, I landed directly in front of the bearish mana-beast and delivered the killing blow before it could even widen its eyes in surprise.

I put my hands on my knees and took a moment to catch my breath. Using God Step drained both my aether and stamina, it seemed. I could only assume it would get easier the stronger my core became and the more I used it. The biggest limiter besides aether consumption was how long it took me to find the correct path within the branching network of aetheric connections.

'Tuckered out already, princess?' Regis asked, cutting across my thoughts on God Step.

We're just getting started. I just hope you can keep up, pup.

The forest was thick with predatory mana beasts, allowing me plenty of practice for God Step as I hunted creature after creature. Assuming the powerful mana beasts' hides, claws, and organs would fetch a better price than the rocavid leather, I left the rocavid corpses behind, knowing they wouldn't go to waste.

Regis hunted as well, which allowed me to see what level he was at. Though he could now be much farther away and his capacity to hold aether had grown, his overall power level wasn't increasing quickly enough for him to keep up with me. He needed to consume more aether, but the problem was, so did I.

Apart from collecting the relics, both in the Relictombs and out here in Alacrya, I needed to build on my aether reserves until they were large enough to awaken Sylvie from her comatose state.

"You okay?" Regis asked. We were heading back to our cottage, and were just approaching the base of the hill. "You're rubbing your left arm again."

"I'm fine," I said, sticking my hands in my pockets.

When we were close enough to town that running into someone seemed like a real possibility, Regis retreated back into my body, and I found myself enjoying the quiet night. There was a cool breeze moving across the low hills, and the braying of rocavids could be heard in the distance. It was for this reason that I failed to notice the little figure sooner.

I only stopped when I heard a small hiss just ahead of me. A small figure was leaning over the corpse of a rocavid and pointing a jagged little knife at me.

The small boy, who couldn't have been older than ten, leapt to his feet, cutting the air with his knife. His sunken cheeks and tattered clothes spoke volumes of his social standing, but it was his eyes that made me pause. His eyes were filled with desperation and fear as he stood between me and the rocavid corpse, but at the same time, I could see the determination within them.

His gaze reminded me of... me. Not Arthur Leywin the Lance, but Grey, the orphan boy. It was the same gaze that I had when I first met Headmaster Wilbeck when she first found me on the streets.

"Boy," I said firmly, eliciting a startled step back from the little kid so that he nearly tumbled over the corpse. "Do you plan on using that skinning knife on me?"

The kid slowly lowered his knife, wavering, then lifted it back up and stepped toward me. "Th-this rocavid is mine."

I tilted my head. "Did you kill it?"

He paused, lowering his head. "No..."

I stepped toward him. "Then why is it yours?"

"I f-found it first. I hid and waited, but there wasn't anybody to claim it," the boy said, his tenor voice haggard but strong.

"What do you plan on doing with it?"

The boy held his ground as I took a step toward him, holding his trembling knife aloft. "My family needs it. If I can sell the hide, we can eat."

I frowned at him. "Wouldn't it be simpler to just eat the rocavid's meat?"

His shoulders slumped. "I... can't carry it."

I walked toward the boy without responding, startling him. Instead of backing away, however, he charged toward me with the knife held in both hands, as if he could run me through.

I slapped the knife out of his hands and carefully kicked one leg out from under him in one quick motion, and the boy fell face first on the ground. Shaken but still determined to fight for the rocavid corpse, he jumped back up to his feet and lunged toward me with bare hands.

I side stepped and tripped him again. Before he could stand a second time, I picked up the corpse by its back legs. "Where's your house?"

The boy got slowly to his feet, his brows turned down in confusion.

I tilted my head. "Didn't you want this rocavid?"

"Y-yes!" he sputtered. He whirled around and began to lead the way, but stopped after only a few feet. Turning around, he gave me a fearful look. "Y-you're not going to hurt my family, right?"

Raising one eyebrow, my lips turned down in a slight frown, I asked, "What's your name, boy?"

"Belmun," he said warily.

"I'll leave this close enough to your house that you can have your family come and help you take it after I leave," I replied. "Does that sound okay?"

Belmun nodded before scurrying off, leading me toward the outskirts of Maerin Town.

I smelled Belmun's house before I could see it—in the area that Chumo and Sembi had told me about. Shacks made from splintered wood and other discarded material lined the wall on the outskirts of the town. Torches were sparsely lit, leaving most of the homes shrouded in darkness.

"You can just leave that here," Belmun said.

"Yeah, sure," I muttered, my gaze still sweeping across the dismal collection of hovels.

To my surprise, Belmun bowed, his tattered clothes showing his exposed ribs. He gave me a toothy grin that finally made him look like a child. "Thank you, sir."

When I arrived back at my residence a few minutes later, my mind was still consumed by the unfortunate child. In Dicathen, even the few slaves that I had seen—despite, of course, the ban on such things—were in better shape than Belmun.

"Didn't think you were such an altruist," Regis said, curling up on the leather couch. "Especially considering your hate for Alacryans."

"I'm not an altruist," I retorted, taking a seat as well. "He just reminded me of someone."

Regis tried to hide it, but I could feel his amused disbelief. Instead of nettling me further, though, he simply closed his eyes and went to sleep. Although he didn't need to breathe, the purple, fire-like mane around his nape started pulsating rhythmically, and I could see the aether particles around him slowly being absorbed.

As the peaceful silence lingered in the air, I ran a mental check of my possessions. I wasn't a king anymore, nor was I a Lance. The only things I had were my clothes, Caera's knife, Sylvie's stone, the relic cube, and several mana beast corpses.

Still, despite my limited belongings, the thing weighing on my mind was that little kid. This was the society that Agrona has created, a society where, without strength, you were tossed aside, no better than trash.

I'm not here to save every urchin I stumble across, I reminded myself. I have bigger things to worry about.

With sleep eluding me, I began meditating, refining the ambient aether into my core, but I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth. From the bestowment tomorrow, to the exhibition, and even beyond that, I was curious but also afraid to see what this continent had in store for me.

This continent, ruled by deities that saw these people only as weapons and tools.

286 PRICE TO PAY

ELEANOR LEYWIN

The pain of my fall was really starting to set in by the time we found our way back to Elder Rinia's cave. Most of my body was covered in black and purple bruises, which I knew would look even worse by the time I made it home.

Mom is going to freak out.

Boo's sense of direction was just as good as his sense of smell, so the return trip was pretty straightforward. I gave him a few scratches around his ears and across the silver crescent of fur on his chest, then limped through the narrow crack opening into the little cavern, carrying my broken bow and the blight hob's slimy tongue wrapped in a piece of cloth from my shirt.

Inside, Elder Rinia was sitting at a little table, staring down at a square board covered in marbles. As I watched, she picked up a marble, set it back down at a different place on the board, and mumbled something under her breath.

I opened my mouth to say something suitably dramatic, like, "I've returned!" but the old seer raised a wrinkled hand and motioned for me to be quiet.

Typical, I thought.

After what seemed like a very long time, Elder Rinia quickly moved two more stones, then turned to me with a satisfied smirk on her face.

"You've returned," she said, eyeing the bundle in my hand. "And successfully, from the looks of it." Her gaze quickly traveled over my body, lingering on the visible bruising on my cheek, neck, and arms. "Though not without a few bumps and bruises, I see."

I opened my mouth to start telling her about the hunt for the blight hob, but Elder Rinia waved for me to come closer, cutting me off again. "Here, let me see it. Quickly now!"

Scowling, I stomped across the cave and handed the cloth-wrapped tongue to the elder. She gingerly unwrapped it, examining the tongue carefully.

"Yes, yes. This will do nicely. Very nicely." Without even looking at me, she hopped up and practically ran across the cave.

I watched, bewildered, as she dumped the tongue into a pot that was steaming over her little fire. The cave, I realized, was filled with the scent of cooking food. My eyes bounced from the boiling pot to Elder Rinia and back again, then went wide with horror.

"You—you're not going to—"

"Oh, yes dear. Blight hob tongue is a very rare delicacy. Tender, juicy, fatty, with just a hint of bitterness."

I seriously considered vomiting on her floor for the second time that day, but I choked back my revulsion.

Opening my mouth to ask for the information I'd been promised, I was cut off for the third time.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid the tongue needs to cook just right, so it'll need my full attention. Plus, I'm sure your mother will want to see to those injuries, shouldn't be a problem for an emitter, I imagine. So be a dear and run along now, will you?"

"But what about—"

"Oh, yes," Elder Rinia said distractedly. I would have sworn she was drooling as she stared down into the black pot containing her blight hob tongue stew. "Go with my blessing, of course. You tell that old fool Virion that the mission will be successful, but it won't be without cost."

I blinked, my mouth hanging open. "That's it?"

Elder Rinia turned to meet my eyes, serious for a moment. "Yes. Know there is always a cost, child. The cost of those elves' lives may be more than Virion cares to pay."

"I—I almost died!" I yelled, the stress of the last few hours boiling over and turning to anger, which I vented on the old seer. "I gave up my bow, just so you can eat some nasty old tongue and tell me 'it'll cost'?"

Elder Rinia raised a single thin eyebrow. "Died? Hardly, dear. You still have your brother's present around your neck, don't you?"

My hand went to the phoenix wyrm pendant hidden beneath my clothes. I'd worn it so long that I'd nearly forgotten what it was actually for.

Snorting at my surprise, Rinia continued. "As I said, there is always a price to pay, a choice to make. You made one in the tunnels, and you'll have another to make in Elenoir. When the time comes, Ellie, you *must* choose the mission."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" I said, throwing my hands up in the air and shaking my head incredulously. "Just give me a straight answer!"

"Choose the mission. The price will be paid either way, but you decide if the plan works or not. Now go, the others are beginning to worry, and they'll come looking for you soon." She turned back to her pot, using a wooden spoon to carefully stir the contents, then dropping in a pinch of something from a little jar. "And I don't want anyone turning up and ruining my meal."

The walk back to town was long and uncomfortable, but thankfully uneventful. Boo let me ride on his large and furry back most of the way, since every part of my body hurt. I spent the time preparing my story—and excuses—for my mother, though I couldn't think of anything I could possibly say that would make her any less mad when she saw how bruised I was.

"I can't believe that old crackpot," I grumbled to Boo. "That blight hob almost killed me, all so she could eat its nasty old tongue and tell me the mission 'won't be without cost.' Like, I could have told you that."

Boo grunted consolingly.

I was about to say something else, but was distracted by a tiny source of light that bobbed and weaved ahead of us in the tunnel. A moment later, a voice rang out: "Ellie—Eleanor Leywin, is that you?"

Oh man, I thought, realizing that people in the tunnels looking for me was a bad sign.

"Yeah," I wheezed painfully. "Who's that?"

The light source moved toward me quickly, accompanied by the sound of soft footfalls. The wide, kind face of Durden, one of the Twin Horns and my parents' friend, came into focus once I blinked away the brightness of his light artifact.

"Ellie, there you are. Your mother was really worried, so Helen sent me to search for you, to make sure you are—"

"I'm fine," I lied, forcing myself to sit up straight on Boo's back as I stared down at Durden. "I was on a mission for the commander. I need to go see Virion at City Hall, then I'll head home."

Durden smiled sheepishly. "I've been asked to make sure you go straight to your mother, actually. Apparently she gave the commander quite an earful..." The big mage trailed off, then added, "Don't tell anyone I said that, would you?"

At least if Mom already yelled at Virion, maybe it won't be so bad for me...

I knew it'd be worse if I didn't go home right away, but this was *my* mission, and, despite Elder Rinia's unhelpful guidance, I felt like I needed to give her words to Virion myself.

When I informed Durden of this, he hesitantly nodded. "Well, let's get going then. I'd like to get you back to your mother before she—"

"Explodes like a volcano?" I suggested.

He smiled wryly and led the way back along the tunnel toward town.

Durden held aside the door hanging and gestured for me to enter, so I did. Boo stayed outside, curling up like a huge dog next to the stairs that lead up to the City Hall's front door. Inside the door, Albold stood at his usual post.

"Glad to see you're okay, Lady Eleanor." He gestured down the hall to the main meeting room. "The commander will want to see you right away."

I started down the hall, but slowed when I heard voices coming from the open archway.

"—were too late again, Commander." It was Bairon's deep, nasally voice. "While there were definitely signs of Lances Varay, Aya, and Mica, we can't find a strong enough trace to go after them."

"Damn. What in the world are those three up to?" Virion grumbled in reply.

"We haven't found any reason or plausible pattern to the location of their strikes yet. We can't even be sure they know we're alive. I can't see any other reason why they wouldn't have made contact yet."

"Keep trying. The other Lances will be essential if we're ever going to really push back against the Alacryans."

I had stopped at the edge of the archway, listening to Bairon and Virion's conversation. There hadn't been any news of the other Lances since Dicathen had fallen. It was good to know they were still out there fighting.

Albold walked around me, stopping in the doorway and bowing. "Commander Virion, young Eleanor Leywin has just now returned from the tunnels." He gestured for me to enter the room, which I did hesitantly.

I was too tired to really be nervous, but I still wasn't sure how to explain what Rinia had said.

Virion's stern gaze took in my bruises and the cut on my leg, and his expression softened. "It appears the journey to Rinia's was more difficult than expected. My apologies, Eleanor. If I'd have known—"

"It's okay," I cut in, then mentally berated myself for my rudeness. "Elder Rinia asked me to prove myself so that she would know I was ready to fight, and I did. I—she..." I trailed off, repeating in my head everything she had told me—what little there was.

Virion listened carefully while I repeated Elder Rinia's words.

"A price I'm not willing to pay, eh?" The commander looked down at the desk, but his eyes were unfocused. "Shows what my old friend knows." Virion looked up, staring past my shoulder into the far distance. "There is no price I won't pay for success... for rescuing as many of our people as possible. The elves will not be slaves. Better dead than that."

He stood suddenly, his chair scraping unpleasantly on the stone floor. "Thank you, Eleanor. Your assistance is most appreciated. We'll have several days to prepare for the journey to Elenoir, but I'll send Tessia to you when you are needed." Looking at Albold, he said, "Please, escort Ms. Leywin home. I believe her mother is eager to see her returned."

Albold and I both bowed, and I followed the elf out of City Hall.

No price he wouldn't pay? I wondered. The commander had changed so much since the castle. It was like the loss of the war had stolen the kindness and warmth from him. Then again, who hasn't been affected by it? I asked myself.

A few minutes later, I said farewell to Albold and Durden, both of whom had insisted on seeing that I got home safely, outside of the little two-story house I shared with my mother and Boo. I watched them walk quickly away, then smiled at Durden when he cast a last glance back at me over his shoulder.

"He looks like someone running from the scene of a crime, doesn't he, Boo?"

My bond huffed in agreement, then unceremoniously shoved the door cover out of the way with his snout and disappeared into the house.

From inside, I heard, "Boo! Where's Ellie? Ellie!"

I thought for a second about following Durden, trying to dart out of sight around the corner of one of the nearby buildings. I imagined hiding out in one of the unoccupied houses, fishing from the river when everyone else was asleep, having Tessia smuggle me fresh clothes and that sweet bread the elves loved...

Sighing, I listened to my mother's footsteps pounding down the stairs and forced an innocent smile onto my face while I waited for her to burst through the door hanging, which she did an instant later.

Her auburn hair was half pulled out of her ponytail, giving her a sort of rushed look, and her eyes were wet and red, as if she'd been crying.

Those eyes moved over my bruises with the efficiency of a trained emitter, and she gasped. "Ellie, what in the world has happened to you?"

Before I could respond, she was pulling at the sleeves and hem of my shirt, following the trail of bruising up my arms, across my neck, down my back and hips. Then her hands began to emit a soft green and gold light. I immediately felt warm and cool at the same time as the scratches, scrapes, cuts, and bruises all over my body began to heal.

Mother was silent while she worked, focusing entirely on my injuries. It seemed best to follow her lead, so I kept my mouth shut and watched as the purple and black bruises faded to green, then yellow, then disappeared before my eyes.

When she was done I took a deep breath of the cool cavern air. The pain was gone. I couldn't remember ever having felt better!

Then the icy knife of her voice cut through the pleasant, post-healing fog. "Inside. Now."

I risked a glance at her face; her eyes were full of fire and fury. *Oh boy*.

My mother wasn't a mean person. In fact, she'd always been a very kind woman. However, the stress of being Arthur Leywin's mother had worn her down, giving her a sharp edge. She'd been forced to harden herself against the constant stress and worry of having a son like Arthur who was there one day and gone the next, and always, wherever he was, in constant mortal danger.

Or that's what I kept reminding myself as, for the next hour, she told me in a dozen different ways how reckless, foolish, immature, dangerous, and stupid it had been to go by myself into the tunnels, and how she was going to tell everyone from Elder Rinia to Commander Virion to the sad old elf woman who lived next door that I wasn't to be sent on any missions or hunts or assaults or anything else without her express permission.

She finished off my thorough chewing out by insisting that if anything ever happened to me that she'd die of a broken heart, and did I want to be responsible for that?

I stood up from where I'd been sitting on the floor, my back pressed against the wall on the second level of the house. Mom was sitting at the dining table, her face in her hands, tears dripping from her nose to splash on the petrified wood.

I crossed the room and walked around behind her, then leaned down and wrapped my arms around her, resting my cheek on her shoulder.

There were a hundred things I wanted to tell her: how much I loved her; how sorry I was that Arthur and Dad were gone; how much I wished she didn't have to be so angry and scared all the time; how, no matter what, I couldn't just sit on the sidelines and watch Dicathen struggle to survive anymore...

But instead, what I said was, "I'm going to Elenoir to fight the Alacryans, Mom."

My mother burst out of her chair, tearing free of my grip and nearly knocking me over backwards. She stomped across the room, ripping the leather band from her hair that held up her ponytail, then turned around and brandished it at me like a whip.

"Haven't you heard a damned thing I've said, Eleanor?" Her hair fell around her bright red face in a wild tangle. She looked like a crazy person.

Speaking slowly and calmly, I said, "I have, Mom, I really have. I've listened to every word, and now I need you to listen to me." She scoffed, but I held up a hand and kept speaking, infusing as much confidence as I could muster into my words. "I have to do something, Mom. I have to."

I pointed to the ceiling of our little shelter. "Somewhere up there, right now, a mother is watching her child die, or a wife her husband, or a sister her brother. We're not the only ones who have lost someone, Mom. *Everyone* has lost people!" I was pleading now, the confidence slipping from my tone, but I didn't care. I had to make her understand.

She opened her mouth to reply, but I kept going, knowing that if I lost the thread of my thought that I'd never get the words out. "We're the *lucky* ones, Mom! The lucky ones. So many people—most people—don't have a chance to fight back. But we do! *We* can make a difference, all of us.

"If I just sit down here, that thing inside me that makes me capable of helping will turn against me and it'll eat me from the inside out like a leech. If I don't *do* something, I might as well already be dead!"

I realized that I was huffing like Boo and on the verge of tears. My mother, on the other hand, seemed to have sobered up. She was giving me an appraising look that I couldn't remember seeing on her face before.

After several long moments, she crossed the room again, took my hand, and led me back to the table. We sat down and she just looked at me silently for a while.

"There's something I should have told you a long time ago, Ellie." Mom met my eye, pausing to make sure I was listening, then continued. "You've grown up at the center of all this adventure and chaos and war, making friends with princesses and mana beasts, learning magic and fighting—but that isn't the life you were meant for."

I looked at her uncertainly. "What do you mean?"

My mother drummed her fingers on the ancient tabletop, gazing down at the petrified wood as if hoping it might spell out the words she was looking for. "Your brother... he pulled us into a life that we weren't equipped for. He was, of course, but Arthur was different."

She looked up at me, searching my eyes, my face, for understanding. I wanted to take advantage of having this moment of peace and togetherness with my mom, but I wasn't quite sure what she was trying to communicate.

Sighing, she reached out and put her hand on mine. "Arthur... but this is difficult to explain."

"Is this about Arthur being reincarnated or whatever?" I asked, my mother's words clicking into place in my head.

She gaped at me, her eyes wide and her mouth open. "How did you find out?" I could see her swallowing, hesitating, before she asked, "Did Arthur tell you?"

I shook my head. "No, though I wish he would have. I pieced it together from things you and Dad said. I overheard you fighting a few times in the castle, while Arthur was training with the asuras." Seeing the look of surprise still on her face, I let out a sigh. "I'm not dumb, Mom."

She squeezed my hand and smiled. "No, sweetie, you are not."

"I don't see why it matters anyway. Just because he had memories from another life doesn't make him not my brother. He's still the same person who joked around with me, who stood by me, who helped me... He wasn't always around, but he always treated me like his sister."

"I know, Ellie, and you're right. It doesn't matter. Not anymore. What I want you to see, though, is how Arthur was meant for this life. I think... I think he was brought here to fight for Dicathen..." Mom was starting to falter, to lose the thread of her thought. "He was a quadra-elemental mage with two lifetimes of battle experience, Ellie. But you're—"

"Just a girl?" I asked, my temper flaring. "Arthur's gone, Mom, so whatever reason Arthur might have been reborn with us, his purpose must have already been fulfilled, right?"

"Or failed..." she replied sadly, not meeting my eye.

"He could've been here to inspire us, to show us what we could do, so that when he left we'd know we could still win without him. I know you think it's safer to let Virion and Bairon and the others handle things, but I don't want to run away from a responsibility that I know I have as a trained mage."

I held my mother's gaze with the piercing stare I'd learned from Arthur. "I know what happened to Dad and Brother. I'm scared too, but I want to fight."

Her mouth opened, but closed again as she wiped her tears. My mother let out a hoarse chuckle. "I guess it's my own fault for raising you to be such a strong and upright young lady."

A laugh escaped my lips as I walked around the table and pulled my mother into a seated hug.

287 THE DAY OF BESTOWMENT

ARTHUR LEYWIN

A soft knock on the front door woke me from a brief slumber. My night had been spent refining my aether core; the exercise resulted only in a minimal increase in the amount of aether I could store and the speed at which the aether travelled through my newly-forged passages, but any amount of progress felt better than sitting by idly.

"Ascender Grey," a soft voice called through the door.

After getting up and having Regis withdraw back into my body, I opened the wooden door to see a girl that looked like Loreni, except a few years younger and with longer hair.

For a moment the timid girl simply stared at me, her mouth slightly ajar.

"Yes?" I finally asked.

"Ah!" She shook her head. "My apologies, Ascender Grey. My name is Mayla, and I've been instructed by my sist—Loreni to assist esteemed ascender during your stay in Maerin Town."

So they are sisters, I mused. "You came at a good time, Mayla. I was actually wondering when the bestowment would be happening today."

"It's not until later this afternoon, so esteemed ascender has some time to rest and get ready if you wish to attend," she answered, keeping her gaze downcast.

"It's actually getting a little stuffy in here, so I'd like to take a stroll. Would you mind accompanying me?"

"Of course!" Mayla exclaimed, her eyes going cartoonishly wide.

"Before that, though, I have a cart filled with mana beast corpses. Can you get a few men to take it down to whichever shop will pay for them?"

"Right away!" Mayla gave me a quick bow before scurrying back to town.

After she was gone, I uncovered one of the empty horse-pulled wagons at the back of the house and began taking the beast corpses out of my dimension rune.

'Is all this necessary?' Regis asked.

"The story we're going with is that I lost my dimension ring, remember?"

By the time Mayla came back with three burly townsmen, I had finished piling the corpses on the surprisingly sturdy wagon.

"Th-this..." The speaker was a bearded man sporting a tank top to show off his muscles. He paled at the sight of the mana beasts, and his two companions stepped back in shock.

I frowned. "Is there a problem?"

"N-n-none at all, esteemed ascender," the bearded man said, carefully poking the leg of the bear-like mana beast. "It's just that... these beasts are considered dangerous to even a full team of mid-tier mages."

With no reference to how powerful a mid-tier mage actually was, I just shrugged. "Please take these to town, sell them, and give the money to either Mayla or Loreni."

"Yes!" The three bowed once more before the bearded man began pulling the cart while his two companions pushed from the back.

Mayla and I took our time walking down the small hill leading back down to the downtown plaza of Maerin Town when I noticed her looking at the rune on my right forearm.

"Is something the matter?" I asked, suddenly very conscious that having a rune on your arm might be abnormal.

"My apologies for staring, Ascender Grey," she said, peeling her eyes away. "I've heard many nobles and even highbloods have rune glyphs tattooed on their bodies, but it's my first time seeing one in person."

"Is it not popular in these parts?" I asked, feigning mild embarrassment.

"Oh, it's just that most around here couldn't afford the inks. I suppose in the wealthier parts of Alacrya it must be more in style..." Mayla trailed off, and now she was the one acting embarrassed. "Sorry if I've offended you, Ascender Grey. It wasn't my intention."

"It seems like the people of Maerin resort to apologizing very often," I commented with a smile. "It's fine. I'm glad to have someone explain how things work around here. Are you a mage yourself?"

"Oh, not at all! Although... today is also the day of my bestowment," she admitted, turning pink around her ears.

"Congratulations in advance," I said as we neared the gate to town. "Any particular element or class you'd like to be in?"

"Even though I know I'm a bit on the older side and my chances are low, I would very much like to be an Instiller. I know that Casters and Strikers are the most sought after by academies and powerful bloods, but I'm no good at fighting," Mayla admitted.

I pondered her words. I had heard of the three classes of battle mages, as well as the supporting Sentry class. In Aya's brief, there was a detailed account of the powerful Sentry who had managed to use her magic to create a path through Elshire Forest, allowing the Alacryan army to invade Elenoir.

Her name was... something Milview, I thought. I also knew that she was just one of many mages capable of using elemental magic to scout and scry long distances. I had never heard of Instillers, however.

"What did you want to do as an Instiller?" I asked, hoping to gain more information about this class.

"I want to create artifacts to help the impoverished people all over Alacrya," Mayla effused, eyes suddenly vibrant. "For example, I know that there are artifacts capable of purifying water, but such things are currently too expensive to make on a large scale. However, I've done some research and realized that not all the components for the artifact are necessary, and a lot of them can be replaced with cheaper materials, so—"

Mayla let out a gasp and bowed at me. "I didn't mean to lecture you, esteemed ascender."

"I was the one that asked the question, Mayla," I replied. "It'd be silly for me to get angry because you answered me. Especially when you're so excited."

Mayla reminded me of Emily back in Dicathen. Her excitement and passion for artificing was second to none. My chest tightened at the thought of my curly-haired friend.

"A-anyway, did esteemed ascender have anywhere in mind to go first?"

"Since the mana beast corpses will be taken care of, do you mind if we stop by the schools?"

"Certainly! It would be an honor if esteemed ascender visited! I know the students at our Striker school would love to get some pointers—of course that's only if esteemed ascender wishes to," Mayla said.

The irony of training soldiers that would eventually attack Dicathen caused a laugh to burst out of my mouth. I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to stifle my laughter.

Mayla regarded me with utter confusion. "D-did I say something odd?"

"No, it's... nothing," I said, composing myself. "Anyway, let's take a look through the academies."

The visit to the Caster school was brief. They were practicing outside, so I could see the students over the fence. A row of young would-be Casters were shooting bolts of pure mana at a handful of practice dummies. There was a wide variety of skill on display: some could barely conjure a strong enough missile to reach the target, while others were hurling two or three glowing bolts of mana at a time.

'How cute,' Regis remarked.

"It doesn't seem like these students are using their marks," I noted.

"The students here are still adjusting to their marks, so they're not yet allowed to utilize their elemental magic yet. Once they've been deemed base-tier mages, they'll be allowed to practice the elemental spells their marks carry." Mayla explained this with confidence. Though she was herself hoping for a bestowal, I was surprised by how much regular people seemed to understand about Alacryan magic. Most Dicathian non-mages wouldn't have known as much as this young girl about Dicathian magic, I was certain of that.

She turned her head left and right as if looking for something before letting out a gasp. "I forgot that the primary students are practicing in the arena today in preparation for the upcoming exhibition. My apologies, esteemed ascender. Both the instructors and students are much more excited this year because of the recruiter coming from Stormcove Academy."

"Is Stormcove Academy such a prestigious place?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Mayla thought for a moment before answering. "Well, it is an official academy, so students accepted will have housing and basic needs provided for them within the campus. Stormcove is also one of the higher ranked academies in not only Aramoor, but the entire Grevorind Region. That being said, this is still all relative."

The two of us began making our way to the Shield school as Mayla continued to explain.

"Compared to the elite academies in the rest of the Etril Dominion, and even the other four dominions, which have even more prestigious academies, Stormcove isn't much. It's why esteemed ascender has most likely never heard of Stormcove Academy." Mayla seemed to shrink as she talked about the academy, and her voice became quiet. "I can only imagine how pitiful our schools look compared to the prestigious highblood academies in the central dominion."

I digested this information in silence. It seemed like the entire economy in Alacrya glorified self-improvement and gaining strength, and was even centered on it. Was this all funded by Agrona? I couldn't imagine a viable way for a proper economy to form around just training and getting stronger, aside from hunting mana beasts and ascending from the Relictombs.

"D-did I talk too much again, esteemed ascender? My sister, I mean Loreni, often berates me for this."

"No, I like it." Mayla was a goldmine for information, and the best part was that I didn't have to ask questions that might normally be common sense. I stopped mid-step, causing her to look back at me with some alarm, despite my assurances. "Mayla, do you know what dungeons are?"

"Dungeons? Of course, Ascender Grey. My mother would tell me the story all the time as a child," she answered. "It really is amazing how the great Vritras, led by the mighty High Sovereign himself, vanquished all of those dangerous dungeons in order to keep us safe."

It was easy to imagine Agrona and his clan wiping out all of the dungeons under Alacrya in order to build an economy around exploring the Relictombs, practically guaranteeing himself a constant supply of relics to study.

"What do you know about the other continent then?" I asked, studying her expression.

"Dicathen?" Mayla tilted her head. "I've heard stories from passing merchants about how savage and undeveloped they are. It's scary to think of an entire continent where mages run amok and dungeons still exist. Thankfully, High Sovereign Agrona has decided to liberate them."

"Liberate?" I echoed, careful to keep my true feelings from leaking onto my face. "I see."

We didn't stay long at the Shield academy either. Though it was entertaining to watch the children take turns throwing things at each other, with the targets expected to conjure translucent shields of mana to block the projectiles, there weren't many students training. Mayla guessed that the primary class of Shields was also in the arena, since the Shields and Casters often trained together. It made sense, seeing as the Shields' primary role was to either take damage for their teammates if they were a melee Shield or create defenses from afar if they were a ranged Shield.

Next we made our way to the Striker school, where both the primary and secondary students were present and preparing to spar with one another.

"Remember, release and focus your mana from your core to the rune glyphs that make up your mark! Pay attention to the warmth that spreads from your mark and let that feeling guide you. Don't try to control it!" ordered a scowling woman garbed in a layered, muted blue mage's robe.

Despite her salt-and-pepper hair and the wrinkles lining her face exposing her age, she carried herself with poise as she strode around two students, each wearing padded leather practice-gear, as the rest of the class sat against the walls.

The two students, a dark-haired boy and a freckle-faced girl, looked around the same age as Mayla. They faced each other and bowed, keeping their stances neutral.

"Begin!" the teacher barked.

The two students triggered their spells with surprising swiftness.

The girl's spell materialized first: a short blade of fire surrounding her open palms. She dashed toward the boy, who was barely able to conjure his bracers of fire in time to block her first strike.

Their two flames intertwined from the impact, and the boy was forced to retreat a few steps. Cheers from some of the children on the sidelines rang out in support for the girl, and some of the boy's friends cracked jokes at his expense.

Gritting his teeth, the boy rushed forth and the two began to spar. Despite their young age, they showed a shocking amount of agility and strength, and their techniques seemed almost ingrained into their movements.

"The instructor is good," I muttered, vaguely remembering Chumo and Sembi's praise toward this woman.

Mayla and I continued to watch from the hallway, but the bout soon came to an end. The instructor intervened just as the girl was about to land a critical strike on the boy's open side. Once the children had been separated, the aged instructor called out the results, and was just about to start on the next pair of children when she saw me.

Mayla bowed at the instructor, who regarded me with her sharp eyes.

"Instructor Resbin, this is Ascender Grey," Mayla said without lifting her head.

The instructor's eyes widened for a moment, but she otherwise kept calm as she dipped her head in a formal gesture. "My apologies for not welcoming you sooner, Ascender Grey. You hid your mana so well that I didn't realize such a powerful individual had entered the school."

I raised a hand in a placating gesture. "It's fine. I had no intention of interrupting your class."

By this time, the children that had been spread out against the walls were all standing and craning their necks to get a good look at me. Whispered muttering soon filled the room so that Instructor Resbin had to silence them, but that didn't stop their sparkling stares from boring into me.

"Instructor Resbin was actually once an instructor at Stormcove Academy," Mayla said proudly before turning to the aged woman. "Ascender Grey just told me how good you are!"

"Thank you, Ascender Grey," Instructor Resbin replied, but her eyes continued to assess me.

"I simply noted what I saw," I said with a polite nod. "Please continue."

I turned to leave, not particularly having a reason to stay here any longer, but stopped when Instructor Resbin called out.

"Forgive my insolence, Ascender Grey, but as you know, the annual exhibition is in just two days. My students and I would be most honored if an esteemed ascender showed us some pointers."

Looking back over my shoulders I stared at the woman.

"You say pointers, but your eyes are asking for something different, Instructor. I have no interest in engaging in a meaningless fight just so you can gauge your own strength." I flashed her a cool smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

I walked out of the Striker school, Mayla following beside me. The girl looked uncomfortable with my treatment of the school's instructor, but said nothing.

'You're no fun,' Regis remarked. 'I was hoping for a show.'

You're just bored. Hold on for a few more days.

By the time we reached the town proper, the center of the plaza had been redecorated for the bestowment ceremony. A platform had been constructed there, and a line of twenty or so kids had already formed beside it. Near the end of the line, I was surprised to see a little boy that I recognized.

'Hey, isn't that the boy that tried to stab you last night?' Regis asked.

It was Belmun. I could make out more of his features in the daylight, but this only seemed to highlight how malnourished he was underneath his clean tunic, which was several sizes too big for him.

I couldn't help but wonder if he and his family had managed to eat last night, or if they had been able to sell the leather from the rocavid.

"Didn't you say that the ceremony starts later?" I asked, pushing my worry for the child—the *Alacryan* child—from my mind.

"Yes, but lines always form beforehand," she said, her eyes watching nervously as the line grew longer.

"Then shouldn't you be going too?"

Mayla turned to me, pale-faced and stricken. "Oh no! It's okay, esteemed ascender. It's my responsibility to assist you, so I'll just get in line once the ceremony actually begins."

Frowning, I waved her away. "Just go. I'll be fine."

There was still a trace of reluctance in her expression, but her impatience won over. After thanking me, she bolted to the end of the line.

'She's a good kid,' Regis voiced. 'Too bad she and all the rest of the people on this continent have been brainwashed by Agrona.'

Not sure if brainwashed is the right word but, yeah. Regis had a point. They were just people, really. Regular people trying to make the best life for themselves that they could, considering their situation.

What was it to them if their *High Sovereign* was murdering tens of thousands of equally innocent people on the other side of the world... *but maybe they would care*, I thought.

Maybe, under the right circumstances, they would be eager to throw off the oppression of the Vritra Clan.

I shook the thought from my head, knowing the truth. Agrona was a tyrant. He had controlled life on Alacrya so completely, and for so long, that they really did worship him like a deity.

The ceremony progressed once a man dressed completely in black walked up onto the elevated platform with two hooded figures in gray behind him. The most notable part of his wardrobe was an obsidian staff that he carried. There was a small gem embedded at the top, and it glimmered in the colors of the elemental attributes. Barely noticeable in the reds, blues, and browns, there was also a faint trace of purple.

Regis noticed it too, and I could feel his hunger for the aether.

"Esteemed ascender," a familiar voice called out faintly from behind me.

I turned to see Loreni, dressed in her work attire, a layer of sweat above her brows. "Please forgive me. I completely forgot that Mayla had her bestowment again today."

My brows furrowed "Again? Has Mayla been bestowed before?"

Loreni looked past me to where her sister stood in line. "She's been trying to get her first mark for the past three years now," she explained, her expression tinged with concern. "If a mark doesn't form during today's bestowment, I'm afraid she'll most likely be deemed an unadorned like me."

"How bad is that?" I asked before hurriedly adding, "Around here?"

"Being a non-mage is always looked down upon, but Mayla is well acquainted with everyone in Maerin Town, so she should be fine," Loreni said with a slight smile. "I was devastated when I was deemed an unadorned, but thankfully, everyone was still very nice to me—oh, it's about to begin!"

I watched along with the rest of the town as the first child scurried up the stairs and knelt before the officiant holding the obsidian staff. After muttering a lengthy incantation in a language I didn't recognize, the officiant walked around the kneeling boy and placed the tip of the staff just above his tailbone.

Blood dripped from the boy's back, and the gem glowed brightly. After several seconds, the officiant withdrew the staff and instructed the boy to turn around and lift up his shirt.

"Fiorin of Maerin Town has been adorned with the mark of a Caster! May he bring pride to his blood and vanquish all who stand in the way of our mighty Sovereigns!"

Cheers rang through the town square, and I could see the boy beaming in pride even while tears of pain lined his cheeks. After he stepped off the platform and ran into the embrace of his family, the next child walked nervously up to stand before the grim officiant.

Child after child was presented to the staff, and one after the other they received their mark, or were sent away still unadorned, and for some of these there would not be another chance. Every emotion was on display throughout the day, from utter joy and pride, to complete despair and hopeless anger.

While the event was interesting, giving me a deeper insight into the culture of the Alacryan people, I eventually grew bored and let my attention wonder... until Belmun stepped up onto the podium. I watched him walk up the stairs to the expressionless officiant with some anxiety, though I told myself I didn't really care whether this Alacryan boy was successful or not.

There were some mutters of disapproval from the crowd, and several people—all well dressed and groomed—gave the poor boy disgusted looks as he knelt silently in front of the officiant. I was glad his back was to them, though I'm sure he heard their grumbling.

The officiant's staff flared as it approached the base of Belmun's spine, and a ripple ran through the crowd, silencing those who had voiced their displeasure at his inclusion in the event. Though I didn't understand what had happened, even the poker-faced officiant's eyes glimmered with obvious interest. A moment later, the gem dimmed and Belmun fell to the ground.

The crowd was deathly silent as the officiant hurriedly lifted Belmun's shirt. He let out a sharp breath before helping the boy up to his feet.

"Belmun of Maerin Town has been adorned with the crest of a Striker!" he exclaimed. Another ripple of motion and noise went through the audience. Belmun looked, if anything, even more shocked than the crowd at the man's words.

"A crest?" Loreni sputtered.

The entire plaza seemed to have gasped in unison, then the muttering turned to raucous conversation. However, two adults stuck out to me as they grasped each other and began to weep. Belmun practically leaped off the stage and bound toward the two, slamming into them so hard all three nearly fell down laughing and sobbing.

"Belmun of Maerin Town will be further assessed before being placed in an appropriate academy!" the officiant declared when he had regained his composure.

I watched as the officiant's hooded assistants escorted Belmun and his family away.

"Is Belmun someone esteemed ascender knows?" Loreni asked, snapping me out of my daze.

"Huh?" I turned to Loreni. "Why do you ask?"

"Esteemed ascender was smiling for a moment, so I just thought..." Loreni shook her head. "Forgive me for assuming."

The bestowment resumed like normal—with either the kids getting a mark or not getting one—until Mayla stepped up onto the platform.

Loreni clasped her hands and whistled as her sister kneeled down on the stage.

Mayla was one of the oldest kids at the bestowment, and based on what her sister had told me, it seemed likely that she would end up as one of the unadorned, but I found myself hoping she received a mark. I was both pleased and surprised, then, when the officiant's staff glowed even brighter than it had for Belmun.

"T-this..." The officiant trailed off, muttering under his breath, completely bewildered by what he was seeing. "Mayla of Maerin Town has been adorned with the... *emblem...* of a sentry!"

Regis let out a whistle as the plaza broke out into jubilant cheers. The crowd was ecstatic as the black-robed man patted Mayla on the back, a bemused grin splitting even his grim face. Mayla and Loreni, however, both wore the same solemn expression. Next to me, Loreni had frozen, her hands pressed together as if she'd stopped mid-applause.

"Are you not happy at your sister earning an emblem?" I asked, curious.

"Oh n-no, of course I'm happy, esteemed ascender! I'm very proud of her," she said, but her gaze fell. "Please excuse me, esteemed ascender. I will go congratulate my sister."

I watched as she walked stiffly toward the stage, using her sleeve to wipe her face.

"A crest, and even an emblem," a voice muttered behind me. "It looks like our town will get a lot of extra resources this year. It's a shame for Loreni though. I heard that talented sentries are trained rigorously, and sent into the Relictombs often."

"Shhh, don't say that out loud, you idiot. Mayla should be proud that she will be able to better serve our Sovereigns in finding relics!" another voice said.

So that's what it was, I thought, staring at Mayla and Loreni. The two embraced tearfully, which I might've mistook for tears of joy had I not known.

Ignoring the ache in my chest, I made my way out of the town plaza and back to the house.

288 A SOCIAL GATHERING

The first rays of dawn were just peeking above the horizon by the time Regis and I had climbed back from the beast-riddled hill just outside Maerin Town. I had focused solely on practicing God Step—falling more times than I could count in the process—while Regis scouted around the area and did a bit of hunting on his own.

While progress was slow, I was still proud of the visible growth I'd achieved toward the mastery of my first official godrune. I was able to reach my destination using God Step with much better precision than I had been capable of at first.

That is, as long as there were no obstacles, of course. When attempting to take into consideration the obstacles blocking my path, God Step became exponentially more difficult to use.

There were several ways around this, of course. I could use God Step in a straight line, much like I had with Burst Step, but doing so would basically amount to using the blunt edge of the sword.

Alternatively, I could spend a prolonged period of time focusing and mapping out the correct path I needed to take in order to arrive at my intended destination... but that was hard to do while a two-thousand-pound mana beast was charging toward me, especially since changing positions even slightly altered the path.

The silver lining behind this was that my initial development of Burst Step, so long ago in Epheotus, served as training wheels for God Step. Thanks to my augmented reflexes from my aether core and my having a dragon of the Indrath Clan's physique, I knew that mastering the godrune was only a matter of time and effort.

Regis, on the other hand, had yet to gain any insight in activating the rune of Destruction, despite my guidance.

I knew that if I continued to use the Destruction rune, he would be able to gain insight into the edict, but I was honestly afraid of what might happen to me—or what I might do—while under the pseudo-psychotic state that the edict put me in.

Still, thanks to the fact that, unlike mana, ambient aether was everywhere, Regis was able to constantly absorb aether, and had managed to make progress in strengthening his own aether reserves.

His physical form seemed to illustrate his growing strength: his two horns that twisted and gnarled behind his ears had grown even more intricate, and his body had become more corporeal and real, while the purple fire that made up his mane looked like real flames instead of smoky wisps.

With my head cleared from the events during the bestowment ceremony and my aether core empty, I neared the stone sign that indicated we were back within the "safe" zone. To my surprise, there was someone waiting for me just beside the painted boulder in the clearing.

'Isn't that the kid... er... Velma? From last night?' Regis asked, his form hiding within me.

Are you sure you're an intelligent weapon? I teased, before calling out to the boy. "Belmun?"

'Sentient weapon,' Regis corrected with a grumble.

Belmun shot up to his feet at the sound of his name being called. He bolted toward me, the wind tossing back his long, unkempt hair to reveal a busted lip, bruised eye, and a swollen cheek.

The boy shot me a wide grin as he waved his hand. "Mister!"

Belmun skidded to a stop in front of me and plopped down to his knees. "Please teach me how to fight!"

Noticing the bruises and welts all over his exposed arms and the hardened look on his face, I couldn't help but admire the boy's determination.

"No," I answered, walking past him.

"W-wait!" Belmun scrambled back in front of me. "I don't have anything to offer now, but I've been bestowed a crest!"

I raised a brow. "So?"

The boy scratched his head. "S-so, I have incredible talent! I don't have anything to offer you right now, but in the future, when I'm a ranked ascender, I'll pay you back!"

The confident—almost smug—expression on Belmun's face set off something dark and hidden within me, and I released a wave of aetheric force, lacing in enough killing intent to bring the boy to his knees. His hands flew to his chest as he gasped for air.

Withdrawing my intent, as well as the palpable pressure exerted through the ambient aether around us, I stared deadpan at Belmun, who sucked desperately at the air. "Don't be so ignorant. The world's a large place, and despite your talent in this small town, you might just be the street rat of a major city."

With that, I turned my back on the boy's shocked, confused face and made my way back to the cottage.

After we were safely inside, Regis emerged and jumped on the leather couch. "So what was that all about? Who knew the princess could be so emotional..."

I frowned, "I wasn't emotional,"

"Please. You barely care for the people here enough to exchange more than a sentence with them unless you're prying for information," Regis replied, lying down. "But you not only helped the kid, you gave him advice."

I slid my shirt over my head and wiped the grim from my skin. "That wasn't advice. His smug attitude after getting even a little bit of recognition annoyed me."

Regis rolled his eyes as he curled up into his meditative state, leaving the cottage silent.

I let out a sigh as I sat down on the ground. I knew why I had acted like that—I just didn't want to admit to myself that the little boy reminded me of myself in a lot of ways. Slapping my cheeks to focus, I closed my eyes as the warm blanket of the morning light enveloped me, and began refining my aether core.

Over the next several days leading up to the annual exhibition, Regis and I fell into a comfortable rhythm, largely away from the curious denizens of Maerin Town.

Without the need to sleep more than an hour a day, I had been using my mornings to refine my core, which allowed me to replenish my aether reserves enough to study the cuboid relic in the afternoons. In the evenings and overnight, I would stay near the peak of the tree-covered hill practicing not only God Step, but also fighting utilizing aether in general.

Mayla had come by the first day after the bestowment, but I told her I wouldn't be going anywhere and made her go home. I didn't want her to spend the majority of the day with me when her time with her sister was so limited now.

I did find out from her later on, though, that Belmun had started training seriously at the Striker school until he could enroll in Stormcove Academy. It turned out that the bruises he had received the night after the bestowment were from a fight with some of the other Striker students.

While progress had been made in both studying the cuboid relic and practicing God Step, I was slowly growing more and more impatient to move on from Maerin Town.

So when the day of the annual exhibition finally came, I was actually excited.

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" Regis asked, staring at me.

I held Sylvie's stone tenderly in my palms. "It's been a while since I've tried and my aether core has gotten stronger since I've been practicing God Step so much."

"I know, but didn't your last attempt almost completely suck your aether reserves dry? Will you be okay during the exhibition?"

"Exactly. I can't train today because of the exhibition anyway so I might as well. Now shush," I replied, focusing on the translucent stone and releasing the aether from my core.

I was met with the familiar sensation of the aether draining from my body, and a shroud of purple enveloped the stone. Unlike the last time I'd attempted this, where it felt like I was trying to fill a pond a few drops at a time, I could now feel an actual stream of aether reaching the inner dimension within the stone. My aether was both purer and denser than before, so there was even less aether wasted through the "filtration" process that occurred within the stone itself.

Still, while the progress I had made was clear enough, by the time nearly all of my aether was sucked out of me, there were no visible changes to the translucent stone, but I was left sweating and gasping from the strain.

I put the stone back into the dimension rune and fell back on the cold floor.

Staring at the ceiling, I thought of how far I still needed to go. Even after coming this far, it felt like I had barely taken a step forward. How long would it take to refine my aether core and bolster my aether reserves enough to free my bond? And—I thought fearfully about this, when I let myself consider it at all—what would happen when I succeeded?

Would fully imbuing aether into the stone truly bring back Sylvie? She had given me her physical form in order to save me. Would she truly come back as the same Sylvie that I knew and loved? Would she come back at all?

My chest ached at these thoughts, and it felt like my body suddenly grew several times heavier as my motivation and determination wavered.

No. You've come this far, Arthur. You can't stop now.

Letting out a sharp breath, I got up and changed my clothes. The sensation of the black leather-like armor clinging to my skin was a welcome feeling after the cloth outfit I had been wearing while in Maerin Town.

The gentle knock on the door told me it was nearly time for the exhibition to begin.

"Let's go," I said to Regis. With a nod, his form disappeared into my back.

After pulling the teal robe over my shoulders and tucking the white dagger into the pocket hidden in the inner lining, I headed out the door.

I was greeted by a somber Mayla. She gave me a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Good Morning, Ascender Grey."

"Mayla?" I raised a brow. "I thought I said to send over someone else to escort me."

She shook her head. "I couldn't do that. My mind would be more at peace guiding esteemed ascender myself. Thank you for your consideration though. I have enjoyed the last few days with my sister."

"That's fair enough, I suppose," I muttered, scratching my cheek.

The two of us walked down the hill leading to the town proper in silence. The once talkative girl seemed to be lost in thought, stumbling several times on the uneven road.

"Ah, I almost forgot," Mayla suddenly said, turning to me. "Chief Mason had a runecard prepared with the money you've earned from selling the mana beasts. He figured since you lost your dimension ring that it'd be more practical than carrying around a bag of gold."

'Runecards are physical cards linked to the Alacryan bank using runic technology so that you don't have to carry physical money around,' Regis explained after a quick mental nudge from me.

"I'll be sure to pick it up before I leave," I answered, impressed once again by how advanced Alacrya was compared to Dicathen. I was curious about how this banking institution worked, but when we arrived at the town proper my attention was pulled away from the minutia of Alacryan civilization.

The atmosphere today was much livelier than it had been a few days ago, and it only grew worse as we reached the arena. The din of dozens of conversations all fighting for supremacy overpowered the sound of soldiers trying to manage the growing crowd.

Luckily, we didn't have to take the main entrance. The two of us were escorted by one of the guards toward a side entrance leading to the arena.

"I will take my leave here, esteemed ascender," Mayla said, lowering her head. "Only officials of the towns and guests from Stormcove Academy are allowed inside this viewing room."

Watching her walk away, leaving me with the guard in the well-lit corridor, I cursed inwardly for thinking that I'd be able to watch the exhibition in peace. I could already guess how stifling a room filled with town officials brown nosing the Stormcove Academy representatives would be.

The usher standing at the far end of the corridor hurriedly opened the cherrywood door and directed me inside, calling out, "Ascender Grey has arrived!"

The room was open to the arena, almost like a balcony, and from it there was a clear view of the arena floor below, on which stood rows of preadolescents in uniforms that distinctly highlighted their towns.

The arena consisted of hundreds of coliseum style seats surrounding a wide, manicured-grass field. A raised platform dominated the center of the field.

The room was decorated modestly with dark wood furniture and a couple of portraits that seemed to be decorated warriors from the village. The lack of seats in this "sitting area" seemed to promote walking around and getting to know each other.

Inside were around twenty distinguished individuals of varying ages, all garbed in their best suits or dresses. Considering how rural the area was, I was somewhat surprised to see how dressed up they were, but then it occurred to me that these people were likely trying to create an impression for the visitors from Stormcove Academy. This also explained the fine wine glasses and crystal goblets full of deep red wine held in nearly every hand. It was as if they were posing for a picture, I thought. Like they were trying to capture a specific sensation or atmosphere that wasn't honest to the moment.

"Esteemed ascender!" a familiar, booming voice called out. Chief Mason wore a fitted suit that highlighted his broad frame, his salt and pepper hair slicked back and his beard properly combed and tied near the end.

He handed me one of the many wine flutes displayed on the cocktail tables arranged throughout the room before turning to the rest of the people present. "We're all so excited to have you with us today!"

"Thank you for having me." I accepted the glass and turned to the staring individuals, raising my drink and presenting a smile. "I must've gotten a bit excited myself, seeing as how I'm dressed to join the kids down there rather than to drink up here."

Laughter broke out among the officials, breaking the tension as they began flocking to me.

'Wow. Who is this smooth-talker and what have you done with the angsty Arthur that I grew to tolerate? I thought you said you were bad at social gatherings,' Regis said.

Shut it. And I said I didn't like social gatherings. That doesn't mean I'm bad at them.

"As expected of esteemed ascender. Not only is your presence so imposing, but your looks are stunning as well," a woman, who was perhaps in her early twenties, said with a giggle, brushing her hand against mine.

I smiled back as I took a step toward her. "Please. Call me Grey."

Not bothering to learn her name, I made my way through the crowd. Dismissing their overeagerness to introduce themselves to me and flaunt whatever morsel of power they had in order to appeal to me, I kept a charming and lighthearted air.

I finished my glass of wine quickly as I exchanged greetings and a drink with the people present. As I excused myself to get a refill, a sudden shudder ran through my body.

My attention was pulled toward the door.

"Elder Cromely of Stormcove Academy, students Aphene and Pallisun of Stormcove Academy, have arrived!" the usher announced, opening the door.

The chatter and laughter surrounding me was soon drowned out by the blood pumping in my ears. I focused on the lean, grizzled man, who wore a dark suit that draped around him almost like mages' robes.

More specifically, our attention was pulled toward the unassuming, decrepit stone set at the end of his sleek obsidian cane. Though it looked plain, the stone radiated a powerful aetheric aura.

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I tore my gaze from the stone adorning the man's black cane and studied the three guests that had just arrived.

The hook-nosed and pale-skinned Cromely exchanged polite but terse greetings with the flock of officials and their family members. The two students, both of whom looked around my age, barely spoke, but the way they stood with their chins raised and chests puffed out told me all I needed to know.

The female student, Aphene, had an athlete's body with long, slim legs that were accentuated by her uniform. Her fierce gaze bore into me from behind her dark bangs, singling me out.

Dismissing her provocation as cute at best, I turned my gaze to the blonde-haired man. He looked like he spent a tad too much time in front of his mirror. Compared to his brusque female schoolmate, the student named Pallisun met the officials with a practiced smile that seemed to convey his hubris in a more implicit way.

Watching the teen strut about in his white suit embroidered with a single embellished shoulder guard, I was reminded of a rainbow goose displaying its feathers during mating season.

Regis chortled at my comparison, agreeing wholeheartedly.

The trio eventually made their way to me. Following behind them was the entourage of officials, each of them doing whatever they could to curry favor, though most seemed desperate for Cromely to even look in their general direction.

"An honor to have an ascender in our presence," Cromely said, his expression not quite matching his words. "My name is Cromely of Blood Mandrick." Gesturing to the young female student, he said, "This is my granddaughter, Aphene. And this student is Pallisun of Blood Blather. Both of you, introduce yourselves."

Aphene dipped her head, a bit reluctant. "Aphene of Blood Mandrick."

Pallisun, who was around my height but with a bit more bulk, scanned me from head to toe.

"Pallisun of Blood Blather," he greeted, releasing a bit of mana to cling tightly against his frame in an attempt to show off his control.

'What a rainbow goose,' Regis scoffed.

"A pleasure to meet you all. And thank you again for taking me with you to Aramoor," I said to Cromely with an amiable smile. He was my ticket out of Maerin Town, after all.

"It is nothing," he replied humbly.

"Hearing that our town had an ascender visiting, Elder Cromely brought along the top students from Stormcove Academy," Chief Mason explained.

The Stormcove representative's gaze flickered over the town chief dismissively before adding, "Yes, while they can't yet compare to Ascender Grey, they'll both be transferred to an ascender institute in the central dominion rather soon."

I regarded the two students, keeping my smile casual. "Congratulations in advance."

Pallisun craned his neck to get that extra inch over me as he replied. "You seem very young, esteemed ascender. I can't imagine you having much experience yet, but I'd still love to hear of your tales down in the Relictombs."

Regis bristled. 'Please, let me humble this manchild.'

It's beneath us to bully them. Plus, I'm baiting them on purpose, I sent to Regis before replying to the vain blond.

"It's quite the pleasant place for a stroll. Do you care to join me the next time I go?" I asked with a wink.

This got a few chuckles from the crowd. Pallisun's brow twitched in restrained annoyance, but he gave me a stilted laugh as well.

"Please excuse me while I get a drink," Pallisun said with a forced smile. "Let's go, Aphene."

The two students turned around and headed off to one of the tables behind them. As they did so, I couldn't help but notice that their backs were covered, hiding their runes.

Not thinking much of it, I made myself comfortable against the ledge overlooking the exhibition. Below, the host in charge of mediating the event was having the students walk in a circle to wave at the audience.

Cheers broke out as most of the students walked off the field, leaving behind only one group of students, all of whom looked to be around eight to ten years in age.

Caster students were up first. Workers brought targets and laid them on the opposite side of the field, and the students tried to hit them while displaying both accuracy and power. After that, they began running through an obstacle course while hitting targets without stopping.

While I didn't condone child soldiers, it was impressive to see even the children of this small town effortlessly go through the complicated obstacle course while firing off bolts of pure mana like trained combatants heading for war.

A war against Dicathen.

I cursed myself for thinking unnecessary thoughts. There was nothing I could do at that moment that would change the war in the slightest. Even if I flew into a battle range and killed every Alacryan mage in Maerin, including Cromely and his students, it would only bring the Scythes down on me, and I wasn't ready for that.

Unlike the Vritra Clan, I thought as I watched the young Casters below, *I'm not going to butcher innocents,* even if we are at war.

Swallowing the bitter taste in my mouth, I tried to find interest in the exhibition as the Caster students finished and the host called for the Shields to step back onto the field. Their performance consisted of each of the Shields protecting two mannequins from blunted projectiles made of wood and stone.

Throughout these two events, the other officials from the neighboring towns made wagers on their own local students, and the names of promising students were mentioned and praised loudly in the hopes that Cromely would overhear and take notice.

As the Shield students of Ludro, Cessir, Deura, and Maerin Town stepped down, the atmosphere shifted. While both the Casters and Shields received enthusiastic cheers throughout their events, the cheers paled in comparison to when the Striker students ran out onto the field and took their positions around the raised platform.

This event consisted of six representative Strikers from each town partaking in a tournament. It would start by having the six from each town duel each other for a chance at representing their towns, and it would end with the remaining Striker from each town facing off in the semi finals and finals.

After the host introduced the Strikers and reminded them that intentionally losing to let a specific member of their town advance was strictly forbidden, the tournament commenced.

While I didn't expect much, I had to admit that I enjoyed this part of the exhibition. The children fought with practiced movements, displaying prowess in both physical and magical abilities. Because the marks or crests that they had forced their spells to form into a specific shapes or actions, they had to rely on understanding and outmaneuvering their opponents—utilizing their magic as a tool rather than being entirely reliant on it.

"I can't imagine this little *pageant* would entertain you in any way," a thin voice said from behind me.

"You'd be mistaken then," I said lightly, not bothering to turn around. "At this level, their weapons are unsharpened and inflexible. This forces the students to be more quick-witted and creative. Don't you agree, Elder Cromely?"

The older man stepped up next to me, his brow raised in thought. "Are you saying that the sharper our weapons get, the slower and more unimaginative we become?"

I shifted my gaze to Cromely, a smirk pulling at the edge of my mouth. "That would depend on the person, but the temptation to lean heavily on the sharpest tool is always there. Isn't that why we evolved past fighting with our bare fists in the first place?"

Cromely blinked before letting out a dry laugh. "Wise words, and something that I haven't thought of myself. Perhaps the Relictombs bestow wisdom upon its ascenders."

"Perhaps." I turned my gaze back to the next pair of Striker students stepping up onto the arena. "So have you found anyone worth admitting to Stormcove Academy?"

"I've already scanned the entire lot of students and not a single one carries the mana reserves worthy of Stormcove," he replied in a tone that said he had expected it. "Still. The Headmaster of our academy requested we bring more talent from outside Aramoor, so I'll just take the winner of this little tournament and be done with it.

"Truthfully, I was reluctant to visit this... outpost." Cromely then turned to me, his hooked nose less than an arm's length away from my face. "If that old bear of a man hadn't told me an actual ascender was here and needed a favor, I wouldn't have bothered coming, let alone with my top two students."

"It seems like you're implying something, Elder Cromely," I responded, casting a sideways glance at the older man. "I wasn't aware that there were strings attached for my short trip to Aramoor."

"No strings attached of course," he quickly responded with another dry laugh. "I merely hoped that you would grace my students, and this town, with a display of what the strength of an ascender looked like."

I had been waiting for it from the moment the two students had looked me over like they were sizing me up for a fight, but I didn't think they'd want to challenge me here.

'Makes sense though,' Regis sent. 'If you guys spar here and they lose, they don't run the risk of losing face for stupidly challenging an ascender.'

"Hmm... while educating the youth is important, I chose to become an ascender rather than an instructor because I valued material goods a bit more," I hinted with a playful smile.

The old representative gave me an appraising look, and I could see the gears turning in his mind. A genuine smile spread across his wrinkled face, and he patted me on the arm. "Looks like it won't be very hard to get along with you, Ascender Grey! Name your price!"

"Gold is easy to come by," I replied, flashing him the runecard provided by Chief Mason, which was filled with my earnings from selling the mana beasts. "But I am curious about that odd rock you have on your cane."

"As expected of an ascender, you have a good eye," he mused, holding up his cane so I could get a better look. "Even though this has been deemed a dead relic by our Sovereign, it still cost me a small fortune at auction."

"Does it contain any remnant of its previous power?" I asked nonchalantly, suppressing both my and Regis's urge to consume the aether stored inside it.

"If a dead relic could perform even the smallest spec of ancient magic, then it would be impossible for a mere academy elder in some small city to afford it," Cromely answered as he rubbed the palm-sized stone with his thumb. "No, it's just a very expensive trinket for me to brag about."

"A shame," I said, feigning disappointment.

I was unaware that relics deemed "dead" by Agrona were auctioned back to the public, but it made sense. Why not obtain riches for the scraps you had no use for after taking all of the relics that were still intact?

Thinking back, I couldn't help but wonder how things would've played out differently had the djinn projection not given me the dimensional storage rune, and if Chief Mason had said he would need to take the cuboid relic from me.

It was safe to assume that my relationship with the people of this town wouldn't have been as carefree as it was.

"Still, if Ascender Grey is a connoisseur of such things, I can't imagine you not wanting to add this to your collection," he replied. "How about this: if esteemed ascender can best Pallisun and my granddaughter in a friendly spar, I will not only escort you to Aramoor and ensure you're completely taken care of, I'll also give you this relic. If they can best you, all esteemed ascender needs to do is put in a good word for them."

I cocked a brow. "Put in a good word?"

A knowing smile crept across the old man's face. "It's no use feigning ignorance, Ascender Grey. Mason told me of your close relations with Highblood Denoir," he whispered. "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me."

I took a deep breath and willed down my irritation. Looks like the large chief caved in. I really didn't want my association with such a powerful name being broadcasted so soon, but I guess it did work in my favor at the moment.

Letting out a sigh, I agreed. "That doesn't sound like a bad proposition."

"Great!" Cromely clapped his hands. "I presume that you'd have no qualms with facing off against my two students at the same time?"

He really has no shame, I conveyed inwardly to Regis.

Shrugging, I said, "I assumed that would be the case."

"As expected of an ascender!" Cromely beamed. "I'm sure, whether my students win or lose, this will be an excellent learning experience for them!"

'As expected of an ascender,' Regis echoed mockingly. 'What a fox.'

He speaks in politics. It's nothing to be surprised about when there's such a distinct hierarchy in Alacrya.

Cromely gave me the smallest of bows and turned on his heel, making a beeline for his students. He couldn't have taken more than five steps before Chief Mason scurried over to me, concern laced in his furrowed brows. "E-esteemed ascender."

Chief Mason turned his head to make sure Cromely was out of earshot before continuing. "M-my sincerest apologies. Elder Cromely was on the verge of cancelling his visit, and I knew that would complicate your trip back to Aramoor as well. And he's met many ascenders before, so just saying you were an ascender didn't seem to interest him."

"What's done is done," I replied, my voice tinged with annoyance. "I'm assuming you've anticipated that Elder Cromely would ask me to put on a little show with his students?"

The burly man's gaze lowered. "He mentioned it, yes."

"Good. Then progress as planned." I stood up to get a drink when Chief Mason grabbed my sleeve and leaned in toward me.

"Please be careful of Elder Cromely. He is known to be quite devious in his plans, and he cherishes his granddaughter," he whispered.

My mouth twitched upward in a smirk. "So you're worrying about me now?"

The town chief's expression faltered and he looked like he very much wanted to crawl into a hole.

"I'm joking," I smiled, patting the large man's shoulder. "I hope your son wins the exhibition. His first win was impressive."

"Thank you!" Chief Mason's expression brightened as he beamed in pride.

Meanwhile, I made my way toward the exit, passing by Cromely, who was speaking urgently in a low voice with his two students. Aphene's fierce expression mirrored her determination, while Pallisun looked like he had already won.

'Not that I'm worried, but are you going to be okay? They seem to be hiding something, and you've drained most of your aether reserves trying to wake up Sylvie.' Despite his assurance, Regis wasn't able to hide the genuine worry leaking through to me.

They're under the assumption that I'm a newly fledged ascender who just barely made it out of his first ascent.

A smile pulled at my lips as I left the viewing lounge. I had been getting bored of training against the mana beasts nearby, and regardless of whether this duel would prove challenging or not, I'd at least get to unwind a bit.

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I felt somewhat bad.

Chief Mason's son, Braxton, had won the Striker's tournament, meaning he would be sent to Aramoor to become a student at Stormcove Academy. Any other day, Braxton would've been the center of attention for his victory, and the target of envy from his peers. Not only Braxton's, but his entire family's status would be elevated within Maerin Town and—if he did well at Stormcove—all of Aramoor.

However, after Cromely had congratulated Braxton on winning the tournament and half-heartedly said he was looking forward to seeing him at Stormcove, the old representative practically pushed the poor boy off stage and announced a "once-in-a-lifetime event" for the citizens of Maerin Town and the other nearby towns.

The crowd quickly forgot about the exhibition and erupted into cheers as Aphene, Pallisun, and I stepped out onto the field with Cromely standing between us. Workers quickly removed the raised platform where the Strikers had fought since we'd need more space, leaving only the grassy floor of the arena.

"Thank you for agreeing to spar with us," Pallisun called out loud enough for the audience to hear. More quietly, he said, "We were afraid you would decline."

"The pleasure is mine," I said, ignoring the haughty undertone in his gratitude.

Both students had changed from their formal attire. While their armor looked more like a fashion statement than functional battleware, their weapons told a different story.

Pallisun withdrew a coffin shield his dimension ring; the ungainly shield was nearly as tall as he was, and twice as wide. Aphene, meanwhile, held a claymore with a pearlescent blade in her right hand, and her entire left arm was covered in a silver bracer.

"Following the standard rules of non-lethal duels, weapons are permitted but must be blunted. Magic is expected, but control should be utilized to avoid dealing grievous injury, and no effects used that risk injury to the audience. All combatants must adhere to the commands of the moderator." Cromely announced the rules with a practiced air. "When the combatants are ready, we will begin."

The three of them waited silently for me to withdraw my weapons but I shook my head. "I'll fight bare-handed."

Aphene stepped forward, eyes narrowed. "Are you looking to blame your defeat on the lack of a weapon, Ascender Grey?"

'Nnngh! They're so cheeky,' Regis growled, bristling with anger.

"I promise to blame only myself in the event that I'm defeated," I replied calmly before turning to Cromely. "Now, can we begin?"

The old man let out a cough before stepping back several paces, holding his right hand high in the air.

"Begin!" Cromely belted out as his hand swung down.

Immediately, the crowd began to cheer. Pallisun held up his shield to cover both himself and his partner, and the pair studied me closely. They had no clue, I realized, whether I was a Caster, Shield, or Striker.

After a brief pause, the two charged forward. Though both were hidden from view behind the large shield, I expected Aphene was preparing to launch her first attack, likely something intended to probe my defenses and feel out my fighting style.

Taking a dueling stance with both arms relaxed at my sides, I pondered on how to approach this. Without being able to sense their mana levels, I couldn't be sure exactly how powerful they were, but based on what I had seen from the Alacryan students at the exhibition, I had to assume that the top students from Stormcove Academy would be on the level of an A-rank adventurer.

With my aether reserves barely at the ten percent mark, there was just enough danger to keep me on my toes.

Pallisun kicked up a storm of dust behind him as he charged toward me. Sidestepping out of the way was simple enough, but Aphene was waiting for that, brandishing her claymore. Her dark hair fluttered in the wind as she swung in a broad arc, which I hopped back from, followed by a lunge, which I sidestepped.

Meanwhile Pallisun made a sharp turn, aided by precise bursts of wind. His shield glimmered just a few feet away, like a bull leading with its horns. "You're going to have to do more than just dodge!" the shield-wielding student roared.

Their movements were well-practiced and without blatant openings. Aphene used Pallisun as protection—and an obstruction to limit my view of her—while launching devastating attacks with the big two-handed sword. As well as the pair fought together, I didn't doubt their ability to rival even a veteran AA-rank adventurer.

Unfortunately for them, with my experience supplemented by the inhuman reflexes that I had inherited, they might as well have been calling out their moves.

Pivoting on my front foot, I redirected Aphene's next lunge with my hand against the flat of her blade. At the same time, I stamped my back foot into the ground just as Pallisun was about to tackle me.

With my foot obstructing Pallisun's charge, he flew over my shoulder, barely able to hold on to his shield. Aphene had put most of her weight into the lunge, making her body lurch forward as her attack missed its mark. Making use of her imbalance, I hit her with an open palm square on her gauntlet.

Aphene toppled to the ground, then stumbled awkwardly as she attempted to roll quickly back to her feet. If this were a life-or-death battle, she had already given me more than enough opportunity to strike her unguarded back. Pallisun fared better, using his wind magic to reposition himself in the air to land deftly on his feet.

My gaze lingered on the two naive students, both now glowering angrily, though the anger was framed neatly with the flush of embarrassment.

APHENE MANDRICK

"What's with those faces?" the ascender asked, tilting his head to the side. "You should've expected this much from an ascender, right?"

I studied the pretty man. Despite his toned but slender frame and unarmed state, I couldn't help but begin to fear him. His golden eyes, nonchalant expression, and charming manner should've come off as amiable, but he had all the warmth of a predator seeking blood.

Unwilling to show any weakness, though, I swallowed my emotions.

"We didn't want to accidentally hurt you. My apologies for underestimating your prowess." I circled around him and stepped half behind Pallisun's shield. Through gritted teeth, I added, "It won't happen again."

Pallisun, next to me, abandoned his shield as if to punctuate my point. Realizing that our opponent was clearly a Striker, he withdrew the two heavy plate gauntlets that he had inherited, as the next in line of the Blather blood.

The wind hummed and hissed as he curled his fingers into a fist. With a grunt, Pallisun dashed forward. I followed shortly behind.

Pallisun swung his wind-clad fist, hitting only thin air as the ascender easily stepped back before kicking him the chest. Despite the weight difference between powerfully built Pallisun and the ascender, my partner slid backwards across the ground and doubled over, gasping for breath.

Not willing to give the ascender even a moment's chance, I leaped past Pallisun and swung Harmony downward in a feint. My sword's shimmering blade whistled as it cut through the air just in front of the

ascender, but I channeled a flood of mana into my sword arm in order to change the trajectory of my blade mid-swing.

My own sword's motion was a blur, and even I was barely able to follow it, but somehow, his pale hand had grabbed my wrist out of the air.

"Not bad." Despite how thin and delicate his hand looked, he held my wrist in an iron grip.

Letting Harmony fall, I caught it with my free hand and thrust forward, but he again side-stepped, the movement so nonchalant it looked like he was stepping around a mud puddle while out for an afternoon stroll.

"Try again," he said as if he were my instructor rather than my opponent. The ascender released my hand—then *pushed* me square in my shoulder.

My whole body jerked back from the sudden force before I could spin away from the impact, and Pallisun just managed to get out of the way before I tripped over him.

As the two of us recovered, we stood side to side with weapons up in defensive positions. However, the ascender merely stood there with that aloof—almost bored—expression of his.

"Cocky bastard." My partner spat on the ground and straightened himself. Swirling wind picked up from nowhere and encased his entire body.

He gave me a knowing look and I nodded in understanding.

Just like how we've been practicing.

Bursting forward once more, we approached the ascender from different angles. I dug in my heels and prepared to thrust Harmony's point at him just a few steps shy of reaching him, while at the same time Pallisun ducked low and aimed for the legs.

However, by the time I began to channel lightning through my arm and into my blade, the ascender had flashed past Pallisun and was right in front of me.

Moving with uncanny precision, he dodged my thrust. Then the world suddenly flipped as I found myself in the air.

A rush of wind oriented me enough to aim the spell that I had been channeling, and I unleashed the voltaic spear from the point of my blade while still falling to the ground.

Yet even the fastest element couldn't catch the ascender off-guard as he stepped out of view, his body a blur.

By the time my feet had touched the ground, the ascender had tripped Pallisun, spun him around mid air, slammed him into the grass, and thrust his fist down at my partner's chest. Thankfully, Pallisun had managed to bring his arms up in a crossguard, but the sheer strength of the impact cracked the earth beneath him.

Immediately, I hopped back to maintain my distance rather than try to fight in close quarters against this monster.

I swung Harmony in a broad arc. A shockwave of lightning ripped out of my blade and arced toward where the ascender stood on top of Pallisun. Focusing more mana into my emblem, I willed the voltaic crescent to split into a dozen separate projectiles. It took all of my concentration to control the chaotic nature of lightning into the form that I wanted, but in the split second it took me to do this, the ascender hauled Pallisun from the ground to use as a human shield.

"Coward!" I cursed, dispersing the spell just before it hit my partner.

"I'm the one fighting without a weapon." The wheat-haired ascender frowned as he peeked out from behind Pallisun's unconscious body. "But I'm confused. Are you a Striker or Caster?"

Is he not even taking this seriously?

Both Pallisun and I had tested into the threshold of a high-tier mage—he as a Shield and myself as a Striker. The evolution of one of my crests into an emblem had allowed me even fire lightning over a distance.

Yet this ascender, who seemed to be using only pure mana, was dancing circles around us like we were toddlers barely able to walk.

The ascender's gaze flickered down to Pallisun, who was struggling in his arms. In a mocking tone, he said, "You think you can stand up if I let you go?"

"Screw you!" my partner roared, unleashing a dome of enhanced gravity around them. The short grass was flattened, and even I felt the pull of gravity weighing down on me.

Pallisun's first emblem took a heavy toll on him with his current mana capacity. Since he had decided to use it, then I shouldn't hold back either.

"Hold on!" I shouted as Pallisun broke free from the ascender's weakened grip.

My partner and the ascender broke out into a close-quarter brawl. Even within the gravity field that should've been slowing down his movements, however, the ascender seemed unimpeded.

Wasting no time, I ignited my second emblem.

"Aphene, stop!" I heard my grandfather's concerned voice in a drawl as the entire world shifted into slow motion.

My body protested as mana coursed through my emblem, releasing voltaic mana that coursed through my veins like thousands of small pinpricks. I could feel every inch of my body electrified with energy, renewing my confidence.

In a way, the ascender's capabilities would work in our advantage.

With the footage our artifact would capture from this fight, Pallisun and I would surely be able to get into an ascender's academy in the central dominion.

My gaze flickered to the ascender who—even as he fought against Pallisun—was watching me with an expression of surprise, and he seemed to be genuinely interested in what I was doing for the first time.

It's not surprising. Internal lightning magic is rare, and this one is a high-tier emblem.

Tuning out my grandfather's shouts, I approached their duel. "Pallisun!"

The emblem on my partner's lower back blazed underneath his tunic, and the dome of heightened gravity condensed around his gauntlets to form a glassy aura that blurred the space within it.

A confident smile crossed Pallisun's worn face as he activated the full effects of his precious artifact, which had been designed for Blood Blather's inherent affinity for gravity magic.

Once he was able to fully master his emblem and gauntlets, Pallisun would be able to not only block physical projectiles, but redirect magical ones as well through the use of the repellent force.

Even in his current state, he was a force to be reckoned with. With me by his side, even a full-fledged ascender would be hard-pressed to beat us, let alone one that had just barely finished his first ascent.

"Interesting!" the ascender said, beaming. He had broken off his exchange with Pallisun, stepping away, choosing to watch with interest as my partner activated his artifact instead of pressing the attack. Then, with a terrible grin, he shifted his footing and prepared to charge toward us.

I had known he was fast—he'd been little more than a blur or flash of color during our previous exchanges—but even with my internal lightning spell greatly heightening my senses and reflexes, I was barely able to keep up with his movement.

Pallisun managed to bring his arms up to defend against the ascender's strike, allowing me to step around my partner and swing at the man's exposed side.

The world moved in slow motion around me while my senses took everything in: the crunch of grass and dirt beneath my feet, the whistle of Harmony's blade cutting the air, and the resounding thud of the ascender's fist hitting Pallisun's gauntlet.

Yet, before I could finish the blow, the ascender spun on his heels, closing the distance between us so that my attack swung harmlessly behind the man's back. He trapped my sword arm under his own and swept my legs out from under me.

I could follow every moment of the ascender's brilliant maneuver, from his footwork, to his apparent ability to predict the position of my swing while timing his own movements. Following and reacting, however, were two different stories.

Before he could finish his move, Pallisun managed to throw a gravity-imbued punch from behind the ascender. It wasn't surprising to see that he was able to dodge: one of his emblems, or even a regalia, must have given him a pair of eyes behind his head.

This time, however, the field of gravity surrounding my partner's gauntlet expanded just as it passed the ascender's head, *pushing* him just enough for me to wiggle free from his grasp before executing a lateral handspring to right myself.

My left leg throbbed like it was on fire from that simple kick, but I managed to put enough weight on it to follow up Pallisun's attack with a low horizontal sweep with Harmony.

The ascender pivoted back, dodging my strike, and at the same time, hooking his leg behind the inside of Pallisun's knees. Before I could even warn Pallisun, the ascender kicked his leg back and swung a straightened arm right at his face.

Pallisun's neck snapped back from the force, while his legs flailed up in the air before the back of his head smashed against the ground in a resounding crash.

A guttural yell tore free from my throat as I charged the ascender.

I can do this. I can still read his movements. As long as I can read him, I can react.

The ascender looked back over his shoulder with an impatient gaze, causing me to involuntarily flinch. He turned toward me and paused, giving me the time I needed for my next attack.

Currents of electricity coiled around me, reassuring me that I could win this exchange, and my eyes tracked every inch of his body for signs of his next move.

His left shoulder twitched, and I responded by bringing Harmony up to defend my left side. Then his right shoulder twitched, followed by his left arm rising. I tried to predict all of his movements, to react to each one individually, but by the time he was in range of my blade, his hand was at my throat.

His grip was gentle, with just enough pressure to let me know that he had won.

He didn't simply win: he had used my most powerful spell against me.

Withdrawing my mana, I dropped my sword. "I-I concede."

It was when I spoke that I realized I had been holding in my breath. As I acknowledged my defeat, my shoulders slumped and the trapped air escaped from my lungs.

I was frustrated, disappointed, and envious of the man who stood in front of me. But more than anything, I realized I was relieved—relieved that he wasn't truly my enemy.

Because I knew that, had he considered this a real fight, I wouldn't be alive.

The entire arena shook as the crowd erupted into cheers, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"It was a good fight," he said in a low voice as he lowered his hand from my throat. "But you shouldn't rely so heavily on something you have no idea how to properly use."

"Aphene!" the familiar voice of my grandfather rang from behind me.

The ascender patted my shoulder as he walked past me. "Do you have a name for that spell?"

"There's no official name for it in the records," I admitted weakly, turning my head toward him. "I just call it internal lightning."

He looked back with the strangest smile, his golden eyes gleaming. "How about naming it 'Thunderclap Impulse'?"

291 DEEP DIVE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

The nondescript black stone hung in the air just shy of the ceiling before falling back into my hand. I threw it again, like I had been for the past hour, as I thought about what to do with the relic.

Meanwhile, I could hear the rhythmic thumping of Regis's tail. He had been sitting beside my bed for about as long, his eyes following the stone like a hungry dog waiting for a treat. The only thing missing from the picture was his tongue hanging out and saliva spilling from his mouth.

Sentient weapon, capable of mass destruction, bestowed upon me by the asuras to serve me in my time of need... yeah right.

"I'm not giving this to you," I said flatly, despite Regis's subliminal begging.

"Oh come on! You promised a percentage of all of the aether you consume," he cried.

"I haven't decided whether I'm going to consume the aether from this relic yet."

"Why wouldn't you consume it? That's something even Agrona can't do; otherwise he would probably hoard even the dead relics," he argued, flabbergasted.

"Dead or not, this is still a relic," I argued back, catching the black stone in my hand and sitting up on my bed.

My progress with the keystone—the name I came up with for the cuboid relic—was slow, but it had become increasingly obvious how powerful the knowledge stored inside it was.

"If I can somehow tap into this relic as well, maybe I can gain insights into a new godrune," I continued. "Or maybe this thing is actually a weapon or some sort of tool."

Regis lowered his ears, dejected. "If Agrona, who has been tinkering with relics for gods knows how long, can't figure it out, how do *you* expect to do it?"

"Utilize my inherent advantages until I'm able to figure it out?" I shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm tempted to consume the aether in here to refine my core too, but I don't want to do anything I can't undo."

"So what are you going to do with it until then? Mount it on a cane like that old man?" Regis retorted, his eyes narrowing in frustration.

I smirked. "Maybe I'll just hang it off a stick and dangle it in front of your face as I ride you around the city."

"Rude."

I let out a chuckle. "Then stop looking at it like it's a carrot."

With a snort, my mighty steed turned away and curled up in the corner to sulk.

Shaking my head, I walked over to the large window overlooking one of the main streets of Aramoor. Below our rooms, a wide lane flanked by raised walkways was loud with activity. Carriages pulled by horses or mana beasts rumbled past; chattering, vibrantly dressed Alacryans walked in the shade of the tall buildings; and a dozen different store owners stood outside under their businesses' colorful awnings, encouraging and inviting passersby to examine their wares.

Placing my newly-acquired relic into my dimensional rune, I headed toward the door.

