

THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

BOOK 5: CONVERGENCE

TURTLEME

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FLOATING CASTLE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin. The Council has decreed that, due to your recent actions of excessive violence and the inconclusive circumstances involved, your mana core is to be restrained, your title as a mage is to be stripped, and you are to be incarcerated until further judgment.

"... Effective immediately."

Those words, spoken with a cold, almost detached authority, were followed by three distinct reactions from the people around me. The first came from those who were ignorant but curious. They eyed me with perplexed looks, studying my appearance as they tried to make it fit with the words the Lance —Varay—had just read: Inconclusive circumstances; excessive violence. I could feel their cautious skepticism as they silently tried to figure out how a boy, barely a teen, could cause the Council itself to issue the verdict instead of the city governor.

The second reaction was on the ever-foolish faces of the all-accepting crowd, those who blindly worshipped any form of higher authority. They took the words written on the communication artifact as God's truth. I could hear their whispers from where I stood and see their eyes narrowing into disdainful glares as they decided that I must somehow be responsible for everything that had happened inside the academy.

The third reaction was one I would have expected only from my family, but, to my surprise, the students and faculty who had been involved in the incident—those who still had enough strength to speak—all cried out in protest.

Because my family was the closest, I could hear them the most clearly: "Incarcer—Your Honor, there must be some sort of mistake," my mother's voice called from the other side of the fence.

"Yes, I'm sure there's an explanation for all this. My son would never—there must be an explanation for this," my father amended, knowing perfectly well what I was capable of.

There were other outcries of protest, some from students I recognized, others from the staff present at the scene. Varay ignored them all.

"This makes no sense! How dare you punish the one who actually did some good? If it weren't for Arthur, you Lances wouldn't have had anyone left to save!" I turned my head toward the source of the voice. To my surprise, it was Kathyln Glayder. She was marching in my direction with unbridled fury in her eyes—an expression I had never seen, nor expected to see, from her.

"I will see to it that my mother and father rescind this decree at once—"

The Lance opened the scroll she held, revealing the signatures at the bottom. "Your father and mother were the ones, along with King and Queen Greysunders, who voted in favor of this judgment," she said. Though her words were respectful, her expression and tone could only be described as indifferent, even rude.

Kathyln's brother held her back, speaking quietly into her ear. I couldn't hear what he told her, but the princess finally relented, her face red and her body shaking.

I knew that no matter how much I tried to reason with the woman, she wouldn't listen. It wasn't her decision to make.

"Can I speak to my family one last time before you take me?" I asked, my voice coming out more sullen than I had wished.

Varay gave a terse nod, and I walked back to where my parents were leaning against the fence. For a few seconds, we just stared at each other, not knowing how to begin.

"Don't look so sad, guys. This misunderstanding will be cleared up soon." I flashed them a wide grin, hoping to mask my uncertainty. I had allies within the Council, but there were too many unknown factors at work here. I wasn't as worried for myself as I was for Sylvie. Having a dragon alive on our continent wasn't a matter that could be waved off.

My façade must have faltered as I focused on my thoughts, because my parents' expressions changed. They both gazed at me, wide-eyed and afraid.

"You—you honestly have no idea if you'll be able to come back to us, do you?" my mother stuttered, her voice thick with worry. I couldn't meet her eyes; instead, I focused on her hands. Her fingers were deathly pale from the strength of her grip on the iron fence.

"Brother... you're not going anywhere, are you? This is all a joke, right? Right?" Ellie's face was crimson, and I could tell she was doing her best to keep from breaking into sobs. She was so tense that her lips were almost white.

I leaned forward to be at eye-level with my sister. I studied her childish face, hardly able to believe she was already ten. One of my biggest regrets was that I hadn't been by her side as she grew up. I had met my sister for the first time when she was four, and even after that, I had been with her for only a few weeks at a time. I hoped that I would see her again before she was a teen—or an adult... or ever at all.

I got back up, prying my gaze away from Ellie's face. "I'll definitely be back home." I turned around just in time—I didn't want them to notice my eyes watering.

The Lance named Olfred conjured a stone knight beneath me, lifting me up and separating me from Sylvie, whom Varay carried off in an orb of conjured ice. Lance Bairon approached us carrying the wrapped corpse of his deceased younger brother. His gaze pierced through me with pure venom, but he didn't attack me again.

And so we departed. Bairon informed the others that he would be making a detour to his family's home to deliver Lucas' body for a proper funeral. Olfred seemed about to argue, perhaps thinking that the body should be returned to the Council for examination, but Varay waved him off. I could only assume that was an argument they would have elsewhere.

I wasn't sure if the ability to fly was part of being a white core mage, but even without invoking any spells, all three of the Lances were capable of flying—and they had enough power left over to support the conjured knight who was carrying me.

My eyes stayed fixed on Xyrus Academy, which seemed to grow increasingly smaller the farther we flew. The place itself didn't mean much to me, but my time at the school had been spent as an ordinary student mage. I had been considered gifted, but I was still just a student. As the floating city fell away below us, I had the feeling I was leaving my life as an ordinary student behind.

We travelled wordlessly through the sky; all my attempts to start a conversation had blown away on the wind, or perhaps I was just being ignored. As gently as they were treating me, to them, I was still a prisoner waiting to be judged.

'Papa, what's going to happen to us?' Sylvie voiced in my head.

I'm... not sure, Sylv. Don't worry, though. We'll be okay, I reassured her. She didn't reply, but I could still sense the emotions she was feeling: uncertainty, fear, confusion.

We traveled south, though it was impossible for me to tell exactly how far. Below us, all I could see were the Grand Mountains, which divided the continent of Dicathen in half.

"We should stop here for the night," Varay said as she descended into the mountains, and Olfred and the stone knight carrying me followed her down.

We landed in a small clearing on the edge of the Grand Mountains, facing the Beast Glades. I was still shackled at the wrists and ankles, so I sat leaning against a tree, watching Olfred erect a stone hut with a mere flick of his wrist. "Hold still, Arthur Leywin." Without waiting for me to respond, Varay clamped an artifact over my sternum. Instantly, I felt the mana drain out of my core as the device sank deeper into my skin.

"My magic can't help me escape, so why the sudden precaution?" I asked through gritted teeth. The sensation of my mana being forcibly contained wasn't a pleasant one.

"There are other ways you can make trouble," she replied tersely. Then she lifted Sylvie, still encased in the translucent prison, and retreated into a second hut only moments after Olfred had conjured it.

"How could I even..." I muttered under my breath, annoyed.

"It's because we're so close to the Beast Glades." I turned my head toward Olfred, who took a seat on a newly-created bench next to me.

"You are *Lances*, though. Are you saying there are mana beasts that even *you* aren't capable of defeating?" I asked.

"I haven't met one so far, but the Beast Glades hold many mysteries that even the Lances have to be wary of, especially at night, when the more powerful beasts roam. Despite our powers, boy, we're still mortals; death never looms far from us. With all the strange events these days, one can never be too careful."

There was a brief silence, broken only by the low sound of the howling wind. Then he sighed. "What am I doing, telling all this to a little kid?"

I cocked my head in the direction of the hut. "To be fair, your comrade don't seem like the best of company."

I was surprised when the old Lance erupted into a fit of laughter. "You're right about that, boy. Let me tell you, spending time with Varay and Bairon together is more stress-inducing than any SS-class mana beast I've ever fought." Still grinning, he looked me over. "Let me ask you something, boy.

I'm curious as to how you became such a capable mage at your young age."

"How do you know I'm capable? You've never seen me fight," I challenged.

"I've heard Bairon tell me about his younger brother—the one you killed. I also heard some stories from the students I talked to," he answered, shrugging slightly.

We talked to each other for a short while, but though Olfred seemed amiable, he was also very guarded. I wasn't able to pry any sort of information from him; he spoke professionally without revealing anything crucial, as did I. In spite of our little dance of polite conversation, there was a subtle tension between us as he weaved my questions into jokes. We tiptoed around each other with our light words, each of us fishing for hints to satisfy our mutual curiosity. After an hour of fruitless effort on both sides, Olfred suggested I get some sleep.

While Olfred wasn't as distant as his companion, he was, in a way, more mysterious.

Olfred hadn't been so kind as to create a stone hut for me, as he had done for himself and Varay. Without shelter or the protection of my mana, the sharp winds sent chills throughout my body, and I made myself as small as possible as I lay curled against the tree.

I fell asleep at some point, but was rudely awakened when the stone knight picked me up like a sack of rice.

"Hi, best friend." I patted the conjured golem indifferently as it whisked me back into the air.

Sylv, how are you holding up? I asked my bond.

'I'm okay, Papa. The cage is a little small, but it's comfortable,' Sylv replied. Her emotions were linked to mine, so I was careful not to let any of the worry I was feeling leak out to her. I didn't need her to know just how worried I was about her, or what the Council might due to her if they found out the truth of her origin.

Flying over the Beast Glades, I realized just how big our continent was. The

diverse terrain of the mana beasts seemed never-ending. We passed over deserts and grasslands, snow-capped mountains and rocky canyons. More than once I spotted a mana beast large enough to be seen even from the height we were flying.

Olfred and Varay constantly released their killing intent, warding off all the mana beasts in our vicinity. Still, several times we detoured around some threat I couldn't sense, and in these moments the Lances withdrew their auras.

I assumed Varay had put the mana restriction artifact on me so I wouldn't purposely attract the attention of dangerous, territorial mana beasts. I had to commend her, as that was something I would probably have tried as a way to escape—although whether I would have had the ability to survive this deep in the Beast Glades, even if I had escaped, was a question I wasn't very keen on learning the answer to.

I didn't have much time to ponder it. Varay stopped suddenly, sending out a blast of wind around her so she could hover in midair, and took out the communication scroll from which she had read the Council's sentencing.

"We are here," she said after carefully scanning the area around us.

I looked around in the sky, but there was nothing near us other than the birds dumb enough to venture close to flying humans.

Just as I was about ask her what was going on, Varay raised a hand, as if searching for something in the air. With a soft click, the sky split apart to reveal a metal staircase.

Olfred smirked at the sight of my gaping mouth.

"Welcome to the Council's floating castle."

FELLOW CAPTIVE

"LOOKS like some of the keener mana beasts have sensed the castle. We should hurry if we don't want any unnecessary trouble," Olfred said to no one in particular.

"Mm," replied Varay.

The resounding roar of mana beasts below prompted us to climb up the aged staircase. Well, not *me*, since I was being hauled over the golem's shoulder, free to admire the iron steps which were pitted with dents and rust.

Peering down from the sky, I could faintly make out the subtle movements of a few huge mana beasts shrouded in the dense cluster of trees.

The stone knight, which had me slung over its shoulder, gently lowered me onto the base of the flight of stairs. Then it crumbled into sand and reconstructed itself into a cape, fastening itself around Olfred's shoulder.

Olfred winked at me upon noticing my surprised expression. "We dwarves always carry a bit of dirt with us wherever we go," he said as the door closed behind us.

I had thought we would be surrounded by darkness, but a moss-like substance covering the walls began glowing with a soft blue light. Varay dissolved the ice cuffs that shackled my legs together so I could walk on my own. She took the lead, while Olfred followed closely behind us.

We had been trudging up a seemingly endless flight of stairs for at least an hour when I finally voiced my frustration. "Is there no faster way to go up

than climbing this absurd staircase?" I sighed. Due to the assimilation process I had gone through, I was stronger than most humans—even without my mana core—but I was still growing impatient at the wasted time.

"Magic cannot be used at within the castle entrances," Varay answered immediately, a hint of impatience in her already cold voice.

I let out another deep breath and followed along silently, stealing a glance at my bond. Sylvie was sleeping a lot more than usual due to her recent transformation. Windsom had told me about the different forms asuras could utilize, depending on the situation, but I never knew how much of a toll it took on Sylvie to release her draconic form. It made sense, though—Sylvie was basically a newborn in the eyes of deities who could live for thousands of years.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't realize that Varay had stopped.

I let out a surprised grunt as I bumped into her. The female Lance was just a tad taller than me but I was a step below her, so my face had hit her back. However, my arms were cuffed in front of me and had hit someplace a bit more... intimate.

I didn't think much of it, but Varay reacted in a way I would not have expected. She let out a rather girlish squeal as she jumped forward. She whipped around to face me, and I could see her face flush in embarrassment and surprise before immediately contorting into a fearsome glare that might have made someone else break out in a cold sweat.

Collecting herself, she turned back around and placed her hand at the end of the stairwell before muttering softly, "We are here."

Olfred, his amused smirk obvious under his beard, shrugged his shoulders and nudged me forward.

A glaring light seeped through the crevice of the wall, which had split apart. My eyes adjusted until I could finally make out what was ahead. A brightly lit corridor with an arched ceiling stretched high above us. Mysterious designs had been carved into every visible surface. The engraved runes made

the corridor seem more like a memorial etched with names of the deceased than a luxurious decoration; each engraving and design seemed to hold a purpose and meaning. There were simple chandeliers hung from the ceiling every few yards, but, while the hall was brightly lit, the white light gave the space a cold, emotionless feel, reminding me of hospitals back in my old world.

"Now that we're inside the actual castle itself, it is best not to converse with us or any of the Lances," Olfred whispered, with an unusual chill to his voice, as we entered through the crudely-made door.

We walked in silence, only the echoes of our footsteps filling the hall. On either side were doors that didn't match the metallic corridor; there were doors of different colors and materials, all quite distinct from one another. The corridor didn't seem to have an end, so I was relieved when Varay stopped along the way at a seemingly random door to our left. She knocked on the door without pause until it swung inward, revealing an armored bear of a man.

"My lords." The guard immediately knelt, his head bowed.

"Rise," Varay replied coolly. The guard stood back up but did not make eye contact with either of the Lances. Instead, his gaze was fixed on me, and he regarded me both curiously and cautiously.

"Tell the Council of our arrival." Olfred waved the guard away impatiently. The armored man gave another quick bow and disappeared behind a black door, which had been hidden, appearing to be a part of the wall until it was opened.

After a few minutes, the guard returned and fully opened the door for us, allowing us in. "Lance Zero and Lance Balrog have been given permission to meet the Council, along with the prisoner Arthur Leywin."

I looked at Olfred, raising a brow. As he walked past me, he muttered, "Bah. Code names," as if embarrassed.

I trailed behind the two Lances wearing a wry smile. Whatever waited ahead

would most likely determine my future, but suddenly all I could think of was what the code names for all the other Lances might be.

I passed the guard and stepped through the hidden door, and I could immediately sense a change in the atmosphere. We were in a large circular room with a high-rise ceiling that seemed to be made entirely of glass. The room was sparsely decorated, with only a long, rectangular table at the very back. The six members of the Council were seated behind the table, each one looking at me with a different expression.

"Your Majesties." Olfred and Varay both bowed toward the Council as the kings and queens rose from their seats. Not knowing exactly what custom dictated in situations like this, I followed the example of the two Lances and bowed as well.

"Ignorant! Do you consider yourself on the same level as the Lances? You should take a knee at the very least, as a sign of respect," a husky voice boomed. I looked up to see that it was the dwarf king, Dawsid Greysunders.

He sported a bushy brown beard that spilled from his chin and covered his upper torso. The barrel of his chest was covered by leather armor adorned with gold plating, which seemed like it was restraining his muscles rather than protecting them. With his great, bristling beard and dark, heavy eyes, he looked much larger than he really was. However, looking at his soft, uncalloused hand twiddling the golden wine flute, I wondered whether those muscles were ever put to use, or if they were just for show.

I had a hard time controlling my face, and it contorted into a look of annoyance. But before I could make a rebuttal, I caught sight of Alduin Eralith, Tessia's father and the elf king, who frowned in worry. He gave me a quick shake of the head, clearly warning me against doing anything to upset the dwarven king.

Clenching my jaw, I relented, taking a knee. "My apologizes, Your Majesties. I am but a boy from the countryside, uneducated in the ways of nobles and royalty."

Greysunders snorted and plopped back down on his seat, crossing his arms as his sturdy frame sank into his chair. The veins on his muscular arms stretched with every little movement.

"Now, now. I'm sure the journey was long and everyone must be eager to get started. Varay, uncuff Arthur," said Blaine Glayder, Curtis's father. The Lance dissolved the cuffs that bound my wrists but left the slumbering Sylvie inside her frozen orb.

I surveyed the rulers of this continent. It had been years since I had last seen Blaine and Priscilla Glayder, but, aside from the few extra wrinkles, little had changed about them. The human queen's expression, especially, conveyed a strong resolve despite the dark bags under her eyes.

I had never seen the dwarf queen before, but she was just as I had expected—manly. She had a defined, square jaw with sharp eyes, and her dark hair was pulled straight back into a ponytail. However, in contrast to what I had imagined, bangles of gold and other fine metals clustered around her thick wrists and neck, speaking volumes about her lavish tastes.

Alduin and Merial Eralith, however, seemed to have aged significantly in the few days since I had last seen them. I wasn't surprised—their only daughter had been the focus of Draneeve's act of terrorism.

The two Lances took a few steps back from me as I regarded the Council.

Alduin Eralith spoke in a gentle, vaguely guilty tone. From what Varay had said, Alduin and Merial had not supported the order to arrest me, something I was very grateful for. "Arthur Leywin. Before we begin, I would like to thank you, not as a leader, but as a father, for saving my daughter—"

"Need I remind you that we are here as leaders of this damned continent, not fathers?" Dawsid interjected, pounding his fists on the table. "This boy mutilated one of his fellow schoolmates before killing him. We've all read the description the scout sent us."

Priscilla shook her head, interjecting with calm dignity as she said, "Dawsid, I hardly think it's necessary—"

"Both legs crushed into mush past the mid-thigh. Left arm dismembered and cauterized past the elbow. Right arm frozen and crushed. Genitals..." As the dwarf king read from the scroll, even he seemed to have a hard time saying what was coming up next. "Genitals, along with the pelvic bone, crushed and "

"I think that's enough, Dawsid," Alduin warned.

"It seems I've made my point. Yes, it's all convenient and everything that this boy happened to save the entire school, but that does not justify the torment he put the Wykes boy through. I can only see this as him using this whole fiasco as an excuse to get revenge on someone he's clearly had enmity with in the past," Dawsid said coldly.

"You can't be saying that Arthur's main motive for delving blindly into such a dangerous scene was just to seek revenge! And even if he did, what of it? You can't prove to anyone here what Arthur's motives were. He did what we couldn't do in a time of need: potentially save every student inside Xyrus," Alduin barked back, his face turning more and more red.

"Yes, which is why I'm not suggesting we kill the boy. We merely need to cripple him as a mage." It was the dwarf queen who spoke this time. The cold indifference in her voice seemed to make even her husband falter for a moment.

"What my wife, Glaundera, said is exactly my thought as well. This boy is too dangerous if left alone. Imagine if he and his pet dragon decide to make enemies of us..."

My ears perked up at the mention of Sylvie.

"My God, do you hear yourself? You sound paranoid. Blaine, Priscilla, what do you have to add to all this?" Tessia's mother was shaking her head, disconcerted.

"Merial, speaking as a parent, my husband and I both agree with you on this," Priscilla said evenly, her distant gaze switching back and forth between Sylvie and me. "But we must consider the Greysunders' view as well. They

are thinking not only of themselves, but the entire continent."

"So—what, we cripple the boy and kill the dragon on the off chance that he might harbor ill feelings toward us and decide to get revenge?" Alduin was nearly yelling as he stood up to face the other leaders.

"Alduin, know your place! Don't think you are on the same level as us just because you sit here. May I remind you of your inability to even take care of your own Lances?" Dawsid growled menacingly as he pointed an accusatory finger at the elf king. "This continent is potentially on the brink of war and you were careless enough to lose one of our biggest assets!"

"Your Majesties, was I brought here to simply hear my judgment or am I allowed to—"

"You will not speak until you are instructed to!" Dawsid roared, cutting me off. "I refuse to accept any claims this boy is trying to make. He could say that the God of Iron himself spoke to him and ordered him to do all this, but it does not change what he has done and what he will be able to do if left alone."

"I see no point in me being here if I am not allowed to speak and give my account of what happened, and why it happened the way it did." I did my best to control the volume and tone of my voice, but it was still coming out a lot sharper than I wanted it to.

"You're right! There is no need for this *prisoner* to be here. Olfred, lock him up in one of the lower cells and keep him there until further orders. And lock his *pet* in a vault," Glaundera Greysunders responded, waving her hand toward us.

"Dawsid, Glaundera, the Council is not for you to run and order as you see fit. Aya!" Alduin growled. Behind him, a figure masked in the shadows kneeled, awaiting a command.

"Stand down, elf! Remember that you only have one Lance at your disposal." There was heavy tension as the two kings locked eyes.

Finally Alduin conceded, sitting back reluctantly in his chair. As Olfred's

stone knight picked me up, I met Alduin's gaze for a brief moment. I could see the unrelenting determination in his eyes as he gave me a firm nod. I bit my tongue and chose to stay silent.

It was obvious that the dwarf king and queen were all for crippling me, while the Glayders were refusing to support either party in deciding my fate. I was going to have to rely on Alduin and Merial if Sylvie and I were going to get home unscathed.

As the golem carried me through a different door and down a flight of stairs, I tried to talk to Olfred but was met with stony silence.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, I took a look around. It seemed like your typical castle dungeon for traitors and prisoners of war. It was a spacious area with many cells, but much of it was covered by shadows that the light of the few burning torches didn't reach.

"This will be your cell, Arthur. Your bond will be placed elsewhere." Upon reaching my dungeon chamber, the summoned knight carrying me suddenly crumbled into dust. I landed rather unimpressively on my knees and elbows as Olfred shut the metal cage and stomped away.

"Ouch. He could've warned me," I muttered aloud, brushing the dust off of my knees.

"That voice... A-Arthur? Arthur Leywin?"

My head bolted up at the feeble, yet familiar sound.

"Director Goodsky?"

INTENTIONS

- "DIRECTOR GOODSKY?" I sputtered incredulously.
- "Y-yes. Although 'Director' doesn't seem to be appropriate anymore, seeing as I have been stripped of that title. Who would've imagined I'd meet you in here, Arthur," she replied weakly. Her speech was breathy and pained; it seemed she had suffered considerably.
- "Stripped of your title? I don't understand. What is going on here? Why are you here, Director?" I leaned against the metal bars of my cage in hopes of hearing her more clearly. Judging from the source of her voice, I deduced that her cell was diagonally opposite my own, but because of the way the torches were arranged, most of the cells were in darkness.
- "We will get to that later." There was a hint of despair in Director Goodsky's voice as she asked, "Arthur, why have you been locked up? With your abilities, I assumed you would be able to fend well enough for yourself, or at least escape if necessary."
- "Lucas was holding Tessia captive and I had to use most of my mana to fight him. When the two Lances appeared, I didn't have enough strength to escape," I sighed.
- "I... I apologize, I don't quite follow. The half-elf boy, Lucas?"

It was obvious Director Goodsky wasn't aware of any the recent events at her academy, though this realization didn't surprise me—she would surely have been there to help if she had known. I filled her in on as many details as I

could in the quiet of the dungeon, and could only assume that her silence indicated she was listening intently.

It was hard to tell whether there were prisoners in the other cells too, but the information I was revealing wasn't exactly confidential. I got Director Goodsky caught up on the attack, including what had just happened with the Council.

"Can you describe for me exactly how Lucas seemed to you when you fought against him?" Goodsky asked.

"Apart from the massive increase in his mana manipulation capabilities, I noticed that his physical appearance was different as well. Let's see—he had this sickly gray skin tone, and dark lines running down his face, neck, and arms; I assumed those were his veins. His hair color had changed too; it wasn't blond like I remembered it, but more of a dusty black and white color. The Wykes family is known to have a keen fondness of elixirs, no matter what the side effects might be—"

"No elixir on this continent has the capacity to enhance the user's mana core *that* drastically, Arthur," Director Goodsky interrupted. "You—you weren't able to catch a glimpse of what the leader of this attack looked like?"

"No. He was gone by the time I arrived. Why?"

"I just wanted to confirm some things, but I think I already have a basic understanding of the whole situation. I knew it was bound to happen, but not this soon. They're moving forward with the plan much too quickly." I could hear the director's footsteps echoing as she paced inside her cell.

"What do you mean 'you knew it was bound to happen'? Who are 'they'? Director Goodsky, I'm beginning to have a nagging suspicion that I truly hope is wrong..."

We were both silent for a few moments, only the flickering snaps of the torches' flames breaking the stillness of the dungeon.

"I cannot say, Arthur. I am bound by forces beyond anything either of us can hope to go against. I am truly sorry."

"A binding? Huh, I see. How convenient. And is there a way to remove this binding?" I replied sardonically.

Ignoring my tone, Director Goodsky said, "I have searched for decades on this matter, and always without success," and let out a deep breath.

"And the reason you're locked up here is because...?"

"From what you've told me, and based on what I already know, it seems I have been made a scapegoat. I assume the Council wishes to use me as a convenient excuse for all that has happened recently."

"Why would they need a scapegoat?"

"I cannot say the reason for that either," she replied. There was clear frustration in her tone—not directed at me, but rather at herself. "Arthur, it is painful for me to continue trying to talk about this. Even the very thought of telling someone what I know activates the curse. We should both get some rest; heaven knows we'll be needing it."

With a sigh, I stepped away from the metal gate and leaned my back against the stone wall of my cell. Even if the artifact hadn't been binding my mana core, I would still have been unable to use any sort of magic here.

With nothing else to do, my mind began racing with thoughts.

We were inside a floating castle located above the farthest reaches of the Beast Glades. Assuming I could escape with Sylvie and Director Goodsky, would we be able to make it out of the Beast Glades alive? Assistance from Sylvie was out of the question; her recent transformation had left her in a state only slightly better than a hibernating bear. Goodsky was a silver core wind mage, which might be enough for us to fly back...