Regis's ears perked at the sound of my footsteps. "Heading to the library again?"

"Mhmm," I answered. "Are you going to stay behind again?"

"Might as well. I'm going to fall asleep there anyway," he groused. "At least here, I can take in some ambient aether."

"I promise I'll let you absorb my aether again once we're back in the Relictombs," I said apologetically, then headed out the door.

Once in the crowded street, I looked around. I had made it a habit to take a different route with every trip, not only taking in the sights that the busy city had to offer, but how the people behaved as well. I also wanted to ensure I didn't catch anyone's attention by passing through the same area every day.

Four days had passed since my duel with Aphene and Pallisun. After collecting my prize from the reluctant Cromely and destroying the recording artifacts that he had arranged, I bid my farewell to the small and peaceful Maerin Town.

Loreni, Mayla, and Chief Mason were really the only ones that I cared enough to say goodbye to. I had assumed that Mayla would be travelling to Aramoor with us, but it turned out that, due to how rare a sentry of her innate ability was, she would be sent to a larger city capable of properly testing her.

The usually talkative Mayla had barely uttered a word as Loreni explained all of this with as much enthusiasm as she could muster, and I left it at that. The two sisters had been helpful while I was in Maerin Town and I was thankful for them, but that was it.

Belmun, the shaggy-haired kid that tried to make me take him as my student, came with the group to Stormcove, along with Braxton and an older male from Maerin Town that I didn't recognize.

The entire party from Stormcove Academy had been in a foul mood ever since I had beaten them in the duel, but they acknowledged their loss. Thankfully, the trip to Aramoor was short—almost instant, actually. Within the designated landing port on the edge of the academy grounds, Cromely handed me a piece of paper and gave me directions to an inn where I would find comfortable lodgings, then bid me a brusque farewell.

Belmun had shot me a wide grin before he and Braxton eagerly followed after the representatives of Stormcove Academy. Trailing behind them silently was the older man, a caretaker assigned to them from Maerin Town.

A light brush against my shoulder brought me out of my thoughts.

"Excuse me! Watch where you're go—" The blue-haired woman, whose colorful makeup accentuated her eyes, froze as she gazed up at me. Her cheeks were flushed, but that might've just been her makeup. "Ooh, my apologies."

"It's fine," I replied, keeping my expression deadpan and unreadable.

I continued walking, ignoring the lingering gazes of passersby. It was hard to admit, but even a supposed small city like Aramoor could give Xyrus a run for its money.

Restaurants specializing in cuisines of the different dominions were commonplace, as were cafes with outside patios where well-dressed Alacryans sipped their drinks and conversed leisurely.

"And don't come back!" a gruff voice shouted from somewhere up the street.

A well-built old man, face scarlet and eyes half-closed, lay on the ground just outside a finely appointed restaurant. A well-dressed man who looked like he might be the owner was wiping his hands on a white towel hanging from his waste, and giving the drunken man a disgusted glare. Finally, the restaurateur stomped back into his business and slammed the heavy door, causing the whole storefront to rattle alarmingly.

"Bah! Your rum tasted like chilled piss anyway," the drunkard slurred, throwing the bottle he had been holding at the door.

By now, a small crowd had formed around him, and murmurs of judgment and criticism could be heard as he spat on the ground and scratched at his bed of long and disheveled gray hair. The drunkard didn't seem to mind, or perhaps he was too far gone to even notice.

He did, however, single me out within the crowd, giving me a glassy stare before walking away with surprising deftness despite his inebriated state.

Not thinking much of it, I eventually passed the row of restaurants and arrived at what seemed like the clothing district. I debated for a minute whether to purchase some new clothes. Even while wearing the plain shirt and pants that I had taken from Maerin Town, I had been drawing attention to myself, which I wanted to minimize.

In the end, I decided against it, not wanting to get caught up in frivolous things. Walking past the shopping district, I made my way toward the small building that I had frequented every day since arriving in Aramoor: the library.

"Welcome," the attendant, a bored looking teenage boy, muttered, not caring enough to even peek up from the book he was reading.

Unlike the rest of the city, the library was empty and unembellished, with way too many wooden shelves for the number of books that it contained.

I wandered between the shelves, looking for any interesting books that I hadn't already read over the past few days, and I discovered a particularly old book that had been bound in a leather cover. What had caught my eye were the red splotches on the corners of the cover and spine. When I opened it and flipped through the pages, it looked like the words were actually written in blood.

"Well, this is new."

Putting the blood-stained book in my pile of to-reads, I took my normal seat in a far corner of the library. I'd chosen the little table not only because it was out of the way, but also because it was the least wobbly chair I could find.

Looking at the stack of books, I let out an audible sigh. I already knew what sort of books these would be even without opening them, but I felt compelled to keep trying.

As a totalitarian continent ruled by what were essentially gods, the books that were available in this library were mostly propaganda and misinformation. They provided an embellished history where Agrona and the Vritra descended upon Alacrya to help the inhabitants and bring about a new age of magic and technology and provide a safe haven from the other gods, who had of course vowed to strike down all lessers.

These past few days, I had to stop myself from laughing a few times at the sheer ridiculousness of some of the claims contained within the books. Most of them made Agrona out to be a strict but just god that valued and rewarded the strong, while the asuras of Epheotus were gods that hated Agrona for his love and benevolence toward us lessers, and were hell-bent on destroying all of us.

I had to admit that, while it was twisted in a very favorable way toward Agrona and his clan, there were some truths mixed in—namely, the fact that the gods of Epheotus had been the ones to destroy the ancient beings of old, the ancient mages.

I was surprised that this was publicly known in Alacrya, and it made me wonder how the tales of the Indrath Clan's destruction of the ancient mages had avoided spreading throughout Dicathen. I wouldn't be surprised if Lord Indrath himself had a hand in suppressing the story, but at the same time, had I not learned of the genocide from Sylvia directly, with her story being confirmed by the djinn projection in the Relictombs, then I probably would have seen it as just another piece of propaganda by Agrona.

In order to find any tidbits of information that would prove useful, I had to continue sifting through fictional history and veneration for Agrona and his Vritra Clan, book after tedious, lie-filled book.

Hence, me sitting in front of another stack of dusty old tomes.

Hoping to find something different, I went straight to the book that had been written in blood. Despite its rather insidious source of ink, the content inside might've just been written by a passionate worshipper of Agrona. It outlined that the unjust gods hated Agrona for loving us and bestowing the lessers with magic, and that they hated him even more for spreading his blood. It also neatly reinforced why Agrona wanted everyone to get so strong: so that they could protect themselves and help Agrona to fight back against the unjust gods, who simply wanted to kill them for the crime of being born lessers.

I always wondered why people here referred to family as "blood", and this book had the answer.

"Interesting," I whispered to myself as I read through the latter half of the blood-scored book.

It highlighted the importance of how rich your blood was with the Vritra lineage. Apparently, Agrona and the rest of his clan had gotten fairly friendly with the Alacryans of old while they were experimenting.

Of course, the book outlined this as High Sovereign Agrona and his Vritra Clan "falling in love" with the people of Alacrya and sowing their "seed" so that Alacrya would flourish.

How disturbing.

Thankfully, the next book contained some new information that didn't have to do with asuran reproduction.

It detailed the layout of the continent, but went into detail in areas I hadn't seen mentioned before. Apparently Agrona, as the High Sovereign, resided in a towering spire situated neatly in the middle of the central dominion. The central dominion, unlike Truacia, Sehz-Clar, Etril, and Vechor, the northern, southern, eastern, and western dominions respectively, had gone unnamed since the founding of Alacrya. No reason was given for this, but the author seemed to suggest that the central dominion, as the seat of Agrona's power, was somehow beyond the application of anything so mundane as names.

Reading on, the author wrote, "Aside from the High Sovereign that resides in the mysterious"—here I had to squint to make out the words, which had been slightly smudged—"Taegrin Caelum, there exist five other Sovereigns that protect and watch over their respective dominions."

According to the author, these five "Named Sovereigns," even as gods themselves, were much more intertwined in the lesser affairs of their dominion—playing king while answering only to Agrona, the High Sovereign.

The book eventually trailed off into a tangent describing the various great deeds of Exeges, the Sovereign residing over Etril, which was the dominion of the author's birth.

After finishing the book, I took a moment to digest its content. I had thought about what the books had taught me. While factually wrong, it shed light on the culture of this continent, and, more importantly, what the people here believed in.

I whiled away a couple of hours engrossed in the books in front of me. While many were basically different authors' renditions of Alacrya's glorified history, the time wasn't completely wasted.

An interesting tidbit of history contained within a book titled "Rise of the Ascenders" was that the term "ascender" was coined only seventy years ago. Before then, practically anyone was able to delve into the Relictombs. Because there were so many mages willing to partake in the ascents to try and get rich, but the Relictombs proved so dangerous, the death rate among adventurous young people was catastrophically high.

"It's a lot like how the Beast Glades were responsible for most of the deaths in Dicathen," I muttered quietly.

According to the book, while measures had been taken by the Vritra to restrict the Relictombs to only those who passed a rigorous test, this only applied to those who wanted to go deeper than the second floor.

Apparently, the first two zones of the Relictombs were an interconnected underground expanse filled with valuable natural resources and very few beasts.

The author didn't seem to be an ascender himself, because he never went into further detail on the deeper levels of the Relictombs. However, the first two zones only had weak monsters, and were prime places to train even without an ascender's badge, so anyone was allowed to go in.

The book went off on a tangent, focusing on the mages who had survived several ascents before the test was mandated. These mages had made a name for themselves from the riches they gained, and become the first of the named bloods.

Basically, they were nobles, but socially were still one tier below the highbloods, who were considered true nobility based on their lineage tracing back to an actual Vritra.

The author went on to applaud the efforts of the named bloods and highbloods that soon built academies to forge talented ascenders and teach a new generation from their own experiences, allowing them not only to survive, but to gain their own fame and wealth in the Relictombs.

I couldn't help but note that this was the first instance that an author had praised someone other than the High Sovereign.

Even under the embellished prose of this particular writer, ascenders were just glorified tomb raiders. To the masses, they were seen as heroes, but this was largely because of how Agrona himself placed such importance on it.

The author even wrote that there had been many times where Agrona himself said that his biggest regret was not being able to enter the Relictombs. That was because the ancient mages had designed them so that the vengeful gods of Epheotus would not take advantage of the secrets within and use them against the Alacryans, thereby preventing the Vritra from entering as well.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes as the author stressed how Agrona and the Vritra wouldn't go inside the Relictombs, out of fear that their presence would destroy the place, rather than stating they *couldn't* go.

In the end, the ascenders were basically marketed as heroes risking their lives for the betterment of all Alacryans by collecting the treasures of the ancient mages—treasures that would ultimately help the Sovereigns fight against the other gods and protect the people of Alacrya. This brought the book full-circle. It was tidily done, even if it was complete bullshit.

"Watch it!" someone yelled at the front of the library.

I turned to see the bored teen up on his feet, angrily glaring at the drunkard—the same drunkard from the restaurant—who had managed to spill his drink all over the floor.

"Oops! Sorry about that, kiddo," the drunkard said with a hiccup. He sauntered inside the library, teetering on his feet but never actually losing balance.

It wasn't until his bloodshot eyes locked onto mine that his expression brightened. "Aha! I knew you'd be here."

He knew *I'd be here?*

While annoyed by both his interruption and his foul stench, my curiosity got the better of me. I remained in my seat and waited for the drunkard to make his way to my table.

He practically fell on the seat across from mine as he slammed his beverage on the table, liquid splashing on the books.

For a moment the two of us sat silently, gauging each other. Finally, he broke into a wide grin, revealing a set of surprisingly white teeth underneath his unkempt beard.

"So... what continent are you from?"

292

A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIP

"This is why you need the expensive stuff!" the drunkard emphasized as the glass hit the sticky bar with a thud. "Come on, pretty boy. Take a swig!"

I glared at the grizzled old man, who had caramel-colored liquid dribbling down the sides of his

mouth and into his beard, and wondered how I had ended up in this situation.

After the drunkard, who introduced himself as Alaric, interrupted me in the library and asked what continent I had come from, I promptly dragged him outside for some answers.

Alaric refused to say anymore without something in return, and so had led me to his favorite drinking establishment, which was surprisingly upscale for a man who wasn't even wearing shoes. We had been there ever since, sitting at the far end of the bar, well away from the handful of other patrons sprinkled throughout the room.

Letting out a sharp breath, I lifted my own glass and gulped down the rum.

A smooth burn washed over my mouth and throat, followed by a sweet and oaky wave of flavor that lingered on my tongue.

"There, happy?" I challenged as the drunkard waved his hand at the bartender for a refill.

"I'd be happier if you ordered the entire bottle," the old man said with a nudge.

"How about this?" I took the refilled glass in front of him and began slowly pouring the rum into the sink on the other side of the wooden counter.

"No!" Alaric pulled at my arm, which made me spill even more of the rum. "Fine, fine!"

I placed the half-empty shot glass back in front of the man, and he quickly snatched it away from my reach.

"What kind of sick bastard throws out good rum," he grumbled.

Cocking a brow seemed to get the message across that I was no longer in the mood to humor this old drunk.

He quickly shot what was left in the glass, then leaned toward me. "You see..." Alaric whispered, glancing around the room suspiciously. "I have a crest that tells me you're not from around here."

I stared at the old man, deadpan.

He winked. "Just kidding."

My annoyance boiled over into anger. I should've known that the filthy old alcoholic was just messing with me. Wordlessly, I stood up to leave, but the drunkard kept talking.

"I don't need magic to tell that." He rolled his eyes dramatically. "Anyone with half a brain would be able to tell if they spent some time watching you."

"You were watching me?" I asked, sitting back down.

"Only because you stick out like a sore thumb. You carry yourself like a seasoned warrior, but your build and flawless skin suggests that you're either a noble, Caster, student, or even all three." Alaric licked the last dribbles of rum in his glass before continuing. "As if that's not strange enough, you look and act like a tourist visiting from a faraway outpost."

He waved his hand up and down as he examined me casually. "You're a walking bundle of inconsistencies. Now if you were in a more military or politically inclined dominion, like Vechor or the central dominion, I'd put my nonexistent money on you getting cuffed in less than a day."

I let out a scoff. "So why haven't I drawn suspicion until now then?"

"Oh, you probably have," he mused. "Suspicion, curiosity, interest—all of the above. It's just that Etril has always been such a hub for diverse travelers that the worse they'd do is wonder and judge silently."

After surveying the establishment we were in more carefully, I turned back to Alaric.

"Assuming what you said was correct, what is your reason for making yourself known?" I lowered my voice into a more threatening tone. "Haven't you thought of the possibility that I'd just get rid of you?"

"In this place, where there are witnesses?" he asked, batting his eyes. "Trust me, kid. If I wanted to turn you in, I would've done so from a safe distance, but what does that do for me?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't get anything out of turning you in." Alaric paused, leaning in closer for dramatic effect. "If I were to, let's say, help you instead, I'm sure we could come up with some sort of deal."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "I think you've had one too many drinks. Besides, I don't have much money."

"Oh I don't doubt that," he agreed. "But I can recognize a golden ticket when it's fluttering in my face."

By this time, I was growing a bit uncomfortable, afraid that people would overhear. Alaric must've noticed because he waved his hand in dismissal. "Relax. I've been obstructing the sound around us, so no one has heard a thing we've said."

Is that why Alaric had been gesturing for a refill instead of asking for one?

Disappointed in myself for failing to notice, and frustrated at how my lack of mana perception was hindering me outside of the Relictombs, I let out a sigh. "So you're saying that even though you think—"

"Know," he corrected.

"—think, that I'm not from here," I stressed, "you'd rather try and strike a deal with me rather than turning me in?"

He gave me a sleepy look. "Is that so strange?"

"It's just that the people of Aramoor seem so reverent of the High Sovereign," I said.

"What does my respect or disrespect of the Vritra have to do with helping out a refugee?" he quipped.

"Fine," I acquiesced. "Let's assume that your suspicions are true. What can you provide for me and what exactly would you want in return?"

"You're an ascender, or at least you're trying to pass yourself off as one, right?" he questioned.

This insight surprised me more than anything else Alaric had said. Outside of Stormcove Academy, no one in Aramoor could've known I'd been in the Relictombs. "How did you know?"

"The inn you're staying at caters mostly to visiting ascenders," he answered dismissively. "Now, onto your first line of questions: I'll help you blend in so you don't stick out like an armored troll in a doily shop, no questions asked."

"No questions asked?" I echoed, interested despite not quite trusting the old drunk.

"Frankly, I don't give two shits about who you are," he answered, swirling the caramel liquid in his glass, which had just been refilled yet again. "That's not it though. I'll also help train you for ascents."

I stared at the inebriated man, whose entire face was ruddy with drink, and his eyes unable to focus on one thing for more than a few seconds. "Why?"

"Well, you're going to need to be a successful ascender in order to make me lots of money, right?" He let out a disbelieving scoff, like this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Good alcohol doesn't come cheap, you know."

Admittedly, I was intrigued by his offer. The strange gazes I attracted had been growing more frequent over the past few days, and it was much more difficult to probe for information in the city, where I didn't have kind-hearted people like Mayla and Loreni to answer my unasked questions.

"So all you want is money?" I asked, still suspicious. "How much of it, exactly?"

"Sixty percent of all of your earnings in the Relictombs, as well as any form of ancillary promotions or winnings you earn while you're on the surface," he answered as if he'd had the figure set before we even sat down.

I gaped. "Sixty percent?"

"Hey! I'm uprooting myself from my beloved home and travelling with you to offer my tutelage."

I cocked a brow. "You have a home here?"

Alaric let out a cough. "The city is my home."

I rolled my eyes. "So no home."

"Don't be so whiny, kid. Besides, Stormcove Academy takes around thirty percent of their graduates' profits from selling accolades or other precious material found only in the Relictombs, and that's for the first five years after graduating. That percentage is even higher in Vechor, Sehz-Clar, and the central dominion," he informed me with an innocent expression. "But since you're from Alacrya, you already know that, right?"

I actually didn't know. Much like the rest of the information about Alacrya that I *did* know, it consisted of tidbits that I had picked up here and there by eavesdropping on conversation or asking questions like I had in Maerin Town.

"Forty percent," I countered after a brief pause.

"Deal," he replied immediately, grabbing my hand to shake it roughly.

"Stormcove only charges five percent, while even the most prestigious ascender academies charge twenty percent," he said, shooting me a wink.

This hastard...

Regardless of his deceit, it highlighted exactly how much I needed help outside of the Relictombs if I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

"Will you be coming with me on my ascents?" I inquired.

"Are you crazy? Of course not!" Alaric sputtered. "Does this look like a body fit for that godsforsaken place?"

I nodded. It would be easier that way.

Money wasn't something I had any greed for. It was the relics that I needed, and that would be something I could store in my dimensional rune. Even if Alaric's training was utterly useless, as long as he could help me acclimate to Alacryan lifestyle without prying too deeply into my background, it'd be worth it.

I didn't trust the drunkard, but at least his intentions were straightforward. I trusted human greed more than kindness, and if he had any other ulterior motives... well, hopefully it wouldn't come to that. If it did, I was confident that I could remove him as a threat.

"You done introspecting?" Alaric interrupted, holding a new bottle of liquor in his hands.

"What's that?" I pointed at the bottle.

"Oh this?" He gave me a wide grin. "Down payment."

I resisted the urge to bury my face in my hands. Of all the kinds of people out there, how was it that I got stuck with the alcoholic version of Regis?

Suddenly, Alaric jumped out of his barstool, stumbling to gain balance before turning to me. "Anyway, we should get moving. Lots of things to do and we're burning daylight."

After paying the bartender with my runecard, I followed after my unstable new adviser. Our first order of business was getting "my story straight," as he called it. To do this, we went back to my inn.

I opened the door to see Regis waiting by the entrance. I probably should have warned Alaric, but after the day's events, it hadn't occurred to me that Alaric might be surprised to find a black wolf waiting patiently in my room, a mane of purple fire blazing around its neck and shoulders.

My companion and drunken man stared at each other silently for a minute, as if still processing what they were actually seeing. Then Alaric wobbled over to Regis and... patted him on the head.

"Good dog, there, aye," Alaric slurred.

Regis turned to me, his baffled expression almost comical.

"It's fine," I said to Regis. "This inebriated gentleman will be working with us for the time being."

Regis shrugged his lupine shoulders and turned to Alaric. "Ah, well in that case. What's up, old man?"

Alaric gasped, stumbling back behind me as if to use me as a shield. "It talks!"

Regis glowered at the drunk, his upper lip curling to reveal huge white fangs. "How rude. I'm not an 'it'! I'm a 'he'..." Regis cocked his head toward me. "Or am I a 'she'?"

With a smirk toward Regis, I said, "Does gender matter for a 'mighty weapon' such as yourself?"

"I'm a 'he'," Regis decided.

Behind me, Alaric continued to mutter curses to himself about how he regretted all of this.

Once I was able to drag my drunken advisor inside the room, I began to explain my situation, though many of the details were omitted for safety's sake.

Alaric himself said he wasn't interested in my past. He just needed enough to go off of in order to come up with a story.

"Okay, Grey. You did a good job not telling people your blood name. That carries much more importance than your given name," he acknowledged, his voice strained and his eyes darting between me and Regis. "First things first: I don't know how you got well acquainted enough with a Denoir that they'd be willing to give you this medallion—"

"Lend," I corrected.

"Lend. Whatever," Alaric dismissed. "The important thing is that you don't tie yourself up with Highblood Denoir. While it'll definitely get you out of some sticky situation, it'll also draw too much attention—especially once we get into bigger cities."

"Then what do I do?" I stared down at the white dagger in my hand, the Denoir medallion still tied to the handle. "Without this, I have no identity here."

"That's where I come in," Alaric replied. "I have an acquaintance that's an accomplished artificer capable of forging you an identity. You'll be my nephew, whom I have taken under my wing because you didn't want to follow after your father in the merchant business."

"You just happen to have an *accomplished* artificer friend that's able to forge identities?" I pried. It seemed too convenient.

"Accomplished, yes, but gravely underpaid," he chuckled. "Two clients make him more gold from this side business than a year's wage he gets at the fancy laboratory where he works in Sehz-Clar."

I frowned. "Sehz-Clar? Isn't that the southern dominion?"

"Relax. He has a tempus warp anchored to this city," he answered, taking a swig from his newly acquired bottle of alcohol. "Anyway, I need to know a bit more about your... abilities."

'How much are you going to tell him?' Regis asked.

Just enough to give him something to work with.

"Augmented regeneration, strength, speed," I listed off.

"How augmented? And no elements? You're strictly a Striker then?"

"Very augmented," I said confidently. "No elements, and if you're asking if I have any long-range spells, not yet."

"Have you gone on an ascent before?" he asked, clearly deep in thought.

"Just once," I admitted.

Alaric nodded, undeterred. "That's better than nothing. How big of a group did you ascend with?"

I tilted my head. "It was just me."

"Just you..." Alaric repeated slowly, his brows furrowed.

"I did team up with a few others in a convergence zone, but we parted ways after," I explained.

Alaric let his head fall, and for a moment I wondered if he had fallen asleep. His shoulders began to shake, then finally he burst out into maniacal laughter.

Regis and I exchanged a glance and my companion twirled a paw beside his head.

"I'm not crazy!" Alaric howled through his own laughter. Perhaps in an attempt to exert some control over himself, the old drunk took a swig form his bottle, but since he was still laughing he ended up spraying booze all down his front. "I'm allowed to be happy," he told Regis with a grin, his beard still dripping alcohol.

He looked at me like I was made of jewels. "It's not every day that you can strike gold like this. A Striker capable of not only surviving in the Relictombs, but who has gotten far enough to reach a convergence zone!"

"Maybe you should ease up on the alcohol," I warned, but before I could take the bottle away, Alaric shoved it in his stained pants.

"Don't you dare, pretty boy." He narrowed his bloodshot eyes. "Take this away from me and I'll be nonfunctional, and there's still too much to do."

Heaving himself out of the little chair he'd claimed upon entering our room, Alaric teetered toward my companion.

"How did you manage to hide this creature of yours, anyway?" he questioned, studying Regis. "I'd expect him to draw attention, especially in these parts."

"I usually just hide inside him," Regis answered in my stead, demonstrating this by leaping and disappearing into my body.

Alaric just stared at me for a few moments, opening his mouth at one point only to close it again. He repeated this a few times before deciding to take another gulp of his rum, which he had to free from inside his pants first. "I'm not even going to ask. Just... make sure that when your companion—"

"Regis," I cut in. "His name is Regis."

"Just make sure *Regis* doesn't talk a whole lot in front of other ascenders." The old drunkard gestured grandly while rolling his eyes. "While there are accounts of rare regalias capable of conjuring elemental summons that borrow the Caster's sentience, this obviously seems a bit beyond that..."

I decided not to mention that a handful of other ascenders had already witnessed Regis speaking, but took note of this restriction for future forays into the Relictombs.

"So it's fine to fight alongside princess here?" Regis asked as he slipped back out of my body. He looked rather excited by the idea.

"I don't see why not. There are quite a few documented emblems and regalias where elements take on the form of a beast." Alaric shrugged. "Those summons, however, are basically just animated puppets that can be provided with a certain set of instructions, so no talking, and it's best not to stay out for that long."

"Hell yes!" Regis whooped. "No more twiddling my metaphorical thumbs while watching princess here have all the fun."

"Now!" Alaric declared. "Since I have the basic run down, let's head to our first destination."

"Which is?" I asked, suddenly nervous about trusting the old man again.

"We need to get some new clothes on you," the drunkard sang as he did a sloppy twirl to demonstrate his point.

"If you're talking about armor for the ascent, I already—"

"Bah! Not that, you wogart," Alaric snapped.

I didn't know what a "wogart" was, but I was pretty sure it was an insult.

"Remember my whole speech about you being a walking bundle of inconsistencies?" Alaric continued, walking toward the door in that unsteady yet surprisingly light-footed gait of his. "Right now, you look like some runaway prince who thinks he's disguised himself by putting on a shabby outfit. You'd actually draw less attention if you just looked the part of a well-off blood."

I frowned at the idea of dressing up like one of those colorful rainbow geese strutting down the streets outside. "Can't I just look more shabby, like a commoner? I'd feel more comfortable that way."

"No," he stated, deadpan. "Your face stands out too much."

"My face stands out too much?" I echoed, bemused.

"Annoyingly so," he grumbled. "If I was born with a face like that, I'd just woo some rich highblood lady and bathe in sweet rum every night."

Regis jumped back into me, and I could hear his snickering in my head as Alaric continued to mutter quietly about his alcohol-fueled delusions.

"Fine, let's get this over with," I moaned, following Alaric out of our room. "But what's after that?"

"You, my dear nephew"—the drunkard patted my back—"will be taking your ascender's assessment and start making your uncle some money!"

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"This is the fifth outfit already. Is all of this really necessary?" I groaned, stepping out of my changing room and into the viewing area.

Waiting for me was a plethora of employees from the high-end clothing boutique, and even some other customers who had stopped to enjoy the show.

"Kid, do you know how many named bloods seek me out only to be put on my waiting list? I'm only doing this because the old coot asked me for a favor," the bespectacled old woman, who Alaric had introduced as Odile, snapped.

Her heels clacked on the tile floors as she strode behind me, tying my hair with a thin string.

"Speaking of the old coot"—I looked back at the short-haired woman— "How do you know him anyway? The two of you are so... different."

Odile's stern expression faltered, and there was something akin to sorrow written on her face, but it was only for a split second.

"You came for my professional—not personal—advice," she quipped before turning her sharp gaze to the *audience* waiting just outside the changing rooms. "Though it seems like my employees are more than willing to offer their professional advice as well."

The uniformed employees scattered throughout the crowd of about twenty or so began chuckling nervously. A blonde-haired clerk spoke up first. "All the guests are here as well, Madam Odile. We're just watching out for them."

Odile, who was leading me toward the set of nearby mirrors, snorted derisively, but said nothing as she pushed me onto the platform.

'A once quadra-elemental Lance, gifted with the physique and aetheric abilities of an asura, now reduced to this... a dress-up doll,' Regis lamented mockingly. 'Oh, how the mighty have fallen.'

Keep that up and I'll get you a nice flower barrette that really highlights your purple mane.

Regis let out a cackle. 'I'd rock it.'

"Your shoulders look narrower when you're tense like that! We're going for confidence!" Odile huffed as she combed her short white hair back with her fingers. "Great Vritra, I don't see what you have to be ashamed about with *your* face and body."

There was a disturbing chorus of agreement from the crowd, and while I hated drawing attention to myself, I had to agree that Odile had quite a sense of style, one that I wasn't entirely opposed to.

I looked at myself in the tri-fold mirror. In contrast to the tight-fitting armor I had picked up from the Relictombs, Odile had fitted me in a white dress shirt tucked into a pair of black slacks. Rather than wearing a tie or vest, she had me put on a black sweater underneath a dark blue coat. As the final touch, Odile put on what she called a collar bar that accented my suit to give that "classy noble look" she kept going on about.

I liked it. It was a bit more... modern than I had expected—this outfit was something I could easily see passing unnoticed in my old world—but really I only cared about blending in. If I had to dress myself up like a pompous princeling to do so, then so be it.

"He's a rather whiny boy, but I knew you'd want to get your hands on him," Alaric said from behind the crowd, drawing more than a few raised eyebrows. The old drunk had also washed up, trimmed his hair and beard, and changed into a completely black suit. He made his way roughly through the audience, then closed a curtain, blocking off the viewing area.

Several voices rose up in dismay from the other side, but I was glad for the privacy.

"I just wish you would've told me in advance so I could procure an image capturing artifact," Odile said with a sigh. She snapped out of her daze and pointed a finger at Alaric. "That doesn't change the fact that I did *you* a favor, you old drunk! Don't you dare try to change that."

Alaric raised his hands—one of which was still holding onto a bottle of rum—placatingly. "I meant to do nothing of the sort, my beloved crone."

"You're still drinking?" I asked, exasperated. "How're you going to handle the hangover after all of the alcohol you've sucked down?"

"You can't get a hangover if you're always drunk," he said sagely, tapping his temple with a finger.

I opened my mouth to say something, but Alaric just stared at me as if daring me to refute his point. My words came out as an unintelligible grumble.

After gathering the literal pile of clothes that Odile had chosen for me and taking it to the front counter to pay, I was met by a confused clerk.

"Your clothes have already been paid for by Madam Odile," she said as she bagged my clothes.

"Oh." I considered at the number of outfits that were strewn across the counter. "This is a lot of clothes. I'd feel more comfortable paying."

"Don't take it the wrong way. It's an investment on my part," Odile's husky voice said from behind me. I turned to see her walking toward me, Alaric at her side. "It seems like the old coot found someone interesting, and I want to be a part of it."

"Let's go, Grey," Alaric muttered grumpily. "Before she tries to rip me off even more."

After saying our farewells, Alaric and I headed back out in the busy streets, where the sun was beginning to set. A courier would be delivering our new clothes to the inn, which only left us with one last stop for the day.

"Listen up, my lovely nephew," Alaric began, sauntering beside me as we made our way out of the shopping district. "If we're going to get you an ascender's badge as soon as possible without having you affiliated with any sort of institution, here's what we have to do..."

The old drunk proceeded to explain what he had planned. Basically, Alaric would pose as my uncle who had been teaching me to hone my magic and survival skills, since I had no intention of being a merchant like my father. Now that I was of age and had been thoroughly trained, he would be the one to vouch for me in order to take the assessment.

I had expected something more complicated. "So anyone can just vouch for you in order to take the assessment?"

"Don't be silly. It's because your uncle is a retired ascender himself that he's qualified to vouch for you," Alaric said with a cheeky grin. "Unfortunately, passing the assessment won't be enough."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll have to participate in—and survive—one ascent by tagging along with an experienced party," he explained. "Only then will you get an ascender's badge. Thankfully there's an ascension chamber right here in Aramoor, which I assumed you were planning to visit, since you're here."

I shook my head. "I had no intentions of going to the Relictombs in this city."

Sylvia's message had given me memories of the four ruins within the Relictombs that I needed to get to. I had already visited one of them, and while I didn't have an exact map of where the rest of these ruins were, I knew they weren't in Aramoor.

"As both your uncle and your partner in crime, may this one ask where it was you were planning on going?" he questioned, staring at me with that glassy gaze of his. While he still looked drunk, Alaric looked much more reliable now that he'd cleaned himself up.

"I'm looking for ruins within the Relictombs, and while I don't know exactly where they are, I know it's not here."

"You really aren't from around here, aren't you?" he said, leaning closer as we walked. "I'm sure you've noticed this by now, from the last time you were inside, but the Relictombs don't have a conventional structure that you can travel through. You've heard of simulets, right?"

"I have," I replied, the memory of Daria's offer still fresh in my mind.

"The Relictombs were a much deadlier place before the development of the simulets. Before then, even if you crossed an entrance together at the same time, holding hands and all, you would most likely be transported to different zones." Alaric sighed deeply before continuing. "You say you're looking for these 'ruins' within a specific zone, but the truth is, it doesn't really matter where you enter the Relictombs, since you never know where you'll end up. More than that, though, the ascension chamber doesn't take you into the Relictombs proper, just to the first level."

Based on what I'd read, I'd had a feeling tracking down the separate ruins wouldn't be as easy as just entering the Relictombs from the right place, but so much of the literature around the Relictombs had been subjective that I'd held out hope some of the stranger assertions were simply poetic blather.

"So I just have to blindly wander around the Relictombs until I stumble across what I'm looking for by chance?"

Alaric took another sip of his rum, letting out a loud burp before answering. "Some say that the Relictombs has a will of its own, left behind by the ancient mages."

I wouldn't be surprised if the Relictombs *did* have a mind of its own, but I couldn't see how this would help me at all. I hated how so much was still outside of my control. If only I'd thought to ask the djinn projection several more in-depth questions about navigating the Relictombs...

I rubbed my temples. "Fine. It doesn't seem like I have much of a choice."

"Good." Alaric patted my back. "I have no idea how strong you are, but remember that, while trained, you definitely should try and at least *act* like you're having a hard time. Once you've gotten your ascender's badge, it might not be a bad idea to accumulate experience with other parties if you *really* don't want to draw attention to yourself."

'You should just 'summon' me and let me take the test,' Regis chimed in.

"Are solo ascenders that rare?" I asked, ignoring my companion. Trider's surprise when I mentioned it came to mind.

"Very," Alaric answered as he weaved deftly through the crowded street filled with pedestrians. "The Relictombs are much too unpredictable even today, when we have so many records of different zones. It's why experienced sentries are as important as—if not more than—battle mages."

"What sort of mage were you then?" I asked, looking at the old drunk. He looked at least fifty, though a life of hard-drinking could have prematurely aged him, and although he sported a large beer belly, it couldn't mask the warrior's build that he once had.

Alaric turned to face me, frowning slightly. "I thought our deal here was that we don't pry or ask questions that are unnecessary?"

I shrugged. It would be a lie to say I wasn't curious about the old drunk, but it seemed like he had about as much reason to keep me at a distance as I did for him. It was probably why he never specifically confirmed whether I was from Dicathen, even though it was probably pretty obvious for him by now.

We continued our way through the streets of Aramoor in relative silence until we arrived at the wrought iron gates of a large rhombus-shaped building that stood by itself, set off from the surrounding city by a lush grass lawn. A single paved road, lined on both sides with statues of battle mages, led to the building.

"This is it, dearest nephew," Alaric said casually, handing me a small metal card with "Grey" written on it, along with a series of numbers and a birth date that showed I was twenty-two. While I was a bit younger than that, I didn't say anything.

I stored the card safely in the inside pocket of my coat. "When did you have the time to get this?"

"While Odile was having fun dressing you up," he replied, walking toward the guard stationed inside a small stone chamber next to the front gate.

After Alaric gave the guard his identification card, along with a piece of paper, the gate quickly opened.

The old drunkard slid his hand over one of the statues. "Impressive, isn't it?"

'These things aren't going to crack open like eggs and unleash some awful creature to attack us, are they?' Regis asked, only half joking.

I think we're safe, Regis, I said, reminiscing about how many times I had almost died in that zone alone. *Good times.*

Despite how quiet it was outside, when we walked through the doors of the rather flat building, a cacophony of noises erupted over us.

Alaric cackled in pleasure, noticing my surprise. "Busy, right? There are teleportation gates inside every ascender building, restricted only to ascenders, and a platform where they can use their own tempus warps."

I scanned the various groups of mages gathered in their own circle, busy either talking to clerks or amongst themselves. "So the gates are purely for candidates testing to become ascenders?"

"It's more like they're just for normal civilians to gaze upon the majesty of us ascenders," Alaric said with a wink. "Come on. The area for testing is this way."

Walking through the marble-floored building reminded me of some of the nicer Adventurers Guild Halls back in Dicathen, except it was much larger and had a much wider array of accommodations. I saw weapon and armor polishing services, meeting rooms for strategizing, resting pods filled with high concentrations of mana for faster healing, and even large training rooms that teams could rent out. It was an all-inclusive facility that you could spend days in.

Alaric took his time going through the different sorts of facilities that every ascender building offered... for a fee, of course. This was, once again, a cold reminder of how much more developed Alacrya was compared to Dicathen.

"How are these training rooms able to take the strain of mages fighting inside here?" I asked, watching a team of ascenders leaving one of the private training rooms dripping in sweat.

Alaric knocked on the solid metal wall of the training room. "The Instillers that work on the ascender buildings are top class, and the metal making up these rooms are special alloys only found in northern mountains of Truacia."

'Instillers are basically enchanters specializing in enhancing objects with their mana,' Regis clarified for me.

After a leisurely walk through the ascender building, we arrived in the area designated for helping ascender candidates. Like the other areas within the facility, the large circular waiting room was filled with mages.

Aside from a few nervous applicants that wore regular clothing, most of the mages present were wearing militaristic uniforms of varying designs, colors, and cuts. Several older mages, garbed in more traditional robes, were walking around and talking to some of the uniformed mages.

"Most applicants come from academies, hence the reason why so many of them look like they have a stick up their ass," Alaric whispered distastefully. "Unfortunately for you, most ascenders look down on the 'unschooled' as they say. It might be hard for you to attract a party, so do decently well—but not too well."

I frowned. "What is 'decently well' supposed to be?"

"Just follow their instructions," the drunkard said dismissively, picking his ear. "They'll tell you what you need to do to pass."

The two of us took a seat near the far end of the circular waiting area after Alaric signed me up for a practical skills assessment.

"Damn, I really need a flask," Alaric muttered, struggling to drink alcohol while hiding it within his suit jacket.

"What you need is help," I retorted.

"Thank you for caring so much about your uncle's health, *dearest nephew*," Alaric said, holding a particular finger up on the hand that was holding his bottle.

With nothing better to do while we waited, I closed my eyes and visualized the realm within the keystone. By now, I had accessed the relic so many times that I could imagine the kaleidoscopic space clearly enough to simulate previous attempts and try learning from them.

'Check it out. Some of the girls are checking you out,' Regis commented with a lecherous giggle.

Are you twelve? I shot back, not bothering to open my eyes.

'Technically, I'm not even one,' my companion argued. 'But that's not the point. Some of them are pretty cute.'

How do you even know what cute is? I asked.

'I'm made from you, remember?' Regis reminded me. 'So technically, my interpretation of cute is actually your interpretation of cute.'

Curiosity getting the best of me, I opened my eyes just enough to make out a trio of girls a few rows in front of me, who quickly turned away, giggling amongst themselves. That's when I also noticed a powerfully built young man, whose uniform was having a hard time containing his muscles, glaring at me not far away.

"Are you trying to drill a hole into the boy with your gaze?" Alaric snapped, apparently having noticed my stare-down with the powerfully-built student. "Come on. You're up next."

I followed the old man down the aisle, and a thin clerk guided us through a narrow hallway leading to another, smaller circular room.

"Your assessment will be through portal five," he said, motioning us toward the shimmering gate. "Guardians will be led to the viewing room where they can watch from there. Any questions?"

Alaric went ahead, stepping confidently through the portal marked with the number five. I followed after him, unsure what to expect.

The jarring sensation of teleportation gates in Dicathen was enough to make some people physically ill, but the Alacryan portal left me with only a dull sense of vertigo that quickly faded.

Studying my new surroundings, I found myself in a brightly lit tunnel. Runes flashed on the immaculate white walls, illuminating our way. Aside from the main path that stretched out in front of us, there was a set of stairs to our right, and a metal sign indicating that it led to the viewing room.

"Break a leg." Alaric smacked my back before heading up the stairs. "It'll be interesting to see you fight."

With a deep breath, I made my way along the marble pathway, this entire place reminding me of some sort of underground lab rather than any sort of testing area.

The hall took me to a small changing room, where I found some kind of tight suit neatly folded on a bench, as well as a locker for me to hang up my current clothes.

"For your own safety, please wear the protective suit," a tinny voice repeated every few minutes as I changed.

After putting on the foamy, skin-tight suit, which was covered in runes, I walked up to the door clearly labeled "assessment hall." The runes on the suit flashed brightly as I neared the entrance, and the doors slid open as if the suit itself was required to go through.

'Wow, fancy,' Regis commented.

I had expected to find myself in an arena of some sort, but after walking through the automatic sliding metal doors, I was greeted with the sight of a huge, empty chamber.

The enormous room was a perfect cube, around fifty yards in width, height, and length, with rows of intricate runes pulsating across the walls. Both the floor and walls were divided into smaller square tiles, but devoid of additional detail aside from a glass pane near the ceiling. I could just make out several shadowed figures standing behind it.

"Candidate Grey, Striker," a voice boomed from high above. "Your first assessment will now begin."

That was it. No guidance, no instructions of any sort. Instead, a row of lower square tiles receded from the wall, and out crawled a trio of giant, armored spiders... each of which were at least twice my height.

Regis let out a groan. 'Again... how come all of the monsters we fight are so damn ugly?'

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As the three giant spiders, each one clad in rune-covered armor to protect their bulbous bodies and twitching legs, let out a series of chittering hisses, I couldn't help but wonder how they had gotten these beasts out of the Relictombs.

'Maybe they're just normal mana beasts from the surface,' Regis answered.

Ah. You're probably right, but aren't these supposed to test—

One hulking, armored form skittered toward me, cutting my conversation with Regis short. Despite the spider's large frame, it moved incredibly fast.

The runes on my suit began glowing brighter as one of the spider's clawed legs slashed past me.

'Hey, do you think the runes on your gear react to the runes on the spider's armor?' Regis asked in my mind.

Artificing was not my field of expertise, but I thought Regis was probably onto something. Perhaps the shadowy judges above could track my performance with the runes, similar to how Emily had helped me train back in the castle. I could just imagine how fascinated Emily or Gideon would be if they saw something like this firsthand.

Actually, Gideon would probably feign disinterest while getting grumpy out of envy, I thought with a smile.

I dodged another barrage of strikes from the spider, glancing toward the other two, which were still waiting at the edge of the assessment hall.

The giant spider lunged at me and I grabbed its fangs, holding it at arm's length. "Uh, excuse me?" I called out as I turned into the momentum of the spider's attack, using its own weight to send it tumbling away. "What exactly am I supposed to do for this assessment?"

There was no response.

Frustrated, but hesitant to do anything that might give away my strength, I continued to defend against the relentless assault of the first spider, feeling like a mouse fleeing from a tarantula. As I threw myself back from a slash of the spider's claws, a warning sounded in my mind and I was forced to spin and dive to the side to avoid the stabbing fangs of the second spider, which had suddenly burst into motion and joined the battle. Had the mana beasts' armor been designed to be more silent, I might not have heard the creature's hurried approach in time.

'What do you suppose happens if those things bite you? Do people die in this test?'

Thanks for the concern, but I'm fine, I thought back, sliding under one spider's thick legs just as the other leapt at me, causing them to collide with a crash.

'I'm not concerned, I'm bored.'

My companion's words got me thinking, and so I started to experiment, purposely allowing a few of the spider's strikes to hit me.

Surprisingly, despite the speed at which the spider struck, most of the force was dampened upon contact, as if the foam suit I was wearing was several feet thick, rather than several millimeters.

'You should find out what happens if you get hit in the face,' Regis suggested, half out of curiosity, half for his own amusement.

Despite Regis's obvious intentions, I was curious too. I waited until the third spider had sprung to life and joined its brethren, then, right after I had dodged one of the spider's fangs, I let spider number three swing down at my cheek with its front limb.

The runes around the collar of my suit lit up, encasing my entire head in a silvery dome. The runes surrounding the limb that was about to strike my cheek also flared to life, and, just as it made contact with the protective barrier around my head, both of us were blown back by a concussive force.

I spun in the air, landing on my feet, but the three spiders' bodies slumped. They scuttled slowly toward the tiles that they had come out from as if they'd been scolded, then the tiles closed behind them.

"The next assessment will now begin," the examiner watching behind the glass window declared, his voice echoing through the chamber.

Before the last echo had faded, the entire testing chamber began trembling, and the tiles on the ground and walls began sliding outward, forming square pillars. The tile on which I'd been standing lifted me upwards a few feet, then water began flooding the room below me.

"Seize the gem located at the top of the assessment hall before the water touches you," the voice commanded. "Begin."

I rolled my eyes. At least this time I had some clear instructions.

Wasting no time, I channeled aether into my legs and leapt from platform to platform. The entire chamber had been transformed into a sort of vertical maze, with rectangular platforms crisscrossing each other to block my view of the top.

Additionally, the platforms moved at random intervals, keeping me on my toes more so than the oversized spiders.

Regardless, with my draconic physique and aetheric enhancements, the assessment was little more than a casual climb up a children's playground. High above the floor where I fought the spiders, I found a fist-sized crystal hanging from the center of the ceiling. Below me, the water had filled less than a quarter of the space.

As soon as I grabbed the crystal, the platforms slowly receded, and the water drained through a series of empty tiles in the floor. The pillar I stood atop lowered until I was again standing in an empty square room.

After the water had completely drained and the chamber was back to its original empty form, the central squares of the room began to glow with a dull blue light. A single square at one corner glowed white.

"Please step onto the white square," the judge announced in his eerie, echoing voice. I did as I was asked, though a part of my mind told me it was stupid. What did I really know about this whole place? They could have detected my lack of mana, or Alaric could have turned me in, and stepping on that white square might disintegrate me, or teleport me into a prison cell, or—

I caught myself before I dug myself into a hole and steeled my nerves. There was no reason for them to be suspicious, and I had already decided to trust the old drunk. I was in the heart of the enemy's empire, but here I was Grey, not Arthur Leywin.

Once I was standing with both feet firmly placed on the white square, further instructions echoed down from the shadows above.

"Step only on the white tiles. Your goal is to reach the black tile"—one blue tile turned black in the opposite corner from where I stood—"without leaving the platform or touching the blue tiles. You must do so before you pass out from mana loss."

'Wait, what did he just—'

Regis was cut off as a sucking pressure began pulling at every inch of me, and I felt the aether in my body being drawn out through my aether channels. *How the hell?*

'It's like that platform in the Relictombs!' Regis shouted in my mind. 'They must have modeled this place on those crazy djinn's tests."

He was right, of course. I immediately pulled all of my aether back into my core, similar to what I had done with my hand back in the Relictombs, and it seemed to work. My physical body was weakened due to the lack of augmentation, but it drastically slowed the rate at which aether was being sucked out of my body.

I bet they don't even realize what they've created here. There is no way they know that this place can manipulate aether as well as mana.

'Probably a good thing, though. The sweaty, pained expression on your face doesn't give anything away.'

I suddenly realized that, while I had been speaking to Regis, the tile in front of me had turned white, and the tile below my feet was slowly turning blue. I stepped forward quickly, and the title behind me instantly changed to the same glowing blue hue as the rest of the tiles. Besides the square I was standing on, one tile to my right, and one tile in front of me were also white.

This, too, was familiar. It wasn't exactly the same as the revolving platform puzzle I had navigated in the Relictombs, but it was similar in premise: a maze that I couldn't see until I was standing in it.

I chose the right-hand path, and two more tiles turned white, one in front of me, one to my left. I stepped forward again, and the tiles forward and to my left and right all turned white. When I stepped forward once more, however, I found myself at a dead end as no new squares changed color, and was forced to return to the previous tile.

The path changed before me with each step, sometimes leading me backwards, other times stopping suddenly, forcing me to dart back to a safe square before the title under my feet turned blue. And all the while, the aether continued to leak out of me. After nearly two full minutes, I had progressed approximately halfway across the board when the voice from above spoke again.

"Your ability to manipulate and contain your mana is impressive. We will now increase the level of difficulty, but not to worry—you will be scored at a handicap."

Behind me, the corner square where I had started turned gray, then fell out of sight, leaving a shadowed pit beneath it.

'Oh, great.'

I waited, counting until the next square descended.

Twenty seconds between squares, unless they speed up as they go. That gives us... a few minutes at most.

'Step on it, chief,' Regis urged.

As I progressed across the platform, I twice found myself turned around and cut off by the collapsing tiles. Still, this maze was a much simpler version of the one I experienced in the Relictombs, and even that hadn't been able to stump me.

It took only two more minutes before I was standing on the black square. Behind me, more than half of the tiles were missing. Internally, I could feel that I'd lost perhaps a third of my aether.

The missing squares reappeared, the lit tiles all faded back to their default dull gray, and the sucking pressure vanished.

A panel in the far wall slid open, revealing a second entrance to the assessment hall. A man and woman, each garbed in a white mage robe with a distinct red band on the right arm, walked out, my "uncle" tottering behind them.

"Striker candidate Grey," a thin bespectacled man said, reading off his clipboard. "Flexibility of offensive magic, below average. Manipulation of mana, above average. Athleticism, above average. Mental acuity, above average. Survivability rate, high."

I cocked a brow, amused by the man's reading that my mana manipulation was above average even though I didn't have a shred of mana in me.

The bespectacled man finally looked up and gave me a smile. "Congratulations, Grey. You have passed the assessment."

"Of course my nephew passed!" Alaric huffed before walking over to me and patting me on my shoulder.

"I have to say, your ability to obscure your use of mana is impressive," the blonde woman said, echoing the examiner's praise. "Even our suit wasn't able to pick up on the minute traces of leakage while you augmented your limbs."

"It is impressive indeed," the bespectacled tester agreed. "And it'll serve you well in the Relictombs since many of the beasts within are attracted to mana."

I simply nodded at this new information, but quickly added a smile and said, "Thank you," when I noticed Alaric staring at me intently.

"I highly recommend you partying with a Caster, as you specialize heavily in close combat. Even better if that party has a Shield as well," the woman added before offering her hand. "We hope to see great results on your initiation ascent."

I took her hand. "I'll do my best."

After I had changed back to my casual attire, Alaric and I were escorted back through the teleportation gate to Aramoor City's ascender building.

"I guess you weren't just spouting nonsense when you said you reached a convergence zone by yourself," Alaric muttered before taking a sip of his rum. "You lasted for a pretty long time against those arachnoids."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "How long do ascenders usually last?"

"Well, if you saw one in the wild, the sensible thing to do would be to burn them down, but the arachnoids that they use for testing are protected heavily by runes," Alaric explained. "You weren't able to do any damage to them, which is why they marked you low for that, but you still lasted longer than a lot of the formally trained candidates from academies."

I turned to Alaric, who was peering down the nozzle of the dark glass bottle, trying to see how much rum he had left. "Would you believe me if I said that the times I got hit were on purpose?"

The old drunk's eyes shifted to me as he raised a brow. "You got hit... on purpose? Why?"

"To see how the runes on the suit worked?" I looked away and rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly embarrassed.

"So while you were facing off against a giant armored mana beast, you thought that, 'Hey, let me try getting hit in the face to see if this suit protects me!' was a valid train of thought?" he asked slowly as we walked down a quiet corridor leading back to the main hall.

"It wouldn't really have done any lasting damage even if I got hit."

"Oh right, your *very* augmented regenerative abilities, right?" He rolled his eyes. "I can't tell whether you're an idiot or just ridiculously overconfident."

"Those two traits aren't necessarily mutually exclusive," Regis chimed in with a snicker, his head peeking out. "He can be both."

Alaric raised his bottle of alcohol. "I can drink to that."

"You can drink to anything," I groused, shoving Regis back into my body.

Alaric eyed me seriously. "Regardless, idiocy and overconfidence are two of the biggest causes of deaths in the Relictombs."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said dismissively.

"Good." Alaric veered left at a fork into a larger hallway with marked doors on either side.

I followed closely behind the old man, watching his head turn left and right as if searching for a specific room.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked.

"My end of the bargain," he said without turning back. "Now come on, the faster you're briefed, the faster you can find a team and go on your preliminary ascent."

"And then the faster I start making money?" I finished.

"Good-looking and smart. You're just the whole package, aren't you?" Alaric said mockingly.

Moments later, Alaric stopped in front of a door labeled "C28," inserted a rune-inscribed key into the lock, and waited. The lock clicked, and he pushed his way through the door and slumped down at a large circular table, beckoning me to join him. The room had no windows and only a single entrance; inside, the table was surrounded by eight chairs. There was a projection artifact on the table and a drawing board hanging on the wall, but the room was otherwise empty.

"The rooms here are completely soundproof and impossible to scry into, even for regalia-holding sentries," Alaric confirmed.

"Great! That means I can come out," Regis exclaimed, leaping from my back and prancing once around the table before stopping to stretch.

"All right, we only have half an hour reserved so let's get started," the old drunkard declared, stamping his bottle of rum on the table as if it were a gavel.

He turned his chair around so he could reach the drawing board and picked up an ink brush. Regis and I watched in silence as he drew two wide ovals, one stacked above the other.

"These disks represent the first two floors of the Relictombs," he began.

Regis raised a paw. "Question. I thought the different areas in the Relictombs were called zones?"

Alaric massaged the bridge of his nose. "They are... *after* the first two floors, which I was going to get to eventually."

"Then please proceed," Regis responded calmly.

"Anyway, I'm sure you two noticed already, but unlike zones, the first two floors are all interconnected," Alaric explained.

"Wait," I interrupted. "So all of the ascenders end up in the same place in these first two floors?"

Alaric raised a brow. "You sound confused. It would be impossible not to notice other ascenders in these two floors."

"I wound up in the Relictombs in an... unconventional way," I said. Regis l scoffed beside me but I ignored him.

"Not interested anyway," the old drunk said, raising both his hands placatingly. "Just know that these two floors are vastly different from the zones you've explored."

"What do you mean?"

"These two floors represent how far Alacrya has come in colonizing the Relictombs," he answered in a low voice. He paused for a moment, then seemed to shake himself out of whatever reverie he had just lapsed into. "The first floor consists mainly of mine pits but it's also where beasts native to the Relictombs are bred and raised for specific raw material. Oh, there are quite a few merchants on the first floor as well—never buy anything from the merchants on the first floor!"

I gave Alaric a curious look.

"There are loads of scammers on the first floor that prey on new ascenders who don't yet know any better," he explained, shaking his head.

"Were you one of those scammers?" Regis asked with a chuckle.

"Hush, pup," Alaric snapped, though he couldn't quite hide the sly smile that crept onto his face. "Anyway, the second floor is where the majority of ascenders actually spend their days. You'll also be able to buy some new armor and weapons there if you need it."

"Is that why I haven't seen any armories or weapon shops in Aramoor?" I asked.

"Yes," the old man replied. I realized that he no longer gave me strange looks when I asked questions about what was probably common knowledge amongst the Alacryans. Apparently he had grown used to my ignorance. "You might find some small ones on the surface, but the majority of them are on the second floor."

Alaric went on to describe what seemed like an entire city built within the second floor of the Relictombs. Aside from the smithies and shops, there were training grounds, inns, merchants who would buy your accolades, and even restaurants.

I shook my head. "I get that having some of these things in the Relictombs would be convenient, but is there really a need for an entire city catered to the ascenders?"

"You have to realize that the shop owners and workers there are also ascenders," Alaric said, taking another swig of his rum. "It's very hard to open a store on the second floor, but being right there when a party of ascenders stumbles half dead out of the Relictombs is good business. Some hardly ever leave, just returning to the second floor to rest and regain their strength before diving back in again. There are other perks, too, though. For example, there aren't any taxes on goods or services within the Relictombs."

"Another way for Agrona to promote the livelihood of ascenders?" I asked, gazing at the simple oval drawing and trying to picture a thriving city built around ascending alone. I thought of the Wall before the horde of mana beasts attacked; it hadn't been so different there, where an entire economy had grown up around the Wall's defenders.

"Yup! There's even bigger rewards if you actually manage to find a relic, but it'd be foolish of us to bank on that," Alaric explained.

After the drunkard finished his brief explanation of the workings of the first two floors, he explained what I should expect during this preliminary ascent. There was only so much he could tell me about the zones, since the portals from zone to zone could take me anywhere, but he explained where to look for a party and what to look for in potential party members that would be useful. Some of what he told me I could have worked out on my own, but it was Alaric's insight into the ascender culture that I knew would prove invaluable.

"I understand," I repeated for the fourth time as we left the room, Regis safely back inside of me. "A good party composition is the key to success. I should find ascenders who compliment not only my own skills but each other's. I'm only required to go to one zone, so don't overdo it. Got it."

Alaric narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. "You're a very boring person, have I ever told you that?" he grumbled.

Ignoring him, the two of us walked down the brightly lit hallway, following the signs that directed us toward the ascension chamber, which was sensibly located right beside the ascender building.

The hallways got busier as we approached the edifice housing the ancient portal that would take me back to the Relictombs. Unlike adventurers in Dicathen, ascenders came in all shapes and sizes.

It was particularly amusing to see a herculean warrior, who must have weighed over three hundred pounds, standing politely in line behind a petite girl garbed in what looked like an academy uniform.

"This is as far as I can go," Alaric said, gazing toward the portal with that faraway look I'd seen in the conference room. He jumped when a passing ascender accidentally bumped against him, then scratched at the back of his head awkwardly. "I'll stand by in our room back at the inn."

"Don't trash the place," I said, turning toward the line.

"Ah--"

I turned back to see him reach out as if wanting to grab me.

"Was there something else you wanted to say?"

"Er..." Alaric cleared his throat. "Just... don't die, kid. And don't ever fall into one of those parties that require you to pay a 'fee.' They're always scams."

'Aww, he cares about you,' Regis teased.

"Thanks, Uncle. Did you want a hug as well?" I asked with a smirk.

"Snarky brat. Just hurry up and get your damn badge so you can start making money," he grumbled before turning to leave.

I stepped into the growing line, excited at the prospect of making progress once more, frustrated that I wasn't moving fast enough... and scared for what the future held. Pushing down the cacophony of emotions, I focused solely on the entrance to the Relictombs ahead.

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"I can tell by your wandering gaze that you're new here. Well, you're in luck! We have—"

"Not interested," I interrupted, waving away a thin man with shiny, slick-backed hair.

It only took four steps to be stopped by another resident of the first floor. A petite girl wearing a short battle-skirt—way too short to provide any sort of coverage in a fight—brushed her arm against mine and glanced up at me.

"Would you like to join my team? There are only us girls, and we'd really like a strong, cool man like you around," she said, batting her eyes.

I had arrived on the first floor less than ten minutes ago and this was already the seventh time I'd been stopped. Even after all of Alaric's warnings, I hadn't expected things to be this bad.

Losing my patience, I exerted a light pulse of aetheric pressure.

A ripple ran through the surrounding crowd as they stiffened and shied away from the source of the pressure. The girl's eyes went wide and she stepped back, staring at me as though I were a demon.

'Begone, foul wench!' Regis declared theatrically in my head as the girl scurried away.

Aside from the constant movement of workers and the ever-present hucksters, there wasn't much to look at on the first floor. The air was stuffy and it smelled of sweat, dirt, and excrement.

The first floor stretched out for miles on either side of me, and I couldn't even see the ceiling above us... if there even was one. From what I could tell, there was no ambient light. The wide pathways were lit by a combination of torches, and cranes holding up a web of light orbs high above our heads.

Most of the space I could see from the main path was dominated by huge quarries and even larger fenced fields of tall orange grass, where cattle-like beasts roamed mindlessly.

The entire area was a cacophony of grinding metal, breaking rock, distant bestial crooning, and a lot of loud conversations fighting each other for supremacy. Meanwhile, ascenders filed toward the teleportation gate leading to the second floor in droves.

As I got closer to the gate, the crowd of ascenders funneled into yet another single-file line. A pair of imposing guards—their rune-scored backs proudly displayed by their armored uniforms—were checking each person for their ascender's badge before letting them through.

When it was my turn, the guard stuck out an armored hand, looking me up and down. "Badge?"

I gave him my badge. After a quick scan, he let out a scoff and handed it back to me. "Good luck on your prelim, wogart."

Though irritated by the obvious pejorative, I ignored the comment and stepped cautiously through the glass-like portal leading to the second floor.

I was tired, annoyed, and hot from the half hour I had been on the first floor, but all of those negative feelings were completely washed away as I took in the sight in front of me.

'Damn... 'Regis let out a whistle.

The second floor was nothing like the industrial wasteland I had just come from and completely different from what I myself had imagined.

It was an entire city, miles wide, built under a radiant, sunless sky. The streets were paved with decorative tiles that sparkled under the glowing blue expanse overhead.

Along the avenue, hovering orbs of soft light filled neatly placed, elegant street lamps, giving the streets an almost ethereal quality.

"Get out of the way!" a husky voice barked behind me.

I snapped out of my daze, apologizing to the burly man, then walking forward. It was a lot to take in, even for someone who had lived in a flying city.

The streets were busy but never congested, with ascenders everywhere. It was like being back in the Adventurers Guild Hall in Xyrus, if it had expanded to take over the entire city.

As Alaric had suggested, businesses catering to ascenders were ubiquitous. The embellished signs hung above the multi-level storefronts advertised everything from blacksmiths to butchers. I saw several shops specializing in the creation and repair of certain weapons, markets where one might find simpler needs, such as dried rations or a new pair of boots, and I even found an impressive building advertising imbuing services for artifacts and accolades.

However, what I saw the most were inns. In fact, most of the multi-storied brick buildings of varying colors and decorations were inns, all of which were advertising long-term rental of rooms, most often paid by the month rather than the day.

"Alaric was right. You can spend your entire life here," I muttered under my breath.

'Focus! You look like a country bumpkin. Remember that we're here for your ascent,' Regis chided, even though he was just as absorbed in sightseeing as I was.

I realized I had become so sidetracked that I wasn't sure which direction to go to find a team. Alaric had provided several tips for what to look for in potential teammates and what kind of negotiations to expect, but his guidance on navigating the second level had, I realized, been pretty shallow.

Making my way back toward the portal that I had arrived from, I searched for any sort of laborer or guard who could help guide me in the right direction. On this side of the portal, however, there was only a constant stream of ascenders.

"Excuse me?" I said, tapping a passing man on his shoulder. "Do you know where I can find a team for a preliminary ascent?"

The bearded man, whose golden chainmail vest made him practically glow, cocked his head toward me and shot me a glare. "Shove off."

After receiving several such colorful rejections by other ascenders, a younger gentleman that looked only a few years older than me actually looked willing to help.

"Are you serious?" he asked with an amused chuckle.

"It's my first time here," I admitted, scratching my cheek.

"Come on," the man motioned with his chin. "I'm actually heading over there anyway."

Walking out of the main avenue, the two of us walked across a less crowded street. I sized the man up as we walked; he wore a fitted set of dark leather armor, well crafted but much less opulent than what I'd seen some of the other ascenders wearing, like the man with the golden chainmail. He moved confidently, clearly knowing exactly where he was headed.

"So what academy are you from?" he asked languidly. "Probably a slim chance, but maybe I'm an alum."

I shook my head. "I didn't go to an academy. My uncle trained me."

"And you managed to pass the assessment? Congrats," he said with a smile before sticking out his hand. "I'm Quinten, by the way."

"Grey," I responded, receiving his gesture.

"So have you had a chance to tour the city, Grey?" Quinten asked, looking up at the buildings towering over us.

"A little. The city is even more amazing than the stories I've heard."

"Well, what do you expect when you have a city made exclusively for powerful mages," he said with a chuckle. "You should see the Summit Estates."

My brows furrowed. "Estates? As in homes?"

Quinten nodded. "I've only ever peered past the gates, but it's a gated area of villas for highblood ascenders."

"And considering how many long-term inns I've seen just walking down the street, I'm assuming these houses are astronomical in price?"

"Astronomical would be an understatement," the ascender snorted as we turned right into a narrow alley between two buildings. "No, even if you had the money, the real problem is exclusivity. The number of properties there is pretty limited, and it's rare that the highbloods would give up the prestige of owning a house on the second level. They generally only go up for sale if a highblood is struggling."

"I see."

The ascender shouldered me with a smile. "Just giving you some dreams to try and reach."

I chuckled. "Thank you."

Quinten then leaned closer to me. "You should also check out the girls on Blossom Street."

"Huh?" It took me a second to realize what he was referring to. "Oh... wait, they're ascenders as well, why would they—"

"Ascents are dangerous." He shrugged. "A lot of us—not just our lovely escorts—have been through enough that we're fed up with them. The smarter ones have realized that there are easier ways to make money."

"Like leading poor mages just trying to become ascenders into dark, out of the way alleys and mugging them?" I asked innocently.

Quinten blinked before stifling a laugh. "When'd you notice?"

I looked around, ignoring the ascender calmly leaning against a brick pillar supporting a bridge several stories above us. There wasn't a single ascender in sight aside from my amicable mugger.

"Early enough," I said, lowering my gaze to meet Quinten's. "I assumed you would have a group of other thugs waiting to help you, though."

He let out a chortle. "Why would I need a group to handle one little wogart?"

Quinten's form blurred as he rushed toward me, a blade of condensed stone coalescing around his arm.

'Need help?' Regis asked lazily.

I got it.

I reached for the stone blade that had manifested over Quinten's entire hand. Gripping his wrist with my left hand, I guided the blade safely past, stepped back with my left foot, and brought my right elbow up into his chin.

With the momentum of his own dash, I barely had to use any strength aside from shrouding myself in aether.

Quinten's head snapped back and he crumpled to the ground, his stone blade dissolving.

Fortunately, the mugger hadn't died, and his body was sturdy enough that he regained consciousness within a few minutes, giving me enough time to use his own clothes to tie his hands and feet together.

"Had a nice nap?"

The ascender let out a groan before realizing that he was half naked and his limbs had been tied. "I don't know what you did, but do you really think leather bands can hold me?"

"No, but they'll give me just enough time to knock you out again if you try and do anything troublesome," I said with an innocent smile.

Quinten nodded awkwardly from his position on the ground. "What do you want?"

"What I wanted from the beginning," I answered. "Where do I go to find a team for my preliminary ascent?"

The half-naked ascender wiggled on his side until he was able to point in the direction with his chin. "Just follow that road until you hit Vritra Avenue. Make a right and follow the road until you see a tall building with a giant clock on the top."

"Thank you," I said, walking toward him.

"Hey—hold up—you know it'd be really stupid to kill me here, right?" he asked, panic laced in his voice. "Y-you'll be banned from—"

I bent down and snapped the leather bands around his wrists. "Relax. I know you weren't trying to kill me either earlier. And I assume you know it would be really stupid to hold a grudge, right?"

Quinten simply snapped the thick leather bands around his ankles. "The most important thing we obtain through our ascents isn't knowledge or strength—it's how to survive."

"I'll keep that in mind." I turned to leave when I remembered another question I wanted to ask. "One more thing."

Quinten visibly flinched at my sudden movement. "What is it?"

"What does 'wogart' mean?"

Quinten looked at me, deadpan.

"Wogart," I repeated. "What does it—"

"I heard you the first time," he grunted. "I just never heard someone ask me what it was before."

"I grew up fairly sheltered," I lied. "Practically had to escape from my father to become an ascender."

"Fair enough," he said, pulling out a new set of clothes from his dimension ring. "You'll probably run into them fairly often, but they're these doe-eyed beasts that are at the bottom of the food chain. Basically, it's slang for an inexperienced ascender."

'Yeah, you wogart,' Regis chortled.

"Fair enough," I said, chuckling in amusement as I walked away.

Taking the narrow marble road, which was surprisingly clean—there wasn't a single piece of trash in sight—I made my way toward the clock tower when I saw the faintest of shadows blur by.

I was more disappointed in myself that I hadn't noticed this person than I was annoyed at yet another interruption.

"You can come out now," I said without breaking stride.

A slim man garbed in dark leather and chainmail hopped down from one of the lower buildings to my left.

"Why are you following me?" I asked, studying the man who looked close to my age.

Curly locks of moss-green hair draped over much of his face, but I could make out high cheekbones underneath a pair of deep-set brown eyes.

"Peace," he said, his voice low and croaky. The man raised his arms, showing his empty palms.

"Assuming Quinten was telling the truth, you're not with him," I mused. "A third party trying his luck?"

He shook his head. "I sensed mana usage, and in this part of the level that generally means a fight. I assumed someone was in trouble, so I checked it out."

"That doesn't answer my question," I responded calmly.

"Curiosity got the best of me," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "I was impressed with the way you took that thug down and, honestly, surprised you let him off so easy. Despite what he told you, you'd have been in your rights to end his life."

"That's not how I do things," I said, not bothering to hide my distaste.

"That's why I'd like to be on your team when you go back into the Relictombs." The stranger held my gaze confidently, but the fingers of his left hand were twiddling with nervous energy.

With the recent attempted-mugging fresh in my mind, I wasn't feeling particularly trustful, and I was sure this man was hiding something. "Sorry to disappoint, friend, but I'm not going 'back' into the Relictombs. This is my preliminary ascent."

He nodded, his curly green bangs bouncing gently around his face. "I heard. I can help with that, help you find a team that won't get you killed."

'He's a persistent one,' Regis said.

Silently agreeing, I decided to be blunt. "Why? What's in it for you? Give me an answer I can believe, and I'll think about joining you."

"I can't sense your mana. I couldn't even when you took out that mugger, which you managed with a single blow. You don't make sense. You're different. And in the Relictombs, different is good."

Regis chuckled in my mind. 'I like this guy.'

"That's it?" I asked skeptically.

"We all go in for the same reasons: get strong, get rich," he said, his hands balling into fists to still his fidgeting fingers. "But the Relictombs can't be charted or mapped. The only way to change where you go is to change who you travel with. Like I said, different is good."

"So you think the Relictombs are going to take you somewhere new if you go in with me?" This ascender seemed to know more about the Relictombs than anyone else I'd talked to, except maybe Alaric. Even the old drunk hadn't made the connection about traveling with different people to chart different paths through the dungeon, though.

"That's the idea. New paths, new chances to win accolades—maybe even a relic."

That was something I could believe. Anybody with his level of knowledge and confidence was bound to be useful inside.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Haedrig."

He held out his hand. I took it and was immediately surprised by how small it was. I could feel the calluses from long hours holding a weapon on the fingers and palms, and his grip was strong, but delicate.

"Grey."

"You know, Grey," Haedrig said as we turned to walk together toward the clock tower, "you'll find fewer alley rats willing to try their luck with you if you properly displayed your runes. Generally, only those who lack confidence in their runes will cover them.

"Is that another reason why mages show off their runes?" I asked. "Sorry, I'm from the countryside, so to me, it just seems like they're showing off."

"It may seem arrogant, and there are plenty of ascenders out there who fit that description, but it does make life easier in general," he explained. "Not many people actually take the time to learn to read runes since, depending on the spell it provides, there can be a lot of variances in design. Ascenders, in general, aren't a studious group."

As I listened, I realized I hadn't considered the societal impact of having your strength so clearly displayed to anyone who looked. On Dicathen, I might judge someone's strength by the quality of their weapons and armor, or because they had a mana beast bond, or—back when such things were still possible—because I could sense their mana, but I could still be wrong. Here, a potential ally—or opponent—could tell exactly what you were capable of just by looking at your runes.

"Anyway, let's find us a team," he continued. "There are a few ways to go about it, but I'm assuming you want to take your prelim as soon as possible?"

"Yeah."

"Then the association building that thug directed you to wouldn't be a good idea," he said, taking the lead. "It's the safest way, but you have to fill out a pretty extensive request, and it'll take them a few days to find you a team willing to take you."

I rubbed my chin, wishing I'd hit Quinten even harder. "What do you suggest then?"

Haedrig motioned toward the way. "Follow me."

We made our way out of the narrow road and onto Vritra Avenue. The streets were pleasantly lively with ascenders—some were garbed in casual clothes while others looked as if they had brutally murdered someone just moments ago. Dozens of white trees with soft purple leaves stood tall on the streets every few blocks, providing shade and scattering their gem-like leaves.

I couldn't help but notice Haedrig's eyes constantly surveying the area, as if always on the look-out for something.

"Are we lost?" I asked.

"No. It's just... there are some people looking for me. It's not important."

It sounded important... but I dropped the subject for now.

After passing the clock tower that Quinten had directed me to, we took a winding road that led past several inns, two brothels, and a medical center. Finally, Haedrig stopped.

'Woah... ' Regis said breathily.

My eyes widened at the sight in front of us, not quite sure what to make of it. I thought that maybe Haedrig had gotten lost... He looked back at me with an amused expression, as if relishing my reaction.

"We're here."

296 FAMILIAL ASCENT

A large plaza surrounded by a ring of tall lavender trees stretched out ahead of us, overcrowded and even louder than the first level of the Relictombs. The area was filled with the rumble of dozens of half-shouted conversations. If the crowd hadn't been composed entirely of ascenders clad in impressive armor and weapons, I would've mistaken this place for a flea market.

"What... is this place?" I hesitantly asked, watching the ascenders file between neat rows of wooden booths.

"The best place to find a team... if you know what you're looking for." Haedrig replied before plunging into the crowd. "Come on."

I hurried after him, not wanting to get separated within the sea of ascenders.

"Looking for a Caster! At least two emblems required! One time ascent!"

"Looking for a sentry! Favorable distribution of all accolades!"

Each stall had at least one ascender standing nearby hollering out their requirements for an ideal candidate to join their team. It was fascinating.

I watched as a flat-faced, broad-shouldered hulk turned to show his exposed runes to a tall, twiggy man with long golden hair. The golden-haired ascender looked thoughtful, then shook his head, but I lost sight of them in the crowd after that.

Nearby, a handsome young ascender sat nonchalantly on his table, speaking in a low voice so that those surrounding him had to lean in to hear. I couldn't make out the words, but, by the rapturous expressions of his audience, he must have been telling them a thrilling tale.

"Grey!" Haedrig called out, several paces ahead. "This way."

The green-haired ascender led us past several rows of stalls until we arrived at a small building with ascenders shuffling in and out.

"You'll need to get changed here first," Haedrig explained, pointing to the windowless shed. "You brought your armor, right?"

I stepped to the back of the line. "Of course."

While I had kept the white dagger within my coat as a safety measure, the black armor and teal cloak had been stored safely in my storage rune; Alaric had gotten me a dimension ring—using my own money, of course—before we visited the ascender building. The problem was that, because I couldn't use mana, I wasn't able to activate the ring. Still, I kept it on me; if anything, the ring served as a camouflage to others.

After changing, I stepped out of the large shed. Haedrig eyed me critically.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's—it's nothing," he said with a cough. "While the cloak looks nice, I was hoping you'd have a more impressive set of armor."

"I haven't really had the time to shop for armor," I said, looking down at myself. "Do I really look that shabby?"

"Not shabby, just—" Haedrig scratched his head. "Never mind. Let's go."

As I followed him back into the press of ascenders, I wondered what he was looking for. We had passed dozens of groups looking for new party members already, but Haedrig had barely spared them a glance.

Admittedly, based on the shouted advertisements and posted signage, it seemed unlikely that any of these groups would be interested in a new ascender who hadn't even completed his preliminary ascent yet. In fact, most of the teams looking for an ascender here had listed requirements for a minimum number of ascents candidates must have completed.

"How are we going to find someone willing to take me here?" I asked, narrowly avoiding bumping into yet another ascender. "Most of these people seem to be looking for experienced ascenders."

Haedrig looked back at me as he continued leading the way. "There are only established teams here looking for one-off members. If we go in a bit deeper, we'll see different types of groups, including individuals who are looking to escort ascenders on their prelim."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Unless I'm willing to pay them, I really can't see any benefit for an ascender to take the time to escort a wogart on their prelim."

Haedrig stifled a laugh.

I frowned. "What is it?"

"I've never heard someone refer to himself as a wogart before," he said, his voice tinged with laughter. "And, while not everyone finds it worth it, there are quite a few benefits."

"Watch it," a brawny woman in silver plate armor grunted as we butted shoulders.

"Sorry," I muttered before turning back to my green-haired companion. "What are these benefits?"

"If you go to the trouble to meet the higher qualifications to get a principal's badge—which a lot of experienced ascenders do anyway, since most academies require all of their instructors to have one—you don't have to pay for any of the accommodations in any of the ascender buildings. Also, the High Sovereign gives a generous stipend for principals to take ascenders on their prelims," Haedrig explained.

'So another way to foster new ascenders. Agrona has invested an awful lot in making sure his people are willing to throw themselves into the jaws of death for him, huh?' Regis said.

I nodded, considering Regis's words. To Haedrig, I asked, "Is there anything else?"

Haedrig thought for a moment, slowing down his pace while still deftly avoiding the mass of ascenders. "Well, being a wogart farmer isn't the most respected career path, but it's pretty safe, especially if you have blood to take care of."

I raised a brow. "Wogart farmer?"

"Oh, sorry. It's another slang—ascenders who have 'retired' and only escort candidates that need to do their preliminary ascent," he clarified.

"So are those who we're looking for—wogart farmers, I mean?"

"Yes, although we have to be careful about who we end up going with."

As we walked further into the large, overcrowded plaza, I began to see more young ascenders—some of whom looked just about as lost as I felt.

"Let me handle the talking," Haedrig said as he led us to one of the larger stalls.

"Ah, are you two looking for a principal to take you down?" The attendant, a burly gentleman with a handlebar mustache, asked gruffly.

"My friend is on his prelim, and I'll be accompanying him," Haedrig replied courteously. "Do you have an information sheet for your business?"

"Information sheet?" the burly ascender echoed, confused.

Haedrig didn't bother with the man any further. With a curt nod, he said, "Thank you for your time," and walked away.

I was curious, but stayed silent as Haedrig went from stall to stall. Some offered simple pamphlets, which looked to be a summary of their work history, though others, like the mustachioed ascender, seemed caught off guard by the request.

Ultimately, however, Haedrig would give the same curt nod and we'd move onto the next stall.

"What was wrong with that woman? She seemed to already have attracted a few people for their prelim ascents," I asked.

Haedrig cocked a brow. "Attracted. Interesting choice of words. Did you want to go with her because she was pretty?"

"What?" I sputtered. "No, I was just saying that the other ascenders probably thought she was qualified enough to lead them down, right?"

"They were all men."

"I'm just curious what your criteria is," I grumbled, feeling as if I had been scolded for some reason.

"I see that Grey likes his women ample in the front," Haedrig said with a shrug. "I'll keep that in mind."

'I am also pro-ample women,' Regis said matter-of-factly.

"Keep it in mind for what?" I said indignantly.

Ignoring my question, Haedrig handed me the pamphlet he had received from the female principal ascender. "Look closely. Though her pamphlet is notarized by the association, there's no column for referrals from previous ascenders she has led on prelims, and she's not even an alumna of an academy."

"While I appreciate the thoroughness, is all of this really necessary?" I asked, handing back the piece of parchment. "I'm quite capable, and, seeing the way you carry yourself, I'm pretty certain you are too."

Haedrig stared at me, mildly surprised. "Is it that noticeable?"

"For the trained eye it is." I stepped toward my mysterious companion. "And it's natural to study someone you don't fully trust."

Haedrig only nodded, his eyes meeting mine, his brow turned down thoughtfully, but the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

'He's a little strange, isn't he? Not us strange, but still strange,' Regis mused.

He is a peculiar one, I agreed. But he doesn't seem to have any ill intent, so far as I can tell.

We continued our search, going from stall to stall while Haedrig asked a few questions to the principal ascenders while I listened. There were a lot of older, washed up ascenders who reminded me of Alaric—albeit not so blatantly drunk. Some of the principals seemed to take it personally, as if it was a blow to their pride that we weren't immediately worshipping them, but most were genuinely nice and rather patient with us.

This made it all the more frustrating that Haedrig still hadn't found anyone he considered suitable. By the time we had looped the entire two rows of stalls, I was on the verge of just choosing one of the principal ascenders we had talked to myself when Haedrig stopped mid-step, causing me to almost bump into him.

"What's wrong?" I asked, trying to follow his line of sight through the crowd, but there was too much noise and commotion.

Without a word, he bolted off, weaving through the crowd of meandering ascenders back to where the teams were looking for experienced ascenders. I followed after, surprised by how strongly he had reacted.

By the time I had caught up to him, the green-haired ascender was talking to a man of heroic build clad in a stunning dark suit of gold-trimmed armor emblazoned with a crest in the shape of a crown. With long blond hair that draped behind shoulders and an expression that practically bled confidence, I could see why he had caught Haedrig's eye. He seemed to be mulling over something Haedrig had just said, but a muscular young man in a uniform embellished with the same crown interrupted them.

"Brother! You said we were looking for an experienced Shield. We don't need another Striker, much less one with baggage."

'Isn't that the boy that was glaring at you in the ascender building back at Aramoor?' Regis asked.

I think so.

"Wasn't it actually my overprotective little brother who actually wanted to find a Shield?" the armored ascender responded with amusement. "I can't believe you don't trust me enough to watch over my own siblings."

"Yeah, you're worrying too much, Ezra!" The speaker, one of a pair of girls—both wearing similar uniforms to the boy—had the same blond hair as our potential principal. I realized then that I recognized her and her friend; they had been with the group of students waiting to take their assessment. "You know that Brother has gone on at least a dozen ascents already. And besides, this ascender seems to be experienced as well."

"And your poor old brother gets to make a little extra money," the armored ascender said with a wink.

"It's unbecoming for a member of our blood to say stuff like that," the boy in uniform, Ezra, said with a click of his tongue.

Smiling faintly, Haedrig turned and scanned the mass of people until he caught sight of me.

"Grey! Over here!" he shouted while waving an arm.

The two girls' eyes widened in surprise as they saw me approach, while Ezra's brow furrowed aggressively.

Their older brother just looked at his two younger siblings in confusion.

I walked over to Haedrig's side and looked at him for some answers.

"Kalon, this is Grey, my friend who needs to take his preliminary ascent," Haedrig said, motioning toward the armored ascender. "Grey, this is Kalon of Blood Granbehl. He has agreed to take us along."

"So you *are* familiar with my blood," Kalon said with a nod.

"Blood Granbehl is a distinguished named blood hailing from the Dominion of Vechor," Haedrig explained to me.

"From Vechor?" I echoed, wondering why I had seen the students in Aramoor, which was on the other side of the continent.

Kalon turned toward me. "Nice to meet you, Grey. As your friend mentioned, I'm Kalon Granbehl and these two fair-haired young ascenders-to-be are my younger siblings, Ada and Ezra."

"And I'm Riah of Blood Faline," the perky, short-haired friend said without missing a beat. "What a coincidence that we're all seeing each other again so soon!"

"Again?" Kalon asked, his head shifting from me to Riah. "You've all met before?"

"I think we saw each other briefly back at the ascender building in Aramoor City," I clarified. "Thank you for agreeing to take us with you."

"Oh, it's nothing! My brother has done this a lot since he's an instructor," Ada replied, shaking her head while Kalon looked at her with a mischievous grin.

I had a sudden flashback to the castle. Ellie and I were training, and I had done something clever with mana. I remembered so clearly her look of prideful irritation... exactly the same look Ada gave to Kalon now.

My chest tightened and my throat constricted; the memory was like taking a sudden, unexpected breath of icy-cold air.

If Agrona hadn't invaded Dicathen, maybe Ellie and I could have been getting ready to delve into the dungeons below the Beast Glades, just like this family would be ascending the Relictombs together.

Ellie... Mom, wherever you are, please be safe.

'You know, that's sweet,' Regis said, intruding into my moment of reflection.

Get out of my head, Regis, I thought, mentally glowering at him.

'Right now? With all these people watching?'

My attention snapped back to the conversation happening in front of me as Ezra stepped forward to size me up. "You'd best not hold us back," he warned. "Even if it is just a preliminary ascent, the Relictombs are dangerous."

He stood roughly around my height, but his frame was much broader and bulkier than my own.

Slapping Ezra on the back, Kalon said, "You're not at school anymore, little brother. Be careful, the pretty boy might be even stronger than you are." Kalon eyed me as he said this, the jovial grin slipping from his face for a moment.

"A wogart with no academy training? I doubt it," Ezra snapped before turning away.

Shaking away whatever thought had caught him, Kalon gave me a friendly smile. "Don't mind him, he just gets a little protective around our precious little sister."

"Brother!" Ada huffed, her cheeks turning red. Riah snickered and elbowed her friend.

"Anyway, I'm stuck having to take the kids on their prelim anyway, so you're just making the trip a little more lucrative for me," Kalon said with a grin. "Don't worry though, I'll still keep you all safe!"

"Thank you again," I said with a faint smile.

It didn't take mana perception to tell that, despite Kalon's easy-going attitude, he was strong. From the way he looked at me beneath that placid gaze, he knew I was strong as well.

"Shall we depart?" Haedrig asked, looking at the students in uniform. "Or do the three of you need to change into your armor first?"

"Not necessary," Ezra responded curtly, enveloping his body in mana.

Moments later, a full set of silver armor materialized around Ezra's body along with a glistening crimson spear inscribed with faint golden runes.

"You should've seen how happy he was when our father got him that for his graduation present," Kalon noted with a smirk, forcing Ada to stifle a surprised giggle.

Ezra shot his older brother a menacing glare, and his neck and jaws flushed red in embarrassment.

Riah also had her own set of materializing armor, albeit one made from leather and chainmail, designed for speed and flexibility. She wielded a unique weapon—a dagger with a wide fan-like blade held by a grip embedded with small gems.

The youngest Granbehl sibling wore luxurious mage's robes of soft green, lined on the inside with rows of runes while the sides were cut to enhance movement. The trim was gold, like Kalon's armor, and was emblazoned with the same crown, likely signifying their blood's crest. She had no wand or staff; instead, each of her ten fingers had a ring interlinked by a small chain attached to a silver bracelet on her wrists, which was embedded with a single pink gem.

"Those magically appearing armors seem useful," I mentioned to Haedrig.

"They are," the green-haired ascender replied as he led our now-complete party away from the rows of stalls.

"They're also ridiculously expensive," Kalon added. "But it's a symbol of wealth and power, and my father loves that."

I only nodded, unsurprised.

"So, Grey." Riah stepped up beside me as our group headed out of the plaza, briefly catching my eye then looking away. "I'm curious what your scores were on the assessment."

Ada stepped up closer, and even Ezra slowed his pace, tilting his head toward us to listen in.

"I think, aside from 'flexibility of offensive magic', I scored above average," I answered.

"Oh! That's not bad!" Kalon chimed in, looking back at us over his shoulder. "It's hard to get a good score in flexibility unless you have runes of different elements so don't beat yourself up for it."

Ezra scoffed. "Not even one 'exceptional' score?"

'Another wogart that needs to be humbled,' Regis said with a sigh.

"Ezra, what did Mother say about being arrogant," Ada chided.

"Yeah!" Riah defended as well. "And who was the one that got below average on their 'mental acuity' score again?"

"Shut up!" Ezra barked, this time red up to his ears.

"Settle down, kids," Kalon scolded gently. "You're making our two new members uncomfortable."

Ezra rolled his eyes but didn't say anything. The girls shared a quick glance and hid their laughter behind his back. Haedrig, on the other hand, had grown quieter and more serious the closer we got to our destination.

"We're almost there!" Riah said excitedly, pointing at the giant three-story arch with a golden white light shimmering at the center.

A wide terrace separated the busy plaza from the portal. Several other roads opened into the terrace, and a steady stream of ascenders moved through.

The terrace itself was ringed with white walls, each road entering under a copy-in-miniature of the portal arch. Banners bearing crests were displayed proudly, hung from the walls all around the terrace.

"The crests of the bloods who own homes in the Summit Estates," Ada said, following my gaze.

Ascenders huddled in groups throughout the terrace. One group appeared to be praying, each of them sitting cross legged in a line facing the portal, their eyes closed, their lips moving silently. Another team was arguing about how to divide their accolades, their raised voices cutting across the noise of conversation and heavy, booted feet.

There were no lines, however; the massive size of the portal could accommodate any number of ascenders at a time.

"I wonder what sort of zone we'll end up in!" Ada wondered out loud, her vivid green eyes lighting up in excitement as she gazed at the golden white portal.

Ezra stood stone-faced and resolute, almost, but not quite, looking the part of the stoic warrior about to embark upon an epic quest. The slight shaking of his hand on the shaft of his spear, and the way he kept having to rearrange his facial features, gave him away.

"Are you okay?" I asked Haedrig, who had been silent since we left the plaza.

He looked up, eyebrows raised and mouth partly open like he was surprised to find me standing next to him. "Yeah, I'm fine—" Haedrig's voice cracked, causing him to stop and clear his throat. "I'm fine," he repeated.

I nodded in response, but I could tell he was nervous about something. He had withdrawn his long, thin saber from his dimension ring and was constantly fidgeting with it as we approached the towering arch of stone and magic.

"Wait!" Kalon exclaimed abruptly. "I told Mom that I'd take a picture of you three before we go on our ascent!"

Ezra let out a groan, but Riah linked her arm through his and pulled him over to Ada, who happily took Riah's other arm. The three stood in front of the gate, the portal rippling softly behind them.

"Perfect!" Kalon shouted after taking several steps back. He crouched on the ground and clicked a switch on the large metal-and-glass artifact he was holding.

"Did you two want to join as well?" Kalon asked.

"Yeah! Join us!" Riah said, her eyes lighting up. "Grey can stand next to Ada!"

"It's okay," I said politely. "But I can take a picture of the four of you."

"Can you?" Kalon handed me the artifact, which was the size of my head. "Just point this part at us, imbue some mana into the artifact, and toggle the switch!"

'Well that backfired,' Regis commented. 'How are you going to make it work if you don't have any mana?'

Before I could say anything, Kalon had already run off to strike an exaggerated pose next to his siblings and Riah, who laughed at his antics. Even Ezra wore an amused expression as he watched his brother.

"Do you need help?" Haedrig asked, walking toward me.

"I've... um... never really worked with one of these artifacts before," I said. "Do you mind taking it?" I held the device out to him. "I don't want to take a bad picture," I finished lamely.

Haedrig looked at me for a moment but took the artifact from my hands.

"Ready?" he asked, pointing the artifact at the Granbehl blood and their friend.

"Ready!" they answered in unison. Ada and Riah struck cute poses while Ezra held his chin high and gripped his spear with both hands. Kalon settled on just crossing his arms and revealing a wide, confident smile.

It was a bittersweet feeling watching the happy family commemorate what seemed almost like a rite of passage for their blood.

"It's a nice sight," Haedrig said, staring off into the distance.

"The gate?" I asked.

He shook his head, a trace of sadness on his stoic face. "The family. You can tell that they've grown up being loved."

"Yeah," I agreed. "A bit loud, but they all seem like good people."

"And Kalon Granbehl is a very capable ascender. He's one of the rising stars among ascenders," Haedrig said, his voice lowering to almost a whisper. "Let's hope he's strong enough to get us through this ascent, right, Grey?"

297 FULL CIRCLE

"Ada of Blood Granbehl, Ezra of Blood Granbehl, Riah of Blood Faline, Grey, and"—the uniformed woman paused, glancing from the ascender card in her hand to Haedrig and back—"and Haedrig of—well—yes... Your identities have been verified," she finished, smiling widely as she handed us back our cards. "Principal ascender Kalon of Blood Granbehl, the stipend will be automatically transferred to your runecard after the candidates have successfully received their official ascender's badges post-preliminary ascent."

"Aw, can't I receive the stipend now? It's not like there's going to be any foul play; I'm guiding my siblings," Kalon complained.

"There are no exceptions. Please understand that these rules are for the safety and well-being of all ascenders," the thin, black-haired woman stated as if she had been asked this question countless times.

"Have there been situations where principal ascenders extorted candidates in the past or something?" I whispered to Haedrig as the two of us waited in the back.

"Worse. There are accounts of some principals taking candidates on their prelims after collecting the stipends only to kill the candidates and loot their bodies, then blaming their deaths on the Relictombs," the green-haired ascender explained with an expression of distaste.

After our preliminary ascent had been recorded, our team headed to the center of the terrace, where the towering arch stood over us. Complex runes scored every inch of the massive edifice, making the teleportation gates I'd seen up until now look like toys in comparison.

The longer I stayed in the Relictombs, the more I found myself marveling at its beauty and complexity. The flying city of Xyrus was the marvel of Dicathen, but even it paled in comparison to this place.

Admittedly, the Alacryans were quite impressive as well. What they had managed to do with the first two floors of the Relictombs—creating a capital for ascenders to better prepare themselves for the unpredictable dangers lying ahead of them—was nothing less than remarkable.

The number of resources and time invested into making sure ascenders were not only well-equipped and rewarded for ascending into the Relictombs, but also idolized by the citizens of Alacrya, spoke volumes of how much Agrona needed the ascenders.

Even these preliminary ascents had been devised to give candidates a safer experience within the Relictombs.

'So why does Haedrig seem to be expecting trouble?" Regis asked, having read my thoughts.

I was wondering the same thing. What did he mean when he hoped Kalon was 'strong enough to get us through this ascent'?

Everything I'd heard up until then had made it sound like the preliminary ascent was merely dipping your toes in the water, especially for those trained in academies.

'Maybe he's not as tough as he pretends to be?'

"Is everyone ready?" Kalon asked, stirring me from my internal deliberation with Regis. We stood just a few paces from the massive arch housing the white-gold portal.

"Shouldn't we do a supply check?" Haedrig replied seriously.

"Is that necessary? Prelims usually don't take longer than a day," Riah responded impatiently, her body practically gravitating toward the humming gate, which she gazed at in wide-eyed anticipation.

"We should treat this as if it's any other ascent," Haedrig insisted, already taking stock of his own rations. "I have enough water for myself for a week and dried rations for two days."

"Haedrig makes a good point. You can never be overprepared for the Relictombs," Kalon chimed in, pulling a large leather waterskin and a bundle of dried meat wrapped in cloth from his dimension ring. "I have enough water for three days and dried rations for one day."

The rest of the team pulled out their rations as well. Surprisingly, I had the most food and water, courtesy of Alaric. The old drunk had packed two weeks' worth of water and air-sealed rations for three days.

'The man may be a grumpy old drunk, but at least he really seems to have your best interest in mind,' Regis said with a chuckle.

"All right, we're packed more heavily than some of the deeper ascents I've gone on," Kalon said, looking at Riah with an amused expression. "And Riah here seems to think she's going on a picnic, with all of the sweets she's brought."

Riah flushed and let out a string of curses under her breath. "Whatever. I was going to share..."

"Sure, sure," Kalon chuckled. "You all have your simulets, right?"

We each took out a polished, rune-inscribed amulet the size of my palm, which would bind our team together as we travelled through the teleportation gates.

Kalon nodded and turned to face the shimmering pane of golden-white light that would lead us into our first zone.

"Blood honor me, light guide me, Vritra protect me," Kalon recited, followed by his siblings and Riah.

Haedrig and I looked at each other, neither participating in their ritual. I couldn't be sure, but I almost thought I saw Haedrig roll his eyes. Not thinking much of it, we then stepped through the gate.

We entered into complete darkness. The air was dry and stale with a crisp breeze blowing from underneath us. Even with my augmented vision, I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed.

"No one move," Kalon said, his voice cutting through the dark in a hushed whisper.

I saw the soft glow of someone's rune lighting up before a burst of sparks flashed in front of me, lighting up the area. Giant, gnarled faces glared at us from the darkness.

Riah, who was only a few steps ahead of me, raised her fan-shaped dagger and jumped back, nearly tumbling off the edge of the narrow raised path we were standing on. Haedrig's hand darted out and caught her by the elbow, holding her firmly until she had her feet under her again.

Riah turned to look down over the edge, then the burst of sparks died, hiding the grotesque faces and their contorted, anguished expressions.

"Give me a second to modify my spell." Kalon spoke softly as a rune on the exposed area of his lower back glowed once more.

This time an orange flare manifested from the ascender, brighter and more controlled than the sparks. It bathed the area in a warm light, revealing a huge chamber, or maybe a hallway. I could not make out the ceiling, or anything in front of or behind us. The narrow pathway where we had been deposited was about four feet wide and seemed to float amidst a sea of darkness.

Lining both walls were what looked like carvings of faces, vaguely humanoid, though grotesque and misshapen. This wasn't for lack of apparent skill, though; so detailed were the expressions that it looked almost as if they were once alive, and had been petrified in their final moments of pain and rage.

'Quite the morbid taste in decorating,' Regis said. 'Look, you can just make out the screaming one's tonsils—and you can see that one's teeth through the tear in its cheek.'

I can see them, I thought, though they were so hideous I did not look closely.

"Don't stay too close to the ledge," Kalon ordered, no trace of leisure left in his voice. "Spread out an arm's length apart from each other; Ezra, give yourself a bit more room for your spear."

We spread out in a line, walking slowly and keeping to the center of the stone pathway. Haedrig and I walked at the rear while Kalon took the lead, lighting the way with his hand bathed in bright flames.

"I can't tell how far this path goes, but it's the only course I can see," Kalon said.

"I can conjure some light as well," Ada said, her eyes darting nervously between the faces peering down at us from the distant walls.

"Save your mana for now," Kalon replied. "And don't be so nervous, Ada. We're going to be fine."

"Don't forget that you've prepared for this for years," Ezra growled.

"Ezra's right," Riah said comfortingly, despite her uneasy expression. "This is just the first zone. Don't be phased by the distractions."

"I just didn't expect the Relictombs to be this scary," Ada whispered.

"Are you okay?" I asked Haedrig, who had been surveying our surroundings silently, his stance low, his saber held firmly in hand.

"I'm fine." he muttered, not meeting my eye.

The six of us walked in a line, heading deeper into the dark zone, our pace careful but steady. The lack of change in our surroundings—aside from the diverse array of creepy faces—made it impossible to judge how far we had walked.

In addition to staying watchful and keeping my feet on the path, I also had to acclimate to the high level of aether in this zone. I hadn't felt much different in the first two floors, but stepping through the portal had been like opening another eye, and it was staring straight into the sun.

That was probably why I didn't notice them sooner.

'Arthur,' Regis warned in a grave tone.

I sense them too.

I hesitated for a moment, worried it might be suspicious for me to warn the rest of the group if even Kalon hadn't noticed anything yet. I was supposed to be a wet-behind-the-ears nobody on his first ascent, after all.

"I think there's something coming from below," I said finally, deciding it was better to warn them than risk them being taken unawares.

Kalon stopped in his tracks, leaning over the edge of the stone path with his blazing arm stretched out. After a minute, he did the same on the other side, then looked back at me.

"Are you sure? There's nothing down there, and I haven't sensed any other mana signatures," he said, giving me a searching look before turning to Ada. "Send a homing flare down on one side."

Ada spread her arms apart, and, as the rune on her back glowed, a swirling orb of fire the size of her head manifested. She pushed the fireball into the abyss as the rest of us peered warily down after it.

We watched the large ball of condensed fire descend. It didn't drop like a stone or sail through the air like an arrow, but instead weaved through the air almost as if it was alive, turning and twisting wherever Ada sent it. In its path, the fireball lit up the smooth wall of the bridge we were standing on as well as the hideous statues on the far wall of the wide hallway.

Then, as suddenly as if a curtain had been wrenched away, dozens of humanoid faces appeared far below, their large glassy eyes reflecting the orange light.

A startled yelp rang at my side and the fireball dispersed, plunging whatever creatures were down there back in darkness.

"Run!" Kalon roared, pushing Ezra and Riah ahead of him. He scooped up his sister with one arm, raising his other hand, still blazing with light, high in the air to extend the light to its limit as he took off running down the path just behind them.

Aether coursed through my limbs as I ran, and I found that I was able to keep up with the others with relative ease.

However, despite our breakneck pace, there was no end in sight. Worse yet, we could now make out the nightmare sound of the creatures below, a sort of moaning, chittering noise that grew steadily louder.

"I still can't see an end anywhere near!" Ezra shouted from the front, his deep voice quivering.

"Damn it! What the hell is going on," Kalon cursed.

I looked back over my shoulder at Haedrig, stoically taking up the rear. He was surrounded by a dim white aura, and he ran with his hand on the leather-wrapped hilt of his sheathed saber. I almost turned back around, but the faintest glimmer caught my eye.

"Duck!" I shouted as I spun on my heels.

Haedrig dipped his head without hesitation, just barely enough to avoid a black blur that sailed past, right where his head had been.

"W-what was that?" Ada shrieked. She was still being carried by her eldest brother and had been able to see it the most clearly.

"Don't stop!" Kalon urged.

We picked up our pace, the faces carved on the wall nothing but a blur now. However, I knew that it was only a matter of time before whatever aetheric creatures were lurking beneath us caught up.

The distorted wail of the beasts, along with their chittering, grew to a deafening din before more shadows began rising up from the sea of darkness.

It was under Kalon's illuminating spell that we finally saw the creatures we were up against, and they were something straight out of a nightmare. They had snakelike bodies the size and girth of a man, with two long arms ending in gleaming claws. Atop their long necks, each monster had a disfigured humanoid face, just like the statues. These, though, were alive with hatred and fury.

Kalon dropped Ada and drew his weapon for the first time. It was a spear, much like Ezra's, except with a pitch-black blade that seemed to blend in with our surroundings.

The ghoulish creatures tilted their heads as they climbed up onto the narrow path. Their boney jaws clacked repeatedly to create that eerie chitter, melding with the low moans.

Kalon's spear flashed, decapitating three of the ghoulish serpents in a single swing.

"We need to keep moving!" he roared, slashing at another man-serpent and sending its chittering head falling into the abyss.

Ezra, taking the lead, followed his brother's order, spinning his spear to knock away the serpentine ghouls rather than trying to kill them.

'Should I come out now?' Regis asked, brimming with anticipation as I struck a beast with my bare fist, absorbing some of its aetheric essence in the process.

Not yet. The others still seem to be in control for now.

Behind me, Haedrig moved through the ghouls like a dancer, felling one after the other with grace and precision.

Kalon, on the other hand, fought with the mechanical efficiency of a farmer cutting down wheat in a field. His spear cut wide arcs through the air, often shearing through multiple serpents at once and flinging others back off the bridge, easily making up for where his siblings fell short.

Ada, despite hanging over Kalon's shoulder like a sack of grain, had summoned a circular saw of fire that was not only able to lacerate its enemies, but also grow larger with each foe it cut down.

Controlling this left her completely defenseless, however, as it clearly required all her concentration to maintain the spell. She held both hands out before her, making minute adjustments with her fingers to control the saw's movements. With both Riah and Kalon by her side, though, she was defended as well as any of us from the attacking ghouls.

Still, more and more of the serpentine monsters flowed up from the darkness. They had begun to interlink with one another, creating chains of snake-like bodies down into the depths and allowing others to climb up with startling speed.

"We're going to be run down if we keep going like this!" Riah shouted, trails of sweat lining her brows and cheeks as she blocked the sharp boney claws of one of the ghouls with the flat of her wide blade before hurtling it away with a gust of sharp wind.

"I'll try to buy us some time!" Kalon shouted. "Ezra, focus on protecting Ada."

Our line shifted as Ezra moved next to Ada, putting Riah in the front while Kalon went to the very back.

We ran, the three students leading the way. I took down a trio of ghouls, my aether-hardened fists smashing into their deformed faces, each contact allowing me to siphon more aether from their bodies as they collapsed in broken heaps or tumbled back off the path.

"Ada, now!" Kalon roared.

Another rune lit up on Ada's back, and the whirling saw of jagged fire, which was now the size of a carriage, disassembled into dozens of thin ropes of fire that slithered in the air much like the ghoulish serpents we were fighting.

A spark of electricity erupted from the epicenter of Ada's spell, using the writhing cords of fire as conduits for the tendrils of lightning. The chains of electrified fire dispersed, coiling around the ghouls closest to her, burning through them like a hot wire through candle wax and causing tendrils of lightning to leap from one to the next, creating a chain lightning effect that felled dozens of ghouls in an instant.

Ada slumped, her skin ghastly even under the warm light of fire.

"Good job!" Ezra said, breathing hard as he fended off another pair of ghouls with a swing of his crimson spear.

My eyes scanned our surroundings while my awoken aetheric senses picked up on all of the ghouls nearby.

"Riah, underneath you!" I yelled, spotting a boney claw about to grasp the short-haired Striker's ankle.

She tried to step back out of its reach, but a deafening explosion shook the stone path and Riah stumbled forward instead, right into the ghoul's rigid claws.

With both Ezra and Ada in the way, my only option was to use God Step to reach her in time to save her.

But I hesitated.

I hesitated at the thought of exposing my aetheric abilities to these people.

In that moment of hesitation, Riah was dragged off her feet.

Despite myself, I turned back to see what the cause of the explosion was and saw that a large portion of the stone path had been blown to pieces by Kalon.

Haedrig was only a few paces behind me, completely occupied in fending off the droves of ghouls, which were practically piling on top of one another trying to reach him.

I jerked around at the sound of Riah's panicked scream

"Ezra!" she cried in desperation as she clawed at the edge of the stone path, her fan-like blade spinning away into the abyss.

"Riah!" Ezra gasped, wide-eyed, unable to move past another pair of ghouls that were after his sister.

My mind spun in that instant. I thought of bypassing Ezra and Ada by using God Step to reach Riah, but revealing that here and now would be too risky.

Instead, I utilized my imperfect, aether-version of Burst Step in order to close the short distance between myself and where Ezra and Ada were fighting.

Ada had resorted to using small bursts of lightning to temporarily stun the ghouls, even though it didn't do any lasting damage, while Ezra focused on knocking them off the platform.

Grabbing the disfigured humanoid head of a ghoul trying desperately to bite down on Ada, I twisted, snapping its neck and causing it to slump.

Another blood-curdling scream pierced the air. Riah was clinging on with bloody fingers as more serpent ghouls climbed on top of her small body.

I pulled Ada behind me and met Ezra's eyes. He didn't waste time, rushing ahead to save Riah.

With the trail of ghouls behind us unable to cross over the large gap in the stone path, Kalon and Haedrig were free to dislodge the ones climbing up from the side before joining up with us, providing a moment's respite.

While the rest of the ascenders were sweating profusely from the strain of constant battle, I had gained more energy than I had spent due to the limited amount of aether I was using.

"What happened, why did you guys stop?" Kalon asked, his breathing still steady despite how long we'd been fighting.

Before I could answer, Ada let out a sharp gasp, her face paling in horror. "Riah!"

Kalon's eyes widened as his sister ran ahead. I turned around to see Ada pulling Riah off the ledge. Ezra had just killed the last of the ghouls that had nearly pulled the girl from the path.

Kalon rushed after them while Haedrig and I focused on killing any of the ghouls that managed to reach the path.

Even a quick glance showed me that Riah was in bad shape. Her right leg had been gnawed off at the ankle and deep gashes lined her back and her legs. Her face was twisted in pain, tears streaming down her cheeks as she clung desperately to Ada.

"We have to move," I said, not even looking as I redirected a ghoul to slam into another ghoul, sending them both spiraling down and out of sight.

"Do you think she's in any condition to move!" Ezra shot back.

"Grey is right. We can't stay here," Kalon cut in, turning to me. "Can you hold onto Riah? Haedrig, Ezra, and I will be responsible for keeping the two of you and Ada safe."

I nodded, hastily scooping Riah up in my arms.

Riah's entire body convulsed as she let out a pained scream, but the small ascender managed to wrap her arms around my neck.

"Let's move! Ada, give us some light!" Kalon said fiercely while striking away a ghoul.

'Are you sure you—well, they—don't need my help?' Regis asked, apparently bored by the situation.

Not yet, I quipped, beginning to run.

Haedrig and Kalon were a flurry of strikes and slashes as they focused entirely on protecting me and Ada, but with the growing numbers of serpentine ghouls, I had to resort to ducking and weaving past some of the ones that had managed to climb up the walls and get ahead of us.

We only made it a few more minutes up the path before Ezra suddenly skidded to a stop.

"No way," he gasped. "That's not possible."

The rest of us caught up to him, and the fiery orbs shined ahead, revealing a large chasm in the path, blocking our way.

The same chasm that Kalon had made.

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Despite the fast-approaching ghouls both behind and below us, we stared dumbly at the large chasm that Kalon had made, collectively unable to understand why it was in front of us.

"We—we were running in a circle the entire time?" Ada said, her voice quavering.

"That's impossible!" Ezra panted after felling another ghoul with his spear. "We were running in—a straight line. I'm—sure of it!" I could hear the strain in his voice; he was starting to grow tired.

"Ezra's right. There's no curve in the bridge." Kalon spun his weapon and swept the heads off of two ghouls that were trying to reach me. He, at least, seemed to have retained his strength so far.

The idea of a straight path looping in circles seemed impossible, yet was completely plausible if one took into account the edicts of aether. I couldn't help but wonder if the Relictombs had brought us to this zone because of me.

I looked down to see that Riah had lost consciousness in my arms. Perhaps it was for the better; Ada had coated her wounds with a thick paste that had stopped the bleeding, but her strained expression said it did nothing for her pain.

"What do we"—Haedrig unleashed a flurry of slashes at a trio of ghouls that had managed to reach the path—"do now?"

'Still think they're in control?' Regis chimed in snidely.

Fine. Come out, but remember not to talk.

Regis's large wolven form leapt out of my back, startling our team and drawing their attention away from the ghouls around us.

Kalon instinctively tried attacking Regis, and while I was curious what would happen if he struck my companion, I intervened.

"Stop! It's my spell," I snapped, immediately halting Kalon's spear before turning to Regis. "Go scout ahead and see if you can spot anything."

'Roger,' my companion sent back before leaping across the chasm.

Turning my attention back to the battle, I realized that Ezra, Ada, and Kalon were looking at me with shocked expressions. Haedrig was the only one who didn't seem fazed; if he was surprised by Regis's sudden appearance, he hid it extremely well.

Fortunately, the group's attention was forced back onto the growing horde of ghouls surrounding us. We abandoned our line formation, tightening into a close knot around Riah and Ada and inching closer to the chasm.

"What's the plan?" Kalon shouted, glancing at me.

"We wait," I said as my foot connected with a ghoul's sternum, sending it flying back down into the abyss. "I want to make sure that this place really is looping."

We held our position, restricting our mana consumption as best we could out of fear that our war against the nightmarish ghouls would last for hours more. Considering that I was surrounded by people I felt responsible to protect, and that I couldn't even reveal my own strength as I did so, there was little else I could do.

'Good news! Well, I guess it's bad news, but I see you all ahead of me now,' Regis thought to me.

I cursed under my breath.

So that confirms it.

'Did you want me to help fight? I took down about a dozen or so of these bastards already.'

No. I don't think we're going to get out of here by just killing more of these beasts, I sent back. I want you to go around and carefully scan the walls.

I could feel a wave of curiosity coming from Regis. 'You mean the gross faces?'

Yeah. Something about them has been bothering me. Just let me know if you find something out of the ordinary.

'Out of the ordinary from gross stone faces... got it,' Regis responded, turning to race away from us once more.

A stifled groan pulled my attention behind me.

"Ezra!" Kalon roared. His form flashed, appearing next to his brother and decapitating the ghoul that had wedged its claws through a slit below Ezra's pauldron.

With Ezra unable to freely move his left arm due to his injury, he became a crack in our defense. It wasn't long before a ghoul was able to slip past his weak side, forcing me to throw myself into its path to save Riah. The creature's putrid claws carved a series of deep gashes into my hip and thigh.

A pained grunt escaped from my throat as I drove my open hand straight through the ghoul's throat. It spit out a mouthful of blood and collapsed before Ezra could turn to drive his spear into its back.

The boy's face was pale and wet with sweat, but after that he redoubled his efforts, refusing to let another ghoul through.

Have you found anything? I asked Regis.

'Just a lot more hideous faces. There aren't any patterns I can see either.'

Keep looking, I sent, pulling a ghoul off of Ezra and shoving it to the ground so he could finish it.

"What are we still doing here? We have to get moving!" Kalon shouted, his relaxed demeanor completely gone.

"And go where?" I asked. "I've already confirmed that this zone is looping back on itself, taking us in circles. I sent my summon to check for any anomalies on the walls."

"Can you share senses with your summon?" Haedrig asked, redirecting a ghoul's tackle and causing it to fall back down into the dark.

"Kind of?" I hesitated. "It has a limited amount of sentience."

'Hey!'

Ignoring my companion, I turned to Ada, who had been helping out where she could, standing over Riah at the center of our circle. To conserve mana, she had resorted to firing small bolts of fire and lightning at the ghouls climbing up from the sides, but even that had been a huge help in keeping them at bay. I could tell she was at the end of her power, however. "Focus on replenishing your mana reserves."

"But there's too many of them!" Ada stammered, wiping away the beads of sweat rolling down her face. "I-I should be helping..."

I sat her down with a slight push and gave her the closest thing to a smile I could muster. "I'll keep you safe."

After a moment of hesitation, Ada nodded in determination before closing her eyes.

"Haedrig. Do you have an extra sword?" I asked, turning toward the green-haired ascender.

Without a word, Haedrig withdrew a thin shortsword from his dimension ring and tossed it to me.

Grasping the handle and pulling the sword out of its sheath, I was suddenly overcome with a sense of calmness. It was a silly thing what a weapon could do, but after fighting so long with Dawn's Ballad in my hand, I realized how much I had missed the sensation of wielding a sword.

I let out a sharp breath as I imbued aether into the sword; a fine crack appeared in the blade, leaking a subtle purple light that only I could see, and I knew it wouldn't hold up long. Still, though the sword was simple and obviously just a spare weapon, it was perfectly balanced with a good weight on my hand.

It would do.

The world around me seemed to slow and the sounds distracting me became indistinct. My first strike seemed to confuse even the ghoul, who didn't know what happened until it slumped and fell off the bridge.

The next series of slashes killed any and every ghoul within my reach. The sword in my hand travelled in a flurry of narrow arcs that shimmered, catching the reflection of Kalon's fire-clad spear.

My eyes constantly scanned our surroundings, making sure none of the ghouls managed to slip by. I hoped to see some sign that the onslaught was beginning to slow, but it seemed that, if anything, the ghouls became even more desperate the more of them we killed.

Kalon and Ezra's side had it the worst, since the chasm in the bridge allowed the ghouls to climb up more easily. With Ezra injured, Kalon had to keep the ghouls from getting past him and protect Ezra.

Haedrig's movements, on the other hand, hadn't slowed down at all, even as pools of both sweat and blood had formed beneath his feet.

I was confident that we could hold on for a while longer, but it would all be meaningless unless we found a way out of here.

A blinding flash lit up the hall, followed by a torrent of voltaic streams that obliterated the horde of ghouls that had managed to climb up from the chasm.

I was gazing around to admire the pure destructiveness of Kalon's spell when Regis contacted me again.

'Uh... Arthur?' he said, his confusion clear in my mind. 'You should come see this.'

"Let's move!" I yelled out immediately. "Ezra, can you hold Riah?"

The younger spearman's brows furrowed in annoyance. "What? I should help guard—"

"Ezra!" Kalon snarled, cutting his brother off. "Carry Riah."

Following Kalon's order without hesitation, Ezra put away his spear and picked up our unconscious teammate.

Leading the way, I cleared the path of ghouls while Kalon remained in the back of the line as our rear guard.

What did you find? I asked Regis.

'Something even more disturbing than the deformed stone faces,' he answered cryptically.

"Did your summon find something?" Haedrig asked from behind me.

"Yes, though I'm not sure what yet. Keep moving!"

With me clearing the way, Kalon defending the rear, and Haedrig darting from side to side casting down any monstrous serpents that climbed up the sides of the bridge, we ran as fast as Ezra could move. He was wounded and carrying Riah, so it wasn't as fast as I would have liked, but within minutes Regis's shadowy form materialized ahead of us.

Several ghoulish corpses littered the path around him, with more climbing over the edges every moment.

"What is it?" I asked, letting my battle instincts run my body, cutting down the ghouls attempting to swarm Regis while I focused on scanning the distant faces around us.

Pointing with his muzzle, Regis directed my gaze to one statue in particular. From this distance, it took my eyes a moment to focus through the gloom and the dancing shadows, but when I realized what it was, I froze solid, forgetting for a moment that we were fighting for our lives.

Razor sharp claws raked across my shoulder and back, tearing into my flesh and scraping bone. Flipping the short sword in my hand, I thrust backwards and up, stabbing my attacker through its chest. I turned and kicked it, pushing aether into my leg. The blow sent the ghoul flying into three others, all of which tumbled off the bridge.

Haedrig gasped, his eyes wide as he stared at the gaping wound on my back. "Grey!"

"It's fine." I gritted through the pain, telling myself it would heal quickly, and turned instead back to the statue.

My own face looked back at me from the wall.

The statue had been carved as if in the midst of a fierce battle cry: the mouth was open wide, teeth bared, and even the tongue visibly carved as if in motion; the brows were turned down, angry and aggressive; the eyes were alive with fury, glaring out at the rest of the zone as if this giant Arthur were about to smash the place to dust.

That had to be it. Why would *my* face be carved into the wall otherwise?

Looking at the battered sword in my hand, crumbling from the burden of aether flowing through it, I tossed it out into the empty space between the wall and the bridge. It tumbled down into the dark and disappeared.

"Hey!" Haedrig grunted from a few feet away, where he was holding off four ghouls that were clinging relentlessly to the edge of the path.

"I was hoping for some sort of invisible bridge," I admitted, shrugging apologetically.

'You think that's the exit?' Regis asked mentally, his jaws busy tearing at the throat of a ghoul.

I think it might be, yeah. I think we're here because of me, because the Relictombs knows I can use aether and is trying to test me somehow. That's why this zone has been so hard for the others. I need to use aether somehow so we can escape, I'm sure of it. I just need to think...

'Well think fast, or there will be fewer of us leaving once you do figure it out.'

Ezra grunted as one of the fallen serpent-ghouls, which was missing much of its lower half, grabbed at his heel and tripped him. Riah fell next to him and jolted awake with a scream of pain. The monster clawed toward her, pulling its slithering torso across the ground with its long arms.

From his back, Ezra spun his spear around and tried to drive it into the ghoul's neck, but he didn't have the angle or momentum, and he merely nicked its arm instead. Strong claws wrapped around the shaft and ripped the spear from his hand.

Riah tried to scramble backwards away from it, but in doing so slammed the stump of her leg against the stone path. Her entire body went rigid as she screamed again, and it looked as if her strength had left her.

Kalon was nearly overwhelmed at the rear, unable to disengage.

Haedrig had his back turned to the pair, and though he must have heard the screams, he couldn't see the half-dead monster crawling toward Riah.

Ada was backpedaling away from two other ghouls, flashes of electricity jumping from her hands to their snakelike bodies, but she no longer had the strength to generate spells strong enough to kill.

Regis whimpered behind me as three ghouls fell atop him, their claws ripping and tearing at his neck, ears, and belly.

They're all going to die, I realized with grim certainty. They aren't strong enough to be here, and even with God Step I can't—

It was like a jolt of electricity went through my mind. *God Step!* I couldn't walk through thin air with Burst Step, but God Step would take me directly into the statue's gaping maw.

I hesitated. If I'm wrong—

'What the hell do you have these powers for if you're not going to use them?' Regis growled in my head, his voice thick with frustration and pain.

Choosing not to look behind me again, hoping against hope that I wasn't about to leave Haedrig, Riah, and the Granbehl siblings to a gruesome death, I tuned out everything. I pushed away the pain wracking my body from both the injuries that I had sustained and the rapid healing of those injuries. I bottled my emotions of doubt, anger, guilt, and frustration, and I concentrated on the way forward.

I let my eyes unfocus, seeing the aether all around me. The forking, lightning-bolt paths spread out like a spiderweb around me, connecting every point to every other point in my range. The paths seemed to vibrate, shivering into and through the godrune on my back. I focused on only those leading in the direction I needed to go, and tried to block out all other sensory input.

Though I couldn't see it, I felt the godrune flare with warmth, glowing through the false-spellforms on my back. The aether reacted, the vibration intensifying, and I felt the path beckon me.

I followed it. Though my eyes told me I was standing in a different location and my ears detected the sudden muffling of the sounds of combat, the movement was otherwise so instantaneous that even my own senses didn't feel it as a physical action of my body.

I was standing atop the stone tongue within the giant carving of my own face, purple electricity crackling over my body. The inside of the mouth was recreated with excruciating detail, except, where the back of the throat should have been, there was a stone door.

For a single breath, nothing happened. In my mind's eye, I watched as Haedrig was pulled from the edge of the bridge and cast down into the depths; as Riah, paralyzed by pain, was mauled by the crawling ghoul; as Ada was run down by the pursuing monsters...

Then a grinding noise like an avalanche roared through the zone, so overwhelmingly loud that it shook all thought from my mind. I felt as though the entire chamber—every piece of stone, every molecule of air—was about to be torn apart. Then the stone beneath my feet began to move.

Turning, I saw that the bridge, where my companions had only an instant ago been fighting for their very lives, was slowly drawing nearer. It was with a wave of relief that I realized they were no longer surrounded by the awful, snakelike ghouls.

Kalon and Haedrig both still had their weapons held at the ready, their heads turning back and forth as if scanning the bridge for enemies. Ada was kneeling down next to Riah and Ezra. Regis stood at the edge of the path, staring down into the abyss.

'They just vanished!' Regis practically screamed. 'One second they were all creepy faces and nasty claws, then they just turned to shadow and—poof.'

The others turned to watch as my face approached the footbridge. The walls slowed, then halted, leaving no gap between the statue's gaping mouth and the path.

I stepped over the statue's teeth and back onto the bridge, now a narrow path between two high walls of faces. The statues carved on the wall, I noted, didn't look grotesque and misshapen from up close. They were kind, regal faces, and I was reminded immediately of the djinn I battled before I was given the keystone.

"Is everyone alright?"

"Ezra's a little beat up," Kalon said, eyeing me warily, "and Riah really needs medical attention. But she'll survive. At least it's over."

Ada looked up at me from where she kneeled next to Riah. "What happened?"

I wasn't sure exactly what to tell her. My hesitation must have shown, because Haedrig stepped in to interrupt my response.

"Any sort of explanations can happen once we're out of this hellish zone." He nodded toward Riah. "Let's get her up off the cold stone." Haedrig caught my eye as he turned to look back into the statue's mouth. From this angle, it was no longer recognizable as my own face towering over us. "Is there a portal in there?"

I nodded. "There is a door, yeah."

"Lead the way then."

I gestured to Regis, and the shadow wolf loped up to me and leapt into my body. The gaping jaw was perfectly placed against the path, making an easy step down and into the mouth. Kalon and Ezra lifted Riah and followed behind me.

The stone door opened easily to my touch, revealing an opaque portal. None of us said a word to each other, but we didn't have to. Expressions of relief were written clearly on the faces of Kalon, Ezra, Ada, and even Haedrig.

'Well, that could have been worse.' Even Regis sounded like he just wanted some rest.

Our team's gaze fell on me expectantly, and, after a nod, I stepped through.

299 FIGHTING BACK

ELEANOR LEYWIN

I followed several feet behind Tessia, keeping my face carefully passive so that the soldiers bustling around us wouldn't see how nervous I was. Most of them were elves out of necessity; humans and dwarves were at a disadvantage navigating the foggy forest of Elshire, even with the elves there to guide us.

Boo trailed along behind me, wandering in and out of the trees as he sniffed around, stuffing his nose in the dirt to search for grubs or other small forest creatures to eat. My bond was really at home in the deep forest and glad to be out of the caves.

We'd only been in Elshire for an hour or two, but I felt like the fog had seeped into my ears and was floating around inside my head, making it hard to think. I tried to pay attention as Tessia gave orders but constantly found myself gazing dreamily at some flower or tree or rock, only to snap back to the present when Tessia would ask, "Ellie, are you coming?"

Tessia stopped to check the progress on a pit trap that was being dug in the middle of a narrow road through the forest. Though it seemed like little more than a deer trail to me, Tessia had said that such clear paths only existed near the interior of Elenoir, connecting some of the larger cities and towns.

Three young elves were working together to build the pit trap. The first, a fair-haired boy with handsome emerald eyes, was using earth mana to dig out a large hole in the path that was at least ten feet deep.

The other two wore their hoods up, though I could still make out their serious expressions underneath, and were coaxing roots up out of the bottom of the pit and twisting them into sharp, spiraling spikes.

All three turned to snap quick salutes to Tessia before returning to their work.

"Make the pit just a bit wider, from there"—she gestured to a large chunk of granite—"to there," she said, pointing at a space between the roots of a large, knobbly tree with patches of moss hanging from it like a hundred little beards.

"That way, even a soldier walking on the edge of the path will fall in."

"Yes, Lady Tessia," the green-eyed elf replied, immediately starting to widen the hole so that it encompassed the entire path.

Tessia moved on and I trailed along after her, watching her long, silvery-gray hair bounce against her back. She had really taken to command. I knew she'd led soldiers before, and that she had been beaten badly by the Alacryans in Elenoir previously, but now she seemed confident in her role, and the mages we brought with us all showed her respect.

My mist-clouded mind was drifting randomly, and I thought of asking Tessia for advice on gaining control of my beast will, since I knew she relied heavily on hers in battle. I had to remind myself that now wasn't exactly the best time for that.

I'd had a short talk with Commander Virion after he'd heard more about what happened in the tunnels, and he'd made it obvious that the more powerful a mana beast was, the harder it was to unlock its beast will... and of course, Boo wasn't just any ordinary mana beast.

Then how the heck did Arthur unlock his beast will so fast? I shook my head, not wanting to fall into the trap of comparing myself with my brother.

Trying my luck once again, I brought the words that Commander Virion had left me with to mind.

"Feel for the powerful, foreign entity deep inside your mana core and bring it out," I muttered, closing my eyes.

Feeling nothing except for Boo's damp breath tickling my neck as he sniffed me curiously, I let out a sigh.

Ahead of me, Tessia stopped and turned back with a raised brow. "Ellie, are you coming?"

I nodded frantically and jogged to catch up.

A short distance from the pit trap, two dwarves were working some kind of earth magic, causing the packed dirt to shake and soften. I hadn't met the dwarves yet, though I'd heard of their arrival: the brothers Hornfels and Skarn Earthborn, cousins of Lance Mica.

They stopped their casting and straightened as we approached, though they did not salute. The dwarves were both short and broad, like most of their kin. They had identical features: broad noses, red cheeks, and wirey blonde beards. Their expressions were so different, though, that it would have been easy to miss that they were twins.

One grinned, looking at Tessia as if she were his long-lost best friend who had reappeared after being missing for a decade or two, while the other glared at her as if she'd just said something very unkind about his mother.

"How are the preparations going?" Tessia asked as she bent down and ran her hands over the tilled earth.

"Well enough," the scowling dwarf answered. "This is just the preparation, as you said. The real spell's cast when the carts arrive."

"Then, shoop," the smiling dwarf interjected. "The carriage tires sink in and stick fast. It'd take a dozen horses to pull 'em out."

Tessia pressed her hand down into the soft soil. "You may be the first dwarves to ever work dwarven magic in Elshire forest," she said quietly before standing up straight. "And it's a privilege to be working alongside you."

The grinning dwarf grinned wider, the scowling dwarf scowled deeper. Tessia gave them a respectful nod before turning on her heel and walking into the forest.

The dwarves' eyes fell on me as I stood there, staring at them. I thought it was really too bad that the dwarven king and queen had betrayed Dicathen. They'd left their people in such a hard position. I thought it was very brave of these Earthborns to have sought us out, when most of the dwarven kingdom had revolted in support of the invaders.

"Can we, perhaps, help you with something, girl?" the scowling dwarf asked, causing me to jump and look around for Tessia.

"Ellie, are you—"

"Coming!" I yelled.

Giving the dwarves an awkward wave, I leapt over a knee-high boulder and jogged toward Tessia.

She rested a hand on my shoulder once I'd caught up. "I have a few soldiers fortifying positions within the trees." Tessia pointed above us, where an elven archer was coaxing several tree branches into a sort of nest. It was amazing watching the tree move as if it was alive, responding to the soldier's mana. "You're going to be here."

"Got it." I traced the line from the platform above to the road: it was a straight shot to the dwarves' sinkhole.

"These points—here, here, and there—form the kill box." Tessia's eyes locked onto mine, her gaze deadly serious. "The mages up there will be the most important part of this battle, which is why I want you right in the middle of it. This needs to be quick and quiet, otherwise we risk losing the prisoners.

"I know the mist is making things difficult right now, but if you concentrate mana into your eyes and keep shifting your focus, it'll help keep the effects of the fog at bay. The most important thing is that we keep the prisoners safe and stop any Alacryans from escaping."

I returned her serious gaze, nodding in understanding. I couldn't disappoint her, I needed to prove myself here—not as Arthur Leywin's sister, but as Eleanor Leywin.

Tessia dipped her head down, gently caressing the back of my head as her forehead touched mine. "I know you don't want to be coddled, but... stay safe out there."

Taken aback, I pulled away from her before answering with as much determination I could muster. "Of course."

"Lady Tessia?"

Standing nearby, tall and straight-backed and handsome, was Curtis Glayder, a warm smile on his face. His sister, Kathyln, stood behind him, half-invisible in a deep shadow.

Boo perked up when he noticed Curtis's bond, the world lion Grawder, and the two cautiously approached and began sniffing one another.

Curtis ruffled his tawny hair as he approached Tessia. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was hoping to further discuss the ground tactics before the battle."

"I need to see that preparations on the eastern line are progressing as expected," she stated before nodding her head in the direction she was heading. "Walk with me?"

"Lead the way," he said, making a well-practiced gesture with his hand.

You can take the prince out of the castle...

I watched with growing annoyance as the two walked away, shoulder to shoulder. I knew it was nothing and that they had been friends since their days at Xyrus Academy, but I couldn't help it. Tessia was Arthur's girlfriend!

Then I realized for the hundredth time that Arthur was gone, and the creeping sentimentality that was threatening to overwhelm me burst its dam, and the bottom fell out of my stomach.

Damned mist, I thought, wiping a tear from my eye with the back of my hand.

"It's still difficult, isn't it?" I jerked around, just then realizing that Kathyln was walking next to me. "Moving on without them." Her skin was so white and her face so still that she could have been a porcelain doll, as cold and beautiful as an ice crystal.

I had grown to really like Kathyln since she and Curtis were rescued and brought to the underground shelter. She always seemed wise beyond her years, and there was that weird, flowery, almost poetic way she spoke that I found refreshing.

"Eleanor?"

Blinking, I realized I had been staring silently at Kathyln for way too long. "Yeah, I guess..." I murmured.

We crossed back over the path and followed Tessia and Curtis through the trees on the other side. They were speaking, but I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying. Curtis said something that made Tessia smile, and she turned to look at him in what I thought was an admiring sort of way.

Maybe I'm just imagining things because of this stupid fog, I thought, hoping it was true.

"Are you scared?" I suddenly blurted, my eyes falling to the forest floor, drifting along the contours of the tree roots and the sharp edges of the broad-leafed plants that blanketed the ground.

"Only a fool isn't scared before battle," Kathyln answered. "But these people need our help, so I'll fight anyway."

Kathyln and I walked in silence after that. Tessia verified that the snipers' nests on that side of the road were ready, then spent several long minutes reviewing what the ground team would be doing during the fight. Finally, she called the entire assault party together for one last pep talk.

Once everyone was gathered, Tessia began. "You all know why we're here. The lives of over a hundred elven—no, Dicathian—prisoners hang in the balance. We only have one chance to free them.

"Based on our reports, we'll match the Alacryan soldiers in number. But we have the element of surprise, and we have the forest itself on our side. This happens quickly and cleanly. We don't let anyone hurt the prisoners. Don't let anyone get away."

Tessia's piercing gaze moved from face to face as if she could memorize them all. "Now go, take up your positions. Be quiet, and be ready."

When the first crunch of the mist-muffled noise of carriage wheels on dry earth was heard in the treetops, it was like someone had struck me with a jolt of lightning. Suddenly my mouth was dry and my palms sweaty. My entire body felt alive with the anticipation of battle. I forced myself to take a long, deep breath, and focused mana into my eyes, making sure not to keep my sharpened gaze in one area for too long. It was as if the wind had blown away the fog in my mind.

Tessia had been right. Though the forest's magic was still disorienting, I felt clear-headed and ready for the first time in hours.

I shuffled atop the platform of woven branches, moving into a better position to draw and fire my bow, but I didn't conjure an arrow. The glimmering of a spell would be a dead giveaway to the approaching Alacryans.

There hadn't been a way to fix the bow Emily had made for me, so Tessia had given me one crafted by the elves. It didn't feel quite... mine, but I supposed it would have to do.

Barely perceptible even though I knew they were there, I saw the slightest shuffling as archers and mages in other trees around me did the same, moving like leaves in a gentle breeze. Knowing they were there helped to give me courage.

It seemed to take forever for the first of the Alacryans to appear between the trees. Several guards marched in front of the train of prisoner carts. They all seemed so young.

The Alacryans marched in silence, their hands white-knuckled around their weapons, their eyes darting from shadow to shadow. It was almost like they expected to be attacked, but I told myself it was just the mist-born paranoia and disorientation.

Then I could see the first of the carts. The squat wagon was pulled by a single moon ox. The mana beast was nearly as tall and wide as the cart itself. Its pale blue hide shimmered wherever the rare sunlight touched it, absorbing the light and glowing dimly in the deep shadows of the forest.

The cart itself was an open cage set atop a simple wagon. Inside it, elves were pressed shoulder to shoulder, packed so tightly they couldn't even move. Several of the elves were manacled to the bars of the cage, and I could sense mana whirling through metal collars around their necks.

Mana suppression collars, I realized. There were mages among the prisoners.

There were four carts that I could see, each as fully loaded as the last. Eight Alacryans marched ahead of the wagon train while four walked alongside each cart. I couldn't see the end of the prisoner transport line, but I knew they'd have at least a few soldiers bringing up the rear as well.

I tensed as the first soldiers approached the pit trap.

The crack of thin branches breaking and a brief, panicked yell was the signal to begin.

Conjuring an arrow onto the string of my bow, I took aim at a surprised-looking woman marching beside the lead cart. She raised her weapon, but before she could even take a step forward, my arrow pierced her breastplate, striking her in the heart before dissipating.

At the same time, a dozen other Alacryans stumbled and fell under a barrage of arrows and spells flying from the trees.

My second arrow flew at an Alacryan soldier who was rushing back from the front lines to the cover of the wagons, but it bounced off a magical shield. All around the Alacryans our attacks were deflecting off of translucent panels of mana, and bolts of fire, spears of ice, and crackling balls of lightning were now flying into the treetops as they responded with their own offensive magic.

Then the dwarves' spell kicked in.

A cloud of sandy dust exploded upwards, briefly covering the carts and the Alacryan mages around them. Several voices cried out in surprise, then a gust of wind blew the dust down the road, forcing it into the Alacryans' noses, mouths, and eyes while revealing our targets to us.

The carts had sunk into the road up to their axles, and many of the soldiers were stuck up to their knees. The poor moon oxen trumpeted in fear as they were caught in the spell as well.

In the confusion, a few of our arrows and spells slipped past the shields, and another handful of the Alacryans fell dead.

A second explosion—this one unplanned—kicked up another storm of dirt, obscuring the wagons. The Alacryan soldiers were almost entirely hidden, making it impossible for us to continue firing or risk hitting the captives.

"They're trying to release the elves!" a voice boomed from within the chaos below, making my heart pound and my fingers tremble on my bowstring.

A long jet of violently blue energy struck my tree several feet below me, causing the whole thing to wobble. The fear crept up in me, stronger than before, but I focused on it this time, repeating Virion's words over and over in my head.

The same gut wrenching feeling I'd had in the tunnels took over, and my already enhanced eyesight sharpened even further. But I focused on my smell. Even through the thick layer of dirt, dust, and blood, I could make out the subtle smells that distinguished everyone down below, even if I couldn't see them. I could smell the rancid odor of the elves, deprived of any sort of hygiene, and I could clearly make out the foreign stench of the Alacryans.

With a short, controlled breath, I fired four mana arrows in succession. Two sounded as though they had deflected off mana shields, but with each of the others came a pained grunt that sounded like it came from only a feet away, and the faint smell of fresh blood.

Nearby, an elven soldier screamed in pain as a dozen needle-like darts of stone tore through him, tossing him into the air. I watched, detached, as he tumbled like a ragdoll then hit the ground below with dull thud before firing another arrow in the direction that the enemy's spell had come from.

Again, I could hear the mana arrow deflect off some obstruction before it reached its target.

A wild, monstrous roar tore through the forest, and for a heartbeat everything seemed to stop as all eyes turned toward the end of the prisoner caravan. Visible through a burned patch of leaves, I watched as Curtis charged along the road, riding atop Grawder and gleaming golden, shedding his own light like the sun.

Boo ran at Grawder's side, answering the world lion's roar with his own as the mana beasts charged together along the line of carts, a gust of wind clearing their line of sight to where the last of the Alacryans

were huddled between the front two wagons. Two huge stone golems followed the mana beasts, their heavy footfalls shaking the leaves around me.

"Kill the prisoners!" screamed one of the enemy soldiers, her voice shrill with fear. I sent an arrow at the tall woman's throat, threaded carefully through the barest crack in the shields, but it rebounded off one edge and missed.

Fear surged through me as the enemy spellcasters turned their magic toward the packed carts around them, preparing to execute the dozens of elven prisoners inside, but there was nothing I could do. They tightened the protective barrier so that my arrows couldn't pierce it, nor could any of the other attacks raining down on the Alacryans from around me.

The very air around me began to change color, taking on a translucent green hue, and for a second I worried it was some side effect of my beast will. Then thorny vines of shimmering emerald energy sprouted from the ground in the middle of the knot of enemy soldiers, inside of the dome of interlocking panels. The vines ripped and tore at the Alacryans, plunged into and through their bodies, filling the forest with their dying screams.

They all fell before even a single spell was cast, all except for the tall woman, who was bound in a cocoon of the vines, unable to move or speak.

Curtis, Grawder, Boo, and the golems fell upon the enemy just as the shields flickered and failed, ensuring that there were no other survivors.

Suddenly everything was silent as the twang of bowstrings, the hiss of spells burning through the air, and the shouts of dying men and women all stopped. Only the low moans of the trapped moon oxen broke the eerie quiet.

Then Tessia stepped into view, her entire body wrapped in a shroud of emerald light. Mossy grass bloomed in her footprints, and the plants and trees of the forest seemed to turn toward her as she strode calmly through the battlefield toward the carts and the last living Alacryan.

When she was face to face with the tall woman, Tessia encouraged her to be calm and asked for her name and rank. The bindings slithered away from the Alacryan's mouth, and she spit at Tessia and shouted a vulgar curse.

Then the woman's skin began to glow, burning brighter and brighter as if a star were being born inside her. I heard Curtis shout out a warning, then lost sight of both Tessia and the Alacryan as a solid dome of tree roots and thick vines burst from the ground around them.

An instant later, a huge explosion rocked the forest, shaking the ground so that my right foot slipped and I was forced to wrap my arms around the largest limb of my woven platform to keep from tumbling from my perch.

A thick cloud of dust enveloped the carts again so that I couldn't see what had happened. Somehow, the Alacryan had erupted with mana right between the two lead wagons. There were at least fifty elven prisoners in those cages alone, and Boo and Tessia had been right there too...

Sliding so that I was hanging from the side of the platform, I let myself drop the twenty-five feet to the ground, reinforcing my legs with mana to absorb the force of the landing, then I was sprinting toward the road.

Just inside the thick dust, I ran headlong into a large, hairy body: Boo. My bond rumbled with a low growl, but I ran my hand through his coarse fur and he relaxed.

"Tessia?" I called softly, fear making my voice thin and childlike.

"Stay back," Curtis commanded from somewhere to my right.

Then a gust of wind carried the dust away yet again, and I saw the cocoon of vines, still intact and hiding the Alacryan woman and Tessia both. As I watched, the vines and roots began to unravel, slowly collapsing and revealing the charred wreckage within.

I was amazed that the prisoner wagons had survived, but Tessia's spell had almost entirely contained the blast. The Alacryan woman was gone, nothing left but ash and the twisted remains of her armor.

Tessia turned, levelling me with a calm but otherworldly gaze, her beast will still active. She frowned as a giggle escaped from my mouth. Even though she seemed unhurt, her eyebrows and steely gray hair had been slightly singed, reminding me of the mad-scientist Gideon.

My giggle turned into laughter as Tessia released her beast will, letting the writhing emerald vines fade and the air return to its natural misty gray color. Her hand went to her face and gingerly felt at her scorched brows, and a slow smirk spread on her lips.

With her other hand, Tessia reached out and touched my cheek. "Ellie, do you have whiskers?"

I traced the faint lines on my cheek with my own fingers, struggling to hold back another fit of giggles. "My beast will…"

Around us, the prisoners were starting to come to life as they realized they had been freed. A woman's voice shouted out a cheer, then several others joined her.

We had done it.

300 THE MIRROR ROOM

ARTHUR LEYWIN

My mind reeled in confusion as I stepped through the portal and into the next zone. A figure lunged from my left and I jerked my hands up to deflect the blow, but nothing happened. Movement from the corner of my eye caused me to turn sharply, expecting a flanking attack, but no attack came from that direction either.

'Jumping at shadows now, eh princess?' Regis chuckled in my mind. 'Look.'

"Who—who are they?"

All around, people looked back at me through rectangular windows, each wearing a look of anguish, their faces wet with tears, twisted with rage, or contorted into soundless screams. Some sat still, though most were in the midst of manic fits, gesticulating wildly, striking and scratching at themselves or the ground, like wards in an asylum.

Before I could investigate further, Kalon and Ezra were stumbling into me, Riah between them.

"What the hell?" Ezra said, flinching back from me and from the figures within the windows.

At the center of the room there was a square fountain, six feet to a side and surrounded by benches. "There," I said, pointing to a bench. "Set her down there."

The brothers carried their family friend across the room, a steady stream of her blood running from the severed wreckage of her foot, spattering darkly across the marble floor.

Ada came next, her steps halting, her eyes glassy. "Is—is this the sanctuary?" She gazed at one of the nearby figures, her brows knitting in confusion. She actually leaned toward it and squinted to try and focus on it, as if she didn't quite believe her own eyes.

The figure, a very portly man who wore only linen pants, a pair of steel boots, and spiked gauntlets, didn't look back, but kneeled on all fours, hammering one massive gauntlet into the ground again and again.

Haedrig, the last in, set a hand gently on her shoulder and guided her past me, toward the fountain at the center of the room. "No, this isn't a sanctuary room," he said, his voice low and ominous.

Kalon was wrapping Riah's stub with bandages from his dimension ring while Ezra looked on, helplessly fidgeting with his spear. He snapped around when Haedrig spoke.

"What do you mean this isn't the sanctuary room? It"—he glanced around and flinched again, as if seeing the room for the first time—"has to be..."

Haedrig guided Ada to the benches and encouraged her to sit down before turning back to Ezra. "It clearly isn't, and after that first zone you'd have to be a fool to think that we'd end up anywhere so expected as a sanctuary room."

Ezra glared petulantly at Haedrig, but the mossy-haired veteran seemed entirely unconcerned. They held one another's eyes for a long moment before Ezra huffed and turned away, this time looking to his sister.

I turned my attention back to the room. It was only about fifteen feet wide and eight feet tall, making it feel very low and claustrophobic after the enormity of the last zone.

Though the area near the fountain was brightly lit by orbs of light that hung down over the running water, the room faded into shadow beyond the light's edge, making it difficult to tell how long the room was. The light reflecting off the many windows showing us the tortured figures made it feel as though the room stretched on forever.

'Not windows,' Regis thought, 'mirrors. Look.'

Regis was right. As I approached the nearest mirror, I could see the room reflected within it, though, of course, the man in the mirror was not me, nor did he exist outside of that reflection. He was an older man with a thick gray beard. He sat cross legged, staring unblinkingly back out at me, his lips moving ceaselessly.

I leaned forward, cocking my head so my ear was nearly pressed against the mirror, and I realized I could hear the faint whisper of a voice, though I could not make out the words.

"Well," Kalon said, drawing my attention back to the others, "Riah is sleeping. She's lost a lot of blood, but that poultice you gave her saved her life, Ada. If we can get out of here quick enough, she'll be okay."

Kalon stepped up to a mirror near the fountain. The man within it wore a helm topped by sharp, onyx-black horns like scimitars, giving him the appearance of a Vritra. He stood with his arms crossed and a haughty sneer smeared across his face. Based on his armor—black leather and blackened steel plates with jet runes inlaid throughout—he was an ascender, and a wealthy one at that.

"They're all ascenders," Haedrig said, as if he'd read my mind.

"Look at the design and material of their clothes and armor," Kalon pointed out. "Especially the horns. It's been out of favor to wear horned helms for, what, several decades? They've been trapped here for quite awhile, haven't they?"

No one answered, though a collective chill ran through the group as we all considered being trapped in this room for eternity.

"Why in Vritra's name are we here?" Ezra said, moving to stand by Kalon. "This is a prelim. It's supposed to be over!" The broad-shouldered young man turned toward me. "You! I don't know how, but this is your fault, isn't it!"

"Enough," Kalon said quietly. "Whyever we're here, it's just another test. This is a puzzle zone. We need to start looking for clues that'll help us solve the room and move on."

Ada's discouraged expression disappeared as she got up to her feet, forcing a smile for us to see. "That's right! We can do this! For—" Ada glanced at the sleeping Riah, her bandages already spotted through with blood. "For Riah!"

The first-time ascender's bravery seemed to douse Ezra's hot head, and he gave his sister a side-hug, wincing as he did so.

"What about you?" I asked him. "How badly were you hurt?"

"It's nothing," he said, his chin up, his gaze haughty. "I'll be fine."

Shaking my head, I turned away and began examining the mirrors, one by one, for any hint or clue about how to proceed.

Kalon stepped up beside me. "That was an impressive spell you used to teleport back there."

"Thanks," I said simply.

"I'll admit, I wasn't the best student at academy," Kalon went on, "and I was particularly bad at ancient runes—I just never really understood the point, you know? I always knew I was going to be an ascender, and ascenders don't fight each other."

I turned to Kalon, meeting his eye. "What are you getting at?"

He raised his hands and smiled warmly, but I could see the tension in the way he held himself and the way his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Just making conversation, Grey—and, thinking about that spell. I've never seen anything like it. We studied all kinds of runes at the academy—making it more difficult increases the prestige, I guess.

"I was curious"—he paused, glancing up the hall toward his brother and sister—"if I could see your... What is it you have? An emblem? It seems too powerful for a crest." When I didn't immediately answer, Kalon broke into a surprised grin. "It's not a regalia, surely? Is that why you don't have your runes displayed? Who *are* you?"

"Listen," I said, "there'll be plenty of time for war stories when we're out of here, okay? For now, let's just figure out this puzzle room."

Kalon shook his head and patted me on the shoulder. "I'll figure you out yet, Grey." He turned to walk up the hall, following his siblings, then stopped. "Oh, and sorry about Ezra. Don't mind him, he's just protective of the girls."

'And an imbecile,' Regis said in my mind.

I smiled and turned back to the mirrors, focusing again on the task at hand.

'Guesses here?' Regis asked after we'd looked over a dozen or more of the reflections. 'What are we looking for, Arthur?'

If everyone here is an ascender, then they've presumably been trapped somehow. Maybe by touching the mirrors?

'Okay, so don't touch the mirrors, check. But how do we get out of here?'

I stopped when one of the figures we passed by waved wildly with both arms, clearly trying to get my attention. He was a bearded man who also had a horned helm with locks of wavy brown hair that flowed down past his chin. His eyes were deeply sunken and ringed with shadows, but he perked up when I stopped.

They can see us, I thought, realization washing over me.

The trapped ascender pressed his hand to the inside of the mirror, gesturing for me to do the same. When I didn't immediately respond, he grinned and nodded, then gestured again more urgently.

'It's a trap, you know it is. What if you get sucked in after touching that mirror? What if he gets loose and tries to kill everyone else?'

"Can you hear me?" I asked out loud, pointing at the mirror. The man shook his head and gestured again at his hand pressed against the inside of the pane. I shook my head back.

The man's face fell, and when he looked back up there was such a pure and malevolent hatred in his eyes that I took a step back from the mirror. He began shouting, even going as far as taking off his helmet and using it as a pickaxe to try and break his way out.

'Sheesh... someone woke up on the wrong side of the mirror,' Regis said, laughing at his own joke.

Ignoring Regis, I moved on from the enraged ascender.

After a few more minutes of fruitlessly examining the mirrors, now conscious that the inhabitants were watching me as closely as I was them, Ada called out.

"It's... it's me!" Ada said, her voice carrying down the hall, which seemed to be much longer than it had at first appeared. Ada was standing in front of a mirror perhaps twenty feet away, and from where I stood I could just see the figure within.

The mirror-Ada waved and smiled warmly, a gesture the real Ada immediately returned. Then, moving identically so it was almost as if one was genuinely a reflection of the other, both raised their hands and made as if to press them against the glassy pane.

"Ada," I shouted, "stop! Don't touch the—" Ada's right hand pressed against the mirror, as did the reflection's, and purple energy—aetheric essence—rose like steam from Ada's skin, then moved like wind-blown mist along her body until it was absorbed into the mirror.

Using God Step, I was at her side in an instant, but even that was too late. Her body slumped into my arms, and I watched in horror as blackish-purple energy from the mirror oozed across her and was absorbed into her skin.

Weariness settled over me like a warm blanket. Using God Step twice in such a short time had apparently taken a toll on me. I would have to grow much stronger before I could use aether in such a way more consistently. In the meantime, at least I could use Burst Step now without tearing my body apart.

Heavy footsteps from behind me announced Kalon and Ezra's approach. I glanced from the unconscious Ada in my arms to the mirror, and my stomach lurched. Ada—the real Ada—seemed to be banging on the inside of the mirror with her fist, practically blind with panic and the tears that streamed down her face and dripped from her chin.

Even though I couldn't hear her, her words were clear. "Please," she said. "Please."

"What happened?" Ezra snapped, leaning down over his sister's prone form and placing his hand on hers. "Ada? Ada!"

As I opened my mouth to explain, Ada's eyes fluttered open, causing us all to recoil in surprise; they were a deep, dark, glowing violet.

Kalon looked from the purple-eyed Ada to the mirror where the crying, frantic Ada was still screaming, "Please, please!" The eldest sibling's eyes were bloodshot as he tried to muster every ounce of composure he had left, his hand reaching closer toward the mirror.

"Stop!" I released a pulse of aetheric intent, causing everyone—Haedrig had joined us only a moment before—to freeze in place. "Touching the mirror is what caused this. I think..." I paused, carefully considering how best to explain what I saw. "I think that Ada was drawn into the mirror, and that something came *out* of the mirror to inhabit her body."

Ezra, seizing on this thought, grabbed Ada's hand and pulled her toward the mirror. "Then we just make them switch back!"

I reached for Ezra's arm, but Kalon stopped me. "Let him try."

Before I could argue, Ezra—over the terrified objections of the purple-eyed Ada—had pressed her hand against the glass. On the other side, our Ada mirrored the gesture.

Nothing happened.

"Please," Ada said, "Let go of me, Ezra. You're hurting me." A single large tear welled up within those otherworldly eyes. "Please."

Ezra let go and stepped away, grimacing. He looked from Ada to Kalon and back, anguish written across his face. In the mirror, the image of Ada had fallen onto her knees, her hands over her face, her entire body wracked by sobs.

"How do we know," Kalon said, speaking deliberately as tears welled up in his eyes, "that the Ada in the mirror is the real Ada? What if it's some kind of trick—or trap?"

"The glowing purple eyes didn't give it away?" I asked, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice. Kalon didn't respond, but Ezra stepped toward me aggressively, his fists clenched and his eyes full of dark fire.

I whipped my head around and met his gaze, a near-palpable intent leaking out of me. "Don't do anything you're going to regret, *kid*."

Ezra halted and gnashed his teeth, his fists still raised in wary defiance.

"This isn't the time to be fighting amongst ourselves," I added gently, letting out a sigh.

Ezra held my eyes for a long moment, breathing hard. Then he turned suddenly and pressed his hand to the glass of Ada's mirror prison.

Though I couldn't sense any change, it was clear that something was happening to Ezra. His entire body tensed, and, when he turned back to look at Kalon, his face was pale and his eyes shined with tears.

"Ezra!" Kalon gasped.

"I can hear her," Ezra said, his voice choked with emotion. "When I touch the mirror, I can hear Ada. She sounds so scared..."

Following his brother's lead, Kalon pressed his palm against the mirror's surface. Immediately Kalon's expression darkened. He didn't have to say anything for me to know that he, too, could hear her cries.

Wanting to give the brothers a moment of privacy while they shared their sister's suffering, I turned to Haedrig, but he was nowhere to be seen. I looked toward the fountain, where Riah lay sleeping, but he wasn't there. Neither could I see him in the dim light at the edges of the room.

A jolt of fear ran through me, and I began searching the nearby mirrors for any sign of him.

I passed a wispy haired young woman who lay naked on the floor, rolling back and forth with her hands stretched out over her head like a child playing in the grass; a figure in bulky armor whose face had been tattooed until only the shocking blue eyes were untouched; and a man who wore robes like a monk, but who had the mindless, murderous look of a mana beast.

Haedrig wasn't there.

I glanced back at the others; Kalon and Ezra each still had one hand pressed against Ada's mirror and the other set upon each other's shoulder. In the mirror, Ada pressed her hands to theirs.

The purple-eyed Ada was crawling unnoticed away from them, toward the fountain next to which Riah slept. There was something alien and malevolent in the way Ada moved, and her glowing eyes narrowed into a glare as she caught me watching her. I stepped toward her, but stopped when the sound of shattered glass filled the room.

"Haedrig?" I called into the darkness, the creature masquerading as Ada momentarily forgotten.

"Fine, I'm fine," Haedrig said, walking toward me out of the gloom, his sword drawn.

Instinctively, I drew the white dagger I'd claimed from the lair of the giant millipede. Haedrig's eyes seemed almost drawn to the weapon as his gaze fixated on the white blade. With a start, he seemed to realize that his own blade was out, and he immediately sheathed it within his dimension ring.

"I'm sorry if I startled you, Grey," he said, his voice steady, his hands out to his sides to show that he was not armed. "I found my own image in a mirror farther down the hall, and—well, it may have been a bit reckless, but—I was taken by an instinct, and I smashed it."

'Oh, yeah, great idea, let's just smash up the cursed mirror-prisons, I'm sure nothing bad will happen,' Regis grumbled.

"That was—" I wasn't sure whether to praise Haedrig for his bravery or admonish him for his thoughtlessness, but I was saved the trouble of finishing my sentence when Haedrig's eyes went wide and he yelled, "Ada!"

Turning, already sure what I would see, I prepared to Burst Step to the fountain, where I knew I would find the false-Ada hunkered over Riah's unconscious form. *You fool, Arthur!* I chided myself. I shouldn't have taken my eyes off her.

I activated Burst Step, intending to move almost instantly to the edge of the fountain, then leap the remaining distance and tackle Ada. Unfortunately, Kalon moved as well, darting toward Ada and stepping directly into my path.

I struck the eldest Granbehl sibling shoulder-to-shoulder, causing him to tumble head over heels through the air. Unable to maintain my footing or my trajectory, I found myself veering headlong directly toward one of the mirrors with no way to stop my momentum.

Twisting, I slammed through the mirror shoulder first, finding myself suddenly outside of the hall of mirrors. For a sickening moment, I saw empty blackness stretch out below me, but I was able to grab onto the frame of the mirror despite the jagged edges of the remaining glass biting into my fingers.

'Don't look down,' Regis urged.

I looked down.

Blackness. Infinite blackness.

The only thing to break up the nothingness was the bright rectangle that looked into the mirror room, a window floating in the abyss. I was dangling from the frame, blood beginning to seep down my hands and forearms from the cuts on my fingers.

I tried to pull myself up and back through the mirror, but a cold lethargy was seeping through my muscles. My mind was foggy, my limbs weak and unresponsive. I couldn't focus...

'Arthur!' Regis yelled in my head, his voice cutting through the mist like the beam of a lighthouse. I heaved, feeling the glass scrape the bones of my fingers, but I was able to get one elbow over the lip of the mirror.

Then Haedrig appeared above me, and he was hauling me up by my cloak, half choking me in the process. My strength came roaring back as soon as I was back on the right side of the mirror, and I tore free of his grasp the moment I had my feet under me, sprinting toward Ezra and Ada, who were scuffling over Riah's prone form.

Ezra had wrapped both his arms around Ada's body, pinning her own arms to her sides, but she was twisting and jerking wildly within his grip. She threw her head back, smashing her brother's nose and almost slipping free.

I tackled them, knocking both Granbehl siblings to the ground, then helped Ezra to pin Ada. Her purple eyes blazed with light and fury and she kicked, scratched, and bit at us. When she couldn't hurt us, she began slamming her head onto the ground with a hollow *thud*.

Kalon appeared, throwing himself onto the pile and helping to hold her still and keep her from hurting herself. "Ada, stop! Please..." His voice cracked as he pleaded with the creature controlling Ada's body.

Regis, I need you to go in there and see what is inhabiting her body. I wasn't sure it would even work, but I thought that if Regis could go into Sylvie's stone, perhaps he could inhabit Ada's body as well.

'Gross. You want me to go into someone else's body? What if—' I could sense the revulsion leaking out from Regis, but there wasn't time to argue.

Just do it. Now!

The shadow wolf leapt from my body, paced once around our roiling pile, then hesitantly dissolved into Ada. At first, nothing happened. Then the struggling lessened, and Ada went limp, though her eyes still blazed with violet light.

Kalon, Ezra, and I held our positions, waiting to see if Ada would resume struggling. My eyes darted around the room, taking in the scene. The figures in the mirrors all around us had stopped their wild gesticulations; every single one now stood still, their eyes locked onto the four of us lying on the floor in a heap. The broken mirror now looked out onto black nothingness, like an empty eye socket.

Haedrig stood over us, though he wasn't looking toward our group. His gaze was turned toward the bench where Riah lay, quiet and motionless. The bandage on her leg had been partially unwrapped, revealing the gory, gnawed stump beneath. Blood no longer flowed from the wound.

Riah's face was pale, locked in an expression of fear and agony. Though her glassy eyes still stared up at the low ceiling, I knew they no longer saw.

Riah was dead.

301 MORE TO DO

ELEANOR LEYWIN

An ox was bellowing nearby. A distant bird cried angrily, our battle likely having disturbed its peace. My own heart was banging against my ribcage audibly, but I could hear Tessia's and Curtis's as well, which felt wrong somehow, almost like an invasion of their privacy.

Underneath these noises, there was something else. A thin, fearful voice whispered a prayer to the Vritra.

I spun, an arrow already on my string, and loosed it just past Curtis's hip. My arrow *thunked* into a young Alacryan soldier who had hidden, playing dead, behind one of the cart wheels. He had been preparing a spell aimed at Curtis's back.

Tessia and Curtis both turned, mana condensing in preparation for their spells, but the soldier was dead.

Curtis turned back to me and ruffled his hair, looking a little embarrassed. "Thanks," he said quietly.

Tessia met my eye and nodded sharply.

By now, most of the other members of our assault force, those who had survived, were coming out of the trees.

"We'll be sure to celebrate later," Tessia said, her voice carrying clearly as she cast a hard gaze at her soldiers. "For now, let's get these people free!"

Just like that, everyone burst into motion, breaking the locks, releasing the prisoners, and shattering their manacles.

Tessia hesitated before stepping away to oversee her soldiers. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I said, letting my beast will fade. For a moment, it was like someone had pressed a blanket over my head, but my senses adjusted quickly. "Their attacks never even got close."

Tessia smiled her warm smile, saluted me, and said, "Well fought... soldier."

I returned the solute awkwardly, and Tessia marched away.

Boo nuzzled me, and I leaned forward and pressed my forehead to his.

"Looks like we're getting closer, aren't we, buddy..." I said with a sigh before my gaze wandered past him, to the young Alacryan I'd just killed.

I tried to look away, to distance myself internally like I'd been doing until now.

But I couldn't. I kept staring at the man, who looked only a few years older than me... Arthur's age.

It was when his body was getting carried away by our soldiers, though, that I saw them. The blank, lifeless eyes that were still wide open in shock.

I tore my gaze away, stumbling onto the ground in the process. I crawled to the nearest tree I could find and heaved out my last meal as tears blurred my vision.

Boo sat behind me, comforting me and hiding me from everyone else as I sobbed and threw up at the same time.

How did Arthur do this? How did Tessia, Curtis, or *anyone* do such a gruesome thing like killing. Like murder.

And yet, here I was, after having killed multiple living people, more worried that everyone would see me crying like a child.

A delicate touch on my shoulder made me jump. I spun around, coming face to face with Kathyln, whose cool gaze was uncharacteristically sympathetic.

A loud hiccup interrupted my sobs and I could taste the acidic remains of my throw up. I hurriedly wiped both my eyes and my mouth, while trying unsuccessfully to rearrange my facial features into a less embarrassing expression.

"How do you do it?" I let out another sob. "How is it so easy for all of you to do this?"

"It's never easy and it should never be easy." The once-princess held out her arm for me to take. "As for how I do it, I'm afraid everyone's answer is different."

Kathyln gave me a solemn smile as she looked at me. It was the same kind my brother often had... a complicated smile that I didn't get until now.

How many enemies had Arthur killed? I wondered. How many allies had he watched die? He always kept going.

Wiping my tears once more, I took Kathyln's arm, and she led me away toward the rear of the caravan where the prisoners were just starting to be released.

As we passed by the other carts, each one surrounded by a handful of our soldiers helping people out and trying to remove the mana-suppressing shackles, I watched the freed elves. Many threw their arms around each other and their rescuers. Many more cried, letting relieved tears run unabated down their faces. Others gazed about dreamily, as if they'd just woken and were still unsure if what they were seeing was real.

A frightened bellow drew my attention to the helpless-looking moon ox still stuck in the ground in front of one of the carts, its legs trapped within the dwarves' spell. It gazed back at me forlornly.

We were passing by the third cart in the caravan when a tall, shirtless blond elf with dark bruises discoloring his face fell to his knees as his manacles were released. From nearby, I heard Tessia exclaim, "Feyrith!" and I stopped, forcing Kathyln to release my arm.

She turned to watch with me as Tessia ran to the kneeling elf and leaned down to wrap both her hands around his. Kathyln brushed my shoulder as she rushed past me, crouching down next them, one hand resting gently on Feyrith's back.

I took a few steps closer, curious who this elf was that he could call both of these princesses his friends.

"Feyrith, what did they do to you?" Tessia asked, her voice strained. Not only was the elf bruised across his entire face and most of his torso, he was dangerously thin; his cheeks were gaunt, his shoulder blades jutted from his back, and his ribs were clearly visible.

He tried to speak, but the effort caused him to cough, which must have been painful because his face twisted into a grimace. I quickly withdrew a drinking canteen from my dimension ring and handed it to him.

His pale green eyes lingered on me for a moment before he accepted the canteen and took a long drink from it. "Thank you," he said hoarsely when he handed it back. "You seem... familiar."

"This is Eleanor Leywin," Tessia said softly, still half holding the emaciated elven mage.

Feyrith's brows crinkled. "As in..."