Still, I realized, the three of us would probably be wiped out. On our way here, the two Lances had constantly released a strong killing intent to ward off any beasts—and even then, they had been cautious enough at times to hide our presence. It would be near suicidal to try to simply fly over the entire Beast Glades.

I clicked my tongue in frustration. Despite what felt like hours deliberating

with myself, I was no closer to an answer. It was impossible after all. The more I tried to plan for our escape, the harder it became to push down the creeping sensation of hopelessness, so I rolled over on the cold floor to try and get some sleep.

BLAINE GLAYDER

"What the hell was that, Glayder? I thought we had an agreement," Dawsid barked after slamming the door of my study.

"Yes. I am well aware of our agreement. Rest assured, you will have my, and my wife's, vote, Dawsid. However, even you cannot make me spout such irrational accusations at the boy who has just saved the entire future generation of this continent, including my children," I responded icily, pouring myself a glass of aged liquor.

"And I'm saying that there will be no future generation if you do not side with me! Arthur and his bond have to go. That was the agreement. They have to be brought back to Him if we hope to have a future on this continent."

"I know what the stakes are, Dawsid. I do not need you badgering me every moment you feel insecure," I hissed. "What you and I are doing is betraying the entire population, you realize that, yes?" I stared at the dwarf. Though I was seated and he was standing, our eyes were almost level.

"It's not betrayal if the continent is already bound for annihilation. Blaine, you and I both know what's going to happen to Dicathen, whether we try to save it or not. We have to look beyond that and try to salvage what's important to us," he said consolingly, making a placating gesture.

"If that's what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night, go ahead. What we're doing is abandoning our people so we can save our own asses," I scoffed, shaking my head.

"That is what I tell myself! What He promised isn't a bad deal. My family will all live and serve Him, and so will yours, if you follow through."

"And what of our people, Dawsid? What will He do with the citizens of

Dicathen? If even the kingdoms of Sapin and Darv aren't safe after we promised allegiance to Him, what will happen to Elenoir?"

"Bah! The elves have always been too old-fashioned and righteous for their own good. We could have convinced Alduin to side with Him if not for that old geezer Virion butting in. It's a shame—but, unlike us, the elves don't realize what being a leader truly means. Just imagine, Blaine, the technology, the riches that He and His people will bring to Dicathen! Immortality, unrivaled martial strength, infinite wealth—it will no longer be just a fantasy for us. It's only a matter of time."

"Mind your words. I am following Him for the sake of my family. Do not lump me together with the likes of you, abandoning your own race for the sake of personal gain. I'm sure you can imagine what He will most likely do once He arrives. What will become of the rest of the three races? Either a genocide of some form, or, if He's smart, He'll make them all His slaves."

Dawsid was rendered speechless by my response; his mouth moved as if he was trying to refute my argument, but no audible words came out.

"Nevertheless, my wife's love for our children seems to heavily outweigh her concern for the entire human kingdom, and my duty to preserve the Glayder blood will always triumph, so rest assured, we will side with you. Hopefully my ancestors will forgive my actions—this is the only way to save the Glayder line." I sighed in defeat.

Dawsid lifted his hand as if to pat my shoulder, but I gave him a sharp look. Feigning a dry cough, he excused himself, leaving me to my own dark thoughts in the silence of my study. I stared blankly at the extravagantly decorated room, furnished with rare wood carved by master carpenters, embellished with rare gems and metals worth more than a small town, and a sense of dread and guilt began surfacing in my stomach.

These luxuries meant nothing to me. All my life, all I had wanted was to be the strongest mage in Dicathen—to make my father and my ancestors proud. Yet it was blatantly obvious that my talent as a mage was subpar compared to

even countryside peasants. Only through spending an enormous amount of resources on mana strengthening elixirs and aids had I been able—barely—to break into the red stage. I caught myself harboring feelings of scathing envy, even toward my own wife and children.

I had always been ashamed of this but there was little else I could do. Even having control over the two Lances did not help my feelings of inferiority. Instead, it was a daily reminder that I needed to be guarded at all times in order to properly rule over my own people, because I wasn't strong enough to fend for myself.

Was I truly making this decision for the safety of my family and myself? Or did I, like Dawsid, hunger and yearn for power incomparable to other mages? The safety of my loved ones was what made me take action, but the more I dwelled on it, the more excited I grew at the prospect of gaining strength, of being at the pinnacle of my abilities. I thought of how my people would fear and respect me for my own power, instead of the Lances I controlled. My true motives and intentions became more and more blurry the more I thought upon it.

After an hour of alcohol-fueled contemplation, I realized that no amount of drink could wash this miserable feeling away. I stumbled over my own feet and toppled to the ground. I lost my grip on the glass I was holding; hitting the floor an instant before I did, it shattered. The shards embedded themselves into the arm I used to break my fall. I could only curse in frustration at my own ineptitude. How pathetic was I—stumbling around, being cut by mere glass. Had I been born more talented, more powerful...

I picked myself up—ignoring the bloodstains on the floor, leaving the shards of glass in my bleeding arm—and staggered to my bedroom. I could smell the stench of liquor in my breath as I sighed deeply.

Memories of when I had first met the boy flashed in my mind as I trudged toward the door to my room, which now seemed so far away. Even before my children started speaking about Arthur from school, he had left a deep impression, enough for me to see him as a figure of great importance in the future. Perhaps the only thing greater than his strength as a mage was his poor luck in being involved in this conspiracy.

"I'm sorry, boy," I mumbled under my breath. "I would like to believe that it is for the good of this continent that you become a sacrifice." Even as I said the words, they sounded empty to my ears. I had hoped saying it aloud would provide some sort of reassurance, but what I felt for Arthur wasn't grief or sympathy.

It was stronger than the feelings of a king sacrificing for the greater good—even stronger than the weight of a Glayder trying to keep his bloodline alive. I felt the soothing sensation of my dark envy being resolved with the death of this boy.

I loathed myself for this, but what of it? I was Blaine Glayder, fourth of the name, yet my talents as a mage didn't amount to even a single drop compared to the ocean that was Arthur Leywin. Why should that boy of no origin carry a power that was better fit for me?

I unlocked the door and wobbled unsteadily, brushing off the maids who rushed to help me.

"I'm sorry, boy," I mumbled again. "It is for the greater good... for my greater good."

VISITORS

ARTHUR LEYWIN

The silhouette grew larger—an enormous castle, shrouded in darkness—but whether I was approaching the castle or the castle was moving toward me, I had no idea. As the shape drew closer, I was gradually able to make out the details: the fluttering house flag at the top of the highest tower, the splendid fountain carved with intricate features, the high gates with sharp spikes and barbed wire.

Little by little, the shadows concealing the castle receded, exposing more of its exterior. I could see the image of a flaming phoenix on the house flag and crows gathering atop the gate. However, a horrendous feeling began creeping up my back the closer I drew. When I finally arrived below the towering gates, I locked eyes with a particularly grotesque crow. It regarded me for a few seconds, then let out a caw and resumed its meal.

What was it eating?

I couldn't see from the bottom of the gate, but for some reason, I felt the need to know what the birds were eating.

This unrelenting urge to find out...

I began climbing up the gate, ignoring the spikes from the barbed wire that dug into my hands. The higher I climbed, the more crows gathered at the top of the gate, joining in the feast. At some point, I became so shrouded in crow feathers that I could only see black. I roared for them to disappear, but no

sound came out. Despite the silence of my shriek, the flock dispersed, and I saw what they had been so eagerly consuming.

The decapitated heads of Tessia and my family were impaled on black spikes. There were chunks of flesh missing from their faces. Without their eyelids, their half-eaten, milky eyes seemed to stare distantly, and their lipless mouths hung open.

As I reached out to remove their heads from the spikes they were skewered on, their gazes all suddenly focused on me and they screamed at me, revealing hundreds of writhing insects that had burrowed inside their mouths. "All your fault!" The sudden volume of their voices made me lose my grip on the gate, and I plummeted downward as their lifeless eyes continued to stare at me.

I bolted up from the stone ground I had been lying on. Cold sweat had already drenched my clothes, and I sat there heaving for breath.

It was just a dream...

I stared down at my hands and saw that they were trembling. As I tried to control my breathing, an unfamiliar voice startled me to my feet.

I whipped my body toward the sound, only to find myself staring at a darkened figure in the corner of my cell.

She stepped out toward me, and I was able to see her more clearly.

"Do not speak," the woman said quietly, but her mouth wasn't moving. The soothing timbre of her voice tickled my ear.

It dawned on me that I recognized the woman. I had caught a glimpse of her earlier today; then as now, she was covered in a cloak that hid her appearance. *The second elven Lance, Aya*.

What surprised me most was the fact that, despite how close she was to me, I wasn't able to sense her mana presence at all. It reminded me of when Virion released the second stage of his beast form, but it seemed as natural as breathing for her.

"I bring you a message from King Eralith," she whispered, leaning close to

me as she handed me a piece of paper.

I immediately unfolded it and began to read.

Dear Arthur,

While explanations and apologies for the recent events concerning the disaster at Xyrus Academy are in order, I fear the scale of this incident is much deeper and more sinister than what it appears to be on the surface.

You do not have much time. In a few hours, the Council will declare you and Cynthia Goodsky the perpetrators of the act of terrorism that befell Xyrus. Director Goodsky will be sentenced to public execution; you and your bond will be imprisoned. I'm sorry I cannot help you more in this matter; my voice simply cannot overcome the unified front of the dwarves and humans.

What I'm about to tell you next is something that was not meant for my ears. I have yet to find all of the missing pieces, but I overheard an exchange between King Glayder and Dawsid—they are planning to deliver you to someone. I do not know who, but it seems to be the only reason they're keeping you alive and intact. I have already sent my father, along with a few escorts, to take your family to a hidden location where they'll be safe from those who wish to do your family harm or use them against you. Think of it as a small compensation for all you've done for Tessia. I hope this at least gives you some ease of heart.

My apologies, as this is all I can do for you for now. Even if my Lance could free you from your cell, once you stepped outside the other Lances would be notified. Stay strong and be firm.

Alduin Eralith

As soon as I folded the letter, it crumbled to ashes between my fingers. When I looked back up, expecting to see the Lance, she was no longer there, having disappeared as quietly as she had arrived.

I had to admit that a heavy burden had been lifted from my chest. The safety of my family had been a concern for me the entire time. Considering the information Windsom had passed on and the Council's behavior since our first meeting, I had begun to question the possibility of the Vritra playing a part in all of this. However, now that the Council had decided on the public execution of Director Goodsky, I was almost certain that the Vritra were involved.

I had originally suspected the Wykes house of retaliating against me for killing Lucas by somehow tilting the odds against my favor; they were a family of wealth and high influence, after all. But the Wykes family had no reason for involving the Director of Xyrus Academy. Even though Goodsky wasn't from an influential family, her name bore weight all over the continent. The Wykes family alone wouldn't be able to influence the Council enough to make them do something as rash as condemning her to public execution. Even if shifting the blame to Goodsky would ease some of the burden the Council faced from the public, her death wouldn't be worth it...

Unless there was a third party involved, calling the shots, either bribing or

I let out another deep breath as I sat down, remembering how I had refused to grow attached to anyone in my past life because I didn't want any weaknesses. Shaking my head to try and disperse the thoughts, I leaned my back against the cold wall. I couldn't dwell on my past life. If I hoped to spend much more time in this life, I needed a plan.

"Get up!" a sharp baritone voice snapped.

forcing the Council.

My eyes fluttered open at the abrupt bellow and clanging of the metal gate. Rolling to my stomach, I pushed myself up and stretched. My bones were aching from sleeping on the hard stone floor.

I expected to see Olfred, since he was the one who had brought me to the cell, but instead I was greeted by Bairon's happy face—and by 'happy,' I meant a scowl of impatience, laced with a hatred for my very existence, written on his face. I couldn't blame him, since I had been the one to kill his

younger brother, but I sensed that Lucas' death wasn't the only reason for Bairon's blatant animosity.

"The Council is waiting." Bairon spoke sharply, opening the gate. He grabbed my arm roughly and half dragged me out of my cell after binding my arms.

"Good morning to you as well. I see you're not much of a morning person," I quipped, trying to keep myself from falling as he jerked at my arm.

The Lance said nothing in response, though his cold glare spoke volumes. As we made our way toward the exit, I noticed that the cell Director Goodsky had been held in was open.

I tried communicating with Sylvie as I was jerked along through the castle corridors, but there was no response—only silence.

We arrived in front of a different room than yesterday's; the large double doors, towering high enough to admit giants, were closed, with muffled sounds coming from the other side.

"You don't know how much I'm looking forward to the trial," Bairon said, his jaw tensing as his grip on my arm became even tighter. "Don't worry, though, I'll be sure to treat your family with the same care you showed mine." The Lance turned to me, his lip curling upward in a smirk, just enough to reveal his sharp canines.

Had I not received the letter last night, I might've actually been worried. But I knew my family was safely hidden and that, for now, the Council needed me alive and intact, so his empty threats didn't mean much.

"Are you honestly trying to pick a fight with a thirteen-year-old?" I shook my head, using my best expression of disappointment.

A sharp tug lifted me from the ground, and suddenly I was face to face with Bairon. "I don't think you understand what's about to happen to you right now. You're going to either end up dead or wishing you *had* died, while your little dragon is going to become a prized pet for one of the kings. You think this only affects you? I'll make sure your family and anyone you even

remotely care about faces a miserable death," he said, spittle flying into my face.

"Yes, yes, the great Lance Bairon is going to take vengeance for his lunatic younger brother—who chose to go to the dark side and kill innocent students—by tormenting the teenager who put him out of his misery—and killing his family too. All hail Lance Bairon!" I spoke in a monotone, but my voice was dripping with sarcasm.

I could see his right hand ball up into a fist, but he just clicked his tongue in disgust, then tossed me back to the floor with enough force to send me rolling toward the tall double doors. Dusting myself off as best I could with my arms tied in front of me, I remained seated, leaning my head back on the doors as I gave Bairon a wink.

Either Bairon didn't see or he chose to ignore me. Just as I was about to say something, I heard faint sounds coming from the other side of the doors. After assimilating with Sylvia's dragon will, my entire body had been strengthened, including my senses and reflexes. I wouldn't be able to last more a few minutes against a Lance without my magic, but my hearing was strong enough to vaguely make out some familiar voices inside the protected room.

I felt I could safely assume the person on trial was Director Goodsky, and it seemed the Council was almost done with their sentencing.

The last statement, in Dawsid's booming voice, rang particularly loud.

After a moment of silence, the tall doors against which I was leaning suddenly swung inward without so much as a creak, and I tipped backward. Looking up from the floor, I spotted the guard who had admitted Varay, Olfred, and me during the first Council meeting. He regarded us without any emotion. "The Council is ready," he said, shifting his gaze from me to

[&]quot;...perpetrator of..."

[&]quot;...refusal to answer..."

[&]quot;...sentenced to public execution."

Bairon.

As I picked myself up, I was able to lock eyes with the former director of Xyrus Academy as she was escorted out by two guards.

Her gaze was firm but her jaw was tensed with suppressed anger as she passed me by.

Keeping my expression deadpan and unreadable, I trudged toward the Council, studying each of their faces.

Wordlessly, I sat on the single chair and waited for them to start. Bairon moved to stand behind Blaine Glayder, and, as the double doors shut with a loud thud, the room was filled with an eerie silence.

The dwarf king was the first to speak, his eyes glued to a stack of papers he had begun shuffling through. "Boy, let it be known that the Council is merciful. Even though your heinous actions against a fellow schoolmate would normally result in at least the incapacitation of your mana core, we have agreed that since your actions were for the sake of the greater good, your sentencing will instead be as follows: Arthur Leywin is to be stripped of his previous title as a mage, and of all benefits that come with that title. He is to be imprisoned until further notice." Dawsid spoke grandly, as if he believed he was being benevolent.

There was a brief silence; I suspected the dwarf king was waiting for me to shower him with gratitude and flattery. Finally he spoke again.

"Is there anything you would like to say?"

"Just a few questions... Your Majesty. While my first punishment is clear enough, what do you mean by 'imprisoned until further notice'?" I tilted my head.

"Over the next few weeks, we'll be monitoring how the disaster at Xyrus Academy plays out concerning the victims and their families. As soon as we see that enough time has passed and the memories of your actions have dissipated from the public mind, we will release you. Think of it as a sort of provisional detention, instead of imprisonment," Blaine explained, mustering

up a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I see. Fair enough, I suppose. And what of my bond?" I asked.

"The Council is being kind enough to let you live, yet you ask for more?" Glaundera snapped, banging her thick palm on the raised desk.

"That is another issue, Arthur. Losing your rights as a mage means that you will no longer be able to keep your bond." It was Alduin who spoke up to tell me this. Had it been anyone else, I might have reacted differently, but reading the subtle intonations in his words, I knew he was only trying to keep me from trouble.

Our eyes locked for a few seconds, then I forced a stiff nod.

"I understand, Your Majesties."

"Good. Bairon, take him back to his cell but keep him chained up." Blaine waved us away. I studied the expressions of each Councilmember one last time. While Blaine looked more self-assured than he had during yesterday's trial, his wife was still pale with guilt. Alduin and Merial wore stoic expressions, their faces like masks. The dwarves were both looking down at me with haughty, self-satisfied smirks, and in that moment I was certain that they were the ones involved with the Vritra.

I could tell Bairon was furious, but he stayed silent throughout the trip back to my cell. I decided it was best not to antagonize him in his current state, so I remained mute as well.

I had expected to be taken back to the same cell I was in before, but instead I was brought to a different holding place, with an actual bed and toilet. The accommodations weren't terrible, if one ignored the bars. It was like a very secure room in a very cheap inn.

After tossing me inside, with a bit more strength than necessary, the Lance left. My arms were still chained together in front of me and the artifact was still embedded into my chest, limiting my abilities.

Without any windows, I couldn't tell how many hours had passed or whether it was night or day, but I sat there patiently. Eventually I heard the sound of

soft footsteps approaching.

"It seems you were expecting me," the voice sighed.

My lips curled upward as I gazed upon a strikingly familiar face.

"About damn time, Windsom."

CHESS PIECES

DAWSID GREYSUNDERS

I pursed my lips, trying to contain the laughter building up inside me. "Cheers, my love; the madness will soon be coming to an end." I held up my goblet as I leaned forward.

"Cheers." My wife smiled back, touching my glass with hers to make a hollow *clink*.

Leaning back in a leather armchair much too big for me, I relished the dry taste of fermented fruits, which had cost as much as a small house. Admiring the extravagant rings on each of my fingers, sparkling in the candlelight, I couldn't help but smile widely.

"Just think, Glaundera. After this, no longer will our people be stuck in holes at the bottom of this continent. With His new rule, we, along with our people, will be there to serve directly beneath Him. Dwarves will no longer need to be tools—slaving away, forging weapons for the humans. We will be the chosen race that will lead this underdeveloped continent into a new era alongside Him." I sighed.

"Was He really that powerful, dear? You're the only one who has had direct communication with this being. What was He like?" My wife leaned her head on her arm, getting comfortable.

"It was nothing like I'd ever imagined. I've fought my share of mana beasts, when I was younger. Unlike the old dwarves who stick to their traditions, I

carried no pride in the weapons that I had built. What satisfaction is there in watching someone mindlessly swing the weapon you poured your blood and sweat into crafting? No, the only weapon I ever finished, I made for myself. With my war axe, Full Cleave, I slew hundreds of mana beasts of all classes. There were some that could send shivers straight down my spine with just a passing glance, while others could petrify even the strongest of mages with a glare." I took another sip from my glass. "Yet when He first made Himself known to me, I couldn't breathe. My head felt like it was being pounded by hammers, and my whole body stung as if each pore were being stabbed by needles. I've lingered at the gates of death countless times, but nothing ever made me so fearful."

Looking down at my hands, I saw that they were trembling. "I truly felt I was facing a god. I had this overwhelming notion that He didn't need me in order to achieve His goals, yet He was giving me this chance. He chose us, my love. He chose us," I whispered.

"I believe you, my dear. Tell me again what He has promised us when He assumes control of Dicathen." My wife scooted next to me, cuddling against my arm as her large hands wrapped around my waist.

"He promised us everything we could ever hope for: vast wealth, magical abilities beyond comprehension, more people to serve us—and best of all, an eternity to enjoy it all. Glaundera, I can finally swing Full Cleave once more. No longer will this crippled body of mine hinder me," I said, my voice growing louder as I became more excited.

"That's wonderful, my dear. Truly, being on the Council is hindering your full potential," my wife cooed as she rubbed my belly.

I leaned further back, enjoying her touch. "Hah! We three kings have a joke we share with one another—that the three kings of this generation all lack talent and potential as mages. We call it the Dicathen Kings' Complex. Screw them! Unlike the other two, I was once a great mage—an orange core mage at my prime. And I would have soared to even greater heights if it weren't for

that—that damned incident that left me in this pitiful state."

I had never told my wife that the 'incident' had occurred because I'd had some fun with a peasant girl. I unconsciously licked my lips as I recalled that night.

It would have been a lot more enjoyable if she hadn't been screaming so loudly.

I didn't know how her husband found out, but he had been crafty enough to get me alone, even using his own wife as bait. Of course, I ended up killing them both to hide my little secret, but not before he had managed to land a wound on me that would forever cripple my mana core. "Curse them! They should have just quietly accepted their fate—in fact, they should've seen it as an honor," I spat. For having put me in such a pathetic state, even being tortured and killed wasn't enough punishment.

"Dear, hush! The dwarves all respect you and you know that," my wife scolded gently, snapping me out of my bitter memories.

"Respect? Bah, bull testicles! They all grudgingly obey me because of the two Lances I have in my possession. I can feel it. Their eyes when they look at me, I know what they're thinking: 'Why is such a weak dwarf leading us?' 'He was just born lucky. He doesn't deserve the crown and Lances.'"

"Then we can kill all those who once looked down on you, simple as that. And you will do it with your own two fists." My wife moved her hand up, stroking my beard with her thick fingers as she looked up at me, her soothing smile accentuating her powerful square jaw. "You forgot one thing, though." "Of course. He also promised us fertility. We will finally be able to have sons

and daughters of our own to carry on the Greysunders bloodline. In fact, why not see if He has already blessed us?" I put down my wine glass and shifted my body to face my wife. As I looked deep into her dirt-brown eyes, I dug underneath her clothes to feel her warm, coarse skin. I could feel her shudder at my touch as I continued softly rubbing her back, slowly reaching lower and lower.

Her eyes closed in pleasure, and I used my other hand to untie her thin gown. When I slipped my hand underneath her top, she gasped in surprise at the chill of my fingers on her firm exposed bosom.

I slipped off her gown to reveal her defined shoulders, smiling at the mesmerizing sight. I'd never understood the tastes of human and elf men, wanting thin women. A real woman should have muscles like these.

My wife inched closer impatiently as I took my sweet time undressing her, coaxing her as I spread her legs—

Bang!

The door to our room slammed open to reveal my guard, who had been stationed outside, looking wide-eyed at us.

"What is the meaning of this!" I roared. "How dare you barge in without—" Like a wooden plank, the guard leaned forward and dropped to the ground without a word. I sprang up from our intimate embrace as I realized there was a hole through his back where his heart should've been.

He was dead.

"My greetings, Greysunders." A cold, hoarse voice filled my ears. I took a step back, and could see my wife quickly redressing, fumbling as she got off the couch.

"How dare you barge into this room? Do you know who I am?" I screamed, fear filling the very depths of my soul as I stared at the figure. I couldn't make out his features in the shadows where he stood.

"Of course," he answered evenly. "You two are an infestation, which I have come to remove."

A light flashed toward us, but a wall of molten lava intercepted it just in time to stop the intruder's attack. Still, I could taste the blood that trickled down from the tip of my nose into my mouth from the glowing needle that my Lance's magic had barely stopped in time.

"Ol-Olfred! How could you let someone just barge into my room?" As I stumbled backward, my firm rebuke to my Lance ended up sounding much

more like a frightened whimper.

"My apologies, Your Majesties. I do not know how he managed to get in, but I have notified Mica as well. The intruder will not be leaving," my Lance stated. Even as he gave my wife and me a curt bow, his eyes never left the shadowed figure.

Mica was the second Lance under my command. Though she wasn't as obedient as Olfred, her skill as a mage was enough to make me lenient toward her.

"Good, good. Take care of that intruder right now! I want him alive if possible." I pointed my finger at the figure, hoping my wife couldn't see that how fiercely it trembled.

"I seek only the Greysunders' heads. Needless bloodshed is not my desire," the voice said coolly.

I backed up against the wall involuntarily when he spoke. For some reason he left me feeling terrified—but with Olfred here and Mica on her way, I told myself I had nothing to worry about.

"Unfortunately, the only thing *I* seek is *your* head," Olfred hissed, his limbs becoming engulfed in flames as he manifested mana into them.

The bright flames my Lance emitted as he dashed toward the intruder revealed the latter's features, but knowing whom I was facing did not quell the fear inside me. Instead, it made me even more horrified.

He was elderly, his long white hair tied tightly into a ponytail, flowing down like a stream of liquid pearl. Yet, despite his age, he stood poised, his hands elegantly placed behind his straight back. Both of his eyes were closed, bringing further emphasis to the third, unblinking eye in his forehead, which glowed a radiant purple.

"Magma Knights," Olfred rumbled, his voice barely a whisper. Five soldiers made of magma were instantly conjured, rising from the floor at the intruder's feet. However, before they could even reach for the elderly intruder, he moved his arm with a faint blur and they crumbled into pieces.

Olfred conjured more magma knights, but no sooner did they arise than they were just as quickly diced into little pieces by a movement too fast for my eyes.