"As in the sister of Arthur Leywin," Kathyln confirmed, glancing at me.

Feyrith's eyes went wide and his tortured expression broke into the ghost of a grin. "Is he here? Arthur?" Feyrith looked around hopefully, as if expecting to see my brother appear through the mist, grinning and rubbing the back of his neck...

"He's gone," I said, my voice as cool and emotionless as Kathyln's.

Feyrith's momentarily hopeful expression crashed. His eyes closed, his shoulders slumped, his face dipped toward the ground. "I'm sorry," he said, his lips barely moving, the words no more than a whisper.

The four of us were still, sharing a spontaneous moment of silence for my brother. Above us, the tall trees leaned inward in a bow, as if even *they* felt sorry for us, while all around our soldiers were freeing the imprisoned elves.

Then Tessia spoke again, and the spell was shattered. "Come on, Feyrith, we need to get you ready to teleport back to the sanctuary." The noise rushed back in, and we were returned to the chaotic scene of the elves' hurried emancipation.

"What?" Feyrith asked, his eyes narrowed in confusion. "No, we have to save the rest!"

"The rest?" Tessia asked, standing up and helping Feyrith get to his feet beside her.

Feyrith tried to take a step and stumbled. He was forced to lean back against the wagon just to stand. "We came from a staging camp to the north. One of the villages—it's been handed over to some Alacryan noble." The battered elf paused, his eyes losing focus, but after a moment he shook his head and continued on. "There are dozens—hundreds—more prisoners there, waiting to be sent to other holds. Our people are being divided up like livestock and gifted to high-ranking Alacryans."

When Tessia didn't immediately respond, Feyrith grabbed her arm, his eyes wild. For a moment he looked half mad. "We have to save them. Once they're all transferred to the other towns, spread all over Elenoir—"

"It would be impossible to rescue them all..." Tessia finished, the corners of her mouth turned down in a thoughtful frown. "We don't have the force to storm a fortified location, but..."

"But Commander Virion's words are weighing on your decision, right?" Kathyln interrupted. "He may have ordered us to save as many elves as possible, but it's safe to assume he meant within the scope of this mission."

"He didn't. Back then, my gran—Commander Virion had this desperation that I've never seen in him before." Tessia paused for a moment before she shook her head. "We'll discuss this with the others before coming to a decision. For now, we should organize the elves that need to get back to the sanctuary."

Kathyln nodded at this, but Feyrith looked stricken. Before he could say anything, however, a nearby elf, one of the freed prisoners, stumbled over and threw herself at Tessia's feet. "Please, Princess Tessia, my family is still being held in Eidelholm. You have to save them!"

The woman's dirty face looked so pitiful, so horribly forlorn and desperately reverent, that I knew Tessia couldn't help but say yes. Instead, Tessia leaned down to meet her gaze on the same level.

"My duty as a leader is to get everyone we saved today back to safety," she said sternly before gently pressing her forehead against the woman's. "But once that has been accomplished, we will carefully consider our next steps, so please help me do my part."

The woman's lower lip trembled as she nodded, and with another encouraging pat from our leader, she went off to join the other elves that had been freed.

Kathyln's gaze followed after the woman, expressionless, but Feyrith frowned, clearly hoping for a stronger answer.

"Kathyln, can you round up your brother, Albold, Skarn, and Hornfels?"

Kathyln nodded, her shining black hair bouncing. "Of course, Tessia." Then she vanished into the bustle of activity all around us.

Tessia and I assisted in organizing the teleportation groups. We had twelve medallions, and each one could teleport around fifty people back to the sanctuary at a time. Apparently Virion and Elder Rinia had been working on increasing the strength of the medallions since Dicathen fell, though he had been vague about the details.

While the soldiers who would activate the medallions finished their preparations and gave directions to the elves, Kathyln returned with her brother, the two dwarves, and Albold. Tessia pulled us all slightly away from the milling groups, and I noticed Feyrith watching us closely from the nearby crowd.

With a flick of her wrist, Tessia conjured a dome of wind around us to mask our conversation before she spoke.

"Before anything else, I'd like to commend all of you. Our mission was to secure and free the prisoners being transported in this caravan, which we have done," Tessia declared before her gaze flickered back to where Feyrith stood. "But I've recently learned from one of the elves we freed that they were only part of the group held at the nearby village of Eidelholm."

Albold, Curtis, and the Earthborn brothers exchanged gazes of surprise before looking back to Tessia for answers.

"Before we left, Commander Virion insisted that we rescue as many of our people as possible, so we wouldn't be going against orders for doing this..." Tessia looked to Kathyln. "But I also understand the risks of going off script. I have a plan in mind, but I'd like to hear everyone's opinions."

Kathyln spoke up first. "We should regroup back at the sanctuary and come back with proper reinforcements."

Curtis shook his head. "By the time we do all of that, the Alacryans will have heard of this attack and be much more guarded. It might not even be possible to come back and rescue the elves at Eidelholm later."

"Aye, but a win's a win," Skarn insisted. "As Lady Tessia said, we accomplished our mission. We didn't prepare for a larger assault. Didn't bring enough dwarves, for one."

Albold was nodding. "Not that I don't want to save my own people, but Skarn is right. It's a big risk to storm a fortified town, even if our casualties were minimal in this battle."

I wanted to weigh in. I wanted to say that we should go to Eidelholm. Tessia was well on her way to breaking through into the white core, Kathyln and Curtis were both in the initial stage of silver core along with the Earthborn brothers, and even Albold, who was still a light yellow core, wouldn't slow them down.

But the words were caught in my throat. I was the weak link here and I knew it.

Tessia finally spoke, breaking the brief silence amongst our group. "We'll go to Eidelholm."

Curtis and I brightened at the words but our leader held up her hand.

"But..." she continued. "Our main objective is only to scout. What Curtis said was right. By the time we go back, prepare and make our way to Eidelholm, the Alacryans will be ready for us. This is the only open window for us—once there, we can better assess our position without exposing ourselves."

After a pause, the rest of the group began nodding in agreement.

"Good." Tessia said with a faint smile. "The rest of the soldiers will return with the freed elves, allowing us to move much more quickly without drawing attention while we gather intel."

I couldn't help the sudden sinking sensation I felt in my stomach as I realized Tessia likely wasn't including me with that group, but I stayed quiet.

The others all agreed and our group separated so the news could be shared with the rest of the soldiers.

I braced myself next to Boo as Tessia turned to me, most likely with the intention of sending me back.

"Ellie. If you're up for it, I'd like to borrow your and Boo's keen senses."

"I'm not going back. I want to come with—" I furrowed my brows. "Wait, what did you say? I can come with you?"

A smile pulled at the edges of Tessia's lips as she saw my confusion. "Only if you're willing."

Boo and I shared a determined nod before I turned back to Tessia. "Of course I'm willing!"

With that settled, we both turned our attention to the people who would be teleporting back to the sanctuary.

We were sending the rescued prisoners back in three groups. Those of us who were moving on to Eidelholm kept the other nine medallions in order to take back as many elves as possible.

There were over a dozen mages among the rescued elves, and every one of them, Feyrith included, volunteered to come to Eidelholm, but Tessia refused point blank. None of them were in good enough condition to fight.

Tessia, Curtis, Kathyln, the Earthborns, Albold, and I stood well outside the range of the medallions. Groups of elven prisoners gathered around our remaining soldiers, three of whom had medallions and had been trained to activate them.

Most of the men and women who came with us were returning. Those who didn't survive the fight had been laid among the roots of the trees so that they could rejoin the land where they had been born.

We watched solemnly as the first group activated their medallion. A translucent purple dome lit up around them, radiating from the flat disk that a tall elf held over her head. The mysterious aetheric energy hummed, a sound I could feel in the little hairs on the back of my neck.

The dome began to fracture into individual beams that fell on each person within like violet spotlights. The soldier holding the medallion spoke a word of command, and all at once, the people standing within those beams dissolved into thin air.

The next group went, taking along the freed moon oxen with them back to the sanctuary. The last group repeated this process, until only the seven of us, and our two mana beast bonds, remained.

A blanket of silence fell down on the hazy, twilight forest. A gentle wind was stirring, and for just a moment the deep blue sky was revealed. The first stars twinkled within it.

The weight of my decision to stay behind lingered, but I didn't regret it. Out here, I wasn't just Arthur's sister. Out here, I was making a difference.

Tessia stepped forward, her darkened-silver hair catching the moon's reflection. "Let's move."

302 TELLING TALES

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Reaching out, Haedrig closed Riah's sightless eyes before turning back to the rest of us gathered around Ada.

Though she appeared immobilized by whatever Regis was doing in her body, I knew this wasn't over. The glowing purple eyes were locked on Riah, and a quivering smile kept flitting across her lips as she fought for control.

'I can't hold this forever!' Regis transmitted to me.

"We need to tie her up," I said, my voice sounding raw and tired to my own ears.

Haedrig helped Kalon and Ezra to their feet while I held Ada, just in case she broke free of Regis's control. Kalon scooped her out of my arms and set her gently on the bench next to Riah's body, then began to restrain her using rope from his dimension ring.

Suddenly her head lunged forward and her teeth snapped shut, just barely missing Kalon's nose.

"Ada... I'm sorry," Kalon whispered, sorrow dripping from his voice.

After she was restrained, Regis burst from her back, landing in the fountain between the benches. The shadow wolf immediately rolled onto his back and began to splash around in the fountain, coughing in a hacking, throaty way that reminded me of a cat coughing up a hairball.

'That—was—gross! I need a bath,' he thought to me.

Thank you, Regis. It was enough for us to safely restrain her, so—

A shove from my left caught me off guard, causing me to reel back, though there wasn't enough force behind it to knock me off balance.

"If you wouldn't have knocked Kalon over, we'd have gotten to Riah in time!" Ezra, his face bright red and his eyes bulging, shouted at the top of his lungs. "She's dead because of you! I should kill you right now—"

I let him vent. Behind him, Kalon had frozen in the act of covering Riah with a spare cloak. Haedrig had stepped off to the side to give the brothers some space. I could tell by the way his hand drifted toward the hilt of his sword that he was ready to jump in if necessary, however.

'How long are you gonna sit here and let him shout at you?'

He's right to be upset, Regis.

'Maybe, that doesn't make him not a jerk.'

"—never should have brought you with us, you bastard!"

No, perhaps you shouldn't have, I thought.

Just like in the convergence zone, it appeared that my presence made things more difficult for the others. From everything I'd heard, the first zone should have been easy enough for ascenders as strong as Kalon and Haedrig.

"Do it, brother! Kill him!" Ada chimed in, her voice oozing with malice. Once she had killed Riah, any pretence of this purple-eyed creature still being Ada had slipped away, leaving behind a violent shadow of Ada's innocent excitement.

"Shut up!" Ezra roared, turning on Ada as if he would strike her. Kalon was between them in an instant, his eyes boring into Ezra's. The younger Granbehl brother was quick to submit, turning away from us all and walking to the broken mirror, staring out into nothing.

Ada's glowing eyes followed him, her lips twisted into a disappointed sneer. She then turned toward Kalon and put on an innocent smile. "Oh, big brother, please untie me? These ropes hurt..."

Having had enough, I let out a wave of aetheric intent that froze everyone in place, including the false-Ada. I took a step toward her, my eyes boring holes into her skull.

"What are you doing?" Kalon asked through gritted teeth, my intent pressing down on him like a giant fist.

"I need answers," I said matter-of-factly. "So I'm going to ask this... thing... some questions." I released the pressure and kneeled down in front of Ada. She grinned.

"Who are you?" I asked, wanting to start with the obvious.

"Ada of House Granbehl," she said confidently.

"Where is the real Ada?"

"I am the real Ada," she said without hesitation or any hint of a lie.

"How do we get her back out of the mirror?"

"You can't," she answered with a sneer.

I narrowed my eyes. Had the creature just slipped up in admitting that the real Ada was trapped in the mirror? I couldn't be sure if I was dealing with a trapped adventurer or some manifestation of the Relictombs, so I had no way to know what this phantom's purpose was.

"How do we escape this room?"

"You can't," she repeated, the sneer twisting into a vindictive grin.

"The djinn wouldn't have designed a test that couldn't be completed," I shot back in a whisper.

Taking a moment, I thought through everything I knew about the Relictombs.

Some zones we'd visited were clearly tests of our strength, requiring us to fight through powerful creatures to proceed. Others, like the millipede jungle, tested resourcefulness and adaptability, requiring less pure strength but more caution. Then there had been the platform zone, which required careful consideration instead of direct action to complete.

These "aether zones," however, seemed less distinct than those I'd seen on my first ascent. The hall of faces had presented itself as a test of our strength against the serpent monsters, but I had no doubt now that the horde would never have been defeated. What was the test, then?

It had required the use of an aetheric ability I already knew—God Step—to complete. Beyond that, it also forced me to acknowledge the limits of my power; no warrior could fight forever against an endless army of foes, no matter how strong. Instead of fighting our way to victory, retreat had been the only way to win.

What aspect of my control over aether was the mirror room intended to test then? Regis and I shared control over the Destruction rune, but I couldn't see how destruction would help us escape the zone.

I glanced at Kalon, who was watching my conversation with Ada closely. Speaking plainly about my abilities in front of the others would reveal more than I'd intended when I sought out a group for my preliminary ascent, but it might also be the only way to escape.

"Is the ability to manipulate aether required to escape this place?"

Haedrig's gaze, which had followed Ezra to the broken mirror, snapped back to me with furious intensity. He took a step forward, his mouth agape, and I met his eye. There was something strangely familiar about his expression; it reminded me of someone else, but I couldn't quite place it in the moment.

I realized Ada had spoken, but I was so focused on Haedrig that I missed the answer.

"What?"

"No." Though Ada said the word with a mean-spirited confidence, I heard it as the lie it was. I couldn't believe that this zone was not a test of some aspect of aether.

"Do I have to use the rune of destruction to escape this place?" Kalon gave me a confused, disbelieving look. Haedrig seemed surprised, but did a better job covering his expression this time.

Ada grinned. "Yes."

Regis huffed in my head. 'But that doesn't make sense. If the solution requires you to use destruction, then it requires you to use aether, right? This thing is just running you in circles, bud.'

I grinned back at Ada, meeting her glowing purple eyes knowingly. I thought I understood what was happening, but I needed to make sure with a few pointed questions.

"Who is that?" I asked, pointing at Ezra.

Ada rolled her eyes. "Why are you asking me such a stupid question?"

Pointing again, I asked, "What is his name?"

She glared at me. "I don't know."

Ezra had turned away from the broken mirror to watch. He seemed about to interrupt, but I motioned for silence.

"Did you kill Riah?"

"No."

"Do you know who Riah is?"

She glanced hungrily at the cloak covering Riah's corpse. "No."

Shaking my head, I asked the simplest question I could think of. "Does one plus one equal two?"

"No!" Ada hissed, her face twisted into a hideous scowl.

Haedrig was the first to catch on. "Everything the creature says is a lie!"

I nodded, smiling faintly at Kalon. "See? She said that Ada couldn't be reclaimed from the mirror, but everything that she says is a lie, even if the answer is obvious. Working backwards, we can use the lies to build a picture of the truth."

Far from looking happy about this revelation, Kalon was staring at me as if I were a mad drunk shouting wild tales on the street corner.

It was Ezra, however, who spoke up first. "Who the hell are you? What are all these questions about aether and destruction and stuff?"

"You're no first-time ascender from some rural blood, are you?" Kalon asked, his gaze hardening as suspicion crept through him. "Ezra was right. You're the reason that first zone was so hard, and you're the reason we didn't go to a sanctuary room."

There was no longer any point in hiding my abilities, so when Ezra's crimson spear appeared in his hand, glowing balefully, Regis manifested from my body and pounced on top of him, dragging him to the ground.

"What are you doing!" Kalon's hand shot out toward me, but I grabbed his arm, standing firm.

Enveloping my body in aether, I squeezed down on the armored ascender's wrist. His expression contorted in pain as he tried to pry free from my grasp.

"I feel responsible for what happened to your sister, which is why I've done nothing as your little brother continued to insult and hound me," I said with an icy stare, keeping my grip on him firm. "But I hope you don't mistake my inaction as fear." After a pause I let out a sigh, softening my voice, "I have a sister as well, and I know what I'd do—what I have done—to keep her safe."

Regis's deep growl vibrated through the room like the low rumble of distant thunder as his shadowy maw drew closer to Ezra's throat.

"Enough," I warned my companion, who withdrew back into my form.

Ezra scrambled back onto his feet, trying to put some distance between us, and I loosened my grip around his older brother's wrist.

"If what you said earlier is true, you should know that I'm your best bet at saving Ada and getting us out of here" I said, turning to Kalon.

Kalon winced, rubbing his wrist. "I won't pretend to understand what's going on, and I won't promise you that we aren't going to settle things when we get out of the Relictombs, but I'm not stupid. Just save our sister, and get us the hell out of here, alright?"

"Brother!" Ezra burst out.

"Knock it off." Kalon's voice was tired, but commanding. Ezra ground his teeth but said no more.

Sensing an opportune moment, Haedrig coughed and said, "Perhaps you two could go find the mirror copies of Grey and yourselves? And Riah, if there is one."

"And what are we supposed to do if we find them?" Ezra asked, glaring down at his nose at Haedrig.

"Destroy them," I said. "Just like Haedrig did. Don't touch them with any part of your body. Weapons only."

Kalon nodded and led Ezra off into the shadowy depths of the hall, his hand on his younger brother's shoulder. This didn't stop Ezra from turning to shoot me an icy look before he was hidden within the gloom.

Haedrig was silent as I set to questioning the false-Ada. Now that I understood the parameters of the phantom's answers, I was able to target my questions to gain insight into the mirror room and its rules.

Any ascender who entered this place would find a mirror with their own image, just as we had. Should the ascender touch his or her own mirror, a conduit would be created that would draw the ascender's life energy into the mirror while releasing a mirror entity—I decided to call them phantoms—to live within the ascender's body.

It was more difficult to discover how to reverse the process, but eventually I asked the right questions.

Like the hall of faces, the mirror room required knowledge of a specific edict of aether. It was difficult to determine exactly what this ability would do, or which branch of aether it was a part of, but what I could discern was that it would allow me to reverse the effects of the mirror, freeing Ada and trapping the phantom back within the relic.

The problem was, of course, that I didn't know any such ability.

'You have to know something, though,' Regis argued. 'This place can't have brought us here by mistake.'

Why not? I asked bitterly. I was sitting on the ground several feet from the fountain, having left Haedrig to guard over Ada while I thought. The Relictombs are old. It's been under constant assault by Agrona and the Alacryans for who knows how long. It's failing.

'I guess that would explain how all these other ascenders got here. Damn. What do we do then?'

The other ascenders...

Foolishly, it hadn't even occurred to me to wonder about their presence. Theoretically, every one of the ascenders trapped within the mirrors around us should have been an aether user to be brought to this place.

If they weren't, it was true that we might be trapped. If they were, though...

Thinking of the imprisoned ascender who had previously tried to get me to communicate with him by touching his mirror, I jumped up and began searching the reflections. He had been near the fountain, and I found him in moments.

Kalon and Ezra had been able to hear Ada by touching her mirror, and they hadn't been hurt. *Shouldn't I be able to do the same with this imprisoned ascender, then?* I thought. Hoping I was right, I pressed my hand to the mirror, watching as his tired, lined face lit up as I did so.

"Hello?" I asked. "Can you hear me?"

'Yes, yes!'

His voice rang in my mind, much the way Regis's did, or Sylvie's before him. His voice was all grit and gravel, as if it hadn't been used in decades.

'Oh, thank you, thank you. I can't tell you how nice it is to talk to someone—anyone!'

"I can't imagine," I said honestly. The thought of being trapped within this glass prison, watching ascender after ascender walk by without realizing you could see them, knowing they would likely share your fate soon... it was too awful to consider. "I'm sorry for ignoring you earlier. I didn't know what would happen if I touched the mirror. Can I ask you some questions?"

'Of course! My knowledge is the only thing I have left. Though'—the reflection shuffled self-consciously—'I would ask for something in return.'

I nodded, my hand still pressed against the cool surface of the mirror. "If your request is something I can do, I'll do it. Go on."

'I ask only that—should you find a way—that you release me from this prison.'

"I'll do what I can. Now, when you were—before you became trapped, did you know anything about aether?"

The reflection sighed and shook his head. 'No, I had a couple of mediocre crests for ice spells. I was never a particularly good ascender, if I'm being honest. No wonder I got trapped in here, I suppose.'

Though his answer was disheartening, I forged on with my questions.

"Were you ever able to do anything that was... a little bit different? Powers that didn't line up with your marks?"

The man looked thoughtful for a moment, then smiled and pulled a thin dagger from his belt.

'This is an old family heirloom. When it was given to me, it looked more like a rusty nail than a blade. I took it with me on my preliminary ascent, you know, for good luck.' He tossed the dagger into the air and caught it with a flourish. 'Well, I was talking to this girl—one of my teammates, real pretty—and I pulled it out to show her, and, well, a sort of vibration ran down my arm and all the rust fell off the blade, and it was shining and new as the day it was forged.'

"How?" I asked, though I already had an idea of the answer.

'Not a clue. I just figured it was something to do with the Relictombs, honestly. Anyway, it all worked out, because that pretty girl married me and... 'The reflection trailed off, his gaze traveling from the dagger to a thick ring on one finger of his left hand.

"Thank you. That's helpful, honestly. I'll find a way to release you, I promise." As I walked away from the mirror, leaving the ascender's spirit to ponder the life he'd left behind, I hoped that my promise had been true.

I repeated this exercise with a couple of the other saner ascenders with similar results. Though none had been aware of possessing any aetheric abilities, they each had similar stories in which strange and unexplained things happened around them, just like the first ascender and his knife.

Knowing that those trapped here had shown at least a potential for using aether gave me hope.

'So what do you know... that you don't know that you know?' Regis asked without a hint of his usual glibness.

I don't know, I thought, sitting on the hard floor while watching the others.

Kalon and Ezra had returned, having found and destroyed a mirror containing each of our images. A part of me had hoped that destroying the mirrors would release us, but then, there was still Ada's mirror to deal with.

While Kalon had gone to sit with Ada, keeping watch over her, Ezra had taken to listening to the ascenders in the mirrors. I watched him for a while, wondering what the trapped men and women around us were telling him. Ezra avoided the saner reflections, preferring to listen to the wildest and lost. He never said anything to them, apparently content just to share their pain and their rage.

"Ezra," I said, getting his attention, "you shouldn't be listening to them. They don't have anything to give you besides anger and hate."

When the boy ignored me, I only shook my head and turned away.

Haedrig was lying on the bench opposite Riah's body, his green hair pulled over his face, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. His reaction to my question earlier about aether was bothering me, but I'd been too occupied to give it much thought. I was confident that if the green-haired ascender had some key piece of knowledge that would help us escape, he would have divulged it by now.

A key piece of knowledge...

My mind thundered in realization as I shot up to my feet. "The keystone!"

303 MISSING PIECES

It was with a pang of regret that I sat down with the stone cube I'd received from the djinn projection during my first adventure in the Relictombs. After my early attempts at understanding the relic back in Maerin, I had spent very little time studying the geometric shapes within.

Still, my previous interaction with the keystone must have done something; the Relictombs had sensed that I had some knowledge of this edict of aether, whatever it was, and drawn us into this zone to test me. Or perhaps it sensed the cube itself, tucked away in my extradimensional storage rune, and that alone was enough to bring us here.

For being a peaceful people, the djinn seemed to have a very dark methodology in how they trained and protected their aetheric arts.

Settling myself cross legged on the floor with the cube in my lap, trusting in Regis and Haedrig to watch over me while I worked, I began.

As before, I imbued aether into the relic, and its aether reached back out to me. My vision faded into a wall of purple, and I pushed through it, finding myself once again surrounded by the countless floating and spinning geometric shapes.

Using aether, I was able to manipulate the shapes, moving and sorting them to try and make sense of their meaning. I felt like an infant playing with alphabet blocks. There was no rhyme or reason to the geometric forms, and although I could interact with them, I didn't have any foundation for understanding, no idea what I was supposed to be doing.

Still, I had to believe the djinn wouldn't have given me this relic if there was no way for me to solve it. I started by collecting similarly shaped symbols and organizing them into groups. Next, since they were geometric and not rune based, I looked for ways in which they fit together, treating it like an abstract puzzle.

This seemed easy at first, as there were enough shapes that I was always able to find a piece to fit. Once I had a couple dozen pieces locked together, however, I realized the problem. Before me, a sprawling, multi-directional fractal had taken shape, but I had run out of pieces that would connect to the shape I had created.

With no other choice, I broke the puzzle down and began again.

All the while, I felt my aether being drawn from me and consumed by the cube. Its sucking force wasn't as bad in the Relictombs as it had been when I'd studied the keystone in Maerin, allowing me to stay in longer, but it still put a limit on the amount of time I could spend working on the relic in a single sitting.

I organized my pieces again, then began building the puzzle for the second time, keeping in mind which pieces I had used during my first attempt. This time, however, I found myself at a dead end even sooner, but I was too tired to restart again.

My eyes snapped open, and it took a moment for my mind to make sense of the mirror room with its constant movement and small army of reflected figures.

Regis was curled up in front of me, one eye open and tracking the others closely. Ezra and Haedrig appeared to be asleep, while Kalon watched over Ada. Her mouth had been covered to muffle the constant stream of vitriol and lies.

"How long was I out?" I asked, startling Kalon, who practically jumped up to his feet.

He cleared his throat and sat back down. "Several hours, at least. Did you do... whatever you were trying to do?"

"I made some progress," I replied elusively. I had a feeling he wouldn't like to hear that I didn't have a clue what I was doing.

From his bench on the other side of the fountain, Ezra said, "It's been hours, and all you can say is you've made 'some progress'?"

The young ascender stood up, glared at me, and turned away, stomping off into the gloom.

"I'd already spent hours studying the... device before we got here," I said, speaking to Kalon. "I don't know how long it's going to take, but I'm doing what I can."

His expression stoic, Kalon asked, "Are you sure there isn't anything we can do to help?"

"Just don't let your brother stab me while I'm in there," I said, raising an eyebrow.

Kalon laughed, causing the restrained and gagged Ada to snarl at him and twist within her bindings as if the sound pained her. Kalon gazed at her sadly for a moment before turning back to me. "Do what you need to do, Grey."

I felt like a well-wrung sponge; nearly every drop of my aether had been expended. I didn't need much sleep, but I did need time to replenish my aether core.

Standing, I ran through a series of martial movements Kordri had taught me back in Epheotus to help me get the stiffness out of my limbs. After several minutes of the routine, I sat back down beside Regis and began the process of absorbing ambient aether.

I felt my companion shifting nearby before I heard his voice in my head.

'What's it look like in there?'

I'm not sure how to describe it, honestly. I thought about the disparate shapes, the patterns I had designed, the walls of aetheric energy caging it all... *What does it feel like when you go inside my body?*

'It's sort of like swimming.'

I opened my eyes, breaking my meditation, and stared at Regis. The shadow wolf shrugged his shoulders.

'You asked.'

Closing my eyes, I focused on the aether around me, on drawing it through my aether channels and into my core. *Inside of that relic, it's pure knowledge. I feel like I'm trying to understand the contents of a complicated book by burning it and breathing in the smoke.*

'Any idea how much knowledge you need to inhale to get us out of here?'

More, I thought. A lot more.

The third attempt to put the puzzle pieces together wasn't exactly a charm, but I did reach an unexpected moment of understanding. Without consciously making a decision to do so, I stopped trying to use all the pieces and instead just built a large cube.

The shape was relatively straightforward, fitting together naturally in my mind. Once I'd decided what to build, it almost seemed as if the pieces presented themselves to me when they were needed.

When the cube was complete, it began to glow and shimmer like oil on water, then the lines of the individual pieces faded away until a solid, shimmering box floated in front of me. The oil-slick ripples settled and fell still, and each of the cube's six faces lit up like an electronic screen from my previous life, showing me the hall of mirrors.

Regis was still at his place by my side. Kalon now slept while Ezra watched over his sister. Haedrig, I was surprised to see, had his hand against one of the mirrors, apparently deep in conversation with its inhabitant. Nothing they said was audible, however. In fact, no sound came from the cube at all.

I was at a loss. Though I'd clearly made some kind of breakthrough, I didn't understand how this window to the outside world helped me, or what it revealed about the edict of aether I was attempting to master.

Leaving the cube for the moment, I began building a second, smaller box with the remaining pieces. What I ended up with, however, looked more like a sharp-edged lump of dough than a true cube, as I lacked the pieces to make it perfect.

It took three more attempts, building the shape smaller each time, to create a second perfect box. I waited, but nothing happened—no lights, no coalescence of energy, no visions of the outside world.

That's when I had my second moment of understanding.

What if the cube—or, theoretically, any shape—represented the subconscious knowledge of some aspect of the edict of aether I was trying to learn? If I assumed that the act of this puzzle-building was metaphorical for studying the edict itself, then studying the same thought—represented by the shape I built—would not move me further toward understanding the whole.

With this in mind, I deconstructed the smaller square, but by then my aether core was near empty.

When I opened my eyes, I found things just as I had seen them projected by the screens.

"H-Haedrig," I said, finding my voice croaky from misuse.

The ascender's hand pulled away from the mirror whose inhabitant he had been speaking with and he quickly walked toward me.

I took a long drink from the skin of water that rested at my side, dribbling some down my chin.

"Careful with that," Haedrig said. "We may all regret not packing as many supplies as you before we escape this place."

"How long?"

"I'd say maybe twelve... fifteen hours since you went in." Haedrig was watching me carefully, almost nervously.

'Actually, it's been thirteen hours and forty-eight minutes. Not that I'm counting or anything.'

"Wow. I'm lasting longer at least."

"And we're about out of food!" Ezra cut in, looking at me incredulously. "Are you hoping to just stay in there until the rest of us starve to death?"

"You should be rationing your supplies," I snapped, but before Ezra could respond I drew my food bundle from the extra dimensional storage rune on my forearm and tossed it to him. "I can get by for a few days." Glancing at Haedrig, I added, "Make sure that gets split up—and rationed this time."

Ezra tossed the bundle onto the bench next to him and sat back down. "Thanks, hero."

Haedrig took a seat next to me and drank from his own flask. When I stayed silent, he turned to me and raised a brow. "How are you doing?"

I shook my head. "I made some progress, but no epiphany yet."

"That's not what I meant." Haedrig took another drink, then abruptly stopped himself before storing his flask in his dimension ring. "Look at me, not heeding my own advice."

We sat in silence for a moment as I began replenishing my aether.

Haedrig cleared his throat. "So, aether..."

I sighed. Though I was loath to discuss it, I was also surprised it had taken so long for one of them to bring it up after I mentioned aether to the false Ada. The best way to lie, I had decided, was to tell as much of the truth as possible.

Speaking quietly so Ezra wouldn't overhear, I said, "This isn't my first trip into the Relictombs, though you couldn't call my previous visit an ascent, really."

Haedrig seemed entirely unsurprised by this revelation, giving me a deadpan look. "Thank you for finally stating the obvious."

"I woke up in a sanctuary room, half-dead, with no memory of how I'd got there. The first room I came to was full of these awful, zombified chimera things, and they almost killed me, but while I was fighting them I realized I could use a new kind of magic. Aether."

Haedrig gestured toward Regis. "The wolf?"

"Yeah, he was the first manifestation. Then I learned that... teleportation trick I used to get us out of the last zone." When Haedrig only nodded, I turned to meet his eye. "You seem surprisingly relaxed about all this."

"I knew there was something different about you," he answered with a shrug. "I could sense it. To be honest, it's why I wanted to join you on your ascent. To see what would happen around you."

I thought back to Alaric's description of the Relictombs, and how it changed based on who was within it. Some ascenders, he had told me, would take every ascent with a new group, hoping to discover new and unexplored reaches of the ancient mages' creation.

"And the djinn?"

"It's what the ancient mages called themselves," I answered truthfully. They were gone, thanks to the Indrath Clan, and I couldn't see any harm in sharing the name now. "I found a... spirit, or manifestation, or something... it's what gave me the relic."

Haedrig shook his head and gave me a look of purest amazement. "You've discovered more about the Relictombs in two ascents than I have in twenty. You lucky wigeon." His eyes fell to the relic in my lap. "Still, risky to have held onto that. The Vritra—Sovereigns would skin you alive if they knew you'd discovered a relic and not handed it over the second you were out of the Relictombs."

"Fortunately for me," I said, thinking about the imbecilic guards who met me at the exit portal in Maerin, "I came out in a little backwater town. They were as surprised to see me there as I was to be there."

"Lucky wigeon," he said again, shaking his head.

"How are things out here?" I asked after a short pause. It felt good to just... talk, and I realized I didn't want our conversation to end so soon.

"Tense and sullen," Haedrig answered matter-of-factly. "The boy's near to boiling over. He's eaten through his rations and half of what we pulled out of Riah's dimension ring. Subjecting himself to the anger and fear from the reflections isn't helping, but he didn't stop even when his brother commanded him to."

"They're practically manifestations of his own inner turmoil," I said, thinking about my life as Grey after Headmaster Wilbeck was murdered. I had fanned the flames of my rage in any way I could. "I guess it's cathartic for him."

Haedrig only grunted, and we lapsed into silence.

Casting about for a topic of conversation, I suddenly remembered Haedrig's reaction when I had asked the false Ada about aether earlier.

"Back on the topic of aether," I started, somewhat unsure how to ask what I wanted to know. "Earlier, when I mentioned it... well... you seemed surprised."

Haedrig met my eye then looked down at the ground, letting his green hair fall over his face. "You're observant, Grey. You've—you've shown a lot of trust in me. If the wrong person found out how you'd come to that relic, you could be executed."

There was no hint of a threat in Haedrig's words. Instead, he sounded genuinely grateful for the trust I'd shown him; I'd told the others only that it was a device for housing knowledge, and hoped that would be enough to satisfy their curiosity for the time being.

"I've studied aether a bit," he continued, "but that's not something I can talk about often. It's not a... polite topic of conversation in most circles, and my family doesn't approve. In fact," he added with a bitter laugh, "my family doesn't really approve of anything I do. They expect me to sit at home like a good little—"

Haedrig cut himself off and shot me an embarrassed glance. "Sorry, family is a bit of a sore subject for me."

"I can empathize," I said with a sad smile. "No matter how hard we try, we can't be perfect sons."

"No, we cannot," Haedrig replied, somewhat bitterly. "Perhaps my birth parents would have thought differently, but I wasn't raised by my own blood. The house that brought me up—well—they do not appreciate my aspirations as an ascender."

"But ascenders are so highly regarded in"—I stopped myself from saying "Alacrya," instead fumbling for a moment before finishing—"in most families."

"Oh, don't get me wrong; my adopted blood is very eager to establish renown as both soldiers in the war against Dicathen and as ascenders, whether through blood or patronage. But I wasn't meant for this life... at least, not according to them."

Before I could say more, Haedrig stood and straightened his armor. "I'm sorry, Grey, but I think I'd like some time alone with my thoughts. I'll leave you to your meditation." After a moment's pause, he added, "Thank you for listening," then walked away.

'I didn't think it was even possible, but that guy seems to have as many secrets as you,' Regis said with a chortle. The shadow wolf was curled up between me and Ezra, his eyes closed, though clearly he had been paying close attention.

You think he's another Dicathian stranded in Alacrya and hiding his identity to avoid being hunted down by the Vritra? I grinned and pushed at Regis's backside with my boot.

'No, you fool, but he's definitely not telling us everything.'

You may be right. Still, I can't help but trust him. I hadn't realized it until that moment, but it was true. Despite myself, despite our short acquaintance, I trusted Haedrig to watch my back. I couldn't say the same from the Granbehl brothers.

'Whatever. Trust away, but if he does anything weird I'll still bite his arm off.'

Smiling and shaking my head, I went back to my mediation, preparing myself for yet another attempt at the keystone.

When I pushed through the purple wall surrounding the field of geometric shapes, I found the cuboid screen still intact. Within it, I watched Haedrig walk down the shadowy hall, his eyes down, his expression thoughtful.

My perspective shifted, focusing instead on Ezra as he stood up and walked toward me. Regis immediately abandoned his pretense of being asleep, lifting his head and gazing at Ezra. The young ascender stopped, met the shadow wolf's eyes for several seconds, then turned to walk away, though he stayed close enough to keep an eye on Ada.

I forced my consciousness away from the screen, focusing instead on the remaining shapes. I already knew that creating another cube served no purpose, so I began building the first thing that came to mind: a pyramid.

It was more difficult than the cube. The pieces didn't seem to fit together correctly. They didn't jump out at me like they had before, guiding me, and so I found myself dismantling and rebuilding the shape again and again. By the time my aether core was empty, I still hadn't discovered the right pieces to complete a satisfactory pyramid.

Still, once my mind was set on it, I felt compelled to see it through. I knew instinctively there had to be a way to combine the shapes and figures into the image in my mind, and the next time I entered the keystone, I tried again.

But it wasn't until my third day—my trips into the keystone were lasting nearly sixteen hours by this point, with the remaining time dedicated to replenishing my aether and getting a little sleep—that I succeeded in forging a perfect tetrahedral pyramid.

As before, the pieces shimmered and formed a solid shape, and when the glow receded, each of the pyramid's faces showed an image, just like the cube. Each image was of the mirror room, but there was something very wrong with what I was seeing.

In the first picture, I could see myself sitting cross-legged on the floor with the keystone in my lap, Regis sitting in front of me, and Kalon watching over Ada. The strangest sense of déjà vu washed over me, and I realized that this had been the moment I had first seen in the cuboid display when I had completed it.

What in the world?

In the second image, the mirror room was empty except for the dozens of imprisoned ascenders. Then an opalescent portal appeared hanging in mid air, and I stepped out.

Despite being in a room full of mirrors for the last few days, I hadn't spent much time looking at myself since my body had been rebuilt. It was strange to think that the man in the image flinching and preparing to defend himself was me.

My pale wheat hair whipped around when I turned toward the reflections moving in the mirror, thinking I was going to get attacked. My golden eyes narrowed as I glared around the room, then widened in surprise at what they saw.

"Who—who are they?" I heard myself ask.

Then Kalon and Ezra appeared, bumping into me. "What the hell?"

I was seeing the past, I realized, as if it had been captured by a recording artifact. The cuboid shape showed me the present. In the faces of the pyramid, I could watch the past play back like a home video.

Using aether, I spun the pyramid around to better see the third and fourth sides. The mirror rooms shown by those facets were empty of people, but when I looked closely I realized more of the mirrors were empty in these visions.

They must be older than the others, I thought, which made sense when I considered the two different sides showing me and my party.

If the first shape shows the present, and the second shape shows the past...

My heart beat rapidly as I considered the third shape. Was it possible?

My attention was drawn back to the cube. Haedrig sat next to Regis, his fingers running through the shadow wolf's thick mane. Regis's eyes were closed, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth—the very picture of a satisfied pet enjoying a good scratch.

Traitor, I thought, smiling.

Behind them Kalon was sitting with Ada, his head in his hands, and Ezra was standing before one of the mirrors, his hand pressed against it.

I let out a sigh. *Fool*. The boy was only torturing himself by interacting with those spirits. They had nothing to share but their madness and hatred. Listening to them would only drive him to darkness and despair.

Turning back to the images visible on the sides of the pyramid, I watched as our time in the mirror room played out again. I found it difficult to turn away, watching for the second time as Ada was taken by the phantom.

The false Ada skittered across the room unseen, distracted as we all were, and crawled up on top of Riah. Riah seemed unconscious, but she still flinched away when Ada leaned down, then pressed her lips against Riah's.

Riah convulsed, one sharp, unnatural jerk, then fell still, pale as a ghost.

The phantom had somehow drawn the life-force directly out of Riah, killing her instantly. I had assumed it was some kind of aetheric being, like most of the monsters in the Relictombs, but I hadn't seen anything as powerful or deadly as this.

In front of me, the false Ada, now restrained, snapped forward, almost biting Kalon. *No, not biting—almost kissing Kalon*. We'd had no idea how close to death he had been in that moment.

I shook away the thoughts spiraling in my mind. Reliving these past moments was a trap, like living life in a circle.

I needed to start building the next shape... and I knew exactly what it needed to be.

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If the pyramid was difficult to piece together, the last shape proved nearly impossible. It wasn't as simple as a flat circle, of course, but it had been thinking of life as a circle that had led me to the shape I was now trying to construct.

During my life as King Grey, I had studied a wide variety of subjects, including symbology. The "regular polyhedra" were an oft discussed topic in such studies, as the ancient philosophers of my previous world had spent a lot of time discussing their existence and meaning.

Which is why I found myself trying over and over to build a perfect regular dodecahedron from hundreds of irregular puzzle pieces. The dodecahedron represented a fifth element, the binding that held the universe together, and it was considered the mediation between finite and infinite.

I couldn't think of any better geometric symbol to represent the future.

It was just too bad that I also couldn't figure out how to make the damn thing.

I'd lost track of how long we'd been in the mirror room. Our meager rations had run out days ago, even though I hardly ate any of my own and the others rationed carefully. If it wasn't for the water I'd brought, Kalon, Ezra, and Haedrig would have been out of that too, since drinking the salty fountain water would've caused them to die of dehydration even faster.

On the bright side, the phantom in Ada's body seemed to sustain itself, requiring no food or water. Though I worried about the condition of her body when we found a way to return her to it, for now she seemed to be holding up fine.

My eyes fluttered open as I left the realm within the keystone after yet another fruitless attempt to solve the spherical puzzle. I was met with the sound of shouting.

- "—just wait around anymore! We have to try it. For all we know, Grey is just waiting for us to die! After all, that freak doesn't need food or water like we do—"
- "—have no idea what will happen if you do what he's asking—"
- "—least we'd be doing something, rather than just sitting around waiting to die—"
- "—a trap, making things even worse!"

Kalon and Ezra were standing nearly chest to chest, yelling into each other's faces. Ezra looked somehow diminished. He had lost a few pounds from lack of food, but there was something else. He had shrunk in on himself, losing his bravado as he withered away into someone weak and scared.

Haedrig was lying on one of the benches, apparently doing his best to stay out of the family conflict.

I sighed and got up.

Regis, noticing my movement, said, 'They've been going at it like this for about ten minutes. The kid's been talking to one of the reflections and thinks it can help us out of here.'

What the hell does he think I'm trying to do?

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the siblings' argument. "Both of you, take a step back and let's talk about this."

Ezra looked at me with purest loathing, practically spitting the words, "Oh, fuck you!"

I repressed the growing desire to cuff him like that brat he was, but held back. I knew it would just make things worse.

"I'll handle this," Kalon said, his tone uncharacteristically brusque.

I raised my hands in a gesture of peace. "I'd like to hear what Ezra has to say."

Ezra looked at me warily, clearly not sure whether to believe me or not. His eagerness for action won out, however, and he shouldered past his brother and walked toward one of the mirrors, his heavy boots *thunking* dully on the stone floor.

"Here," he said, gesturing for me to look at the mirror, which contained the ascender with the tall onyx horns on his helmet. The man stood straight with his arms crossed, just as he had when we entered. "This is Mythelias, once an ascender. He knows how to escape this place."

I inspected the reflection again, taking in the little details. He was about my height, though thinner, and he held himself like a soldier. His skin was incredibly pale, making his coal-black eyes stand out like empty voids in his sharp face. A single lock of grey hair had escaped his helmet, hanging down the side of his cheek.

The black leather-and-plate armor looked light and flexible—the armor of a skirmisher. It seemed likely that it was magical; the shining jet runes inlaid in the steel plates weren't just decorative. The helm was particularly impressive. The long onyx horns extended over two feet from the top of the helmet, making him look even taller and thinner than he already was.

My eyes caught on something. A small detail, just the curved edge that outlined the horns. It wasn't a joint, fastening the horn to the helm; it was a hole, allowing the horns to pass *through* the helm.

The man was a Vritra, or at least of Vritra blood.

"What exactly is Mythelias's plan?" I asked, not immediately pointing out my discovery to the others. It probably wouldn't mean the same thing to them, anyway.

Something in my tone must have given away my incredulity about whatever this plan was, because Ezra gave me another wary look again before continuing. "He says he knows how to use aether, and he also knows how he can escape the mirror. He's seen it done."

The young ascender hesitated, so I pressed him to go on.

"He—he said that the spirits from the mirror can inhabit bodies. Dead bodies." Ezra glanced down the hall, to where Riah's remains now lay. We'd been forced to relocate her away from the bench after the first few days due to the smell.

Kalon, who had been standing behind Ezra listening and looking thunderous, said, "There is no way in hell we're giving Riah's body to this liar."

"And how," I said loudly, cutting their argument off before it could begin again, "does getting this ascender out of his mirror help us leave the zone?"

Glaring at his brother like he wanted nothing more than to stab him, Ezra said, "He knows how to use aether. He can't tell me how to escape, but he can show us if we set him free."

"He's lying, of course," Haedrig said suddenly, not bothering to get up from his bench. "I've spoken to some of the trapped souls here as well, and they've promised me all kinds of things if only I'd help them escape."

Ezra turned on him, snarling like a cornered woadcat. "He's Vritra-blooded! One of the Sovereigns' own. Who the hell are you to question his honor?"

Haedrig rolled his eyes, but Kalon started, now looking unsure. His gaze drifted to the mirror, taking in the horns, the man's features, then shaking his head. "We can't be sure, brother."

Ezra looked his brother in the eye and spit at his feet before shouldering past him. "I don't care what any of you say, I'm doing this."

Kalon snapped. The elder Granbehl sibling grabbed his brother from behind, pulling him into a choke hold and then slamming him to the ground. The false Ada cackled through her gag, her eyes wide and ecstatic as she watched the scuffle.

Suddenly Ezra's crimson spear was in his hand, but he didn't have any room to use it, and Haedrig was quick to roll off the bench and kick the weapon out of his hand. It spun away into the shadows with a clatter.

"Get off me you coward!" Ezra roared, slamming his elbows backwards into his brother's stomach.

Ada was flailing so wildly that the gag slipped from her mouth and she began shouting, egging the brothers on. "Knife him! Kill him! Kill him!"

With a heavy sigh, I stepped forward to replace the gag. Regis stood at attention behind me, practically quivering with eagerness to get involved.

Deal with this, I instructed him.

My companion leapt forward and his jaws were at Ezra's throat in an instant. The boy quit struggling, and both Ezra and Kalon lay on the ground panting.

I let the moment linger, wanting Regis's fangs to leave an impression on the boy.

We had passed a point of no return. Now that our internal strife had devolved into violence, trust was broken. I couldn't simply let Ezra stand up and go back about his business, but I didn't like to consider the alternative.

Making a decision, I mentally ordered Regis to let him go and gestured for Kalon to disentangle himself from his brother. Ezra stayed where he was, staring up at me wild-eyed and red-faced.

Kneeling down next to him, I spoke in a low, cold voice, injecting it with as much self-assuredness and authority as I could: "I understand how you feel right now. You may not believe me, but I do. However, I can't accept your aggressive actions or your insubordinate attitude.

"Listen carefully, because I'm only saying this once. From this point forward, if you don't follow orders, if you attack me or anyone else in this group, if you try to pursue this senseless plan of yours against my wishes, I will kill you. I will—without hesitation—throw you into the void."

I met Kalon's eyes, and I could see the tumult of emotions warring within them: protectiveness over his brother, anger at Ezra's behavior, and his own fierce grip on what little remaining hope he felt.

"And if your brother tries to stop me, I'll throw him in too. Understood?"

The Granbehls stared at me, fearful and angry, but I could tell they believed me. Kalon nodded, then nudged his brother in the shoulder with the toe of his boot.

Ezra scoffed. "Understood."

I walked off without another word. Regis started to follow me, but I stopped him.

Stay with Ezra. Watch him and don't hesitate to take him down if he tries anything.

'Aye aye, captain,' Regis said, eager to have a task to commit himself to after long days of boredom watching me sit with the keystone.

Five minutes later, I was deep in the gloom, far down the hallway from the fountain. It was strange. No matter how far I walked down that hall, I always seemed to be only a few steps away from the fountain. It was like the aether trap that protected the djinn's underground city back in Dicathen, where—hopefully—my family was still sheltered.

All my life—my second life, that is—I'd been surrounded by artifacts of the djinn: Xyrus, the castle, the teleportation network... upon my reincarnation, I had accepted it all as normal, never thought to question the ancient mages' accomplishments nor made any effort to learn more about them.

Was that what was holding me back now? The ways in which the djinn passed down their knowledge were much more complex than textbooks and tutors. Even when threatened with extermination, they had not been able to teach the Indrath Clan their secrets, because the dragons weren't capable of learning the way the djinn did.

I had exhausted the capabilities of my current method. It was hard to admit but, without a fresh perspective, I wouldn't be able to learn what the keystone was trying to teach me.

Putting into practice a skill I'd learned as King Grey, I began to categorize everything I knew about the djinn and aether. I thought through every lesson from Lady Myre, Sylvie, and Elder Rinia. I relived my battles with the retainers and Scythes, as well as the aether beasts within the Relictombs. I let Sylvia's message replay in my mind and recalled the words of the djinn projection.

The problem was, I just didn't know enough about relics or how the djinn had used them. Though I'd learned a lot since waking up in the Relictombs, my exposure to relics themselves was entirely limited to my time spent in the keystone, and I had the dead relic sitting half-forgotten in my storage rune.

I withdrew the dead relic I'd won in Maerin and began inspecting the dark, unimpressive stone, but only a moment later my attention was drawn to the sound of footsteps echoing along the hall, moving toward me.

I looked up to see Haedrig approaching, both his steady gait and poise expressing a refined sense of grace. Remembering how valuable even a dead relic was for Alacryans, I quickly hid the lumpy stone away.

"I didn't think you'd be the type of person to carry around a dead relic," the green-haired ascender said as he raised a brow, a hint of judgment in his voice. "Is that a blood heirloom or something you use to charm materialistic nobles?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes. This is what I use to seduce all of the attractive women I come across."

"Assuming that your physical appearance isn't enough?" he added with a soft chuckle.

"Are you complimenting me or judging me? I can't quite tell," I said, unsure whether I was amused or annoyed by his interruption.

Haedrig took a seat a few feet away from me, appearing uninterested in the supposedly rare and expensive ancient artifact that I held in my hand.

"I'll admit that, objectively, your facial features can draw some attention. But I wouldn't necessarily call it a good thing," he noted before clearing his throat. "Anyway, things turned rather tense earlier."

I rubbed the back of my neck, looking away from Haedrig. "I—"

"You were right, though. I think you handled it well." Haedrig reached out, hesitated, then patted my shoulder. "Anyway, it seems that I'm interrupting. My apologies."

I shook my head. "It's okay. I needed the distraction."

"Ezra would probably disagree," Haedrig responded as he got back up to his feet, the corner of his lips curving into a smile. "Good luck, Grey."

Letting out a chuckle, I focused my attention back on the dead relic in my hand. Except for the purple haze of aether surrounding it, the stone was bland and uninteresting. It was the type of rock a child might thoughtlessly kick out of the road.

I pushed aether into the dead relic, the same way I interacted with the keystone, but nothing happened. Next I tried to draw the aether out of it, but stopped immediately. I could tell there was very little aether still contained within the dead relic, and I didn't want to blindly destroy it for such a paltry amount of aetheric energy.

Letting out a sigh, I took a glance at Haedrig, who was seated back on the bench beside the fountain in a meditative state.

With a flick of my wrist, I tossed the relic into the air, watched it arc up until it nearly touched the low ceiling, then snatched it out of the air as it came back down.

With no more straws to grasp at, I slipped the relic into my pocket, closed my eyes, and began replenishing my aether yet again.

As I pushed through the purple wall into the realm within the keystone once more, I could immediately sense that something had changed. The previously completed shapes were still there, displaying the

present and past within the mirror room. The remaining geometric shapes—my puzzle pieces—had drifted apart in my absence, as they always did.

It wasn't something I could see, but there was a static charge, a sort of latent energy suffusing the atmosphere.

Quickly, I gathered and sorted the pieces, hoping the sensation I felt was some sort of unconscious understanding achieved by my efforts to revisit my own knowledge of aether. Yet when I had the pieces in front of me, I felt no new insight into the edict.

Like when I followed the aetheric vibrations that allowed me to step through space, I let my mind unfocus and drift along in the wake of the electric hum. It seemed to fill the space, to fill my whole mind, but there was one small, unassuming spot where it was clearer, more present.

Using aether like a pair of forceps, I reached into that node and pulled something through.

The dead relic.

Stunned, I watched as the unexceptional rock drifted through the air, just like the other shapes I'd found in here. Instinctively, I pushed aether into it, as I had tried while sitting in the dark in the hall of mirrors.

The dull, rough surface of the stone shattered as if it'd been struck with a hammer, revealing a blazing diamond burning with white light. The diamond dissolved as it spread its radiance across the keystone realm. Wherever the light touched, I felt the dull ache of sudden growth, as if my mind were expanding to contain it.

The field of geometric shapes seemed to absorb the light, glowing white hot themselves, and suddenly I understood. Just like when I was building the cube that became the window into the present, the pieces practically presented themselves to me, and I quickly began placing them together.

In my excitement and the euphoric rush of understanding, I nearly missed it. An alarm bell rang in my mind, and my focus turned toward the cube.

The mirror room was in chaos.

Kalon was struggling to fend off Ada, who was free of her bindings. She clawed and bit at him with furious, barbaric strength, but he moved as if afraid to injure her.

Haedrig was crawling out of the fountain, moving slowly as if dazed. A trickle of blood from his ear diffused into the water and stained his cheek and neck red.

The mirrors nearest Haedrig and the fountain were nearly all shattered, now revealing only the void beyond.

Ezra was running along the hall, dragging Riah's dead body behind him.

Regis was nowhere to be seen.

Abandoning all thought of finishing the dodecahedron now, I tried to open my eyes, to leave the keystone realm, but I couldn't. Whenever I approached the smoky purple barrier, my consciousness flicked back to the incomplete puzzle floating expectantly amidst the field of geometric pieces waiting to be placed.

Damn it!

Across all the faces of the cube, Haedrig had rolled clumsily out of the fountain and was on his feet, stumbling toward Ezra. The young ascender pulled back his arm as if to hurl his spear at the green-haired ascender, and Haedrig threw himself to the ground, but it was a feint.

The ruse gave Ezra the time he needed to drag Riah's body the rest of the way to the horned ascender's mirror. My stomach dropped as I watched him yank the corpse around and press the dead hand to the mirror's cold surface.

Frantically, I began placing the puzzle pieces again, moving as quickly as my aetheric manipulation would allow. At the same time, I kept one eye on the battle happening outside of the keystone.

In the mirror, the Vritra-blooded ascender was grinning malevolently. And then he was gone, and purple mist was oozing out of the mirror and flowing into Riah, just like when Ada had touched her own mirror.

Riah's eyes shuttered open and two black voids stared up at Ezra. With one hand, the boy was warding off Haedrig with his spear, and with the other he reached down to offer his hand to Riah. When she took it, Ezra flinched, practically jerking away from her, but Riah's puffy, dead hand tightened around his until it looked as if his bones had cracked.

Haedrig dashed forward, grabbing the spear and shoving it back and up, cracking Ezra under the chin with the shaft and knocking him backwards over Riah's body. There was an explosion of energy from Ezra that pushed Haedrig away and shattered several nearby mirrors.

All three forms lay prone on the stone floor for a moment. Riah, or Mythelias in her body, was the first to move. As he rolled over and began to push himself up, the flesh around the severed stump of a leg began to bubble and grow, forming a black, gangrenous club of a foot.

Next to him, Ezra began to convulse with pain. Spreading from his hand, black boils were growing on his flesh, the skin around them turning gray. His face was twisted into a tortured, terrified scream as the pestilent growths rapidly subsumed his body... until nothing was left but a twisted, Ezra-shaped lump.

And still, despite the chaos, Regis was nowhere to be found.

While all this was happening, I had been working feverishly to finish the dodecahedron, unsure exactly what would happen when it was complete. I knew I couldn't leave until I'd finished the puzzle; I only hoped I would be in time for the others.

Suddenly Kalon flew past Haedrig, his spear blazing ahead of him.

Rolling away from the attack, Mythelias came up to his feet with Ezra's spear in hand, and immediately became a storm of cuts and strikes that forced Kalon to fall back into a defensive stance, and even then he seemed barely able to avoid the lightning-quick assault.

Mythelias kept pressing Kalon, but this put Haedrig at his back. Whether he had lost track of the green-haired ascender or discounted Haedrig's ability, Mythelias was focused entirely on the last of the Granbehls when Haedrig struck.

The thin blade punched through Mythelias's back, just to the left of his spine, then ripped outward through his side, half-severing his torso just below his ribs and leaving a horrific, gaping wound. Before I could so much as cheer, however, the flesh began to boil again, and a hard black scar formed over the gash.

Spinning, Mythelias cut at Haedrig's ankles with the edge of the spear-blade, then let the spear's momentum carry it around his body, lining it up for a thrust to the heart that Haedrig just barely parried.

Within the keystone realm, the last pieces of the dodecahedron were falling into place, but I was distracted by the scene playing out on one face of the pyramid, which showed the recent past. It seemed to be catching up to the present, and was now showing what had happened only moments ago.

In it, Ezra was pacing up and down the hall, Regis prowling behind him like a murderous shadow. The boy had a nervous furtive look about him: his hands were jittery and he kept glancing around like he expected to be attacked at any moment.

Haedrig was sitting on the edge of the fountain, his feet in the salt water. Kalon was checking the bindings on the false Ada, something we had to do frequently to keep the phantom from injuring Ada's body.

As Ezra approached the fountain, his nervousness cemented into a look of dark determination. He suddenly took a sharp step to the side and activated his crest.

My heart hammered as an explosion pushed out from him, slamming Haedrig across the water and head first into the edge of the fountain. Kalon was tossed backwards so I couldn't see him anymore, and even Ada was jerked violently in her bindings.

The mirrors around Ezra shattered, and, to my horror, Regis was thrown through an open frame, disappearing into the emptiness on the other side.

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No, I thought, my heart pounding in my throat. That's not possible.

The explosion had broken the closest benches and wrenched Ada hard enough to loosen her bindings, and she was quick to rip free of the rope.

My focus was drawn back to the dodecahedron as the last piece fit into place. Like before, it shimmered and glowed, the outlines of the individual pieces I'd used to complete the puzzle fading away, forming a solid shape.

In the present, Haedrig and Kalon had fallen into a rhythm, working together to keep Mythelias on the defensive, but any time they scored a hit, the wound instantly sealed over.

Half of Riah's corpse was now covered with scabrous growths, but neither Haedrig nor Kalon had escaped injury themselves. Kalon was bleeding badly from a cut on his leg, and Haedrig appeared to have taken the butt of the spear to his cheek, which was swollen and already changing color.

Finally, the opalescent shimmering on the faces of the dodecahedron smoothed out and stopped moving, and each face displayed a different moving picture.

In one, the hall of mirrors had been obliterated. The entire end of the hall had been burned away, its blackened edges opening directly into the void. Every mirror was shattered, and most of the frames had been incinerated. There was no sign of life in the room.

In another face of the dodecahedron, I saw myself standing with Haedrig and Ada, who was crying furiously as we pushed Ezra's remains through an empty mirror frame and out into the void.

The hall was scorched and blasted, the fountain empty, many of the mirrors broken, but it was overall intact.

Haedrig pulled the girl into a tender hug, but I turned and walked away.

My eyes were drawn to a third image. Mythelias, in Riah's corpse, was stalking across the hall of mirrors toward me. Behind him, Kalon and Haedrig had been entirely subsumed by the dark boils; they were clearly dead.

Ada lay unconscious near me. Mythelias leaned down over her and pressed one blackened hand to her cheek. I turned away, pushing the dodecahedron with aether so it spun, removing the awful image from my line of sight.

The revolving dodecahedron brought different images into sight. Some were variations on what I'd already seen, but one in particular caught my eye.

In it, I saw myself activating a godrune that glowed golden through my clothes. Purple motes of aether spun and swirled through the room like dandelion seeds, and everything they touched glowed with aetheric energy.

I watched, awed, as the mirrors mended before my eyes and the pieces of the fountain flew back together as if time was being rewinded, the smoke and steam from the air literally coalescing to reform stone and water.

When the purple motes landed on Ezra, the boils began to shrink, receding until they faded away entirely. The young ascender gasped and his eyes flew open. He was alive.

Just before the glass of the shattered mirror through which Kalon had been hurled snapped back into place, Kalon himself drifted through it, settling gently onto the ground in the hall of mirrors. The wounds he'd sustained from his battle with Mythelias closed; even the damage to his clothes and armor was reversed.

The terrified, heartbroken image of Ada in her mirror dissolved into pinkish smoke, which flowed out of the mirror, then moved purposefully across the hall until it found her unconscious body, returning her to herself.

Where the floor of the hall was most blasted and burned, ash began to swirl, creating a miniature cyclone. As the ash condensed, a form began to take shape.

Riah's body, still missing one foot, hung in the air like a rag doll, lifeless and somehow incomplete. Then the gnawed flesh of her foot began to regrow, healing before my eyes. When her eyelids fluttered open, she stared around the now pristine hall with confusion and fear before drifting down to the ground where she was met with a running hug from Ada.

Though the visions of the past and present had suggested the possibility that the third puzzle might show visions of the future, I hadn't dared to hope such a thing might be possible, yet there I was, watching events that hadn't happened yet.

Each face of the dodecahedron seemed to show a different potential future, some showing our other failure, true, but there was at least a chance we could defeat the Vritra-blooded ascender and escape the hall of mirrors.

Still, fear bubbled in my gut at what I had seen, or not seen; Regis was nowhere to be found in any of the futures I could see, even the one where I was somehow able to bring back the dead.

What is this power? I wondered, still watching the potential futures play across the faces of the dodecahedron. It seemed too incredible to be possible. Was it an aspect of Life, of vivum? A way to bring the dead back to life?

No, I thought, it seemed more like aevum, an aspect of Time. It was like the aether was turning back the clock on whatever it touched, undoing the damage done to glass, stone, and flesh alike.

Excitement surged within me. This was it! This was the power I needed to defeat Agrona and end the war with Alacrya. Not only that, but I could undo the damage Agrona had done. I could save everyone: Buhnd, Cynthia, Adam, Sylvia... my father.

I could bring them all back!

As the dodecahedron revolved around, the panel in which Haedrig, Ada, and I stood alone in the wreckage of the hall came back into view. In that version of the future, I began using aether on any mirrors that were still intact and had an ascender trapped within.

Like in the other vision, the cracks and chips in the mirrors began to disappear as if mending themselves. Then, one by one, the ascenders faded away. When they had all been released from their prisons, the light within the room shifted subtly, taking on a warmer tone, and a portal appeared within one of the empty frames.

In that version of the future, however, the others remained dead.

Why? I wondered fearfully. What is the difference between these two visions of the future? What do I need to do?

Then the images of past, present, and future faded away, and the three shapes I had constructed within the keystone realm began to dissolve into streams of purple sand that eddied around me on gusts of wind I couldn't feel. Soon I was looking out through the eye of an aetheric tornado, and the scouring wind and rough sand were scraping across all the layers of my mind.

It's too soon! I thought, panic taking hold of me. *I don't understand yet!*

The pain and pressure built and kept building until I was sure the storm would tear my mind apart, rip my consciousness from my body, and cast it into the void...

Then it was gone. In place of the raw, tearing pain I felt a sense of freshness and calm, like I'd just stepped out of a cool shower on a hot summer's day.

I opened my eyes. My mental cleansing had been so complete that for just a moment I forgot what was happening around me.

'Arthur!'

It took a moment for Regis's voice to sink through my foggy confusion. Was it coming from the past, present, or future? I felt as though time itself was meaningless, and wondered vaguely if this was how the trapped ascenders felt within their mirrors.

The trapped ascenders... The thought nagged at me. I had seen them in the vision of the future... or was that the present now? And then there was the Vritra-blooded ascender, Mythelias... He had escaped—or he would escape? I couldn't tell the difference.

The room shook as, across the fountain from me, Kalon released his voltaic energy spell, the arcing energy striking Mythelias from several angles at once, nearly burning Riah's body to a cinder and imprinting jagged, fiery afterimages into my retina.

I blinked rapidly, a creeping feeling that I should be doing something clawing through the confusion.

Kalon leapt at Mythelias, attempting to use the aftermath of his catastrophic attack to drive his burning spear down into the Vritra-blooded ascender's heart. At the same moment, Haedrig cut low, aiming to take Mythelias's leg off at the knee.

He was ready for them.

The flesh around his knee bubbled outward then hardened, trapping Haedrig's sword in a knot of gnarled black tissue. In Mythelias's hands, Ezra's spear swung with the force of a battering ram, catching Kalon in the air and batting him aside like a bug.

A jolt of adrenaline hit me like a lightning bolt as I watched Kalon fly sideways, strike the frame of one of the mirrors, and spin out into the void. He was gone.

Riah's face sneered at Haedrig. "As if you lesser scum could truly fight back against me." The words slithered out between her stiff, blackened lips, sounding entirely unlike Riah. "You can't even understand the honor I give you. In my time, only the greatest warriors died by my hand..."

'Arthur!' Regis screamed again in my head. He was inside me, I realized. I could feel his debilitated presence, his mind, his wild panic. And I could feel the Destruction rune raging like a wildfire, begging to be unleashed and burning away the last of my confusion and uncertainty.

Before me, Mythelias casually reached down toward Haedrig, who tried to throw himself backwards but slipped in blood and hit the ground with a grunt. To his credit, the veteran ascender seemed calm even in the face of certain death.

As the bloated, puffy white fingers reached toward my friend, I raised my own hand and summoned the violet flame. Mythelias's head snapped around as he sensed my power, and with astonishing speed he cocked the spear back and launched it like a missile aimed straight at my throat.

The spear seemed to slow until it looked as if it were hanging suspended in the air. Riah's dead face was twisted into a hateful snarl, as still as a painting. Haedrig lay on his back at Mythelias's feet, one arm up to ward off the blow that had been diverted toward me.

Without meaning to look for them, I saw the network of aetheric vibrations between Mythelias and me; all I had to do was focus on them and activate my rune, and I was able to pass through the pathways with God Step, appearing between Haedrig and Mythelias, the power of Destruction still held in my hand and a network of aetheric lightning playing across my skin.

The world lurched into motion again, and I watched as the spear flew into the distance. Mythelias's eyes widened in surprise, still focused on where I had been just a moment ago, before twisting around with the speed of a razor grimalkin, his hand thrusting toward me like the tip of a poisoned dagger.

But it wasn't fast enough.

"Burn," I commanded, and the hungry flames leapt from my fist in a fan of pure violet destruction fueled by my aether.

Destruction engulfed Riah's body, flinging Mythelias screaming onto his back. He rolled and beat at the flames, and his power caused a hard, black shell to start forming all around the body.

Even as he burned, he screamed out, "I am the Mythelias Dresdium—son of the Sovereigns—and I—refuse—to—"

"Die," I said coldly.

The purple fire consumed the scabrous black lumps and the pale dead flesh alike, destroying the body faster than Mythelias's ability could regenerate it.

As I watched the body of the kind girl—the girl who brought sweets on an ascent instead of rations—disintegrate, I felt only the flush of power, the knowledge that, with Destruction at my command, I could defeat anything. Even Agrona wouldn't be able to fight back against this kind of raw destructive force.

Destruction fed until not even ash remained, but when Riah's body was gone, Destruction remained. I felt the power pull at me, eager for more.

I clenched my fists and ground my teeth as I tried to snuff out the remaining flames, which had spread to the stone floor and were quickly eating through it, along with most of my aether reserves.

A gout of the violet fire erupted from my right hand, boiling away the water within the fountain and setting two of the broken benches aflame. All around me, purple embers floated through the air, and anything they touched caught fire.

It was beautiful.

Then a spark landed on Haedrig's leg.

He would burn, I knew, like everything else. Kalon, Ezra, Riah, Ada... Haedrig. They were all collateral damage, but their lives had been the price I had to pay to make it this far.

No! That was wrong, I knew. That's Destruction talking, not me!

I saw again the future I'd witnessed in the dodecahedron: the hall of mirrors destroyed, nothing but ash remaining of my companions. That was what would happen if I couldn't control Destruction. In the end, it would consume everything. Even me.

Feeling control slipping away from me, knowing that Haedrig would be incinerated in moments if I didn't do something, I shouted for Regis.

We have to exhaust our aether reserves. All of it! Gauntlet Form! Now!

Regis didn't hesitate. When he was in my right hand, I held it out, pointing through one of the many broken mirrors and away from Haedrig, who was shouting my name, pleading for help.

With Regis in my hand to draw my aether, I turned Destruction in that direction and *pushed*. Purple fire boiled out of me like an inferno, spilling out into the darkness where there was nothing for it to consume.

More and more of the destructive energy streamed from me. I burned it all, every last breath of aether in my body. And when I was as dry and empty as a sun-bleached skull, the last of the fire flickered and died, no longer able to draw from Regis's rune.

My head whipped around, but I let out a sigh of relief when I saw Haedrig back on his feet, his armor scorched but otherwise looking unburned.

Then my knees buckled, and the world went dark.

306 FOLLOWING HIS FOOTSTEPS

ELEANOR LEYWIN

The journey to Eidelholm passed quickly, though it took nearly two full days.

We traveled in silence, mostly. Tessia and Albold were forced to slow their pace, guiding the rest of us carefully through the outskirts of Elshire. Hornfels and Skarn had it the hardest; they weren't woodsmen, and had spent very little time above ground. They hated the mists as much as I hated stepping in puddles of mud... which happened often.

Boo and Grawder, on the other hand, seemed completely at home. We let them move at their own pace, sometimes rushing ahead, charging through the forest like a couple of wild animals, and other times lingering behind to dig in the soft soil or sniff after some mana beast trail. I didn't worry about them, though. I knew that Boo would always be able to find his way back to me.

Though we stayed cautious, Tessia and Albold weren't worried the Alacryans would find us in the forest. They expected that we would already be at Eidelholm before the prisoner caravan was reported as missing, and the Alacryans couldn't navigate Elshire well enough to have effective patrols.

When we did actually talk, it was largely to discuss optimal paths we should take to scout out the area without being discovered. While neither Albold nor Tessia had a map, both knew the area well enough for us to have a good sense of what to expect by the time we reached the elven village.

Signs of the Alacryans were all over the place before we got our first look at Eidelholm.

The first was the corpse of an elven man lying face down at the base of a dying tree. A hole the size of an apple had been burned completely through him and the tree both.

I kept my gaze fixed on the sight, despite wanting to spin away and puke. This was something I had to get used to.

Albold leaned over the corpse, his usual cheery expression nowhere to be found. "He was most likely trying to flee."

Agreeing in silence, we didn't linger to investigate more closely.

We slowed our pace as we got closer to the village, moving carefully in case we ran into Alacryans in the woods. As we approached, the sound of axes thudding into trees grew louder and louder.

Tessia held up a closed fist, and we all went still and tense. She leaned toward me and pointed ahead. The mists had cleared, but the trees were still dense enough to limit my line of sight. Using mana, I enhanced my vision to try and see what Tessia was pointing at. There was no movement, no enemy that I could see. Just trees, with sunlight shining on brown earth beyond.

Then it snapped into place. Where the sun shone, the forest simply ended. We crept forward again until we were just at the edge of the treeline. The Alacryans had cut down all of the trees around Eidelholm, an uncountable number of trees. A large field of deforested land lay between us and a sad, gray little town.

I'm sure the elven village must have been really pretty, once upon a time. Now the twisted timbers and boughs that made up the structure of the buildings seemed withered and dead, and the green roofs had turned brown like fallen leaves.

I could see where a lot of the houses around the edge of the town had burned down. A few square buildings, minimal in design, had been built in their place, and a handful Alacryan men and women could be seen going about their day, doing normal, ordinary things like hauling buckets of water or armloads of wood.

Tessia stood to my left. The set of her jaw and the angle of her body made her look like a predator. She was so tense I could practically see her quivering, like a silver jaguar waiting for its prey.

I wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Let's find someplace with some shelter so we can wait for the cover of night," Curtis said, stepping up beside Tessia.

"No," Tessia said simply. "We need to get a good look at the village in the light. Albold, you and Curtis make a circuit to the west. Ellie and I will go east. Kathyln, Skarn, and Hornfels, you three take the mana beasts and find someplace to shelter, somewhere we can use as a base of operations."

Curtis must have noticed the looks of confusion all around. "I'll be able to find Grawder when the four of us meet back up after our circuit," he explained. "We always know where the other is."

Skarn spit into the dirt. "I can't wait to be done with this hiking nonsense. C'mon you great brutes, you're with us." This last was directed at Grawder and Boo, who looked hesitantly toward Curtis and me.

"I'll be back soon, Grawder," Curtis said, smiling warmly at his world lion bond.

I ran a hand through Boo's fur, then scratched him under his chin. He looked at me in a way that said he'd rather be by my side. Smiling, I booped his nose. "You stay with Grawder, silly. We'll be right back."

Curtis gave his sister a hug, and over his shoulder she shot me an embarrassed look, forcing me to turn away to hide my grin.

To the dwarves, Tessia said, "Thank you for being here, friends. The elven people owe you a great debt."

Skarn simply grunted, but Hornfels gave Tessia the slightest bow. "We're all in this fight together now. It's Skarn's and my hope that, some day, we'll be able to free our own kin from the poisonous ideas of the late king and queen Greysunders. Until such a time, though, we'll deliver our boots to Alacryan asses wherever we can find them."

Tessia returned the bow, then turned her turquoise eyes on me. "Ready, partner?"

Partner...

It was strange, being referred to like that by her. We'd come so far together since that first tense exchange in the underground town after Arthur disappeared. Past me likely would've killed present me for thinking this, but I thought of Tessia almost as an older sister now, as well as a guide and mentor. She had pushed for me to be involved, for me to have the chance to help our people.

With a deep breath, I reached for the feeling deep in my core and manifested the first phase of my beast will. "Yeah, I'm ready."

With a backwards glance at Boo, who stood up on his hind legs and waved one big paw, looking as sad as I'd ever seen him, I set off after Tessia.

She led us east, always keeping under the cover of the trees. We moved slowly. Tessia scouted the village while I kept a lookout for any threats in the forest, especially Alacryan soldiers.

We hadn't been moving for more than ten minutes when I stopped Tessia after catching a whiff of something familiar. We both fell flat on our stomachs, using the undergrowth to hide as best we could while I searched for the source of the scent.

"There," I mouthed, pointing west.

A young elven woman came around a large tree less than twenty feet away. She was carrying a wicker basket in the crook of one arm. Her blonde hair had been cut short, exposing red marks and bruising across the side and back of her neck. She walked with a slight limp.

I was surprised to see that she wasn't chained or manacled in any way. *There are probably other, less obvious ways to bind someone*, I thought, my mind going to Tessia's parents, the late king and queen of the elves. *The Alacryans are good at things like that.*

Distant shouting and the splintering crash of a falling tree made the girl stop. She stared sadly in the direction of the noise for a moment, then moved on.

Even though I knew we both wanted to help her, it wasn't the time. Tessia and I waited until the limping elf had moved off, leaving the forest and stepping into the light, where she jogged awkwardly back toward the village.

After that we crept along even more cautiously, our eyes mostly on the village, but my enhanced hearing and smell trained on the forest, cautious of anything approaching. We'd gone a little more than halfway around the village before I had to withdraw my beast will to rest.

Shortly afterward, Tessia stiffened, then stabbed her thumb down to signal us to drop. We both dove behind a large berry bush.

I couldn't see anything, so I watched Tessia's face carefully in case I needed to conjure an arrow in an instant, but after several long seconds she relaxed and stood up. Hesitantly, I followed her lead, my bow at the ready.

Nearby, Albold stepped out from between two trees where he was waiting for us alongside Curtis, and I let out a relieved breath.

"Things seem quiet on this side," Tessia said softly, waving them over. "No sign of where they're keeping the prisoners yet. You?"

Albold nodded, face tense. "Makeshift cages—little more than kennels—have been constructed at the edge of town. There are a couple hundred prisoners at least. I counted thirteen guards."

"But only three mages," Curtis added. "The rest were just normal soldiers—unadorned, they call them."

Tessia tugged thoughtfully at a loose lock of her hair. "Okay, you two complete your circuit, put a second set of eyes on this side of the village. Ellie and I will take a look at the prisoners ourselves."

"There is a large logging party working on that side of town, too. We had to go well out into the forest to avoid them," Albold noted.

Tessia nodded in understanding, we said our farewells, then we split up again.

As we rounded the far side of the village, the consistent thudding of axes into wood grew louder, and, as Albold had said, we found a group of men and women working to fell, cut, and carry away lumber. The first thing I noticed was that all the workers were Alacryans. In fact, there were no elves assisting with the logging at all.

We were crouched behind a naturally fallen tree a couple hundred feet from the nearest Alacryan, watching them work.

"Even under threat of death, my people wouldn't cut down the trees," Tessia whispered, answering my unasked question.

Without another word, she took off deeper into the forest, giving the workers a wide berth. It didn't take us long after that to find the roughly built cages housing elves like animals ready to be butchered.

It was hard to believe anyone could survive long in such awful conditions. The elves were nearly all standing, their bodies pressed against one another. They had just enough room for a few to lay down at once in the cramped cages. The elves looked pale and thin, their dirty skin stretched too tightly across their faces, giving them a ghastly, skeletal look.

The cages were made of wood, but were little more than roughly milled frames connected by narrow planks. I wondered for a moment why the elves didn't try to break out, but then I realized that they were probably so tired and weak that they didn't even have the strength to break the wooden slats, much less escape from the guards.

My eyes caught on an elven man who was pressed up against the side of one of the cages. He was slumped down unnaturally, his eyes open but glazed. I couldn't bear to continue looking at the sight of his body left to rot next to his own family.

Animals, I thought angrily. My fingers trembled, itching to send mana arrows flying at the guards right then and there.

The voice in the back of my mind that sounded like Arthur's told me I was thinking like a child. It reminded me that we were just here as scouts. Looking at these prisoners, though, I doubted that they would last much longer.

Two of the guards were playing some kind of board game, sitting at a makeshift table made of a stump. I closed my eyes and activated my beast will so I could hear what they were saying.

"—tired of the stink. Babysitting a bunch of unwashed, half-dead elves wasn't what I had in mind when they told us we'd be taking this place over, you know?"

"Tell me about it. And with that Bilal creeping around, glaring down at us all the time. He's even worse than Jagrette, and she was awful. Are you going to take your move or what?"

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking. But yeah, you're right. I'm not sure why we need a damned retainer for this post, anyway. My kid sister could guard these elves all by herself. It's those Milviews, I'm sure. Cowards. How they ever earned highblood status, I'll—"

But I lost track of the conversation for a moment as my mind buzzed. *Jagrette, where have I heard of that name before?*

I turned to Tessia to ask her, but she held up a hand.

Not a second passed before a chill ran down my spine, my own bestial senses picking up the deathly aura that smelled even worse than the rotting corpses nearby.

A man stepped from between two of the buildings, approaching the guards. He looked like a walking skeleton. His face was pale and puffy, his eyes so sunken and dark that they looked like empty holes. Flat, greenish hair like dead seagrass clung to his forehead and cheeks. He was tall and awkwardly thin with sharp, spiderish limbs that his sheer black mage's robes highlighted.

The back of his robes were cut away, revealing a series of dark tattoos standing out against the white flesh. His spine and ribs were sharply defined, their gray shadows intersecting the sharply inked lines in a way I found gross... almost inhuman.

Silently, the man walked around the end of the cages, then stopped suddenly, just outside of the enclosure with the dead elf pressed against the bars. He turned to look at one of the guards, a thick-chested man with a black beard. The rest of the guards stood well back.

"What happened here?" the pale man asked the ranking guard. "An early execution?"

"N-no, sir. They're not in good health. A few have died of—of weakness."

"Is it not your job to guard them, soldier? The executions will be rather uninteresting if most of them have already succumbed to their... weakness." The man seemed mildly amused as he said this, but the bearded guard threw himself to one knee and bowed.

"Of course, Bilal. We will make sure the rest survive to be killed at the proper time."

The pale man stared down at the back of the guard's head. "Just keep them breathing for another day or two." He turned away from the guard, gazing out into the trees.

I froze. There was no way he could know we were there, but still...

Tessia was the one to act, shooting a soft gust of wind at a nearby tree rodent perched on a low hanging branch.

The tiny mana beast, surprised, hopped off of its branch, drawing the pale robed man's gaze to where it scampered off.

"This damnable forest," Bilal cursed, shaking his head.

Sneering, he turned to leave, then stopped again suddenly. He waved the bearded guard over; then, his voice low and sickly, he said, "Pick out one or two of the livelier elves and have them sent to my abode, would you?"

The guard paled, his nose wrinkling in disgust, but he was quick to assure the retainer he would do so.

Tessia grabbed my hand, drawing my attention without speaking, and nodded into the forest. It was time to go.

We sneaked away from the treeline, moving deeper under the cover of the dense boughs, then turned and navigated quickly around the village toward our rendezvous with Albold and Curtis.

When we found the others, both Albold and Curtis were watching for us fearfully.

Curtis moved quickly to Tessia's side. "Are you okay? We worried when you weren't—"

"Yes," Tessia said quickly. "We took our time at the prisoner cages." To me, she said, "Ellie, what did you hear?"

I recounted everything I'd heard. The others were quiet when I'd finished.

Finally, her face hard as a statue, Tessia turned and walked south into the forest. "Let's find our companions. Curtis, you lead the way."

I glanced at Curtis, and he smiled and winked at me. "Do you regret following us yet?"

"Not at all," I said, forcing a smile that fell away as soon as Curtis turned to follow Tessia.

We walked for over thirty minutes before we found Grawder and Boo. They were lying next to one another in a little patch of sun at the center of a clearing. Kathyln and the Earthborns weren't with them.