"Bestow upon me," Olfred chanted through gritted teeth, "Hell's Armor."

My Lance's body completely erupted into dark crimson flames as he approached the intruder. As the flames subsided, I could see the exquisite armor made of magma that encased Olfred. Glowing red runes intricately covered the armor, and a cape of billowing fire flowed down his back.

"Ha! This is what you get for being so arrogant. Die!" I cheered maniacally. A crazed smile formed on my face as I prepared to watch my Lance destroy the intruder who had left me so pathetically afraid and helpless.

Olfred's first blow landed squarely on the intruder's face, and even the wall behind him was decimated from the shockwave. My fist clenched in excitement as I waited to see the bloody mush the man's face should have now become.

However, as the dust cloud faded, I felt my mouth drop open with shock. The intruder's face was intact and unblemished, yet Olfred's armored arm had snapped in two, his fist reduced to a bloody pulp. I could see splinters of white bone protruding from his knuckles.

"You have admirable skills, for a lesser being. Your powers may prove useful for the future of this continent, but right now, you are only an irritant." As the intruder spoke, he manifested a thin, glowing blade from the tip of his finger. His next movement was so quick it seemed as if he had teleported, but he was simply moving at such a monstrous speed that my eyes couldn't comprehend. The intruder blinked a few feet over to where Olfred stood on guard, and the tip of his glowing saber gently touched the center of my Lance's armored chest.

"Break."

The Hell's Armor, one of the highest-ranking fire-attribute defensive spells, shattered into dust. Blood spewed from Olfred's mouth as he was flung

across the room and into the wall I was backed up against.

I could only stare blankly at the scene. A shiver ran down my back as I felt the intruder's unblinking eye on me.

My throat was too dry to even swallow, let alone speak. As I glanced at the trembling figure of my wife, an earth-shattering sound made me whip my head back.

"Hello, King and Queen. Mica is sorry she's late!" chirped a familiar voice from within the cloud of dust.

"Mica! Your king was almost killed! Hurry up and dispose of that man," I sputtered, holding onto my wife.

Mica was an anomaly amongst dwarves. She didn't have any of the usual traits that would make a dwarf lady attractive. She was short but thin, with pale creamy skin instead of the usual bronze skin that was so admired.

Her features gave her the appearance of a feeble human child, her slightly pointed ears the only indication that she was really a dwarf. Despite her unimpressive appearance, her abilities in gravity manipulation were monstrous. She wielded a giant mace more than three times her size and was able to easily control the weight of anything within a certain radius.

As the dust cloud dissipated, I could see that the intruder had completely dodged Mica's surprise attack.

"Another annoyance." The intruder's voice sounded a bit more put out this time, but that might have just been my imagination. Before he could make his way toward me, the ground crumbled around him and my Lance.

"Welcome to Mica's world. Don't die!" Mica giggled as she easily swung her giant morningstar.

"Excellent gravity manipulation." The intruder nodded as he approached Mica. I could tell she was caught off guard that her opponent could so easily walk toward her, each of his steps creating a deep imprint as the floor tiles cracked from the increased gravity.

Even with my life in danger, a nagging feeling of jealousy ran thickly

through me. *This* was what I desired—the power to fight like this; to be at the apex of strength and magical capabilities.

"How can you move so easily? Your body weighs more than four tons!" Mica hissed as she slowly retreated, maintaining a careful distance from him.

"Is that your limit?" the man asked.

"Huh?" my Lance responded. She hadn't expected a question.

"It seems it is."

"What limits? Mica has no limits," she yelled as she jumped up for her final attack. She imbued more mana into her weapon, and I could see slight ripples in the space around it from the distortion of gravity. "Eat this!"

Her mace swung down with enough force, I suspected, to bring this entire castle to the ground. But the intruder simply lifted a single finger in response, effortlessly stopping the monstrous strike.

A wave of hopelessness overcame me. Despite the extent of my Lance's power, I knew she couldn't win.

I scrambled to my feet. I can't die here. I need to escape.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of light as the intruder manifested a glowing blade that pierced through Mica. I could see no wound where she had been slashed, but it must have done something to her; she fell to the floor with the whites of her eyes visible, her mace crashing heavily onto the ground.

That useless brat couldn't even provide me with enough time to escape.

The intruder turned to face my wife and me with his thin glowing blade.

Glaundera shrieked, and pointed a finger menacingly at the figure. "You don't know who you're messing with! My husband will soon be the new right hand of Agrona of the Vritra, an almighty deity—"

"Shut up!" I hissed, striking her in the face before she could finish.

"Asura. There are no deities in this world, only asuras," the man corrected as he slowly approached us.

"P-please, have mercy—spare me, O great one." I could feel a spreading

warmth between my legs as I fell to my knees and begged.

"Do you want to live?" he asked as his single eye looked down at me.

"Yes! Please! I'll do anything," I pleaded, trying to wrap my head around the situation at hand. Who, in this continent, could possibly dispose of a white core mage so easily?

"I see Agrona failed to choose his pawns with proper caution," he continued, his voice filled with contempt.

"Please, I've never even met Him. He only called out to me, threatening to kill my wife and my people if I didn't obey. I—I beg you. This was all against my will," I pleaded, prostrating myself on my hands and knees as my forehead touched the warm puddle of my own piss.

"Very well. Release the two Lances in your possession from the oath," he commanded, his voice even and cold.

"R-release?" I stuttered.

"Yes. Is that a problem?" His single eye narrowed.

"No, of course not." I took off the artifact that I always kept around my neck and imbued my mana signature into it. As I released the oath, blood dribbled from the corners of my mouth.

I had been instructed by my father to never undo the oath—that it could and should never be released. However, my life was at stake.

Olfred and Mica glowed a faint red, indicating that the artifact's binding had been released, and I looked back at the intruder.

"There. I did it."

"Good. They were unfortunate to have such a poor master, but they will be useful pieces in the upcoming war," he responded, nodding as he looked at the two Lances.

"Now please... please let me go." I hated how weak and desperate my voice sounded.

"I'm sorry, did I say I would let you go?" As I looked up, there was a change in his expression; for the first time, a small smirk formed on his face.

I tried responding but my voice has been taken from me. Instead of words, blood gurgled from my throat. Instinctively, I reached for the wound I hadn't felt but I knew must be there, and my numb fingers plunged into a gaping, wet hole where my throat should have been. As my vision faded, I forced my gaze from the intruder toward my wife. She was staring back at me with wide, disbelieving eyes, reaching desperately for me. Her thin gown bloomed red with her lifeblood, which gushed from a hole in her chest. The last thing I saw before my eyes went dark was my love's still-beating heart.

In the darkness, I could feel a cold hand grasping my soul, pulling me away from my body.

"Let the game of chess begin." The intruder's words echoed from afar as my consciousness drifted toward whichever level of hell the hand decided to take me.

PECULIAR CONGREGATION

ARTHUR LEYWIN

An expression of ever-so-slight amusement reached Windsom's raised brow and sharp eyes. The asura, still wearing a military-esque uniform with a trim, side-swept hairstyle to match, held out my bond.

"Sylvie!" I exclaimed. I bolted up from my seat but was extra careful as I lifted her from Windsom's hand. Upon careful inspection, there were no visible wounds on her body, and by her rhythmic breathing, it seemed that she was simply asleep.

With a relieved sigh, I carefully placed my sleeping dragon on my head before regarding the asura standing before me.

"Thank you." I gave him a meaningful nod, and he responded with a look like a parent might give to a child who had misbehaved.

"I knew you were rash, but to think you would get yourself and Lady Sylvie caught so soon—and by allies of the Vritra no less," he reprimanded me.

"To be fair, I was saving the academy from the Vritra." I half shrugged, as if that would validate my actions.

"You need to understand that your and Lady Sylvie's safety should take precedence for now."

"Windsom, there were people inside that academy whose lives I consider more important than my own." My face grew stern, reflecting the resolve in my voice. Windsom regarded me for a moment before speaking again. "Was it for the elf princess?" he asked, as if he already knew the answer.

"It wasn't just for her," I said defensively, my voice coming out a lot less confident than I had wanted.

"No matter," the asura sighed. "What's done is done. But what I do not understand is why the perpetrator of the incident took your friend Elijah with him."

"I don't know either." I was at a loss as well. No matter how many times I had pondered it in my cell, I couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation.

"I don't know," I repeated. "But I need you to help us out here, Windsom. I need to find out where they took Elijah and—"

"And what? Save him?" the asura cut in, his deep-set eyes cold and penetrating. "You can't escape from this place, but you think you have the ability to save him?" After releasing a deep breath, he lowered his voice and continued. "But I do know roughly where the man named Draneeve took your friend."

"Really? Where?" I grabbed his sleeve unthinkingly.

"After investigating the artifact left at Xyrus Academy, I suspect it was a teleportation device that Draneeve used to escape with your friend Elijah—as well as the device he used to..."

"...to get here," I finished the sentence, a feeling of dread growing inside me.

"They took Elijah back to Alacrya, didn't they?"

"Most likely," he replied, his voice cold.

I slumped back against the wall, staring at my feet. Neither of us spoke for a while.

"Windsom, I was going to suggest that I follow Elijah to Alacrya in the hopes that he is still alive so I can save him. You would then probably respond by telling me that I shouldn't even dream of it since I'd get killed as soon as I set foot in Alacrya..." I looked back at him and it dawned on me that this was a truly rare moment; I had no answer. "So what do I do?"

"Well, I wouldn't say you'd die as *soon* as you set foot there." The asura smiled slightly, a hint of empathy evident in his usually cold voice. "But yes, it would be suicide. Luckily, the pawn the Vritra clan sent left before you arrived; otherwise they would be much more wary of you. As of now, they hold enough interest in you that they want you in their possession, alive—but if they find out that you actually have Lady Sylvia's innate will as well as her daughter, I'm afraid even the asuras will have a hard time keeping the two of you safe."

"What am I to do then? Just give up on my best friend?" I countered. "I calculated the possibility of receiving aid from the elf king, and I knew you'd help us escape, but even so, there wouldn't be a safe place for us to stay. Considering that the Council is working for the Vritra, I would either have to stay where my family is hiding, or burrow somewhere deep within the Beast Glades.

"If I stayed hidden with my family, I wouldn't be able to train without revealing my mana signature to the Lances, which would endanger both my family and Tessia's. In order to benefit from hiding out in the Beast Glades, I'd have to make my way to the deepest, most dangerous areas, which means I'd be at risk from mana beasts and may not survive any longer than if I just charged off to Alacrya." I thought of the roars of the giant mana beasts we had passed on our way to the castle, and how even the Lances were cautious enough not to brazenly charge through.

"You seem to have quite a good grasp on the situation at hand," the asura acknowledged, giving me a terse nod. "Have you discovered anything about the Council's connection with the Vritra?"

"Enough to reasonably suspect that the ones most closely connected to the Vritra were the Greysunders. The humans seemed to be favoring the opinion of the dwarves as well, but I have a hunch that they're reluctant," I said, thinking aloud.

"Impressive," Windsom admitted. Sliding back his left sleeve, the asura

looked at his watch. "Arthur, it is about time we—"

"Who are you?" a voice interrupted.

Both Windsom and I turned our heads toward the voice. It was Bairon.

"It seems he has finished taking care of things," Windsom muttered softly to himself.

"How did you get in here?" The Lance's eyes narrowed as his gaze flickered between the asura next to me and the supposedly locked-up dragon on top of my head. Despite how rash Bairon had acted with me, I realized that he was actually very cautious and level-headed under normal circumstances. He regarded Windsom with caution, not leaving any openings in his stance even though they were separated by a reinforced cage.

"I asked how you got in here," Bairon growled, his eyes glued on the mysterious visitor. "Are you with the other intruder?"

"Yes," Windsom replied indifferently, taking a step toward the Lance.

"Then no further explanation is necessary." Bairon raised his fist like a loaded cannon, and the gathered electricity crackled and popped around his arm.

I frantically jumped out of the way, knowing what was coming—he had launched a Flash Ray spell, and Windsom had forgotten to remove the artifact that was strapped to my chest and disabling my mana flow. If I were to get hit with that spell, there wouldn't even be ashes left to bury.

A condensed sphere of electricity shot from the Lance's fist, disintegrating the reinforced metal bars as if they were tissue. However, Windsom stayed glued in his position as the spell rapidly approached him.

I braced myself against the moment the ball of lightning would collide with the asura, but as Bairon's high-level magic reached Windsom, the asura simply reached up and caught the spell as if it were a rubber ball.

I'd known without a doubt that Windsom would be able to handle the attack, but even I hadn't expected it to be done so easily.

Crushing the orb of condensed lightning in his palm, he turned to me and

gave a flick of his head. "Looks like we have our way out."

I let out a snort of laughter, but before either of us could say anything else, Bairon had reached Windsom.

"Child, there is no longer a reason for you to fight me," Windsom said coolly as he easily dodged the barrage of lightning-imbued strikes and kicks. Unlike my own, Bairon's lightning magic seemed to mostly consist of external spells.

Bairon activated a Thunder Lance spell in the midst of his attacks, conjuring five spears made of lightning to stab at Windsom.

I had moved to the furthest wall of the cell to avoid the brunt of their fight, but as I watched, it looked to me like Windsom was actually... bored.

"Enough." Windsom gave a simple flick of his arm, which seemed slow in comparison to Bairon's rapid succession of attacks, and suddenly the Lance's face was buried in the ground. The entire cell shook as a spiderweb of cracks split the reinforced floor, Bairon's sunken head being the epicenter.

From catching his spell to burying his face, Windsom was doing a fine job of humiliating one of Dicathen's strongest mages.

"Heel," Windsom said impatiently as the Lance struggled to free his head from the ground. Although Bairon's face was scratched and a little bloody, he was otherwise unfazed.

"Bairon, stand down."

My ears perked up at the familiar voice. It was Varay, the female Lance who had caged Sylvie, and who was capable of going up against two Lances herself.

"I don't understand. He's with the intruder," Bairon said, turning to face his fellow Lance.

"He is a deity, not someone you can address so flippantly," Varay snapped back, her voice particularly cold. "My apologies, O great one. Our king humbly asks for your presence."

Despite knowing what Windsom was, it still stunned me to see Varay

actually bow to someone. By comparison, Bairon's look of confusion was pretty amusing.

"D-deity?" the Lance stuttered stupidly.

"Correct. And now that you know what I am, ignorance is no longer an excuse," Windsom answered, looking harshly at Bairon. "Bow."

From the way Bairon's head slammed into the ground again, it looked like Windsom had done something to forcibly make him kneel, but it was a pleasant sight to see nonetheless.

When he rose, Bairon very reluctantly broken my shackles and removed the artifact inhibiting my mana flow. Then we were led back to the room where my trial had taken place, but this time I wasn't chained.

A guard—not the same one as last time—opened the door for us, revealing the people inside the room.

"Welcome." King Blaine was the first to speak, rising from his chair. His complexion was almost sickly, as was Queen Priscilla's, and they sat around an oval table that hadn't been there previously.

Sitting adjacent to the human king and queen were Tessia's parents, Alduin and Meralith, along with their hooded Lance, who had delivered the note to me the night before. Both the king and queen of the elves acknowledged me with an uncomfortable greeting, but otherwise remained silent.

Also sitting at the table was Director Goodskey, who wore a baffled expression to complement her disheveled appearance.

When I locked eyes with the man sitting next to her, I instinctively leaped back on guard. All the hairs on my body stood on end and every fiber of my being begged for me to run away from the elderly man, who had an eye in the middle of his forehead.

"Arthur. It is all right," Windsom said soothingly.

I found it odd that the Greysunders weren't present, but the rest of the people in the room, except the one person I didn't know, rose from their seats and each gave a small, respectable bow to Windsom.

Acknowledging their gestures, he motioned for me to take a seat with him at the table. As I sat down next to him, I could feel the gears in my head turning, trying to make heads or tails of the situation at hand. Here I was, sitting alongside the Council and their Lances; Director Goodsky, who had been a prisoner sentenced to death; and a man whose identity I had no clue about.

There was a palpable tension in the room, enough to drive a normal person out in sweat and fear. I had placed Sylvie on my lap and was petting her when I heard someone rise from their seat.

To my surprise, it was the man I had instinctively wanted to escape from. He appeared to have three eyes, but two of them were closed. His white hair was tied back, reminding me of Virion when I had first met him.

"For those who do not know me"—the purple eye on his forehead focused on me—"I am Aldir. Windsom and I have been sent here to give you lesser beings a chance of survival in the imminent war with the Vritra," the asura continued without pause.

"So, just as we feared, there really will be a war." Alduin spoke aloud, as if simply voicing his thoughts.

"I have taken the first step of discarding the corrupted. My role here now is to oversee the remainder of what you lessers call 'the Council' and instruct you on the necessary preparations to fight against the continent of Alacrya."

As soon as the word 'corrupted' came out, both Blaine and Priscilla Glayder froze, and the blood drained from their faces.

"Y-your Majesty. If I may say something..." Blaine said weakly, and I thought something must have happened to make the king appear so meek. "You have clearly shown us your capabilities, enough so for me to believe that you are not of this realm. The difference in our abilities is vast enough that I am unsure why you would need us. Can't you simply go to the continent of Alacrya and defeat the Vritra?"

I leaned toward Windsom, whispering in his ear. "What did that other asura

mean by 'discarding the corrupted'?"

"The Greysunders have been eliminated and their Lances are now under my control," Aldir said, answering in Windsom's stead.

Everything made sense. It seemed the asura had killed the ones working directly for the Vritra, while leaving the Glayders with some sort of warning. That was why the human king and queen were such nervous wrecks.

"And as for your point, King Glayder: Yes, it would be simple enough to gather the asuras and personally fight against the Vritra. However, the Vritra clan, along with the three other clans that are under their command, were all former asuras who have broken our law. Even we can no longer calculate how much stronger they may have become. Moreover," Aldir continued as he faced the frightened king, "a battle of that magnitude would undoubtedly level the world. And that's me being conservative."

King Glayder responded with stunned silence as we all tried to imagine the ferocity of a battle that could sink continents.

Aldir continued speaking, "We asuras and the Vritra clan had agreed to a treaty where no higher beings can directly attack one another or interfere with any lesser beings. Instead—"

"Hold on," I cut in. "Doesn't the fact that you killed two 'lesser beings' contradict that?"

The asura's glowing purple eye narrowed as it peered at me, but after a brief moment, Aldir's lips curled into a smirk.

"Dicathen received no direct aid from us asuras, but is now up against a population governed directly by Agrona of the Vritra. Even with my actions, he wouldn't be rash enough to break the treaty in retaliation for us having simply evened out the playing field," Windsom answered in Aldir's stead.

"What of the black-horned demons that have been invading our land for years? One was even responsible for killing a Lance," I countered.

"You're talking about the owner of this fragment?" Director Goodsky held up a black shard, which had once belonged to the horned being that had killed Alea Triscan.

"Boy, I see it wasn't a lie when Windsom said you are not simple. The being responsible for killing the Lance, and the ones that have snuck into this continent, are not asuras. Those monsters were once lesser beings, such as yourself, that have gone through countless experiments," Aldir spat with obvious disgust.

"So there are monsters which are not asuras, but are still capable of destroying the strongest mages in Dicathen? Is it even possible for us to win?" Merial Eralith said, speaking for the first time.

"Yes, but they are limited—Agrona's precious trump card in this war. Now that he knows of my presence, he will not dispatch them as recklessly as before." Aldir sat back down, turning his body toward me.

"Think of me as a general in this upcoming war. It is in the asuras' best interest that we are able to defend this continent. Now, Windsom, isn't there something you and the boy have to do? I will take care of the rest here. We require significant preparation before we can defend ourselves."

Giving the three-eyed asura a nod, Windsom pulled me up, then led me and the sleeping Sylvie out of the room.

"Something we have to do, Windsom? Isn't it important that we participate in the discussion? Shouldn't we be in that room as well?" I asked as I followed the asura.

"That is not your fight. Aldir knows what he is doing, and will do his best to prepare you lessers for the imminent war. We need you to be stronger when that time comes, if you do not want to be useless."

"Makes sense. So what are we going to do?"

"First, we're going to visit your family. You will need to say your goodbyes to them." The asura's back was to me, and I was unable to determine whether he was joking or not.

"Goodbyes? What goodbyes? Where will I be going?" I pulled back on his arm, surprised when he turned around easily.

"I'm taking you and Lady Sylvie to the homeland of the asuras. Your training will be held in Epheotus."

THE GREAT EIGHT

"AM I allowed to know all this?" I asked, removing a sharp branch from my hair.

We were hiking through a familiar part of Elshire Forest; Windsom had teleported us nearby—a feat I hadn't even realized was possible. It had taken me only a few moments after arrival to recognize that I had been to this part of the forest before with the Eralith family; we were headed toward Elder Rinia's hideout.

"You have been given permission to stay in Epheotus, so you will figure it out sooner or later. Although it isn't necessary to memorize the information I've told you, it is always beneficial for one to know the local culture, mannerisms, and politics when in unfamiliar territory. Especially if you have to interact with the important figures of the place," Windsom advised, not bothering to turn around as he pushed branches and vines out of his way. "But I have a feeling you already know the importance of that."

"Of course," I smirked. "However, knowledge without understanding is but a sword stuck in its sheath. You've told me the *what*, Windsom, but you've yet to tell me the *why*."

"Very true," he admitted. "Do not worry, we'll get to that soon enough."

"Okay, so there are sev—no, eight races of asuras in Epheotus. Each race comprises multiple clans, but only one clan of each race is considered one of the High Eight?"

"The Great Eight," the asura corrected immediately.

"What race was the Vritra clan?" I had tried multiple times in the past to determine what sort of creatures the Vritra clan might be, with their horns and gray complexions, but nothing came to mind.

"The true form of the Vritra clan is that of a fearsome serpentine asura called the Basilisk. It will be good for you to take note of the races and clan names of the Great Eight."

"What became of the Basilisk race after the Vritra clan and other Basilisk clans' betrayal?" I pressed on, swatting a particularly annoying insect that seemed to think my ear would make a good resting spot.

"A lesser clan replaced the Vritra clan as one of the Great Eight, and some of the more radical races pushed to annihilate whatever remained of the Basilisks. Fortunately, the ties between the races reach far back in history; friends of the remaining Basilisk clans stood up for them. In the end, drastic measures such as genocide were never taken; it would be foolish for a whole race to bear the crimes of a few, after all."

I couldn't discern what Windsom was thinking as he told me all of this. The inflection and tone of his voice didn't match with his words, which sounded almost sardonic.

"I see..." I continued walking, my dirty boots crunching on fallen leaves and broken branches. "How were the Great Eight selected, anyway?"

"The clans of the Great Eight have almost never changed. For example, even though the Dragon race has the fewest number of clans, the Indrath clan, the clan of my master and Lady Sylvia, has been a part of the Great Eight since the beginning of our history. However, even to this day, the great clans are far stronger than the others. This is about the closest thing to an answer I can give you."

As we made our way toward Elder Rinia's hidden shelter, Windsom taught me the names I needed to know and then quizzed me on them. I was able to process most of the information fairly quickly, but my sleep-deprived and starved state took a toll on my ability to retain information.

"Anyway, not to complain, but couldn't you have brought us any closer? If you teleported us to Elshire Forest from an airborne castle in the middle of the Beast Glades, I'm sure you could've taken us a few miles farther."

"The home of the diviner where your family is currently taking refuge is surrounded by a fairly large barrier that I did not wish to agitate. Teleporting through it could cause a ripple in the barrier, which might give away the location of everyone inside."

"Ah... my apologies then. I'm just a little on edge," I responded, scratching my head.

We had just gone through the waterfall that hid the entrance to Elder Rinia's home when I spoke again. "So let me get this straight. Agrona, current head of the Vritra clan, led his race out of Epheotus to Alacrya, where he had been experimenting on the lesser races, and declared himself Eternal Ruler?"

"A rather tasteless title to give to oneself but, in essence, yes," the asura confirmed.

"Then this treaty that you talked about earlier—if the Vritra clan, and the other clans of the Basilisk race, are asuras, shouldn't they be forbidden from being directly involved in this upcoming war?" I asked, trying to keep track of how many turns we had taken in this maze of a tunnel.

"Yes, but that was never the problem." Windsom stopped walking and turned back toward me. "Arthur, didn't you ever once wonder why the asura races didn't just kill the Vritra clan and the clans following them? There are seven other races, after all."

"Of course I have, but didn't you say something about consequences that would affect the lesser races living in Alacrya?"

"I did, but what I have not told you was that the treaty was not our first course of action. After Agrona and his followers escaped, the Great Eight—excluding the Basilisk race—came together for the first time, regardless of factions, and their leaders formed an assembly. They decided to send a small

division of our elite warriors to quickly dispose of Agrona and his followers." Windsom paused for a moment, and although his level tone gave little away, it was clear that he was deliberating whether to express what was on his mind.

Eventually he let out a sigh and conjured a small barrier around us, which illuminated us with a gentle, rippling blue light. "Arthur, what I'm about to disclose must stay with you; this information is known only to a few members of the Indrath clan."

I nodded, locking eyes with Windsom as I waited for him to continue.

"Everyone in Epheotus believes that Lady Sylvia was somehow captured and held prisoner somewhere, but in truth she chose to go with the elite division tasked with killing Agrona Vritra and the clans that followed him."

"What?" I exclaimed, my voice coming out a lot louder than I had meant it to. "How does that make sense? She went on a mission into enemy territory without knowing what to expect? That's basically suicidal. There's no way Sylvia's father would have let her go."

"Of course Lord Indrath didn't *allow* her to go," Windsom growled. "What I'm saying is that Lady Sylvia concealed herself and followed after the others. By the time they were aware of her presence, it was already too late for her to back out."

There was a long pause before either of us spoke again.