Boo rolled to his feet and lumbered toward me. My bond rumbled deep down in his chest and nudged me so that I almost tipped over backwards.

I laughed and wrapped my arms around his neck. "I'm glad to see you too, Boo."

Grawder, who must have known Curtis was returning, only raised his huge head, shook it gently so his golden mane waved like wheat in a sunny field, then went back to his nap.

"Where are—" I started, but was cut off by the grinding of stone.

Just behind where Grawder still lounged, the earth shifted, folding in on itself to reveal an earthen tunnel. Skarn and Hornfels stood just inside.

"You weren't followed, were you?" Skarn grunted, glaring past our group into the trees.

"They're hot on our tails!" Curtis gasped, his eyes going wide. "Quick, everyone inside."

I snickered at the handsome prince's bad joke. Tessia's lips quirked up in a wry smile, and Hornfels laughed loudly, but Skarn only glowered more deeply.

"Yes, jokes about our immediate and untimely deaths... my favorite." The dwarf spit on the ground. "Inside then. Couldn't find a suitable shelter, so we made one."

Curious, I followed the dwarves down the earthen ramp into a smooth-walled cave, which was about twenty feet long and wide, and perhaps eight feet high. A handful of lighting artifacts, glowing stones like those we used in the underground city, had been set around the room to provide lighting.

A simple set of chairs and a table had been molded out of earth at the center of the room, and seven low cots were pushed against the walls. I plopped down on one and was surprised by how soft it was. The far end of the little cave had been left open for the mana beasts.

"This is pretty nice," I mentioned, nodding my approval to the Earthborns.

Hornfels beamed at me. "The cots were my idea."

Skarn grunted and rolled his eyes as the rest of the group filed in. Tessia inspected the cave, and Curtis whistled in appreciation. Albold, however, seemed uncomfortable.

"I hate being underground," he muttered.

Once everyone was in, Skarn used mana to close the entryway again, hiding us completely. Boo and Grawder pushed their way through the crowd, both sitting down at the far end of the cave. Their presence made the space feel a lot smaller than it had just a few minutes ago.

"Now that you've all finished your tour through our humble abode, may we have the honor of discovering what fresh slice of hell awaits us at the village?" Skarn groused, taking a seat at the table.

Tessia nodded, taking a seat at the table as well. "Almost everything was what we expected..."

Kathyln sat down across from her. "Almost everything?"

Curtis and Albold exchanged a knowing look, while the dwarves wrinkled their brows in confusion.

After everyone took their seat around the table, Tessia recounted what we experienced, from the female elf we saw all the way to the two guards' conversation and our encounter with Bilal.

"A mass execution..." Hornfels said with a long breath.

"So much for our plan of coming back with a larger force," Skarn chortled.

After a moment of strained silence, it was Curtis who shot up to his feet. "We can't leave these people here."

Everyone's head turned to the crimson-haired prince, surprised.

"What does the enemy force look like?" Kathyln asked.

Her brother's determined gaze wavered as Albold answered. "Not many mages on their side, but..."

"There's a retainer," Tessia said simply.

"Well, that's that then," Skarn said with a shrug. "I say we teleport straight back to the sanctuary, we've—ouch!" Skarn glared at his brother, who had just stomped on his foot under the table.

"What my brother means," Hornfels said, looking much more serious than normal, "is that, as much as we'd like to help these people, perhaps we should take stock of our abilities. Has anyone here ever faced a retainer?" The dwarf looked from face to face around the table, then turned to look at me for good measure.

I shook my head, as did the others. I expected Tessia to argue, but it was Kathyln that spoke up.

Turning to our leader, the ice mage asked, "What are your chances against a retainer?"

Tessia's gaze fell as she thought for a moment before her turquoise eyes landed back on Kathyln. "At worst, a stalemate. At best, a close win."

Skarn let out an appreciative whistle while the rest exchanged excited glances.

"We have five silver core mages amongst us," Curtis said with a confident smile. "We can do this!"

Kathyln nodded as she rubbed her chin. "And having more water and plant mages back in the sanctuary would help our settlements spread tremendously—"

"Kathyln, we're not saving them for the value that they'll bring back to our sanctuary," Tessia said sternly.

A flash of red emerged on the ice mage's pale face. "You're right. My apologies."

"I won't pretend to be as strong as Arthur was when he defeated Jagrette, but I don't need to be," Tessia said seriously. "I'll hold off Bilal along with Albod, who'll be keeping the other guards busy, long enough for the rest of you to secure the imprisoned elves and send them back to the sanctuary."

"If you are able to hold a retainer off alone, why not have the rest of us join you and finish this Bilal bastard off first?" Skarn asked.

"Because this isn't just a simple one-on-one battle like Arthur had against Jagrette," Kathyln answered. "Our priority is to get everyone out of here safely."

"Kathyln's right. If we were all to charge after the retainer, he might decide to harm the prisoners." Tessia's lips curved into a mischievous smile. "But if the distraught and emotional princess of the elves stormed the village with just her trusty aid for backup, wreaking havoc..."

"The retainer will come running. He might not even notice that his prisoners are gone!" Hornfels finished, snapping his thick fingers. "I like it!"

"Me too!" I exclaimed with newfound confidence.

Curtis turned to the two elves and said with a grin, "Looks like the two of you will have to practice your acting."

307 GOD RUNE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

A piercing pain that spread throughout my body wrenched me out of my sleep. I couldn't even muster a groan as I pried my eyes open.

It was only as I stared at the scorched remains of the long, squat hallway that memories of what had happened flashed before me: Riah being possessed by the Vritra-blooded ascender, Ezra's death, Kalon falling into the void, my use of Destruction to kill the ascender, and the violet flames spreading onto Haedrig.

Haedrig! I tensed as I thought of the green-haired ascender, causing the organ-rending pain to flare in me once more.

'The first thing you do when you wake up is worry about some random ascender you met a few days ago and not your beloved companion?' a familiar voice said in my mind, albeit a bit higher in tone than normal. 'I see how it is.'

Regis! What happened?

'I'll tell you what happened!' Regis snapped, his almost child-like voice laced with frustration.

A black shadow emerged from my sternum to reveal my shadowy companion... kind of.

"Look at me!" Regis barked, floating a few feet above me. The once formidable shadowy wolf, who had been large enough for a grown man to easily ride when I'd last seen him, was now, for lack of a better word, a puppy. He still had his wolven features, from a shadowy tail to four black paws and two horns on his head, but he was now only about the size of my head.

"I see you... lost some weight," I rasped, wincing in pain.

"Hur hur," Regis mocked, glaring at me. "I would've slapped you already if I had the upper body strength to do so."

"Did this"—I waved my hand in his direction, indicating his diminutive form—"happen because we had to exhaust all of our aether?" I asked.

My pup of a companion rolled his large eyes. "No. I became this way in order to live out my dreams as someone's *cuddle buddy*."

Ignoring his sarcasm, I tried pushing myself off the ground. With barely a sliver of aether remaining in my core and pain radiating throughout every inch of my body, I couldn't even sit up, let alone stand on my feet.

With no strength and a headache severe enough to keep me from meditating, I laid back and let my thoughts wander. Memories and emotions that I had been bottling up and storing deep inside began to surface—memories and emotions of my friends and family back at Dicathen.

I had been trying so hard to keep myself busy, not even giving myself time to think of the painful memories of the life I had left behind. Watching the Granbehl family's tragedy play out must have broken the dam I'd been unconsciously building to hold back these emotions. I was afraid there was a genuine possibility that the hopeless odds I faced if I ever wanted to see my family and friends again would overwhelm me entirely if I dwelled on them too often.

But what was even scarier was the fact that I felt myself slowly forgetting their faces and voices. Recognizing them wasn't the problem, but being able to picture them in my mind... that was getting harder.

With my body slowly regenerating its aether reserves and the pain from backlash beginning to dull, I pushed away the faces of Ellie and my mother, frozen in my mind with expressions of grief and desperation.

Slowly getting up to my feet, I took out the dead relic I had stashed in my pocket, confirming with my own eyes that the once black stone was now a cloudy white crystal. Eager to see what its actual purpose was, I infused it with the meager remains of aether I had left.

Nothing happened.

'Did you break it?' Regis asked.

I don't think so? I tucked the opaque crystal back in my pocket. We'll have to explore this more later, when I don't feel mostly dead.

Shifting my gaze, I noticed that a piece of cloth had been rolled up into a makeshift pillow for me. Needless emotions of attachment to these Alacryans that I had just met began surfacing, gripping my insides. Shaking my head, I asked the question I had been afraid to ask since waking up.

"Who's alive?"

"Go check for yourself. They're over there," Regis grunted, pointing to his left with a pudgy paw. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to hide out in your body until I can absorb some aether on my own again. Don't call for me unless you absolutely need to."

I raised a brow. "Would you even be useful in the state you're in right now?"

"Oh shut up," he snapped before disappearing back into my body.

Letting out a sigh, I looked around at the scorched remains of the mirror room. Just like the future I had seen within the keystone, the hall was painted in black and red with the fountain shattered and water spilled all around it. Many of the mirrors were broken, revealing the endless void that Kalon had fallen into.

The keystone...

I glanced around, but the cuboid relic was nowhere to be seen.

'It crumbled to dust after you snapped out of your trance,' Regis said.

Damn it! I had hoped perhaps there would be another opportunity for me to delve back into the keystone, another chance to build on the knowledge I'd gained. If that stupid kid wouldn't have released the Vritrablooded ascender—

I recoiled from the thought. That "stupid kid" had paid for his mistake with his life. Being mad at him now didn't serve any purpose, and there was no taking back what had been done.

Unless...

The keystone had shown me a future where I could literally turn back to the time on death itself. I probed my mind for the godrune, and while I could feel it there, I couldn't tell what it did.

Regardless, I had learned everything I was capable of understanding from the keystone. That's why it had pushed me out, I was sure. I would just have to try it out to see what it could do...

Despite the chaotic state of the room after our battle, it didn't take long to find the others.

And like I had expected, the only two left were Haedrig and Ada. Haedrig was kneeling by the gruesome remains of Ezra's deteriorated body. The sole remaining Granbehl sibling was lying on the ground near her mirror, which was thankfully still intact. The phantom was unbound, but she appeared to be unconscious.

The Ada in the mirror, the real Ada, was also lying on the ground, her entire body shaking with sobs.

She must have seen everything that happened, I realized with a jolt of horror. I thought of the battle at the Wall, how I had searched the battlefield in a panic, looking for my father, and how I had found him too late...

I reached out and touched the mirror, and suddenly I was able to hear her choked, manic sobs. "I'm sorry, Ada."

Let's hope this works, I thought, but I hesitated before activating the new godrune. It felt so... final to activate it, to experience for real the result of my work in the keystone. Once I used it, I'd know exactly what it could do—and what it couldn't.

Regardless, this needs to be done. I steeled myself, then directed aether into the godrune.

The familiar warmth radiated from my lower back along with a flood of knowledge into the specific edict of aevum gained through the keystone. Much like my flames of Destruction and God Step, the edict molded into what I was able to grasp, manifesting itself into a form that made sense to me.

Motes of purple began spreading from my hand, swirling around like a miniature galaxy. Ada looked up, confusion and surprise overtaking her desolation for just a moment, and she began to fade away, turning to pinkish mist that flowed out of the mirror and back into her body.

A thick blackish-purple smoke was expelled from her pores and sucked back into the mirror. The phantom manifested back in its prison, a look of pure hatred on its twisted copy of Ada's face.

At my feet, Ada's body twitched and her eyes snapped open. She scuttled backwards, away from the mirror, her eyes wide with fear. Haedrig leaned down and put his arms around her shoulders, causing her to scream.

"Shush now, Ada, it's me, it's only me. Shush now."

Drawing the bone-white dagger that had once belonged to Caera's brother, I drove it handle first into the Ada mirror, shattering it and destroying the phantom forever.

When I turned back around, Ada had her head buried in Haedrig's chest, her small frame quivering as she let out a wail so sorrowful that I just couldn't bring myself to go closer.

These were Alacryans, the same people that had devastated Dicathen, who were responsible for the deaths of so many people that I knew and loved. I should be relishing in their misfortunes and misery.

So why? Why did my chest feel like it was being wrung like a soaked towel?

But then, it wasn't just about them. The disappointment and regret I felt—the sense of loss at knowing what I'd failed to learn—gnawed at my insides, and I couldn't help but wish I hadn't seen the potential futures.

Although I'd unlocked a new godrune, it was clear now that I'd only managed to grasp a part of the intended whole. And with the keystone gone, and my affinity with aevum as weak as it was, I might never have the chance to learn it again.

"Aroa's Requiem," I whispered. The flood of knowledge I'd experienced had included this name-like signature imprinted in the spell itself. It was poetic and beautiful, but to me, it would only serve as a reminder of what the spell could've been.

A spell that could've saved Kalon, Ezra, and Riah—a spell that could've even brought my father back.

At least I saved Haedrig and Ada, I thought half-heartedly, trying and failing to see the silver lining in the future I'd ended up in. And I can release these trapped ascenders and keep going, keep trying.

I peeled my gaze away from the others, turning my attention to the countless intact mirrors still containing ascenders, most of whom were studying me with expressions of respect... and some even fear.

Leaving Haedrig to tend to Ada, I began searching for a specific mirror near the fountain. It didn't take long to find the ascender who I had promised to free, and while it was riddled with chips and cracks, his mirror prison had remained intact.

"I'm a man of my word," I said with my hand pressed against the cool glass. The ascender's eyes widened in shock as the motes of aether swirled around my hand and began to mend the many cracks that marred the surface of the mirror. "Rest well," I whispered as he faded away.

'Thank you.'

As the ascender completely vanished, I let out a deep breath. Stepping away from the mirror, I looked down at my palm. The few traces of the aetheric motes that continued to slowly orbit around my hand slowly dissipated, leaving me with a hollow feeling.

Unlike God Step or Destruction, this rune didn't expend much of my aether reserves. Even with the limited amount of aether in my core, I was confident I could free all the remaining ascenders.

Still, despite this new ability that I had unlocked, I was left with a bitter aftertaste.

The keystone could've unlocked a deeper and more powerful insight into aevum, but because of my lack of comprehension, I was left with only a piece of the whole.

The least part of the whole...

Now that I fully understood the rune, I knew this ability could only affect inorganic objects like the mirrors.

'On the bright side, with this ability you'll be able to revert dead relics into actual, usable relics,' Regis chimed.

I curled my fingers into a tight fist. You're right.

Despite its limitations, the ability to revert time was something even Kezess Indrath couldn't do, and while I wouldn't be able to use it in battle—or to bring back those who I had lost—that didn't mean I couldn't make full use of its utility. I just wished that I still had Dawn's Ballad here with me now, so that I could revert the asura-forged sword to its pristine state.

I pulled out the once dead relic from my pocket to examine it again. The edges of the clear crystal were now glowing dully. Now that I had more of my strength back, I pushed more aether into the stone, but still nothing happened. It seemed like, rather than being activated by aether, the relic had some sort of recharge period before it could be used again. At least that's what I hoped.

Making my way through the remaining mirrors, I continued exerting my newly acquired godrune to free the souls of the ascenders trapped within until the last one faded away, a disbelieving grin on her tired face.

The cold, white hall dimmed slightly and shifted to a warmer tone. In the distance, a translucent portal manifested within one of the empty mirrors, just like the image I had seen in one face of the dodecahedron.

It was only then that I realized that both Haedrig and Ada had been watching me.

"How—how are you feeling?" I asked hesitantly, looking at Ada.

The poor girl was barely able to muster a nod before she looked away, her swollen red eyes full of resentment.

I swallowed heavily before walking over to the two of them. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the simulet that Kalon had given me. "Here, you should take this."

Ada whipped her head back to face me, eyes alight with panic. "Y-you're leaving us here?"

I shook my head. "You all ended up in this mess because I was with you. If you two go through the portal on your own, it should lead you to a sanctuary."

"You have no way to know that," Ada said, her tear-lined face crumpling into a scowl.

"I don't, but I do know that if you go with me to the next zone, it'll be even more challenging than this one."

After a moment of hesitation, she reached for the simulet in my hand, but Haedrig intervened.

"I have no intention of going back up to the surface," the green-haired ascender said gravely.

"You can't be serious." I let out a scoff. "You almost died and you want to delve even deeper?"

"I almost died by *you*," Haedrig corrected. "As I've already said, the Relictombs react differently to unique individuals. I expected something like this to happen."

"You expected this to happen?" Ada asked incredulously. "And you still brought us along? My brothers and best friend *died*!"

For once, Haedrig's cool demeanor was nowhere to be seen, replaced by an expression of guilt. "I thought your eldest brother would be strong enough to—"

"Oh, so it's Kalon's fault that they all died?" Ada yelled, her hands clenched into quivering fists.

Haedrig winced. "That's not what I—"

Ada withdrew her simulet from a hidden pocket and threw it at the green-haired ascender before stomping off toward the portal.

Haedrig followed, trying to go after her, but I caught him by the wrist and held him back.

Just before Ada stepped through the portal, she looked back at us over her shoulder, fresh tears lining her cheeks and her vivid green eyes sharper than daggers. "If the Relictombs don't eat you two alive, Blood Granbehl will."

As the last of Ada's blonde hair disappeared through the portal, I let go of Haedrig's wrist.

"Was that wise, just letting her go like that?" Haedrig asked, clearly concerned. "Her blood is quite imposing, especially to an unnamed blood."

"Should I have killed her?" I inquired, raising a brow.

"Not kill... but at least we could have tried to talk it out."

"Her best friend and both her brothers were all butchered in front of her. I don't think anything we could've said would have convinced her. Besides, it's suspicious either way since our names are recorded."

"True," Haedrig said after a pause. "Are you not worried?"

"I'm more worried about what the next zone will be, and you should be too," I said as I tossed him my simulet. "Go back."

Haedrig shook his head, pushing the simulet back to me. "I want to go with you."

I shook my head, unable to believe his obstinacy. "Are you that eager to die, or are you expecting some sort of treasure vault at the end of this?"

"It shouldn't matter to you what I want. Even you have to admit that I can be useful," he said.

"And if there's nothing you can eat or drink in the next zone?" I pushed.

Haedrig revealed a playful smile. "Are you worrying about me?"

I let out a deep breath before stuffing the simulet back in my pocket. "Do as you wish. Just don't expect me to protect you."

"I never dreamed of it," he said, leading the way to the portal.

With my aether reserves about a quarter replenished and the warm lights flickering as if to warn us to leave quickly, I followed after the mysterious green-haired ascender.

With the decision made, there was no reason to linger in the mirror room. We stepped through the translucent portal, together, Haedrig holding onto to the back of my teal cloak just a step behind me.

To keep me from trying to ditch him at the last second, I suppose, I thought. He really doesn't want to be left behind, but why?

The thought was blown out of my mind as, immediately upon stepping through the portal, I was blasted by a gust of icy wind so sharp that I could barely keep my eyes open.

Unfazed by the drastic change in scenery, and with nothing in sight except a panorama of white, I pulled out the crystalline relic again. While I didn't know its full capabilities, I was sure it had some sort of navigational function.

Except this time, when I took out the crystalline relic, its glassy edges were once again fully opaque. Feeling instinctively that there was something off about this place, I turned back to Haedrig...

...only, instead of the shaggy, green-haired ascender, a familiar navy-haired girl with two piercing red eyes looked back at me.

I stumbled away from her, completely caught off guard, and she stared at me uncertainly.

"Caera?"

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"What the hell?"

Caera lifted one delicate hand to her face, feeling her cheek, then pulled a lock of her long hair out in front of her face so she could see it properly. She paled visibly as her hand reached up and touched one of the onyx horns that grew from the sides of her head. Each horn had two separate points: the main horns swept forward and up, while the smaller fang-shaped pair jutted back behind, framing her head like a dark crown. Thin golden rings adorned each of the smaller spurs.

"Grey, I can expla—"

My hand shot out in a blur, gripping Caera by her thin neck and lifting her off the snowy ground. A small gasp escaped her lips as she tried to pry herself free, but my eyes were focused on those black horns.

She's a Vritra! I thought, feeling foolish for letting someone I knew so little about get so close to me. No, she wouldn't be able to enter the Relictombs if that was the case. I wasn't sure what to make of this sudden revelation. Is she just Vritra blooded?

'I know you're shocked—so am I—but I don't think we'll get any answers from her if she's dead,' Regis chimed in, sobering me.

I loosened my grip, letting the Alacryan woman fall to the ground, where she coughed fitfully and rubbed at her throat.

"Please... Grey. I don't mean... any harm," Caera pleaded, her red eyes locked on me.

"Stop," I warned, drawing the white dagger from my dimension rune as I studied the highblooded Alacryan woman.

What was Caera's purpose—to kill me? That didn't make sense. She could've killed me anytime while I was in the keystone realm. Did she need proof to take back to her blood, a Scythe, or maybe even Agrona himself, so that they could find and execute me?

In the end, regardless of her reasons, it boiled down to two choices.

The thought of simply killing her right there and mitigating any potential risk surfaced in my mind, but holding the dagger brought up memories of Caera giving up her late brother's blade so that I could have a

weapon. Not only that, Caera and I had parted on good terms after our temporary allegiance in the convergence zone.

Even then, she and her two guards had several chances to kill me while I was unconscious after our fight against the titan, though it was also true that she could have guessed my identity after returning to Alacrya.

She's still calling me Grey, though, which means she might not know who I am after all...

My grip around the bone-white dagger tightened as I struggled to come up with the right decision. I had trusted Haedrig, but the green-haired man that had fought beside me never actually existed. Instead, it was a woman wrapped deeply in the veil of Alacryan nobility—with Vritra blood coursing through her.

Regis let out a chortle. 'Why are you thinking so deeply about this? Maybe she just likes you.'

"What?" I blurted, startling Caera, who was still on her knees in the snow.

"Nothing," I said, clearing my throat and silently cursing my companion for his flippant attitude.

I could feel Regis roll his eyes. 'Kill her or not, it's up to you, but chop chop. I don't fancy finding out what happens to me if you freeze to death standing here.'

My face and hands felt stiff from the cold, but my asuran body made this deadly weather a nuisance at most. Caera, despite her obvious Vritra ancestry, didn't share my fortitude, and she had already started to shake.

Letting out a sigh, I reluctantly made up my mind. I withdrew the wool bedroll from my rune—yet another piece of equipment that Alaric had thought to pack for me—and tossed it to her. "Wrap yourself up in this. We need to find shelter—then we'll talk."

She took the soft bedroll and draped it around herself like a blanket. "Thank you."

My eyes quickly scanned our surroundings. Like before, the portal we'd come through had vanished, leaving us stranded in a pure white expanse. An icy wind kicked up a lot of snow, making it difficult to see very far.

"Let's get moving," I replied curtly, turning away.

'I would've gone for the nice gentleman play, but aloof bad boy works too,' Regis teased.

Do you want me to cut you off from my supply of aether?

'No, sir. Sorry, sir.'

Rolling my eyes, I continued walking, paying close attention to the soft crunch of Caera's footsteps just a few paces behind me.

"You're wary of me, yet you're exposing your back to me. Are you that confident?" Caera asked, her silvery voice cutting through the howling of the wind.

"Do you want to find out?" I asked, not bothering to look back.

"Perhaps next time," she said softly after a beat of silence.

'Ooh, so she wants there to be a next time,' Regis snickered.

I ignored my companion's comment but mentally gave him his second strike.

"Keep an eye out for any kind of shelter," I called out, my own eyes scanning every shadow and wrinkle in the frozen wasteland for something that could be a cave or ravine, or even just an overhang that would get us out of the biting wind.

"I can barely see past you. Even with mana, I don't think I could find anything unless it was standing right in front of me," Caera said, frustration laced in her voice.

'Maybe you guys will have to dig yourself a shelter and cuddle for—'

Strike three.

Coalescing aether around Regis's incorporeal form inside me, I directed it to the palm of my hand and pushed outward.

To my surprise, Regis's fiery cub form actually burst out of my hand, limbs flapping in surprise.

'Hey! What the—'

Caera gasped and burst into action. Flinging off the bedroll and drawing her thin, curved sword, she cut swiftly downwards, cleaving Regis in two.

I watched with a raised brow as Regis's bisected form faded away, dissolving into the windblown snow.

Caera's sharp eyes darted around the terrain, but when she didn't see any more threats, she smoothly stored the blade once again. Then she noticed the look on my face, and her own confident expression slipped away.

I pointed nonchalantly at the area where Regis had disappeared and said, "That thing is going to reform in a few seconds. As amusing as it was, please don't attack him again."

Her eyes went wide. "That was something you did?"

"That was my wolf, yes."

"Grey, I'm—"

She was cut off as a pocket of dark ash began to spin within the light snow, condensing down until it was a perfectly round ball, then bursting into flames. Finally, Regis's bright eyes popped open, and the dark shadow of his mouth twisted down into a comical frown.

The will-o-wisp floated down to the ground where it shifted again, bulging outward as it transformed back into the small, wolf-like puppy. "You know, I'm not sure I like either one of you very much right now."

Caera's brows furrowed in confusion as her gaze shifted from Regis to me and then back again.

I shrugged. "This is Regis. You two have met before in the last two zones."

Her eyes shone in realization, then she tilted her head. "But he was a little bigger then."

"Yeah, well you were a dude," Regis snapped angrily.

"You're right." Caera's lips quivered as if she were trying very hard not to smile. "I'm sorry, little friend."

The Alacryan leaned down and scratched Regis behind one pointy little ear. His bright eyes glared at her, but he couldn't stop his shadowy tail from wagging in pleasure.

This time, I let out a chortle, causing my companion to stiffen.

Letting out a growl, Regis snapped at Caera's finger, startling her so that she jerked her hand away.

The tiny shadow wolf pounced ahead of us, bounding through the snow with some difficulty. Without looking back, Regis said, "Stop staring and start walking, before you both turn into meat popsicles."

I met Caera's strange red eyes, narrowed in a pleasant smile, and forced myself to turn away. Scooping up my bedroll, the Alacryan shook the snow off and wrapped it around her shoulders, then we followed after our fuzzy little guide.

[&]quot;It's a bowl," I muttered, stopping so that Caera, who was walking in the track I left in the deepening snow, bumped into me.

"What?" she asked, taking a step back and peering around us.

I took her by the shoulder and turned her so that she was looking down into a wide dip in the land. Visibility was poor enough that I hadn't immediately noticed it, but we were walking along the ridge of a massive, shallow crater.

The wind let up at that moment, and a beam of silvery light cut through the gray blanket above us, spilling across the snow and highlighting the entire basin. Far below us, perhaps a mile or more, there was the clear outline of a large, round bulge under the snow—much too round and perfect to be a natural formation.

Then the wind picked back up, and the clouds closed in, and the shape was lost behind a white curtain.

"Did you see that?" Caera asked excitedly, pointing down toward the hidden mound.

She turned toward me, and suddenly she seemed very close. Her gaze then landed on my arm, which I suddenly realized was still around her shoulder. Immediately, I pulled myself away, taking a step back as Caera also shifted uncomfortably.

"See what?" Regis asked, trotting back toward us after having gone several yards ahead. "What'd I miss?"

'And what were you doing with your arm around the spy, eh?"

"There's something down there." I gestured down the slope, ignoring my companion. "It looks like the snow gets deeper, though, so maybe you should get back inside me." I looked at Regis pointedly, making it clear this was less a question and more of a demand.

"You know, it's been nice to stretch my legs. I think I'll stay out here. I don't mind a little snow."

I glared at the pup, and Regis wiggled his eyebrows in return, a gesture that reminded me of the cartoon animals in the shows I had seen as a kid.

'I think I'll keep an eye on things from out here,' he thought to me, making it obvious that he was still upset about being cut in half.

Caera was watching us expectantly, so I waved my hand toward the slope. "After you, my mighty companion."

Regis swished his shadowy tail as he trotted on ahead. Within sixty feet, though, the drifts were well over his head, and, even though the cold wasn't bothering him, his tiny wolven body wasn't equipped to swim through snow.

After struggling for a couple of minutes to keep up any sort of progress, pouncing and paddling through the snow, Regis gave up. "You know, I think I've stretched my legs enough. I better go back to gathering

aether." With that, my companion leapt up as if trying to jump into my arms, but instead faded into my body.

"What did he mean, gather aether?" Caera asked as we pushed forward through snow that was now up to my hips. I was leading, breaking a path so that Caera could more easily follow.

"My summons is powered by aether. When we used... the purple fire, well, we used up all his power. So he shrunk into this form." I kept my tone matter-of-fact, as if it were perfectly normal to have an aether-powered shadow wolf for a companion.

"But he's not really a summons, is he?" I could practically feel her piercing eyes burning into the back of my neck.

"No, I suppose not. Not the way you normally think of one."

"And..." Caera hesitated. I kept my attention forward, shoveling through the deep, heavy powder. "And you're not really a mage, are you? Not the way we'd normally think of one, anyway. You don't use mana."

I stopped walking, more out of realization than out of apprehension—realization of how tired I was of hiding everything about myself to everyone that I came across. There was no way I could answer truthfully without giving away who I really was, but any lie would be as obvious as the horns on her head.

"No, I suppose not."

We marched in silence for a few minutes, and soon the snow was up to my ribs. A strong hand on my shoulder pulled me up short. I turned to see what was the matter, but was blinded by my own bedroll being tossed over my face.

Caera laughed for the first time, a refreshing yet elegant sound. "I'm no ordinary mage either, remember?"

I jerked the wool blanket from my face, already gathering aether into my extremities to defend myself if needed, but Caera wasn't attacking me. She wasn't even looking at me.

An ominous power was growing within her, however, and when she finally met my eyes, there was a dark fire in them. "You might want to move aside, Grey."

I stepped back into the snow, getting out of her path as she drew her sword—her real sword. The dark, flaming aura I'd seen her use when fighting the giant monster in the convergence zone flickered around the red blade, turning it black.

This time, though, it was much more muted, less wild and dangerous.

Then Caera thrust the sword forward and the dark flames billowed outward, carving a channel in the snow for at least two hundred yards.

She turned back and walked toward me, sheathing her long curved blade. Snatching the bedroll back and wrapping it over her shoulder, she shot me an almost childish grin. "You look tired, Grey. Let me lead for awhile."

"That trick was more impressive the first time I saw it," I muttered, dusting the snow off of my clothes.

Snorting indelicately, Caera spun away and started marching through the wide path she'd made.

I followed, my mind entirely occupied by Caera's ability. When she'd used her power in the convergence zone, I had been too busy not dying to really examine it. This time, though, I had watched carefully as she manifested the dark aura and released the torrent of black fire.

The flames hadn't produced heat. They destroyed without burning, kind of like the violet fires of the Destruction rune, but she wasn't using aether. In the convergence zone, those same flames had eaten through the titanic guardian's attack, literally carving a path through the beam of energy.

I flashed back to my battle with Nico, how he had controlled the dark flames to destroy my lightning storm. Caera's ability seemed similar, able to destroy both energy and matter. Then I thought of Cadell's soulfire, and how it was able to burn away someone's life force from inside, preventing even vivum from healing them.

Then something I hadn't thought about in a very long time returned to me. I was walking through the forest with Windsom, my asuran protector and mentor. Birds were chirping. The sun shining through the leaves dappled his wise old face as we walked. He was teaching me about the different asuran races and their magic.

He had described the nature of aether, though he struggled to communicate into the "lesser tongue," and had settled on referring to it as a "creation-type mana art." The Vritra were made up mostly of basilisks, a race that used a decay-type mana art, though he never gave me another name for it.

Was that what Caera was using? A unique deviant form of mana-based magic?

I watched Caera's navy hair bounce around her onyx horns as she strode ahead of me like nothing could touch her. She was incredibly talented—and equally confident in her abilities. When I'd first seen the way she fought, I'd immediately been reminded of myself.

It was no secret that Agrona and his basilisks had bred with the people of Alacrya. Clearly Caera was the result of such experiments, but she hid her ancestry when we first met in the Relictombs—using her strongest ability only when there was no other option. Something about this zone had caused her disguise to fail, but even the first time I'd met her while she was with her two guards, she had hidden her horns.

Why?

'Right? Personally, I think they're hot.'

When we reached the end of the path carved by Caera's power, the snow was deep enough that the channel had become a tunnel. Instead of a round, rippling tunnel of ice, though, the fifteen-foot-deep cave in the snow was rough and imprecise, like a dozen children had dug it out with their bare hands.

With no heat to melt the snow, allowing it to refreeze and harden, the tunnel didn't seem safe to enter—but that wasn't all that was bothering me.

Caera lifted her sword from her shoulder and pointed it forward, but I held out a hand. "I don't think your power is best suited to this kind of thing. Save your strength. Based on my experience in the Relictombs, it won't be long before something tries to kill us."

"I concede the point. What do you suggest, Grey?"

As far as I could tell, we were still a quarter mile or more from the round bulge we'd seen from the rim of the caldera. The powdery snow made walking on its surface impractical, as either one of us could sink in over our head with each step.

'You could blast a tunnel with aether,' Regis suggested.

I had already considered this, but the aether cost of utilizing Gauntlet Form for something as mundane as drilling a whole through the snow seemed reckless. *Drilling*...

Regis, you're a genius.

'I... know?' I could sense my companion's confusion, but I was already preparing myself.

With a thought, I encouraged Regis to move to my hand to help draw the aether that I released from my core. I didn't build up a large blast of aether like I might have if I were preparing for an attack, but instead I released a small burst of aetheric energy.

As I siphoned aether through my arm, I willed it to coalesce rather than surge out, but the manifestation faded in my palm; this was something new, and it required more control than creating a straightforward burst of energy.

Taking a deep breath and tuning out Regis's stray thoughts and Caera's piercing gaze, I tried again—and again.

After the fourth attempt, the aether finally manifested into the form of a globular balloon that dispersed as soon as it left my palm. After the seventh attempt, the aether took shape into a sphere that grew larger as I fed it more aether.

It took every ounce of my concentration to keep the shimmering purple globe from dispersing as it grew to my height. Then I shoved, driving the aetheric sphere forward into the snow.

Despite using only a fraction of the aether it would've taken to unleash a full aetheric blast, the large aetheric orb bored through over twenty feet of snow before it faded away, leaving behind a round, stable tunnel that we could easily walk through.

"Good enough," I huffed. I had hoped to manipulate the aether into a cone-shaped drill, but seeing as even a half-decent sphere was barely possible, I quickly settled for something simpler.

'You know, that's pretty much exactly what I was thinking.'

Of course it was, I teased.

Caera walked carefully into the tunnel, her hand running across the wall and roof as she warily inspected my handiwork. "Clever. Can you do it again?"

Nodding, I said, "I should be able to get to that dome without totally draining myself, yeah."

She stepped aside, gesturing into the tunnel. "After you, my mighty companion."

Whether it was because I was tired from the amount of concentration that went into the aetheric spell—if it could even be called that—or just because I was still proud of my accomplishment, I actually let out a small laugh before building up aether in my right hand again.

By resting briefly after every few uses of the aether cannon, as Regis quickly dubbed it, I was able to keep my core topped up, just in case we ran into anything hostile under the snow. I took it as a good sign that we did not, however, and within an hour we found what we were looking for.

Behind me, Caera held up a light artifact, revealing a smooth, gleaming white wall. I ran my hand along the cold stone.

"I've never seen anything like it—like frost that's been turned into stone," I said, brushing away the snow at the outer edges of the tunnel. My aetheric sphere hadn't even scratched the surface. "Let's hope there's a door somewhere."

Utilizing my new aether cannon spell, I began to open up space around the outside of the white dome. Wherever the swirling purple energy touched the shining stone, my power seemed to disperse, rolling over the smooth surface like water across wax.

Then, with a final pulse of aether, golden-white light spilled from an arched door in the dome, causing our snowy tunnel to blaze so brightly that I had to shield my eyes.

Caera held up her hand to ward off the glare. "I hope that light is coming from a nice, warm fire."

Blinking away the glittering stars in my eyes, I drew the white dagger, infused my body with aether, and moved cautiously up to the archway.

The inside wasn't exactly what I had expected.

The dome was about forty feet tall at its peak, and nearly one hundred feet wide. Blazing balls of light drifted through the air like paper lanterns. A dais rose up from the floor at the center of the cavernous room, and on it was a beautifully carved arch.

Or, what was left of it.

Though the dais was twenty feet across and raised up ten feet over the level of the floor, it still looked small and forlorn in the huge, empty space. There was an atmosphere of neglect and loss within the dome that made my skin crawl.

From next to me, Caera said, "It looks... broken."

Scanning the room again to make sure there were no enemies clinging to the ceiling or creeping along the walls, I stepped into the dome, then slowly crossed the open expanse to the stairs, feeling entirely exposed.

There was a pile of random items at the foot of the stairs. Caera kneeled down to inspect them.

"Bones, mostly, but look at this?"

She held up a pure white arrowhead. "It looks like it's made from the same material as the dome." I took it from her and rubbed it between my fingers; it was cold to the touch and silky smooth. "And look at this."

Draped from her fingers was a leather cord hung with large, curved talons, like those of a hawk or an eagle, but larger.

"Made from something native to this zone, I imagine," I said, pressing my fingertip to point at one of the claws. I winced as a drop of blood bloomed on my fingertip. "Damned sharp."

"Made by what though, I wonder," Caera asked, tossing the talon necklace back into the pile.

Although I was interested in the items and what they might tell us about this zone, I was more interested in getting out of it. Stepping over the scattered objects, I took the stairs two at a time until I reached the top of the platform.

The arch was ten feet high and just as wide. I ran my fingers across the designs, which were incredibly detailed, showing animals at play in gardens full of impressively crafted plants and flowers.

But Caera had been right. Several pieces of the arch were missing, which, assuming that this was the portal out of the zone, meant that we were stuck.

309 TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL

My fingers ran over the arch's frame, tracing the jagged, broken edges where parts of the large structure were missing.

Was this another challenge or just bad luck? I had hoped that crossing the frozen wasteland was enough to leave this zone, but clearly that wasn't it.

I turned to Caera. "Do you see any pieces of the arch in that pile? It looks like there are at least four or five separate chunks that have been broken off, judging by the damage."

She sifted through the large pile for a moment before looking back up at me and shaking her head. "There's quite a bit to sort through here, but I don't see anything else in the same white stone the arch seems to be made of. Maybe here under some of the bones..." She kept rummaging, but I wasn't hopeful. Things were never that easy in the Relictombs.

Regis popped out of my side, landing on the platform and shaking himself like a dog, the violet flames of his mane flickering. He gazed up at the ancient structure towering over him before speaking. "Do you even need the pieces? Maybe that fancy new power of yours can just... fix it."

"You can't just fix..." The rest of my words died in my throat as I realized my companion had a point. Pressing my palm to the arch, I ignited the newly acquired godrune that sat latent within me. Repairing all of the mirrors in the last zone had given me more than enough practice utilizing Aroa's Requiem, but the sensation still felt new and raw, almost foreign.

The rune glowed golden from beneath my clothes as aether circulated through it, and purple motes of aether began to swirl around my hand. The motes left me and flowed along the arch, concentrating where the broken edges stood out against the flawlessly smooth carvings.

Aside from some light scuffs fading away, nothing happened. I kept concentrating, imagining the missing fragments of the arch rebuilding themselves. The sparkling particles of aether had simply worked when I'd used the rune before, repairing the cracked mirrors and releasing the imprisoned ascenders with no direction from me.

But I had seen what to do in the vision of the future...

Maybe I needed more understanding of how to repair an item, or what its purpose was, to affect it with Aroa's Requiem.

Or maybe that wasn't it either.

Frustrated more at myself than the circumstances we were in, I let out a sigh.

"It's not working," Regis said helpfully.

"I can *see* that," I muttered, withdrawing aether from my godrune. The purple motes flickered out one by one as the rune's glow faded. "Try searching the rest of the hall for any pieces of the arch. Maybe if we can find them I'll be able to repair it."

"Maybe? I mean, I'm as much an optimist as the next guy, but 'maybe' sounds like—"

"Do we have any other choice?" I snapped, glaring down at the shadow wolf pup.

Regis's ears drooped. "No, I suppose not."

I sighed as my companion hopped from stair to stair and began sniffing around the outside wall of the huge space. Sylvie and I had never fought like this—but that wasn't Regis's fault. Sylvie had always been my counterpoint, providing me wisdom when I was being foolish, temperance when I was reckless, bravery when I was afraid.

Regis, on the other hand, was more like me, reinforcing both my strengths and my weaknesses. Was that why I was harder on him than I had been on Sylvie? I thought back to those first moments in the Relictombs, when I woke up alone and powerless—alone except for him.

Without him, waking up in that sanctuary room without Sylvie, knowing she sacrificed herself for me...

Sitting down on the edge of the platform with my legs dangling down the side, I withdrew the rainbow-colored stone that held my bond. It had been quite some time since I had tried pushing aether into it, but I could feel that I hadn't grown strong enough yet. Despite everything I'd faced and all that I had learned since waking up magicless and broken in the Relictombs, I had barely scratched the surface of what was possible with aether.

I'm going to get you out of there someday, Sylv. I promise. When you meet Regis you're going to—

"Another relic secreted away from the Vritra?" Caera asked as she slid to a seat beside me, my bedroll pulled tightly around her shoulders. Her navy hair fell in front of her eyes and she leaned down to inspect Sylvie's egg.

"Not exactly," I said, turning my eyes back to the iridescent egg.

"It's beautiful," Caera said, her words barely a whisper.

"Thanks," I said, hurriedly stashing the egg back in my dimensional storage rune before she was able to study it any more closely.

I started to stand up when strong fingers gripped me around the forearm and pulled me back to my seat. I turned to make some excuse to Caera, but she was staring at me flabbergasted. "What was that?"

My eyes narrowed. "I don't think I'm obligated to tell you what my—"

"I'm not talking about the colorful stone," she said, waving my words away with her free hand. "How did you do that? Where did it go?"

Nonplussed, I showed her the back of my hand and the dimensional storage ring that I wore. "In my—"

"No, you didn't." She shook her head, her usual calm demeanor replaced by a childlike excitement. "You didn't activate the ring just now, I could tell. Wait, you can't..." Caera's eyes widened in realization. "Of course, how did I not see it before? You don't have mana to activate the ring."

My mind whirled for lies to explain what had happened: my ring could be another relic that didn't need mana, the egg could've had similar powers to Regis, or some other convenient excuse...

But as I opened my mouth to speak, I hesitated... tired of it all.

What was the point of lying? Caera knew I could use aether. She knew I had at least one relic—which was already punishable by death—and probably assumed I had more. She'd even seen Regis talk and absorb aether but still chose to scratch him like he was just another household pet.

"I..." Letting out a sigh, I pulled up my sleeve and imbued aether into my forearm to activate the dimensional rune. "I have a rune—a spellform—that operates on a similar principle. The ring is just for show."

"Fascinating." Caera's ruby eyes shone with intense curiosity as she stared at the complex runes engraved to my skin.

I felt a slight smile tug at the corner of my lips as I watched her inspect my arm like a child opening a brand-new toy.

Catching myself, a wave of guilt forced myself to remember who this girl was. Caera had followed me and lied about her identity. She was not only an Alacryan but of the same blood as Agrona and the rest of his monstrosities that had wreaked havoc on my people.

A dark part of me reasoned that I could always kill her before leaving the Relictombs if I told her too much, but I also knew I was just making excuses to myself. Being honest with myself, it simply felt good to have even that small weight of having one less secret off my shoulders.

A cold touch on my arm snapped me out of my thoughts, startling me.

Caera pulled her hand away. "M-my apologies! My curiosity tends to get the better of me at times, and I wanted to see how the rune felt..."

"It's fine," I said, clearing my throat.

I pulled my sleeve back down to cover the rune, but Caera was still staring at me.

"Is there something on my face?" I asked, cocking a brow.

"It's just... Who are you, Grey?" Caera asked.

"Just a soldier that was mortally wounded," I said with a shrug. "You should remember, you met me only shortly after."

Caera narrowed her eyes as she stuck her lips out into a pout. "That's a bit of an oversimplification, Grey. If you were to ask me, I'd speculate that you're some sort of aberration of the Relictombs, conjured of aether to lure me into the deepest depths of the ancient mages' endless fortress."

"Lure you?" I scoffed. "Excuse me, but if I recall correctly, *you* were the one who somehow tracked me and tricked me into taking you along."

Caera stiffened before clearing her throat. "That, I admit, was a bit unbecoming," she said, turning away.

"So..." I said quietly. "Isn't it about time I get an explanation?"

Caera fidgeted uncomfortably, still unable to look me in the eyes as her hair fell over her face like a curtain. She raised a hand and pointed at my chest. "The medallion," she said finally.

"The medallion?" I echoed, confused. "What meda—"

Realization struck me and I withdrew her brother's bone-white dagger and gazed at the golden coin strapped to its handle. Etched into it was the sign of Denoir house: feathered wings spread out from a wreathed shield.

Of course.

"Can anyone track me with this, or just you?" My voice came out cold and collected as my narrowed gaze locked onto her. If Agrona or his Scythes were able to hunt me down with a magical tracking beacon, then I would be in danger as soon as I left the Relictombs.

Damn it. If I was still able to use mana, I wouldn't have fallen for this.

"Only I'm attuned to the medallion," she said hurriedly, turning to meet my eyes. "No one else can track it, I swear."

She held my gaze for a moment, her ruby eyes sincere and unwavering until she dipped her head. "Again... I apologize."

I held out the dagger and coin. "You said that you expected these back one day. Here, take them."

She didn't move to accept the offered items. "Grey, I—"

I set the dagger and medallion down on the platform between us, just loudly enough to cut her off. "You've told me how. You still have to tell me why."

Aether leaked from me, rippling in the air to give a tangible weight to my emotions.

"What I said back in the mirror zone was all true," she said, flinching slightly. "I could tell you were different and... I wanted to know more, to see for myself."

"Then why not reveal yourself?" I asked icily. "Why go to all the trouble to disguise your identity?"

"No offense, Grey, but passing dogs can tell how standoffish and untrusting you are. Would you have really let me travel with you had you known who I really was?" she asked, raising a brow.

Surprised by the blunt response, I opened my mouth to reply, but Caera continued speaking.

"Besides, I'm always in disguise, no matter where I go." She smiled solemnly, her hand touching one of her dark horns.

I stared at the Alacryan noble. Even after enduring two zones and a deadly winter storm, her posture remained poised as she sat across from me. But underneath that polished exterior was something that reminded me of myself when I had first wound up in the Relictombs. I could tell how alone she felt...

Letting out a sigh, I spoke once more, breaking the silence. "I want to trust you, Caera, but I can't."

"Then don't, Grey." Her gaze hardened as she swallowed audibly. "If I harm you in any way, impede your goals, or do anything to cause you to think that I'm sabotaging your purpose here... kill me."

I remained silent, taken aback by her confidence and resolve.

Thankfully, the sound of little paws plodding across the silky stone floor drew our attention to Regis.

I slid off the edge of the dais we were sitting on, landing the ten foot drop with ease, before walking toward Regis. "Did you find anything?"

"Not a damn thing," Regis muttered, shaking his head.

"Which likely means we'll have to venture back out into the snow," I added with a sigh.

I glanced back at Caera, who hopped off the edge of the platform as well, landing deftly before joining us. Tossing the bedroll that I had given her over her shoulders, she gave us a nod. "We should get going then."

I shook my head. "The blizzard sounds like it's getting worse. I doubt you'd last very long out there."

Caera frowned. "While it would drain my mana reserves by quite a bit, I should be able to endure if I clad myself in my soulfire."

"It's not just that. The storm makes it almost impossible for me to see anything even with my enhanced senses. We should set up camp here for now and get some rest while we still can."

Caera nodded, wrapping the thick blanket tighter around her. "That also doesn't sound like a bad plan."

I managed a faint smile before turning to my companion. "And Regis?"

"Yeah, boss?"

"You better spend some time gathering aether. We're going to need you back at full strength."

The little shadow wolf grinned hungrily before jumping into my body.

The camping situation wasn't ideal. We weren't equipped for the cold weather, though at least the light orbs floating around the dome shed some heat. Alaric had packed a surprisingly large amount of blankets for some reason, but I couldn't find any sort of matches to start a fire. Worse yet, Caera's dimension ring had been damaged in her fight against Mythelias, which meant the matches and other survival equipment she had packed was inaccessible.

"What about your soulfire?" I asked as the two of us sat on the thick pile of bedrolls we had spread out along the edge of the platform near the staircase.

"It doesn't produce any heat like a normal flame would," she said, igniting a black fire on the tip of her finger.

The two of us idly watched the shadowy flame as Caera made it bigger. Her gaze followed the tip of the flame when her eyes suddenly widened. Extinguishing the flame, she pointed up. "We can use those!"

I looked up to see the floating orbs of light hovering high above us in the room. Before I could argue, Caera had already jumped up to the pedestal and was climbing the arch. Reaching the top of the arch, she was just under the height they were hovering at.

Curious, I watched as Caera crouched down atop the white arch, got her feet under her, and waited. After a few minutes, one of the lights drifted close enough. Her scarlet eyes locking onto the target, she leapt from the peak of the arch, soaring through the air and landing right on top of it...

Or, she should have landed on top of it.

Instead, she went right through it.

Caera let out a soft squeal as she fumbled in the air before crashing gracelessly to the ground twenty feet below her.

'Ouch,' Regis groaned. 'That's gotta hurt.'

The Alacryan noble bolted up to her feet as if nothing had happened. Her hair, however, was in shambles, and dust was caked throughout her clothes and parts of her face.

I stifled a laugh as she turned away.

"You alright?" I asked, watching her pat the dust off her clothes.

"I'd appreciate... if you could forget that ever happened," she said, still facing away from me.

"You were waving your arms so hard that, for a second, I thought you were actually going to fly," I smiled slyly. "That image is pretty hard to forget."

Caera whirled around, cheeks red and eyes glaring angrily. "Y-you..."

I couldn't help but laugh even as Caera ripped out a bedroll from under me and spun on her heels, marching to the other side of the room before huddling with the blanket over her head.

Feeling a tinge of guilt for making fun of her, I let Caera have some time to herself while I went back outside. Ignoring the biting winds that cut through my clothes and armor, I scooped snow into our waterskins and a small wooden cask that Alaric had packed for me before going back inside the dome.

"How is it outside?" Caera asked, leaning against the wall beside the entrance.

I held up the cask and waterskins for her to see. "Water shouldn't be a problem once this melts."

"I guess our biggest problem is food then," she said softly before taking a peek at me. "Or rather, my biggest problem."

"When was the last time you ate?" I asked.

"It's been about five days, maybe a week... so I'm not in any immediate danger of starving," she said. Her stomach grumbled at that moment as if to argue.

"The pile of bones we found earlier means that there still might be some wildlife out there somewhere," I stated.

Caera let out a sigh. "Whether it's for sustenance or the missing pieces of the arch, it seems like all of the signs are telling us to venture back out there."

"Do you regret stalking me now?" I asked with a smirk.

"Investigating for personal research," the Alacryan noble corrected.

I handed her the wooden cask stuffed with snow. "Well, Miss Investigator, chew on this for now."

Caera grabbed a handful and held it up like it was a glass of wine. "You've managed to find quite the delicacy, Grey. Is this S-grade ice?"

Rolling my eyes, I walked over to the bedrolls we had stacked on top of one another to make a makeshift bed.

Care to take the night shift, my gluttonous companion? I asked.

Regis emerged from my arm, falling to the ground on all four of his stubby little legs. "I take offense to that kind of language."

"Tell that to your belly." I pointed to the round bulge of a stomach that nearly touched the ground.

"Hmph! Let it digest and I'll return to my adult form in no time," he argued before waddling toward the stack of bedrolls.

"You should try getting some sleep," I said, handing Caera a few more bedrolls. "The strength of the blizzard seems to fluctuate, so ideally this storm will subside soon. If not, we should still be ready to head out as soon as Regis is back to full strength."

She nodded, accepting the bedrolls and curling up into a corner with the cloth blankets wrapped tightly around her.

I was lying underneath a single bedroll a few feet away, leaning against the smooth wall of the platform. With my asuran body constantly supplied by the abundant amounts of ambient aether in the zone, the teal, fur-lined cloak was enough to keep away most of the cold.

Sleep eluded me and closing my eyes caused unwanted memories to resurface, so I let my gaze wander across the large marble dome until it landed on Caera's prone form, still shivering within her bedrolls.

"Maybe it would make more sense if we shared my bedroll," I said softly, thinking that our bodies' shared warmth in the confined bedroll might keep us warm.

Caera stopped shivering as her entire body seemed to tense up underneath the coverings. Regis, who was lying nearby, lifted his head, his eyes bulging.

Slowly, Caera turned toward me, eyes wide and blushing bright red all the way up to her curved horns.

It only took a split second to realize why both Regis and Caera looked so shocked. I held my hand up in front of me. "Wait, I didn't mean—"

"Grey," Caera said hoarsely, "while I admit you're quite handsome, don't think that getting me into your bedroll will be so easy."

"Oh my," Regis sang.

I opened my mouth, closed it, and opened it again before burying my face in my hand. "Forget I said anything," I mumbled, turning my back to the two of them.

"I'm sorry, your forwardness just surprised me." Caera's voice still had a tinge of laughter in it as her soft steps drew closer to me. I felt the back of my bedroll being lifted as she climbed in under the thick blanket behind me. "Thank you, Grey."

I didn't respond as her body shifted closer to me, her constant shivers gradually subsiding. We lay back-to-back, and I kept my mind carefully blank as I listened to her breathing become more even, but it was obvious that she was still awake by her occasional shuffling.

"There's been something on my mind," I finally said. "Why do you hide your horns? I assumed that having horns would be something to take pride in."

"I suppose it is normal to think so, and for many it might be," she said, her voice soft. "But reality is never that simple."

Caera paused, as if hesitant to reveal any more. After letting out a sigh, she went on.

"Every house that has had traces of Vritra blood in their lineage is recorded so that offspring from those houses are immediately tested upon birth. If a newborn's blood contains traces of the High Sovereign's lineage, then they're immediately taken away from that household and placed into a highblood house capable of raising and training the baby to become a distinguished figure," she explained.

"So, the Denoirs aren't your blood parents?" My mind jumped to my own parents and my strange relationship with them. Though I'd been born to Alice and Reynold, and I thought of them as my true parents, as Grey I had been birthed by a different woman, a mother I had no memory of.

"No, they're not. I don't know my blood parents. The Denoirs had the 'honor' of fostering me in the hopes that the Vritra blood in me manifested—which is quite rare."

There was a hint of sarcasm at the word 'honor', but I didn't press it, letting her continue.

"Until then, I was to be raised, educated, and trained under the safest of conditions because if anything were to happen to me, the Sovereigns would strip the Denoirs of their nobility and land at the very least, or, in the most extreme circumstances, even kill the entire blood."

"That must've put your relationship with the Denoirs on edge," I chortled.

Caera let out a small laugh. "That's a bit of an understatement, Grey. But yes, the only one that actually treated me like a person rather than a glass sculpture was Sevren, the original owner of the white dagger, and the only one I could actually call a brother.

"He would sneak me out of my room and the two of us would spar until sunrise. After he became an ascender, he would come back and always tell me stories of his ascent—the thrills and dangers of the Relictombs." Caera shifted slightly under the blanket.

"That explains your fondness for the Relictombs," I said, connecting the dots with what she'd told me as Haedrig. "That also explains why you have to disguise yourself as someone else, but not why you hid your horns even when I first saw you with your guards."

"The fact that my Vritra blood has manifested has been kept a secret from the Denoirs—even to Taegen and Arian," she divulged.

"What? How do they not—" I turned, only now noticing that Caera had been facing me.

Her scarlet eyes widened in surprise as we came face to face and I immediately pulled away from her, lying on my back and keeping a couple inches of space between us.

"My back was taking up all of the heat," she quickly explained, flustered.

"No, it's okay," I said. "But how do the Denoirs not know that you've manifested your Vritra blood? I thought that was the whole point of taking you in?"

"It is, and in normal conditions, they would've been the first to know," Caera agreed. "But at the time of my dormant Vritra blood's manifestation, I was with one of my mentors—a Scythe sent by one of the Vritra themselves."

I stiffened at the mention of the powerful Alacryan generals, who had nearly killed me on multiple occasions, but Caera didn't seem to notice.

"My mentor immediately took me to a secluded area and helped guide me through the process before explaining what would happen to me, now that I was a true Vritra-blooded Alacryan." A solemn smile appeared on Caera's face. "She gave me a choice: I could be experimented on and molded into a soldier for Agrona, or I could continue on as I had been, the frustrated foster-child of an overprotective blood."

"I'm assuming you went with choice number two?"

Caera let out a chuckle. "I don't think I'd be in the same bedroll as a mysterious wielder of taboo magic with several relics in his possession if I had chosen the first option. Do you know how many laws you're breaking?"

"Probably not many more than the girl hiding the fact that she's able to wield Vritra magic," I pointed out. "And I doubt it's okay for you to be referring to the *High Sovereign* himself like he's your least favorite uncle."

Caera stared at me for a moment before bursting into laughter, startling me.

"I guess that's true. Here..." She then reached down her undershirt, pulling out a small teardrop-shaped pendant before handing it to me. "It's not working right now, but this is the relic that keeps my horns hidden and allows me to change my appearance to Haedrig."

I held it in my palm, feeling the unmistakable traces of aether radiating from it. "Is it okay for you to be revealing this to me?"

"It's unreasonable for you to trust me after how I deceived you, but a close alternative to trust is mutually assured destruction," Caera said, giving me a somber smile.

I raised a brow. "You know I can destroy this right now..."

The Alacryan noble's eyes widened. "Y-you can? That would be... problematic."

I stared at the crystalline blue relic, studying the aetheric runes that seemed to have been engraved on the inside of the translucent gem by the djinns. Caera watched me closely, biting her lip nervously as I turned the priceless relic over.

She was right. If I held onto this relic now—or destroyed it before we left the Relictombs—her life would be in as much danger as mine.

After thinking the matter through, I tossed the pendant back to her. "You'd be no use to me if you get locked up as soon as we got out."

Caera's eyes lit up. "Does that mean you don't plan on killing me yet, Grey?"

"Let's get some sleep." I turned my back to her, lying on my side under the cover as I asked myself that same question...

The rational side of me knew that it would be safest to kill her here and now, but I had vowed to myself after first winding up in the Relictombs that I would need to take risks if I wanted to kill Agrona. And if Caera, with all of her powers and connections, really was opposed to the Vritra as much as she had led me to believe, then having her on my side might just be worth the risk.

The sound of soft, even breaths behind me jogged me out of my thoughts. I peeked back to see that Caera had already fallen asleep.

'No funny business. I'm a proponent of mutual consent,' Regis japed.

I ignored my companion, thankful that he had at least kept to himself during our conversation, and closed my eyes, both hopeful and anxious for what this zone would bring.

310 TRACKS

Regis and I stood at the archway opening into the snowy tunnel. The entrance had partially collapsed and was quickly being filled with snow. In front of us was a blurred expanse of gray and white, howling gales tearing and tossing snow with enough speed to tear flesh from bone.

I scratched my cheek. "Maybe it's not as bad as it looks."

Regis chortled. "Imagine those being your last words."

Ignoring my companion's snide remark, I approached the end of the tunnel, where snow had piled up and largely filled in the chasm cut by Caera's power, leaving behind only a shallow divot. Flecks of purple aether swirled within the storm, giving the snow a pinkish hue and making it even more difficult to see.

"Wait, you were being serious?" Regis asked, walking around me to stand between me and the storm. "We were barely able to see two feet in front of us yesterday and the storm is even worse than before."

"Well we can't keep twiddling our thumbs hoping for the storm to pass," I said, stepping over my companion.

I clad myself in aether, fortifying my body against the cold and cutting shards of snow and ice. Climbing up the divot, I began to make my way up out of the tunnel. My feet sank with each step on the soft white powder as I had to continually use my hands to shovel aside the fresh snow.

Even with the endless amount of ambient aether replenishing my reserves, I could feel my core draining fast from the winds constantly slashing at my aetheric defenses. I had to walk slowly and with a wide stance to keep from being tossed off my feet by the storm. The aetheric winds constantly changed directions, shifting the landscape with every blow and shaking my confidence in my own sense of direction.

"Damn it," I cursed, my voice drowned out by the howling gale.

Admitting defeat, I turned back. The blizzard had already started filling in the trench I'd forged to reach this point, but using my link with Regis as an anchor, I quickly found the vanishing entrance to the aether-carved tunnel leading back to the dome.

By the time I returned, Caera was awake and standing next to Regis, wrapped tightly in several layers of bedrolls.

Caera stared at me before letting out a shiver. "Just looking at you makes me feel colder."

I looked down to see that I was caked from head to toe with a thick layer of compacted snow.

"Did you find anything out there? A bit of snow, perhaps?" Regis asked with a wolfish grin.

Sweeping a thick clump of snow out of my wheat hair and off my shoulders, I promptly dropped it on top of my companion.

"Hey!" Regis yelled, his small voice muffled by the snow. He struggled to free his diminutive form from the snow before Caera dipped down and pulled him out by his tail.

"It looks like we're going to be stuck here for a bit," I said to Caera as I shook the rest of the snow off of me.

The Alacryan noble let out a sigh. "I figured as much."

Walking back along the tunnel and into the dome, I took a seat at our makeshift camp and began to think. The thought of just idly waiting felt nearly as dreadful as the trek through the snowstorm. I debated whether to use this time refining my aether core but the process left me too vulnerable for my comfort and Regis still needed to get back to normal.

As I continued to deliberate our next course of action, my gaze was drawn to Caera, who was digging through the pile of random items by the foot of the stairs. Her eyes lit up as she picked up a small item before stuffing it in her pocket, then she went back to looking again. After a while, she made her way back to the pile of bedrolls we had laid out, carrying a handful of small bones and smooth stones.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Come here and you'll see," she said, patting the ground by her side.

My curiosity getting the better of me, I walked over to where she was using a knife to draw thin lines on the smooth stone ground until a rough hexagonal grid had been carved out.

At first, I thought she was trying to map out our coordinates within the zone, but then she started placing the random assortment of stones and bones into two opposing sides of the grid.

"Is this, by chance, a game?" I asked, brows furrowed.

"It's a strategy game popular amongst highbloods," she explained, adjusting some of the pieces so they were in the center of their respective hexagons. "I carry a portable board during my ascents, but since my dimension ring is broken, this will have to do."

Caera hadn't eaten in days. In these frigid conditions, where her body was burning off more energy to regulate her internal temperature, she would last a week, maybe two, without some proper food. Yet she seemed to be unconcerned as she sat in front of the crudely made board.

"Is now really the time?" I asked, still standing.

Caera raised an eyebrow as she looked up. "I'm sorry, did you have some other pressing business to attend to, Grey?"

I rolled my eyes, but sat down on the opposite end of the makeshift board. "Fine, but you'll have to teach me the basics."

"So, the casters can move up to five spaces in a given direction—"

"No, it can move anywhere as long as it's within five spaces. Here, let me show you again," Caera said, speaking up to be heard over the noise of the blizzard outside.

We each sat on top of a folded bedroll within the dome, the carved game board positioned between us while Regis remained in my body to replenish his aether. In front of me were the bone shards, each piece carved with a small image of either a square, a line, a triangle, or a circle. Caera's pieces were smooth rocks each carved with one of the same four symbols.

"And the pieces with lines are the strikers?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Caera said with a pout. "And it's not a line, it's a sword."

I lowered my head to the board to take a closer look. "I'm pretty sure that's a line."

"I had to improvise, so just use your imagination," Caera retorted. "Anyway, the caster pieces, the ones with the symbol for fire—"

"The triangle," I corrected.

"The *fire*," she stressed, "are the most flexible. The shields are best used defensively while the strikers are good at taking pieces. Remember that you can only capture a piece by jumping over it."

"And you win if you take my sentry?"

"Mhmm," Caera nodded. "Or if my sentry reaches your hold, which is called a true win."

I raised a brow. "What's the difference between a normal win and a true win?"

"True wins are much more difficult to obtain so it's considered a great achievement."

"Seems like another way for nobles to flaunt their skills."

"I suppose it is." Caera let out a chuckle as she set the pieces back to their original position. "Are you ready?"

I nodded. Though I hadn't played this specific game before, it was similar enough to the strategy board games of my past that the rules fell into place easily in my mind.

"Traditionally, white goes second," she said, pointing to my pieces of bone.

Dipping in a miniature bow, I gestured for Caera to take her first move. She slid a stone shield forward one space. I moved my outer striker to the leftmost corner of my side of the board.

Caera responded by moving one of her casters up the edge of the board, opposite of the striker that I had just repositioned. I moved my caster as well this time, bringing it around my outer shield piece and up to the front so it would be in position to capture the shield in my next turn.

However, Caera seemed to have anticipated this because she moved one of her strikers behind the shield so my caster wouldn't be able to capture the piece in its allotted five moves.

"Ah, I didn't think to move the pieces that way," I mused, more to myself than to Caera.

It didn't take long for the game to unfold in my opponent's favor. By about seven moves in, I knew I couldn't win, so I opted for moving pieces around in order to see how Caera would react.

At the very least, Caera wasn't able to obtain the true win like she had wanted, making her bite her lip in irritation.

"Another," she declared, already moving the pieces back to their original spots after capturing my sentry.

"Sure," I said, amused by her competitiveness.

Caera was good. It was obvious that she wanted to use this game to learn more about me, but through the next few rounds, I was able to learn a lot about her as well.

She moved cautiously but never passively. There was a strategy with every move, evident in her desire to keep as many pieces in play as she could while slowly whittling down my pieces. And for the first few games, I fell for her tactics, but her personality leaked into the game and she showed a crucial weakness that I was able to expose.

"That's a win for me," I said with a grin, deliberately lifting her sentry slowly off the board for her to see.

"H-hold on," she said, her scarlet eyes scanning every inch of the board for some kind of mistake.

I stifled a laugh. My victory was a shallow one, caused by Caera's own greed to get a true win off of me. If it hadn't been for that fact, I wouldn't have been able to win.

"Look all you want but it's not going to change anything," I chuckled.

Caera whipped her head up, shooting me a glare. "You've played this game before, haven't you."

I shook my head. "I haven't."

"I've played this game for years and while I'm not the best, there is no way for me to lose so easily to a first timer."

Letting out a sigh, I put the sentry back on her board. "I only won because you got greedy. Did you think I wouldn't notice you trying to go for a true win?"

Caera's eyes widened and she let out an embarrassed cough.

"You isolated your caster three moves before hoping to draw my sentry out of its hold to clear a path for your sentry, right?"

"See! The fact that you're able to think like this proves that you've played this game before," she said.

"The only thing that this proves is that you're competitive and also a sore loser," I replied with a smirk.

"You just got lucky," she muttered, setting the pieces back to their original places.

"I did, and I'm pretty sure I would've lost had you played seriously," I said calmly. "You're good, Caera. It doesn't take a master to see that."

Caera narrowed her eyes. "You are continually surprising, Grey, do you know that?"

"I'll take that as a complim—" I raised my head, just barely catching a noise different from the usual howl of the wind.

A frown fell over Caera's face as she cocked her head side to side, but my gaze had already turned to the single doorway into the dome.

Caera's eyes followed my own, and we both waited silently. I thought for a second that I must've just heard wrong. It still could've been the wind against the dome.

Then I heard it again: the heavy scraping of something large moving through the snowbound tunnel. It was coming our way.

"Behind the platform," I said in a hushed tone, dashing away from our gear to put the raised dais between us and the door, Caera right behind me.

"Do you sense something? Is it stronger than us?" she whispered, a trace of fear in her voice.

"That's not it." I knelt down, peeking around the corner of the platform so I could just see the door. "Something has been leaving things here. That suggests intelligence. I want to see what it is before we engage."

I focused my hearing on the tunnel, listening carefully for any noise over the howling of the snow-heavy winds, but I heard nothing. By this time, Regis had woken up from his meditative state.

'Maybe it was just the win—'

My companion's thought cut off as a large, purple mass of aether appeared in the doorway, so big that it had to squeeze to pass through. The aetheric shape paused, appearing to turn toward our equipment, and I heard an audible sniffing, snorting sort of noise.

It wasn't until the shape turned and took a cautious step toward our bedrolls that I recognized it. It had a long, stocky body, a sloped back, and four powerful limbs. Its wedge-shaped head lowered to the ground as it continued to sniff, clearly attempting to catch our scent.

It was similar in size and shape to Boo, though longer and not so broad in the body. Each step the bear-like creature took was slow and deliberate, its movements wary, almost delicate.

But why can't I see it? I wondered. I could see its aether, but not the beast. It was almost like it was an aetheric ghost, a being of pure energy.

'I doubt ghosts make noise when their sides rub against a tunnel wall,' Regis pointed out, cementing my own thoughts.

Turning carefully to catch Caera's attention, I pointed to my eyes, then toward the intruder. She looked at me in confusion, then shook her head.

'It's invisible,' Regis thought, but I shook my head.

More than that, it's using aether to shield itself from being seen.

'That's a trick I wouldn't mind learning,' Regis said hungrily.

Suddenly the invisible bear pushed at the game board with its snout, scattering the pieces across the cold, white floor.

Caera's eyes widened in surprise but she managed to keep silent. Still, the invisible mass of purple was drawing closer, its wedge-shaped head tracing the very steps that Caera and I had taken during our hasty retreat.

I ushered Caera around the corner of the dais, then pointed upward toward the top before clearing the height of the platform and lying flat so the aetheric being couldn't see me.

Caera followed suit, jumping the ten-feet to the top of the platform and using her hand to soften her landing.

Only seconds passed before I caught the sound of snorting and sniffing from below.

It was moving very slowly around the edge of the platform, so I began to push aether through my body in case the creature found us.

'Maybe we should attack first, get the jump on it.'

No, I want to see what it's doing, if we can, I replied. If the aetheric beast was intelligent, if it could be communicated with, then perhaps it could help us escape the zone.

'When was the last time we ran into a smart monster in the Relictombs?' Regis asked, but I ignored the comment, despite the fact that he wasn't exactly wrong.

Sliding across the silky stone, I moved around so I could just see over the lip of the platform. After the bear made a complete circle around the dais, it approached the pile of items at the base of the stairs, and I felt the sting of disappointment.

Was it just drawn here by the smell of the bones?

But instead of ransacking the mound, the bear set something carefully on the pile, then plodded slowly toward the door.

Realizing the creature was about to leave, I slowly pushed myself up into a crouching position and held my hands up above my head in what I hoped was a universal sign of peace, even to aether-wielding invisible bears.

The shimmering purple mass froze, standing perfectly still and silent.

'The big guy doesn't realize we can see him,' Regis thought. 'What now?'

Slowly rising until I was standing straight, my hands still held above my head, I locked eyes with the creature—or least, I looked where I thought its eyes were. "We're not going to hurt you," I said, keeping my tone even and unthreatening.

The bear-like beast stayed motionless. I knew if I couldn't see aether, it would be completely invisible and silent. I couldn't help but wonder what other sorts of aether beasts inhabited the snowy zone if a creature so large and imposing had developed such an impressive defense mechanism.

"What do you think you're doing?" Caera hissed.

"I'm not sure yet," I said out of the corner of my mouth. I stepped sideways toward the stairs, never taking my eyes off the aether-shielded bear, then felt around with my foot at the edge of the platform until I touched the stair below. Cautiously, I went down one step at a time.

At the bottom of the stairs, I took a single step forward. Instantly, a roar that drowned out even the blizzard outside filled the vast dome. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Caera whirling into action, her red blade drawn.

Dropping to all fours, the aetheric beast charged at me.

I raised an arm, signaling for Caera to stay back while shrouding myself in a condensed layer of aether. I could feel the drain on my reserves, but it was better to take safety measures against enemies of unknown strength.

I lowered my stance to meet it head on, expecting it to rear up and attack or to veer away, but instead it lowered its broad head and the aether surrounding it flared as it ran straight into me.

Sidestepping at the last moment, I thrust my palm at its side, hoping to push it off balance. However, the beast shifted its weight at the moment of contact and used the force of my blow to whirl in place. The invisible beast lashed out mid-spin with a paw the size of a dinner plate.

I blocked the blow, catching its giant paw in my hands before pivoting my stance and throwing its arm over my shoulder. Aether flared from my core as I summoned the strength to shoulder toss the two-ton behemoth onto the stairs, shaking the entire dome.

The shell of aether shimmered and faded, and suddenly I could see the thing hidden underneath, strewn across the base of the stairs.

It had thick, brilliantly white fur, which shimmered with a pinkish pearlescence when the creature moved. A flat ridge of steel-gray bone protruded from its broad forehead, like horns that had been sawed off a few inches from its skull, and a plate of bone wrapped around each shoulder like armor.

"Did you just... throw this giant beast?" Caera asked, slowly making her way down the stairs.

"I don't want to hurt you," I said to the bear, which had been stunned by the impact. I had seen it leave something on the pile of objects at the foot of the dais stairs; there had to be some meaning behind that.

I walked closer to the white, bear-like beast when its eyes suddenly shot open and it burst at me with a blurring speed.

My eyes widened in surprise but my reaction speed wasn't any slower than the bear's. I spun on my heels just as the bear attempted to tackle me and tried to grab a hold of its thick fur. Unfortunately, the bear had surrounded itself in aetheric armor once more and my hands slipped off.

I tumbled to the ground before catching myself. By then, Caera had already gone after the beast's fading form, her blade in hand.

"Stop! Don't kill it—"

I felt the tingle in my spine as she summoned her Vritra-born power and caused a curtain of black fire to burst to life within the doorway, just ahead of the escaping aether beast.

It wasn't enough. The bear roared again and burst through the dark wall of fire, leaving behind the scent of singed hair.

Channeling aether into the rune, I ignited God Step but was met with a sharp pain. With my aether reserves already low because of Regis and the amount I had spent in the short span of our battle, I didn't have enough aether to use God Step.

"Don't lose it, Regis!" I ordered, cursing inwardly.

'Aye aye.' Regis emerged, now the size of a large hound, and raced off after the bear in a blur of black and violet.

"Grey, it's not worth it—"

"You saw it feign unconsciousness," I snapped, cutting Caera off. "It's intelligent, and if we can find out where it came from, we might be able to find the missing pieces of the arch."

Even without Caera's uncertain gaze, I knew it was a long shot. Still, the creature could manipulate aether in ways even I couldn't.

There had to be some greater meaning to its presence within the dome. It hadn't wandered in by accident, and it had seemed surprised to find us there, which meant that it didn't come because of us.

The djinn had designed every aspect of the Relictombs to challenge all those who entered it. The fact that relics didn't work in this zone, the broken exit portal, the invisible bear: It all had to be connected.

Caera gave me a hard, piercing look. "I don't know what keeps you from freezing solid out there, but I won't last forever. I can give myself a little time, but..."

She didn't need to finish the thought. I knew what she meant. If we followed after the aether beast but got lost in the storm, she could die.

"If we're not willing to take risks, we'll never get out of here," I said earnestly, meeting the gaze of her scarlet eyes. She only nodded, then took a step back and gathered her power. Ghostly flames flickered to life all over her body.

'Where the hell are you?' Regis shouted in my head.

On our way. Just don't lose it!

I flashed past the door and sprinted along the exterior of the dome, Caera just behind me. By the time we turned away from the wall, Regis was well ahead of us, nipping at the giant bear's heels.

I could see where it had rubbed against the sides of the tunnel as it ran, its shoulders gouging thick trenches into the snowy walls, causing a partial collapse of the tunnel so that Caera and I had no choice but to dig our way through, losing valuable time.

We climbed up the hill of snow leading to the surface while I continued to replenish my aether reserves. The bear galloped nimbly through the powdery snow, its purple mass indistinguishable from the aether-laced snowstorm where even Regis's black form was almost entirely shrouded.

Still, it left heavy tracks, and I followed it without hesitation.

Then Regis's voice was ringing in my head. 'I'm losing it, Arthur! It's swimming through the snow like a big, angry fish. I can't keep up!'

Just hang on for a few more minutes, I urged, my aether reserves almost replenished enough to use God Step.

Utilizing all the strength of my asuran body, I used the compacted snowprints of the beast as stepping stones to continue the chase. Caera struggled along behind me, the fiery aura keeping her warm and eating away at the flakes that whipped past us on the aether-laden winds.

Skidding to a halt, I turned to Caera, who was still catching up. "Keep following this trail!" I barked. "I'm going on ahead."

Caera's eyes widened but I couldn't wait for a response. Turning my back to her, I ignited my rune.

I let my eyes unfocus as I searched through the vibrations in the aether that I could slip into using God Step.

But the aetheric blizzard blazed with violet light, obscuring everything, even the vibrations and the destinations that they led to. My heart pounded as I felt for the path around me while seconds continued to tick away. Knowing that I couldn't waste any more time, I locked on to a shimmering vibration.

Then I stepped forward.

311 VICTORY

ELEANOR LEYWIN

The night was brisk. Low-hanging mists had seeped northward from the Elshire forest, floating just over the ground and making it look like we were walking on clouds. It was quiet except for the cry of some distant nightbird.

The wide ring of clear-cut forest was just ahead, the round tops of the tree stumps jutting out above the gray mist like stepping stones leading to the still-sleeping village.

A strong hand rested on my shoulder, and I turned to meet Curtis's eyes.

"Fight well, Ellie."

"F-fight well," I echoed, the tremor in my voice obvious.

Hornfels grinned at us all. "See you on the other side, aye?"

Tessia gave them a small wave. "Whatever happens, remember the plan."

Tessia, Albold, and I stayed where we were while the others turned and headed around the village to where the prisoners were being held.

We were giving them fifteen minutes before Tessia and Albold launched the attack.

Tessia spent the time mussing her hair and clothes, and dirtying her skin. She stripped dozens of tiny twigs from a low branch and rubbed them into her hair, then, with a small knife that Albold carried, gave herself a tiny cut an inch from her left eye and smeared blood across half her face.

I winced as I watched, but the cut healed in seconds. The blood that stained her fair skin remained.

"It's going to take you forever to get those twigs out of your hair," I said with a smirk.

"A small price to pay," she replied with a soft smile. "Do you need to go over your part again?"

I nodded my head firmly. "I stay out of sight and watch. Once I've confirmed that the retainer takes the bait, I send the signal to the others to move in, then make my way through the forest to their location.

Once the prisoners have been freed and everyone has teleported back to the sanctuary, I send you the signal to fall back."

"Perfect," she said, her expression turning firm. "You're strong, Ellie. More than you realize."

I tucked a stray piece of hair back behind my ear as an excuse to hide my burning cheeks, turning back to Tessia only when I'd been able to regain control of my face.

"Thank you." I let out a shuddering sigh before mustering a smile. "And I'm not sure I ever said this to you, but... I forgive you, Tessia."

Our leader's eyes widened, her mouth opening just a bit as if she were about to say something when Albold stepped into our view.

"It's time," he muttered, his appearance equally disheveled as Tessia's.

She nodded, then looked at me and twisted her facial features so her eyes were wide and glazed while her mouth hung a bit crookedly.

"Yeah, that's definitely going to scare some people," I told her seriously.

Letting the mask fall for just a second, she reached out and squeezed my hand. "Stay safe."

Then they were gone, rushing quietly through the forest toward the village. They had broken free of the treeline and were halfway across the misty clearing before a guard noticed them.

"Intruders!"

The yell cut through the silent night, but that was part of the plan. Tessia gave the man just enough time to shout out a second time before a condensed gust of wind hurled him through a nearby wall with a *crunch*.

Shouts went up throughout the village as the rest of the guards were alerted.

Three, all mages, came running from the east, bursting out between two short buildings and almost colliding with my companions.

Albold's bow was already up, and, with a guttural roar, he let loose an arrow at the closest Alacryan. Dozens of small panels of stone burst from the ground, deflecting the arrow as they began to spin around the Alacryans.

The biggest of the three had icy gauntlets around his huge hands, and he lunged at Albold and threw a punch. The stone plates shifted to avoid striking him as they spun round and round.

Albold jumped back, and Tessia's swordstaff was already cutting toward the Alacryan in an arc. One of the flat stones moved to intercept, but the blade sheared through it, then through the Alacryan's outstretched arm.

His hoarse scream was cut short an instant later when an arrow struck him in the heart.

The mage still being protected by the shield-caster, a broad-shouldered man in a green robe, had been gathering his power and hadn't yet cast a spell.

As Tessia began hacking at the spinning disks of stone, the mage held up both hands, and a billowing cloud of yellow vapor poured out of him, engulfing Tessia and Albold, as well as his dying companion.

Layers of mana shimmered around my companions as their protection fought against the caustic cloud, but I could tell the spell must be strong by the way Albold slumped under the weight of it.

Tessia spun her swordstaff like the blade of a fan, using it to focus a jet of wind that pushed the gas spell back over the Alacryan mages. The caster seemed immune to his own magic, but the one holding up the shields wasn't.

He screamed in pain as his flesh began to run like hot wax, and within moments he was dead.

I glanced away for a moment, trying not to throw up. When I looked back, the last mage was dead too, but six non-mage warriors had appeared from the west. They might as well have been children with sticks instead of swords.

Alarms continued to be shouted throughout the village. I activated my beast will to better hear what was happening.

My senses were instantly overwhelmed with the scent of rot, decay, and death. I spun around, looking for anyone nearby, but Boo and I were alone in the forest.

I turned my attention back to the village, trying to made sense of the jumble of shouted orders and questions:

"—from the east!"

"—a mad elf woman—"

"—tearing our men apart!"

"—Bilal! Where is Bilal?"

Then Tessia's voice boomed over them all. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you all for what you've done to my home! Justice for the elves! For Elenoir!"

She's overacting a bit, I thought to myself. I could tell by the sudden hush that fell over Eidelholm that it had been effective, however.

I reached out to pat my bond, but my hand froze halfway. Boo stiffened, ceasing his pacing. An aura of black fear enveloped me, gripping my insides in an icy fist. I couldn't move, I wasn't even sure if I was still breathing.