"So what ended up happening to the asuras? The ones the leaders of Epheotus sent, I mean?"

"What none of the leaders expected." Windsom's face contorted in disgust and his hands formed into fists. "Agrona, that cunning snake, was waiting with an even larger army of Basilisks and lesser races that had the same innate magical abilities as the asuras."

It took only a moment for me to realize what his words implied. "The Vritra clan was interbreeding with the lesser races of Alacrya," I whispered.

He nodded before continuing. "Apparently, Agrona and his followers had

been interbreeding for quite some time—there were tens of thousands of the mutts waiting for our battalion."

"So the band of elite asuras your people sent was outnumbered."

"Tremendously outnumbered," he stressed. "And the element of surprise we'd thought our warriors would have was rendered moot."

"What befell them in the end?" I murmured.

The asura shook his head in response. "Communication was lost soon after the battle started. While we are certain that their side took a considerable loss in numbers, we can only speculate that our brigade of elite warriors, the prides of their respective clans and races, were either killed or captured."

I was silent, my mind filling with thoughts as to how Sylvia had managed to escape.

Windsom's next words snapped me out of my daze. "Lord Indrath was furious when Agrona himself appeared to tell my lord that his only daughter had been killed in battle. If it had been up to my master, he would surely have waged war, ignoring the consequences. However, the rest of the clans were against it and pushed for a treaty." Windsom turned around and resumed walking, letting the barrier fall and casting us back into darkness.

"A treaty was eventually formed between the two sides, forbidding the asuras from acting directly because of the collateral damage it would cause if a full-scale war were to occur between the seven asura races of Epheotus and the Vritra clan's army of Basilisks and lesser, half-breed mutts." There was a tone of obvious spite in his voice.

As I thought over his words, I realized how much of a disadvantage Dicathen was at. This treaty had been in place for generations, and even though it prohibited asuras and the half-breeds from directly participating in the battles, who knew how many of the so-called 'lesser races' of Alacrya had the blood of asuras mixed with their own.

I wanted to ask why the other asuras hadn't also bred with the lesser races, but I reasoned that if it had taken centuries for the mad genius Agrona to come up with a way, then the other races probably hadn't yet found how. Even if they could, I assumed most would be against such interbreeding with lower races because of their own morals and pride. Then I had a realization.

"Wait. So the six ancient artifacts you gave to the people of Dicathen..."

"Yes. It was our way of giving the people of this continent a sword and shield. We knew that the powers and knowledge contained within those artifacts would ignite a revolution for your people. We were right, but it was only through recent events that we learned it hadn't been nearly enough. It is Lord Indrath's hope that, with our direct intervention, we can equip the mages of this continent with the strength needed to defend Dicathen from Agrona. We fear that if Agrona is able to conscript the inhabitants of this continent, the Vritra clan will amass enough fighting power to overthrow Epheotus."

"And this is where I come in," I sneered, crossing my arms. "A stronger chess piece, which the Great Clans can utilize to gain the upper hand in the upcoming war."

"Well, I would think of it more as us training you to defend your family and homeland," Windsom countered.

"Honestly, I prefer knowing there is a mutual benefit over embarking on questionable acts of altruism anyway," I said with a shrug.

"I guess you still don't trust us completely," Windsom said curiously, then he asked, "On a side note, how do you plan to inform your family of our... plans?"

"Don't worry, Windsom. I spent a long time thinking about how to break it to my parents while I was in jail." I winked, walking past the asura and toward the flickering firelight coming from the end of the tunnel.

As we approached the tunnel's end, I could see the shadows of a few people surrounding a fire. I smiled at the sight of my large warrior-father scrubbing dishes near the underground stream as Elder Rinia, my sister, and my mother

concentrated on a simmering pot over the flames.

"Something smells delicious! Did you make enough for me?" I yelled, causing everyone to whip their heads in my direction.

I watched their reactions when they realized who had spoken: my father dropped the dented pan he was scrubbing; my mother and sister simultaneously bolted up from the makeshift chairs they were sitting on; and Elder Rinia simply gave me a meaningful smile as she continued peeling the potato in her hand. The only one I didn't see was Tessia, but I wasn't sure if she was even here or not.

In seconds, I was wrapped in the embrace of my family as my mother and father checked me for any signs of injury, while my sister's gaze went straight to Sylvie, sleeping in my arms.

"Is Sylvie okay?" Ellie asked, concern lacing her voice as she carefully lifted Sylvia out of my arms and hugged her warmly.

"Your brother just escaped from prison and you don't even ask if I'm okay?" I croaked, pretending to be hurt.

"Mm, you always seem to come back alive anyway," she shrugged, focusing her attention back on Sylvie. My father gave a snort of laughter as my mother did her best to hide her smile as she chastised my sister.

I felt a sharp pang in my chest at my sister's callous words. Where was the sweet child who had stuck to me like glue and shed tears when she couldn't see me? Had she already reached the rebellious stage?

It seemed that someone had already informed my family I would be visiting them soon, but it wasn't difficult to guess who. I hoped, though, that Elder Rinia had not spent any more of her life to use her powers for my benefit.

My parents began interrogating me for the full details of exactly what had happened, but suddenly they both froze, falling dead silent.

The soft footsteps stopped behind me, and I didn't hesitate to make introductions.

"Everyone, this is the person who helped me escape my imprisonment—and

also my prospective master."

I waited for some sort of reaction, but my parents and sister were still silent, frozen in place with their eyes glued to the figure behind me.

"Ah, Windsom? Tone it down," I said, turning to see Windsom looking at me in confusion, then his eyes widened a bit in understanding.

"My apologies," he replied, and the air around us returned to normal. I had gotten used to the pressure the asura exuded, but to a normal mage, it was suffocating.

My mother and sister fell to their knees, and my father stumbled, barely keeping himself on his feet.

Elder Rinia, who was a bit farther away, stood up and made a deep bow toward Windsom. I wasn't sure whether she knew his identity, but she, at least, seemed to understand that this unknown person was not ordinary.

"Welcome to my humble abode. Please, make yourself comfortable." The elderly elf spoke in a well-mannered, respectful tone that I'd never heard her use before.

Windsom simply nodded in response, and the cave was filled with silence except for the crackling of the fire.

My father was the first to speak. "I—I'd like to thank you for helping my son. I know he can be a handful."

The asura actually smiled faintly at this before speaking. "It seems your child has caused you many worries."

"And will continue to do so in the future," my mother finished as my father helped her and my sister back up. "But Arthur, what did you mean by 'prospective master'?"

"Alice, your son has just finished a long journey. There's plenty of time to discuss this after he's gotten something inside his belly," Rinia scolded, ushering everyone back to the fire.

Thankful for the chance to finally eat something, I sat down, impatiently blowing on the hot stew to cool it down.

Windsom declined the offer of food, but sat down with us and idly watched the fire. Once everyone had finished their meal, my father began telling us what had ensued on their side.

Virion had taken Tessia and Lilia somewhere else to properly tend to their injuries. The Helstea family had followed him to look after their daughter, which explained why only my family was here. Elder Rinia teased that I would be able to reunite with Tessia in a few days, and everyone smiled at my embarrassment.

Eventually we all ran out of things to chatter about, and the cave was silent once again. I could tell my parents were awaiting my reply to their earlier question.

I turned my gaze to Windsom, who stared back at me, expecting the same thing. Scratching my head—a gesture which I felt had become a habit during awkward circumstances since coming to this world—I spoke up.

"Elder Rinia. Is it all right for me to speak to my parents in private?"

"Of course." The diviner gave me a warm smile.

"What about me?" my sister chirped, still cradling my bond in her arms.

"Sorry, Ellie." I shook my head as I lead the way inside the tent.

My parents came in after me, looking a bit confused.

"Isn't your master going to join us?" my father asked, looking back outside before closing the flap.

"There is something the two of you need to know about first." The timbre of my voice and expression on my face silenced them, and they sat down in front of me without asking any more questions.

"Before we begin, there's something I've thought long and hard about telling the two of you, ever since coming to this world."

WHEN IGNORANCE IS BLISS

THERE WAS A LINGERING silence following my words as my parents tried to process what I had just said.

"'Coming to this world'? What do you mean, honey? You were born here. I —I don't understand," my mother replied, reaching out to me. She held my hands tightly, as if afraid I might vanish if she didn't.

My father, on the other hand, stared at me silently, waiting for me to continue. Taking a deep breath, I squeezed my mother's hand and spoke with a comforting smile.

"Of course I was born here, Mom; I'm your and Dad's very own flesh and blood. Trust me, I remember better than anyone else when I was born," I said with a chuckle, garnering another confused look from my parents.

"I was transported, reborn... I'm not quite sure exactly what, but *something* happened and I was taken from my world and brought into this one."

"Wait a minute, son, you're going to have to back up—"

"Art, what are you talking about? Another world? Are you okay? Did that man out there tell you this? Where is this coming from?" my mother cut in as she scooted closer, examining my head—probably looking for signs of a concussion.

"No, Mom. Windsom doesn't know this; no one but the two of you knows any of this. I don't know the correct term for this—this *phenomenon* either. I've thought about it for a while, but my best guess is that it's something akin

to a reincarnation," I explained.

"Arthur, did something happen to you after they took you away? Did they hurt you in some way? Come here, let me try and heal—"

"Honey, the boy is fine. Go on, Arthur," my father encouraged me, but my mother persisted.

"No, Rey, our son is *not* fine. He's spouting nonsense about another world and reincarnation. Art, let me—"

"Alice! Let the boy speak," my father snapped, using a voice I'd never heard before, stunning both my mother and me.

So I explained.

I described the world I'd come from, the role I had played there, and the relationships I'd had. I offered an excruciating amount of detail, to make sure they knew I couldn't have made this up. Throughout it all, my parents stayed mostly silent. My father asked questions here and there, but his face remained expressionless. My mother, however, was visibly shaken; her face was pale, and the trembling of her hands increased as my story progressed.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed, but by the time I finished speaking, I was feeling very tired. My mind was numb and I suddenly wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest.

"King Grey..." my father mumbled, running his fingers through his hair as he leaned back in his chair. "So the fighting, your talent in magic—"

"Yeah, the ki system in my old world worked similarly to certain aspects of mana in this world," I replied. "And as for the fighting... you get the idea."

"So... ever since you were born, you've been able to understand what we were saying? You remember everything?" my father asked.

I simply nodded in response.

My mother chuckled.

My father and I both turned our gaze to her. To our surprise, my mother started laughing. My father wrapped his arm around her, but she just glanced at us, seeming disoriented.

"I get it. This is all a joke, right? Oh, my son. Art, you almost got us there—right, Rey?" she said, still laughing. However, when neither of us responded, her smile faded. Her eyes searched our faces for any cues that would confirm her belief. When she couldn't find any, she grabbed my hand and stared at me with a look of desperation.

"This is a joke... right? Arthur Leywin, tell me this is a joke. You can't really be... some former king who died and was transported into the mind of my unborn child, can you? *Can you*?"

"I don't know exactly what happened, but I'm not joking," I replied, unable to look her in the eyes.

"No... No, no, no. This—no, this isn't happening. Rey, don't tell me you believe all of this? Our son is sick; something must've happened to him while he was gone—no, something *definitely* happened. Rey, say something! Tell me our son is sick!" My mother grabbed my father's arm, pulling on his sleeve as tears rolled down her pale face.

"Honey..." Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, my father held my mother close to his chest. He looked up at me and motioned for me to leave the two of them alone.

I wanted to hug my mother, to tell her I was still her son, but I couldn't muster up the courage to do either. Opening the tent, I walked out without saying anything, leaving my parents alone.

Elder Rinia, Windsom, and my sister all looked up as I walked toward them, but the look on my face stopped them from asking any questions. Even my pouting sister held her tongue as I sat down next to her and the slumbering Sylvie in front of the fire.

Time passed slowly, and my mind felt like it was trying to swim through a particularly viscous syrup.

Was telling them the right decision? What did they think of me now? Did they still think of me as their son, or would they inevitably grow distant...?

Noises blended together incoherently and everything other than the fire I was

staring at slid out of focus. But it all immediately snapped back when the sound of the tent flap opening reached me.

My father came out of the tent, looking much older than he had a short while ago. I expected my mother to come out right after him, but my father shook his head.

"Ellie, can you stay with your mother inside the tent?" he asked as he grabbed small light-emitting artifact and motioned for me to follow him.

"Here you go. Feel better, you poop." My sister stuck her tongue out as she carefully handed me my bond. I felt a smile tugging at my lips as I watched her skip toward the tent.

Placing Sylvie atop my head, I followed my father into the tunnel Windsom and I had arrived through. I concentrated on the sounds of our echoing footsteps until my father finally decided to speak.

"Your mother... she's sleeping right now," he announced with a sigh.

"Is she okay?" I kept a few steps' distance from my father, watching as he idly kicked a pebble as he walked.

"She was... in quite a bit of shock, to say the least."

"So you believe me?"

"Unless you've suddenly developed a taste for sick gags, you have no reason to lie to us about this. Besides, it all makes sense now: the early awakening, your brilliance as a fighter and a mage... it all makes sense," he repeated.

"Are you okay?" My eyes stayed glued to the pebbles, which glittered in the dim, white light as they bounced across the uneven ground.

"Of course I'm not!" my father exclaimed, turning around. "This isn't easy news to swallow, Arthur. All the memories we had as a family in the past, was that all a façade—what you thought the son we wanted would've been like? How am I supposed to act around you now? You're technically older than me, yet you're here now as my thirteen-year-old son!" he continued, looking at me desperately for answers. "And your mother—your mother nursed you as an infant! She mothered a middle-aged man thinking he was

her own son!"

I stood silent, unable to reply. Everything he said was true, after all. My father's fists were clenched so tightly that blood dripped from between his fingers. His expression was ghastly; from his trembling frown to his furrowed brows, his emotions rioted uncontrollably across his face. Fear, anxiety, frustration, confusion... they were all there.

"I'm sorry, but are you really our son, Arthur? Or did you take over the unborn baby that *would* have been our son during your reincarnation, or whatever it was that happened to you?" he blurted. His eyes widened immediately as he covered his mouth with his hand.

"I-I didn't mean that," he stammered. Letting out a deep breath, he whispered, "I'm sorry, Arthur... I'm just very confused right now."

"Like I said earlier, the truth is, I really don't know. I don't know who or what brought me to this world, or why. You're right, Da—Reynolds. Perhaps I killed the fetus inside—I don't know how the... the process that brought me here works," I stated coolly, swallowing back something particularly hard in my throat.

He winced when I addressed him as 'Reynolds' and was about to say something, but then just closed his mouth.

"I didn't want to keep hiding this from you, but now I'm questioning whether I made the right choice," I murmured with a dry laugh. "I wanted to tell you for so long, but never had the courage to. So I wanted to say it before I left." "Left? You're leaving?" my father asked, clearly surprised.

"Yeah. And I think that, given the current circumstances, it'll be good to spend some time apart," I continued, a certain—unintended—aloof edge to my voice.

"How long will you be gone?"

"At least a few years."

"That long, huh?" he replied, staring at the ground. He showed no sign of stopping me or forbidding me to go.

I turned around, my chest aching and my head throbbing with an intensity I had never experienced before. Humans... no matter how powerful we had the potential to be, we were still so fragile.

"You know, I never had any memories of family in my old world. Growing up in an environment where no one truly loved me—and, in turn, being callous and distant to everyone—made me an unrivaled fighter, but a crappy person. Ever since I came to this world, the two of you—my parents—and later Ellie, taught me something I'd never known. I may not be the strongest fighter or mage in this world, but I'm a hell of a lot better person now than I ever would've been in my previous life. I'm sorry for the hurt I caused you. Thank you for making me a better man... and thank you for loving me as your son." Without turning to face my father, I headed back to where Windsom waited. As I walked away, the muffled sobs of my father behind me, I struggled to keep my own tears back.

When I returned to the main cave, Windsom and Rinia seemed to be deep in discussion. Elder Rinia held something wrapped in a blanket—I could've sworn it moved, but I chose to ignore it. Windsom had just drawn his hand back from whatever was bundled inside the blanket when he noticed me approaching.

"I see you've wrapped things up. Are you ready?" Windsom's glittering eyes studied my expression carefully as he rose.

"Yeah, let's go."

"Wait—aren't you going to say goodbye to your family?" Rinia asked, setting the blanket-wrapped bundle carefully on her seat.

"No need. I've already sorted out everything I needed to here. I leave them in your care." I gave her a curt bow and was about to follow Windsom when Rinia grabbed me. Her eyes glowed mysteriously, and I silently waited for her to speak. Suddenly she placed her hands on my cheeks.

"Arthur, please. Your expression is frightening—unbecoming of someone as kind-hearted as you. I cannot begin to understand the gravity of the battles

that lie ahead of you," she said, "but do not fall back to your old ways. As you well know, the deeper you go into that pit, the harder it will be to climb back out." Her eyes faded back to normal and she slapped my cheeks gently, then turned me around and nudged me toward Windsom.

"Now go. I'll take care of things here," she said with a soft smile.

While Rinia had been talking, Windsom had retrieved a large disk-like object and dropped it on the ground. The asura pricked his finger and let a drop of his blood fall to the disk. Immediately, it expanded, emitting a column of light that reached the ceiling.

My mind still on what Rinia had said, I turned to Windsom and asked, "Was there something wrong with my face?"

"It reminded me of the Pantheon asuras of Epheotus. They are a race of fine warriors who have learned to close off their emotions in order to fight with maximum efficiency. A very useful technique indeed." Windsom nodded his approval. "Now, let us go. Are you sure you have tied up your loose ends here? I will need your full concentration once we're in Epheotus."

I glanced around the cave one last time, then took a deep breath.

"I'm ready."

Hugging Sylvie tighter in my arms, I accepted Windsom's invitation, and we stepped into the column of golden light.

LOGIC'S BIGGEST FOE

REYNOLDS LEYWIN

I hated myself for what had happened. A part of me wished I had told Arthur it was okay... that he was still family.

But a bigger part of me—the part I hated—wished he had just never told us.

I had known since early on in Arthur's life that he was different. He had always been very composed and mature for his age, and even when he acted his age, it seemed... rehearsed. From a very young age, his actions had always displayed a certain sense of foresight; there was always a reason for anything he did, a goal or plan of some kind.

Maybe that was why I was so fixated on his reason for telling us this. Wouldn't it have been better for everyone, including himself, if he had kept it a secret? What was the reason? What was his goal?

And why was it so hard for me to accept? Was it because it hurt my pride? My own selfish pride that maybe, just *maybe*, I had sired and raised the type of genius that only came along once in a millennium?

The signs had always been there: his strange behavior from an early age, his inexplicable prowess as a swordsman and talents as a mage. Had I subconsciously chosen to ignore all those signs just to maintain my petty ego? Deciding just to accept the fact that that my own flesh and blood, my... son, could be so bloody impressive?

I had to laugh at myself, at how difficult it was now to say 'son'—such a

simple term of endearment.

It took me a while to drag my sorry feet back to the cave. Looking around, the only person I could see was Elder Rinia, cradling something by the fire. I glanced at the tent my wife and daughter were in, but I couldn't bring myself to go inside. Instead, I sat down next to our benefactor.

"He left, you know." The aged elf's eyes remained glued to the bundle of blankets she cradled in her arms.

"I figured," I sighed, feeling like a child being scolded.

"I have long dreaded the day he decided to tell you."

"You knew, Elder Rinia?" Startled, I turned to the elf seated next to me.

"I see many things, but only for that boy do I have to grind my old head to try and piece together what is in store for him." She met my gaze, her eyes dim with weariness.

"He's hardly a boy," I scoffed. I leaned forward, losing myself in the flames that danced in front of me.

"Bah! He's still a child to me, just as you're still a child as well," Elder Rinia chortled. Leaning back carefully in her seat, she continued. "I've always found it amusing, the preconceptions people have about age and intelligence: The older someone is, the more wisdom he or she should possess, and the more intelligent someone is, the more logical he or she should be. Pair those two traits up, and the intelligent senior should be cold, calculating, shrewd... don't you agree?"

Noticing my puzzled expression, she gave a soft smile, gently set down the bundle, and leaned closer to me.

"Do you see me as cold, calculating, and shrewd?" the aged elf asked with a wink.

"No, of course not. But... I don't understand what this has to do with Arthur," I stammered, caught off guard.

"Weren't you wishing Arthur had just kept his mouth shut? Thinking you would feel better if you were still ignorant of who the boy really is? I bet you

were wondering why he told you in the first place, right?"

Before I had the opportunity to reply, the aged elf poked me softly in the chest... right where my heart was.

"The heart remains the brain's biggest enemy. Well, actually, for men, the brain's most formidable foe is probably..." Elder Rinia's gaze dropped. When I realized what she was referring to, my immediate instinct was to cross my legs, but I soon found myself laughing along with her.

Elder Rinia straightened up and continued. "As I was saying, emotion—the heart—constantly clashes against things like validity, efficiency, utility... anything logical. That's what gets us hurt or even killed, yet we can't seem to help it. It lessens us as individuals, but makes us greater as a group."

"So Arthur was acting on emotion rather than logic when he told us this?"

"Bah! How could I know what he's thinking?" She shook her head. "I do know this, though. I've known that boy since he was a mere toddler in this world, and he's come a long way since then. Much of that cold exterior of his has slowly melted. Perhaps his 'coming out' this way was a step he had to take, to break out of that shell he once found safety and comfort in."

Elder Rinia got up and stretched painfully, then handed me the bundle of sheets she had been cradling. "Hold on to this for me so I can prepare some food for your wife. I suspect she won't have much of an appetite, but she still needs to care for her body."

"Thank you, Elder." I gave a slight bow, then asked, "What is it, anyway?"

"Arthur's master only told me it was a gift for the Leywin family." There was a mysterious grin on her face, and I was suddenly helplessly curious as to what it could be.

I carefully peeled away the layer of blankets, and gaped.

It was a mana beast—an infant mana beast, to be more precise. The small bear-like creature was dark brown, except for two darker spots above its eyes that made it look like it was scowling and a tuft of white fur on its chest.

"Awww! So cute! Papa, what is it? Can I keep it?" Ellie's sudden

exclamation startled me and I nearly dropped the mana beast.

"Honey, you scared me! I'm not sure if—" Just then, the mana beast woke up and locked eyes with my daughter, and I trailed off. "...if that's a good idea..."

I stared as my daughter's eyes, and the beast's, began glowing a faint gold. I sat motionless, witnessing what I assumed was the bonding process. I had yet to bond with a mana beast, but now both Arthur and Ellie had.

I sighed to myself, bitterly acknowledging the fact that it was important for my daughter to have a bond to protect her. The image I'd briefly formed, of me riding into battle atop a mighty bearish mana beast, slowly crumbled.

The glow subsided from their eyes, and a gold insignia imprinted itself onto my daughter's right collarbone.

The bear-like mana beast stretched out its arms, as if wanting Ellie to pick it up, and it let out a soft whine.

My daughter giggled as she picked up the mana beast. "I'll name you Boo," she said.

"Boo?" I sputtered. The creature was sure to grow up to be a ferocious mana beast, and it was difficult to imagine it being called something so cute.

"Yup! The black spots make him look like he's always mad. So, Boo," Ellie declared. "Let's go help Grandma, Boo!" My daughter skipped off, then stopped and turned around. "Oh, I forgot—Papa, Mama is awake."

I immediately rose and made my way to the tent. Elder Rinia's tent was much larger inside than it appeared from the outside. Quietly stepping into our room, which was separated by another flap, I smiled when I saw my wife sitting up.

"How are you feeling?" I gently asked, taking a seat next to her.

"How long have I been sleeping?" she groaned, rubbing her temples.

"Only a few hours." I put my arm around her and pulled her close so she could rest her head on my shoulder.

"Where's Arthur? Is he... gone?"

- "Yeah." I held her tightly as she began trembling.
- "Am I a terrible person, Rey?" she sniffed.
- "No, you're not. Why would you ask that?"
- "I called Arthur sick. I didn't take him seriously when he told us his secret... I didn't *want* to take it seriously." She looked up at me, her eyes filled with tears.
- "That's normal. I wouldn't trust anyone who could easily accept what Arthur told us," I consoled her, gently running my fingers through her hair.
- "Am I a terrible person for doubting whether Arthur is our son?"

I hesitated. I wanted to tell her no, but how could I, when I had called myself terrible for thinking the exact same thing? The pain and hurt I'd been feeling since learning the truth about Arthur was a result of the selfish desires and dreams I had placed on the child I called my son. But Alice was the one who had actually birthed Arthur. She went through the stress, discomfort, and pain of pregnancy for nine months before enduring the agony of labor. She nursed him, fed him, took care of him when he was sick, and taught him the ways of this world. Now, everything she thought she had known about the child had turned out to be a lie...

I bit my quivering lip, trying to stay silent.

I needed to be the strong one. I needed to be the one that my wife could rely on.

- "I'm sorry," Alice suddenly whispered. Her head was still leaning against my shoulder so I couldn't see her face.
- "You have nothing to be sorry about, honey. We... we just need time to sort out our feelings. Arthur knew this—that's why he told us before he had to leave."
- "How long will he be gone for?" she asked. I might've been imagining it, but I thought my wife's voice sounded somewhat brusque.
- "He said a few years," I replied, expecting Alice to be surprised. Instead, she gave a slight nod and muttered, "I see."

"Alice, what's wrong?" I held her at arm's length, trying to get a better look at her face. She wore an expression that was vaguely familiar—her eyes were dull, almost lifeless, and she refused to make eye contact with me.

"I wonder what our son would've been like if Arthur hadn't taken over," she mumbled, looking at the ground.

"Alice... please don't say that. Don't ask something like that," I said, my voice coming out in a sort of whimper.

"Would he have been courageous and outgoing like you? Or maybe he would've been a bit more careful and shy like me," she continued, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Honey, don't. Just don't." Tears were falling down my own face, and I was doing all I could to steady my voice. "Arthur is... Arthur..."

"Arthur is what? Our son?" My wife met my eyes and I could see how desperate she was, how lost. "If you haven't noticed, Rey, not once since we started this conversation have we referred to Arthur as our son."

I opened my mouth, trying to refute her argument, but nothing came out: no sound, no words. Only silence.

I took a deep breath and wiped the tears from my wife's face before speaking. "It's hard for me to confidently call Arthur our son, just as it is for you. Hopefully, that'll change by the next time we see him—but Alice, it doesn't change the fact that we have considered him family for over thirteen years now. We laughed, we fought, we celebrated, we shed tears together. Isn't that what brought us close? Not the blood running through us, not who we once were in the past, but what we have been through together."

Embracing my wife tightly, I continued. "Remember when Arthur almost sacrificed his life for you in the mountains on our way to Xyrus? He expected to die that day. You know very well he wouldn't have done something like that for anyone else. So don't dwell on the 'what if's—let's just try to accept what's happening around us."

I could feel my wife trembling in my arms as she broke down and cried. Now

I recognized that dull, lifeless look I had seen in Alice's eyes. It was the same look she had worn when we thought Arthur had died. It was her trying to escape reality.

We sat there for a while, crying in each other's arms until our tears ran dry and our sobs were reduced to soft whimpers.

"Alice, you're not a horrible person. Believe me, I've thought worse than you. It is going to take time for us to wrap our heads around this..." My voice trailed off as I held my wife's face and gazed deeply into it, studying every detail of the woman I loved.

"Stop staring. I must look horrible right now," she croaked, her voice hoarse from crying.

"You're beautiful," I whispered, staring at her puffy red eyes and runny nose. My wife softly closed her eyes and leaned forward. I had just pressed my lips gently against hers when Ellie's voice rang out from just outside the tent.

"Mama, are you feeling better now? Let me show you Boo!"

"Now now—come play with Grandma. Your parents are... resting. Yes, resting," came Elder Rinia's voice from nearby.

"Aww." Ellie sounded disappointed, but her mood quickly bounced back.

"Okay. Come on, Boo. Let's play with Grandma!"

Alice and I locked eyes. We held each other's gazes for what felt like a long time, until she finally smiled.

"What is this 'Boo' that Ellie's talking about?" my wife asked, raising a brow.

"I'll tell you later." I shot her a wink through my swollen eyes, then wiped another stray tear from her face and resumed where we had left off.

A GRUDGING TOLERANCE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I wasn't sure what I had expected.

I was going into a land inhabited by beings that we basically considered gods. For some reason, in my imagination, grand and fantastical lands always heavily featured gold, diamonds, or some other precious material.

In my old world, the homes of even the most influential figures had been designed with a focus on practicality more than anything else. The most important figures were mostly warriors, after all, and our tastes were rather simple. Extravagant things—furniture made from the hides of precious beasts, for instance—were unnecessary, only sought after by rich merchants and politicians whose sense of self-worth was directly proportional to their wealth.

Thus, when I exited the golden column of light and stepped into the realm of asuras, I was left wide-eyed and breathless.

My mood was sour and I was still wallowing in regret over the decision I had just made, but one glance at the land Sylvia and Windsom had come from was all it took for me to temporarily forget my troubles.

It felt as if I had been transported to a different planet—a planet where it wasn't the inhabitants who had constructed the buildings and manors, but where the earth and land had forged structures worthy of gods.

The towering castle in front of us seemed to have been birthed from the earth

itself; there were no signs that it had been shaped or molded. Sophisticated designs and runes made from what looked like precious minerals covered the walls of the castle, which stood high enough to be seen from miles away. The trees bent and tangled together in arches to create a corridor that led to the entrance, which was atop a bridge that shimmered in an array of translucent colors.

Peeling my eyes away from the castle itself took a great effort, and the iridescent bridge was no easier, but I managed to collect myself enough to take in the rest of my surroundings.

Windsom had transported us to the top of a mountain, cluttered with familiar trees in full bloom. The shimmering pink petals reminded me of cherry blossoms, and seemed to dance as they floated down to the ground. The vibrant bridge that stretched out in front of us led to another mountain, from which the castle seemed to have been carved. Clouds covered everything underneath the bridge, and the two mountain peaks stuck out like twin islands in an ocean of hazy white.

"Welcome to Epheotus—or more specifically, the Indrath clan's castle." Windsom walked toward the castle, stepping out onto the bridge of precious minerals the likes of which any mortal king would wage wars for. Then he glanced back, beckoning me to follow.

Taking a deep breath, I trailed behind the asura, carefully placing my right foot on the incandescent surface of the bridge. It was semi-translucent, like stained glass. As I put my weight on the structure, a deep feeling of fear washed over me, taking me by surprise—I have never had a fear of heights. Perhaps it was due to the fact that there were no visible supports holding up the bridge, which easily spanned a few hundred feet.

"Indrath clan? You mean we're at the home of Sylvia's family?" I asked. I decided to trust in the colorful bridge rather than imagine what would happen if it were to abruptly break. Walking alongside Windsom, we made our way toward the castle.

"Yes. Lord Indrath commanded me to bring you and Lady Sylvie to him upon arrival," the asura replied. I found it amusing to see the usually cool and aloof Windsom anxiously smoothing out the creases in his robe.

"Any last tips before meeting this almighty lord of lords?"

"Unfortunately, even I do not know what to expect. This situation is rather peculiar, after all," he answered, tidying his hair.

With a sigh, I glanced down at Sylvie, asleep in my arms. I was beginning to grow worried about how much she slept; her rhythmic breathing was the only thing that comforted me.

The doors to the monstrous castle were enormous—and not just from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old boy. They were tall enough to admit giants and—well—dragons.

"There aren't any guards or watchmen?" I asked, looking around.

"Of course there are. They were watching us as we crossed over the bridge. Now come, we shouldn't keep Lord Indrath waiting."

I thought of the sudden prickling anxiety I had felt as I stepped on the bridge. It hadn't been from the height at all, but from the weight of whoever—or whatever—had been watching me as we crossed.

The interior of the castle was just as magnificently crafted as the outside. The ceilings were unnecessarily high, with arches that looked to have been carved out of the mountain. The walls themselves were adorned with intricate detailing, as if the artist had been trying to tell a story. Yet, considering how large the castle was, it was eerily quiet.

"This way. The Indrath clan is waiting for you." Windsom was on edge and kept adjusting various parts of his attire while we walked.

"Wait, the entire clan is waiting for us?"

"Yes—now please, let us hurry," the asura sighed, leading the way into another corridor.

Shivers ran down my spine again, but this time, I was able to identify the source. At the end of the corridor were two figures guarding the doors. I

wasn't able to make out much of their appearance; they were shrouded in darkness by the shadows cast by the corridor's lights. However, my instincts had already kicked in, desperately trying to convince me to run as far away as possible from these two shadowed figures.

I was reminded of my encounter with the Elderwood Guardian. However, I had a feeling that, compared to these guards, the S-class mana beast that had almost killed me would only be cannon fodder.

As we drew nearer to the doors, I was able to discern the two guards' features. One was female, with an amiable expression on her face. She looked rather boyish with her green hair cut short, just below her ears, but the distinct curves noticeable beneath her light leather armor showed otherwise. The man next to her looked much fiercer, with sharp eyes and a scar cutting jaggedly across his cheek. They each wore a short dagger strapped to their waist; I saw no other visible weapons on either of them.

"Elder Windsom. I see you finally brought the human boy," the female guard said with a grin. The male guard stared at Sylvie, then looked up at me with a studying gaze. "Is it appropriate for a human child to be carrying the princess?" he asked disapprovingly.

"Let it be, Signiz. They are bonded," Windsom said dismissively. "Now, are you going to let us in or not?"

The two guards looked at each other briefly before giving Windsom a brief nod. They turned to face the doors, and the aura they emitted increased significantly, enough for it to be nearly palpable. After only a few seconds had passed, beads of cold sweat were rolling down my face, and my breathing had become shallow and jagged.

Each guard held onto one of the door handles and heaved. I could only imagine how heavy they must be since the two guards were struggling to pry them apart. Finally, with a loud *clack*, the towering doors slid open, revealing what I assumed to be the great hall—and staring right at me, seated on a throne which burned with a shimmering white fire, was a man who appeared

to be no older than twenty.

Windsom immediately stepped past me into the room and kneeled.

"My lord," the asura said, bowing his head. Lord Indrath wasn't what I had expected in the least. He had a cool, almost mellow feel to him, sporting shimmering, cream-colored hair that was neither long nor short. He would certainly be considered an attractive man by any means, but he wasn't exceptionally stunning. I couldn't really tell what his build was underneath his white robe, but he didn't look particularly robust. His eyes reminded me of Sylvia—they were the same shade of purple, but even from here, I could see the colors shifting and changing. But where Sylvia's eyes had been compassionate, his were hard.

Realizing that I had been staring for far too long, I followed Windsom's example and kneeled as well. I kept my head down but couldn't help but peek around the room. Figures of all ages and sizes stood around the sides of the great hall, staring at me. Some looked disdainful, like the male guard, while others showed simple curiosity.

Each of the figures standing around us emanated an aura that would make even the most powerful mages in Dicathen faint and froth at the mouth, yet the man seated on the blazing white throne emitted none. Even when I made a conscious effort to sense him, I couldn't even feel his presence. Despite the fact that I was able to see him, I had trouble remembering he actually existed if my eyes weren't directly focused on him.

"Stand." His voice was soft and silvery, yet sharp like a knife in a way that was both gentle and imposing. We rose to our feet and walked toward the throne, Sylvie still in my arms. I could feel the eyes of everyone in the room following me, judging my every movement. I was reminded of my former life, being an orphan and fetching groceries for our house at a nearby market. This felt much like how the adults had looked at me then—the glares and blatant disgust as if I were some sort of disease that they needed to avoid.

Seconds slowly ticked by as we waited for the man on the throne to speak,

yet he only stared wordlessly at me and Sylvie with an expression I couldn't interpret. Without warning, my sternum and left arm began burning furiously. I hurriedly set Sylvie down, then pulled up my sleeve and removed Silvia's silky feather to see the insignia glowing hotly.

The asura seated atop the throne let out a sigh and gave a dismissive nod in a gesture of reluctant resignation.

My eyes had stayed fixed on Lord Indrath while he studied me, so when I saw Sylvie appear suddenly in his arms, as if from thin air, my immediate reaction was a clumsy and baffled astonishment.

"What the—?!" I sputtered. I reflexively reached for my bond, but Windsom placed his hand on my shoulder.

"What? Am I not allowed to hold my own granddaughter?" Lord Indrath retorted, holding Sylvie in one hand. Lifting her up to his eye level, Lord Indrath turned her around, inspecting every angle of her sleeping fox form.

"I see you have done nothing to train her. Her mana levels are insultingly low, and given that she is in a hibernating state, it seems you have strained her." Lord Indrath's eyes narrowed, piercing me. Only my pride kept me from taking a step back.

To my surprise, Windsom defended me. "My apologies, my lord. I should have trained Lady Sylvie while I was in Dicathen. If it is to your liking, I can start her training now." He bowed once again to the creamy-haired man on the throne.

"No need. I will personally look after... Sylvie," Lord Indrath said dismissively, shaking his head. At that, a wave of surprised gasps and soft murmurs filled the great hall as the other members of the Indrath clan whispered to one another excitedly.

Placing a finger gently between Sylvie's brows, Lord Indrath mouthed something inaudible. His eyes glowed, and suddenly Sylvie jolted awake, her eyes glimmering in the same shade of purple as her grandfather's.

"Kyu?" 'Papa? Where am I?'

The familiar voice, which I hadn't heard in days, filled my head. Sylvie was obviously confused by the unfamiliar scene, and by the fact that a man she had never met was holding her so intimately.

We've traveled a bit, Sylv. How are you feeling? I transmitted back, a smile forming on my face.

'Sleepy. Can I go back to sleep, Papa?' I could see Sylvie's eyes struggling to stay open, and she blinked wearily before fully closing them.

"Lord Indrath, Win—Elder Windsom has already explained to me what is needed of me, but he has yet to fill me in on why exactly I was to be brought here. If it is simply for training purposes, wouldn't a remote dungeon in Dicathen be as suitable a place?" I asked, impatiently waiting for him to hand me back my bond.

"I have deemed you a necessary component in our struggle against Agrona and his army. I take it that you already understand the mutual benefit in winning the approaching war, yes? Having said that, it will be most beneficial to have several specialists available to help Windsom in your training, which is more easily accomplished here. Think of it as an honor—only the most talented of the younger generations get the training that you will receive."

"How do you know when the war will begin? How much time do we even have?" There were far too many uncertainties for me to be able to comfortably train.

"That is not your concern. Focus on your training; I will notify Windsom when it is time for you to go back to your homeland. That is all." Lord Indrath signaled to Windsom to take me away.

"Wait—what about Sylvie?"

"She will stay with me until her training is complete," he said matter-of-factly.

"What? How long will that take? I won't be able to see her until then?"

Lord Indrath's brow twitched impatiently and he shooed us away with his

hand. Before I could respond, Windsom squeezed my arm tightly, dragging me out of the great hall.

After we passed the two guards, I angrily shook free from Windsom's grasp. "What was the point of that meeting? I went in there just to have Sylvie snatched away and be looked down on by all of the Indrath clan? That was humiliating!"

With a sigh, Windsom replied, "The relationship between you and the asuras is very peculiar. It can be summed up as, let's say, a 'grudging tolerance.' The fact that we have no choice but to rely on a lesser being is a wound to our pride. But do not worry, neither you nor Lady Sylvie will be mistreated. As Lord Indrath mentioned, you are important to us."

"I'm pretty sure he said 'necessary component," I scoffed as we reached the iridescent bridge once more.

Windsom's lips curled into a faint smile. "Come, there are some people I want you to meet."

ONES CLOSEST TO GODS

"No! I said left foot out at a forty-degree angle. Your center of gravity should be aligned with your right heel, since that is your pivot foot. Do you understand, stray?" The instructor cracked his whip to get me in proper position as he went around the class.

Gritting my teeth, I silently obeyed, adjusting my left foot to comply with my instructor's imperfect technique. If I hadn't, it would only mean a delay in whatever scraps of dinner we were given, since we weren't to be fed until everyone had gone through the stances and forms from the day's lessons perfectly.

Every day at the school consisted of eight hours of combat training, which I found somewhat flawed, then meditation to nurture our ki centers for around ten hours after. The remaining six hours were divided between the daily necessities of eating, washing, and sleeping. Students whose centers had developed enough to learn ki techniques were separated from the rest of the group and placed into special classes depending on their aptitudes.

Those who were not able to awaken their ki centers were to be "relocated," which I had eventually realized actually meant being disposed of. I followed the instructor's training regimen to the letter for the allotted eight hours. During the time given for meditation, I actually only meditated for the first eight hours and slept for the remaining two. I used the time officially designated for sleep to unlearn all the garbage that the instructors regarded as

martial arts and train in my own techniques.

The only useful information the instructors had taught us were the vital spots of a human body—the weak points to target for certain death. Their techniques, though, were brutish, senseless ways of trying to inflict damage on those areas, regardless of how the opponent might react. Using their methods, as long as one followed the proper steps, the goal would be achieved: reach the target and inflict pain on them. Like I said: senseless.

My ki center was cultivated enough to learn ki techniques, but I hid that fact for as long as possible. I knew that once I advanced to the higher level classes, I would have less time to train on my own. In a stroke of luck, I had stumbled upon a book about the ki technique for hiding one's presence. I had absorbed the words in that book like they were fresh water in a barren desert. The manual was low-grade, but I practiced the technique until I mastered the ability to sneak into the private library where they stored all the ki techniques. I'm not sure how I ever made it through that training regime—I only slept for eight to ten hours a week because of how much time I spent reading and practicing the techniques. I had known it wasn't possible for me to learn all the techniques, so I narrowed them down and studied only the ki arts that would most benefit me in the long run.

Although the library was secured, it wasn't very heavily guarded. There was no real need—even if a student trespassed inside, they couldn't learn those techniques on their own. Like the manual I had stumbled upon for hiding the user's presence, the other ki technique manuals were filled with terms and jargon that no orphaned child or teenager would've known.

That included me, of course, so all I had to go off were the crudely drawn pictures that showed the necessary steps in learning and using the ki techniques.

It didn't strike me then, but reflecting back on it now, it was clear to see that I was nothing short of a prodigy. Just by studying the pictures demonstrating the steps for the ki technique, I was able to grasp how the ki was supposed to

flow inside my body to properly execute the technique.

The first thing I had learned after breaking into the library was a series of ki enhanced footwork techniques that I had practiced to the point where you could almost see the bones on the soles of my feet. The technique looked like a tap dance sequence without proper ki flow, but once I had managed to input the proper flow of ki into the appropriate appendages at the appropriate time, I was able to evade, reposition, maneuver behind an enemy, and basically teleport within a limited range.

I still remember using that very ki art, the technique I mastered and finetuned to pseudo-perfection, to defeat the same instructor that had whipped me so many times for no apparent reason—other than to satisfy his sadistic tendencies.

I could still vividly recall the look on his face when I had my wooden sword pressed against his sweating neck, his wide, astonished eyes shaking as his mouth hung agape trying to string together the words to form a convenient excuse that would allow him to save some face.

Even as I was on the road to becoming king, the foot technique I had mastered and made my own left me with nicknames like Untouchable, GodSpeed, Mirage, and more.

However, upon arriving into Dicathen, there was little use for such movements once my mana core had advanced enough. I was hardly within range to use the moves that I had once relied so heavily on, and it seemed so much simpler to just conjure a wall to block whatever projectiles hurled toward me. With mana being so abundant, I had never needed to regulate and control my mana output.

It's amusing how the human brain recalls moments of the past. All the memories a person might wish to forget are somehow ingrained even deeper into the hippocampus.

This ancient memory of my previous childhood had been suddenly evoked as

my life flashed before my eyes, when my opponent's kick, a simple low sweep, shattered both of my legs simultaneously. As I collapsed to the ground, I failed to dodge another sharp jab that dislocated my right shoulder. I was all but defenseless as my gaze shifted from the man who had overwhelmed me so tremendously to my severed left arm, which he held in his hand.

Windsom had told me that the pain I would experience in this domain was greatly diminished. If that was truly the case, how much more agonizing would these wounds be if I had actually suffered them?

The man responsible for my current mortal injuries approached me with an unreadable expression. He gave me a terse nod and snapped his fingers. "Enough," he announced, and the world faded to black.

And, just like that, I was awake again, with all my limbs attached and unbroken.

I immediately crumpled to all fours and hurled, losing the remainder of my last meal, then heaved for breath. The vomit immediately vanished in the small sapphire pond I had been meditating in. I was soaking wet, but I wasn't sure if it was from the magical liquid surrounding me, or from my profuse, stress-induced sweating.

"No, let me continue," I managed to choke out between gasps.

"The human boy has admirable willpower. How much time has passed, Windsom?" The deep, calm, controlled voice came from the lean, shavenheaded man who had broken most of the two hundred six bones in my body.

"About five minutes have passed out here," Windsom said tersely.

"So roughly an hour for us in there." He spoke in a way that was neither disappointed nor proud, just matter-of-fact. I regarded the two asuras' conversation with a weary curiosity as I wiped the vomit from my lips.

"Again," I demanded desperately from the middle of the sacred pool, sitting back up into the meditative posture Windsom had taught me.

The asura with the shaved head nodded approvingly and sat down facing me,

mirroring my position exactly. He traded glances with Windsom, signaling for him to start.

Once again, the glowing sapphire liquid rose up around us and enveloped the asura and me. I was soon engulfed in the familiar scorching sensation that had overwhelmed me the last few dozen times we had done this. My vision darkened again as I waited anxiously for us to reappear in the hell that was the mental training facility where I had just been dismembered.

My thoughts slowly trailed back over the last few hours since we'd left the Indrath clan's castle.

'Upset' would be a mild way to describe my state of mind after Lord Indrath had decided I wasn't fit to see—or even communicate—with my own bond for the duration of our stay. He had made it explicitly clear that my presence would hinder the progress of Sylvie's recovery and training.

It was an odd feeling to be separated so entirely from Sylvie. Usually, even when my bond was sleeping, I could still feel her presence. Suddenly having that connection yanked away again, as it had been in the Widow's Crypt dungeon, made me feel empty, almost as if a limb had been pulled off.

"Come, there are some people I want you to meet." The asura paused before continuing, "Well, just one person specifically, for now."

Even after crossing the bridge, Windsom didn't bother to explain the location of our training grounds, keeping mostly silent as we scaled down the steep mountain. As we descended, the atmosphere drastically changed. Color was lost and we were surrounded by a dreary canvas of gray stones and rotten wood. The sea of clouds that had seemed so far below us was now just above, and the layer of haze gave the appearance of being the border between heaven and what felt like purgatory.

Windsom must have intentionally taken us down the steepest side of the mountain, since we were climbing down vertically most of the time. He had vaguely explained to me that the use of mana to venture down was forbidden

—something to do with tradition and being worthy. Because of this tradition, the journey that could have taken us minutes stretched into hours.

"We're here," Windsom finally announced. His voice was steady, with no sign of fatigue even in this zone of increased pressure and low air density. He was staring intently at a dead root jutting out of a crevice between two stones. "We're going to train here?" I muttered between breaths, staring at the nondescript root Windsom seemed so fixated on.

"Take my hand," he replied, ignoring my question as he reached out toward me.

As soon as I had a grip on his hand, the asura yanked me toward him, swinging me at the root and the stones as if to dash me against the cliffside. Before I even had time to call out in surprise, however, the scene had changed and I was in some sort of small cave.

Windsom appeared behind me a moment later and took the lead, stepping past me and marching toward a glowing pool, which was the dominant feature of the cave.

"It's good to see you again, Kordri," Windsom said, to no one I could see.

"It is nice seeing you as well, Elder Windsom. And you must be the human, Arthur Leywin, correct?" A figure appeared directly in front of us, though I could have sworn there had been no one there before.

This man reminded me of a monk—someone who had chosen to let go of worldly matters—but he was dressed in a light, tight-fitting tunic instead of a robe. His four hazel eyes studied me with a calm wisdom, a welcome change from Lord Indrath's silently terrifying gaze. If not for those four eyes, he would have been by no means distinguishable, unremarkable in every way.

"Yes, I am. Nice to meet you," I replied, quickly regaining my composure.

"Arthur, this is my close friend, Kordri. He is of the Thyestes clan of the Pantheon asura race—just like Aldir, whom you met back at the floating castle in Dicathen," Windsom said.

Windsom had been teaching me about the eight asura races and the affiliated

Great Eight as we had traveled to meet Elder Rinia. The Pantheon race were the only asuras who were versed in what I thought of as force-type mana art. The Basilisks—the race of the Vritra clan—were the only race capable of decay-type mana art. The remaining six asura races, including the Dragon race of which Lord Indrath, Sylvia, and Windsom were members, held distinct creation-type mana art.

While the Dragon race were feared for their unique, mysterious aether mana art, it was still considered creation-type. Of course, the asuras' terms for creation-, force-, and decay-type mana arts differed for each race, but I had simplified it for my own ease.

There hadn't been time for us to go over the special qualities each race held before we had arrived at Elder Rinia's home, but I had a feeling I would be learning that later on.

"Has Lord Indrath truly granted you the aether orb?" Kordri's even voice snapped me out of my train of thought. He peered curiously at Windsom.

"Yes, it is right here." Windsom produced a spherical object the size of his palm, revealing it to Kordri.

"Lord Indrath is truly investing much in this human," the monkish man sighed, admiring the orb.

Windsom glanced back to meet my eyes, giving me an 'I told you so' look before turning back.

"Arthur, come and sit here with us," Kordri said, gesturing to a space next to him. "I'll explain how your training will begin."

"Windsom believes it will be best for your training to start with me instead of him, for a few reasons. First, your body and mana core are not nearly strong enough to handle the sort of training that even young asuras are capable of. If we did not have the resources readily available, it would take decades for you to physically absorb anything we could teach you." The asura looked at the orb in Windsom's hand before continuing. "Fortunately, we have the aether orb."

I knew he was expecting me to ask. "What exactly is this aether orb?"

"Arthur," Windsom said, "you may not know this, but the Dragon race is considered, among the asuras, the race closest to being gods. Yes, actual gods. The reason for this is that we have the ability to manipulate aether. Aether is a material that flows throughout the entire universe. As you know from receiving Lady Sylvia's will, aether contains the power to manipulate even space-time itself—as evidenced by your recent experience with Lord Indrath. Aether's full potential remains incomprehensible even to the Indrath clan, but one artifact that has remained in our possession since the beginning of our clan's history is the aether orb. This treasure has allowed our clan to gain glimpses of the powers aether holds—one being the ability to separate the body from the soul." Windsom regarded the orb with near reverence as he held it tenderly.

Kordri continued where Windsom left off. "The orb also has the power to manipulate time. With the aether orb's abilities, your training can progress at a rate and an efficiency that would be impossible otherwise. Because of the close relationship between the Thyestes clan and Indrath clan, Lord Indrath decided to gift us with the use of this treasure from time to time."

"Remember me telling you that Lord Indrath has committed significant resources to making sure you will be ready for the upcoming battles?" Windsom asked. "Along with this orb, he has allowed us the use of his private training grounds. The aether-rich liquid inside that pond will help accelerate your training and heal the wounds that you incur throughout this process. Kordri here is a talented and highly respected teacher of the Thyestes clan. He will be responsible for the initial phase of your coaching." Windsom gave Kordri a stern nod as the two of them stood back up.

[&]quot;So what exactly will we be doing first?" I asked, almost timidly.