The retainer stepped out of the shadows not ten feet from Tessia, suddenly appearing from nothing. It was his murderous intent I was feeling, even so far away in the safety of the forest.

Albold flinched back from him, but Tessia took a confident step toward the retainer, her face twisting into a snarl.

"Oh my, it's the lost princess, daughter of the betrayer king and queen," Bilal said, quiet and mocking as his eyes probed Tessia up and down. "She appears to have gone well and truly mad."

Without replying, Tessia activated her beast will. Emerald light infused the air around her, and the weight of the retainer's presence vanished from my chest. I took a deep, shuddering breath, and Boo growled next to me.

Emerald vines burst from the ground in a ring around Tessia, Albold, and Bilal.

Sickly green mana extended from the retainer's arms into two long blades that dragged across the ground, causing it to sizzle and pop and stink.

As Albold nocked an arrow, I found myself already trying to get away from the fight as much as possible.

Not yet, I told myself, planting my feet. *I need to make sure that Bilal is fully engaged before I go signal the others.*

"This *will* be interesting, elf," the retainer said in his harsh, dead voice. "I'm quite curious to see what the famed Tessia Eralith can do. I have heard the stories of your glorious failure to push back our assault on this land."

Tessia glowered. "And I've heard the word retainer spoken in fear so many times since this war began. Honestly, I expected something more from the one who replaced Jagrette. Or are you really the best they could do?"

She must've struck a nerve with her taunt, because the retainer's arrogant sneer wrinkled into one of rage.

"I've earned the title of retainer through my skills, *ignorant* princess," he growled. "Self-assured stupidity truly is the trademark of you Dicathians, isn't it?"

Tessia opened her mouth to reply, but the retainer lunged forward, the mana blade around his right hand extending forward until it was several feet long. The sickly green mana swept toward Tessia's neck, but she easily dodged, and countered with a swing of her glowing swordstaff.

Bilal brought his other toxic blade up in time to block the swing, creating a small shockwave from the mere impact.

Tessia's attack had been just a diversion, though, as the earth exploded upward under the retainer's feet, releasing dozens of thorny emerald vines around him.

With a grimace, the retainer retracted his mana blade and the sickly green energy dispersed around him like a suit of toxic armor that Tessia's attack couldn't penetrate.

The retainer jumped with such incredible strength that he broke free of the vines and flew fifteen feet in the air. Two arrows sizzled against the energy shield, then both blades extended again until they were each several feet long, and he plummeted toward Albold.

Tessia's form blurred across a framework of the vines before leaping between the pale Alacryan and Albold. She swung her swordstaff once more, and it forced Bilal to use both of his mana blades to block her swing.

The retainer followed up with a mana-clad kick, sweeping Tessia's legs from underneath her, but the vines pulled her to safety before he could take advantage of the opening. When he tried to reform his blade, Albold fired at the exposed parts of his body, forcing Bilal to stay on the defensive.

Tessia didn't give the retainer a chance to focus on Albold as she launched a barrage of piercing stabs with her swordstaff. Her emerald vines seemed to each have a life of its own, serving to either attack Bilal or grab onto his arms and legs to make it more difficult for him to deflect her blows.

Still, while Tessia was able to put a few bloody gashes on the retainer, she hadn't managed to land a deciding blow. The layer of pale green mana that flowed around his angular body held strong, dampening Tessia's attacks while dissolving Albold's mana-clad arrows.

I need to send the signal now! I thought to myself, stepping away from the fierce battle.

If Tessia and Albold could keep up their current momentum, not only would we be able to rescue the prisoners, but we could also kill another retainer.

Leaping up on Boo's back, we took off into the forest and around the outer edge of the village. I needed to get farther away from the battle before I sent out the signal or else Bilal might notice.

Suddenly, Boo skidded to a stop, and before I could even ask why, I knew the answer.

A sour odor of rot circled around us like a jawfish that smelled blood. I hopped off Boo and readied my bow as he positioned himself on his hind legs.

"I'm glad I kept my distance from your group until now," a shrill and breathy voice echoed from the shadows.

A black silhouette appeared between two nearby trees: a tall man, his stiff black robes clinging to him, pale skin ghostly in the gloom.

The retainer! I thought in an instant of blind panic, then my beast will-sharpened eyes focused on him properly and I realized that this was a different man.

Aside from the physical differences of being shorter with thin black hair, I was relieved to sense that the pressure this person emitted wasn't as powerful as Bilal.

Next to me, Boo growled deep in his chest, a wild sound full of rage and fear.

The man held up his hands as his bulging eyes studied us. "Please, do not struggle. I would like to speak to you. The truth is, I'm powerfully curious what the plan is here." His thin voice scratched against my ear uncomfortably. "I know your companions are preparing to ambush the men guarding the prisoners while the princess holds off my brother. But you Dicathians possess neither the requisite magic nor the technology to transport so many prisoners, and you couldn't hope to lead these people through the depths of the cursed forest."

He continued to look down at me, a thoughtful frown creeping across his pale face. "But then, I would have said the same for the attack on the slave transport. How exactly did you get all those slaves away, hm? Are the asura helping you?"

My mind spun, trying to estimate how long this mage had been following us for.

When I didn't respond, he glowered. "Answer me, girl!"

Boo snarled and took a trembling step forward, but I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him from attacking.

The Alacryan leaned down and looked me in the eye. "These Dicathian rebels must be getting truly desperate to bring little girls such as you along." His eyes moved to Boo. "Then again, you are one of these bonded mages I've heard about. A strange tradition, joining yourself with mere beasts. How does it work, exactly? Do you *mate* with them?"

His dark eyes gleamed perversely at the thought. "Well, this is proving fruitless, I suppose I'll just—"

The man's words cut off into a hiss as Boo lunged at him, reacting to the smallest pressure from my hand. I jumped back and sent an arrow flying over Boo's head, but the Alacryan was gone from my sight.

I wrinkled my nose, though, still able to smell him. His stench mingled with the trees as if he was inside them, and that's when I remembered one of Jagrette's abilities.

If Bilal could use the same kind of toxic magic that she used, then perhaps this mage, who seemed so similar to the retainer in every other way, might be able to as well.

Ignoring my pounding heart, I condensed an arrow of mana, thinner and longer than normal.

Catching a whiff of his rotten odor behind me to my right, I whirled around and shot at the base of a crooked tree where the stench was the strongest.

My arrow pierced through the tree trunk like a streak of light and barely—just barely—I was able to smell a hint of blood.

"Interesting brat," he growled from within the tree, his voice muffled.

His movement shifted again, this time faster.

A light step crunched in the earth behind me, but I was too slow to avoid the punch to my side that sent me crashing into the dirt.

Boo roared and rushed past me, but I could tell by his frustrated huffing that the man had gone again.

His rot-and-death scent washed over me as he crouched down beside me. One long, crooked, mana-clad finger pressed into my back, just below my left shoulder. It passed effortlessly through the light armor I was wearing as well as the layer of mana protecting me, then into my flesh.

I couldn't even hear my own scream over the pounding of blood through my ears. Maybe that was what allowed me to act.

My hand snapped out and wrapped around his ankle. Like I had done against the blight hob, I condensed a spike of pure mana in my palm and fired it through his leg. I could hear the shattering of bone even over his horrible scream, then the pressure in my shoulder was released.

Grunts and snarls told me Boo had tackled the Alacryan before I could push myself up to look. The thin man was entirely hidden under Boo's bulk, and for a moment I thought we had the upper hand.

Before I could even get to my feet, however, Boo was hurled into the air. My heart stopped as I watched the huge bear-like mana beast tumble over and crash back to the ground with enough force to send tremors up through my hands and knees.

A helpless scream tore from my throat. "Boo!"

"Damned beast," the Alacryan muttered as he struggled to stand.

His right ankle was shattered and bleeding profusely, and he had several puncture wounds in his shoulder and neck from where Boo's powerful jaws had pierced his protective mana.

Anger—hot rage like I'd never felt before—gave me the strength to throw myself to my feet before the Alacryan could finish standing up.

I caught my bow with the tip of my boot and kicked it up into my hand, then drew and fired a concussive bolt of mana. It didn't pierce him, but the explosion was strong enough to knock him back to the ground due to his weak ankle.

Cold laughter met my attack. "You're spirited, girl. You'd make a fine present for my brother, but I think I'd rather take the pleasure of killing you myself."

My mind continued to spin and I found myself searching for that voice in my head that sounded like Arthur. What would he do in this situation?

Seeing the self-assured grin on the dark-haired Alacryan's face as he slowly unfolded from the ground and hobbled toward me, mana already beginning to heal his foot, a plan began to form.

Firing another arrow that was made to burst before hitting him, I used the opening to sprint toward Boo.

"Boo!" I shouted while keeping tabs on the Alacryan's location using my nose.

I fired another arrow back, this one made to spin like a drill. The Alacryan dodged by plunging into another tree and I could smell him drawing closer... but it didn't matter.

Reaching Boo, who was just now able to get back on his feet, I positioned myself between him and the Alacryan.

"To go to such lengths for a mere beast. I'd be touched, if it wasn't so idiotic," he said with a cackle, stepping out from a large tree nearby.

I should be far enough now.

Lifting my bow, I conjured another arrow, this one riddled with holes along the glowing shaft.

The Alacryan conjured his own sickly green knife of mana and hurled it at me.

Boo intercepted in time, smacking the knife away with his large paw. Some of his fur sizzled from the toxic mana, but it gave me enough time to finish my special arrow.

Letting go of the bowstring, the arrow let out a piercing screech as it sailed through the air at the Alacryan.

Brows furrowed in confusion, my opponent decided not to take the risk of blocking it, instead stepping out of the way and letting the arrow whistle past him.

Signal sent, I thought with a breath of relief.

Without wasting time, I fired again, this time with an explosive arrow that was meant to inhibit his line of sight while Boo sprinted toward him.

"Enough with the pathetic tricks, child!" he snarled, bursting forward with a toxic mana knife in each hand.

Seeing Boo's giant form about to leap on top of him, the Alacryan's smile curved into a wicked grin as he prepared to plunge his deadly knives into my bond.

My heart continued to pound against my ribs as I did all I could to stay steady. Nocked against my bowstring was another arrow, glowing brightly as it held the rest of my mana... and it was aimed straight at my bond.

Seeing this, the Alacryan's expression only turned even more delighted.

My arrow struck Boo's back with a flash of gold just as my foe's twin knives plunged deep into my bond's chest.

"Did you think your arrow would be strong enough to pierce both your bond and me?" The Alacryan cackled maniacally. "Looks like your beast's sacrifice was in vain!"

I dropped my bow, falling on my knees... a smile flashing on my lips.

Boo, protected in a suit of gold mana, wrapped his arms around the Alacryan's body.

"W-what? How!" Our opponent struggled desperately as he was lifted off his feet. Pale green mana burst wildly from his body as he tried to use the rest of his mana to break free from Boo's grasp.

As it became clear that he couldn't break free, his panicked shouts turned into terrified screams. "Bilal! Brother! Help m—"

Boo's jaws closed over his face, ending his yelling with a wet *crunch*.

My bond released the lifeless corpse, spitting out whatever was in his mouth as he turned away. His small, dark eyes met mine for a long moment before bending to scrape at his tongue with a paw.

Peeling my gaze away from the Alacryan, I scanned Boo for any injuries. "Are you okay, buddy?"

My bond let out a triumphant snort, and it was only then that I fully realized what had just happened.

"I—I won," I muttered, looking down at my trembling hands. "I won!"

I buried my face in Boo's neck, wrapping my arms around him as I laughed and cried at the same time.

"I'm getting stronger," I muttered into my bond's thick fur.

I had mixed feelings as I glanced down at the body. I knew I shouldn't be glad that anyone was dead, but this man had been cruel and evil. He had *deserved* to die.

My eye caught on a jet black ring worn around the middle finger of his right hand.

A dimension ring.

Despite the feeling of wrongness, I bent down and jerked the tightly fit ring from the dead man's hand. The ring could have all kinds of useful things stashed inside it.

I'll take it back to Virion, I thought, tucking it into my pocket.

Turning away from the corpse, I clenched my still-trembling hands into tight fists and nodded at my bond. "Let's go free the prisoners."

312 FEATHERS IN SNOW

ARTHUR LEYWIN

The world warped, stretching and folding in a sea of violet, and the omnipresent sound of the harsh winds was cut down to a distant rumble in the span of my single aetheric step.

To everyone else, God Step was instant. But I struggled to fully process the rapidly-shifting landscape as I approached my destination. I needed to understand and predict exactly what would be around me when I arrived, or that split second of disorientation would give my enemy more than enough time to retaliate.

But neither the towering frame of the bearlike beast nor my companions could be seen as I appeared at my destination. Instead, I was met with complete darkness. Then came the claustrophobic feeling of being entirely encased, like a rodent trapped in a fist. Something was covering my mouth, gripping at my arms and legs, pressing against my eyes, filling my mouth.

A blind sense of fear coursed through me, causing my heart rate to spike and my breath to come in quick, labored gasps around the mouthful of quickly melting snow that threatened to choke me.

'—ck happened?' Regis thought, his own mind nearly blank with worry. 'Arthur? Arthur!'

Tried to God Step—everything is muddled from the wind—must have missed—under the snow somewhere...

My thoughts were scattered and difficult to collect, even more than my sudden emergence under the snow could account for.

This was the sole instance where I had failed God Step, and it was the first time feeling not only the disorientation, but the repercussion of the spatium art. Had I wound up underground or deep in the ocean, the consequences might've been life threatening.

I shook away the unnecessary thoughts, which caused me to sink further down into the snow, opening up a bare inch of space around my face and torso.

Twisting and turning, I used my whole body to break apart the heavy, packed snow and give myself some room to breathe. By the time I had a rough little cave to huddle in, my mind had cleared a bit as well.

Regis, find me. Look for the blast of aether.

I could sense a tinge of hesitation from my companion. 'You want me to give up on the—'

If I can't use God Step, then there's no way we can keep up out here. Just look for the—

'Aether cannon. Yeah, yeah, I'm on my way, princess.'

Using the technique I'd made to drill through the deep snow around the dome, I released a small amount of aether from my core and gathered it in my hand, molding and shaping it into a sphere. The violet sphere shot upward, easily passing through the layer of snow above me, then rising another fifteen feet up through the storm.

As soon as the hole was exposed to the surface, the biting wind and the blizzard's roar rushed back in. I counted to thirty, then released another blast of aether up into the sky, which glittered like a flare amidst the wall of rushing ice and snow.

I kept track of time by the number of aether spheres I sent soaring into the sky. Around the fifth shot, I started to wonder how far off course I'd gone. By the tenth, I was growing nervous. Then, shortly after I'd sent the thirteenth ball of purple, glowing aether into the sky, a dark shape outlined in flickering black flames plunged unexpectedly into the hole from above, landing on top of me with a grunt. The figure yelped in surprise and something hard hit me in the nose, then the fire winked out.

"Grey!" Caera shouted, struggling to disentangle herself from me. "What happened?"

"Later!" I shouted back. "Just waiting for Regis, then we'll—"

The shadow wolf's thoughts cut through my own. 'Uh, Arthur?'

Where are you, Regis? I thought, unable to suppress the frustration I felt leaking into our connection. I could feel my companion's presence closer to me than before but I was unable to pinpoint him in the aetheric storm.

'Almost there, I think. Send up another flare.'

I followed my companion's instructions and in moments he was sliding down into our now cramped hole next to Caera and me, unmarked by the raging storm.

"Nice to see you both again, lovely weather we're having," Regis quipped. "I think it's actually about to get—"

Catching a flash in the corner of my eyes, I intercepted an object just before it struck the side of my head. In my hand was a hailstone the size of my fist.

"—a lot worse," Regis finished as a second frozen projectile shot down next to me, leaving a crater only inches from my companion.

Beside me, black flames burst from Caera's form just as a hunk of ice the size of her head struck her on the shoulder. Though the aura devoured most of the hail before it hit her, she sucked in a pained breath and flinched away from the impact.

"We can't move in this," she said, speaking over the noise. "We'll—I'll be pummeled to death."

Knowing she was right, I did the only thing I could think of. Twisting around in the little hole so my back was to the others, I sent a blast of aether outwards and down, opening up the hole down to the permafrozen ground and even removing a couple feet of the dark soil.

I slid down the slick tunnel, which was about five feet deep and seven feet across, and the others quickly followed. Spreading out my cloak, I gestured for Caera to lay down next to me.

"Regis, inside me. Caera, here."

"What are you—"

"There's not enough snow above us to block the hail," I said impatiently. "I can protect my body with aether, and you with my body. Just lay down."

Regis immediately leapt into my body, but Caera continued to look at me uncertainly. This moment of hesitation was interrupted when a massive bullet of ice blew through the snow above our heads and bounced off the hard ground at my feet, showering us with snow, dirt, and ice.

"I feel like we've gotten much closer in these last few days, Grey, don't you?" she said, letting out a stiff laugh before lowering herself down next to me.

"A bit *too* close for my comfort," I grumbled, pulling the cloak around us and shifting so that I was hovering awkwardly above Caera, shielding her from the hail and sharing my warmth. My entire body began to hum with a palpable layer of aether.

'Well this is cozy,' Regis thought happily.

I rolled my eyes and settled in for a long wait.

By the time the hail stopped falling and the wind subsided, we were mostly buried again, as the continual bombardment had caused the snowy roof to collapse down on us, and the blizzard had deposited several feet of new snow down into our hole.

The enclosure had protected us from the wind, though, and left a smaller area for our bodies to heat, which likely saved Caera's life. Still, she was blue around her lips and shivering violently as we dug our way back up to the surface.

After breaking through into the cool, still air, I froze, my breath taken away by the sight around me. The sunless sky was clear and cloudless, a brilliantly glacial blue canvas painted with sweeping streaks of greens, yellows, and purples.

The painfully bright landscape glittered under the sourceless light, and, squinting, I could see the full shape of the land for the first time. God Step had taken me past the caldera where the dome containing the broken portal was hidden, into a valley of snow that stretched out into the horizon. Still, the fact that we could see the large crater in the distance was something I was happy about.

Leading up to the ridge of the caldera were uneven, broken borders of jagged stone and deep ravines, while behind us, the zone kept climbing until fading away in distant, misty mountains.

"It's beautiful," Caera said, having pulled herself halfway out of the snow beside me.

"Brr'ahk!"

The screeching squawk was so sudden and so close that I acted on instinct, bringing one arm over my head and the other over Caera to defend against an attack from the sky. Caera stumbled from my sudden action, using my body for support as she sank down into the snow with a puff of powder.

Behind me, there was a flutter of wings and another harsh crow.

Whirling my body in the deep snow, I spotted a tall, thin birdlike creature just several feet behind us. It had long black legs, thin as sticks, a teardrop-shaped body covered in gleaming white feathers, broad wings that it tucked tightly to its sides, and a gracefully curving neck.

Its neck was currently twisted to the side, tilting its head comically. Two vibrantly violet eyes shone from behind its jet-black beak, which was shaped like the head of a javelin. The beak opened and snapped shut two, then three times, the sharp crack echoing across the caldera.

I waited with caution, uncertain if the creature was hostile or simply curious. Instead, Caera was the one to act first.

"Uh, hello," she said softly.

"Uh, hello," it mimicked back in its high-pitched, rasping voice. The egret-like aether beast stepped to the side, then took a series of shuffling, back and forth steps that almost looked like some kind of dance, after which it flapped wide wings to flutter several feet to the left.

'I think big bird here likes Caera,' Regis teased. 'That looked like some kind of mating ritual to me.'

"More like it was writing something," I mused out loud. As if to reinforce this idea, the creature gestured sharply toward the series of claw prints in the snow with its spear-like beak.

"Writing what?" Caera asked, her tone clipped as she grumpily extricated herself from the snow once again. "Oh."

Moving slowly so as not to spook the creature, I pulled myself free of the snow and moved to stand over the series of interwoven claw marks. It did look remarkably like writing, though it wasn't in a language I could read.

Caera appeared beside me, her hands tucked under her armpits as she hugged herself for warmth. It wasn't as cold as it had been before, I realized. The temperature was still below freezing, but well within a talented mage's ability to survive with the effective use of mana.

"Do you have any idea what it's trying to tell us?" she asked, gazing down at the prints in the crystalline snow.

"Not a clue," I replied, racking my brain for a way to communicate with the being. It was clearly intelligent, possessing written communication and perhaps even its own spoken language. It had the ability to mimic the noises we made, so, theoretically and with enough time, I might be able to teach it the common tongue, but that could take months, or even longer.

"Not a clue," it mimicked again, hopping side to side nervously. Then it turned and flew fifteen or so feet away, set back down, and turned to us, one wing flapping toward a mountainous ridge in the distance.

"Maybe it wants us to follow it," Caera said as I met her red eyes.

"What other choice do we have?" I asked in a resigned sort of way. "I'd say we either eat it or follow it."

Nodding, she took several steps through the deep snow, each footfall breaking through the hard crust with a cracking, crunching sound. The wind had left the deep, powdery snow with a half-frozen shell on top, making each step difficult, but at the same time preventing us from sinking in over our heads again.

Once we'd come within a few feet of the bird, it flapped its broad wings and flew another twenty or thirty feet, then waited for us to catch up.

We repeated this again and again, marching along after our guide in silence as it led us up the side of the caldera and into a narrow ravine, then up a naturally occurring switchback trail that climbed high into a mountain of sharp, dark rock. Despite the sub-freezing temperature, the laborious climb warmed us, and I didn't even need to circulate aether within me to ward off the cold.

'Are you sure it isn't going to lead us up to a cliff and just push us off?' Regis asked after an hour of scrambling along the treacherous mountain path.

No, I answered honestly. But that seems like a lot of trouble for a meal. Besides, it doesn't seem very strong. There's definitely aether circulating within it, but I don't think it's a fighter.

'My point exactly,' Regis groused.

Eventually, we reached a place where the trail became a steep vertical climb. Our guide flew up to the top of the sheer cliff, perched on a little outcropping of the dark rock, and waited.

The cliff face was only forty feet or so, and the weathered stone had plenty of hand and footholds, but I was admittedly strained after having used so much of my aether to shield us against the hail.

"Ladies first," I said, gesturing for Caera to start the climb.

Her brows turned down as she glared at me, and her eyes flicked from me to the steep descent behind us and back. I couldn't help but wonder if she was considering pushing me down the mountainside, but in the end she just sighed and started searching for a path up the cliff.

I stayed right below her, hoping to catch her if she fell, but it wasn't Caera who slipped.

About halfway up the cliff, I missed a handhold and my toe slipped from the crack in which I'd wedged it. My stomach lurched as I grabbed for a protruding piece of rock, but in my haste I crushed the rock in my fist, fell back out of reach of the wall, and tumbled the twenty feet back to the ground, landing with a *thud* at the base of the cliff.

From above, I heard, "Cra'kah!" followed by, "You alive?" Caera was grinning at me from above.

Grunting, I stood and dusted myself off. "Keep going. I'll—I'll be right up..." I said hoarsely.

I watched from below as the highblooded Alacryan woman moved up the wall like a trained mountain climber. Only after she'd heaved herself over the ledge above did I attempt the climb again, this time pushing aether through my legs and leaping as high as I could, then slamming my aether coated hands like wedges into the narrow cracks.

Looking down, I had covered over a quarter of the climb with a single leap.

Getting a good foothold, I repeated the maneuver, throwing myself upward another twenty feet or so, then wedging my hands into a series of cracks, widening them and causing a shower of stone chips and dust.

Caera peeked down from the top of the cliff just as I threw myself upward for the third time. She shook her head. "Why not just grow wings and fly, Grey?"

"Maybe someday," I grunted as I climbed the final few feet and scrambled up onto the ledge. Ahead of us, the cliff's edge sloped downward into a hollowed-out basin surrounded by jagged peaks of black stone.

Squat little huts huddled throughout the basin, each one built of woven sticks, branches, and thick brown grass.

Most had tattered bits of cloth hung across their doorways, which were decorated with more of the bird-foot-shaped letters.

Several of the bird folk were milling about the little village; all had stopped to stare at us, their bright eyes shining within the gloomy hollow. Most were stark white, with black legs and beaks, but a few had mottled gray feathers and one stood out due to its jet-black coloring.

Our guide snapped its beak several times and let out a series of sharp cawing noises that sounded to me like words, then waved one wing toward us as if to say, "Follow me."

Having already come that far, we did as it asked, and it led us hopping down through the center of the small village and toward the largest of the nest-like huts. The other bird folk watched us pass, their feathers ruffled and eyes darting around with curiosity and fear. A couple even took flight, soaring up into the peaks above us, where I noticed smaller nests hidden amongst the crags.

As we approached the largest hut, which sat at the rear of the hollow, built right up against the black stone wall, a truly ancient-looking creature pressed aside the gray-blue cloth and hobbled out to meet us.

Our guide began to click and caw rapidly, occasionally turning to us to gesture sharply with its beak or wave its wings.

I watched the old bird creature carefully as it listened. Its white feathers had turned gray and fallen out in many places, and its thin legs were bent and knobbly and had developed pink splotches. Several of its claws were broken, and a lightning-bolt crack ran from the tip of its beak all the way to where it disappeared into its bumpy flesh. Three deep, pink scars ran across its face, leaving one eye glassy white instead of rich purple like the other.

After our guide finished chattering, the elder turned to me and bowed slightly, its wings unfurling as it did so. In a voice as old and cracked as its beak, it said, "Welcome, ascenders, to the village of the Spear Beak tribe. The ancient ones have told me to expect your arrival."

I gaped at the old bird, stunned by his clear use of our language.

Caera, however, returned the shallow bow without missing a beat and replied politely, "Thank you, elder, for the warm welcome."

A slight nudge at my own foot turned my attention to the Alacryan noble, who was looking at me and gesturing with her eyes to follow her lead.

"Thank you," I said evenly, dipping my head as well.

We have no choice, but we're in a pretty vulnerable position right now so be on the lookout, I warned Regis.

'Fair enough. Want me to just come out? Scare them a bit?'

No, just pay attention. You'll know if I need you.

"Come, come," the elder of the Spear Beak tribe squawked, gesturing with one wing toward its hut. "Enter. Sit. Talk. Then you may join with the Spear Beaks in a feast, should you wish."

I could hear Caera's stomach grumble from the very mention of the word 'feast', which made her blush in embarrassment.

"My apologies, elder, but we're in a hurry and we'd just like some information." My eyes flickered to Caera, who was pressing her hands against her stomach. "And perhaps a light meal we can take with us."

"You wish to activate the portal out, no?" the elder asked, tilting his head.

Hiding my surprise by his knowledge of our motives, I answered evenly. "Yes. We would like to activate the portal in order to leave."

"If that is the case, you must first listen and learn," the elder said as he scratched the lightning-bolt scar on its beak with its wing.

Caera's scarlet eyes turned to me for answers, but I could only shrug in response before turning back to the tribe elder. "We humbly accept your offer then."

"Good, good!" The old bird's mismatched eyes narrowed in what I felt was a smile as he gestured us toward his hut with his wings.

After taking one last look behind me, my eyes quickly tracking across the bird villagers all staring back at us, we entered the hut.

313 THE FOUR CLANS

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the change in light, as the inside of the Spear Beak elder's hut was dim, unlit except for the thin columns of light that flowed in through gaps in the woven sticks and from around the edge of the door hanging.

The hut's interior was simple: a large bed of feathers, brown grass, and tufts of fluffy white fur dominated the space, and a single copper wash basin full of water rested next to the door. A thin layer of ice had formed on the surface.

Hanging around the hut from the small loose ends of the branches were what looked like trophies: several necklaces made of large fangs and small bones, the pelt of a four-armed creature I didn't recognize, and a row of feline skulls.

'Quite the morbid sense of decor from our feathered friends,' Regis thought.

We can't be sure they're friendly yet, I warned as my gaze flicked from item to item until my attention landed back on the necklace made of talons. Don't those look pretty similar to the ones left at the altar?

As the elder shuffled into his bed and squatted down, his spindly legs folded beneath him and I got a better look at his clawed toes.

'I think you're right,' Regis affirmed. 'Now the bigger question is, did they put them there or one of the bear beasts? I think—'

Regis's voice was drowned out as my eyes focused on something far more interesting. As the elder shuffled in his nest, for just a moment I caught the purple glimmer of aether beneath the bedding. There was some kind of relic hidden within, I was sure of it. Maybe even a piece to the portal.

"Sit, sit," the old bird croaked, waving his wing around the hut.

Giving no indication that I'd noticed anything, I sat on the hard packed-earth floor around the bed, thinking it might be rude of us to intrude on the elder's resting place, and Caera took a seat next to me. Unsure where to start, I stayed silent and waited for the Spear Beak to continue.

"Silence is wisdom," the old bird said sagely, nodding his black beak up and down. "Long, very long since an ascender has visited us."

"We have many questions, elder, but first, what should we call you?" I asked politely.

The gray old bird clacked his beak and honked in a way that I couldn't hope to replicate, then it laughed, a sound like grain being milled. "In your words, Old Broke Beak."

Smiling at the accuracy of Old Broke Beak's name, I held my hand to my chest and said, "And I'm—Ar..." I stopped, stumbling over the words as I nearly said, "I'm Arthur."

"This one is Grey," Caera cut in, glancing at me strangely from the corner of her eye, "and I'm Caera. It's an honor to meet you, Old Broke Beak."

"How is it you've come to know our tongue?" I asked, hoping to move the conversation past my near-mistake.

Despite our urgency to leave this zone, I was incredibly curious about these Spear Beaks. Since being reborn into this world, I hadn't met a mana or aether beast as intelligent as these creatures.

Had the djinn been so powerful that they created sentient, intelligent life simply to populate their trials? It seemed implausible.

"Another ascender, wise enough to listen, taught me when I had only just learned to fly." The elder clacked his beak several times, ruffled his feathers, and pecked at the bedding underneath him before continuing. "I have kept this knowledge, and shared your words with every ascender to find us since—or tried. Many are not wise enough to hear the words."

I nodded along as our host spoke, imagining the types of powerful ascenders who might have reached this zone only to attack every aether beast they saw without realizing they weren't monsters.

But if they're able to fight off ascenders powerful enough to arrive in this zone...

'Then these guys must be stronger than they look,' Regis finished.

"I am glad you have come, and you bring wisdom with you," the old bird went on. "We need you, and you need us."

Caera leaned forward, her scarlet eyes boring into the Spear Beaks purple ones. "You know where the broken pieces of the portal are?"

"The clans keep them, yes, but they won't give them to you, no." Old Broke Beak shook his wizened head, his long beak cutting back and forth in the air like a sharp blade.

"The clans?" Caera asked.

"Four clans, yes, and the wild things, the mindless things, they carry one too, but they always hunt for the others. The wild things are sleepless and fearless and forever greedy." The elder leaned forward, looking

from Caera to me then back again. "But the clans are worse. Cruel. Stupid. Four Fists, Ghost Bears, Shadow Claws... only the Spear Beaks know wisdom."

"Ghost Bears?" I asked, thinking of the invisible bearish creature we fought under the dome, squatting far below us now at the bottom of the caldera.

"Huge, hungry monsters," the elder said ominously, ruffling his feathers as if shivering. "Ghost Bears kill as if it's a game, moving unseen through the storms, raiding in the night. If you find one"—he leaned forward again, his cracked beak coming within inches of my face—"kill it, or it will hunt you forever. Ghost Bears never give up a kill."

I only nodded, carefully keeping my thoughts from my face. The Ghost Bear we'd seen hadn't seemed like a murderous killing machine. In fact, it had seemed cautious and curious, then fled before harming any of us.

'We could've just scared it,' Regis pointed out. 'The... Ghost Bears or whatever can't have seen many people, much less someone that could actually see them like we were able to.'

You might be right, I admitted, but I was still unsure. I didn't want to give away our knowledge of the Ghost Bears, though, so I instead pressed the Spear Beak elder for more details about the other clans.

"The others... just as bad, yes. Four Fists clan are like you, yet not like you. Short legs, long arms thick as a grown Spear Beak's breast. Squashed, ugly faces, with teeth like this." Using its feathered wings, Old Broke Beak mimed large, misshapen tusks or fangs.

"Shadow Claws live to fight, to kill." Old Broke Beak indicated the row of feline skulls. "They stalk us, climb the peaks and hurl our eggs from their nests."

Caera was listening somberly to the old bird speak. She shook her head when he mentioned eggs. "That's horrible. I'm so sorry, Broke Beak."

"You said we needed each other," I reminded him, eager to bring the conversation back around to the portal pieces. "So each of these clans holds a piece of the portal out of this zone? Why?"

Old Broke Beak closed his eyes, his long neck swaying gently as if he were singing a song in his head. When his purple eyes finally opened again, there was a sense of the ancient about him, a weariness that rolled off him like an aura.

"Long, very long have I thought on this. Always the Spear Beaks have tried to spread wisdom to the other clans, but now I know they cannot learn it. The others will not give you the pieces. You must destroy them. All of them. Take their pieces. When you have the others, I will give you the piece long guarded by the Spear Beaks."

"My apologies for being blunt, but why can't you give us your piece now?" Caera asked, studying the elder closely.

His neck twisted to the side to such a degree that his head was nearly upside down. "If the ascenders fail, if they die in the snow, under the claws and teeth and rage of the other clans, then we would have lost our own piece of the Creators' temple. No, this is not wisdom."

Though I recognized the sense in his words, I was distracted by something else he'd said. "The Creators?"

The long, dark beak moved up and down slowly. "The other clans sense only the Creators' energy within the relics, and so hoard them and worship them. They are too dumb and too vicious to think about the pieces' purpose, yes."

These clans, it seemed, had developed some kind of mythology around the djinn, the dome, and the arch within. If the portal pieces exuded aether, and these creatures could sense it, then it would make sense that they coveted them.

"You will need the Creators' gifts to heal the portal. You can do this?"

I nodded. Just like the mirror room, we only came to the snowy zone because I already had the tools required to move past it. *Test upon test*, I mused silently.

At that moment, Caera's stomach rumbled noisily. Old Broke Beak snapped around, staring down at her midsection with wide eyes, his cracked beak opened slightly. "Food, yes. I have been a bad host. So eager to share words, while you go hungry. Come. We have sat. We have talked. Now, eat, yes."

The elder's legs creaked audibly as he stood up and led the way out of his hut. Outside, we discovered several Spear Beaks lingering nearby, staring intently at us as we followed him back out into the cold mountain air.

Old Broke Beak snapped, clacked, and cawed, and the others nodded respectfully and began to follow us, forming two long lines.

Caera's brows furrowed in concern as she looked at me, but I just nodded and walked up behind Old Broke Beak.

The Spear Beaks murmured and cackled in low whispers, the rustling of their features growing louder as we followed Old Broke Beak through the village. Others peeked their beaks out of the many huts and shuffled into line in the impromptu march. Several of the Spear Beaks wheeled in the skies above us, their strange song falling down over the mountain hollow.

We followed the elder to another, nearly identical hut with a faded gray door covering. He snapped his beak three times and the crowd behind us fell silent as the dark-feathered Spear Beak we'd seen upon entering the village appeared in the doorway.

There was a short exchange in their own language, then the black Spear Beak pushed aside the hanging with its beak and the elder entered, waving us in with a wing.

I glanced back at the flock; they were all entirely silent and still, their violet eyes following us closely. Those that flew circles above us did so in an unnatural, interweaving pattern like an aerial dance.

Caera vanished through the shadowy doorway ahead and I followed, a surreal, dreamlike feeling of otherworldliness settling over me like a heavy blanket.

Inside, the hut was nearly identical to Old Broke Beak's, though there was no copper wash bin, and the only trophy on the wall was a small bear's skull with a narrow hole just above the right eye socket. It looked much too small to be a fully grown bear.

A second Spear Beak, nearly identical to our guide but with a fringe of feathers that stood up from her head, was nestled into the bed, but stood and shuffled to the side at a few clacks and squawks from the dark-feathered bird.

Sitting in the middle of the nest was a large, pinkish egg. Caera eyed me uncertainly once again, but I stayed silent, waiting for Old Broke Beak.

The elder walked slowly across the hut, his claws crunching through the dry grass and feathers of the nest-bed, then gently tapped at the egg in several different spots. Without turning to us, he said, "This egg will not grow a hatchling."

Then, without warning, he drove his keen beak through the shell of the egg, puncturing it with a sharp *crack*. I looked on, horrified and fascinated, as he began to pick away pieces of the shell, crunching them with his beak and swallowing them down until there was a large hole at the top, revealing the golden, gooey yolk.

'I did not expect that,' Regis murmured in a daze.

The elder took a single beakful of the egg, then crossed beaks with the fringed Spear Beak before she too ate from the egg. They both repeated the ritual with the dark-feathered Spear Beak, who took his portion.

"Eat," the elder said simply, then all three Spear Beaks stood aside, watching us expectantly.

I could see Caera's thoughts written plainly on her face as her hunger and disgust waged a war within her.

It was obvious that there was some kind of cultural significance, perhaps even religious ritualism, to this couple offering up their egg for consumption, and while the idea of these creatures cannibalizing their own eggs was distasteful, I expected they would not understand our hesitation, and might even find it rude if we declined their offer.

Besides, Caera couldn't live forever on snow alone.

Bowing respectfully to each of the three Spear Beaks, I stepped carefully into the nest and leaned over the egg. The insides were thick, warm, and slimy. Using both hands like a bowl, I scooped out a small portion and slurped at it indelicately.

It had a musky, rich flavor that wasn't distasteful, exactly, but was foreign and strange. Despite this, I quickly finished the handful of slimy egg as I realized something else about it.

The raw Spear Beak egg yolk was swimming with aether, and eating it allowed my body to quickly absorb the aether, helping to refill my core after the long night out in the storm.

Regis, are you—

'Feeling it? Oh yeah...' Regis answered, enjoying the hum of energy that we absorbed from just that small scoop of the egg.

Caera watched me with pursed lips and a pinched sort of look on her face. I nodded toward the Spear Beak egg, widening my eyes pointedly.

She clenched her jaw and looked at me darkly before kneeling down in the nest-bed next to the large, pink egg and sticking her own hand into the golden goop. The Alacryan noble held her breath as she quickly slurped down the mouthful of warm egg.

"Yes, eat. Eat," Old Broke Beak said encouragingly.

Caera and I took turns scoping out handfuls of the musky yolk and kept eating until only a shallow puddle of slime filled the bottom of the egg shell.

For Regis and me, the aether-rich yolk was like drinking pure, distilled energy, but I could see the change coming over Caera almost immediately. Though she'd stoically done her best to stay in good humor even after days without food, having a full stomach made her smiley and sleepy, and despite her initial hesitation, she eagerly consumed the last bits of egg within the shell.

Turning to me with drooping eyes, she opened her mouth to say something but a small burp escaped her lips instead. Caera's eyes widened in shock and she raised a hand to her mouth.

"Very unladylike," I commented.

Caera merely rolled her eyes, wiping her lips before responding, "That's sexist."

Around us, almost unnoticed, Old Broke Beak and the others were engaged in a quiet conversation. "Red Wings and True Feather have offered their nest to you to rest and recuperate. Then, if you are willing, Swiftsure, who brought you to us, will guide you to the Shadow Claw village. Yes?"

"Yes. Thank you." Caera nodded, heavy-lidded but trying her best to stay awake.

"Sure thing, Broke Beak," I said, feeling more drunk off the aether-rich yolk than full.

True Feather and Red Wings stepped lightly around me and began to break down the remainder of their egg shell, snapping off pieces and crunching them in their strong beaks, and within moments the egg was entirely gone.

Each of the Spear Beaks gave a splayed-winged bow, then shuffled out of the hut, which was feeling warmer and cozier by the moment.

As soon as the last Spear Beak left the hut, Caera slumped backwards until she was lying prone in the feathers and grass, her eyes already closed and breath steady.

'She sure has gotten... comfortable around us,' Regis commented, letting out a hiccup.

Stop talking and stay focused. I expect you to at least be at your full strength by tomorrow, I replied, taking a seat in between Caera and the entrance of the hut.

Letting out a controlled breath, I focused on the aether coursing throughout my body. I hadn't felt so saturated with aether since I'd taken over the giant millipede's hoard of aether stones, and I wasn't about to let it go to waste.

However, rather than refining my aether core, I ignited the God Step rune. Staying seated on the ground, I watched as my perception of the world around me expanded until I could see all the particles of ambient aether flowing in all directions.

I could feel my heart beating against my ribcage and my mind clear as I focused on the intertwining streams of aetheric pathways.

Failing God Step while chasing after the Ghost Bear in the storm had taught me two things: one was that, as powerful as this ability was, its misuse could be fatal; and two, it took me way too long to find the correct path.

What was the point of having an ability that could instantly transport me across space when it took me so long to even find the path that could transport me where I wanted to go?

So, while Caera slept, I sat and watched, the God Step rune casting a soft golden glow throughout the Spear Beaks' hut. I watched how the aetheric particles moved, how they behaved, and studied any patterns that could help me use God Step more instinctually.

Things moved quickly when Caera finally woke, bleary-eyed and dull from oversleeping. While I was mentally drained from the entire night spent in concentration, my body was flush with newfound energy. We found Swiftsure waiting patiently outside the hut, eager to set off.

Before we left the Spear Beak village, however, Old Broke Beak had some parting wisdom for us.

"Swiftsure is fast and wise. He will guide you to the other clans' villages, but a Spear Beak cannot fight against Shadow Claws or Four Fists," he warned darkly. "Do not expect to share words with them. Do not hesitate. Their language is violence, and you must speak it if you wish to leave this place. Return with the other pieces, and we will give you the last."

With that, Swiftsure led us back out of the hollow mountain top, several of the other Spear Beaks trailing along behind us as far as the cliff to send us off with happy clacks of their beaks and raucous squawks that sounded like cheers.

I peered down at the steep edge of the cliff while Caera was already preparing herself to make the climb down.

Walking up to Caera, I pulled her back to her feet and wrapped my arm around her waist.

"Um, e-excuse me?" Caera stammered, while Regis wolf-whistled in my head.

Walking closer to the edge of the cliff with Caera in tow, I turned to our guide. "Swiftsure. We'll meet you down there."

I watched the white aetheric bird tilt its long neck in confusion just before I stepped off the edge of the cliff, taking Caera with me.

The Alacryan Noble let out a squeal of surprise that soon turned into a terrified scream as we plummeted toward the stone shelf eighty feet below.

'Uhh, Arthur? Being the cockroach that you are, I'm sure you'll survive, but I don't think Lady Horns can...'

I ignited God Step just as we were about to crash and slipped into the aetheric path that would lead us straight down into the ground just several feet below us.

My feet hit the ground with almost no noise, the momentum that we had built during the fall completely gone.

'Oh...' Regis muttered, completely dumbfounded. 'Or you could do that, I guess.'

Caera still had her head buried in my chest, her nails digging into my skin even as I let her go.

"You can let go now," I said as her horns dug deeper into me.

Caera flinched before she peeked down and realized we were no longer in the air. Just to make sure, she stomped her foot on the hard ground before pushing herself away from me.

"H-how did we—what just—you!" Caera glared at me, her breath coming in quick, angry huffs before she punched me in the gut with the strength that could've actually broken some bones had it not been me. "Next time you feel the urge to throw yourself off a mountain, feel free to take the bird!"

I rubbed my stomach, wincing in pain. "Got it..."

Swiftsure landed a few feet away from us, fluttering his large wings as he looked at me in a curious manner. "Shadow Claw?" he squawked, his tone almost like a question, but I wasn't sure what he meant.

Our guide gave up on looking at me for an answer and let out a throaty warble before leading us back down the switchback trail.

Caera was still angry at me, but she kept glancing at me from the corner of her eye when she thought I wouldn't notice, looking at me the same way Swiftsure was.

'That's a pretty cool trick you learned overnight,' Regis chimed in, enjoying the show.

I'll need more time to practice God Step if I want to actually use it in battle, but I'm slowly getting the hang of it.

Once we reached the bottom of the ravine, we turned right, moving away from the caldera. This rocky, uneven path took us around behind the Spear Beaks' cliff-top village, then we turned right again and marched on in silence for hours.

Without the wind and snow, simply walking kept us warm enough. Our bellies and cores were full, making the hike almost pleasant.

While we walked, I thought over everything I had seen and heard during our short stay with the Spear Beaks. I couldn't help but linger on Old Broke Beak's insistence that the other clans were simple, violent aether beasts. After all, it had been the caution displayed by the Ghost Bear that had made me so sure of its intelligence to begin with.

It was clear from the trophies proudly hung from the elder's walls that there was conflict between the clans, but the little broken bear skull in Red Wings and True Feather's hut had seemed no more than a cub.

'Didn't your palace back on Earth have a whole menagerie of stuffed critters, including two polar bear cubs?' Regis pointed out.

My brows furrowed in annoyance. That's not...

I hadn't made the connection, but my companion was right. We saw those bears as only animals, and hadn't seen anything strange about having their corpses stuffed for decoration.

Maybe the Spear Beaks do see the other clans as little more than beasts.

'I'd say we just wipe 'em all out and get the heck out of here. Y'know, if we negotiated for a few more of those eggs...'

I'd had the thought myself, and Regis very well knew it. If we consumed enough of the Spear Beaks' eggs, we could reach the next plateau of our aetheric power—whatever that was.

Consuming the eggs of a sentient species felt wrong, however. It seemed somehow solemn and ritualistic that we had been invited to eat from that egg, and as I thought about it, I realized I had not seen any obviously young Spear Beaks, and had to wonder how rare hatchlings might be among the strange creatures.

Old Broke Beak had claimed that no hatchling would be born from the egg, but at the same time, what did those eggs represent if not the species' future?

These and many other thoughts consumed me as we followed our guide, who would sometimes hop along with us on the ground, other times flying high above, scouting out our path. Though Swiftsure couldn't speak our language, he had learned a few words and could communicate well enough by pointing and squawking.

The light didn't seem to change as we walked, and although we traveled for several hours, night never fell.

I was lost in thought when Swiftsure snapped his beak to draw our attention. "Near," he said in his scraping voice.

The Spear Beak stayed on the ground, hopping ahead of us toward a ridge of dark, exposed stone. When he was close, he folded his legs under him so his round body was nearly touching the ground and crept up to the edge, then waved us forward with a wing.

Caera and I got down on our hands and knees before we began crawling through the snow.

"That's..." Caera whispered under her breath as soon as we arrived near the ledge where Swiftsure was positioned. My eyes narrowed as well.

The mountainside tumbled downward into a small dell full of squat, colorless trees. Within the thick branches, a few dozen huts hunkered like fat little birds. Something was moving around within the village.

"Four Fists," Swiftsure croaked.

314 COST REVEALED

ELEANOR LEYWIN

By the time Boo and I reached the prisoner pens, the field of tree stumps between me and the village was in total chaos.

One of the cages had already been opened, and the released elves were scrambling to get away from the village. Skarn led them along, trying to herd them into a single group so they could teleport away using one of the medallions. Behind them, his golem stomped through a dozen non-mage Alacryan soldiers that had rushed out of the village, crushing them under its hammerlike fists.

On the other side of the battlefield, Kathyln was holding off three mages. Though it seemed like she was successfully keeping them away from the escaping prisoners, she was stuck defending, not able to launch an effective counter attack.

Slipping from Boo's back and drawing my bow, I carefully manifested three blazing arrows of pure mana onto the string and took aim at the three mages pinning Kathyln down. In my mind, I drew a line from the tip of each arrow to one of the mages, let my breath out slowly, and released the string.

The mana arrows drew bright lines in the dark as they streaked toward their targets. The attack took the enemy by surprise. While I wasn't able to kill any of them, I was able to grab their attention away from their real foe.

An instant later, a hail of razor-sharp shards of ice fell down around the mages, tearing through them as though they were made of paper mache.

There was a dull ache from my core after I'd cast the spell.

I haven't recovered from the shielding spell I cast on Boo, I realized with frustration.

Still, it had been worth emptying my core for, since the spell had likely saved my bond's life. The shield spell was something Helen had shown me after my close call in the tunnels, and it was originally meant to protect the caster. Since I was usually in the backlines, I'd played around with the structure of the rather simple spell so that I could cast it on others that needed protection.

Protecting all of Boo's ginormous body took a bigger toll than I thought, but it was worth it.

A golden gleam drew my eye past the cages, to where Curtis and Grawder held back two Alacryan battle groups. My fingers twitched against the string of my bow out of instinct, but with my body on the cusp of going into backlash, I held myself back.

It's not like Curtis needed the help.

The once-prince looked like a shining comet riding on top of his bond. He was brandishing two large swords glowing brightly in a golden red blaze, burning every enemy that stood in his way. When several layers of shields appeared over the Alacryan mages that Curtis was after, Grawder skidded to a stop and the two of them unleashed a joint attack of fire and pure concussive mana that shattered the barrier and engulfed all of the mages.

I closed my eyes, but was too late to avoid the sudden flash as the spell exploded, leaving bright white circles imprinted on my sight. An instant later the roar and rush of wind hit me too.

Diving behind Boo, I blinked away tears and waited for the burning circles and ringing in my ears to fade.

One major flaw in having super senses, I thought, sticking a finger in one ear in a fruitless attempt to make the ringing go away.

By the time I looked back, Hornfels had smashed open a second cage and was moving toward a third as his brother prepared to escape with the first group.

I couldn't see Skarn at the center of a big ring of frightened looking elves, but the purple energy that blossomed upward and out from the center of the group told me he'd activated his medallion.

The static hum of the medallion's magic caused goose pimples to raise on my arms and the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. As before, the dome split apart and the light focused on each of the nearly fifty people standing in a tight circle around it, then they were gone, all of them.

The stone golem, which was still fighting off the group of Alacryan soldiers, crumbled the moment Skarn vanished. Two of them had survived, but they weren't in any state to fight.

Hornfells and Curtis were working to move the remaining prisoners out into the open where they could be organized into groups, while Kathyln shot spells at anything that moved toward them from the village.

An elven child was crying somewhere... I scanned the crowd until I found her, a tiny thing that couldn't have been older than five. She was running through the crowd, her dirty little face looking from person to person.

The little girl looked so scared I nearly rushed out to help her, but I stopped when Curtis scooped her up and whispered calming words to her. No one seemed to be claiming her, so he kept the child with him as he and Hornfels organized the elves into separate groups of fifty.

Hornfels was quick with his medallion, and it didn't take long before a second dome of purple energy had surrounded them. When it broke apart, the beams of light went to only to a select number of the elves, leaving behind some who had crowded into Hornfels' circle.

A cry went up from those who weren't taken, but Curtis was shouting to get their attention.

"You there! Here, to me! Come to me!" He held up his medallion and waved it in the air, still clutching the elven child in his other arm.

Nearly a hundred elves had already been rescued, but as I looked at the number remaining in the clearing, I realized there were too many.

It'll take at least three medallions to take them all...

The far side of the village was still glowing with emerald green light, which flickered and flashed as I watched.

I was supposed to go back to Tessia and Albold to signal when the prisoners had been freed so that they could use their own medallions to teleport away.

But nearly fifty of the elves would be stranded if I didn't help Curtis and Kathyln...

Then Elder Rinia's warning rang in my mind: "When the time comes, Ellie, you must choose the mission."

Is this what she was talking about? But my mission is to save the elves—even Commander Virion said so himself.

Confident in Tessia's ability to handle the retainer, though still somewhat fearful about the *other* part of Rinia's warning, I sprinted out from the cover of the trees toward where Curtis and Kathyln were struggling to organize the last of the panicked elves.

"—can't leave us here, please—"

"—has already gone with the others, I have to find her—"

"—seen my sister? She was just here—"

Nearly overwhelmed by the low rumble of voices, I withdrew my beast will, and, when the blanket-like smothering sensation hit me this time, it was almost a blessing.

Kathyln was waving me over to her, and I began to weave my way between the elves. The first to notice Boo behind me screamed and scattered, but they quickly realized he didn't pose a threat to them.

Kathyln had already realized the problem. "Ellie, I'm glad you're still here. We need you to activate one of the medallions, otherwise—"

Her mouth snapped shut as a blade of pale, toxic mana lanced from the shadows, and Kathyln only barely conjured a wall of ice to deflect it.

My heart thumped painfully as a jolt of terror went through me. Bilal was suddenly standing not five feet from us, his arms again enveloped in the pale green blades of mana, his face twisted in desperation and loathing, his focus entirely on Kathyln.

Does that mean—

Before I could even complete the thought, the field around us came to life with glowing emerald vines as dozens, if not hundreds, burst from the ground. Some snaked around Bilal's arms and legs while others formed a barrier between him and the elves, who were screaming and scurrying away from him.

Tessia's clear and sharp voice, like a bolt of lightning, boomed across the battlefield. "Curtis, go! Now!"

Behind me, Curtis had started to set down the child, clearly planning to throw himself at the retainer, but he froze at Tessia's command. After only a heartbeat's hesitation, he raised his medallion, and the purple dome engulfed him and the nearest elves in light, and then they were gone.

Bilal's blades cut and tore at the vines as he fought to break free. "Just because I can't kill the elf witch doesn't mean I have to let the rest of you live," he growled, his words bubbling up from him as if his lungs were full of poison.

But Tessia was already there, and her vines were protecting us. I had to trust her to deal with him, because all around us the crowd of elves were scattering so that we wouldn't be able to teleport them all at once.

Kathyln was erecting additional barriers of ice to shield the closest prisoners, just in case he turned his attacks on them instead.

"Here!" I shouted, running away from where the retainer struggled. "Here, to me! Quickly!"

It took time, too much time, but the elves were desperate to flee, and they'd seen that we could teleport them away if they actually listened, so eventually they began to flock back to me as I moved farther away from the battle.

I had bent over to help up an older elf who had fallen down in the rush to escape the retainer, when, behind me, Boo roared with pain and anger, and something ghostly and green flicked past me. The toxic blade only barely missed the old man before hissing into the ground.

The old man moaned as I pulled him clumsily up. I almost stumbled over my own feet trying to maneuver myself with the elderly elf while also preparing myself for whatever was coming behind me, but two other elves grabbed him by the arms and helped to drag him back.

A long gash in Boo's flank released a slow trickle of blood. Behind him, Bilal was being lifted from the ground by a huge vine. The vine flicked him away so the retainer tumbled doll-like through the air before smashing into and through one of the nearby houses.

"Ellie!"

My head snapped around to where Tessia's form blurred from vine to vine toward the house where Bilal had vanished.

"Help Albold!"

My eyes searched the gloomy clearing until I caught sight of Albold, who was limping badly, his hand pressed to his side.

I reached out and grabbed one of the closest elves. She was young, with honey-blonde hair and a steely expression. "Help gather them into groups of fifty!" When she looked at me with apparent confusion, I grabbed her arm. "Group them up, now! Go!"

With that I darted across the field, reaching Albold just as he stumbled and would have fallen to the ground.

Albold had several long cuts across his chest and stomach, and the skin around them had turned a sickly green color. He tried to speak, but only managed to cough up a mouthful of blood.

Wordlessly, I pulled the thin elven soldier's arm around my neck and heaved. While I wasn't able to recover much of my mana, with the help of the adrenaline of battle, I was able to drag him to his feet.

In the distance, twenty-foot-tall vines were battering the house where Bilal was, knocking the structure down on his greasy head.

With the retainer out of the way, at least for the moment, Kathyln had reorganized her group, while the elven girl I'd set to rounding up the others had done her best.

"Ellie, can you get that group?" Kathyln asked, her tone half fearful, half just tired.

For a moment I felt a surge of anxiety at the thought of being left in charge of over forty elven lives, but Tessia was still here, she had the retainer under control, and most of the other Alacryan soldiers were dead.

"Yeah, I got these, get those people out of here!"

Purple energy bloomed from her medallion, growing up and over the heads of the elves then spreading out into a dome that covered all of them.

Then the shadows shifted in the middle of the group, and suddenly Bilal was there, standing tall over most of the elves. His entire body was cocooned in a thick layer of his mana, but even as I watched, the mana flowed over his body and formed into the long blades clinging to his hands.

With Albold's arm still slung over my shoulder, there was nothing I could do but watch in horror as the growing blades closed over each other like scissors, aimed perfectly at the back of Kathyln's neck.

The medallion's magic had already split into individual beams, and Kathyln and the elves were spotlighted against the darkness. The elves closest had realized Bilal was there, but seemed frozen in terror. Kathyln was entirely focused on the medallion...

All at once, Kathyln and the elves vanished. The retainer's blades cut harmlessly through the lingering beams of light, then the clearing was dark again.

"You still have your medallion?" I asked Albold, my voice barely a whisper. "Can you use it?"

He shook his head tiredly, but kept his feet when I pulled out from under his weight.

"I had to—"

"Doesn't matter," I snapped, pressing my own medallion into his hands.

If only Curtis and Kathyln hadn't been carrying the extras...

The retainer had paused for a moment to look around him, his expression growing more frustrated by the second.

"Hey, tall and ugly!" I shouted, trying to keep my voice from trembling.

Bilal's dark eyes cast a wary glance at Tessia, who was fast approaching, before his gaze drifted toward me in curiosity.

"Bad day, huh?" I asked, stepping away from Albold and putting myself between the remaining elves and the retainer.

He scoffed, his attention back on Albold and the group of elves. Jagged shards of pale green mana manifested around the retainer's raised hands as he prepared to kill all of us.

Damn it! Just a bit more time.

Without thinking, I forced out a laugh. It came out squeaky and unnatural but it did the trick. Bilal's eyes were back on me.

"You know, out of the two of you, I think your brother was the one that got the looks," I croaked.

Bilal's eyes narrowed, his glowing hand lowering in hesitation. "You've met Bivran, yet you're still alive?"

I nodded. "I can't say the same for him, unfortunately."

Mustering up the remainder of my dwindling courage, I rested my hand on Boo and took out Bivran's dimension ring.

Behind me, a flash of violet lit up the night, and all the tension went out of my body. We'd done it. The last of the elves were safe.

The retainer's eyes went wide at the sight of the jet-black ring, and he lunged toward me. Boo jumped forward to intercept him, but it was Tessia's swordstaff that blocked his attack.

Her bright emerald green energy pushed back his sickly mana as the swordstaff flashed faster than I could follow.

Bilal's swords were just as fast, though, and his ability to redirect his mana to attack or defend at need made it difficult for Tessia to wound him. Still, the retainer's black robes were stained dark with blood in a dozen different places, and it was clear she had the upper hand now that Bilal wasn't running away.

Tessia, on the other hand, seemed nearly unhurt. Her face was determined, her gaze locked on her target, and Bilal's blades never touched her.

I wanted to help, but wasn't sure how. My mana was only somewhat restored, enough for a few arrows maybe, but I couldn't see how that would make a difference.

Then I had an idea.

I don't need much mana, just enough to form the arrow...

"If you don't believe me..." I readied the shield-arrow I had used on Boo and aimed it at Bilal. "I'll just have to show you."

The retainer's dark eyes sharpened as I fired the arrow right at him. Bilal, not taking any chances, twisted away from Tessia.

The golden arrow passed by where he had been and hit Tessia high in the stomach, spreading the golden glow over her body. She jerked to a stop, gazing down at the spell in surprise.

A smirk crept up on the retainer's thin lips as he quickly took advantage of Tessia's opening. Bilal flashed toward her and sunk one of his pale green blades into Tessia's side and the other into her leg.

"I knew Dicathians were ill-trained, but to shoot one of your own—" Bilal's eyes bulged as Tessia's swordstaff burst out of his back.

His disbelieving gaze sank down in confusion, only to widen with realization. Although the two blades had managed to pierce through my barrier, they couldn't pierce through Tessia's aura as well.

Bilal's weapons faded away as the last of his mana leaked from his pierced mana core, and he stumbled to his knees. One skeletal hand was pressed against the wound in his chest, trying uselessly to stop the blood, but it ran freely from the wound and pooled darkly on the ground.

"The Vritra chose m-me," he gasped, frothy blood staining his lips. "I will be a god among..."

Slowly, he slumped to the ground, his face sinking into the pool of blood beneath him.

Several vines crawled up from the blood and wrapped themselves around the body. The retainer started to sink as the vines pulled him into the ground.

His hands and legs disappeared under the churned dirt, then most of his torso, and finally his face. The last I saw of him were his dead, staring eyes, then he was gone.

The emerald vines faded as Tessia released her beast will. Instead of basking in her defeat of the retainer—a feat only my brother had accomplished until now—Tessia seemed to shrink.

Even from the back, she looked lonely, her shoulders drooping as she let out a deep breath before turning around.

"We should hurry back, Ell—"

Tessia's eyes went wide just as a strong hand pressed down on my shoulder.

"The two of you have gotten a lot stronger," said a cool, strangely familiar voice.

A cold, heavy weight suddenly seemed to push down on me and even without my beast will active, everything that happened next seemed like it was in slow motion.

Boo lunged at the man behind me, only to be encased in a prison of black spikes that manifested faster than I could even blink.

My bond let out a thunderous roar as he started banging his paws at the shadowy spikes, but he couldn't even dent them.

Tessia started to move, but stopped as the hand on my shoulder crept toward my throat while the other ripped off the phoenix wyrm pendant around my neck.

I was scared. Even while facing Bivran and Bilal, I hadn't felt like this... like no matter what I did, it wouldn't matter. Without that pendant, he could easily kill me, and I couldn't lift a finger to fight back.

"E-Elijah," Tessia stammered, her face pale in horror.

The mention of that name sent a sharp chill down my spine. I could feel my breath shortening as I tried to wrap my head around what was happening. Memories of Tessia explaining Arthur's last battle before he and Sylvie were killed flooded back to me.

Elijah was the one that killed my brother. He was standing right behind me, but I could barely stay conscious, let alone seek vengeance.

"I would want you, of all people, to call me Nico," the man said coolly.

"Fine... Nico." Tessia raised a placating hand. "Your fight is with me, right? Just release Ellie."

"You slipped away from me last time, Cecilia. I won't take any chances this time."

"Ce... cilia?" Ignoring my screaming body, I looked back. It really was Elijah, the boy who used to live with us in Xyrus, except he wasn't wearing glasses and had dark bags under his eyes behind locks of messy black hair. So who was Cecilia?

Tessia stepped closer, one hand still gripped around the handle of her swordstaff. "Elij—Nico... you're not making any sense."

Elijah let out a sigh as his grip around my neck tightened.

I clawed helplessly at his hand while trying to tell Tessia to run, but my words came out in gagged coughs.

"Drop your weapon and put these on." Elijah tossed a pair of thick metal cuffs to Tessia. Each one had a large gem embedded in the middle and was etched with runes that I'd never seen before.

Tessia's hardened gaze fell into a look of defeat. "And you'll let Ellie go?"

"You'd try to kill yourself again if I didn't, right?" Elijah chortled. His grip around my neck loosened, and I wanted to scream out to Tessia not to do it, but the look in her eyes told me everything.

Tessia smiled sadly at me as she dropped her swordstaff and locked the metal wristbands around her forearms. "Hopefully, with this, your brother will forgive me."

Elijah released his iron grip on my neck and pushed me aside. I tumbled on the ground, my body shaking all over as Boo's growls turned into whimpers.

I could only watch as Elijah grabbed hold of Tessia by the cuffs. He plucked the medallion hanging from her neck and studied it for a moment before tossing it on the ground in front of me, along with the life-saving pendant he had taken from me. "I got what I wanted. Consider this as one last favor... for Grey."

My trembling hands gripped the two invaluable artifacts, looking from it to the dark boy who used to be my brother's closest friend.

With a flick of his wrist, he released Boo.

My bond immediately rushed to me, picked me up by the back of my shirt, and dragged me away. I could only watch helplessly as Tessia and Elijah disappeared from sight, Elder Rinia's haunting words pressing on my mind like a branding iron.

"The cost of those elves' lives may be more than Virion cares to pay."

315 UNCERTAIN TRUTHS

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I strengthened my vision and peered down into the dell.

The huts looked simple, made of grass and packed mud. They were all built off the ground in the thick branches of the trees, with no obvious stairs, ropes, or bridges to allow the aether beasts to get around.

Watching the Four Fists, though, it was easy to see why they had no need for them.

Several of the ape-like creatures were moving around under the trees. Each one had a broad, muscular body, short, thick legs with feet that they used to grab and climb with, and four massive arms. They climbed and ran quickly, using all six limbs to hurl themselves forward. Even from our perch high above I could see that their bodies were entirely littered with scars.

The Four Fists were covered with fur, mostly brown or black, but had pale flesh. Their faces were less ape-like, reminding me instead of something between a human and a pig. They had wide jaws, large, flat noses, and heavy brows. Boar-like tusks protruded from their lower jaws, and their small eyes shone like purple fire under the shadows of the trees.

An enraged roar shattered the mountain silence, and an instant later the source became visible. A truly massive Four Fists, draped in an ornate cowl decorated in what I could only assume were Spear Beak feathers and talons, hurled a smaller representative of its tribe from the open doorway of one of the raised huts.

The victim tumbled ten feet toward the frozen earth before reaching out and grabbing something I couldn't quite see, then swinging to the closest tree branch. The aggressor jumped from the hut, plummeting toward its prey like a comet.

The smaller Four Fists hurled itself away from the tree, again seeming to grab a hold of the very air like some sort of handrail to swing itself across a large gap between two trees as it sought to put some distance between itself and its attacker.

Around them, several other Four Fists looked on, some growling or roaring in agitation, but they didn't make any effort to intervene as the larger of the two Four Fists chased the smaller one from the cover of the trees.

Suddenly the large Four Fists wearing the feathered cowl cocked back one arm and hurled something at its prey. A small orb of purple energy—aether—shot through the air in a blur, bursting through the fleeing Four Fists' calf and causing it to stumble and roll through the snow.

Then the huge gray aether beast was on top of the smaller one, all four heavy fists hammering down on the injured aether beast. It wasn't much of a contest, and in less than a minute, the battle was over.

The victor dragged its opponent's corpse back toward the treetop village while about three dozen Four Fists came out of the trees, moving cautiously, eyeing their kin nervously. With a stone-rattling bellow, the large Four Fists lifted the corpse from the ground and hurled it at the feet of the others.

As it beat its chest like a drum, however, another noise just beside me drew my attention. Swiftsure was clacking his beak nervously, a noise that carried into the mountains and echoed down into the dell.

Every bestial face turned simultaneously toward us, glaring up toward the ridge. I ducked down to hide my head, pulling Swiftsure by his beak with me, but a cry had gone through the Four Fists tribe and I could hear the hammering of their knuckles on the permafrost as they began their charge.

Wriggling his sharp beak from my grip, Swiftsure let out a panicked squawk. "Fight!"

"Damn it," I cursed, getting up and looking behind me as I contemplated retreat.

No, it made no sense to turn and run. The apeish beasts had the portal piece we needed and they appeared just as wild and monstrous as old Broke Beak had promised.

"Prepare for battle," I said to Caera, who was already at my side, her blade out.

Cladding myself in aether, I took in the sight below: over thirty of the four-armed aether beasts, their beady little eyes burning with fury, were stampeding up the side of the mountain toward us.

Regis, come out when we make impact, I ordered, then leapt from the ridge, aiming to land right in the middle of the aether beasts and hold their attention.

Immediately, the Four Fists responded by hurling projectiles of aether at me.

With my asuran instincts at full force and my eyes focused on the barrage of aether orbs, I calculated their projection as they approached me.

Whirling my body as I sailed through the air, I oriented myself to dodge as many of the aether projectiles as possible as they hummed through the air.

Two struck me, one just scraping my right thigh, the other glancing past my ribs. The pain radiating from the two points of injury told me that my aetheric shroud wasn't enough to completely protect me from their aether bullets.

Feeling my wounds already healing, I focused on the approaching battle.

Regis. Gauntlet Form! I ordered. His presence immediately travelled to my right hand to draw aether there and allow it to build up. As I neared the ground, a hurricane of aether raged around my hand, fighting to be released. Maniacal howls of fear and panic echoed below as some of the ape-like beasts scrambled to get away.

Just as I was about to land, however, the large Four Fists wearing the decorative cowl hurled itself between me and the ground.

A deafening explosion resounded across the mountainside as the torrent of aether released from my fist clashed against all four of the large Four Fists' aether-clad arms.

I felt the shockwave of our impact rip through its protective shroud and shatter its bones before it was sent tumbling away in a cloud of snow and debris. Still, because of its sacrifice, my attack had been mostly contained, leaving its brethren dazed but unharmed.

"Regis, now!" I huffed, steadying myself as I fought the draining effects of the aether technique.

'Don't die, princess,' my companion growled as he leapt from my back and jumped on one of the approaching Four Fists, his teeth going for the throat.

Fueled by rage over their injured brethren, the Four Fists howled madly, hurling themselves at me with complete disregard for their own safety.

Letting out a sharp breath, I focused on the aether clinging tightly over my skin, protecting and strengthening me. My mind slipped into a trance as I recalled the years of hand-to-hand training I received from Kordri.

I could hear angered screams of the Four Fists growing louder, Caera calling my name from the distance as she fought her way toward me, and Swiftsure honking high over our heads, but I tuned them all out until all I could hear was the sound of my own, even breaths.

Sidestepping a pair of smaller Four Fists that pounced on me, I struck one with my fist, causing it to collide with its partner before spinning on my heels to intercept a darker Four Fists' aether bullet.

Cladding another layer of aether over my palm, I redirected it to hit the pair that I had just knocked down before driving my elbow into my attacker's sternum.

I ignored the choked gasps the aether beast let out as it collapsed. I ignored the look of pain and fear on the other Four Fists. I just focused on the sound of my own breath as beast after beast was felled by my hands. This wasn't the time to show doubt or compassion.

This wasn't the time to show weakness.

A squashed, ugly face of yet another Four Fists pressed down from above, its jaws snapping and its tusks digging at the air as it tried to gore me. I grabbed the beast by those tusks and slammed its face into the ground. When it didn't go immediately limp, I stomped my feet down into its skull before scanning the battlefield.

Nearly a third of the Four Fists clan had already fallen. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Caera outlined in a burning aura, making it nearly impossible for the big, apeish creatures to physically attack her. In the rough circle of enemies around her, I could see several with destroyed hands and arms, burned away by her dark fire as her long sword continued to carve red arcs around her.

Regis, on the other hand, darted between outstretched arms, ripping and tearing at whatever exposed flesh he could. I felt his exhilaration every time his fangs closed down on an enemy throat.

The frozen battlefield soon became colored in red as we continued to slay the aether beasts that seemed even more savage than elder Broke Beak had described. Even as their bones were broken and bodies bloody, the apes just became wilder. Abandoning their ability to hurl aether bullets at us, they continued to charge in, flailing their fists and gnashing their teeth like rabid animals until a baleful roar thundered across the snowy landscape.

The Four Fists all around us instantly stiffened, then another series of growls echoed in the distance.

'What now,' Regis groaned as we watched all of the Four Fists—those still alive—leap back and distance themselves from us. In a matter of seconds Regis, Caera, and I were standing in a large ring of snarling four-armed aether beasts.

I could hear Caera's heavy breaths behind me as she waited for me to act.

A deep, rumbling grunt drew my attention to the opening in the ring where the massive gray Four Fists that had intercepted my initial strike treaded confidently into the ring of its brethren.

I had watched this creature beat another of its kind to death, so I knew it was bigger and stronger than the rest, but it looked even more formidable up close. The beast stood tall—at least two feet over me—with its scarred chest puffed out and arms crossed. Its upper two arms were caked in dried blood and snow from taking the brunt of my Gauntlet Form strike, but its injuries didn't seem to bother it.

Its two gleaming violet eyes bore into me, looking at me with a calm hatred that contrasted its frenzied brethren. It raised one of its lower arms, causing both Regis and Caera to tense. Grabbing its feathered cowl, the gray Four Fists ripped it off of its shoulders and dropped it on the ground before pointing one of its fingers directly at me.

"Damn, that was manly," Regis muttered.

"I think it's... challenging you," Caera said, her eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Good," I said, stepping forward and dropping my own teal cloak on the ground. "That'll save us some time then."

"At least take this," Caera replied, holding out her scarlet sword.

My hand reached out toward the weapon, but as I peered into the massive Four Fists' glowing eyes, I couldn't help but grin. "No, it's fine."

I thought the Alacryan noble might argue. I knew it was foolish of me to put myself at a disadvantage by fighting bare-handed against an opponent four times my weight and with twice as many arms, but Caera stepped away without another word, leaving me alone in the ring with the gray Four Fists.

My opponent let out a throaty bellow, and several of the others began pounding their chests in a steady rhythm, like the beat of war drums.

The start of our battle was marked by the explosive charge of the gray Four Fists.

Pushing aether into my legs, I shot forward as well, dipping under its muscular arm as it tried to grab me.

Just as my aether-clad fist was about to reach under its ribs, my opponent's body blurred and I was barely able to guard its strike to my knee.

I flew back in the air from the impact, the wind knocked out of my lungs, but I was able to see what had happened. It used the same spatium technique that one of its brethren had used to swing in the air, but instead, used the aether as a handle to pull itself forward, giving it incredible momentum.

I ignited God Step and, without the time to determine which path to take, I utilized one that would simply get me out of the way.

The world blurred and I found myself a few feet higher than I had been. Quickly reorienting myself in the air, I channeled aether into my arms just in time for the gray Four Fists to snap out of its initial surprise and create another aether handhold to fling himself back toward me.

Our fists met, but without the aid of Gauntlet Form to strengthen my attack, our clash was no longer as one-sided as it had been before.

I could feel the bones in my arm splintering even through the thick layer of aether protecting me as the impact caused both of us to crash back to the snowy ground.

Leaping up to my feet, I didn't even wait for my arm to heal before I ignited God Step once more. This time, I was able to find the path I was looking for just as my opponent managed to haul himself out of the small crater of snow.

My world shifted perspectives as God Step placed me next to the gray Four Fists, just under its arms.

Every ounce of concentration was focused on maneuvering aether through my aether channels, letting it travel from my legs and hips and up my back and through my left fist in a perfectly timed fashion to match my final strike.

The result was devastating.

The gigantic ape-like beast crumpled as my fist sank into its side, and it was sent flying out the ring of Four Fists, crashing into the side of the valley and causing a sheet of snow to break loose and cascade down over part of the battlefield.

Silence fell as I stood panting, looking down at my bloodied fist as aether still leaked out from the surface of my skin.

A sorrowful wail snapped me out of my daze and I immediately readied myself for battle. The Four Fists had fought madly with little regard for their own safety before their massive leader stepped in, but rather than rally for battle, the ape-like beasts fell on all six of their limbs and howled with grief as one of them pulled out the mangled corpse of the gray Four Fists that I had just defeated.

Suddenly, a warm hand grabbed me. "Let's go, Grey."

Caera, hair disheveled and several cuts on her face, pulled me, leading me toward the village while Regis followed shortly behind. My gaze remained on the broken ring of Four Fists all mourning over the tribe's leader.

I was worried the tribe would pick up the attack again at any moment, and kept glancing back over my shoulder, but they made no move to follow or to defend their village.

"Something's bothering me," the Alacryan noble said as we passed under the boughs of the trees. "Not only the leader that you fought, but a lot of the Four Fists had tattoos all over their bodies."

"Tattoos? Like spellforms?" Regis asked.

"No," I replied, answering Regis. "I'm not sure about mana, but I never sensed any aether being manipulated through the tattoos."

"They're different from the types of crests that we have as well," Caera said, shaking her head. "The tattoos actually looked really close to the carvings in the portal archway."

I stopped, taking it all in. "So they're just... art."

The revelation made me uncomfortable. These Four Fists had charged us, fought furiously and to the death with no provocation at all, but these tattoos spoke of an intelligence far beyond wild mana beasts. I'd seen the signs, but had chosen to ignore them. The very act of having homes in the trees, wearing decorative pieces of clothing like the feathered cowl, the way their leader challenged me to a duel...

They were all signs of intelligence and culture, contrary to what Old Broke Beak had told us.

"Where's Swiftsure?" I asked, looking up in the air.

Caera shook her head. "He went ahead of us as soon as the battle started."

I unfocused my gaze and concentrated on the ambient aether while my eyes scanned the huts. Without the aetheric snowstorm to muddle my senses, I was able to see several distinct aether signatures, most likely coming from Four Fists hidden in the huts.

"Should we split up?" Caera asked

"That's never a good idea. It may take more time, but there aren't that many huts we have to check." I pointed to one of the rough-barked trees nearby. "This one first."

I held my hand out to the Alacryan noble, thinking she would need help getting to the hut high above us. "Hold on—"

Caera's thin body flowed with a visible shroud of mana before she leaped up onto the nearest branch, kicking up a cloud of snow over me and Regis.

My companion shook the white powder off him and leaned in toward me.

"Rejected," he whispered before leaping up onto the lowest branch behind Caera.

Rolling my eyes, I jumped up as well, following after the two of them until we arrived just under a hut situated on a thick, gnarled branch.

"Careful," I muttered. "There's one inside."

I slowly stepped into the hut. The hut itself was simple grass and mud molded into a vaguely rounded shape. The floor was more of the same, though it was almost entirely covered in a layer of straw-like grass that had a sweet, mildewy sort of smell to it.

Huddled in the back corner of the small dwelling was a Four Fists. It was pressed into the corner, its eyes turned away from us.

Regis immediately tensed, the violet fire around his neck flickering wildly.

I turned to Caera, who had taken out her sword but held it loosely at her side. The Alacryan had a pained expression as her scarlet eyes focused on the Four Fists. "Let's just look around and leave."

My eyes focused on the rough shelf that had been dug out of the side of the interior wall. A series of primal looking tools sat on the shelf along with some crude bowls.

Caera and I scanned the hut to make sure the portal piece wasn't hidden somewhere when a brief bawling cry came from the corner. The three of us turned to face the source of the sound.

The Four Fists huddled at the back wasn't alone. It was holding an infant, which must have just woken. The little creature, which had only a thin dusting of fur over its pink skin, looked as much like a six-legged piglet as it did the massive gorillas. It was so small it fit within just one of the Four Fists' hands.

The larger Four Fists quickly covered the infant, hiding it between two big hands and turning so the baby was shielded by its body. It peeked at us through the corner of its wide, trembling eyes.

A bitter taste filled my mouth as I clenched my teeth. Prying my eyes away from the sight, I quickly searched through the rest of the room before leaving their home.

The next hut was close enough that we could jump to it, and while it wasn't occupied like the last one, it was a lot more cluttered. In a roughly hewn wooden bowl near the door, there were a handful of bright blue fruits that looked like giant blueberries. They smelled fresh, so I risked taking a nibble of one, finding it was rich and sweet with a texture like nectarines.

A warm glow slid down my throat and sat contentedly within my stomach like I'd taken a shot of alcohol.

I tossed some to Regis who ate it whole, then handed all but one of the fruits to Caera. The fruit wasn't as aether rich as the Spear Beak egg, or even the dangling fruit we'd found in the giant millipede zone, so it wasn't as useful to me as it was to her.

She took the fruits wordlessly before turning around and searching the rest of the hut. Along a raised flat surface were a set of sharp tools and some rock bowls full of smelly ink. There were also some ancient looking steel chisels next to a collection of carved bones, claws, and tusks... but no portal piece.

"Maybe these Four Fists don't have a piece of the portal," Caera offered as she inspected some of the tools.

"But Broke Beak had one and he said..." The words got lost in my mouth as I realized what she had actually meant.

"Let's try looking a bit more," I said.

Caera just nodded and the three of us continued searching, for both Swiftsure and the piece of the portal.

As we made our way through the tree huts, we found one of the things we were looking for.

High up on a tree so ancient that it seemed nearly petrified by time was a mud hut, and circling around it was Swiftsure. The high tree had been hidden from view earlier, otherwise I would have seen it straight away due to the thin, translucent bubble of aether surrounding it.

"What's he doing?" Caera asked, watching the Spear Beak flying around the small structure while stabbing his sharp beak in the air.

"He's trying to get in," I said.

My mind immediately thought of the near-invisible hand holds that the Four Fists were able to create out of aether and wondered if this was an advanced application of that.

"There's definitely at least one Four Fists inside," I said, turning to Caera and Regis. "Regis, with me. Caera, stay out here and make sure Swiftsure doesn't try flying off."

She nodded, the scarlet sword humming with energy in her hand.

Igniting God Step, I let my perception of the world around me stretch, as streams of aether coursed through the air. My limits had vastly increased since first using God Step in the town of Maerin, but it still took me some time to find the right path that would lead me beyond the aetheric bubble and directly into the hut.

My heart pounded as I took the step, cladding myself in aether in preparation to face off against the powerful Four Fists capable of creating such a potent aetheric barrier.

316 GOD STEP

The world shifted as I rode the currents of aether to arrive just within the open doorway of the ancient hut, and I immediately stepped into a defensive stance.

But it wasn't necessary.

Lying on the floor of the hut was a very, very old Four Fists, undoubtedly the source of the powerful aetheric presence.

Its massive muscles had atrophied, shrinking in on themselves like an empty waterskin, its wiry pelt had faded to a snowy white, and its pale skin had wrinkled and shriveled. Two tiny purple eyes turned toward me and the aged aether beast crooned, low and gentle.

It attempted to lift its head, but after straining unsuccessfully for a few seconds, it settled back down into the deep indentation its body had made in the bed of dried twigs and plants.

One shaking arm lifted up and pointed toward the far wall. My gaze followed to the spot it indicated: on a shelf in the wall sat a long, thin slab of white stone.

Three quick steps later and the portal piece was in my hand, cold and silky to the touch. I ran my fingers along the intricate carvings, a sense of accomplishment building within me.

I turned back to the elderly Four Fists, lying defenselessly on the ground. The thought of killing him grew in my mind; this ape beast was such a large well of aether that I knew I'd be able to grow stronger if I absorbed its power, just as I had done to the chimera when first grappling with my aetheric abilities.

Cladding my fist in aether, I raised it over the old Four Fists' head, but I couldn't bring myself to strike. Powerful and aether-abundant as this creature was, it wasn't a mere construct of the Relictombs like the chimera had been. Killing it purely to consume its aether felt deeply wrong... like I was eating another person.