[&]quot;You will be fighting against Kordri in your soul state, and you will be dying. Over and over again."

SNAIL'S PACE

"Trust in your body, Arthur. As long as you are able, your body will be the only thing that will not fail you." Kordri's words rang softly in my ears, and a piercing pain forced my eyes open as I looked down to see Kordri's hand jutting out of my chest, unbloodied.

"Damn it." As the word left my tongue, the all-too-familiar sensation of being sucked out of the soul realm overwhelmed me once again.

As soon as I awoke back in the cave, my hands shot to my chest, prodding for a hole that wasn't there.

I fell to my back in the shallow pool. "How long this time, Windsom?"

"Two minutes," he replied. "Arthur, the more you are forced out of the soul realm, the more time is wasted in your training. An hour out here equates to roughly twelve in there, but it will still not be enough if you are expelled every few minutes."

"Don't blame me, blame your friend who's killing me those 'every few minutes," I groaned. It was impossible to get used to the sensation of dying. Even if my physical body wasn't getting injured, the mental trauma and stress would be enough to make even veteran fighters go insane.

I wasn't sure just what the two asuras were thinking, putting a teen through this sort of nightmarish training.

"I am doing only what you are able to handle," Kordri responded, as if he had read my mind. "You are a resilient child, though. It makes me curious why

that is. Even young asuras, who don't die nearly as often as you do, have a hard time coping with the stress."

I figured my mental strength was probably due to the fact that I had lived two lives—but even so, this training was beginning to take a toll on me.

Windsom nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, I was also worried at first, considering the number of times Arthur was expelled from the soul realm."

"Well, time to get training again. Are you ready, Kordri?" I gave one last stretch before returning to a sitting position.

He nodded, chuckling. "I will always be ready, greenhorn."

"Remember, Arthur, while you are training in the soul realm, your physical body will also be refining your mana core. The longer you are able to last in the soul realm, the faster your cultivation will go. Don't overexert yourself—we are only a week into your training. We still have some leeway, but not if you take on more than you can handle," Windsom cautioned as he activated the aether orb.

Once again, Kordri and I were back on the same grassy field that expanded endlessly into the horizon. It had been eight days since I had started this torturous training. One hour outside the soul realm equated to twelve within it, so twenty-four hours out there translated to twelve days in here. Even counting the time spent eating, sleeping, and resting in the physical realm after dying too many times in the soul realm, I had spent well over two months in this grassland training with the even-tempered and patient monk, Kordri.

"I can tell you are well-versed in physical combat, Arthur, but you have become overly reliant on the use of mana arts—or what you lesser races call magic. By my guess, you are much more accustomed to shorter battles and duels. Proper conservation and distribution of mana has never been a priority, right?" Kordri speculated.

"More or less. I'm only thirteen, remember?" I countered innocently.

"Sure." The asura shrugged, shooting me a look that told me he didn't buy it.

"You are only human, meaning you are bound by certain limitations. You are a long way from reaching white core stage, let alone the integration stage. My job, therefore, is to train your body. After all, the less mana you expend on protecting yourself, the more flexibility you have in other areas of its use. Now, I've wasted enough time talking—let us begin."

"Yes sir," I answered, getting into a defensive stance. Kordri's figure vanished and reappeared an arm's length in front of me.

The first time I had come to the soul realm for training, he had killed me with the first blow. I had been unable to even react. Even when I hadn't been killed, I'd jolted out into the physical realm at the slightest blow, because my soul wasn't used to taking on injuries. The second time, the third, fourth—all the way up to the twenty-eighth time, I had been thrown out of the soul realm with the first hit. But the twenty-ninth time, I was able to dodge, just barely. Enough to persist until the second blow, at least. Residing and training in the soul realm was difficult, to say the least; only after a few weeks of dying in the soul realm was I able to last long enough to actually call it training.

Kordri followed his left jab to my neck with a right elbow to my sternum. It was only when we fought that I realized how terrifying Kordri was. His meek temperament disappeared, replaced by the aspect of a cold, ruthless warrior capable of killing me more than a hundred times in the span of a few seconds. The asura's limbs were moving at such high speed they seemed to vanish. I was only able to dodge because Kordri's attack pattern was always the same. Of course he was doing this on purpose—the asura had explicitly told me the choreography of his strikes, and had never once deviated from that since the beginning of our training. It was pathetic—I was barely able to dodge an attack that I already knew was coming, but that was the difference between us.

Beads of sweat flew off my face and body and I was scarcely able to keep up with Kordri's onslaught. Seconds melded together, forming minutes with increasing slowness as my sense of time dulled. The longer we fought, the

more mistakes I made. No matter how long I lasted, he would eventually strike me down. Yet, in all the weeks I'd spent fighting Kordri, I hadn't landed even a single blow; every one of my strikes had met with thin air.

"Good! You are keeping up longer than usual. Do not get sloppy, Arthur. Remain patient and bide your time if you do not see an opening," the asura shouted. He continued striking me, simultaneously—and easily—dodging all my feeble attempts to land a blow.

In that moment, I made a blunder. Kordri's sequence of attacks was strategically timed so that if I didn't dodge them by just a hair's breadth, I wouldn't be able to avoid the next attack. While I did avoid his spinning elbow, my movement had been uncontrolled, and I'd leaned too far back to dodge it. I was instantly met with a low sweep that I couldn't avoid.

I chose to give up my left foot in response, knowing I wouldn't be able to completely avoid the sweep. As I expected, the crunching blow shattered my left ankle, but I continued dodging.

Even in here, where I knew it wasn't real, I didn't want to die.

"Sloppy, but nice follow up. Stay levelheaded, and do not grow desperate," he repeated, executing his next blow.

Even with my broken ankle, I was able to somehow dodge more of Kordri's restrained attacks—then he did something he hadn't done before.

I was expecting a forward knee to my stomach, as he had always done after a right strike, but instead he shifted his body to perform a roundhouse kick with his left leg.

I wasn't able to dodge his foot, but I was able to keep myself from dying instantly. Instead of snapping my neck, his kick connected squarely with my jaw.

The world tumbled around me and I felt myself skipping like a flat rock across the surface of a lake. Finally I tumbled to a painful stop on a bed of tall grass.

I wasn't able to speak due to the bottom half of my face being completely

mutilated, and it took most of my mental capacity to suppress the excruciating pain, but that didn't stop me from good-naturedly extending a middle finger at my mentor.

Responding with a smirk, he helped me up. "You managed to not get yourself killed," he said, seeming impressed. "Rest until your soul state is healed."

Even as he said this, I could already feel my body—that is, my soul state—recovering. The broken fragments of my bones fused together as torn muscle fibers, tendons, and ligaments reattached themselves. Someone who hasn't experienced such a sensation might think the act of healing so fast would be comforting or soothing, but it was actually just as painful, if not more so, than the injury that had caused it.

I kept telling myself that experiencing agony like this, becoming accustomed to it, would be useful later on. I hoped it would get me through this torture every time we trained, but I was on the verge of breaking.

It had barely been a week, yet, because of the time distortion in this world, it felt as if months had passed. My progress as a mage had always been unrivaled, so training here like this—where my biggest achievement in two months had been staying alive for longer than five minutes against someone who was purposely restraining himself—I couldn't help but become frustrated and impatient.

"We should take a break from combat training for a while." Kordri's sudden statement took me by surprise. Seeing as he specialized in hand-to-hand combat, I wasn't sure what else he would be teaching me.

"What do you mean? Am I not learning fast enough?"

"No, it's not that. Actually, your ability to grasp and comprehend is frightening. Coupled with your stubbornness, it's no wonder that your potential as a mage is beyond anyone else's. However, because of that stubbornness of yours, I'm afraid you are going to break down if we keep going at the current pace," my trainer answered as he sat down.

"Break? I thought the realm inside the aether orb wouldn't allow me to die?

And besides, with the regeneration speed of my soul state, as long as you don't kill me instantly, I should be okay, right?"

The four-eyed asura lifted his gaze and regarded me sternly. "I'm not talking about damaging your body, Arthur. I'm talking about injuring you *here*," he said, tapping his head.

"You think this is hurting me psychologically?" Perhaps it was the same stubbornness that Kordri had just mentioned, or a layer of pride that had made me ignorant of this possibility, but I couldn't bring myself to agree with him.

"Arthur. Training here with me, you are experiencing death constantly—on a daily basis. More than that, death has no longer become the endpoint for you, but a precursor to a level of pain that even asuras can find daunting." Kordri got up from the ground as he explained. "Even if it won't damage your body, that kind of trauma will eventually get in the way of producing the sort of fighter I am trying to train you to become. With this type of pain, in these amounts, your body will instinctively try to save itself, regardless of whether you want it to or not. Just enough pain, and it will be your most reliable sword and shield."

I thought about Kordri's words for a moment. I understood where he was coming from, but having lived through two lives, I considered myself an exception. Perhaps I was being arrogant, but I felt like I could take it. "Honestly, Kordri, I'm fine, we don't n—"

I didn't even have time to consciously process what happened next. One moment, I was speaking; the next, an overwhelming sense of dread crashed down on me like a tsunami. Then I was several yards away from the asura with my sword, Dawn's Ballad, held tightly in my grasp. My eyes focused back on Kordri, only to see the asura with a flower in his hand.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

Just as I let my guard down, Kordri's figure flickered and vanished, without

even a trace of presence or intent.

A searing pain made me look down.

My mentor's hand, once again, pierced straight through my chest. As I tried to pull myself away from him, I collapsed.

The asura withdrew his hand and kneeled down so he was level with me. Giving me a gentle smile, he continued, "Even the gods may not know what sort of life you truly led, but it is because of your past experiences that you could lose like this. You trust too deeply in your instinct, Arthur, and while it is a useful tool, it should not be relied upon to the exclusion of all else. Small steps, Arthur. You have much to learn, but much to *unlearn* as well."

As he ruffled my hair, I thought again of the time I had spent in the institution during my past life as an orphan; the times I'd had to teach myself from what little useful information and tools I could gather. I realized that, for the first time in either life, I had finally gained an actual mentor to train me in combat —a mentor wise and powerful enough that, even with my unique past and monstrous potential, I could simply be a student hungry to learn.

"Do you understand, Arthur?" Kordri asked as he got up and extended his hand.

"You bet." I accepted his hand and pulled myself back to my feet. My body still trembled, but whether it was from the lethal wound in my chest, the excitement of my future prospects, or the anticipation of being under skilled mentors, I couldn't say.

I had a feeling it was a mixture of all three.

THE LOST ART

HE WAS A MONSTER... a true predator.

That was the only thing that came to mind when he released the shackles he had put on himself for my safety, when he released that petrifying pressure.

The paralyzing fear slowly spread through my body like a snake's deadly venom. I clenched my sweaty hands, tightening the hold on my sword. The muscles in my legs continuously twitched, fighting the impulse to whirl around and sprint away. Salty blood filled my mouth as I bit down on my bottom lip. Holding my blade up, I approached the oppressive aura emanating from my teacher.

Sweat stung my eyes like a blazing fire, but I dared not blink. Slowly, painfully, my brain sent signals and I picked up my feet, moving them in a cautious but steady gait as I walked toward the manifestation of fear itself.

"I'm coming, Arthur. Prepare yourself!" His voice rang clearly within the cloud of menacing air.

I forced my tightened jaw to relax. Despite the fact that I already lacked the air to breathe, I let out a barbaric roar, dispelling some of the chilling fear that gripped my insides. "Damn it all!"

The teal blade in my hands dimmed as I drew near Kordri, as if even my sword was afraid. But I kept walking, feeling with each step as if I was trying to wade through wet cement.

When my blade was finally within range of him, I cleaved down, hoping to

end this in one strike—but of course it didn't. Kordri parried Dawn's Ballad like it was a foam stick, creating an arc with his own blade. Just before my sword hit the ground, I used the momentum to spin myself, whirling my blade back around at Kordri's knees.

Kordri's short sword easily blocked mine, stopping it just short of his leg. Knocking Dawn's Ballad away, my teacher threw a swift kick at my face. I could hear the sharp whistle of air, and I dodged in time to bring my sword around into an upward swipe.

Kordri turned his face to the side and my blade whizzed harmlessly by his ear.

"Your movements are getting better, even with my aura's suppression." I knew he was just complimenting me, but the fact that he was able to talk leisurely while dodging my blows came off as annoyingly smug.

It was becoming harder to breathe, and I realized I was almost at my limit. One more desperate lunge toward Kordri was all I could manage before Dawn's Ballad fell to the ground, my hands unable to grip it any longer. Then my legs gave out and I fell to my knees, and I was left choking for air inside the confines of his hellish aura.

"Not bad." As Kordri's voice reached my ears the pressure disappeared. Without the suffocating aura affecting me, I desperately sucked in air.

Over a month had passed in the outside world, and over a year in the soul realm. A year of continuous, torturous training—Kordri's short lectures being the only breaks I had.

Over the course of the month that had passed in 'real' time, I'd had no contact with Sylvie. I thought of her often, when I had time to think at all. I missed my bond, but at some point I began to understand why the separation was necessary. My deaths became much less frequent as my training went on, and so we spent more of our time within the soul realm. It was better that Sylvie had her own training to occupy her than for her to sit in the cave next to my comatose body for days at a time.

We had last left the soul realm about four months ago—which translated to a little short of two weeks outside in the real world. Apparently the pool was capable of nourishing our bodies, or maybe suspending them would be a better word. I didn't entirely understand it, but then, the nature of the pool and the aether orb weren't exactly the focus of my lessons.

Kordri pushed me to my limits and beyond. He was an exceptional trainer, and I was an avid student. Still, I longed for my family and friends. There were so many matters I felt I had put off, and I was continuously filled with regret when I thought about them. Elijah had been taken away to who-knewwhere; I wasn't even sure if he was still alive. I also don't know whether Tessia had awoken—moreover, I had left my family on such bad terms...

I knew that training was the best thing to do right now, but it ate away at me whenever I thought about it. It didn't help that, after spending a year here, the only thing I had to show for it was being able to endure Kordri's killing intent —or "King's Force," as he called it—long enough to have a short exchange before plopping to the ground like a dead fish.

"H-how—how long... did I last?" I panted, rolling onto my back.

"You're improving," he replied, dodging my question.

I sat up, turning around to face him as I caught my breath. "Not long enough, right?"

"Don't dwell on the seconds. We are not seeking a specific duration, understand?" He said it sternly, more a statement than a question. "Now, again—but this time, no weapons."

"Again?" I let out a sigh, picking up my trusted blade and sheathing it.

Kordri tossed his own sword onto the grass before explaining. "I know you prefer sword fighting, and I have to say that Dawn's Ballad is a fine partner to have. But as a mage, hand-to-hand combat continues to be the most versatile and adaptive form of fighting. *If* you have the patience to learn, that is.

"Once I have drawn out the maximum potential of your human body, my role

as your teacher will be complete. For the sake of the coming war, I will mold your bones, develop your muscles, and train your mind to its limits so that you can be the knight who protects your continent and your loved ones," Kordri continued, putting some distance between us. "It is obvious that you have had training in melee combat, much more than a normal child. However, as I have said before, your fighting style is better suited for dueling against a single opponent."

I nodded in agreement. In my previous life, the majority of my fights had been in the form of duels, as was the custom there. Wars were rarely held, and even if they were, kings did not participate in them directly. After all, our lives were too valuable to risk.

"Since asuras are not allowed to join in this war, their descendants, the mixed-bloods, will be their strongest forces. Your primary duty in the upcoming war will be to take care of the mutts the Vritra clan sends as generals or strike forces. You are incredibly strong, Arthur, but so are they, and do not think they'll line up and take turns fighting you. Expect to be put in a situation where you will be surrounded by enemies with asura blood coursing through their veins." Kordri calmly circled around me with his hands behind his back. "Of course, you will not have a mana restriction placed on you as you do now, so you would be free to wreak havoc. However, you will also have to take into account that there might be ally soldiers or even civilians nearby. What will you do then? When it comes down to it, physical combat, augmented with proper and precise mana usage, will be the most efficient and dependable way of disposing of your enemies. Especially if they are at a higher caliber than the mages you are familiar with."

"I understand." I adopted an offensive stance, with my leading hand relaxed and my right hand curled into a fist by my jawline.

"The first lesson I taught you was how to stay alive. More specifically, you were to become adept at fighting at higher speeds while trying to dodge a set

routine of attacks. While I won't tell you how much I have restricted myself when fighting you, I will say that your agility has improved to a level I deem adequate. Your next lesson was fighting under conditions of substantial pressure. Combat under the effects of my King's Force—killing intent, as you call it—has considerably strengthened your tolerance these past few months. There is room for improvement in both areas, but for now, it is time for the third lesson…" Kordri's voice trailed off as he came to stop in front of me.

"Your field of vision is too narrow, too focused." His voice resounded in my ears as if he were right behind me, and as I watched, the figure of Kordri that I had been concentrating on wisped away.

I realized it had been an afterimage and whipped my head back, but I was too late. A clean blow to my back sent me tumbling forward, taking in a mouthful of grass as I landed. Although it wasn't the most appropriate moment, I had to admire how realistic the soul realm was. The chunks of grass and dirt in my mouth tasted exactly as I would have imagined.

I stood back up, groaning as I stretched my back. "I thought we weren't allowed to use mana," I said, spitting the grass out of my mouth.

"I didn't use mana. Remember, my physiology is fundamentally different from yours. I will restrain myself, but it is inevitable that I will be naturally faster, quicker, and stronger than you. Now come," he instructed, beckoning with one hand.

I immediately propelled myself toward my instructor, getting within range to attack at a speed that would put professional short distance sprinters to shame. The mechanics of my body had definitely improved while training with Kordri. My rear foot rotated as I spun my hips to put as much momentum as possible into my strike. When I unleashed my right fist, I could feel all my muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones working in harmony, like a well-oiled machine. Without even using mana, I was still able to put enough power into the punch to surprise Kordri.

He dodged my blow at the last second, and I could see his lips curl up slightly as he unexpectedly ducked underneath my right arm. All I felt was a light tug at the leg and a gentle push on my hips, but all of a sudden, my face was half buried in the ground.

Never before had I been thrown so swiftly, so helplessly, and so painfully. The wind had been knocked out of me, and as I coughed, Kordri held his hand against my neck like the edge of a sword.

"I have to say, that was a very nice punch, Arthur. How much strength do you suppose you used releasing a strike of that power? Do you think you can do that for two days, three days straight? Can you do that for hours on end without pause, with little sustenance in your body to give you that energy?" Kordri kneeled down to assess the damage on my body. "How much energy do you think I spent tossing you? Remember, the more powerful your strike is, the less energy I have to expend."

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I sprang back up to my feet and took a stance.

"Energetic today, aren't we? Good," he replied, beckoning me once more.

Heeding his gesture, I approached as if I intended to launch the same punch I had done just a moment ago. Instead, I feinted and jumped up, driving my right knee at his jaw.

Again, Kordri's movements were not what I expected. I was used to exchanging blows with the asura, but this time, he used his left hand to gently shift the direction of my knee, simultaneously pushing himself to my right side. In a quick, fluid motion, my mentor grabbed the collar of my shirt at the back of my neck and executed a drop throw, propelling me to the ground head-first. The world turned black.

My ears were ringing fiercely when I woke up. I carefully stretched and massaged my neck, surprised it hadn't snapped cleanly in half from the force of his toss.

Maybe it was because of the blow to my head, but I suddenly recalled a name

for this type of combat. Aiki...do—yes, it was similar to aikido, an ancient form of combat that had been lost when the practice of traditional martial arts had declined after contemporary forms of combat became more widely used. After I had become king in my previous world, I'd had access to numerous archives, including those pertaining to martial arts and the art of dueling. I had glanced briefly through a book on the art of throws, but took little interest in anything besides the concept of capitalizing on the momentum of an opponent. Of course, I made much use of that knowledge, but did little to learn the art of throwing; it had seemed inefficient at the time.

"We talked about proper conservation and distribution of mana in prolonged battles, correct? Well, it goes without saying that it should be the same for your body as well. No matter how much mana you have flowing through you, it cannot act as a battery to power up your body. Mana, like a sword, is a tool for you to control and utilize. Your body is the centerpiece that brings the tools together to create a true warrior. Now, you are healed, yes? Come," Kordri commanded.

Wordlessly, I got back to my feet and dashed once more toward my mentor.

"Your body is capable of being all kinds of weapons," Kordri explained, taking an offensive stance. "For example, your fist can become a hammer or bludgeon, powerful enough to destroy walls," he said, throwing a simple punch.

Dodging his first strike, I lowered my center of gravity and released a punch toward his solar plexus.

In a smooth, liquid motion, Kordri pivoted, wrapping his own arm around the arm I had just attacked with and redirecting my fist with a flick of his wrist. "It can also become a whip to lock and deflect the opponent's attack."

"Your hands can be blades; your legs, axes—all depending on the user," Kordri said as he whirled around and placed his palm on my back. "And they can also be a cannon, capable of blasting your foes to pieces. Defend yourself with mana, Arthur. I will allow it," he instructed.

I wrapped my body tightly in a layer of mana, focusing mostly on the area where Kordri's palm was placed.

The deafening blast of the sound barrier being broken almost distracted me from the pain spreading throughout my body as I hurled through the air like a bullet. It was impossible to tell how many bones I had broken, how many organs had collapsed. My vision darkened and I felt my body being sucked out of the soul realm.

When I opened my eyes, I was in the familiar cave again, drenched in the mysterious liquid as well as my own sweat—and probably my tears. A wave of nausea hit me, as if Kordri had actually just punched a hole through my sternum. I buckled forward and heaved.

"Ugh," I moaned, trying to collect myself. Kordri was still in front of me, his expression soft and sympathetic; then his gaze shifted to something behind me.

"Ah, you're here," he said, standing up.

I turned around, looking past Windsom and focusing on a figure I didn't recognize—a boy who looked to be about seven years old at most, though he stood almost five feet tall. He took a step toward us and bowed respectfully in my direction. His head was shaven like Kordri's, but he only had two eyes, nut-brown in color. He was skinny but not sickly, with a well-toned body that didn't match his childish face.

"I'm sorry for my tardiness, Master," the boy said, raising his head and then tilting it as he regarded me. I could see him giving me the once-over, and when he locked eyes with me once more, it was with a look of haughty derision.

Getting angry at a child younger than my sister was beneath me, I thought, so I just raised a brow and turned back to face Kordri.

"Who's the kid?" I asked casually.

"Arthur, I'd like you to meet Taci—your new training partner."

GOOD NIGHT

"Training partner?" the boy echoed before I had the chance to respond.

"Master, I thought you wanted me to come here so I could finally get a chance to receive some individual training—"

"Taci, you will be training, while you spar with Arthur. Now come here so we can begin." Kordri gestured toward the obviously dissatisfied child.

"Master, what benefit will come from training with this... lesser being?" he grumbled, shooting an annoyed look at me.

It was odd, hearing a child so haughtily complain using diction and syntax so at odds with his babyish appearance and undeveloped, tenor voice.

"Arthur"—Kordri emphasized my name—"has been receiving special training from me. Sparring with him will help with your development. You have been given the rare honor of training with the aether orb, yet you dare complain?"

"N-no, I would never defy your instructions, Master. This pupil only thinks it beneath you to waste your time training a mere human when the Thyestes clan has many pupils awaiting your mentorship," the child named Taci clarified, lowering himself in another bow.

I didn't want to stoop to his level by being offended, but I had to admit the boy seemed to have a knack for pissing people off.

With a defeated sigh, Kordri continued, "Taci, you are one of my most talented pupils, but your arrogance will hinder you." He turned to Windsom,

who was seated on the other side of the pool, holding the orb. "Windsom, will you be okay keeping up the aether orb with an additional person?"

"Three people won't be a problem," the asura replied.

Keeping my thoughts to myself, I returned to my meditating position inside the pool. The child jumped in as well, ignoring me, and sat down so that the three of us formed a triangle. Once more, we were back in the grassy meadow.

"Arthur, while the members of the Pantheon race all differ in their utilization of what you call 'force-type mana,' Taci has been training in the special arts of the Thyestes clan. As I have shown you, one of the primary components of our combat art is swift, precise strikes, coupled with throws that take advantage of momentum and center of gravity. By perceiving where the opponent is distributing their weight and momentum, we can match our attacks to properly take advantage of their strengths. By doing this, we use little effort to dispel their attacks, and conserve our strength for when we attack," my mentor explained.

Taci sat beside Kordri with his arms crossed, never taking his contemptuous eyes off of me.

"When learning these techniques, even our own disciples are forbidden to use mana until they can properly display the basics. I am not saying this to boast, but our clan's fame comes from the deadliness of our combat art. When watching a master, you will see that our form of fighting is both fierce and fluid, like a deadly cyclone. I have shown you only a glimpse of this, Arthur, but I want you to train by fighting against Taci," Kordri continued, then turned his attention to the child. "Taci, you are to use your full strength to fight against Arthur. Do not worry about fatal injuries or death here."

I rolled my eyes at the delighted smirk on Taci's face as he heard this. However, his smug expression immediately disappeared when he heard what his master said next. "Arthur, you are not to use any mana. I will not be applying any pressure on you for now, but expect it to come later on. You are

not allowed to attack Taci at all—you are to simply block and deflect. The only form of offensive maneuvers you are permitted are throws."

"M-Master? This doesn't make any sense," Taci stuttered, shocked. "Shouldn't you be putting restrictions on *me* instead of the human? Do you mean to say that, without these handicaps, he would be able to defeat me?"

"Taci, I am growing tired of your whining. Do you doubt me?" Kordri's eyes grew sharp as he spoke. His expression was merciless, and Taci immediately shut his mouth as he frantically shook his head.

I'd never had the chance to indulge in this feeling—this satisfying sense of victory over a cocky kid when the adult unexpectedly sided with me. "Now, begin."