Unclenching my fist, I walked out of the hut and God Stepped back to the ground where Regis and Caera were waiting for me.

"I got it," I said, holding up the portal piece in my hand for the two to see.

"Good job, Grey," Caera said with a soft smile as she looked down at the smooth slab of stone.

'Birdy incoming,' Regis pointed out just as Swiftsure landed softly next to me.

His javelin shaped beak dipped down as well so he could inspect the portal piece, and it was then that I noticed the last few inches of his beak were red with blood.

He hadn't fought with us on the battlefield, and I couldn't see any sign of a fight on the rest of his clean-feathered body.

I grabbed his black beak, startling him. He flapped his wings and tried to dance away from me, but I held tight, twisting his head so I was looking him in the eye. "Whose blood is this?" I asked, my voice calm but frigid.

I released him so he could answer. The skittish bird took several hopping steps away and examined me with wide, confused eyes. "Four Fists. Enemy."

My gaze locked with his as I tried to study our guide's intent.

Caera's warm hand touched my arm. "Now's not the time for this. We got what we came here for, and we're not exactly honored guests in this tribe," she said softly.

From the Four Fists' hidden vale, Swiftsure led us back up the mountainside and farther away from the Spear Beak village.

Regis was back inside my body, replenishing his aether supplies, while Caera and I followed closely behind our guide. Despite being able to finally make some progress in leaving this zone, neither of us were in the mood to converse as the weight of our actions back at the Four Fists tribe's village settled over us like a dark shroud.

Even after finding out that the Four Fists were not only intelligent but actually sapient, I realized that had it not been for the giant gray Four Fists challenging me to a duel, we would've committed genocide.

Despite the brewing emotions that I kept suppressed, I made sure to keep constant tabs on Swiftsure. While I was still wary of our guide, Caera and I were reluctantly dependent on him to show us the location of the other tribes.

In the end, whatever Swiftsure had done, it was only what he'd been taught to do by the harsh world in which he lived. It was barbaric, but these warring tribes of aether beasts hadn't evolved their cultures beyond the level of barbarism yet.

The Four Fists, I was sure, would have done just as bad to the Spear Beaks given the chance.

Pushing aside my needless thoughts, I focused on our next leg of the journey. The path we were on took us higher up the edge of the seemingly endless mountain ranges that surrounded the caldera where we'd first appeared. The skies stayed bright and cloudless, the temperature hovering always just below freezing.

"How are you holding up?" I asked Caera, who was walking beside me with a blanket wrapped over her shoulders and arms.

"I was able to replenish my mana earlier during your duel with the large Four Fists so I'm okay," she answered with a faint smile.

Swiftsure, who spent most of his time flying above us, landed ahead of us, his feet never breaking the crusty surface of the snow.

He turned to look at me, his beak snapping twice. "Shadow Claws." He then held up his wings, holding them close together.

I nodded in understanding just as a flicker of purple flashed right below Swiftsure, and the snow in front of us burst upward, showering Caera and I with a cloud of powdery white.

Caera instantly clad herself in a shroud of black fire, blanket tossed aside and her sword already in her hand.

Swiftsure let out a surprised cry and tried to take to the sky, but his terrified shriek was cut short as a set of violently purple claws ripped through his graceful neck, spraying blood across the ground at my feet.

Swiftsure's warning cry was cut off in a honking gurgle. The Spear Beak's wings flapped wildly, sending up a flurry of white feathers. Our guide rose a few feet in the air, shockingly red blood raining down into the bright white snow, then his strength gave out and he crashed to the ground, twitched, and was still.

I was already moving well before Swiftsure took his last piteous breaths. My aether-clad fist hissed through the frigid air, but just before it should have connected with our attacker's cat-like face, the creature vanished in another flash of aetheric energy.

God Step! I thought in shock, quickly looking around for the attacker. Behind me, Caera had her flame-bathed blade ready to block, but before she could do anything else the cat-like beast was behind her, its claws raking down between her shoulder blades.

Caera was protected by the shroud of soul fire, but the aether claws were able to tear through the mana barrier and slice cleanly through the chain links covering her back.

She rolled forward, most likely saving herself from any serious injuries, but a score of long cuts ran down her back.

I burst forward, my hand blurring in the air as I launched myself at the aether beast—a Shadow Claw, I assumed—but it vanished before I could reach it.

Caera came up covered in snow and blood, her expression deadly calm, like when we had first met in the Relictombs.

"Do you know where it is?" she asked, positioning herself so we were back-to-back.

"There," I said, pointing some sixty feet to our right where the Shadow Claw crouched atop a jutting shard of black rock twenty feet high.

The Shadow Claw had the head and spotted white fur of a snow leopard, but its torso and limbs were humanoid. Its hands and feet were feline, and a long, muscular tail swished behind it. Though it was some distance away, it looked small, perhaps four feet tall at most.

'Arthur!' Regis thought in warning as aether flared behind me and to my left. I spun, pushing Caera out of the way and throwing a kick directly at the blurry source of aether.

My counterattack failed to connect as my attacker had already managed to duck out of the way. It slashed at the leg planted still on the ground with its aetheric claws before vanishing again.

Even though I had concentrated more aether around my body in defense, the claws still managed to tear through the flesh above my knee, causing me to buckle.

Catching myself, I let the aether clinging tightly around my body burst out in a palpable force that stunned my attacker before it could follow up on the opening.

It was able to teleport away, but this gave me the time I needed to heal my wounds.

"G-Grey," Caera stammered, wincing in pain as she slowly got up to her feet. "This..."

"Sorry," I said, retracting my aetheric force.

The Alacryan noble sucked in a deep breath as her eyes continued to scan our surroundings.

My eyes, however, went straight for the two aetheric presences on the dark rocks. Now both Shadow Claws crouched above us, their gleaming eyes carefully tracking our movements.

I held back the urge to God Step onto the rocks to confront the two Shadow Claws, choosing to remain beside Caera instead.

When the aether warped on my right, my hand flashed out and grabbed a third cat-like aether beast around its throat, squeezing hard enough to choke it but not to kill it instantly. The creature's eyes went wide in alarm, then its impossibly sharp aether claws were ripping through the flesh of my forearm.

I squeezed, intending to break its thin neck, but it flashed away like the others. At the same moment, Caera's blade hissed through the air just below my arm.

Turning to the point of rock, I found all three Shadow Claws glaring down at us, one rubbing gingerly at its throat where I had grabbed it, a trail of blood running down its furry leg.

Caera began to speak but I waved her words away. I was watching the three attackers carefully: they were absorbing aether from the atmosphere.

"They have to charge up before they can use that teleportation ability again," I said quietly.

"Perfect," Caera said as she stepped in front of me, her expression calm and icy as the black flames dancing on the blade of her scarlet sword.

The three Shadow Claws tensed as the flames completely engulfed her sword. She widened her stance and thrust the sword forward, releasing a violent jet of flame toward the shard of black rock.

The Shadow Claws burst out with a series of terrified howls as two of them vanished in a flash of aetheric energy.

The third—the creature I had caught in my grasp when it attacked us—wasn't so lucky. It hadn't had enough time to gather the aether required to use its teleportation ability again, and so it was engulfed by Caera's spell.

For an instant the Shadow Claw was highlighted against the dark rock behind it, surrounded in blazing black light, then both the cat-like aether beast and the pointed peak of rock were gone, destroyed entirely.

An angry, sorrowful howl from behind us caused me to spin around. The remaining Shadow Claws were fifty feet away, crouched in the snow and squalling mournfully.

I took a step forward instinctively, but the memories of the Four Fists mother holding onto its baby for dear life made me falter.

My gaze flickered to Swiftsure, contorted unnaturally in the bed of red snow. He had risked his life despite barely knowing anything about us, and brought us into his home. Despite the wariness I had felt for our guide, his death wasn't just.

The Shadow Claws had ceased their yowling and now seemed to be engaged in a heated conversation. They were distracted.

Just like the Four Fists, these creatures had ambushed us and attacked without cause. Now wasn't the time to hesitate.

Making up my mind, I unfocused my eyes and the paths through the aether lit up like the nighttime highways of my old world before me. It was a simple thing to step through the vibrations, appearing between the two arguing aether beasts in the same moment.

Before they could so much as widen their eyes in surprise, I hacked outward with the blades of my aether-clad hands, which came down on my enemies' shoulders like axes.

The Shadow Claws did not seem to guard themselves with aether, and both small forms crumpled under the weight of my unexpected blow, their shoulders and necks shattered.

I knelt down over the bodies as I waited for Caera to catch up. Up close, I could see that the wide, feline paws had no natural claws.

They create their only weapon with aether, I realized, curious and amazed that there were creatures in a place as dangerous as the Relictombs with no natural defenses.

"Are you okay?" Caera asked as she walked up behind me. "I saw your leg earlier... oh."

I looked back at her over my shoulder. "I heal pretty fast."

"That's a bit of an understatement," she said before her gaze fell to the Shadow Claws. "Did you find anything?"

"I'm checking now." I turned back and studied the Shadow Claw corpses. They didn't wear any clothes, but both had simple leather pouches that hung from corded belts around their waists. I untied the leather string that held one of the pouches shut and fished out a handful of small objects.

First was a slab of dried meat of some kind. I sniffed at the meat, then nibbled off a corner while Caera watched me expectantly, like a puppy staring at a treat.

I grabbed my neck, widening my eyes as I let out choking noises.

The Alacryan noble let out a startled gasp. "Grey!"

I shakily held up the rest of the dried meat before plopping it into my mouth. "Just kidding."

Caera blinked in confusion, then narrowed her eyes. "That wasn't funny."

'I thought it was funny,' Regis said with an approving tone.

Thanks, I responded as I dug through the rest of the pouch, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

Aside from a few more slabs of dried meat, the Shadow Claw also carried a jet-black knife carved from what looked like a beak.

'These things sure do like their little keepsakes from murdering each other, don't they?' Regis pointed out.

I put the knife into the dimensional storage rune, thinking it could perhaps be used as a bargaining chip to receive some more Spear Beak eggs, and I handed the dried meat to Caera. "This, along with the fruits we recovered from the Four Fists' village, should keep you from having to eat my arm to stay alive."

"Another joke, Grey?" Caera asked, horrified.

I shrugged. "It can be now."

The next items that came out from the satchel were three white rocks that had a smooth, almost silky texture to them.

"Look." I held them up for Caera to see. "It's the same stone as the dome and the arch."

She held up four similarly sized and shaped stones. "This one had some too."

Caera had her own small pile of items: the four stones, another flat lump of dried meat, a handful of some kind of small, purplish berries, and a thin rope that appeared to be woven of a tough yellow grass.

The last item from the pouch was a square piece of flat slate about three inches wide. At first I thought it was nothing more than that, but then I flipped it over to reveal a realistically etched image of two young Shadow Claws leaning against one another.

'Whoa,' Regis muttered.

It was a very well drawn picture, and I couldn't help but think it had been scratched into the hard surface with an aetheric claw.

Caera leaned close to me, studying the drawing on the slate with awe. "This is... basically their version of a locket."

"That's what I was thinking," I agreed.

"Strange," she muttered, lightly tracing the carved drawing with a finger. "Why did they attack us?"

"They might just be as bloodthirsty as Old Broke Beak made them out to be," I said.

"After what we saw at the Four Fists' village, it doesn't seem that simple." Caera's gaze turned to the bloody corpse of our guide. "What if it was because of Swiftsure?"

I looked at her questioningly, but kept silent, letting the thought tumble around in my mind. From what we had seen, the animosity between the tribes was unmistakable. The Spear Beaks hung Four Fists pelts on their walls for decoration, but the Four Fists leader that I had fought against had a decorative cowl

made from Spear Beak feathers and talons, and the Shadow Claws carried knives made of Spear Beak beaks. Members from both tribes had attacked us not because they were more violent or animalistic than the Spear Beaks; it was because we were with a Spear Beak.

I shook my head. These were all just speculations at this point, but one thing remained true: The tattoos, carvings, and now this etched drawing, weren't just signs of intelligence. They represented a flourishing culture.

"We should get going and scout ahead," I said, getting up to my feet. My gaze fell to the corpses of the two Shadow Claws. "We'll need to get rid of these bodies though."

Caera nodded solemnly. The flicker of black flames in her palm soon engulfed the two Shadow Claws.

I had utilized very little aether during the battle, so instead of climbing up the rocky cliff, I chose a point high up on the mountainside and God Stepped directly to it, taking Caera with me so we could see far out over the high plateau on which we'd been traveling.

Caera let out a sharp breath at the sight around us. It was hard to believe the djinn had created this entire place. How absolute their mastery over aether must have been for them to leave behind something as strange and incredible as the Relictombs.

The sharply climbing mountains all around us seemed to go on into infinity. I suspected there was some trick to it and that Caera and I could walk forever toward those far off mountains and never reach them. They seemed little more than a surreal backdrop to the caldera and the ring of jagged peaks that surrounded it.

A gust of wind whipped at my straw-colored hair, and I realized that several gray clouds now interrupted the glacier-blue sky, and the paintbrush-markings—the yellow, green, and purple swirls—were fading as a subtle mist blew in.

"The weather is turning again," I told Caera. With Regis's aether levels still recovering, I was currently the only one that could survive the harsh storms in this zone.

Despite nearly succumbing to the storm first-hand, however, the noble Alacryan's ruby eyes remained determined. "Then we just need to find that Shadow Claw village before the storm does."

With a nod, I focused aether into my eyes to enhance my sight and began scouting out the surrounding landscape.

It took several minutes to explore the many folds and disguised valleys hidden around the base of the greater mountain range. When I found nothing atop the plateau, we crossed one rocky outcropping to the next until we'd moved around the side of the jagged peak and began searching again.

It didn't take long to spot what we were looking for. Below me on the next ridge over, there were twenty or so woven huts built within the cliffs. They were carefully hidden between two sharp ribs of stone, and I couldn't see any easy way in or out.

A little waterfall tumbled down the mountainside, pooling at one edge of the village. I watched as a Shadow Claw, barely the size of an ant from my perspective, bent down over the water to fill something, then disappeared back into a nearby hut.

"There." I pointed my finger in the direction of the village so Caera could see as well.

She let out a sigh. "Well, in terms of strategic positioning, I'd say they definitely have the advantage."

"For now, let's head back down," I replied quietly. "The possibility of there being other scouts or guards nearby is high."

On our way back to the base of the rocky outcropping, we stopped at Swiftsure's body. It wasn't a pretty sight. The Spear Beak's once graceful neck was slashed open, his white feathers stained red with his own blood. His thin, barbed tongue hung grotesquely from his beak.

Caera, who stood beside me, gathered her hands and closed her eyes, bowing her head in respect before shifting her gaze back to me. "Should we bury or burn the corpse?"

I shook my head. "Neither."

Bending over Swiftsure's corpse, I dipped my hand in the fatal injury on its neck and ran my bloodied fingers over my face and clothes before turning to Caera, who was gaping at me, confused and disturbed.

"I have an idea that may answer your question from earlier as well as get us into the Shadow Claw village," I said as I walked slowly over toward the Alacryan noble with my bloodied fingers.

Caera huffed out a resigned sigh. "Have I expressed exactly how much I dislike some of your ideas?"

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"Grey. I won't pretend to know what sort of customs and rituals these tribes may have"—Caera touched Swiftsure's blood, which was splattered over her clothes and part of her face—"but this seems like the kind of thing that would be universally disrespectful."

"Stop fidgeting," I replied, smearing some of the blood so it looked more natural.

"Ah, what a cute sight," Regis chimed in, lying on the snowy ground nearby with an amused grin. "Nothing says love like painting each other in the blood of your enemies."

"Nothing about this is 'cute', and it's not for certain that Swiftsure was an enemy," Caera huffed.

I rubbed snow between my blood-stained hands to clean some of it away. "Just ignore him when he says stupid crap like that. It'll only encourage him."

"Hey! I'm not some puppy that needs to be trained!" Regis yapped, his burning mane flickering.

"You're right." I turned to Regis and smiled patiently. "A puppy would at least have the decency to sulk when it gets scolded."

Caera let out a chuckle as Regis sputtered in frustration.

Noticing his mane quivering even more crazily in the growing winds, I looked up to see that the sky had turned almost entirely gray now.

"Hey! I'm still talking to you, princess! I'm the amalgamation of several asuran beings powerful enough to—"

"Let's get moving," I said, cutting him off. "I don't think we have long until this turns into a real storm." Regis glared at me before leaping back into my body.

I held my hand out for Caera. "We'll teleport just past the mountain ridge where we spotted the Shadow Claw village. I don't want to risk using aether anywhere closer."

She took my hand, but was shaking her head disbelievingly. "The fact that I can so casually accept the fact that we'll be teleporting makes me feel like I've lost something..."

Pulling her close, I ignited God Step, following the aetheric path that I had mentally charted on our first run. In the span of several seconds, we were standing on the edge of the sharp lip of stone that surrounded the Shadow Claw's hidden sanctuary.

From there, we travelled on foot. It wasn't a difficult climb, but it did take time, and we were buffeted by icy winds and blinded by driving snow before we arrived in a shallow alcove looking down on the woven huts now clearly visible even through the growing storm. The last part of the plan required that not only the two of us, but Regis be visible as well.

"Like we planned," I whispered.

"Not that I mind posing powerfully and intimidatingly, but I don't see how my presence will help us," Regis said softly.

Caera nodded. "I'm curious as well."

"I just figured wolves and leopards are... close enough." I shrugged, keeping an eye on the village. "Who knows. Maybe you'll make some friends."

"Hard to argue with that logic," Regis said sarcastically.

Imbuing aether into my eyes to supplement my naturally enhanced vision, I studied the details and activity happening within the village. The woven huts the Shadow Claws lived in were shaped vaguely like beehives and made of overlapping layers of a straw-colored woven grass. Each structure was fitted with a simple door woven into a frame made of treated sticks.

Though the wind still howled, the village was protected from the worst of it. In fact, the entire hollow in which it was built was clear of snow. A handful of small, twisted trees with broad, dark leaves decorated the packed earth paths between the houses, and dense, deep green grass grew everywhere else.

In a circular patch of sandy earth, four Shadow Claws appeared to be... training. When we had first arrived, the two pairs had been attacking one another, though without their claws. As we watched, they halted their sparring, bowed to one another, and began a series of identical movements that were clearly rehearsed.

Their combat style was fascinating to watch. They emphasized quick strikes to vital areas, and were always moving. Every slash or swipe of a paw took them at least three steps from their starting position, and each attack was intertwined with a defensive maneuver.

Though they didn't actively use their aether abilities while training, I could see how sudden leaps or strafing hops were meant to simulate their ability to teleport. As I watched them, I wished that I could speak to them and learn about their manipulation of aether.

If this goes well, maybe I'll get the chance, I thought, running through what I'd planned to say and do one last time.

"Ready?" I asked the others, keeping my voice low. They both nodded.

Taking Swiftsure's corpse out of my dimension rune, I gripped it by its ruined neck and leapt from the alcove down into the village, landing between the circular training area and the outer wall. Caera and Regis jumped down just behind me.

The four closest Shadow Claws howled in alarm, scrambling away from us and falling into low crouches. Aether flared around them as they conjured their claws.

More came running from around the village, bursting out of doors or simply appearing in front of us using their aetheric teleportation, each one snarling, claws out and ready to fight.

I raised the stiff corpse above my head, then went down on one knee and bowed forward, letting Swiftsure's body roll out of my hands into the dense grass.

Next to me, I knew Caera and Regis were copying my bow, each of us exposing the backs of our necks to the crowd of Shadow Claws. I listened carefully to the whisper-quiet sound of a single Shadow Claw cautiously approaching.

I peeked through my curtain of pale wheat hair and watched as the cat-like creature nudged the corpse, causing the neck to roll and revealing the torn throat, which Regis had chewed open to hide the razorthin slashes.

It said something in a mewling, pitchy voice and I risked lifting my head a fraction of an inch to better see it. The Shadow Claw was clearly old, its thick white fur having lost its lustre, the black spots fading to gray. Its head snapped around when I moved and it stepped back into a defensive posture.

Very slowly and calmly, my eyes on the ground, I said, "Please, we mean you no harm. We come seeking your aid. Do any of your people speak our language?"

Another Shadow Claw, this one taller than the rest, stepped out of the crowd, which had formed a half-circle around us, and gestured toward me. It began to speak in their hissing, mewling language, its voice the low growl of an angry leopard.

'This doesn't seem to be going well,' Regis said, projecting his thoughts into my mind.

Be patient. They didn't immediately attack, which is exactly what we hoped for.

A third Shadow Claw, so old and stooped that it walked with the aid of a stick, stepped forward and responded to the tall one, who shot me a glare, bowed, and fell back.

The village went silent except for the noise of the wind battering at the stone walls. I resisted the urge to clad myself in aether as I waited for something to happen. Even if they didn't attack us, I didn't know

what their capability for communication was, or if they would give us their piece of the portal frame once we had made them understand our purpose.

If they did attack us, I was confident I could fight them off, even given our poor strategic position, but I really hoped it didn't come to that. The longer they waited, though, the less likely a fight seemed.

Finally the Shadow Claw who had come forward to inspect Swiftsure's remains said something, and two others ran up to collect the body, carrying it out of sight. Then the cat-like creature sat in front of me, its legs crossed. With one paw, it gestured for me to sit up.

Shifting around, I sat in the grass, crossing my own legs and resting my hands on my knees, palms up. Behind me, I heard Caera and Regis shuffling around as well.

The Shadow Claw's eyes shone like amethysts, although they didn't seem to be looking at me directly. Rather, it looked around me, its gaze travelling the edges of my physical form as if she could see the heat radiating from my body.

Or my aether, I realized.

Slowly, very slowly, one broad paw reached out toward my upturned palm. There was no malevolence in the motion, so I stayed still, watching, deeply curious about what this creature might do.

The soft pad of the Shadow Claw's paw touched my hand, and for a moment nothing happened. Then everything changed.

The quiet mountain village of woven huts was gone, as were the stunted little fruit trees and the crowd of worried-looking cat people. Even the constant rushing of the wind had vanished.

I felt as though I were drifting in space, though I wasn't floating, exactly. I wasn't really anything at all. Before fear could set in, however, color and light seeped out of the empty nothing, resolving into moving images, like I had closed my eyes and was picturing a favorite memory.

Except it wasn't my memory. I watched as two Shadow Claw kittens chased each other through the village. One, the chaser, was howling angrily. The other had taken something. As they sprinted toward the pool, I was suddenly in front of them, forcing both kittens to slide to a halt.

Calmly, I took the object—a little branch with a handful of purple berries on it—plucked the berries one by one from the branch, and then gave each child an equal number. "Be kind to one another and share," I said simply, though my words came out in the language of the Shadow Claws.

Then the vision melted away and was replaced with another. This time, I was looking down at myself, bowing, Swiftsure's body lying awkwardly before me. I relived the moments after our arrival in the village again, though this time it was from the perspective of this Shadow Claw.

Though I still didn't hear the words as words, I understood their meaning when the tall Shadow Claw—Left Tooth—spoke, addressing me.

"Three Steps, it is clear this must be some trap of the fiendish Spear Beaks. We should kill these creatures quickly before we fall under their power."

The other Shadow Claw—Sleeps-in-Snow—stepped from the crowd and said, "Take care, Left Tooth, lest your fear cause you to grow feathers and a beak. Let us see their minds and know their purpose."

Then the vision faded and everything went dark and blank again. I felt a sense of... expectation.

I thought I understood what the creature wanted. She couldn't speak my language, but by sharing our memories we could communicate. I could explain what we'd come for.

It was delicate. I had to bring forward the right memory without thinking about anything that could upset our hosts, but I had no way of knowing if the topic itself—our pursuit of the portal pieces—would anger them.

First, I shared the memory of Caera and I standing before the broken archway and my attempt to repair it with aether. Next, I replayed the battle with the Ghost Bear, including my conversation with Caera about not wanting to fight it. Deciding to take a risk, I finally focused on the memory of the ancient Four Fists gesturing for me to take the clan's portal piece.

This communication-by-memory was a slow process, aided only by the fact that I had so much experience with mental communication through Sylvie. Unbidden, the memory of our last moments together played in the darkness. I watched in sudden horror as her body became ethereal and broke apart into motes of gold and lavender.

I forced the memory away before she was completely gone, as if by doing so I could keep it from already having happened, and hoped that the Shadow Claw didn't take offense from my unintended memory. All was blank and silent once again.

While I waited for a reply, I grew anxious wondering how Regis and Caera were doing. While my wolven companion might be able to manage, Caera definitely didn't have any training in mental communication. If one of the Shadow Claws decided to communicate with her, our plans could be run to the ground.

Fortunately, the connection broke without issue and the world came whirling back into existence around me. Three Steps unfolded from her seated position, using her thick tail to push her to her feet. She then gestured for us to stand as well.

I glanced behind me. Caera and Regis hadn't moved, though they were both watching me nervously.

'Where the hell have you been?' Regis asked, touching my mind. 'You just sort of... went away for awhile when that thing touched you. I couldn't sense your mind at all.'

I stood and offered my hand to Caera, but she hopped to her feet without my aid. Turning to Regis instead, I said only, "We made some progress."

Three Steps announced something to the rest of the Shadow Claw clan, sending a ripple through the twenty some creatures. Some bowed respectfully. Several quickly suppressed looks of surprise, but Left Tooth and two others shook their heads in disbelief and looked as though they might argue.

Before they could, however, Sleeps-in-Snow knocked the end of his stick on the frozen ground and spoke briefly. Whatever was said, it seemed to quell any rising tension, at least for the moment.

The half-circle of Shadow Claws opened, allowing Three Steps to walk through. She gestured for me to follow, which I did. I watched Left Tooth from the corner of my eye as we passed through the line of cat people, most of whom stood no taller than my shoulder, but he remained motionless.

Three Steps led us through the town to a humble home next to the pool of water, then held the door open and waved for us to enter, which we did.

The interior was simple, just like at the Spear Beaks' and Four Fists' villages. A woven grass rug covered much of the floor, while a round bed of mounded yellow grass was pressed against the far wall. A white-feathered headdress hung just inside the door, and a short stack of slate plates sat next to the bed. Like the picture we'd found on the slain Shadow Claw, the top plate was etched, though I couldn't quite make out the image.

Space is a little tight in here, I thought to my companion. *Why don't you remain on standby while you recharge?*

"Meal time," the shadow wolf said, licking his muzzle before jumping into me and disappearing into my body.

Three Steps watched this carefully, her bright eyes widening when Regis vanished. Then the old Shadow Claw leaned forward, peering closely at my chest, and her eyes went even wider. She said something in her own language, stopped, and shook her head. She pointed where Regis had been, then pointed at my chest.

I nodded.

Three Steps let out a sharp, yeowling laugh, surprising both me and Caera. She was grinning wildly, though I couldn't be sure what she found so entertaining. Seeing my look of confusion, she gestured to my hands, which I held out, then pressed her soft paws into them again.

I wasn't taken away from the world this time, though I still received a vision of Three Steps' memory. Six Shadow Claws were standing in the circular training area on the other side of the village. I was explaining something.

We were discussing the nature of the Creators' power, how each tribe had been gifted with unique abilities that suited their needs. I was explaining how they should never stop climbing the mountain of knowledge because it had no peak. Just because they had never seen a thing done, did not mean it couldn't be done.

After the lecture, they began to practice with their claws and their teleportation ability. I corrected and encouraged them, provided guidance and feedback, and through the memory I began to understand something of how they used aether.

To the Shadow Claws, calling on aether was as natural as using their lungs to breathe or their hearts to pump blood. It was likely the djinn—their Creators, I assumed—had given them these abilities, much like the chimera had unknowingly manipulated aether to move, fight, and even rebuild themselves.

The speed with which they teleported was impressive. They didn't need to stop and look for the correct path like I did, something that hindered my ability to use God Step in combat.

The vision ended and Three Steps pulled her hands back, but I had an idea. I moved my upturned palms toward her, trying to communicate that I wanted to connect again. She seemed to take my meaning, and touched my hands.

I sent her snippets of memory throughout my journey through the Relictombs. In each one, I was practicing some form of aether art, trying to learn to control my new abilities, to hone them and get better at using them.

It took several minutes, but when I broke the connection I could feel the hunger for knowledge emanating from Three Steps. Our hands had barely parted before she pressed them back together and another memory filled my mind.

I was sitting next to Sleeps-in-Snow, somewhere in the craggy peaks above the village. We had been speaking, dancing around a subject I wanted to broach, but was nervous to do so.

Sleeps-in-Snow wasn't quite as old as he had been when I'd seen him only minutes ago. He hadn't yet taken to using the walking stick. "What is this thought I see hiding behind your eyes, Three Steps?" he asked me, his own stormy purple eyes burrowing into mine.

"What is our purpose, Sleeps-in-Snow?"

The old Shadow Claw watched me closely for a few long moments before answering. "What is the purpose of the mountain? Or the snow? Or the fish in the stream?"

I had expected a response like this. "The mountain is our home, the snow our protection—and the fish fills our bellies when we grow hungry."

"This is how these things touch our lives, yes, Three Steps, but is it their purpose?" Sleeps-in-Snow kept his face carefully blank, but there was something teasing in his tone.

I pressed my paw into a blank snowdrift, then pulled it carefully out, leaving behind a perfect imprint. "They do not themselves have an inherent purpose. It is up to us to decide their purpose."

Sleeps-in-Snow raised a brow as he replied in a challenging tone. "And who are you to decide such a thing? Are you the master of the mountain and the snow to tell them what their purpose should be?"

I shook my head, realizing I had fallen into his trap. "No, I am not the master of the mountain or the snow."

Relaxing into an understanding smile, Sleeps-in-Snow wrapped his tail around my shoulder. "Minds both clearer and deeper than ours have pondered the question of our purpose. Only by climbing the mountain of wisdom may we see more of what lies around us."

"And if we never climb high enough to find the answers we seek?"

Sleeps-in-Snow stretched and yawned, and the cracking of his old joints echoed down the cliffside. "Then hope that those you teach climb higher than you, when it is their turn."

My eyelids fluttered open as the vision ended. I didn't even realize I had closed my eyes, but this memory had felt much more intense than the others. I couldn't help the sense that I'd been shown something very private.

Three Steps was watching my face closely, though how well she could read my features, I had no idea. What I did know was that she was hungry for knowledge, and it was possible she had as much to teach me about aether as I could teach her.

"Grey?" Caera said softly from beside me, making me jump. I'd nearly forgotten she was there. "Not to interrupt, but what's the plan? Are we guests here? Are we prisoners?"

I locked eyes with Three Steps before turning back to her. "We're guests."

The Alacryan noble let out a sigh, her horns practically sagging in relief. "What about the portal piece... do you think they're willing to give it to us?"

"I haven't asked yet," I replied. "For now, I think we should stay here and wait out the storm."

"Is that really necessary?" Caera asked with a frown. "We've already spent so much time in this zone..."

Her voice trailed off as I looked at her—truly looked at her. She had been holding strong without complaint, but Caera had definitely lost weight and her complexion wasn't healthy. Her cheeks, splotched with dirt and blood, were sunken, and dark bags clung underneath her eyes from lack of proper sleep.

She had been following me, someone who barely needed any food, water, or sleep to survive, and had done so without protest.

She couldn't complain, since she had been the one to lie and hide herself in order to follow after me. Despite who she was and what her blood implied, a small part of me felt bad.

"Let's get you some rest," I said gently. "I'll ask if we can wash up, and I'll take watch while you sleep."

Caera nodded wordlessly, but a faint smile played across her lips.

"Hang in there," I added.

We still needed to find the Ghost Bears and the 'wild things', then figure out how to get back to the Spear Beaks.

But before all of that, I needed to stay here. I couldn't just ignore the chance to learn from the Shadow Claws. Not just their ability to teleport short distances, but their ability to conjure their most deadly weapons completely out of aether.

Perhaps I didn't need to find a replacement for Dawn's Ballad. I could just make one.

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"Whew." Caera dipped her head before walking in through the entrance of the straw hut. "This storm is getting stronger by the day."

Even as she spoke, the noise of the wind rushing through the craggy mountains protecting the Shadow Claw village drowned out almost all other sounds, including her voice. However, even with the doors open and the hut exposed to the cold air, the wind itself was barely a breeze by the time it reached the secluded village.

"It seems like you're enjoying yourself out there," I said, almost jealous.

Caera had grabbed a woven towel from a table near the entrance and began wiping away the sweat that ran down her neck and arms. "We're stuck here. If I ever hope to catch up to you, I have to do my best to train as well."

I raised a brow. "Is that what that was? All I saw was you chasing after the little kittens."

The Alacryan noble frowned. "Says the one that's had his behind firmly pasted to the ground these past three days."

"I'm not just sitting around," I corrected. "I'm learning how to filter—ouch!"

Rubbing my head, I picked up the wooden spoon that had been thrown at me from the other side of the woven home.

Three Steps, who had been quietly stirring a stone pot, let out a sharp mewl before pointing to her feline eyes with her paw.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I was just replenishing my aether a bit," I grumbled, knowing that she couldn't understand me. Caera let out a chuckle.

I let my gaze unfocus and put both Caera and Three Steps out of my mind before igniting God Step once again. The rune on my lower back grew warm as aether surged out from my core. I couldn't help but grow annoyed, and slightly worried, by the shadowy presence clinging tightly around my aether core.

Regis. It's been three days now. Either answer me or stop hogging all of my aether.

After waiting for a response for several more minutes, I gave up. Something had happened to Regis after arriving in the Shadow Claws' village. He had been taking a nap—meditating—when all of a sudden his eyes bolted open and he shot into my body, refusing to come out.

Since then, he'd been absorbing an unusual amount of aether, and I could feel his presence shifting back and forth from my core to my godrunes.

At least with Regis eating up so much of my aether reserves, it's allowing me more breaks in between training sessions with Three Steps, I thought somewhat grumpily.

The past few days had been exhausting in a way that I never thought was possible with my asuran physique. After Three Steps had agreed to mentor me in the aether arts of her own kind, she started off by sharing her memories of her own tutoring by a younger Sleeps-in-Snow. They had often discussed the Shadow Claws' aetheric abilities at length and in great detail, providing a very solid base for my own learning process.

Through it, I had learned that Shadow Claws are born with the ability to see the aetheric passages that allowed one to travel across space instantly. However, for newborns, this ability was actually a curse. With so much information bombarding their undeveloped brains, some of the weaker-willed infants actually died.

It was up to the parents and mentors to properly guide their newborns, to help them learn to first shut off their "mind's eye" until they were old enough to start learning how to shadow step, which was their term for the aetheric teleportation technique they used.

Most of the memories I'd been shown guided me through how the Shadow Claws honed their shadow step ability. Three Steps didn't understand my godrune any more than I could fathom how she manipulated aether without runes, spellforms, or an aether core, but by learning the way they learned, I hoped to grow stronger—and quicker—in my use of God Step.

Apparently, I wasn't even at the level of a two-year-old Shadow Claw cub, because that was the age that they started learning how to filter out the countless paths of aetheric streams.

Seeing it firsthand through the eyes of Three Steps as she filtered out the paths was both fascinating and humbling. There were only a dozen or so around her, which she always kept track of in order to be ready to shadow step at a moment's notice.

With over two lifetimes of experiences in different worlds, I considered myself fairly intelligent and sharp. However, compared to how the Shadow Claws constantly focused and kept track of the aetheric paths, even predicting how those paths would move based on their own movements was mind-boggling.

My gaze remained focused on the boulder in the center of the pond just outside of Three Steps' home. Hundreds of branching paths of violet intersected in the space around me, and while I had found the aetheric path leading to the boulder a long time ago, I had no intention of using God Step.

I continued to take in my surroundings through my unfocused eyes, trying to filter out more and more of the aetheric paths that drowned my vision. It was like trying to flex a specific set of muscles somewhere between my eyes and brain in a subtle, yet precise, order.

During these last few days of Three Steps showing me countless memories in hopes of expediting my training, I had learned how to contract my vision in order to filter out the aetheric routes that went *past* my chosen destination. Three Steps had been particularly excited about this breakthrough even though I wasn't quite as satisfied.

I trained God Step constantly, even while Three Steps and Caera slept, stopping only when I needed to replenish my aether reserves. I knew that my time here was limited, so it was crucial that I make the most of it.

It was only when Caera appeared again in the corner of my eye that I realized I had gone through another night training my focus on the aetheric pathways.

"How is your progress, Grey?" Caera asked, taking a seat on the ground beside me. She was dressed in a tight sleeveless shirt, giving her a much more casual appearance than I had grown used to. If it wasn't for the gleaming pair of horns circling her head like a dark crown...

I performed the mental equivalent of biting my tongue, not allowing myself to finish the thought before answering the Alacryan noble. "It's going well. The fact that I barely need sleep certainly helps."

Caera hugged her legs and shivered from the cold. "You know, I used to really envy that particular ability. Perhaps even more so than your ridiculous regeneration ability."

I raised a brow. "Oh?"

"I kept thinking to myself how much stronger I would be if I only needed a few hours of sleep a *week* in order to stay completely healthy, how much I could get done, and how useful it'd be both in and out of the Relictombs." Caera rested her chin on her knees, her gaze far away. "But after being with you for this long, I've realized that it's as much of a curse as it is a blessing."

"Why do you say that?"

The Alacryan noble turned her head to me with a solemn smile. "You always look lonely or in pain during the night. It's why you're always training, right?"

I stared at Caera, not knowing how to respond. My mind flitted to all of the times when memories of my family and friends in Dicathen ate at me, even when I was awake. But it was worse at night.

"It's not like that," I lied. "There are things I have to do, and if I want to even hope to succeed, then I need to utilize every advantage I have."

"With how strong you are already, it sounds like you're preparing yourself to fight the gods themselves," Caera said with a thin laugh.

Before I could answer, a stern mewl drew our attention behind us. Three Steps, who must have slept and awoken again while I was lost in training, was motioning for me to follow her before walking out the door.

"Will you be okay by yourself?" I asked Caera, who was still sitting by the entrance.

"You're not the only one that has training to do," she said with a grin.

I smiled back this time, admiring her mental fortitude. She had been stuck with me in zones far more difficult and deadly than she had ventured through before. Yet, despite almost starving to death, nearly dying several times, and almost freezing to death on multiple occasions, she was still able to stay positive.

Following after Three Steps, we made our way toward the rear end of the village, away from the curious gazes of the Shadow Claw villagers.

Much of the storm had subsided overnight, allowing some of the Shadow Claws to go back out of the village. While it was still hard for me to tell the Shadow Claws apart from one another, one of them did stick out to me. It was Left Tooth.

Beside me, Three Steps let out a hiss before taking a seat on the snow, drawing my attention back to her. My mentor's sharp feline eyes looked at me seriously while she began speaking in her language. I watched her face carefully. Her eyes were darting from my face to my chest, and her feline mouth was turned down in a slight frown as she spoke, her whiskers twitching.

I couldn't understand a single word she had said, but I didn't need to. Three Steps held out her paws, and, as we had done so many times now, I completed the connection.

As I expected, the memory she shared with me was the exact scene of her talking to me just moments ago, except it was from her point of view and I could understand what she was saying to me, even as I looked at my own self through her eyes, staring back in obvious confusion.

"I have shown you enough of our ways to be comfortable asking for something in return. I would like to know more about your unique abilities, passed down from the Creators, even if it is not something I can learn myself," she said before my vision shifted to a memory she had shared with me previously in which she and Sleeps-in-Snow conversed about their purpose.

The vision faded as my host pulled her hands back from mine. She waited, her eyes unblinking, until I nodded and held out my hands to her.

Three Steps looked at me once more, but her expression had changed. No longer did she look at me as if I were a child trying to learn the very basics of shadow step. She regarded me with respect, perhaps even a hint of wonder, remaining dazed even after several minutes had passed since our hands disconnected.

Reliving the memories hadn't been easy for me, either. This was the first time I had shared the memory of my arrival in the Relictombs after losing the battle against Nico and Cadell. Three Steps had just witnessed my entire journey through my eyes, from the giant chimeras and aetheric millipede, all the way to the titan. She had felt my darkness and pain and sense of loss as I struggled to keep fighting, and she had witnessed the evolution of my aetheric abilities with nothing short of awe.

I held back a deep, weary sigh, not wanting to give Three Steps the wrong impression.

I had found the Shadow Claws' method of communication to be long and tiresome, but it was now that I realized how much more effectively you could express your meaning through the sharing of memories.

Three Steps knew more about me, about my journey, than Alaric or even Caera, who had been by my side throughout this ascent. Being so open was honestly somewhat scary, but at the same time, seeing Three Steps' expression of empathy and sadness... it was as if a large weight had been taken from my shoulders.

As if sensing my emotions, Three Steps patted me on the shoulder before motioning for me to follow her once more. This time, with most of the storm having passed, the Shadow Claw led me out of the protective confines of the village and to the base of a jagged mountain nearby.

Once again, my host held out her paw while shooting me a playful grin. Curious, I touched her hand with mine and felt my mind slipping into hers.

In it, a young Three Steps—though she wasn't yet called that—and two other Shadow Claws, Tumble Down and Spear Rider, were training in the same jagged mountain just above their village. It was a sort of competition, where they each teleported as far as they could across the deep folds of the mountain, and whoever made it the farthest from the starting point won the round.

It was Spear Rider's turn to go first. As I watched the strong-jawed, dark-spotted Shadow Claw chart the course of his shadow steps, I found myself considering his bravery, and the awkward thought that he would make a fine mate to raise a kitten with some day passed through my mind.

Though I knew this was part of the memory, it was still an extremely strange thing to find myself thinking.

Outside of the memory, Three Steps pressed harder against my hand, perhaps sensing my distraction. I refocused as Spear Rider, having chosen his course, made two quick shadow steps, bringing him to a shallow ledge of rock about halfway up the next ridge over from our starting point.

It was a fair effort, but there was another path using a boulder just past the column of stone he had used as his own middle step that would take me farther.

Tumble Down must have had the same thought, because he chose the boulder to step to. Unfortunately for him, it was loose. The stone shifted under his feet, forcing him to shadow step to safety. He howled in frustration from a shallow bowl in the mountainside nearly fifty feet below Spear Rider.

Glad that Tumble Down went first and showed me the loose stone, I scouted the mountainside again, looking for a safer path that would take me farther than Spear Rider, but couldn't find one.

"What are you waiting for, Soft Heart?" Tumble Down yelled. "The mountains to move closer together before you take your steps?"

Spear Rider laughed at our friend's teasing. "Perhaps she will wait until the next storm and let the wind carry her to the mountain's peak!"

"If you don't hurry, Soft Heart, your name will become Slow-as-Stone!"

"And yours will be Dumb-as-Rock, Tumble Down!" I threw back, eliciting another howl of laughter from Spear Rider.

Making up my mind, I set my feet and prepared to catch myself on the loose boulder. If I waited for it to settle, and it did not break loose entirely, I could make it to a shelf of stone twenty feet beyond where Tumble Down stood.

Taking my eyes away from the stone and snow of the mountainside, I focused on the shadow paths, the purple lightning-fork cracks that would lead me to the boulder, and then the high shelf.

Though the memory flowed at the speed of perception where I could experience Three Steps' thoughts as she was formulating them, the actual act of her looking into the aether and teleporting was nearly instant.

Even after days of nonstop training, my own view of the branching aetheric paths was still immensely more complex and burdensome than her own. It was yet another reminder of how far I had to go if I wanted to utilize the full potential of my aether art.

In the memory, my surroundings flashed as I took a shadow step from the high ridge to the small boulder. My body tensed, expecting the boulder to shift, which it did. My plan was to let it settle, then step to the shelf.

Beneath the wide pads of my feet, the boulder turned—and kept turning. In a second, it was sliding away from the mountainside, and suddenly I was riding the unsupported boulder as it plummeted down into the ravine.

Rising panic had made me too slow to make my second shadow step, and when I finally did, I was already falling. Looking up, the first thing I saw was the column of standing stone that Spear Rider had used to step to. Following the purple pathways to the peak, I took my second step.

I misjudged it badly, appearing on the side, not the top, of the column. My aetheric claws scratched at the smooth stone, scoring deep lines into it, but failing to catch hold of anything as I slid downwards, at risk of falling nearly a hundred feet to the bottom of the ravine and my death.

A stray, dislodged thought floated through the back of my panicked mind: Why had the Creators given the Shadow Claws the power to see the aetheric paths and step through them, but only allowed us to do it twice in a row?

It was with some bitterness that I—or Three Steps, it grew difficult to tell our thoughts apart during longer memories—thought that if only they'd given us the ability to shadow step three times in a row that I wouldn't be about to die.

The sudden shift in gravity jerked the thought away, and I watched with horror as the branching paths, still there but unreachable, jumped and twitched, showing me a path to safety I couldn't take.

As Arthur watching the memory, I was fascinated by the way Three Steps was able to keep near-automatically adjusting the path that would take her to safety. More than that however, it was the first time I realized that, while the Shadow Claws were able to visualize the aetheric paths, they weren't necessarily seeing it through strictly their eyes.

Through Three Steps' memories I could *sense* the aetheric paths all around me even as I was falling. I'd thought of them often as vibrations, but it took the combination of Three Steps' senses and my own to realize that there were other ways to see them than with my eyes.

There was a music to them, a beckoning, quivering eagerness, almost as if the aether *wanted* to help, to show me the way out. Almost without thinking, I reached out my paw and followed.

The pain was so intense at first that I wasn't sure if I had shadow stepped or if I had crashed into the ground and was taking my last breaths before my inevitable death. A purple fog obscured my vision, but something cold and hard was pressed against my body, flattening my fur.

There was shouting in the distance... then the shouting was right next to me, and strong paws turned me over.

The purple fog faded. Spear Rider and Tumble Down were both standing over me, their eyes wide, their whiskers quivering as they waited to see if I was alive or dead.

My heart was *thumping* so hard I thought it might burst. Meanwhile, there was a terrible ache gripping at every inch of my body, and a severe case of backlash was overtaking me.

Still, I was alive.

As Arthur, I felt myself grinning as my mind slipped back into my own body. Three Steps was giving me a toothy smirk as well, obviously proud of the memory she had just shared with me.

"So this was your secret," I said, my body twitching in excitement.

As if understanding my words, Three Steps held a furry finger over her mouth.

I nodded in agreement as I thought through parts of the memory Three Steps had just shown me. It was obvious that she had been holding onto this memory until she felt I was truly keeping my end of the bargain, because through it I learned something crucial—more than that, I was able to experience it firsthand.

As I ignited God Step, I let my gaze unfocus, but this time, I went a step beyond. Instead of concentrating so hard on limiting the aetheric paths through my eyes, I expanded my focus toward my other senses. While I couldn't smell, hear, or taste the aether in any capacity, I was able to expand my *intent* toward the aether paths around me.

Every aetheric stream, while intertwined with or branching from one another, had a beginning and an end. And these streams acted as highways that I could travel through. However, with my intent fully connected to the aetheric paths, I didn't try to read these intricate and complicated routes.

Instead, I let the aether feed the information I needed to me.

Going a step beyond Three Steps, whose feline body was already adept at sensing the aether paths, I shrouded myself in a thin layer of aether and let my body be an anchor for the aetheric paths to send information to.

This was where Three Steps' training to focus on only the most immediate routes and limit the distance at which I perceived them was crucial. With so much information being fed to me from the aetheric pathways, I was only able to properly make out those that would teleport me just two feet away. If I tried to expand my focus out beyond that radius, it felt like hot rods were being shoved into my brain.

Taking a deep breath, I withdrew God Step and, in my excitement, I couldn't help but give my mentor a hug.

It was only a small step forward, but I knew now how to improve. For the first time, I could see myself not only catching up to Three Steps, but, with my aether core, surpassing her.

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A bead of sweat rolled down the side of my face as I carefully lifted my back leg and slowly brought it forward. I had learned and relearned how to walk throughout the span of two lifetimes, but this single step took more concentration than even the most intricate, multi-elemental spell that I had mastered with the use of mana.

My heart skipped a beat in excitement as the aether paths continued to hold strong and provide me with updated information based on my new position.

I prepared to take another step when a tap on my shoulder broke my concentration. The intertwining streams of violet crackled and distorted, sending me a barrage of chaotic information in the form of a hot knife pressed against the inside of my brain.

"Gah!" I recoiled in pain, but the feeling of losing my streak was even more agonizing.

"I was on my twenty-third step!" I groaned in frustration at Three Steps.

My mentor scoffed and spoke in her language before holding out a paw.

I pressed my palm up against her warm pads in resignation, letting her memories in.

"It's childish to get angry at me for not being able to keep your concentration. Besides, the day is ending and my tribe members should be back from their journey."

Letting out a sigh that coalesced as a cloud of fog around my head, I nodded.

Three Steps smirked, revealing a sharp canine before she disappeared with a shadow step. I looked down to see her on a thin nose-shaped rock about a dozen yards below from the wide mountain peak we had been training on.

I ignited God Step once again. In that moment of focus, I felt the draining presence of Regis within me. He had remained unresponsive no matter how much I called for him. When I tried to eject him out, I could feel my aether core anchoring him inside, leaving me no choice but to remain patient.

Focusing my senses on the streams of aether that had lit up around me, I appeared next to Three Steps with a crackle of aetheric electricity.

Without pause, my mentor disappeared once again, her body becoming a dark blur before appearing another several yards below me, near the base of a winding ravine.

The two of us had made our way up this particular mountain using only our teleportation abilities. Three Steps had shared with me that many of the mountains surrounding the village were sort of obstacle courses for the Shadow Claws to use for training.

With how much difficulty I'd had God Stepping up the narrow ridges and jagged peaks leading to the very top of this mountain, I refused to believe that this was one of the easier courses.

I continued to follow after Three Steps down the mountain, my breath fogging in front of me and sweat leaving a chilly trail down my face and back.

With all of the unknowns in my life always weighing on my mind, focusing solely on training made me feel more... in control. And with a mentor helping me progress, it wasn't as frustrating as nearly killing myself over and over to see some actual results.

I didn't want to admit it, but I was enjoying myself for the first time since my training in the flying castle.

My mind flashed to memories of learning elemental magic from Buhnd, Kathyln, Hester, and Camus back in the castle. We'd had fun then. Kathyln and I had enjoyed listening to the elders complain and gossip, and I couldn't remember when learning magic had ever been more enjoyable.

At that time, we'd been at war, yes, but there was still hope that we could win. And I still had my father.

I still had Sylvie...

Three Steps was waiting for me on a flat protrusion hidden by snow-capped trees, gazing at me with a small frown.

One of the things that I had noticed early on was how hyper-empathic Three Steps was. She told me it had to do with how the Shadow Claws communicated using memories, allowing for a deeper sensitivity of not only scenes shared between their tribe members but also the emotions that followed.

When I didn't immediately meet her paws, she frowned deeper and stretched her arm even closer toward me.

I shook my head, not willing to share these particular memories.

Three Steps looked as if she might press the issue, but the cry of a bird high above us made her flinch and fall into a crouch. She stared upward, trying to see through the clouds.

I followed her gaze, unprepared for her excessive reaction. It was only a bird cawing—

The black body of a human-sized bird, with a beak shaped like a spear, dipped below the surface of the white clouds. It wheeled once around the mountain top, then rose back into the white sea and vanished.

"A Spear Beak," I said, more to myself than to Three Steps. Turning away from the sky, I found her practically flat against the ground, the fur along her neck and back standing on end, her teeth bared in a silent hiss.

I gently tapped my mentor's arm and pointed to a shallow cave in the face of the mountain.

After a moment, we made our way to the cave, though Three Steps never took her gaze away from the sky.

Standing with our backs flat up against the shallow cavity on the side of the mountain, I couldn't help but wonder at the Spear Beak's visit. What would bring a lone member of their tribe all the way to the Shadow Claw village? A scout, perhaps, looking for Caera and me, or maybe just for Swiftsure.

Staring at the Spear Beak weaving up and down the clouds, an idea struck me. I knew it might be a long shot, but I had been fortunate enough to receive a warm welcome from both their tribes. If I could provide at least a small bit of mediation, then it might be easier for us to retrieve the pieces of the portal arch.

With more to gain than to lose, I grabbed Three Step's paw and sent her the image of Swiftsure saving us and leading us to their village, of our welcome there, and of being fed. I only provided snippets of the conversation we had with Old Broke Beak, as I didn't want to upset her.

Three Steps pulled her paw away from me in surprise, looking at me with confusion, or perhaps concern. The Shadow Claws' feline faces were still difficult for me to read.

"It's okay," I said quietly, mustering up a friendly smile for her and holding out my hands again.

I wanted to share more memories, the moments I had spent with Swiftsure on our journey from the Spear Beak village, but before I could send them, I began receiving one instead.

In it, I was again with Spear Rider. We were a little older than before and this memory took place high in the mountains. He was running, sprinting along the snow-dusted stone, and from the emotions I felt through Three Step's eyes as I watched his back, I knew that their relationship was far past mere friends.

"Faster, Spear Rider!" I shouted as Spear Rider chased after a plump rodent the size of his torso.

"What use is your three steps if it takes you so long to recharge!" he retorted with a playful growl just before his body flashed.

Spear Rider shadow stepped right in the rodent's path, startling it, but just as he swept his aetheric claws down at our prey, the mole dipped under the snow and resurfaced several yards behind him.

I let out a howl of laughter as my life partner yelled in frustration.

We had been chasing after this snow mole for the past hour, hoping to bring it back to the village and have a feast. It was rare to see one of these reclusive beasts, and even more rare to catch one, as they could burrow into the snow faster than even a Shadow Claw could get close. Unlike its brethren, this mole continued to resurface rather than hiding deep in the snow, which had given us a chance.

"This fearless rodent must be taught not to be so brazen," Spear Rider hissed as he sprinted after it, with me following close behind.

"I've heard stories about how these beasts are able to feed an entire village twice over because of their ability to make their bodies small or large," I yelled, excitement pounding at my heart. "Imagine how proud Sleeps-in-Snow will be if we bring one back!"

Spear Rider looked back with an eager grin. "Perhaps we'll finally be allowed to train as pathfinders!"

The thought of being one of the coveted seekers of answers, traveling far beyond the safety of the village hoping to find secrets, made my heart pound even harder.

Filled with determination, I shadow stepped mid-sprint just behind the plump white rodent. That's when I noticed that it was chewing on something as it was scurrying.

My moment of distraction allowed the rodent to dip back into the snow and reappear just off the edge of a ravine.

A shadow flashed by and I watched as Spear Rider leapt from the ravine's edge and shadow stepped down into it and out of sight.

"Spear Rider! Wai—"

My ears twitched at a sharp, wet thud and a pained grunt from below, just barely audible in the silence of the snowy landscape. Then the gut-wrenching shriek of a Spear Beak's battle cry resounded across the walls of the ravine.

My vision swam as the blood rushed up to my head. I shadow stepped to the edge of the ravine where I found a Spear Beak on top of my partner.

Without hesitation I shadow stepped once more on top of the lanky bird mounted on top of Spear Rider with my claws extended, but something flashed in the corner of my eye.

Spinning, I brought my claws up in time to block a second Spear Beak's sharp bill aimed straight for my throat.

My paws gripped the ground and I slid to a halt just before going off the edge of the shelf of rock, which was high up on the side of the ravine.

That's when I noticed the trail of blood that I had made. Two red lines had been drawn in the snow by my own feet, but it wasn't my blood. Despite the danger I was in, my gaze followed the crimson trail slowly, until I found myself looking at Spear Rider.

My partner's pale pelt was red with blood that was still pooling underneath him, his hollow eyes open in shock and pain.

A howl ripped from my throat as the anguish and grief washed over me like a blizzard, and despite the Creator's magic drained from my body, I gathered what I had left to sharpen and lengthen my claws.

That's when I noticed.

The Spear Beaks, both dark as a stormy night, blended in with the shadow blanketed over us, and below the second Spear Beak's talons was the rodent that they had used to lure us in, a thin white string attached to its neck.

My eyes watered in rage as I shot forward, cursing to myself that I shouldn't have wasted my third shadow step earlier to catch up to the rodent.

The Spear Beak that had tried to kill me shuffled forward and met my claws with a barrage of stabs using its beak, forcing me to go on the defensive. I parried and dodged, careful not to slip on the melting snow beneath me, but my focus waned when the other Spear Beak began ripping a strip of flesh off my partner. It took its time swallowing the flesh down, its eyes locked on me, as if taunting me.

The vile creature, eternal enemy of my people, continued to peck at and tear off pieces of Spear Rider, letting out elated squawks while I struggled to defend myself.

Abruptly, the memory flashed out, followed by a jumble of other memories, of altercations with the Spear Beaks, of expression of fear, hatred and grief from the Shadow Claw tribe.

And as quickly as the desire to help bring these two tribes together had come... that desire faded.

I wasn't sure if the animosity between the different tribes was a creation of the djinn or the result of eons of competition, war, and strife, but healing such old wounds would be the work of lifetimes, not some afternoon quest for me complete on my way through.

For the first time, I stumbled after being pulled out of Three Steps' memories, her emotions still lingering and affecting me.

The two of us shared a long look, and even without speaking a single word, I knew by Three Steps' expression that I had overstayed my welcome.

A palpable tension clung to the air as we arrived back at the village and it was obvious that the gathering of Shadow Claws near the village entrance had something to do with it. Three Steps was scanning through the crowd, clearly concerned.

It wasn't until I spotted Caera that I realized what was going on. Her blade was drawn, eyes calm and deadly, but she remained in a neutral pose, unwilling to strike.

I stepped forward to help her but Three Steps stopped me. She let out a few low mewls and stuck out her paw.

My gaze shifted between my mentor and Caera before I impatiently accepted her invitation.

"I don't wish for a battle, but if you want my aid, I will need to know the whole truth."

With our hands pressed together, I sent her the memory of the Shadow Claw ambush, from the moment the first of them burst from the snow and killed Swiftsure, all the way to Caera's destruction of the bodies and our formulation of the plan to get into their village.

Throughout the vision, I felt Three Steps flinch away from me, but she never broke the contact, allowing me to complete the sending. I ended by replaying our discovery of the broken portal, the elderly Four Fists giving us their piece, and my conversation with Caera about needing to collect all the portal pieces in order to leave this zone.

When we broke contact, I tried to get some sense of Three Steps' feeling, but her feline face was unreadable.

Damn it. I don't have time for this.

I got ready to accept the fact that Three Steps wouldn't help us, and was about to God Step to Caera's side when Three Steps flashed past me and appeared between the gathering of her tribe members and Caera.

Following after her, I stood next to the Alacryan noble, whose expression finally relaxed when she saw me. "You're here."

"Sorry I'm late," I muttered, my eyes locked on the two familiar Shadow Claws leading the group.

I could discern Left Tooth's aggressive growling as his gaze flickered toward me and Caera while even the calm Sleeps-in-Snow let out a wizened rumble. Anger and fear were clear amongst the tribe members, but the reaction of the group changed as Three Steps spoke.

"It's hard to assess the situation here without knowing what they're saying," Caera said softly. "Do you know what's going on?"

I shook my head. "I don't know for certain, but I think the scouts that left earlier may have found signs of our battle with their tribe members."

While I didn't understand her words, Three Steps' tone was leveled and assertive. As she continued to speak, however, some of the Shadow Claws' faces contorted into expressions of disbelief.

Left Tooth in particular became even more enraged, puffing out his chest and regarding me with a look of derision, aether fluctuating erratically around him.

The conversation ended with Three Steps swinging her arm in the air and pointing behind her with a growl. She then turned back to us and motioned for us to follow her.

Caera and I exchanged a wary glance and started to follow my feline mentor toward her hut when a shadow blurred toward us.

Left Tooth and two of his lackeys darted past my companion and lunged toward me, his jagged aether claws humming balefully.

My foot snapped out in a front kick but he shadow stepped at the last instant. I was ready for this, my vision swirling with the aetheric paths, feeding me the route that Left Tooth had taken. I drove my elbow back, catching him in the side of the head and knocking him to the ground.

Caera had managed to block the slashing claws of the second Shadow Claw, and I grabbed a third midteleport and slammed him into the ground. Pain exploded from my calf, and I twisted away from Left Tooth's claws as he darted away.

Regis! Now would be a great time to be useful, I snapped, only to be met with silence.

Annoyance grew to anger as Caera struggled to keep the other Shadow Claw at bay without gravely injuring it.

Left Tooth let out a growl, his claws elongating and contorting the air around them before his form disappeared in yet another shadow step. Just as he appeared in front of me, I God Stepped as well. The haughty Shadow Claw's head whirled side to side as I stood behind him.

Sweeping his legs out from under him, I grabbed the side of his head and slammed Left Tooth face first into the snowy ground.

The Shadow Claw's arms flailed, his claws scratching desperately at the air, but I held him down firmly, my fingers all but ready to crush his head.

"Greh!"

My head spun to see that it was Three Steps who had called my name. Her eyes, filled with anger and sorrow, bore into me as she shook her head.

It was then that I noticed that a blanket of silence had fallen over the entire village. Not even the soft howl of the wind could be heard as everyone's attention was solely focused on me.

"Tch." I released my hold over Left Tooth and stood up, sweeping my gaze over the tribe members.

Each one I looked at flinched in fear until my eyes locked onto Three Steps, who was walking toward me.

Three Steps held out her paw one last time, and I saw a vision of the portal piece. It was in the caves just above the waterfall, hidden in a bed of black sand beneath a glinting, quartz-crusted boulder.

I stood there dumbly, going over the memory once more just to make sure I wouldn't forget, when a light nudge snapped me back to my mentor. Three Steps held up her other paw, handing me a hollow ball, slightly smaller than my palm, that rattled at the slightest movement.

I'd seen the younger children play with similar balls, and Three Steps had shown me a memory in which she taught them how to use it. Rarely, the hardy little trees in the village would grow a fruit large enough to turn into this toy. When the fruit dried, it became incredibly hard and trapped the seed inside. The adults would pull out the stem, leaving a hole just slightly smaller than the seed in the top of the ball, and would cut a thin seam in the side just before the hardening process was complete.

It was one way in which the kittens learned to manifest their claws, as only by using an aetheric claw could they pull the seed through the hole.

Prying my gaze away from the toy, which I knew would be crucial for my growth, I looked at Three Steps once more.

My chest tightened as Three Steps walked past me and picked up Left Tooth without another word. My gaze followed her as she walked off toward her tribe members without once looking back.

"It's time to go," I finally said to Caera, turning my back to my mentor as well.

Perhaps sensing my mood, the Alacryan noble walked silently by my side as the two of us made our way across the village to the waterfall.

I struggled to keep myself from looking back. Regret and guilt tore at my insides as I wished nothing more than to thank and say goodbye to the mentor who had shared and taught me so much in the past few days.

But I knew her duty was to her village, and it would be wrong of me to disparage the trust she had with her tribe members by acting so close to her. Of all the trials in the Relictombs, this zone was the cruelest in the way it tested an ascender.

I was ready to be finished with it.

320 THE WILD THINGS

I gulped down a mouthful of icy water, letting it wash down my throat before standing back up.

Beside me, Caera winced as she swallowed down the crystal-clear liquid flowing into the waterfall nearby. I continued to survey our surroundings, careful to make sure Left Tooth or his entourage hadn't followed us.

"I don't think they'll try and confront us again," Caera said casually, walking over to me. "It would be obvious to even the children how outmatched they were against you."

"You held your own pretty well back there." I raised my brow, studying the Alacryan noble. "It seems like you've actually grown stronger since we arrived in this zone."

"It's such a rare occurrence for you to compliment me, Grey," she said, narrowing her eyes. "It's a shame that it had to sound so condescending."

"I didn't mean for it to come out that way," I responded, suddenly flustered. "My apologies."

"Apology accepted." A faint smile played at the edge of Caera's pink lips. "Now let's grab the portal piece before any other trouble shows up. It's been too peaceful out here and it's making me anxious."

Nodding in agreement, I pointed toward a set of caves formed on the sloping face of the mountain peak. "We're nearly there."

The two of us made our way over to the other side of the wide stream, arriving in front of an obscure crack between two larger caves. Taking the lead, I squeezed through the entrance, which was just barely wide enough for me to fit in sideways.

"Um, Grey? Care to give me a hand?"

I turned back to see Caera stuck midway, struggling to dislodge her upper body.

"You're lucky Regis isn't here," I said with a smirk before pulling her free.

Even with Three Steps' memory guiding us in the right direction, it still took the better half of an hour to navigate the winding tunnel, which branched off several times as we went deeper.

Finally, I found the glittering boulder that signified the final split and started counting twenty-eight short paces before I started digging with my hands.

Hidden in a layer of black sand was a thin slab of white stone about four inches wide and eight inches long.

"Only three left," Caera said with a deep breath.

I stored the portal piece in my dimension rune. "One step closer."

Suddenly, a dull throb radiated from my lower back before echoing off my core, causing me to buckle forward.

"Grey!"

"It's... fine," I grunted, standing back up. "It's Regis again. I don't know what's happening to him, but it looks like he's closing in on whatever he's been trying to do."

The "pulses", which had started just the day before, had grown steadily stronger. Luckily, they were more a bother than anything else, but I really was starting to worry about my snarky companion.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I turned to Caera who had been staring at me in concern. "Let's go."

The two of us walked silently on the powdery snow, having already traveled quite a few miles from the mountain where we had located the Shadow Claws' portal piece.

We were headed roughly in the direction of the Spear Beaks' village, hoping to obtain their piece of the puzzle and get more information on the last two pieces. As to whether they'd willingly give us this information, I had no qualms with forcing it out of them after experiencing Three Steps' memories.

Looking down, I focused on the dried-fruit toy that Three Steps had given me, which I had pulled out to keep me occupied as we walked. While frustrating to no end, I knew that mastering this children's trinket would be the first step in creating my own aether construct.

I coalesced aether around my hand once more before digging my index finger into the small opening of the fruit. I started trying to squeeze violet aura through the tip of my finger and into the inside of the fruit. I only served to push the fruit away as a dull purple bulge formed over my finger.

Focusing as hard as I could on the small opening of the toy, I tried to lengthen and narrow the tip of the aetheric aura surrounding my finger, but I was only able to push it out a fraction of an inch more before it became painful.

I was reminded of the Aether Cannon ability I had come up with to move through the snow and tried to use that as a basis. Except, once enough aether gathered at a central point, it burst out, taking the toy along with it.

"Pfft."

I turned to see Caera watching me with a smile in her eyes and lips pressed shut from trying to keep from laughing. "Have you grown frustrated with it enough to shoot it out of your own hands?"

"I didn't do it on purpose," I grumbled, jogging a few paces to where the toy had landed. "This toy is just proving to be more of a challenge than I expected."

"Shadow Claws spend most of their childhood training with this, and that's taking into account their innate aptitude for this ability."

I picked up the dried fruit and gave it a shake before turning back to Caera. "So?"

"So..." Caera walked up to me and wrapped her hands over my hand and the toy, gently pushing it down. "You're not going to get this in the span of a few hours, especially when half of your brain is busy figuring out what to do next."

"Did you gain wisdom alongside your horns?" I scoffed.

"That's discrimination," Caera pouted. "And no, I didn't. People just tend to grow up rather fast when their childhood is difficult."

I couldn't help but agree as I thought back to my childhoods, both as Grey and as Arthur. "My joke was rather insensitive. Sorry."

"Do my horns look that odd to you?" Caera asked, leaning closer toward me. "I've always hidden them from everyone except my mentor, and she has horns as well."

I stepped away. "They don't look odd on you. It's just that I haven't exactly had a positive experience with people who have horns."

Caera raised a brow, her piercing scarlet eyes growing even more curious. "What sort of experiences—" Caera stopped and shook her head. "Never mind. As intrigued as I am to know more about you, I'd rather you tell me once you feel more comfortable."

"I appreciate it," I replied, tucking the dried-fruit toy back into my dimension rune. "But I have no—" I paused, staring into the distance. "What is that?"

Caera turned to examine the horizon.

"It looks like another storm... that's rising from the ground?"

She was right. It did look like a storm, except there weren't any clouds in the sky. Above us, the glacier blue expanse was still painted with the aurora colors over the endless range of mountains.

On the ground, the snow was kicked up, swirling as if in the midst of a blizzard. But the real problem was that it was heading our way, and approaching fast.

My vision shifted into a blaze of violet trails as I instinctively prepared to use God Step, but I held myself back. The "storm" wasn't moving in any sort of natural formation, but looked to be weaving, almost as if it were alive.

A part of me was actually relieved that it might be an enemy. So far, the most dangerous obstacle we'd faced in this zone had been the weather, and that wasn't something I could fight, much less win against.

Deciding to confront whatever was approaching us rather than waste aether God Stepping only for it to follow after us, I pulled Caera close.

"Brace yourself!" I said, shrouding myself in aether as Caera did the same with mana.

I dug my heels into the snow and prepared for impact, but instead of sweeping over us, the blizzard encircled our location. Once it was close enough, I could make out aetheric shapes moving in the snow-cloud, and I realized what this must be.

"The wild things," I muttered.

A ghostly creature made of snow and ice suspended in a tornado of aether broke free from the blizzard and rushed toward us. It reminded me of the malevolent phantom that had possessed Ada in the mirror room, except this thing had taken possession of the land itself, coming to life as a sort of snow golem, a shapeless whirlwind of conscious aether.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of identical aether beasts made up the storm that had surrounded us.

Sheathing myself in another layer of aether, I lunged forward to meet the construct. My fist burst through the snow and aether, but it only rippled like water and swirled back together as I passed through it.

A thin arm ending in three icy claws slashed at me. Just as my fist had passed through its body, its claws moved through me, unabated by my aetheric barrier. Though they left no physical wound, a line of cold fire burned in my side. Aether flooded from my core to heal the perceived wound.

"Don't let them touch you!" I barked, just as Caera burst forward, her blade flashing down through the golem's body.

Her attack, however, was even less effective than my punch. It slashed at her with a second clawed arm, forcing her to jump back. Two more arms coalesced from the snow of its body, both reaching out for me.

I tried to grab its wrists, but my hands closed only on the suspended snow; the claws drew twin lines of icy pain along my sides, forcing my body to again heal the wounds. *And draining my aether in the process*, I realized.

"Now would be a great time to come out, Regis," I growled, feeling his presence absorbing more of my already-dwindling reserves.

Dodging a flurry of the being's claws, I coalesced aether into my right hand. Relying solely on the channels that I had forged myself without the help of Regis's natural ability to draw in aether, it took much more time to gather the appropriate amount of energy.

Once I did, I raised my hand, now wrapped in a nimbus of purple light, and unleashed an explosion of aether out at the closest snow golem.

The aether cannon ripped through not only the snow golem I had aimed at but three more behind it, distorting the aetheric mist holding them together before their frozen bodies crumbled into the snow.

I winced at the sudden drop in my aether reserves, and all to kill only a handful of the golems.

My gaze flashed to Caera as I felt the oppressive aura of her soulfire, which cloaked her blade in black flame. She swung wide, bisecting three aether golems. The soulfire around her weapon spread through the center of the aetheric beings, eating away the captured snow and ice.

However, I could still see the purplish mists, and they were already collecting snow from the ground to fashion themselves new bodies.

Caera noticed as well, but remained calm. "It seems like the most I'll be able to do is stall them. Do you have a plan?"

"My Aether Cannon seems to destroy them for good, but I don't have enough aether to kill all of them," I said while evading a pair of snow golems.

Caera thrust forward, disintegrating another golem's body with her soulfire. "I'll follow your lead."

"Conserve your mana and stall as many as you can," I replied before turning back and locking gazes with the Alacryan noble. "And thank you."

"We both want to get out of here alive, Grey," she replied before turning her focus back to the wave of golems emerging from the snow and surrounding us.

I scanned the press of golems, suddenly worried we might accidentally destroy the portal piece, but I couldn't see through the blowing snow and aether to locate it. Would they simply be carrying it around with them? Perhaps it was hidden in an extradimensional storage. The worst case scenario was that they kept it hidden under the snow somewhere we'd never find it.

Dodging a swiping claw, I thrust my hand into the attacking golem's chest. The aether rippled around my fist, but the creature seemed otherwise unaffected. Perhaps it was a reflex from learning to fight against the chimeras and carallians, but without thinking about it I began to absorb the tornado of aether into my hand.

The golem shivered, and the metallic screeching that issued from it set my teeth on edge. As I drew in its aether, several pairs of claws jammed into my sides and back from the golem's brethren, sending shocking jolts of breathless pain through me.

Feeling my core replenishing, I grinned through the pain. My newfound aether supply meant that I could be a bit more reckless in my usage.

I pushed outward, coalescing as much aether as possible into the thin layer surrounding my body. The barrier grew thicker, now casting a purple glow over the trampled snow around me.

A claw came down from above and I lifted my arm instinctively to block it, and the ghostly form of the golem clashed against the barrier. Despite the visible cracks on my protective aura where the claws had struck me, it failed to pierce through.

Taking advantage of the golem's opening, I plunged my hand into its body. I absorbed aether once more through my hand, which was sheathed in violet energy. Like before, the golem began to emit a piercing shriek and froze in place, quaking slightly.

Catching another golem's movement out of the corner of my eye, I dipped under its horizontal slash and, with my other hand, did the same to a second icy being.

They continued to desperately claw at me, creating more and more cracks in my aetheric barrier until it shattered, fading out of existence. By then, however, it was already too late for the golems.

During the ten breaths that it took to draw on their aether, more and more golems surrounded me, and the two I was draining vanished, their shrieks cutting out suddenly as the snow that made up their physical form was released from the little tornado and drifted slowly to the ground.

Before I had enough time to conjure another shroud thick enough to protect me against the golems, a set of icy claws managed to catch me across my left hip while another slashed down my back.

The icy pain drove my body to heal my injuries once more, draining my reserves.

Before more could gather around me, I unleashed a dome of aetheric pressure, careful not to let it reach where Caera was fighting.

The golems surrounding me stiffened in the expanse of purple that encompassed the space around us, giving me the opportunity to jump onto another golem and begin draining its aether. I could see the effects my spell had on the golems, the violet mist that held their form together quivering and distorting.

Outside the dome, Caera spun, parried, weaved, and cut like a master swordsman, each precise strike burning away the body of a golem, and each step taking her just out of range of a swiping claw. However, I could clearly see the nebulous of aether gathering around her, some already forming back new bodies.

Rather than wasting aether forming a new barrier around me, I sought protection elsewhere.

Igniting God Step, I flashed to where Caera fought and drove my hand into the mass of aetheric mist trying to form a body of snow.

"Keep the golems off of me while I absorb the ones without bodies!" I yelled.

Caera sprung into action, sticking close by me and turning into a whirlwind of destruction.

The two of us continued this for what seemed like hours, Caera sparingly utilizing her soulfire to disintegrate the golems' bodies while I absorbed enough energy to let out an aetheric blast before repeating the process over again.

The problem was that, while I could continue to replenish my aether reserves, my partner couldn't. I could see her movement slowing, and the soulfire sheathing her red sword flickered weakly.

Caera's overhead swing came up short, leaving her open for a golem behind her to attack.

Thanks to Three Steps' unique teaching, I was able to God Step in time to bring myself between the golem and Caera.

Clutching the Alacryan noble close to me, I grit my teeth as a score of icy pain raked down my back.

Caera's eyes widened in surprise. "G-Grey?"

"It's fine. I'll heal while you won't," I mustered as I let go of her. "How much longer can you hold up?"

"Not much longer," Caera admitted.

With a nod, the two of us resumed our strategy once more, but this time at a slower pace. While I was able to permanently destroy the golems, it took time for me to absorb them completely. I needed Caera to destroy their bodies and protect me while I did so.

With my internal reserves topped off, I focused on building up another aether blast. It burst from my hand to engulf dozens of the golems that made up the blizzard surrounding us, giving me a brief glimpse of the zone beyond.

Then something changed. The blizzard blowing in a circle around us shivered, and several dozen forms within it compressed in on each other until it looked like a single purple blob within the white wall.

What stepped out of the driving snow wasn't a meager whirlwind of snow and ice; it wasn't even a tornado.

The figure was at least twelve feet high to the back. It had a broad, bearish form, but walked on six muscular limbs, each tipped with gleaming claws of aether. A long, lance-like beak of pure ice protruded from its otherwise round, shapeless head.

The resultant monstrosity looked like an amalgamation of the Spear Beaks, Shadow Claws, Ghost Bears, and Four Fists, except several times larger.

Worse yet, it wasn't alone. Dozens of snow golems had come together to form three of these hideous snow sculptures.

There was no choice now.

"We're not surrounded anymore. Get as far away as possible while I hold it off," I demanded, igniting the rune of Destruction and praying that I'd still keep my sanity after.

"I can still—"

"Please!" I urged, my mind conjuring up the image of Caera's body about to burn from my flames back in the mirror zone. "I don't want to hurt you again."

Caera clicked her tongue, but she began to leave as the violet flames flickered into existence, dancing in the air around me.

Just as the dark, shadowy presence of Destruction began to encroach on my mind, another pulse emanated from my core, this time with a force that brought me to my knees.

Blood rushed to my head, pounding against my ears. I could barely make out Caera calling my name behind me. An unmistakably familiar presence emerged from my core, taking the dark presence of Destruction along with him.

Then my shadow beneath me expanded, taking on a bestial form as a giant claw the size of my torso emerged from the shaded ground.

A pair of sharp amethyst eyes opened and gazed at me before a rumbling growl sounded over the tumult of wind and snow.

"Miss me, princess?"

321 OUT OF PLACE

I watched in awe as Regis dragged himself out from the depths of my shadow, rather than my body. Aside from the fact that I only came up to his chest when he stood on all fours, his front limbs now longer and more muscular than his hind legs, the shadow wolf's appearance had drastically changed.

Regis's fur jutted out in hard spikes, gleaming like obsidian beneath the sharp-edged blades of purple flames that danced over him. His horns were sweeping spears that grew out from his temple and thrust forward like a bull's, while rows of serrated daggers protruded out to form his fangs.

A powerful roar ripped out from the throat of my shadowy companion, carrying a palpable pressure akin to the aetheric version of King's Force that I had learned from Kordri. Sensing the danger, the three giant golems' attention turned to Regis.

My head snapped back to Caera. "Change of plans. Support Regis!"

Caera, despite her fatigued state, gave me a firm nod and channeled soulfire into her scarlet blade as Regis rushed forward, kicking up a cloud of snow behind him.

My companion's movements blurred as he ripped a chunk out of one of the golems with his claws before spinning and lashing out at another with his spiked tail. Where his claws moved, a streak of violet trailed behind, carrying with it the aspect of Destruction.

While not nearly as potent as the violet flames I was able to produce utilizing the godrune, his attacks were able to inhibit the golems' ability to regenerate, unlike Caera's soulfire.

Consuming the information being fed to me through the aether trails, I God Stepped near the giant golem still trying to regenerate part of its torso and leaped on top of its shoulder before plunging my hands into its body.

As I began absorbing the aetheric nebula that made up its actual form, the third golem retaliated by conjuring an icicle spear in its clawed hand and throwing it at me.

Before I even decided to react, a sphere of soulfire crashed into the giant icicle, consuming the golem's attack before billowing out.

My expression must've given away my surprise at the sight of her new spell because Caera shot me a smirk and said, "You're not the only one that's been training, Grey!"

With my reserves nearly full, I began to coalesce aether into my palm in preparation for another aether blast when the golem I was standing on lurched, throwing me off.

"Watch it!" I growled at Regis, who had rammed his head against the golem I was on top of, skewering it with his horns.

Twisting my body to reorient myself, I launched the condensed blast of aether at the golem's head. A muted explosion reverberated as my spell hit, but even decapitated, the golem was still able to wrap all of its six limbs around Regis.

The other two golems quickly took advantage of Regis's limited mobility and began pummeling him with a barrage of fists, claws, and icicles. Despite the onslaught that he faced, however, his thick coat of spiked fur and jagged flames mitigated most of the damage he took, giving me and Caera another opening.

Channeling more aether into my right hand, I condensed it as much as possible before flashing toward the cluster of giant golems and releasing my attack point blank.

While the close-range attack greatly reduced the amount of aether it leaked while traveling mid-air, the rebound from the impact made by the spell was strong enough to blow me backwards, hurling me several yards into the air.

I God Stepped to the ground, absorbing the momentum of the recoil, then ignited the godrune once more to avoid a giant icicle the size of a carriage that had been hurled at me, despite my aetheric blast burning away two of my attacker's arms.

Caera let loose another cluster of smaller soulfire bombs that expanded upon impact, destroying chunks of the giant golems' limbs and bodies, now thoroughly misshapen, and freeing Regis.

Letting out another roar that sounded more like a dragon than a wolf, Regis became a whirlwind of jagged flames, fangs, and claws, mincing the trio of golems like they were in a thresher.

"I don't even think we're needed at this point," Caera said with a weary chuckle, the black flames dancing around her fingers dimming.

As if the golems took her words as a challenge, the physical constructs of snow and ice that made up their bodies suddenly collapsed to the ground.

The purple mist that made up their true forms began to coalesce, becoming thicker and clearer while also condensing into a smaller form.

A dome of kinetic force erupted from where the aetheric being gathered, sending Regis soaring over the snow. Caera was barely able to anchor herself by stabbing her blade into the ground, while I opted to clad myself in a thicker layer of aether and dig my heels into the ground.

From the epicenter of the explosion appeared an ethereal humanoid being with four translucent purple arms and a pair of wings that spanned twice its seven-foot height. Covering its limbs were plates of armor made of ice. But the most surprising feature was the white portal shard covering half of its faceless head like a decorative mask.

Caera took a step forward. "Is that..."

A smile formed on the edge of my lips. "The portal piece."

My body was tinged with a violet hue as aether clung tightly around me. As I prepared to confront the four-armed humanoid, however, a sharp burst of malicious thoughts broke my concentration.

'This thing is mine!' Regis snarled in a voice that didn't sound quite like his own.

My shadowy companion rushed forward in a blur, his Destruction-infused jaws snapping rabidly. However, the snow beneath Regis caved in and hardened so that his limbs were frozen to the ground.