KORDRI

Saying that I was simply surprised would be a lie. No, the more accurate word would be astonished. I'd had a feeling that it might end up this way, but not this soon. Arthur Leywin... what a truly mysterious individual.

Although only seven years of age, Taci had displayed an unusual amount of talent from the beginning. He had covered the basics of combat art in a quarter of the time it took the rest of his class. His mana distribution was rough but improving at a rate that even the clan elders had to admire. He was to be the next generation's star. Yet even with all of the restrictions in place, Arthur was still holding on.

No, it was more than that now—Arthur was slowly beginning to catch up.

In the span of only a few days inside the soul realm, Arthur had begun to match Taci. Though he had not yet learned the true combat art of the Thyestes clan, he was devouring our knowledge like a starving beast and making it his own.

Despite the speed and power of Taci's attacks, Arthur was able to persist against him. With each punch, kick, slash, and throw Arthur faced, his steps, his shifts, his movements... they were all becoming faster and sharper, as if

his body was instinctively paring away unnecessary movement. His improvement was coming at a speed that was easily discernible even to one not trained in combat. How was this possible? What was his past like? How many people must he have fought in order to develop this aberrant level of perception?

In all my years as both a warrior and mentor, I had never come across a feeling like this before. I had trained hundreds in the art of combat, young and old. I'd nurtured pupils who had gone on to become leading figures in the Thyestes clan, but even so, training this boy Arthur introduced me to a sensation that I'd never felt before.

As I taught him, I constantly felt a sense of excitement, awe, and pride welling up, emotions that I did not even feel toward myself. It was similar to the experience of unearthing an unknown yet obviously precious gem. Arthur was still dull and rough, but with each polishing stroke, he shone brighter and brighter. There was no telling what the final product would look like, and the longing I felt to find out was exhilarating. Would he have the chance to develop to his full potential? Or would he run out of time first?

Had he been born an asura, he would have been a prominent figure even in the highest echelons of power. However, the gods had placed him in a lesser body to be merely a pawn—utilized until no longer needed.

Such a pity.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

This arrogant brat.

If it weren't for the restrictions Kordri had placed on me, I would've painted the grass with his blood and tears.

The past few days had been filled with nothing but frustration and resentment for the fact that I was unable to do anything against him. Taci was obviously annoyed that his master regarded him so poorly, and, coupled with the innate condescension he had toward my race, this led to me being tossed around like a rag doll and eating too many strikes to contain my temper.

While his attacks weren't at Kordri's level in terms of fluidity and compact precision, they were still at a faster level than I was used to, as his every movement was reinforced with mana.

I almost lost my life on the first strike. It was only the fact that his body gave away his next move that let me dodge the attack. Combining the experience I had with fighting and dueling from my past life and this one, I was able—to an extent—to anticipate my opponent's next move based on his posture and movement. This ability varied, depending on how capable a fighter the opponent was, but Taci, though well-versed in his clan's form of martial arts, was still lacking in fighting experience.

Unlike Kordri, who had no openings or flaws in any of his micromovements, Taci was basically telegraphing his every move. Dodging, however, was a whole different problem. While his attacks had openings, they were still at a level far above anyone I had faced. If it weren't for the extent of my experience, I would've been thrown out of the soul realm right away. The power and sheer speed of his onslaught could have made any S-class adventurer curl up in utter subjection.

The air around him whistled with the force of his strikes, and every time I parried his blows, my arms throbbed with pain.

Gritting my teeth, I ignored the pain and persisted. It wasn't enough just to be fast. I needed to be *faster than him*. In order to do that, I needed to minimize my movements. The only way I could dodge successfully without using mana was to cut down my maneuvers to the bare necessities. If I couldn't do that, I would soon be overwhelmed.

"You should go back to your kind instead of wasting my master's time," Taci cursed as he unleashed another barrage of strikes. He seemed to want to hit me squarely instead of merely tossing me to the ground. I felt the same way. But I didn't have the luxury of being able to respond, so I just gritted my

teeth and focused even harder.

Faster.

"My mother and father told me how weak you lesser beings are; it looks like that's true. I don't understand why we asuras were given the awful job of looking after you," he growled, turning and releasing an upward knee jab.

I felt a sharp pain in my ear and was barely able to dodge the full brunt of the attack with a quick turn of my neck.

Faster.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed; I was used to sparring for hours with Kordri, but this seemed much longer. As Taci continued his relentless assault, my body became a canvas of cuts and bruises.

Not enough; faster.

The asura child was obviously growing frustrated, and he began trying to go for throws as well. I could see his hand extend like a claw, hoping to grip at a weak point. By now, however, I was growing accustomed to his movements, so dodging became easier. His strikes, which had once passed by me in a blur, were becoming apparent.

"If it weren't for the Vritra clan and their disgusting half-breeds, my master wouldn't have to be stuck here teaching you, hoping a dog could learn something meant for asuras," he spat venomously as he grew more annoyed. *Even faster*.

Sweat stung my eyes, impeding my vision. Blades of grass flew around us as our movements lifted chunks of dirt into the air.

Faster, damn it!

My body was beginning to protest, my mind growing dull. My movements were becoming sharper, but, due to fatigue, there was a jolt of pain each time I dodged.

What was I supposed to do? I wasn't used to fighting for this long, and dodging attacks of this caliber was wearing me down at an even faster pace than usual.

If I reduced my speed, I would bear the full brunt of Taci's childish rage, but I wasn't sure how much longer I could continue to maintain this pace.

My mind whirled trying to think of an answer. *Think, Arthur*. What had Kordri stressed this whole time? *Conservation and proper distribution of mana and energy*. Taci's form of fighting wasn't as concise as Kordri's, but since he was reinforcing his body with mana, he wasn't tiring as easily as I was.

Fluidity.

Yeah, fluid. Arthur, you dumbass, Kordri gave you the answer. Be fluid, but stay fierce. Like a cyclone.

The idea was clear in my head, but it was still horrifying trying to implement it when one mistake could easily mean my death. Even in the soul realm, it was scary.

Taci was also showing signs of wear; his once-smug face was lined with a tense exasperation. His bombardment never slowed, however, as he continued his storm of strikes and grabs.

Don't just dodge. Do more. Look for an opening in his attacks. Follow his movements and go along with them, not against them.

Another cut appeared on my cheek as Taci struck and I failed to properly execute the movement I had envisioned.

Not fast enough, Arthur.

His kick from the side landed squarely on my ribs, spinning me off balance.

I bit down on my lip to keep myself from buckling in pain. I knew that a few ribs were broken, which meant that an organ or two was probably punctured.

Faster. Don't go against his movement. Conserve energy. Be fluid.

Taking advantage of the fact that he had finally landed a solid hit, Taci immediately followed up with a right straight, his fist reinforced with a purple aura.

"Say goodnight," his snide voice rang out.

My brain screamed at me to duck, to cover my vitals, to avoid this punch. But

if I merely dodged, it would be impossible to avoid his next attack.

I ignored my instincts. Using the momentum from Taci's last kick, I whirled my body counterclockwise as his fist headed toward me. At the same time, I raised my right hand, timing it to meet with his.

If I failed in grasping the right timing or speed of this maneuver—if I was off by even a millisecond—my head would probably get blown off. I buried those thoughts and focused.

Time seemed to slow as my right hand grasped his right wrist. I immediately lowered my center of gravity and slung his arm over my shoulder, maintaining my body's spin. I could feel the force of Taci's punch as he was helplessly lifted from his feet.

Using the power of his own blow, I redirected his attack and propelled him to the ground.

What I didn't expect was that my throw would produce a crater the size of a house.

There in the middle of the devastation was Taci, sprawled out and gurgling blood, the whites of his eyes showing.

I collapsed to my knees, trying to catch a breath; I realized that the broken ribs had punctured one of my lungs. While I wouldn't normally condone bullying, especially not someone younger than myself, as I looked down at the sorry state of the brat, I gave a satisfied grin.

"Goodnight."

NEWFOUND GOAL

HE OVEREXTENDED HIS PUNCH; don't dodge, Arthur, duck under and move in. Her kick is too high, she's off balance; exploit that.

The left hook was premature. Lean your head back an inch.

That strike is slow enough parry it, grab ahold of the palm, and twist.

Watch out for the low sweep, but don't jump. There'll be a follow up attack waiting for you if you do. Move in toward the kick where it won't have much power.

There's an attack coming from behind. Don't waste time to look back; use his shadow instead.

Kick incoming toward the face, and another aimed at the ribs. Their attacks are becoming more coordinated.

Lower your body to dodge the kick aimed at your head, and block the one aimed at the ribs. Use the force of the kick to push away from the current disadvantageous position.

"Time!" Kordri's voice thundered, bringing us all to a standstill.

Of the four of them, only Taci didn't say anything, merely clicking his tongue in dissatisfaction before turning away.

"Enough! It is four against one and you still dare to complain after being

[&]quot;Damn it!"

[&]quot;So close!"

[&]quot;We could've had him if you had given us one more minute, Master!"

unable to land a single, solid hit on Arthur? I should have you lot retrained from the basics!" the four-eyed asura shouted in rebuke. Turning his attention to me, he shot me a smile of acknowledgment. "How do you feel, Arthur?"

Returning his smile and shaking off the stinging pain in my wrist from blocking the last attack, I replied, "Never better."

It had been four months since my arrival in Epheotus. I had spent nearly all of that time training within the soul realm. Thanks to the aether orb, I'd enjoyed more than three years of training under the tutelage of Kordri. Well, maybe enjoyed isn't the right word...

For those three years, I had done nothing aside from honing my body, my reflexes, and my acuity for combat. My fourteenth birthday had recently passed and it was very clear how much stronger I had become—compared to my skills now, my past combat abilities seemed about as coordinated as a toddler first learning to walk.

Kordri had also helped refine my mana to aid in combat, but he hadn't taught me anything new. Whether it was because of physiological differences between humans and asuras, or just the fact that he didn't want to—or wasn't allowed to—pass on the Thyestes clan mana arts to a non-clan member, I chose not to ask.

Even after all that time training under Kordri, I wasn't sure what exactly the "Thyestes clan mana arts" were, or what they were able to do, but that didn't matter. Just the fact that I had progressed to this level of physical combat was something to be thankful for.

As the soul realm grew dark, I opened my eyes to the familiar sight of the cave where I had physically spent the past year.

"Thanks again for helping me train, guys." I stood up and gave a respectful nod to the four novice Thyestes-clan children.

After about the first year inside the soul realm, sparring with just Taci had proved to have a limit, so Kordri had brought over more training partners. Eventually I reached the point where I was fighting on par with Taci and

three other young children of the Pantheon asura race.

Of course, the four of them weren't constantly inside the soul realm like I was. Because of that "unfairness," as they constantly complained, I had been able to catch up to them eventually.

All four, including Taci, kept a distance from me outside of training, often showing their displeasure at the thought of helping a lesser race train. It didn't help that I had become stronger than them. Of course, this was only the case because they weren't allowed to use their abilities to the fullest. Kordri had made it explicitly clear that we were to use mana only for strengthening our bodies; anything other than that would be considered foul play.

After we both emerged from the pool of blue liquid inside the cave, I turned and bowed respectfully. "Master Kordri. Thank you for training me."

"Mmm, it was a treat for me as well," he replied.

Giving my body a thorough stretch, I turned to face Windsom. "When is the next portion of our training?" I asked as I mentally searched for signs of Sylvie. For the past year, I hadn't been able to sense my bond, let alone communicate with her. It had become my custom to search for her every time I was thrown out of the soul realm, but each attempt proved fruitless.

"Hm? Ah, we will start the next portion of training soon..." Windsom trailed off, gazing at me with curiosity.

I raised a brow, confused by Windsom's demeanor, and shifted my gaze back and forth between the two asuras. "Is everything okay?"

"Nothing's wrong..." Kordri replied, tilting his head and studying me like a piece of abstract art.

"It's just that you have not changed," Windsom finished.

My heart began thumping louder at his words. What hadn't changed? My initial thoughts were of my mana core, but that wasn't it. My mana core had recently advanced into the latter levels of the light yellow—meaning I had progressed more than a full stage since starting my training here at the solid yellow stage. Windsom had come into the soul realm to watch the progress of

my training every now and then, so he should be well aware of my current level.

"Arthur, while training under the aether orb can be tremendously beneficial, it is strictly forbidden for use on children, or even young adults. You can guess why, right? The time discrepancy between the two realms can cause psychological displacement if a person is not yet fully developed mentally," Windsom explained.

"I was actually firmly against the use of the aether orb for that reason," Kordri confessed. "Even Lord Indrath was somewhat reluctant to have you train using it, for fear of the potential consequences for your mental well-being. However, because we have so little time before the war, there was no choice."

It took me by surprise to learn that Lord Indrath had shown any concern for my well-being, mental or otherwise. That wasn't the impression I had received when I had met him.

"Which is why I'm somewhat astonished at the fact that there is no change in you, Arthur. Your speech, your demeanor, your mentality—they are no different from what they were before the training began," Windsom said. "Essentially, your mind has aged three years during your training here, but you have not displayed any of the changes a normal child should have undergone."

I mulled this over for a moment. I realized now why Kordri hadn't let Taci and the other Thyestes clan children stay in the soul realm. The only reason I hadn't been affected by this phenomenon was because I'd had the mentality of an adult ever since my birth into this world.

"Windsom, you said yourself that I felt different from other children. I've been advanced for my age, mentally, for pretty much my whole life, to the extent that I've grown accustomed to consciously mimicking people of my own age to adapt socially," I answered at last.

"Well, it matters little to us. In fact, it is for the best that this regimen of

training did not result in any unwanted ramifications." Windsom looked thoughtful at first, but relaxed as he let out a sigh, then turned to Kordri and added, "Kordri, thank you for spending so much of your time and energy on training Arthur. Anyone else, even among the asuras, would be subpar compared to your expertise in close quarters combat."

"No thanks are needed. Arthur must be well trained if he is to have a chance against those mutts." Kordri placed a firm hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Remember that the mages in Alacrya have been taught and guided by asuras. Mana arts on that continent are generations more advanced than they are in Dicathen. So do not get overconfident just because you are receiving this sort of training. It frustrates me deeply that our hands are tied like this, but breaking the pact could result in a war that would destroy the world itself. If we don't want that, it is up to you and your peers to fight." Kordri's usually indifferent face wrinkled into a grave expression.

Then we said our goodbyes. Kordri and his four pupils left first, leaving only Windsom and me inside the unnaturally quiet training cave.

I sat on the cold floor of the cave, idly stretching while peeking every now and then at Windsom, and tried to guess what the asura was thinking as he regarded me closely.

Trying to break the palpably thick silence, I asked Windsom something that had been preying on my mind. "So, have you heard any news of Sylvie? Is she doing okay?"

"Lady Sylvie will be fine. No one would dare mistreat the direct kin of Lord Indrath, aside from Lord Indrath himself," he answered casually, seeming oblivious to the way the last bit of his statement sent a pang of worry down into my stomach.

Choosing not to dwell on the topic any longer, I simply nodded and continued stretching. Because I hadn't been physically using my body within the soul realm, it had grown stiff. One apparent power of the aether orb, or of the mysterious liquid I was submerged in, was that my physical body grew

stronger to match my soul form. As I stretched I focused on each part of my body in turn, feeling the ways it had been changed by the years of training with Kordri. Even in my old world, I'd never felt so in tune with my physical form. My hair had continued to grow as well, and was much longer than I was used to.

I still didn't understand the full capabilities of the aether orb, but the chance to train under these conditions would most likely never come again, so I had to make the most of it—

A shiver went down my spine as I suddenly realized the importance of what Kordri had said before leaving. The continent of Alacrya was sure to be more advanced in mana manipulation than Dicathen was. Even with the help of asuras teaching a handful of capable mages how to better utilize their mana, it wouldn't be enough if the enemy's armies were truly as strong as I was beginning to suspect.

In that sense, my training with Kordri may have been an inefficient use of time. What I had learned would make me a great combatant on any battlefield, of course, but considering my capabilities, I couldn't help but wonder if it would have been better for me to hone my long-range mana utilization. Of course, conjuring wasn't my specialty, but with my quadraelemental disposition and the amount of raw mana I possessed compared to other mages, surely it would be better if I were capable of leveling fields instead of learning to destroy enemies around me one at a time.

But when I thought back to my past as a commanding leader, it wasn't the number of soldiers that had posed the biggest threats. No, the ones who presented the most trouble were either leading them, or the few elite fighters capable of penetrating through our forces. I couldn't worry about every single insignificant combatant; I would just have to trust in our army to handle them. I realized then that Kordri was preparing me to face not armies, but the half-blood asura mutts that would surely be leading them.

"Here. I just received this from a messenger of Lord Indrath. It seems Aldir

has written of the events happening in Dicathen currently. I thought you might be interested." Windsom's voice was even as he handed me a few pieces of parchment filled to the edges with immaculate writing.

It was the first time I had received any sort of information from Dicathen. Though my time in Epheotus had flown by, even considering the time dilation effect of the soul realm, I had consistently grown more concerned about the well-being of everyone back home.

Had the war started yet?

What were they doing to prepare themselves for the upcoming battles?

These questions and many more had filled my head, sometimes even distracting me during training until I was smacked back to attention by the four pupils or Kordri himself.

Putting aside my questions, I plucked the paper from his hands and inhaled the words written on the document.

Apparently it had been made known to the higher-ups that Goodsky was a former spy, sent directly by the Vritra clan on behalf of Alacrya. A large portion of the written report was on Goodsky's intel on the political structure of Alacrya, which surprised me since she had told me of the powerful binding that kept her from even having the intention to reveal information.

I put aside my suspicions for now and focused back on the report.

Because of the physical presence of asuras in Alacrya, much of the hierarchy had become focused on the purity of one's blood. Basically, the closer someone was to asura lineage, the higher status they would hold on that continent. It seemed rather simple and shallow at first, but was Dicathen—or any other world—different? Of course, the purity of lineage wasn't as apparent on our continent, but it was rather easy to see the distinction between those of 'noble' blood and ordinary people.

I was willing to bet that those with a higher purity of asura blood would have stronger mage abilities. It was easy to predict that, within a few generations, there would be a clear division in class based on this fact alone.

The letter went on to say that Goodsky possessed very limited knowledge aside from the general hierarchy of the elite figures that Agrona himself had carefully raised and assembled. One part of the report caught my eye.

"So the information that Direc—that Cynthia Goodsky provided us—these so-called 'Four Scythes'—am I to assume that these will be my targets?" I asked without raising my eyes from the report. Aldir had noted further down that, of the potential obstacles, these Scythes, and the retainers under their respective commands, were of the highest priority.

"Ultimately, yes. But read on. What Cynthia Goodsky mentioned next is troubling, to say the least."

I did as I was told, and sure enough, the next paragraph of the report made me curse underneath my breath.

"...based on the density, purity of color, and concentration of lingering mana within the horn fragment retrieved from the site where former Lance Alea Triscan was killed, Goodsky has asserted that it belonged to a prime-blood of the retainer level of one of the Four Scythes," I read aloud. I assumed that the prime-blood was someone with mixed asura—more specifically, Basilisk—blood.

My mind drifted back to the night I had found Alea. I still remembered the last words we had exchanged after she gave me the very fragment Goodsky had mentioned. This meant that there was a retainer for each of the Four Scythes. Four retainers, each capable of easily dispatching a Lance, and four more who were at a level even above them.

Reading on, there was little else of importance to me. There were mentions of a coalition being formed between the humans and dwarves to manufacture armored ships, as well as reports of towering fortresses being built around harbor cities. Aldir had received reports of sightings of someone who may have been from Alacrya, which he recounted in the letter, but there was little other news. Still, it was obvious that there was a growing tension across the continent.

I could only begin to imagine the scale of this upcoming war. This wasn't simply a struggle between two rival countries—this would be two enormous continents sending millions of soldiers to fight for their land.

After letting out a deep breath, I gathered the pieces of parchment, stacking them neatly before handing them back to Windsom.

A mixture of emotions was brewing inside me. News from Dicathen had eased my concerns about my family and the progression of the war. The newly acquired knowledge about the strength of our enemies, on the other hand, sent a cold chill down my spine. Nonetheless I was excited and determined. I finally had a goal—a solid number of enemies to work with. I wasn't fighting random drones or ambiguous opponents about whom I knew nothing; I now had an objective and I had my targets.

"Windsom, let's start the next portion of training," I asserted, standing up and straightening my back.

TO HUNT A PREY

I PEERED ANXIOUSLY down from the edge of the cliff we stood on. The forest looked like one giant bush spilling over the visible horizon, with the cluttered trees blocking any view of what lay below. Large birds and other fearsome winged species hovered over the dense collection of green, diving in and retrieving their catch every so often. What scared me even more, however, were the occasional roars that echoed in the distance. I could only imagine how large those creatures must be if they were able to shake or even bring down the trees that blocked their paths as they traversed the dense wilderness. "This is where you will be training," Windsom announced, his gaze still fixed

on the forest.

"Of course it is," I sighed, making sure that the sack slung over my shoulder was tightly fastened. "Shall we?"

With a quick nod, we jumped off the cliff, spreading mana through our bodies while trying to balance against the harsh winds that buffeted us.

Just as we were about to plunge into the trees below, I willed an updraft beneath my feet to decrease the speed of my fall.

Windsom and I landed deftly in the massive realm of woodland, and the atmosphere changed drastically. The ground beneath my feet was soggy, like walking on foam; the damp earth relented beneath my weight, hugging my boots and gently releasing them with each step I took.

My nose was bombarded with scents from the abundant foliage, mixed with

the underlying damp smell of moss, dirt, and decay from fallen lumber.

"You have given me everything except for the items in your bag, correct?" the asura asked, holding his palm out in case I had missed something.

"Everything I own, which isn't much, is in that dimension ring. Anything else you wish to take from me? My clothes? A kidney or lung perhaps?" I quipped, looking around at my surroundings.

"Amusing," the asura replied flatly, withdrawing a book from his cloak. "Now, since you were so adamant about having complete mastery over your internal mana control—"

"I just said it wasn't necessary to waste time training that explicitly," I countered.

"In any event, I will consider your level sufficient when you have retrieved these three things for me." He pointed at the open book.

"The pelt of a raptor squirrel, the beast core of a silver panther, and the claws of a titan bear," I read aloud, absorbing the black and white drawings of each of the mana beasts. "And these items will prove, somehow, that I am ready to learn more about the will that Sylvia left with me?" I handed the book back to him.

"In a way. Of course, that is on the condition that you do not use any external mana arts whatsoever. Ah, and you are to wear this at all times," Windsom added, handing me a bell roughly the size of my fist.

"I really do have to question your training methods." I sighed again as I held up the silver bell, triggering a series of vibrant rings way too loud for a single bell to make.

"When you've collected all the things on the list, let me know by breaking the bell." He turned around, preparing to leave, but stopped. "Oh, and I recommend getting the items in that order."

Just like that, he was gone, deserting me in this forest with nothing but a bell, some blankets, and a leather pouch filled with fresh water.

I had no idea what exactly Windsom was trying to accomplish by having me

hunt for these items, but if that was what it took to speed up the training process, then that was reason enough.

"Let's see. First on the list is the pelt of a raptor squirrel," I mumbled to myself. It seemed simple enough, though of course I would have to capture one in a relatively good condition.

I pondered the three items Windsom had requested. If this was some form of a test to measure my internal mana manipulation, that meant that these mana beasts possessed skills which would require me to have a certain level of mastery over them. The first beast bore a vague resemblance to a squirrel, which most likely meant it was near the bottom of the food chain. And if that was the case, then it probably had some defense mechanism, like most prey animals, to protect itself and avoid being eaten.

According to the picture, the raptor squirrel looked a lot like any other squirrel, except with more prominent hind limbs, three thin tails, and beady eyes. I observed my surroundings, but had yet to see any wildlife.

Concentrating mana into my eyes, I enhanced and increased the range of my vision: nothing.

I made my way toward the other end of the forest, constantly on the lookout for any indication of fauna. Several hours passed, but still no signs.

"This damn bell!" I yelled louder than I had intended. The bell rang at the slightest movement I made, as if constantly mocking me, and deterred any creatures from coming near me.

As the sky darkened, so did my mood; all I had to show for the passage of time was my frustration at the lack of progress. Deciding to call it a night, I made camp out of the hollow trunk of a fallen tree.

To my irritation, I could hear small animals, hidden by the veil of darkness, come out around my campsite as soon as I lay down.

I moved carefully to get back up, but the ringing of the bell reverberated loudly through the otherwise silent night, causing the creatures to scurry away swiftly.

"I'll start fresh tomorrow," I told myself with a sigh, burrowing back into my blanket. A chill breeze flowed through the log I was nestled in—and through my clothes as well, shriveling me up.

Sometime later, I realized that a ray of light had somehow made it past the layer of leaves and branches and onto my face, rousing me from my slumber. I stayed hidden inside the log, though, keeping completely still so as to not agitate the bell. However, after a few hours, it was evident that the bell wasn't the only thing keeping the raptor squirrels well clear of me. The mana beasts at the bottom of the food chain, I realized, had probably developed extremely acute senses to make up for their lack of physical strength. Thus, even when I was nearly asleep and completely frozen, they still sensed a predator and kept their distance.

For now, hiding my presence was my best bet to hopefully lure the raptor squirrels out. How to catch them was something I would have to figure out later.

After a brief search, I found a decently situated shrub—thick enough to hide inside—close to a clearing. Making myself as comfortable as possible within the brittle branches and prickly leaves, I waited.

Withdrawing all the mana that continuously circulated in my body, I stayed motionless and observed the clearing. Because of my assimilation with Sylvia's will, my body was a lot sturdier than most humans', but I still felt a bit vulnerable, leaving my body unprotected in these unfamiliar grounds.