Letting out a frustrated growl, the shadow wolf began jerking his body, trying to free himself, but even with the aspect of Destruction coating his body, the ice held firm.

With a beat of its translucent purple wings, the being shot up high above the ground and began raining down a shower of icicles tinged in aether.

Caera flashed ahead of me, putting herself between Regis and the flurry of aether-clad icicles without hesitation, and conjured a wall of soulfire.

Meanwhile, I ignited God Step, teleporting in the air above our opponent to stop its attack. Shrouding myself in a nimbus of violet energy, I oriented myself as I fell straight on top of the humanoid's shoulders.

Grabbing hold of the being's neck, its wings beating frantically to either side as our bodies bobbed up and down in the air, I wrapped my legs around its waist and tried to rip the portal piece from its head. However, the white slab of stone wouldn't budge and the plates of frozen armor began to gnaw away at the protective layer of aether surrounding me.

Seeing that Caera had managed to block most of the attack with her black flames and free Regis, I changed my tactics.

Rather than trying to tear off the portal piece, I gripped the humanoid being's head with both hands. As I tried to absorb the aether that made up its purple flesh, however, I was overwhelmed by a torrent of energy.

It was like trying to drink water from the bottom of a lake. At the risk of drowning, I released my grip around its head and focused on the humanoid's wings instead.

The being began to writhe in pain, trying to pull me off its back with its arms, or batter me with its wings, but I clung on firmly even as my foe's icy chill emanated through my protective shroud, causing my flesh to ache and burn as crystalline patterns of frost bloomed from every point where we contacted one another.

Amassing a condensed sphere of aether around my right hand, which threatened to explode at the tiniest break in my concentration, I began molding it, much like I had practiced using the dried-fruit toy that Three Steps had given me.

Flares of purple energy leaked out as I tried to change the aether's form, but I persisted until I was able to make something akin to a misshapen disk.

I sipped from the humanoid form's aether, carefully not to let it submerge me as I continued to try and make the disk thinner, but a sharp *crack* resounded across the snowy plain and a mind-numbing pain radiated from my left leg.

Almost losing enough concentration to explode the aetheric disk I held in the palm of my hand, I chose to fire the spell immediately instead, aiming at the base of the creature's right wing.

The translucent purple disk shot out from my hand, dissipating into the air in mere moments, but not before it managed to sever cleanly through one aetheric wing.

A grating sound akin to a hum and a screech issued from the being as we both began plummeting down to the snowy ground.

"Regis!" I roared, both aloud and in my head to grab my shadowy companion's attention.

Seeing the large, dark blur approaching us on the ground, I released my grip around the humanoid before igniting God Step once more.

With a crackle of violet lightning, I arrived on the ground some distance away, but immediately fell forward as my left leg gave out from under me.

"Grey!"

Caera rushed to my side, her scarlet eyes staring in horror at my shattered leg. However, my own focus went to the bloody wound on her shoulder blade.

"How'd you get that injury?" I asked, wincing at the pain of my leg grinding and shifting as it healed.

The Alacryan noble shook her head. "It was Regis, but I don't think he realized he'd hit me. He's not exactly in the right state of mind right now."

Annoyance rose at seeing Caera injured because of us, but I was also thankful that Regis's newly-acquired Destruction ability wasn't nearly as potent as mine. If it manifested as all-consuming flames, like mine did...

Turning my gaze to the battle ensuing in the distance, I could see Regis and the aetheric being locked in a heated melee. Each attack carried enough force behind it to release shockwaves of energy that could be felt from even where Caera and I watched.

"I should go help," I said, standing up.

Caera looked down at my healed leg, her expression hidden behind her obsidian horn, then looked back up at me. "Regis doesn't seem to want help."

"I know." I frowned. "But I can feel this new form of his eating away at Regis."

With a nod, she stepped forward, standing by my side. "I've drained too much mana to be able to keep up with the two of you. I'll support from behind."

My gaze fell to the curved gash that reached up her shoulder. While it had stopped bleeding, I could make out a tinge of purple over it. "I'm sorry about that."

Caera pushed me forward with a faint grin. "If it scars, you'll have to answer to my mentor. Now go."

Aetheric lightning crackled around me as I ignited God Step. My surroundings changed as I appeared a few paces behind the humanoid just as its arms tripled in length and slammed down on Regis, creating a crater beneath him.

'This thing is mine!' Regis growled venomously.

Shut up, I spat back, rushing forward with an aether-clad step. I was forced to duck as the being's remaining wing condensed into a scythe of aether and cut toward my neck. I grabbed the wing as it hissed over my head and twisted the being's body sideways, then planted my leg in its stumbling path, letting it tumble sideways to the ground.

Gathering energy in my hand, I delivered an aetheric punch—less-potent than Gauntlet Form, but still effective—to its exposed chest, creating a swirling cavern through which I could see the snow-packed ground. I gathered aether again and prepared to release a point-blank blast when something dark and heavy hit me from the side, shouldering me out of the way before tearing into the humanoid golem.

A scoff escaped my lips as my frustration boiled over into anger at my companion's rebelliousness. "So that's how you want to do this?"

An aura of violet energy hummed around my clawed hand as I walked toward Regis and the aetheric being rolling in the snow like a couple of wild animals wrestling.

Not bothering to suppress myself any longer, I raised my open palm and aimed it at the two of them before launching the torrent of aether.

An inhuman screech and a deep howl of pain resounded up into the mountain peaks. Both Regis and the creature had been knocked to the ground where they writhed in pain, momentarily stunned.

"Thanks for holding this thing steady, *pal*," I said before plunging one hand into the being's fading purple body and carefully absorbing its aether. At the same time, I worked at the portal piece with my other hand, trying to pull it free from the faceless head.

Using the humanoid's own body to fuel mine, reinforcing the strength of my arm, hand, and fingers with its aether, I was able to finally pry the white stone slab free with a satisfying *crack*.

The dense concentration of aether that made up the humanoid's body unravelled. Without the portal piece serving as its anchor, the aetheric being detonated into an enormous maelstrom of violet energy that soon rippled out of existence.

I stood awkwardly for a moment, the sudden silence uncomfortable after the overwhelming noise of the battle, until Regis finally found the strength to stand on his clawed feet.

"Look what you did!" Regis spat, advancing toward me with deadly intent. "If you weren't so fixated on that *stupid* stone piece, I would've been able to absorb all of its aether!"

"Then what?" I matched my companion's menacing glare, not a shred of sympathy evident in my voice. "You were going to kill me and Caera and romp free in this wasteland?"

Regis bared his obsidian fangs. "Maybe I would—"

My fist dug into the side of his face, pummeling his head into the ground.

Holding out a hand to stop Caera from approaching, I kept my gaze on Regis. "Looks like I've been a bit too easy on you."

With a rage-fueled snarl, the shadowy wolf retaliated with a swipe of his huge paw, then snapped at me with Destruction laced jaws. However, his movements were wild at best and infantile at worst, making it easy to dodge.

I returned each of his attacks with an aether-clad strike of my own, except mine actually connected. After all my practicing to take in information from the aetheric paths to use God Step, I could feel the improvements in both my reaction time and mental acuity in battle.

"Did you forget that you have no idea what would happen to you if I were to die?" I growled, throwing a hook into his side that sent him skidding through the snow for several yards.

He barked out a cold, unkind laugh. "Don't pretend that you care about me. You've only seen me as a weapon, a tool for you to use! Now that you've seen my potential, you're scared of me, aren't you?"

"I'd be a lot more emotional if I had ever actually seen you as a weapon," I chortled. "You've been more of a leech than anything else."

With a furious howl, Regis charged toward me, the aspect of Destruction burning even more fiercely.

Spinning on my heels, I dodged and parried my companion's deadly claws, making him waste more of his reserves.

"You've been sucking my aether core dry these past few days, and you think suddenly you're powerful?" I said with a scoff. "I think the asuras made a mistake when they told me you'd be a weapon."

"Shut up!" Regis roared, his voice slowly becoming more distorted as the aspect of Destruction took over his body.

Finally, when I sensed that my companion had all but used the last of his aether reserves, I lunged forward to grab him around the neck, then tossed him over my shoulder and pinned him to the ground so that I was glaring down into one wide, glowing eye. "You don't think if I can push you out of my body, I can't take you back in?"

The bear-sized wolf twitched as he began to fade, turning to smoke and aether as his form receded back into the shadow beneath my feet.

Regis burned like a star within me. I ignited my godrune in an effort to seize control of the aspect of Destruction rampaging inside me.

It took every fiber of my being to properly utilize the pure force of aether to control the plague-like entity of Destruction, but after what seemed like an eternity, I found my eyes slowly opening.

Above me the sky gleamed glacier-blue and moved with the aurora. Caera's scarlet eyes peered down at me, laced with surprise and concern.

"You're awake," she said with a relieved smile.

I let out a hoarse laugh as I struggled to sit up. "I can literally regrow missing limbs and you still worry?"

"Yes, I do," she said seriously, helping me up.

Taken aback by her straightforwardness, I turned my attention inward to where Regis's presence glowed faintly.

With a gentle push, my companion emerged from my shadow in the form of a diminutive wolf pup. We locked eyes for a moment before he turned his gaze to Caera. "Grey, Caera... I—"

"Don't," I said, cutting him off. "You tried to kill me, I said some pretty mean things, we'll call it even."

Touseling his shadowy head, I shot him a grin. "Besides, you were pretty badass."

"Agreed," Caera said, giving me a mischievous grin. "Perhaps a battle scar will help me get out of some of the potential suitors my blood has so kindly lined up for me."

The three of us started laughing in the silence of the snowy field, but a sharp cry from high above cut us off. We looked up to find several white, bird-like shapes wheeling through the blue sky.

"Spear Beaks," I uttered, the memories of the Spear Beaks slaughtering Three Steps' mate still fresh in my mind.

322 FESTIVE TENSION

Caera and I appeared atop the snow-capped cliff guarding the entrance to the Spear Beak village. Branches of aetheric lightning crackled around us from the use of God Step as we were greeted by the sharp, beady stares of several dozen oversized birds.

Large torch lights cast a warm glow over the once eerily cold village and filled the hollow mountain top with a wooden, slightly acrid scent.

Suddenly, a cacophony of sounds erupted from the Spear Beaks as they began to flap, honk, and screech. A few even took to the skies carrying long, colorful streamers, circling over us in an intricate pattern.

"Are they... throwing us a party?" Caera asked hesitantly.

"Stay on guard," I whispered before taking a step forward.

Immediately, the crowd of Spear Beaks parted to create a path for us, revealing Old Broke Beak garbed in an elaborate fur coat that reflected the flickering lights cast by the torches.

Lining each side of the path to Old Broke Beak, warriors of the tribe held out a variety of food.

"Welcome, welcome mighty ascenders!" Old Broke Beak squawked excitedly, rousing another wave of cheers from his tribe. "Yes! Today, we celebrate our warriors' return."

As if possessed, the overgrown birds all began to squirm and move erratically to a rapid beat made by two Spear Beaks beating their beaks on what looked to be a giant drum.

Old Broke Beak began to walk toward us, his stick-thin legs quaking slightly as he took slow step after slow step.

Curious to see what he and his village had planned, I waited for him to arrive just a step away from me and Caera. He gently placed a wing on each of our shoulders and let out a mournful honk.

"The scouts say that Swiftsure fell in battle, but he has been brave, yes, very brave, and will soar high with the Creators!" the old Spear Beak squawked. Caera and I exchanged a wary glance.

Lowering his frail wings, he continued. "Our scouts also tell of your triumph over the wild things. This deed will be written in history for all our tribe members to read, yes!"

'Their attitudes are a lot humbler than when we first talked to them. I like that,' Regis thought weakly from within me. Though he was no longer wrapped around my core like a leech and was speaking to me again, Regis wasn't yet strong enough to maintain a physical form after his use of the Destruction Rune.

"It's nothing heroic," I dismissed. "We're just doing what we have to do to leave this zone."

"Heroic, a good word! And a true one, yes. We Spear Beaks can only bow in awe at your bravery," he said before gesturing with one wing toward the table with food. "Ascenders, you must be famished. Please, the warriors of my tribe have brought you gifts of food and drink!"

"Is that all for us?" I asked, looking more closely at the items held in the Spear Beaks' wings. Two carried slabs of meat, while three others did their best to hold handfuls of a fruit that looked like giant blueberries. A sixth carried a sharp black stone, while the last two each held an earthenware jug that sloshed when they moved.

Old Broke Beak nodded his head. "A humble gift from humble Spear Beaks, yes."

Caera subtly squeezed the back of my arm twice, though her smile didn't falter. Even without prior preparation on nonverbal signals, I knew what she meant. If the Spear Beaks were as crafty and cold-hearted as I feared, it was possible they would try to do away with us and take the portal pieces for themselves.

How would I eliminate an unwary, yet more powerful foe?

I looked at the food again. *Poisoned?* I wondered, though when I met Old Broke Beak's eye, I made sure to keep my face passive, even thankful.

"Without any disrespect, we couldn't possibly accept such gifts. Surely your brave warriors should be allowed to enjoy such spoils themselves?" I said, lowering my gaze. "It would be more than enough if we could simply ask for your hospitality once again."

The old bird stood wordless as his good eye travelled up and down me, his cracked beak pointing wherever his gaze went until he finally spoke.

"Very well! While some may see it as disrespectful—though not I, no, not Old Broke Beak—to reject a Spear Beak's gift, I see that Swiftsure's ascension to the Creators has been difficult to bear, and so has put the ascenders off their hunger. It weighs on us also, very much so. But a feast will still be prepared, yes!" he said with a nod. "Come to Old Broke Beak's hut, so that we may sit and discuss. There is much for you to tell."

Old Broke Beak led us past the line of Spear Beaks holding gifts, and though the giant berries looked delicious, they served to remind me of the memory that Three Steps had shared with me, and I knew it was best to avoid any potential trap the wily birds might prepare for us.

If they were smart enough to bait in two cautious Shadow Claws, who were taught from birth to watch out for Spear Beaks, then they were smart enough to poison some food in an effort to weaken or even kill us.

'I thought your cockroach-like body was immune to things like poison, though,' Regis chimed in.

But Caera isn't, I replied. I'd rather be rude than stupid. Anyway, I wanted to see how Old Broke Beak reacted to our refusal. Now stay quiet and focus on recovering. You're useless to me in this state.

I could almost feel Regis roll his eyes as he replied, 'Aye aye, princess.'

The couple whose egg we had consumed, True Feather and Red Wings, stood amongst the rows of gangly Spear Beaks, staring at Caera and I as we followed Old Broke Beak into his hut. I thought of the dark shape in the sky above the Shadow Claws' village and wondered if it had been Red Wings who had followed and spied on us.

Once the elderly chief led us inside his home, he dipped his cracked beak and stepped back outside. "Please get some rest here. There is still much to be done, but I will be back soon, yes."

"Wait. We came here with the portal pieces like you asked," I said hurriedly, not wanting to wait. "I want to try and repair the portal with what we have now, so we just need your tribe's piece and we'll—"

"No." Old Broke Beak clacked his beak sharply to cut me off. "You must provide the four, and we will provide the one. Right now, ascender only holds three. Rest for now, and we will together find a way to claim the final piece."

With that, the chief hobbled away, leaving Caera and I alone.

Caera let out a sigh beside me as she sunk to the ground. "How frustrating."

"That's putting it mildly," I said with a scoff as my eyes flickered to the bed of straw, feathers, and grass where Old Broke Beak usually sat.

"It's unlikely the old bird left the one thing we want alone in the same room as us," the Alacryan noble chimed in as I made my way toward where the portal piece had previously been hidden.

I rifled through the bedding, but only found the dusty floor of the chief's hut. "Damn it."

Caera remained silent as I took a seat next to her, tense and angry.

It hadn't been that long since we'd first arrived at the Spear Beaks' village, grateful for Swiftsure's assistance and the village's hospitality. But in that short time frame, a lot had changed... I had seen too much.

A part of me blamed myself for everything that transpired. I should've noticed it sooner: the facts that didn't quite add up to what these tall birds had told us, the animosity that all other tribes had toward the Spear Beaks, the bird people's eagerness to use us for their own purposes.

If it hadn't been for the Four Fists chieftain's challenge, we might have exterminated the entire tribe before realizing they were anything but wild aether beasts. If it wasn't for the lingering doubt I'd felt after that battle, we might have gotten revenge against the Shadow Claws for their ambush.

I shuddered at the thought of Three Steps and the rest of her tribe's corpses scattered about in a maelstrom of Caera's soulfire and my aether blasts.

No. I did the right thing in following my instincts, and while lives were lost, much worse could've happened if I had trusted Old Broke Beak implicitly.

While the elderly chief and his tribe still thought we were on their side, I had to be patient and wait for the right moment.

"How's Regis doing?" Caera asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"He's using my aether reserves to recover while he rests," I answered, turning to the Alacryan noble.

That was when I noticed that she was no longer shivering from the cold, or even wearing a blanket over her shoulders. "Are you not cold?"

"It's a lot warmer here than before. Maybe because of the torches they have lit outside for the festival," she said, shaking her head. "Anyway, do you know what caused him to behave so wildly earlier during our battle?"

"It had to do with him tapping into the Destruction godrune that I have," I began. "It's difficult to explain, but Regis is a lot more compatible with that specific type of magic than I am, even though I'm the one that technically has access to this magic."

"So he wasn't able to fully control it," Caera said in understanding.

I looked down at my empty palm. "Basically. This magic is really harmful to the caster if they're not compatible, though, which makes it hard for me to practice it. Because Regis isn't limited like I am, I think he's learning at a much faster—"

I stopped, realizing that I had begun rambling.

Looking back up, I could see the Alacryan noble watching me, her obsidian horns shimmering from the torch light.

I frowned. "What is it?"

"It's nothing," she said, revealing a faint smile. "I just appreciate the fact that you're able to share these things with me. Even if I don't fully understand, I doubt this was something you would have revealed to me when we first met."

I cleared my throat before turning away from her scarlet gaze. "The fact that I could silence you at any moment hasn't changed."

Despite my threat, however, Caera let out a chuckle. "Yes, yes."

"Elder Broke Beak," Caera said, her voice clear and confident as we followed behind the gangly old bird. "You said earlier that your tribe would help us get the final portal piece, but we seem to be heading deeper into your village."

We had waited in his hut for several hours before he finally returned with a group of battle-scarred Spear Beaks behind him, only for him to have us follow him back out. Now, we were walking on a well-lit path leading toward the steep cliff that sheltered their village.

"The Spear Beaks will help you hunt the Ghost Bears, yes. We will find, and you will fight." His cracked beak nodded up and down as he spoke. "But first, you must join us for a feast. Very rare feast indeed."

I began to think of excuses to make in order not to eat any of the food provided by the Spear Beaks as we ascended the steep cliff.

Two of the scarred Spear Beaks carried Old Broke Beak, since he was too old to fly. While I was tempted to simply God Step to the top, I didn't want to waste any aether in case things went south, so Caera and I jumped up, using some of the jagged protrusions of the cliff as footholds.

We appeared on the ledge of a small, flat cliff overlooking the village. Tall torch lights were embedded all over the cliff, casting a warm glow over the crowd of Spear Beaks that were already there. A pillar of smoke rose from a fire behind the tall birds, which began to shuffle out of the way at the sight of Old Broke Beak.

The elderly chief of the village was waiting for us, his one violet eye glimmering in excitement as he motioned with one wing. "Behold!"

"Grey?" Caera's voice was small and disgusted.

I looked from Old Broke Beak to her, then followed the line of her gaze to the "feast."

Laid out on a wide, flat stone was the huge Four Fists chieftain. All four of his hands had been removed, as had both his eyes and the largest of his tusks. His once silver hide had been flayed, while a large gash on

his stomach had stretched open and stuffed with more of the large, round blueberries as a roaring fire danced beneath the stone slab he was on.

"What the hell is this?" I asked, unable to hide my revulsion.

"A most rare feast!" Old Broke Beak exclaimed. He then turned toward the waiting Spear Beaks and began to clack and caw in their rasping, birdish language. The tribe listened, then cheered and crowed to the sky, a few even leaping from their perches to wheel around the high peak.

"I have told them," Old Broke Beak said, turning to us, "of your victory over the brutish Four Fists clan, and how you killed their chief and left the clan weak and without protection." He followed this proclamation with a little bow.

My gaze drifted back to the Four Fists' body. "How'd you get this?"

"Raided the village after your battle," Old Broke Beak answered proudly. "An honor to feast on a fallen enemy, yes."

"Barbaric," Caera muttered under her breath next to me. The chieftain's purple eye flicked to her, though I couldn't tell if he understood what she'd said.

"I'm sorry," I said, dipping my head in an effort to hide my disgust. "In our cultures, we don't eat... our fallen foes."

Old Broke Beak let out a raspy gasp. "What a waste to leave strong enemies to rot on the ground, but we will not force you. Would the ascenders, perhaps, prefer another egg for energy?"

'Did someone say egg?' Regis chirped, his voice half groggy still.

I shook my head. "That won't be necessary. In fact, we'd like to get on our way as soon as—"

Old Broke Beak squawked, cutting me off. He hopped a few steps away and held his wings out to his people, then burst out with a single sharp noise.

A cry went up from the Spear Beaks and they rushed down on the corpse, rending and tearing at the half-frozen flesh like a wake of vultures. I turned away, letting my gaze drift over the village below.

Two Spear Beaks had left the peak and were slowly wheeling down to the collection of huts.

Beside me, Old Broke Beak said, "Spear Beaks will celebrate in the enemy's dead flesh for you then, yes? There has been another egg that is empty of a hatchling. We will bring it."

"As I was saying," I started again, my jaw clenched in frustration, "we would like to leave soon. My companions and I see no reason to hunt the Ghost Bears unless we can't make the portal work with just the four pieces we already have."

"Three," the chieftain said, watching with apparent pleasure as his tribe devoured the Four Fists' corpse. "Honorable ascender agreed to fetch *four* pieces, and we agreed to give the fifth. You only have *three* pieces."

I let out a deep breath as I locked eyes with Old Broke Beak. My gaze was calm and level but the aether-laced pressure casting a palpable chill in the air made my intentions clear. Caera and the old bird stiffened, and the three scarred Spear Beaks stepped up to guard their leader.

"I've been civil up until now, but I'm at my limit," I said, my voice icy. "We are not a weapon for you to point at your enemies. You can either help us of your own free will, or our time as allies will come to an end."

A veil of silence fell over the proceedings as even the Spear Beaks feasting on the Four Fists corpse stopped to stare at us.

"As you say. Stay, at least, for this feast. Such victories are not enjoyed often by my people. Eat of the egg of Rising Wind and Thunder Cutter, let the tribe live this moment, while I retrieve you the piece. Yes?"

"I will decline the meal," I said firmly, my gaze piercing through the gangly old bird.

Old Broke Beak clacked his beak in what looked like a display of frustration but quickly hid his emotions with a sharp laugh. "The heroic ascenders wish to fly as fast as Spear Beaks. Very well!"

The chieftain let out a series of sharp squawks to one of the Spear Beaks behind him before turning back to us. "Blade Wing will bring our portal piece."

With a curt bow, the old bird shuffled back with his three guards. Despite their violet eyes boring holes in me, I finally thought we could relax.

That was when my body began to feel sluggish, like my very muscles had frozen. My breaths came out in haggard rasps.

"G-Grey."

I felt Caera grab onto my arm for support as she stumbled. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Old Broke Beak's only eye glimmering in excitement as he eagerly watched.

Caera fell to the ground in a fit of labored breaths as I buckled to my knees, heart pounding against my chest in fear for the Alacryan noble.

"What... did you... do," I said in a forced voice, turning my gaze fully toward the chieftain.

The elderly bird let out a shrill laugh, which was echoed amongst his tribe members as they stared at us in delight.

"Old Broke Beak may not be strong as mighty ascenders, no, but he has the best of brains!" he said while practically skipping toward us. "You see, this one knew the ascender would not eat our food. Suspicious, yes! Obvious, yes!"

I fell to my side, one ear on Caera to make sure she was still breathing behind me.

The old bird remained a few yards away, safe behind his battle-scarred protectors, and continued to speak. "This is why Old Broke Beak poisoned the fires so that smoke would be breathed in by the ascenders. Not harmful to Spear Beaks, very bad for others!"

"C-Caera," I mustered through gritted teeth.

"Poison will not kill. Ascender has to fight the Ghost Bears after all, yes! Ascender will give us four portal pieces, Spear Beaks will give back ascender's mate," the chieftain responded.

"Won't... kill?" I repeated.

Old Broke Beak let out an impatient squawk. "Yes! Won't kill, won't kill."

"Good," I replied, no longer laboring to breathe.

Violet lightning crackled around me as I God Stepped behind Old Broke Beak and made a fist around his neck. "Then it looks like our negotiations are over."

323 MISDIRECTION

I could feel Old Broke Beak's blood pumping frantically through the fragile neck I held in my grasp as he jerked in shock.

Two of the three scarred warriors that surrounded their chieftain immediately reacted, whirling so that their sharp beaks were aimed at my throat, while the largest of the three remained still.

A deathly silence descended on the cliff at the sudden turn of events, no one willing to make a move as I held their leader's life in my hands.

I leaned forward to the quivering chieftain, my gaze locked on his guards. "Are you willing to gamble your life on the chance that your soldiers might be able to kill me before I snap your neck... or will you call them off?"

The old bird stiffened at my threat but remained silent.

"I thought you were smarter than that," I muttered as I stamped my foot. An audible *crack* resounded as Old Broke Beak's left leg snapped near his ankle. The chieftain let out a hoarse honk as he writhed in pain.

Panicked cries echoed through the peaks as the three soldiers brought their menacing beaks closer to me.

"Shall we try again?" I asked, voice frigid.

Old Broke Beak let out a pained caw while motioning the two guards away with his gray wings.

"Th-there! Old Broke Beak has told everyone to stay back, yes!" he squawked, hobbling on his good leg.

"Good." Keeping my grip around my hostage's neck firm, we slowly made our way to where Caera lay unconscious. "Now, you're going to guide us to where you hid your tribe's portal piece."

The chieftain nodded his gangly neck fiercely. "Yes, yes! Then ascenders will let Old Broke Beak go?"

"I'll let you go after we have the portal piece," I confirmed as I picked up Caera's limp body from the snowy ground. She was breathing much more comfortably now, but with Regis deep in recovery mode, I stayed on edge. "Where to?"

"B-back to this one's home!" he stammered, his single violet eye shifting from me to his broken leg.

With a crackle of violet lightning, the three of us arrived in front of the chieftain's humble straw hut. Above, I could see the tribe had exploded into a frenzy as they descended from the cliff we had teleported from in an attempt to follow after their leader.

I looked around at the empty village. "Where is it?"

"Down below, in a hollow beyond the village, yes!" Old Broke Beak squawked, his cracked beak chittering anxiously.

I God Stepped once more to put some distance between us and the crazed Spear Beaks, but with two passengers and an aether-hungry beast feeding off my core, I could feel my reserves plummeting with each use.

"I don't see anything," I said, my patience growing thin.

"Difficult to get into, yes! Need to go around that bend," the chieftain said, pointing with a wing.

My vision swept across the narrow canyon, which was tucked into the steep cliffs at the edge of the Spear Beaks' village, and after sifting through the information each of the aether paths had relayed back to me, I God Stepped once more.

I could see Old Broke Beak sneaking glances behind us to where the Spear Beaks circled in the sky, waiting for their chance to dive in.

Letting out a sigh, I gently placed Caera on the ground and wrapped my free hand around the base of Old Broke Beak's right wing.

A clean *snap* echoed off the canyon walls along with the rasping squawk of the old bird as his wing jutted down at an impossible angle.

Bringing Old Broke Beak's face next to mine, I spoke calmly. "If the piece of the portal isn't within an arm's length from me after your next set of directions, the next thing I break *will* be your neck."

"Y-yes..." he wheezed before giving me a set of lengthy instructions. As I expected, the chieftain had been trying to buy time and waste my energy in hopes that I'd run out of God Steps like the Shadow Claws.

The old bird's instructions led us farther down into the canyon to a hidden cavern, which was covered by a woven net laced with feathers and layered with snow so that it blended seamlessly with its surroundings. If the chieftain hadn't guided us to this exact location, I knew that it would've been near impossible to find the portal piece.

"Into the tunnel, straight ahead," he said weakly, his broken left leg dragging in the snow.

Adjusting Caera, who was again slung over my shoulder, I walked farther into the dark, unlit tunnel until it opened up into a dead end.

Despite how dark the cavity was, I was barely able to make out the sight ahead, and what I saw left me speechless.

Piled up like a greedy king's hoard was a collection of gold coins, precious jewels, and artifacts. And while it surprised me at first, the sight of this trove of priceless treasures made me even more angry.

How many ascenders had the Spear Beaks tricked and killed in order to get all of this? While the question hung on the tip of my tongue, another part of me didn't want to hear the chieftain's answer.

"G-Grey?"

My eyes widened. "Caera!" Abandoning Old Broke Beak, I lowered the Alacryan Noble to the ground and leaned her back against the cavern wall. "How do you feel?"

"Heavy and—" Caera let out a sharp breath as her eyes fell on Old Broke Beak. "He... why is he..."

"Someone needed to help us find the portal piece," I said with a soft smile. "Don't worry, he won't be able to do anything."

"The Creator's piece is here, yes! But hard to see without light, hard to find," the old bird said, gesturing to the pile of artifacts with his good wing.

Letting out a scoff, I headed toward the back of the pile, where a particularly strong aetheric presence glowed. Moments later, I had the smooth slab of white stone in my hand.

Caera let out a sigh as she sunk back into the wall. "Finally."

Old Broke Beak stared dumbly at the portal piece I held before nodding his head. "G-great ascender has found the piece. Old Broke Beak will be released, yes?"

"Not quite yet." I turned to the Alacryan noble, pointing back to the large pile of treasure. "We don't have much time, but we shouldn't let this all go to waste."

Caera glanced back at Old Broke Beak, whose eye quivered in dread, before giving me a smirk.

Holding onto the Spear Beak chieftain, I let Caera go through the pile in search of anything she wanted in particular.

Even with Caera's dimension ring broken, I had expected her to try and take quite a bit of artifacts, but she came back carrying only one item.

"Is that all you're getting?" I asked Caera, staring at the thin metal bracer she held in her hand. Lines flowed through the simple piece of armor, but aside from its elegant design, I couldn't sense what it could do.

"Mhmm. When I touched it, I could feel it trying to absorb my soulfire," she explained. "I don't know what it does, but among the countless artifacts I've held, this is the first one that's interacted with that part of my power."

I shrugged. "Are you sure you don't want to claim anything else? Even if it's worthless, you could probably make a lot of gold."

Caera slipped the bracer over her left hand, and I could have sworn the metal band shrunk to fit her forearm. She held up her new artifact and gave me a haughty look. "I already have more gold than I can care to spend."

I rolled my eyes. "Show off."

Seeing Caera only take one item, Old Broke Beak let out an audible sigh of relief that was cut short right as I imbued aether into my dimension rune.

In a matter of moments, the treasure pile that was about as large as a Four Fist was completely gone.

Caera chortled. "That's showing off."

"N-now Old Broke Beak can go?" the chieftain asked as he ground his beak together in seething anger.

Letting go of his neck, I pushed him forward. "Sure."

The old bird hobbled on one leg, barely keeping himself from tumbling over by using his good wing to keep himself steady.

"Is it wise to let him go this soon?" Caera asked, her voice icy.

"I have a plan," I said softly, going down on one knee. "Here, get on my back."

"I-it's fine. I should be able to run in a minute," she stammered, taking a weak step back.

Raising a brow, I asked, "Would you rather I carry you like a sack of rice, or have you recently developed the ability to teleport as well..."

After a pause, Caera cleared her throat and slowly wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Thank you," she said, pressing herself against my back as I stood up.

Regis. Stop consuming my aether until we're out of here, I sent, snapping my companion from his hibernative state.

'What'd I mi—ooh la la... that's quite the skinship you two have going on,' Regis sang.

Shut it, I growled.

Taking an even breath, I turned my focus completely to my surroundings. I could sense Old Broke Beak hobbling closer to the exit.

I didn't have much time.

"Caera, as soon as I God Step, I'm going to need your help," I said.

"Of course."

After explaining my plan to her, I began to take in the information provided by the countless branching routes of aether, seeking out one in particular.

At the same time, I worked to replenish my core to the point where I could make the long jump with Caera.

Filtering out the aether-laced surroundings, I focused on the unique signatures that each of the Spear Beaks had as more and more of them arrived at the mouth of the tunnel.

Not enough...

Minutes trickled by as my concentration continuously shifted between the aether routes and the Spear Beaks that were amassing right outside.

I could feel Caera's heart beating faster against my back while even Regis remained silent and tense within me.

Now!

The world shifted in a blink as tendrils of violet lightning coiled around me. In front of me was the canyon cliff directly on top of Old Broke Beak's secret cave that we had passed by. Above us were a flock of Spear Beaks, each of which broke into a frenzy of squawking and cawing, feathers flying as they bumped each other in their rush to come after us.

"Caera!" I roared as I spun on my heels.

Caera freed her hands while keeping her legs wrapped around my waist as I began running. Igniting her soulfire, she released a torrent of black flames right at the cliff edge, creating an avalanche of snow, ice,

and rock down towards Old Broke Beak and the large chunk of his tribe that were waiting at the cave mouth to ambush us.

A deafening rumble resounded through the canyon, nearly drowning out the panicked honks and caws of the Spear Beaks. The bird people above, however, had begun to follow after us, diving down in streaks of black and gray, their wicked talons outstretched.

I sidestepped a pair of Spear Beaks as Caera fired off bolt after bolt of black fire, but as more and more of them began to surround us, we were forced to stop.

"I'm going to God Step back toward the dome, but I'm going to need a few minutes if I want to go far enough to lose them!" I said over the cacophony of Spear Beaks flying around us in circles.

Caera hopped off my back, stumbling as her feet hit the ground, but able to stand. "A few minutes might be all I can muster."

Regis! Can you manifest? I asked hopefully.

'Nope. Still useless,' he said, nonplussed.

A thick shroud of aether clung to my skin just as another pair of Spear Beaks began to dive toward us. The gangly birds that wheeled in the air above began discharging streaks of a black substance that had a vague purple sheen.

Pivoting to the right, I struck the side of one diving Spear Beak's neck just as it tried to sweep back up in the air, immediately before sidestepping a stream of foul black sludge.

The vile slime ate through the snow and ice, and part of the stone below it, leaving a hole several feet deep.

'Well that's new,' Regis commented.

Caera and I stuck tighter together, back-to-back. She focused on sniping the birds that were releasing the caustic discharge while I stayed on the defensive in order to continue replenishing my reserves.

"How much... longer?" she asked, her poison-weakened body starting to fatigue.

Catching a Spear Beak by its neck, I used its sharp beak to impale one of its own brethren.

"Almost," I huffed, just as a familiar rasping squawk sounded behind us.

Glancing back toward the source of the sound, I could see Old Broke Beak being carried by two scarred Spear Beaks with a larger one trailing close behind them. They were maintaining their distance from the dome of Spear Beaks surrounding us.

"Of course he lives," Caera scoffed.

I clicked my tongue. "I was hoping the avalanche would slow them more than this."

The crippled chieftain glared down at us in palpable fury as he began shouting angrily at his tribe members and pointing at us with his one good wing.

I tensed in preparation for another wave of attacks, but was surprised to see the Spear Beaks staying in the air, their heads shifting left and right as they looked at their tribe members with uncertainty.

A few dove down once more, but without the caustic black sludge to back them up, they didn't stand a chance.

This seemed to make Old Broke Beak even angrier, because his hoarse cries became even louder and sharper.

"Caera, take out your sword and toss it on the ground," I said.

Her gaze shifted from the wary Spear Beaks back to me as she realized what I was trying to do. Unsheathing her red blade, she stabbed it into the ground.

The crippled chieftain became even more furious, his old body trembling in rage as he continued to squawk and honk while stabbing his wing in our direction.

Old Broke Beak's incessant screaming was suddenly cut short as a bloodied beak jutted out of his feathered body.

Caera and I stared, wide-eyed, as the scarred Spear Beak that had flown closely behind the chieftain and his two helpers ripped his crimson beak from their leader's chest.

Inside me, Regis let out a loud gasp. 'Plot twist!'

Old Broke Beak's cries turned into gurgles as blood seeped from his cracked bill and his long neck sank limply in the air, his violet eye still wide in shock.

The only sound that could be heard in the wall of silence surrounding us was the soft thud of Old Broke Beak's corpse hitting the ground.

The chieftain's killer let out a deep caw that dispersed the Spear Beaks surrounding us. Casting its violet eyes down at me, it opened its bloodied beak.

"Go!" it half-squawked.

Taking one last glance at the pitiful corpse of the greedy chieftain, abandoned by his very tribe, I looked up at the one responsible and gave him a nod before igniting God Step.

The journey back to the dome was much easier than our first trip across the stormy tundra. Though we slogged through the snow most of the way, I God Stepped at intervals to break up the distance.

When we reached the dome, I simply God Stepped into it instead of re-excavating the tunnel.

We didn't waste any time. I withdrew the four pieces and Caera helped me to fit them into the portal frame. There was still a broken chunk about a foot long and four inches wide, but I was hopeful that Aroa's Requiem was powerful enough to rebuild it with the other pieces in place.

I let out a deep breath, trying to calm my pounding heart.

"This is it," Caera muttered, taking a step back.

'Drumroll pl—'

Regis, I swear...

'Fine, fine.'

I set my hand on the white stone. The godrune ignited, casting a golden glow across the platform. Purple motes, like a festival of fireflies, flowed from my hand and across the arch, gathering in the cracks where the pieces had been set back in place. The cracks sealed, healing like a wound, until the four pieces looked as if they'd never been broken to begin with.

I ran a finger over where the cracks had been. It was flawless... except for the last piece that was still missing.

"Damn it!" I pounded my fist against the smooth white frame of our only exit, which continued its stubborn refusal to turn on.

Caera, who had been standing next to me watching me expectantly, sank. Spinning around, the Alacryan noble slid over the edge of the platform, sitting with her legs dangling over the edge.

I sat next to her. Between us, the white dagger rested on the white stone, just where we had left it before rushing unexpectedly out of the dome chasing the Ghost Bear. On the floor below us, the remains of our previous camp were still laid out. There was a thin dusting of snow over everything from where it had blown down the tunnel and into the dome.

"Does this mean we have to go back out in search of these invisible bears?" Caera asked, her gaze also on the pile of bedding beneath us.

I nodded, teeth gnashing at the thought of scouring through the endless plains of snow in search of the last piece. In an effort to distract myself, I picked up the white dagger and began to turn it in my hands. It looked exactly as it had the day I'd recovered it from the millipede's lair.

Despite how often I had used it, the bone white blade showed no signs of wear and tear. Out of habit, I imbued aether into it once more when something clattered into the pile of bones at the base of the stairs.

Snapping up to my feet, I rushed to the edge of the platform, the dagger held before me and already humming with a thin reinforcing layer of aether.

My eyes darted from the pile of offerings to the door, then made a sweep of the cavernous, empty space.

When I found nothing, I looked back to the pile of bones. Sitting atop it, where it clearly hadn't been a moment ago, was a dimly glowing piece of stone. I leapt down the stairs in a single hop and reached for it.

My hand shook as I held the final piece. "Th-this..."

'And you say you're not lucky,' Regis scoffed.

Caera rushed to my side, her blade out and back facing me as her head turned, constantly in search of something.

That's when the creature revealed itself.

Standing in front of the door, where only an instant before there had been nothing, I could now see a massive snow-white bear. Like the other we'd seen, it had a thick ridge of bone protruding from its forehead and shoulders, and when it moved there was a subtle pearlescent shine.

I lifted the portal piece and held it out in front of me, my eyes trained on the Ghost Bear, watchful for any movement or sign of attack. Instinct told me that this creature was giving us the piece, but I still wanted to be ready if it turned hostile.

"Thank you," I said, keeping my voice even despite the quickening of my heartbeat.

The Ghost Bear snorted, a deep rumbling that vibrated up through the soles of my feet. Its dark purple eyes met mine, and then it was gone—or rather, it turned invisible, I was sure. Despite knowing it was there, I couldn't see or hear it. I watched the floor of the dome, but somehow it managed to avoid even disturbing the dusting of snow around the doorway.

Most striking of all was the fact that I couldn't read its aether signature.

I wonder what it'd take to learn that trick, I thought idly.

After waiting a few moments to make sure the Ghost Bear had gone, I held the portal piece up to inspect it more carefully. The silky white chunk of stone showed part of a tree. There was a little bear cub sniffing a flower at its base.

"Grey. Was that... the same Ghost Bear that we first chased?" Caera asked, her eyes still locked on the last place she saw the invisible bear.

"No. The one we first saw wasn't able to hide its aether signature. This one is a lot more skilled," I explained, shuddering at the thought of trying to fight a whole tribe of its kind.

Caera stared at the portal piece, frowning slightly. "Then it wouldn't be surprising if these Ghost Bears had been watching us, and wanted to avoid a conflict."

"Whatever the case..." I locked eyes with Caera and smiled widely, something I hadn't done in a long time. "We did it."

Caera's scarlet eyes widened in surprise, but she smiled back. "We did."

'I'd play some background music to fit the mood for you, but maybe we should save this heartfelt moment until after we try the portal again?' Regis interrupted.

Clearing my throat, I made my way back onto the platform, walked to the portal frame, and set the final piece into place. My godrune glowed as, once again, the motes of aether flowed into the cracks and sealed them shut.

I stepped back from the portal frame and held my breath.

Crackling energy appeared within the arch, flickering into and out of focus for a few seconds before it materialized into a clear portal. On the other side I could see a small, clean, bright white room.

324 WITHOUT RETURN

ELEANOR LEYWIN

"All right, Ellem?" Tedry asked.

I nodded.

"Guard duty for logging crew today," he said conversationally. The thin, dark haired boy was sitting on his cot, pulling on a boot.

I nodded again.

"Been almost a week since we've been stationed here, Ellem, and I swear by the Vritra I don't think I've heard you say more than three words. Why is that?" The Alacryan was looking at me with one thick eyebrow raised.

I just shrugged.

Tedry smirked. "You know, that's why I like you, Ellem. You don't interrupt me when I'm telling a good story."

Rolluf snorted from his cot. "No one has ever interrupted you telling a good story, Ted, 'cause you've never told one!"

Tedry paused while he was slipping on his other boot and hurled the heavy footwear at Rolluf, hitting him right between the legs. Rolluf grunted in pain and tried to roll out of his cot but was tangled up in his blanket. The big Alacryan boy tumbled onto the ground, tipping the lightweight cot over.

Tedry laughed hysterically while Rolluf grumbled and disentangled himself from his blanket.

I was already dressed in the blue and silver uniform I'd been provided. I always made sure to be awake and dressed before the others, with my hair pulled up into a knot on the back of my head, disguising its length. It had seemed easy at first, to pretend I was a boy, but the longer I stayed in Eidelholm, the more difficult it became.

"Come on, you dolts," I said, making my voice deeper. "We're going to be late for breakfast."

After Tessia was captured I had thought about using the medallion to go back to the sanctuary. It's probably what everyone, especially Tessia, would've told me to do. Then I had imagined stepping out of the portal, everyone's expectant gazes turning to confusion when Tessia didn't appear. I imagined the looks on their faces when I explained that Tessia had been captured in order to save me... and that I had run away.

Then, of course, they would've all told me it wasn't my fault, that I couldn't have done anything, that they understood and were just glad that I was alive. They'd be kind... just like how they always were. They'd feel bad for me, pity me.

They'd treat me like a child.

I didn't have a plan, not at first, but I just knew I couldn't go back to that. I'd seen Tessia after she got back without my brother. I'd been on the other end at that time, but now I knew how much Tessia was hurting, how lonely and helpless she had felt.

No. I couldn't return to the sanctuary without at least *trying* to help Tessia. After all, I was the one that let her get caught. I should've just gone with Albold, but instead I had stayed to try and play the hero.

She's my best friend, and she only got captured because of me. If I'd just focused on the prisoners, like Rinia warned, I wouldn't have been taken hostage by Elijah, I admitted to myself. I have to at least try...

Eidelholm was busier than a kicked anthill for a couple of days after our assault. Using the first phase of my beast will, I spied from the cover of the trees, careful of anyone I saw using mana around town, since there was no way to tell whether they could see things from afar.

Several important-looking people visited the village and dozens of new soldiers arrived to replace the men and women we'd killed. I saw Elijah once, meeting with the town's visitors and showing them the site of the attack, but I didn't see him or Tessia again.

It was a stroke of pure luck that I overheard Tedry and Rolluf talking near the edge of the treeline on the third day after Tessia was captured.

I found out that they were students from some Alacryan academy, part of a youth soldier training division. At first, their talk had mostly been about the attack. The leaders of the town were called the Milview blood. The two boys were joking about how the Milviews were cowards, how they had held half of their soldiers back to defend *them* instead of defending the town against the "Dicathian insurgents."

One of the older guards had smacked the back of Rolluf's head and told him to watch his tongue. After that Tedry and Rolluf had moved off a little ways from the rest of the guards, making it even easier to listen in. I had nestled myself in a hollow under a leafy bush and got comfortable. Boo was keeping an eye on me from deeper in the forest.

The Alacryan boys spent a lot of time complaining about being sent to such a backwater hold, and talking about how their friends got to go to places like Zestier, where the real action was happening. It all sounded so... normal. They were just a couple of normal boys talking about stupid, normal boy things.

Then Tedry mentioned what a nightmare it had been for them when they arrived in Eidelholm. The man in charge of their program had been killed, so they were just being shuffled around between guard posts.

That's what gave me the idea. A crazy, stupid idea... but still an idea.

Tedry and Rolluf followed me to the longhouse, where we each accepted a bowl of oats and milk, then took our normal seats at the end of one of the series of long tables.

"Some big event in a couple of days," Rolluf mumbled through a mouthful of oats. "Heard one of the Shields talking about it."

Tedry rolled his eyes. "There's always some 'big event.' Probably just another highblood coming to scold the Milviews for letting all those elven slaves escape."

Rolluf shook his head, dribbling some oats on the table. "Nope, this is something big. Real big."

"As big as your head?" Tedry asked teasingly. Rolluf flicked a spoonful of oats across the table, splattering Tedry's uniform. "Damnit, I'll get a smack if I go to guard duty with an oat stain on my tunic, Roll!"

"Maybe should have thought about that before opening your big mouth, eh?" Rolluf teased, a big, stupid smirk on his tan face.

"Did this Shield say anything else about what's happening?" I asked, my mind racing. I hadn't seen Tessia since she'd been captured—since she traded herself to save me, I mean—but I knew Elijah was still in Eidelholm, or at least he had been, on and off, so I thought Tessia must be too. Maybe this big event had something to do with her...

"An announcement. Something to do with Elenire—"

"Elenoir?" I asked, cutting Rolluf off.

"Yeah, that."

Tedry feigned falling asleep in his bowl. "Don't get excited, you two. You know they'll make it up to be this big thing, then it'll just be, 'Congratulations to the whositswhatsits blood, they're being given a hold in the ass end of Elnire—"

"Elenoir."

"—and we're supposed to clap and cheer and pretend like we know who they are," Tedry went on, ignoring the correction. Then his eyes lit up as something occurred to him. "Maybe it'll be an execution! They could have caught the Dicathians that attacked the hold—"

Rolluf snorted, spitting flecks of oats on the table. "They beat one of the *retainers*, Tedry. No one in this little backwater could lay a finger on them—"

"He could," Tedry said darkly, causing Rolluf to look down into his oats.

The table was quiet for a while.

This wasn't the first time the Alacryan boys had mentioned Elijah, who they seemed to carry in high, but fearful, regard.

I'd been really careful not to ask too many questions to avoid tipping Tedry and Rolluf about my ignorance of Alacrya, which had limited my ability to dig for more information. If I was ever going to find out anything about Tessia, though, I knew I'd have to start taking more risks at some point.

"Think we'll get to attend?" I asked, making sure to keep the deeper voice I'd used since sneaking into Eidelholm.

"Only if it's boring," Tedry complained. He was trying valiantly to rub the oatmeal off his uniform.

"Maybe, as the youth soldiers in Eidelholm, we could... give a presentation or something?" I asked hesitantly. The two boys didn't like doing any extra work, so I knew they wouldn't like the idea, but if it got me involved in this "big event," then it'd be worth it. Hopefully.

The voice that responded came from behind me. "That's a fine idea."

We all turned to look at our preceptor.

The man in charge of overseeing the youth soldiers in Eidelholm was a nervous mage named Murtaeg. He didn't seem to have much time or interest in managing our affairs, though, and did little more than tell us where to be every day and make sure our little house, which had once belonged to one of the elves, was kept in order.

Murtaeg had rusty red hair, a week's worth of ruddy beard that didn't grow in evenly, and watery eyes that quickly darted around the room.

"Hey, Murt," Rolluf said, nodding to the preceptor.

Murtaeg glared at Rolluf. "My name, as I'm sure I've explained several times now, is not Murt. Nor is it Murty, Em, Teach, or any of the other silly bynames you keep calling me. Murtaeg. Remember it, Rolluf."

His ears turning red, Rolluf looked down at his empty bowl of oats and stayed silent.

"As I was saying," Murtaeg went on, standing a little straighter, "I think young Ellem's idea is a fine one." His wandering eyes stopped on me for only a second before darting around the room again. "I'll stop by Milview Manor and arrange it with Silas Milview."

"Do you know what's happening?" I asked before I thought better of it.

Murtaeg's eyes snapped to me again, very briefly. "Since this is your idea, Ellem, why don't you choreograph a short display for the event. I'll let you three out of regular duties today and tomorrow to prepare."

The preceptor didn't wait for a response, but turned on his heel and marched quickly out of the longhall.

Tedry and Rolluf were staring at me.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"I don't know whether to be impressed or angry," Tedry said, his brows turned down but his mouth quirked up in a wry smile.

Rolluf wore a deeply thoughtful expression, as if he were trying to do the mental math on whether he, too, was impressed or angry with me. "On the one hand, no duties for two whole days, which is a total score."

"On the other hand," Tedry said, picking up Rolluf's thought, "we have to plan, practice for, and then participate in a demonstration—to be performed in front of a bunch of fancy-pants named bloods—which totally sucks."

What's the plan here? the voice that sounded like Arthur's asked. If Tessia is here, all I have to do is get close to her, I answered.

"I suppose we better get to work," I suggested.

"Hold up," Rolluf grunted. "I've got something really important to say first."

Tedry and I watched him expectantly, both halfway out of our seats.

Rollof belched loudly, then blew the foul-smelling gas across the table. Tedry kicked him hard in the shin, then bolted from the longhall, Rolluf, limping slightly, chasing just behind.

Boys, I thought, rolling my eyes and following after them.

Despite being surrounded by my enemies, people who would kill me in an instant if they found out my real identity, the next two days ended up being almost... fun.

Tedry and Rolluf weren't mindless killing machines, as I'd told myself the Alacryans must be, particularly the guards that had died by my arrows. To them, the whole war was just a kind of game, a distant and romantic fantasy. They were charming and stupid and funny, and we enjoyed creating the short exhibition together.

Neither of them had marks yet—the tattoos that gave Alacryans their magic—so they weren't at all surprised when I told them I couldn't do magic either. I didn't know nearly enough about Alacryan magic to explain my arrows to them, so it was safer to tell them that I had gotten archery lessons instead.

Tedry had the idea to borrow some training gear and stage a kind of mock battle, with me and my shooting skills taking the leading role.

By that afternoon, we had scripted the basics of our activity.

Standing in the middle of the clearing, Tedry rushed at me with a practice sword and shield. I rolled under his swing and brought the heavy Alacryan bow up to fire an arrow at his back.

The blunted practice arrow snapped dramatically in the exact spot where Tedry's wooden sword would be as he spun and deflected my attack. After that, I would let loose another arrow that would hit him in his thick padded chestplate, causing him to fall backward, let out an overacted gasp and pretend to die.

Rolluf rushed past him, a dull spear held firmly in both hands. I jumped back when he thrust the spear at me, batting it aside with my bow. Using the butt end, he tried to sweep my leg, but I stepped over it, then rolled across the much larger boy's back so that I ended up on his other side.

Letting myself fall backwards, I did a reverse somersault to put another few feet between us, then fired an arrow to his left. He spun and pretended to deflect the arrow. I shot another to his right, which he deflected as well.

Movement in the forest nearby caught my eye, and Tedry's sparring blade hit me on the shoulder.

"0w!"

Tedry winced at me and held his sword up. "Damn, sorry Ellem, you were supposed to duck, remember?"

I rubbed my shoulder and turned away from the forest, hopeful that neither of the Alacryan boys had seen Boo poke his head out to check on me.

"Sorry, I... I forgot. Let's go again."

Tedry shook his head as Rolluf grinned. "I expect that kind of thing from Roll, but Ellem, we're going to be doing this in front of the whole town. You better not embarrass me."

I smirked at him and picked up the broken halves of the practice arrow. "Embarrass you? Tedry, I'm the only thing making you look competent."

Rolluf, whose face had slowly creased into a frown as he deciphered Tedry's insult, laughed loudly and pushed the skinny boy, nearly knocking him over.

"What are you laughing at?" Tedry asked Rolluf. "If I'm merely competent, what do you think that makes you?"

"About half of that, by volume," Rolluf quipped, slapping his belly.

I was surprised how nervous Tedry and Rolluf both were to perform, when the time came. I thought I should have been much more nervous than them, but a detached calm had settled over me since I took on the persona of "Ellem" and settled into a routine as just another Alacryan boy of middle birth. Besides, I didn't really care about the performance. I just wanted to see what the big announcement was.

Our two days of preparation went quickly as we planned and practiced. News that something important was going to be revealed in Eidelholm had spread, and there had been a lot of chatter about it, even though no one seemed to know anything specific.

In fact, many of the other Alacryan soldiers had come to ask us what we knew, since we were participating in the event. We could only shrug and send them away without answers.

The village was much busier than usual the morning of the announcement. Carts were rolling in from the north packed with visitors, and the patrols by the town guard had been quadrupled.

We had our regular breakfast of milk and oats. Then, since we didn't have any other duties to attend to, the three of us made our way to the Milview Manor and watched the workers rush to complete preparations.

The hardest thing about my time in Eidelholm had been the elves. Despite freeing over two hundred slaves, there had been dozens of other elves in the village, those who "belonged" to the Milview blood and would live, work, and die in the town as slaves.

My duties as a member of the youth soldier division hadn't put me in contact with many of the elves, which I was thankful for, but I felt sick whenever I watched the elven laborers rush around under threat of whipping, or worse, from the guards who oversaw them.

Work was being done to a large manor at the heart of the town—now Milview Manor. A nearly-finished balcony was being added to a third-story room, and large patches of the roof had been replaced since whatever growing green material the elves used seemed to have died without their attention.

A small stage was also being built in the square leading to the house. I imagined it was where we would put on our show, though a part of me thought it also looked like the kind of stage executions could be performed on...

Two small sets of raised bleachers had been constructed around the stage. *Probably somewhere for the higher-ranking visitors to sit*, I thought, growing angry and fearful as I took it all in.

At some point we must have sat still for too long, because a clerk from the Milview blood caught us and made us help hang silk tapestries around the Manor exterior. They were blue and silver, like our uniforms, and depicted silver trees with a winding trail of silver stars leading through them against the rich blue background.

Soon after, people began pouring in from every corner of town. The elves were herded in and forced to stand in front of the stage. There were more than I would have expected, and I wondered if more had been brought in just for this event. The higher-ranking soldiers, those not consigned to the increased patrols, stood around or behind the bleachers, while well dressed men and women began to fill the seats.

Because I had purposely limited my interaction apart from my little group, most of the faces in the crowd were unfamiliar.

Seeing so many non-soldiers was a first for me, and really highlighted the foreignness of the Alacryans. The way they dressed, the words they used, their social customs: it was all so different than what I was used to.

I tried to pay attention as Tedry and Rolluf humored themselves by pointing out prominent Alacryans and telling me more about their bloods, but my thoughts were somewhere else. I was starting to fear that I'd wasted my time and risked my life for nothing.

My simple plan—get close enough to Tessia to activate my medallion and teleport us both back to the sanctuary—now seemed naive and childish.

If she's not at this event, I'll leave tonight, I decided.

Rolluf nudged me with his elbow. I looked up at him, unsure what he wanted. His attention was on the balcony above us, where a man and a woman had just stepped out into the open. The crowd fell quiet in a sort of ripple as people slowly realized the couple was waiting.

They were both quite handsome. The man had short, honey-blond hair that shined in the sunlight, while the woman's was closer to the color of fresh-cut straw. They were both wearing blue mage robes with silver lining. His was a more traditional battle-mage cut, while hers was almost like a gown.

They must be the Milviews.

The man set both hands on the rail around the balcony and leaned forward. "Welcome!" he said, his voice a confident boom that I was sure I could have heard from our house on the outskirts of town.

"For those of you whom we haven't yet had the pleasure to meet, I am Silas Milview, and this is my beautiful wife Cerise." The man waited for a polite applause from the bleachers. I couldn't help but notice most of the soldiers did not put their hands together for the lord and lady.

"As some of you may know, the Milviews come from humble roots. It is with the Vritra's blessing that I address you today as a highblood, a most gracious reward from our lord the High Sovereign for an incredible act of courage by our late daughter, Cercei Milview!"

Silas waited again as a louder, more genuine applause burst from the audience. Both the Milviews beamed down over the crowd at this show of respect for their daughter.

So she was the one who breached Elshire, I thought glumly.

"That wench," Tedry mumbled, though he was careful to keep his voice down so only Rolluf and I could hear him. "If she hadn't done that, I'd still be back home in Alacrya kissing my girlfriend between classes..."

Rolluf snorted. "Don't lie to Ellem, Ted. We both know the only girl you kiss is your mom."

Tedry went red around the neck and punched Rolluf in the arm, but both boys snapped to attention and quieted down at a glare from Murtaeg, who was standing nearby with a group of guards.

"—family's achievements are not the reason we stand before you today," Silas was saying. "Though we are honored that our humble new home has been chosen as the setting for this truly monumental occasion."

Silas Milview launched into a rambling speech about his family's history, bragging about the feats of his daughter in the war and his son back at school in Alacrya, and describing the Milviews' rise in unnecessary detail. It quickly became obvious that the crowd, especially the well-dressed visitors, were not interested in what he had to say. Just behind him and to his left, Cerise Milview kept glancing at the back of his head, and though her smile never faltered, her eyes began to grow wide and panicky.

When a dark-haired man wearing a silky black robe coughed pointedly and knocked his onyx cane against the bleachers, Silas Milview seemed to snap out of a trance. He gazed around the crowd, his smile fading, then said, "Well... yes... thank you for—for your attention." The highblood Alacryan shot a glance to his wife, who just kept smiling, then turned back to the crowd.

"We did have some additional entertainment lined up for you today, but—well—I can see how anxious you all are to find out why we're gathered here, so... um... why don't we skip straight to the announcement. eh?"

In the utter silence that followed this statement, the only voice to be heard was Tedry's as he cursed. A few of the guards glanced our way, some grinning, others scowling, but it was Murtaeg's murderous glare that made Tedry turn white as a sheet.

"Without—without further adieu, it is my privilege and honor to introduce the mighty retainer, Nico, who has just returned after a trip back to Alacrya with Princess Tessia Eralith of Elenoir." The lord and lady Milview bowed and waved to the crowd, then stepped back out of view as two other figures walked out onto the balcony.

A cry went up from the elves standing in front of the stage as they saw Tessia.

She looked... stunning. Her silvery hair had been gathered up so that it fanned out behind her head like the tail of a peacock. Dark lines had been painted around her eyes and her lips were vibrantly red. She wore tight-fitting battle robes made of elegant silver plating and an emerald fabric that ran like liquid around her body and glinted like dragon scales.

Faintly glowing runic tattoos were visible on the back of her neck, and from the subtle glow of her arms under the battle robes, I guessed there were more there as well.

My mind felt blank and empty, my thoughts replaced by a swarm of buzzing fire wasps between my ears. I hadn't really known what to expect, but seeing Tessia waving and smiling warmly down at her enslaved people, dressed like a warrior princess, certainly hadn't been it.

And what were the tattoos? Something to suppress her mana, or control her somehow? I had no clue. I was having a hard time thinking at all... Should I rush toward the building and activate the medallion? I could take the elves and Tessia, but would I survive long enough to escape? Kathyln had somehow avoided teleporting Bilal with them, but was that intention or luck?

Now that I had her in sight, I realized I couldn't hope to get away with her, at least not right there, surrounded by enemy mages...

Elijah—or Nico, as Silas Milview had called him—held up a hand, and the elves went quiet. The reaction from the Alacryans had been muted at best as they waited to hear what Elijah had to say.

"Today I speak to both my people of Alacrya and those of Dicathen. I speak to you as a child of both continents! Though I was born in the Central Dominion of Alacrya, I was raised and schooled in Dicathen alongside your people, including Princess Tessia Eralith of Elenoir, daughter of the late Alduin and Merial Eralith."

A whimper went through the elves as Elijah said the late king's and queen's names.

Tessia stepped up, and Elijah wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close.

I stared at Tessia in shock, expecting at least a smidgen of anger or disgust to leak onto her face. But what I saw was a worried—yet genuine—smile.

Elijah continued. "Today is a new day. The war is over, and our two continents are made one in service of the Vritra. The High Sovereign wishes only that we put aside the animosity of our past and unite together under a banner of peace."

A handful of polite applause came from the bleachers, but the elves were entirely silent. Most were staring at Tessia with the same confusion and betrayal I felt.

"Now, please give your attention to Princess Tessia."

Tessia stepped to the front of the balcony. Her steps seemed shaky, and she quickly steadied herself by grabbing the railing. Despite her beautiful clothes and makeup, I could see the dark shadows around her eyes, the sunken, sharp edges of her cheeks.

What happened, Tessia? What did he do to you?

"My—my people," she said, her voice trembling slightly. She shot a quick glance back, but continued after an encouraging nod from Elijah. "I know you are frightened, but I want you to know that—that I will always, that I *have* always, stood between you and the darkness. Don't lose hope. Please listen to my words.

"I stand before you today to announce that I..." She hesitated again, her eyes flickering through the audience.

This time Elijah moved closer to her and rested a hand on her back. She stood a little straighter. "I, Tessia Eralith, last remaining member of the royal family... have ceded the right to rulership of E-Elenoir"—gasps rose up from the huddled bunch of elves—"and sworn fealty to the High Sovereign of Alacrya... legally giving him supreme authority over all lands once belonging to—to the race of elves."

"No!" an elven slave called out.

"It can't be true!" begged another.

"Traitor!" howled a third.

This outcry lasted several seconds before the guards stepped in and made threatening motions with their weapons, causing the elves to be silent.

Tessia seemed to lean into Elijah before continuing. "I have done this in exchange for your very lives." My friend, though I could barely recognize her as such, smiled weakly down on the crowd. "You will be

released immediately... and sent from this place to search out your friends and family... wherever they may be."

Now it was the Alacryans who stirred while the elves stood silent and stunned.

"All elves will be freed and... and offered a place alongside the Alacryan people... as partners in a new world." Tessia stopped for a moment, and Elijah leaned forward to whisper something in her ear. "We will no longer be looked upon as a lesser race, a-afraid to travel our own borders."

I was shaking my head, unable to believe what I was hearing. The humans of Dicathen hadn't always treated elves well, and some places in Sapin had still allowed slavery, but humans and elves weren't at war. We hadn't murdered the elven king and queen and put their corpses on display!

My fists were clenched as I glared up at Tessia, and for a brief moment, I swore I thought our eyes locked. There was no sign of recognition in her weary turquoise eyes.

She just didn't recognize me in my disguise, I told myself through gritted teeth.

I almost wanted to rip off my hat and let loose my hair, but I didn't budge.

No, I *couldn't*... none of us could. Everyone present was frozen, eyes wide in fear as a pressure unlike anything I'd ever felt gripped every inch of my body.

Elijah and Tessia, along with some of the other Alacryan mages, were staring upwards, completely silent.

Something was coming.

325 INTERVENTION

ARTHUR LEYWIN

It felt like the ascent had taken us ages. So much had happened within the three zones that, when the sanctuary came into view on the other side of the portal, I couldn't help but smile with relief.

Even though I would be going back out into the very continent that Agrona ruled, at this moment, anything was better than the snowy wasteland.

"We really did it," Caera whispered with a trembling smile as we exchanged glances.

The two of us quickly gathered up our belongings. I was storing them in my dimension rune when a sharp tingle spread from my right arm.

'What was that?' Regis asked.

I stared at the intricate rune carved on the underside of my forearm. I'm not sure.

"Is everything okay?" Caera's scarlet eyes were laced with concern as she stood by the portal.

"Yeah." Squeezing in the last of our scarce belongings, I headed back toward the portal to stand beside her.

I looked around one last time, realizing that I might never see Three Steps again. She was the only reason this ascent had been truly worth it. Her teachings and the improvements to God Step I had made with her guidance were worth more to me than every one of the Spear Beaks' treasures combined.

Letting out a sigh, I turned back to the glowing portal. "Let's get out of here."

Caera grabbed onto my sleeve as we stepped forward, even though we both had a simulet, just to make sure we wouldn't be separated.

Our short step through the shimmering portal felt anticlimactic. The sparkling white interior of the small room greeted us with a warmth that was almost uncomfortable after days of weathering below freezing temperatures. There was a sterile smell to the space, as if it had been recently cleaned.

A round pool dominated the center of the room and a low white bed rested against one wall. Past the bed, there was a closed door that undoubtedly would lead deeper through the Relictombs. The main feature of the room, however, was the second portal that took up most of the wall to my left.

While distorted from the water-like movement of the portal window, I could make out the second level of the Relictombs on the other side, the very floor where Caera and I had begun, alongside the Granbehls.

There were an unusual number of moving figures gathered in the plaza beyond the portal, but my attention landed back on my right forearm, where my dimension rune was burning against my skin like hot iron.

The once-dead relic that I had acquired from the old man that taught at Stormcove Academy practically leapt from the dimension rune into my hand. Its cloudy white surface was glowing visibly and emitting probing filaments of aether.

'What the shit?' Regis blurted, summarizing my own reaction as well.

"Grey... something's wrong," Caera said, her voice sounding from the portal leading back outside.

But my eyes were glued to the glowing crystal in my hand. The violet tendrils were coiling around my arm, and I felt a pressure... an insistent tugging from the relic.

"Just a second," I muttered absently as the feeling grew stronger.

Caera's voice carried a rare edge of panic as she said, "No, really, Grey, I think those are the—"

Reaching out with my own aether, I probed the relic, causing the countless tendrils of violet energy to intertwine with my own. My vision blurred except for the crystal.

At that moment, a single question, in a voice that was strange and distant and hauntingly familiar, rose to the surface of my consciousness.

'Who do you most desire to see?'

With a single thought that carried the emotions and memories I had held on to for years, my vision plunged downward into the crystal's many smooth facets.

A wide expanse of velvet clouds rolled by in the sky beneath me. Even as the clouds drew closer, I felt no movement, no cool wind rushing across my skin or whistling in my ears. All I felt was a sense of vertigo at the suddenness of the transition.

The clouds rippled apart so that I was staring down at blue water marred only by the occasional white crest of a wave. The ocean gave way to a shoreline, but the ground went by so quickly I couldn't tell where I was until all I could see was a forest from horizon to horizon.

Elenoir, I realized. *Why am I seeing the elven homeland?*

My vision seemed to zoom into the forest, magnifying it until I could make out a small village surrounded by a ring of clear-cut trees.

I didn't even have time to question the clearing of the magical forest, something the elves would never allow, before my vision settled on a crowd of people in front of a large wooden building. From their dress, it was obvious that these were all Alacryans, except for a group of dirty, half-starved elves who had been pushed to the front of the crowd and were surrounded by guards.

My attention was forcefully drawn to three young student-soldiers. Two of the boys were whispering back and forth and nudging each other, but the third was facing the Alacryan nobles ahead.

It was only when that third boy looked up that I was able to see under his visor.

That's when I realized he wasn't a "he" at all.

It was Ellie.

A flurry of emotions stirred within me as I saw her serious, matured expression: confusion and fear as to why she was there, dressed like that, heartache from seeing her sunken cheeks and hollow gaze, and overwhelming relief just from knowing that she was still alive.

But what exactly was I seeing? When exactly was I seeing? Aside from the fact that it had reacted to the energy within the keystone, I had no idea what the relic was or what it did.

The timeline was definitely after I was defeated, that much was clear. Beyond that, I had no idea if what I was seeing was happening now, had happened already, or was going to happen in the future.

Ellie was gazing up at something, and I followed her attention to a small balcony. Elijah—or Nico—was standing next to Tess. The vision I was seeing refocused on Tess as I became captivated by how she looked... and by the runes that lined her fair skin.

What had happened to her? What was she doing there? Why was she standing next to Nico? And why was my sister dressed like an Alacryan soldier?

What the hell is happening in Dicathen?

Nico's entire body went tense and he rose suddenly from the balcony, flying up into the air and out of sight of the vision. Only when Ellie turned to look was I able to redirect the relic-vision's focus to the sky behind the village.

The air was warped, rippling like melting glass. Though I couldn't hear anything, Ellie's face scrunched into a wince and she covered her ears with her hands, telling me some kind of tremendous noise was resounding through the village.

The air shimmered, bulged out, and burst, leaving a black scar in the bright blue sky. A portal.

Through the portal floated two familiar figures.

The three-eyed asura, Lord Aldir, came first. Gleaming silver armor covered most of his body, and he wore a helm over his white hair that left a gap for the third eye.

Behind him was Windsom. The asura was entirely unchanged from when I had first met him. His short, platinum hair was carefully swept to the side, his deep-set eyes gazing nobly from under permanently furrowed brows.

Unlike Aldir, Windsom had not come dressed for battle, but instead wore a simple military-style uniform denoting him as a servant of the Indrath clan.

Nico flew upward toward the asuras, and I wished that I could hear what was happening as he exchanged words with Aldir. Nico sneered, but the asuras were expressionless as they responded.

Their words made Nico go even paler than usual, and he drifted back several feet from Aldir and Windsom.

It was only then that I realized Tess had flown up from the balcony as well. She hovered awkwardly next to Nico, apparently having difficulty maintaining the flight, but the unsure expression she'd worn earlier was gone, replaced by something steel-hard and impossibly self-assured.

The expression was very unlike my childhood friend, yet oddly familiar.

Windsom shook his head in response to whatever she'd said, then held out his hands, which suddenly gripped a long silver spear. Almost as quickly, Tess's sword-staff was out, and Nico's fists were gauntleted in black hellfire.

Fear curdled deep in my stomach. No!

The asuras of Epheotus couldn't attack Agrona's forces in Dicathen. The only reason either side had agreed to any sort of truce, even as ineffective as it had been, was because the alternative would be the destruction of this world.

Nico and Tess were no match for an asura like Windsom, much less two asuras together, but the fallout from the battle would almost certainly destroy the entire town, maybe even more.

And considering what I'd learned about Clan Indrath in the Relictombs, I doubted the asuras would be mindful of the lessers below.

How many elves would die if they fought now?

Would my sister survive?

Why were they there?

This direct intervention was against the terms Lord Indrath had established with Agrona. After their failed assault on the Vritra, the asuras of Epheotus weren't even allowed to *contact* Dicathen's defenders. Breaking that truce—ineffective as it had been—could mean all out war between the Vritra and the rest of the asuran clans.

If the asuras went to war against each other, the *entire continent* would be destroyed...

And all I could do was watch from the other side of the world.

I could feel my heart pound even in this disembodied state.

Windsom hardly moved, just a short, sudden cut of his spear, so fast the eye couldn't follow. The shockwave carved a mile-long trench in the forest to either side of the village, sending up a cloud of dust that darkened the forest for as far as the eye could see.

A shimmering sphere of dark spikes surrounded Nico and Tess. Though the shield shattered and fell to pieces before dissolving, it had saved them from the attack, and not only them. Below, the village and clearing around it were untouched.

Ellie!

As I thought about her, my perspective shifted so I could see her again.

Ellie was frozen, rooted to the spot, just like the rest of the crowd. The full force of the asuras' presence had been unleashed, and it was crushing them.

Run! Get out of here! I tried flailing my arms and yelling, anything to get my sister's attention, but she couldn't see or hear me.

My mind whirled with the options Ellie had available at hand. Even though I couldn't do anything, she wasn't without hope.

It was doubtful she'd be able to get far enough away to escape the battle even if she ran, but she might have one of the djinn's medallions. Better yet, the phoenix wyrm pendant that I had given her might still be intact.

As fast as my mind searched for hope, doubt trickled in as well. Would Ellie even be able to use the medallion under the asura's pressure? Even if she had the pendant, would it be enough to save her against the power of an asura?

Through gritted teeth and the sound of my own pounding heart, I forced myself to look back up at the battle.

Behind Windsom, Aldir had closed his eyes—except for the third eye, which never closed—and had his hands held out in front of him so they intertwined in a complicated gesture.

The very light bent around him as he coalesced power. I could see raw mana being channeled in through the ring he'd made with his fingers, up his arms, and into his third eye.

Nico responded to Windsom's attack with a barrage of black spikes. They flew from his hands like javelins, each one unerring. I could hardly track the asura's spear as he deflected one after another, his motions so fast and precise that he hardly seemed to move.

Tess darted forward and thrust with her sword-staff. Rather than using her beast will, the elf princess unleashed a barrage of mana strikes. Windsom's spear twirled, deflected all of them before countering with a thrust of his own. His spear seemed to grow longer as it raced toward her, forcing her to drop suddenly out of the way. She seemed to have difficulty holding focus on the flying spell and nearly struck a tree before righting herself.

What was Tess doing? Why was she holding back like that? Why wasn't she using her beast will?

Nico was screaming at the asuras, flying rapidly around Windsom to draw his attention away from Tess. A moment later, the asura vanished as a globe of hellfire engulfed him.

A nova of pure mana split the dome in two, and the hellfire faded away. Inside, Windsom was unhurt. I watched as the nova spread farther and farther across the sky, dispersing the low clouds of dust.

Black spikes appeared from the shower of hellfire sparks, each launching inward toward Windsom, and each batted away just as quickly. The asura's steady gaze didn't even flicker as he made another short diagonal cut.

Nico was thrown to the side as a dozen of the black spikes appeared to deflect the blow. In the distance, the shockwave leveled a section of the forest at least a mile wide and three miles long.

My attention turned fearfully back to the ground. The crowd of Alacryans and elves was still paralyzed, but Ellie was moving.

Her arm shook with effort as she slowly reached into her armor and pulled out one of the djinn medallions.

A wave of relief washed over me as she clenched the device in one pale hand, but instead of activating it immediately, my sister's gaze crept across the crowd to rest on the small cluster of elven prisoners.

Fear and frustration replaced my excitement as I watched her turn and take a single painful step toward them.

Just get out of there, Ellie!

She took another sluggish step, then another, like she was walking under water. A few sets of eyes turned to her in surprise, but most couldn't see anything except the battle above.

From the treeline just outside of the village, a beam of pure mana cut through the sky, aimed at Aldir. Windsom blocked the spell, deflecting it directly at Nico.

My old friend dipped under it as his entire body burst into hellfire. He shot forward like a burning arrow and two gouts of dark flame erupted from his hands. The fire dispersed against a translucent shield of mana, but gave Nico just enough time to ram bodily into Windsom. The hellfire jumped from Nico to the asura's uniform and began to spread across the rich fabric, blackening it.

Windsom threw a seemingly casual strike, and although a huge metal spike appeared to block it, it wasn't enough. The asura's blow shattered the metal and glanced across Nico's shoulder.

Nico was sent spinning wildly through the air before crashing headlong into the forest just outside of town with such force that he dug a quarter-mile long trench in the earth and leveled dozens of huge trees.

Aldir's eye had grown brighter and brighter as he continued to do... whatever the hell he was preparing. I couldn't imagine what kind of ability would require an asura of his strength to power up.

Why wasn't he helping Windsom fight?

Below, Ellie had reached the elves. She grabbed the first one by the arm and turned him around, trying to stir him into motion, but the elves were far too weak in their current condition. Instead, she pushed her way into the middle of their group and held the medallion above her head. Her arm trembled with the effort.

The sky above her darkened.

Shifting my perspective, I watched with awe and dawning horror as Aldir began to *expand*.

As the asura grew, his third eye glowed even brighter until it shone like a golden sun from his forehead. Tendrils of golden mana writhed like holy flames from his silver armor as he continued to grow.

Where his feet approached the ground, the golden flames caused the trees to combust, burning them to ash in seconds. The fire quickly spread, racing around the perimeter of the village so that it was ringed by fire.

Ellie stood like a statue, her arm still raised, but her wide-eyed gaze and slack jaw were turned upward toward the impossibly large asura.

Tess and Nico rose up over the burning trees, supporting one another. The question of why she was fighting alongside Nico came to me once again, but at that moment, it didn't matter.

It was obvious now what Aldir was about to do. This wasn't a threat, or an assassination. He was sending Agrona a warning.

By destroying Elenoir.

The enormous, blazing golden eye in Aldir's head swelled with pure energy, rippling the very space around him. The asura's face, now a hundred times magnified, gazed blankly down at where Tessia and Nico hovered above the ground, clinging to each other.

Ellie's fingers twitched and mana seeped out of them and into the medallion. The mana bubbled up from it, curving over the top of the elves and surrounding them in a thin, shining dome. But the dome was flickering, inconsistent.

She's not putting enough mana into it, I realized in horror. She wasn't able to, with Aldir's pressure weighing down on the area.

My attention jumped from Ellie to Aldir to Tess and Nico, and caught Tess and Nico's shared gaze, hers uncertain, concerned, and yet not afraid, while he was looking at her almost... tenderly.

Then they were gone, leaving nothing behind but the faint ripple of whatever magic they'd used to teleport away.

There was a sudden massive swell of power, and a wide golden beam was unleashed from Aldir's eye. The air around it rippled and burned away, sending out a halo of visible heat and energy.

Where the beam hit the ground, the ground was pushed up and away by the force of it. Trees were knocked over, splintered, then obliterated. The town began to vanish, the houses crushed to kindling by the force.

I tried to focus on Ellie, but the last thing I saw of her was the half-formed dome dimming before the wall of concussive force carried the village away.

My perspective was shifting upward, pulling away from the village, and I watched as the blast expanded out from where the beam still blazed into the earth, a constantly growing ring of destruction that leveled

everything it touched, wiping away Elenoir and leaving behind nothing but a cloud of dust that rose higher and higher toward the clouds.

And just before Aldir's form disappeared from view, I saw his gaze turned... straight towards me.

A palpable chill ran down my transient form as his giant golden eyes bore into mine with frigid, deadly apathy. He knew I was watching.

Our gazes locked for what seemed like eternity even as my form was dragged back away from Elenoir and Dicathen. And even as I stood once more in the plain white room of the sanctuary, I could still feel the asura's gaze on me.

Blinking the sweat that ran down my brows and into my eyes, I realized that Caera had one hand around my wrist and was trying to pull the relic out of my fist. She was shouting something, but I couldn't make out the words.

I was nauseous and weak, and I couldn't breathe.

"—ey! Grey, what is it! What's wrong?" Caera's eyes were wide, her voice full of panic.

I fell to my knees and the relic slipped from my hand, bouncing off the white-tiled floor.

'Where the hell have you been?' Regis sounded uncharacteristically worried, and I realized not all of the panic I felt was my own.

I tried to speak, but there was a cold lump in my throat that made me gag.

Elenoir was gone.

Ellie...

I fell forward. My forehead pressed against the cold tile as I hammered a fist into the floor, causing the ground to burst apart with a sharp crack. A deafening scream ripped out of my throat as tears blurred my vision.

Only one asura could have given the command to destroy Elenoir. Lord Indrath must have realized the pact of non-intervention had failed and feared the Alacryan's expansion throughout the forest, and so he sent Agrona a message in the only language either of them understood.

My jaw clenched as I ground my teeth.

Clan Vritra or Clan Indrath... it didn't matter, these asuras were all the same. They didn't care for the peace and well-being of the lessers. If anything, they were even more violent and greedy, willing to kill indiscriminately to get what they wanted.

No, maybe not all of them.

The memory of Sylvia in her last moments, dying alone to protect her daughter, surfaced in my mind.

I thought of the white dragon, dying alone to protect her daughter. She had understood better than anyone what Indrath and Agrona really were.

Was that why she had entrusted her daughter to me? So Sylvie could be raised outside of Epheotus, away from her own people and their inherent cruelty?

My hand slid over the rune on my forearm where my bond was in her egg-bound form. Even after all Sylvia's sacrifices, it still came to *this*.

And not just for my bond, but my father, Adam, Buhnd, and so many others.

The cold, shallow voice of my former self rang in my mind, reminding me that it was because of them that I had become so weak, so emotional.

"Having people to protect only serves to hinder you from making the optimal and most rational decisions," Lady Vera had repeatedly stated. It was why I had walked out on everyone I cared about as Grey.

I shook my head. But it was those same people that I cared about in Dicathen that had driven me to make it this far. Rejecting Caera's outstretched hand, I pushed myself up to my feet.

I wasn't going to let them down. This was only the beginning of my journey now. With aether, I could rewrite reality itself, it was only a matter of learning how.

Then these *gods* would see what I was really capable of.

AFTERWORD

Hello! TurtleMe here, author of this little novel that you've just finished reading. I hope you've enjoyed the story and you're looking forward to the next installment of Arthur's journey! While waiting, please consider taking the time to leave an honest review of this novel. **Ratings and reviews are tremendously important** on Amazon and since this is what I live off of, I would greatly appreciate your thoughts on this book so others can make sure that this is the book they want to read! Whether you loved it or hated it, I hope you can spare the time to write your two cents.

Kindest regards, TurtleMe

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