Minutes soon bled into hours as I waited. It wasn't enough to retract my mana; I soon realized it was absolutely necessary to clear my mind and intent when dealing with prey animals. I could feel my breathing soften, almost disappearing as I exhaled in sync with the occasional breeze that flowed by.

Finally, the fruits of my labor were revealed when a tiny snout popped out from one of the other bushes, curiously sniffing around for signs of danger. Soon, a few raptor squirrels scuttled about, their triple tails continuously twirling around like antennae, desperately trying to find food before predators caught wind of their presence.

I knew it was impossible to acquire the first item on my list today, so I used this opportunity to test some things out. I started by emitting just a bit of mana, and the raptor squirrels responded immediately, raising their hind legs to elevate their tails. They had obviously sensed the minute fluctuation of mana and were instantly alert, some even scurrying away.

I kept testing their limits, and learned three things. The first was that leaking even a bit of purified mana didn't necessarily drive them away, but alarmed them to a degree that it would be impossible to catch one. Exerting too much purified mana would undoubtedly cause them to immediately flee. The second interesting thing I learned was that internalizing mana inside my body did not trigger their alarm signal, but too much concentration and focus did force my intent to bleed out, causing them to scatter. The last thing I learned, and perhaps the most useful, was that external mana flow did not startle or even prompt them to take notice.

I learned this as I sat, hidden, meditating. When I was absorbing the surrounding mana, there were no signs of agitation from the raptor squirrels. It was only when I began actively purifying and condensing the mana that they started to notice something was wrong.

The testing took the whole day since I had to change locations every time I made them flee, but with these three observations, I finally had something to work with.

As I wrapped my blanket around me back inside the hollow log I had decided to use as a makeshift tent, I wondered if Sylvie was doing okay with her training. The same worries that I always carried ran through my mind as soon as I had some time to think. How was my family? How was Tessia? How was Elijah? Was he even alive? If so, would I ever get the chance to save him?

It seemed like I had been lost in my thoughts through the whole night, but at one point, my eyes snapped open to the soft glow of the morning sun.

After packing my scarce belongings, I filled my pouch with a puddle of

morning dew that had formed from nearby leaves and made my way to a clearing.

Today's goal wouldn't be observing or even catching a raptor squirrel. I wanted to test a little idea that I had based on the previous day's observations. I stood in the center of a small clearing surrounded by plants. Before me sat a small pile of mushrooms I had picked up along the way; I'd seen the raptor squirrels eating them, and so hoped they would work as bait. With the trap set, I put my theory into action.

Because my physiology was that of an augmenter, the mana channels responsible for effectively spreading purified mana from my core throughout the rest of my body were much more prominent than my mana veins, which were used to absorb unpurified, atmospheric mana into the body.

However, for this technique, I had to balance the output of purified mana from my mana core through my mana channels and the input of atmospheric mana through my mana veins.

With a perfect balance, I should be able to utilize mana without anyone, or anything, being able to sense that I was doing so. That is in theory, of course. My mana veins were naturally under-developed compared to my mana channels, so I started by matching the output of mana to the amount that I was able to input. The feeling was somewhat similar to when I first learned Mana Rotation from Sylvia but much harder.

The longer I practiced, the more evident it became that it wasn't as easy as I imagined it to be. A certain finesse was needed to accurately come to the point of equilibrium between the two opposing actions, despite doing it while standing still; attempting this while moving would be a whole other mountain to climb.

My perception of time had gotten lost somewhere in the middle of my practice, but to my surprise, when I opened my eyes for the umpteenth time, there were finally raptor squirrels eating from the pile of food I had set out. However, my delight was brief, because as soon as my concentration slipped,

they were immediately aware of the mana fluctuation I had been trying to camouflage.

"Yes!" I pumped my fist. My pace wasn't as fast as I had hoped, but it was still progress. The downside was that my mana supply ran out very quickly. Even the fact that I was almost at silver core stage didn't help; too much mana was being wasted with the improper utilization of this impromptu technique. I would be able to practice this for only a few minutes at a time before I had to stop and resupply my mana core.

The next morning, I kept to my routine, practicing in the middle of the same clearing. It wasn't until the fourth day that I felt I had enough control to try moving while maintaining my technique.

By the end of the week, I was able to move around slowly, but because of the bell tied to my waist, even when they couldn't sense mana, they fled—but I had already thought of this. If all it took was hiding my presence, I wouldn't have needed to find a way to utilize this technique.

I needed to be able to use mana in bursts, pouncing on the raptor squirrels before they could react to the sound of my bell. Drawing a line in the soft dirt and positioning myself in front of a designated tree as my target, I practiced.

I stopped as soon as the bell rang. My goal was to reach the tree by the time the bell chimed. To do this, I needed to utilize enough mana to instantaneously move at a speed fast enough to not shake the bell, all the while balancing the input and output of atmospheric mana and my purified mana to camouflage my presence from the raptor squirrel's tail.

"Again." I turned and walked back to the starting point after hearing the bell.

"Again," I repeated to myself.

As I continued, I realized that I was essentially aiming for something similar to the technique Kordri had once used when he was sparring with me. Controlling mana flow and power while manipulating your presence to either hide or emit it, throwing off your opponent's senses.

Erasing your presence by using the barely traceable atmospheric mana to

mask the output of your own mana, and instantly gaining speed to reach your opponent: Was this the skill that Windsom had been trying to test?

I tried again and again, failing each time, but with each attempt, I was able to get closer to the tree before the bell jingled.

It was just one step, but so much concentration and precision went into getting it even partly right.

However, this single, instantaneous step, coupled with the form of combat that I had been taught by Kordri, as well as the sword art that I had developed myself, could undoubtedly become a valuable trump card.

I remembered how disoriented and helpless I had been when Kordri had used this skill, erasing his presence as he attacked, while the next instant, he would emit his presence only to shift positions and throw me off. Although the asura wasn't using his mana in the same way as what I'm attempting to do, his innate power could be easily comparable to that of someone in the silver core stage.

"Almost," I encouraged myself, positioning myself for another attempt.

I wasn't sure how many hours had passed—the dense cluster of trees covered most of the sky—but I sank against a tree in exhaustion.

Days passed by this way as I continued practicing, until...

I laughed victoriously as I stared at the depressed dirt trail that I had made from the days of practicing this skill. While the rest of the ground was littered with leaves and broken twigs, the thin trail where I had constantly been dashing back and forth was paved clear.

I tried getting up, but my legs trembled in protest, too worn out to carry my weight. Still, I felt good for the first time since coming to this godforsaken forest. "I'll hunt those stupid raptor squirrels to extinction," I declared triumphantly.

WINDSOM

What is the boy planning? I wondered to myself, keeping a fair distance from him. I had left him unattended for two weeks, thinking that would be plenty

of time for him to catch a raptor squirrel.

I wouldn't have been able to find him in this forest without the help of the bell I had given him, so it was clear that he had mastered erasing his presence. Despite this, Arthur had yet to catch a single squirrel.

The raptor squirrels were swift and highly perceptive. Their eyesight was poor, so they relied on their sharp sense of smell to sniff for food, and their tails to sense any mana fluctuation or movement in the area. If their tails detected a high concentration of mana, or even a minute change in the existing mana levels in the area, it would be difficult for even an asura to catch one.

However, beyond that, the raptor squirrels were rather simple-minded. If the boy had erased his presence and then stayed motionless with some bait in his hands, it should have been easy for him to catch one. But he had laid out food in front of him instead.

Well, at least he had grasped the skill I most wanted him to learn. My gaze was still glued to the boy, though, as I waited for something to happen.

He stood unmoving, waiting patiently for a raptor squirrel to draw near.

In the blink of an eye, the boy had suddenly disappeared—then reappeared in front of the raptor squirrel with his hand outstretched.

"He..." my voice trailed off in awe.

Just as he was about to grab hold of the raptor squirrel, however, the bell I had given him rang and the raptor squirrel darted away, just out of Arthur's grasp.

The boy shouted, obviously frustrated, and kicked the pile of food he had gathered to lure in the raptor squirrel.

There was no way he could have moved at that speed without using mana, but... I couldn't sense it.

That meant he wasn't simply erasing his presence by withdrawing his mana and hiding his intent. He had been effectively *using* his mana while covering it with the atmospheric mana surrounding him

Mirage Walk. It was a rather crude shadow of it, but Arthur had definitely succeeded in the first step of Mirage Walk. It was a movement technique, to put it simply, but it was also much more than that. Mirage Walk was the essence of what made the Thyestes clan reign supreme over all the other clans within the Pantheon race, at least in regards to physical combat.

For a mere human boy to be able to grasp the fundamentals of a mana art that had taken even *me* a year to grasp... and that was with Kordri secretly teaching me, despite his clan's strict secrecy regarding their mana arts.

For him to be able to get this far just by watching Kordri...

WORKINGS OF A SINGLE STEP

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"Finally," I whispered, too quietly for the silver panther to hear.

There it was, my ever-elusive target, cautiously sniffing around as it approached the raptor squirrels I had killed and placed carefully to lure it out. My eyes locked onto the large gray cat. I had named it Clawed because of the four long gashes across its back. Clawed and I had gotten close during the time spent trying to hunt for silver panthers. This particular oversized cat was by far the most cunning of the silver panthers I had come across, and the most arrogant—which was why I had decided he would be my target.

The silver panther stopped just a few yards away from me and looked around warily, ready to escape at a moment's notice.

I patiently waited for him to draw near, making sure to keep any traces of my presence hidden. Coalescing the raw mana around me with the purified mana inside my body, I prepared my attack. Since he couldn't see me anyway, I gathered mana in my legs and right arm and lowered myself carefully into an ideal position, making sure I didn't set off the bell.

The muscles in my calves and thighs twitched in anticipation at the thought of finally being able to catch that elusive cat. Just as Clawed bent down to continue his lunch, I propelled myself forward and struck with a speed that would've shocked my old self.

I covered the distance—roughly twenty feet—almost instantly, but somehow

Clawed had already disappeared before my attack could connect; my augmented fist sank deep into the soft dirt floor of the forest, the silver panther nowhere in sight.

"Damn it! Again?" I cursed, impatiently prying my buried hand from the ground.

Where did I go wrong? How could it react so fast? I looked back to where I had initially been positioned. The distance was small enough for me to cover instantaneously. I had been well-hidden in the bushes, and I had even gone to some lengths to mask any smell from my body that might give me away. It should have been perfect.

I kneeled down, inspecting Clawed's paw prints and my own footprints. I was missing something, but what?

I could see where I had landed relative to where Clawed had been positioned, but something about the markings on the ground didn't add up.

Settling down against a nearby tree, I closed my eyes, replaying the scene in my mind to see if I could figure out where I had gone wrong.

"Windsom wouldn't have told me to acquire a silver panther beast core unless it was meant to teach me something different than what I learned hunting raptor squirrels," I said aloud. "In terms of speed, a raptor squirrel is definitely faster than a silver panther. So why can't I kill one?"

Arriving at no satisfying conclusion, I decided to make my way back to camp.

Looking at the remains of the raptor squirrels Clawed had been feasting on, I clicked my tongue in annoyance. Not only had I failed to capture Clawed, but there were also barely any scraps of squirrel meat left for me to eat.

After packing up what was left of the mangled squirrels, I wiped myself clean of the dirt and blood in a nearby stream. I only had one set of clothes so I tried to stay clean, but over the weeks of hiking and training in these woods, my wardrobe had become tattered.

"Arthur, you are not easy to look at," I said derisively to my reflection in the

stream. My hair was disheveled and much longer now, my bangs reaching all the way to my chin. The bags underneath my eyes had turned purplish from lack of sleep. All in all, little remained of my former, hygienic self; replacing it was some unintelligent-looking brute.

It was hard to believe that more than a month had passed since I'd had any actual interaction with anyone other than the animals I had caught.

Windsom had visited me the night I had finally captured a raptor squirrel. He had worn his permanently disinterested expression and hadn't said much, except that my technique—or rather the preface of it, which I had taught myself—was called Mirage Walk. He had disappeared soon after, leaving me by my lonesome to eat the lean meat of a raptor squirrel's hind leg.

The next morning, I had set out in search of the second prey on my list, a silver panther. However, it had become fairly obvious during the weeks I'd spent in the forest, training to catch raptor squirrels, that there were no signs of larger mana beasts at all.

Thus, I had decided to venture out further into the woods, despite the dangers that might've followed. It was only after about three weeks of trekking deeper into the forest that I began seeing different species of mana beasts, including larger ones. I would have cleared more ground in those three weeks had I not been using the journey itself as a form of training.

Windsom had told me that what I'd done to catch the raptor squirrel was only an introductory step to the actual essence of Mirage Walk, but he had refused to divulge any more information than that. However, when I realized that there would be several steps or levels to reach full mastery of the technique, I decided to name this first tier Burst Step.

I had traveled through the forest, using the abundance of trees as a natural obstacle course to practice, hoping to gain some insight that would help me improve the skill.

This process of training had made me realize just how much was needed—in terms of concentration, coordination, reflexes, control, and agility—to

properly utilize the full potential of Mirage Walk. I had succeeded in capturing a raptor squirrel with Burst Step only because I had made the necessary preparations. It had been a flat clearing with no obstructions to get in my way. The distance was short, and once within view, the squirrel had no time even to react.

However, using only Mirage Walk to travel through the lush greenery, which was congested with trees and uneven ground, had made me feel as if I was an infant again, except this time with my feet tied together. It was terribly frustrating—I tripped with the slightest misstep, and even the faintest miscalculation in trajectory resulted in a not-so-elegant tumble and a face full of mud. Slowly and painstakingly, I made my way deeper into the woods.

It had been over a week since I first arrived at this particular part of the forest. The mana in this area was much denser than where I had been before, which was probably one of the reasons it was so appealing to higher level mana beasts.

And here I was, still with nothing to show for my efforts other than the number of tears in my shirt and holes in the soles of my boots.

When I finished washing myself, I inspected the leftover meat I had brought back. "This isn't enough," I sighed, looking up at the sky.

Dusk had spread a thin veil of darkness over the forest, but it was still light enough to hunt. I laid out some mushrooms I had picked along the way and waited, crouching underneath a large root eight yards away. I had mastered Burst Step to the point that I could clear almost ten yards in an instant without triggering the bell.

As I waited, keeping my presence hidden, I watched carefully for any signs of movement. There was a faint sound of rustling, but it came from above me, somewhere up in the trees. I glanced up to see the last glint of sunlight reflecting off the eyes of some sort of large black bird.

The forest grew completely dark while the bird and I waited, hoping for any signs of our next meal.

Finally, I spotted the shape of a lone raptor squirrel, but before the squirrel drew close enough for me to kill, the black bird had already decided to take action.

I barely glimpsed the faint shadow of the bird as it dove; it made no noise whatsoever. It wasn't unnaturally fast like the raptor squirrel or silver panther, but at night, it was nearly impossible to see this predatory bird.

As the black blur drew closer to its unsuspecting prey, something unexpected happened. The bird, nearly invisible to the naked eye, spread its wings and let out a loud crow.

The squirrel immediately jumped, but the bird seemed to have been expecting that—instead of swooping down to where the squirrel *had been*, it stretched out its talons to snatch the squirrel as it leaped away.

The whole scene looked as if the squirrel had simply leaped into the claws of the bird, wanting to be its next meal.

I had lost my meal to the bird, but I gained something much more valuable.

Hoping to be able to put my plan into action, I waited again. As I had guessed, when the bird finished its meal, it moved to a different tree and waited patiently. The bird's wingspan was larger than my armspan, so I knew one squirrel wouldn't be enough.

About half an hour passed before another raptor squirrel finally emerged. Its three antenna-like tails surveyed for danger as it cautiously approached the small pile of mushrooms.

On cue, I saw the swift blur of black out of the corner of my eyes.

Not yet.

Again, just as the black bird swooped down and stretched out its talons, the raptor squirrel appeared to jump straight into the bird's grasp.

Now!

Using Burst Step, I cleared the distance between us, and before the black bird had a chance to react, I reached for its neck.

The bird let out a surprised crow and flapped desperately to escape my hand.

To my surprise, however, the greedy bird never let go of its meal, even when I snapped its neck.

"Yes!" I couldn't wipe the smile off my face as I made my way back to my camp with my two trophies. I was happy that I might have something tastier to eat than the tough and lean squirrel meat, but I was even more satisfied with the fact that I had figured out how Clawed and the rest of his brethren had been escaping from me.

It didn't take long for me to get back to my camp, which was just a hollow log I had covered with branches and leaves to protect me from the rain.

After eagerly plucking the bird's feathers, keeping its fat-coated skin intact, I grilled it alongside the skinned raptor squirrel over the fire I had made. Chewing on the tender meat of the bird's thigh, I started thinking.

I had discovered two things when I saw the black bird capturing the raptor squirrel: First, the bird was stealthy and swift, but its speed couldn't compare to that of a raptor squirrel. It was only successful because it knew that when it made itself known, the squirrel would try to flee in a particular direction. The second thing I had deduced was the significance of my involvement in this. As a third-party spectator, I was able to see the bird beforehand, and I had immediately known what its motives were even before it had attacked, something the squirrel had no way of knowing.

"But this still doesn't tell me how to catch Clawed," I muttered to myself, taking another bite of grilled fowl.

Based on my many failed attempts, I now assumed that the silver panthers had some hyper-acute intuition that allowed them to react almost instantly when they detected my movement. I also knew that, unlike the bird and the squirrel I was feasting on, Clawed was smart. On several occasions he had gotten close enough to me that I knew he was mocking me, but as soon as I took my stance, he fled—even before I could execute Burst Step. He was smart enough to know he could evade me but not fight me face-to-face.

After finishing the last of my meal, I walked over to the side of my camp

where I had cleared some space to train in.

I stood at the edge of the open space and imagined Clawed lurking at the other end. "How am I supposed to catch a cat that reacts as soon as I try to approach it?"

Approach... approach? That was it! It was just like the black bird! The bird had tricked the squirrel by intentionally exposing itself, feinting to get the squirrel into the air where it couldn't change direction.

Even when Kordri, an asura, had used Burst Step, it was essentially still a single step. He still used the necessary muscles to propel himself toward me. Even though the essence of Mirage Walk was to conceal fluctuation of mana to throw off the opponent completely, I still had to move the muscles that were responsible for making that one, incredibly fast, step.

But what if I could get rid of that?

What if I could almost entirely eliminate the motion needed for me to make that step? It would appear as if I had truly teleported.

If I could do that, I could, in theory, feint Clawed.

But how could I come up with a way to make Burst Step into something that would bypass the need to control the muscles mechanically?

If I were any other mage or mana manipulator in this world, I imagine I would have considered it impossible, but I had one crucial advantage: knowledge from my past life.

Due to my mediocre ki center, I had studied the human body in depth—namely the working mechanics of what was required to put the human body into motion. It was through this knowledge that I had been able to fully utilize what little ki I possessed and become a king.

Shutting my eyes, I used the entirety of my concentration as I spread mana throughout every crevice of my body, no matter how small.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was already high up in the sky. Sweat and grime covered my body. I slowly stretched, stiff from standing still for hours. But I was happy—ecstatic, even.

Not only had I made a breakthrough that would bring me to the very peak of the light yellow stage, but I had also found the solution to my problem. "I got it," I grinned.

PREDATOR'S DOMAIN

THE QUADRICEPS MUSCLES, located at the front of the thighs, were responsible for pushing the thigh and leg forward. The hamstrings were the quadriceps' opposing muscles, responsible for bending the leg and moving it back. The buttock muscles worked to complete the backward movement of the step. The abdominal muscles contracted with each forward step the body took. The calf muscles were crucial, despite their smaller size, in propelling the body forward as the foot pushed off the ground.

Those were just the primary muscles. The secondary muscles, which also needed to be taken into account, were the stabilizing muscles located around the pelvis. This series of muscles formed a crown around the pelvis, which included the internal and external abductors, the lower abdominal muscles, and the spinal muscles located in the back. The tibialis anterior, the thin strips of muscle that flexed the ankle, moving the foot toward the knee, also kept the foot from flattening, creating a greater chance of scraping the ground or an object.

In summary, the body's intricate muscular system worked in pairs, each responsible for half of a complete movement. The biceps flexed when the arm curled toward the shoulder, while the triceps triggered when the arm straightened out. The body's mechanisms were even more complex when the body was put into motion, such as walking, running, or jumping.

This knowledge hadn't been all that useful until now, because of my rather

exceptional physique in mana. However, I now needed to further evolve the first sequence I had learned in Mirage Walk. I would need to utilize all this knowledge, and go a step beyond that to put it into practice.

When I noticed that the sun had already set, I went back to my camp and took out a few strips of squirrel meat, which I had smoked so I could focus on training without stopping to hunt.

"I really wish I could use the aether orb for this," I muttered, looking down at the half-charred, tasteless meat in my hand.

I had made significant progress in the past week, having taken a hiatus from my hunt for Clawed and devoted all my time and energy into training. I divided my days between training on Burst Step and refining my mana core. I used the remaining two or three hours for sleep.

The more I practiced, the more I hungered to master this movement technique. When I was able to implement the tweak I had made using my knowledge of human anatomy, Mirage Walk would become even more refined. Not only would it be instant and versatile, it would be as deadly as it was elegant.

When I had first succeeded in executing Burst Step, it had looked almost like a large leap, although incredibly fast. This was because, although mana couldn't be sensed under the effects of Mirage Walk, there was still a stance and a series of motions that were necessary for my body to be able to take that step. Even Kordri, an asura who used Burst Step in his human form, couldn't ignore the mechanisms of his body, despite his superior physique.

What I was working toward was a conscious and deliberate manipulation of mana into specific muscles in a specific progression, with precise timing, to artificially trigger a sequence in my body that mimicked the use of muscles without actually needing to move my body at all.

If I could get the timing and mana output controlled perfectly, I would be capable of something even Kordri couldn't do—I could execute Mirage Walk in, but not limited to, a standing position.

Even thinking about it was confusing, but I was confident I had it figured out. I finished my dinner, then headed back to the clearing I had crudely designed in the last week.

I stood about five yards away from the bed of leaves I had made to soften my fall and concentrated. Willing mana to manipulate my muscles was a lot like using my thoughts to make a dummy move. Most of our movements are automatic; we don't have to think of what muscles we need to use to breathe. However, I would be using a mediating force—mana—in order to generate an action from my body, and it was like learning to move all over again.

"Damn!" I lifted my arms to catch myself as I toppled forward onto the bed of leaves I had fashioned. I spat out a mouthful of leaves and wiped my tongue with my sleeve. Getting back up, I returned to my initial position and concentrated again.

I had succeeded, to an extent, in propelling myself by using a minimal amount of movement, but coming to a proper stop was another huge obstacle, and I was having trouble overcoming it.

Just as a toddler couldn't control how far or how high he jumped, it was hopelessly difficult to control my body when I used mana to manipulate its inner workings.

However, at least the initial step, and the very foundation, of Mirage Walk—where I manipulated atmospheric mana to conceal the fluctuations of mana in my body—had become much easier for me. I still needed to balance the capacity of my mana veins to my mana channels to better control the process, but I didn't have time for that now.

After I had properly hidden my presence, I imagined my body's muscular system. Thinking of all the muscles necessary to use Burst Step, I tried once again, and again I collapsed into the leaves.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, I continued practicing.

As the sun sank and a crescent moon shifted into view, I lay there in the bed of leaves staring vacantly at the night sky. Raising my hand, I pinched at

where the moon appeared to be. The moon looked so small from here... how small did I appear to the moon?

I focused on my upraised left arm, staring at Sylvia's feather, which was wrapped around my arm as usual. Originally given to me to shroud Sylvie's egg, the feather now hid the wing-shaped mark on my forearm, the mark of my bond with Sylvie.

This feather and my bond were all I had left of the asura who had saved me, taken care of me, and protected me as a child. Would training like this really allow me to hear from her again, eventually?

Reminiscing on my time with her had made me long for everyone else. Despite how we had parted, I missed my family.

"Enough, Arthur." I slapped my cheeks and sat up in the pile of leaves. There were only so many hours in a day, and I couldn't afford to waste any more time out here in this godforsaken forest.

Taking a deep breath, I resumed cultivating my mana core. It had been a slow process once I got to the light yellow stage. I was chipping away at a mountain with only a spoon in my hand, but there was definitely progress.

I was lost in the cumbersome process of absorbing, purifying, and refining when the familiar chirps of morning birds snapped me out of my meditation.

I was filthy from the impurities that had been expelled from my mana core, and hungry as well.

Looking at the amount of smoked meat I had left, I knew I would have to hunt today. After gnawing through the remainder of my smoked squirrel, I filled my water pouch and departed.

Keeping my mind placid and my presence hidden with Mirage Walk, I slowly trekked further into the dense forest. It had been hard for me to find wildlife near camp, so every time I hunted, I'd needed to go a bit deeper.

However, despite how often I had come here, it was different this time. The forest had gotten much quieter. Birds chirped in the distance, but there were no signs of raptor squirrels or other mana beasts in the vicinity.

"Hmm," I muttered, surveying the area. Releasing Mirage Walk, I concentrated mana into my ears. I wasn't able to hear anything at first, but after a few minutes I caught a faint noise—it sounded like a growl. I couldn't tell how far away it was, but the sound was familiar; there was a silver panther nearby.

I got a little closer, making sure to keep my presence hidden. I enhanced my hearing once again and was able to make out more noise. I could hear the faint gurgling sound of running water a bit further northeast and the distinct sounds of two different silver panthers.

That's odd, I thought. My understanding of the silver panthers was that they were fairly territorial and hunted by themselves.

At first, I had thought that perhaps they were fighting over territory, but they were too quiet to be fighting. Either way, having two silver panthers in the area would certainly explain the lack of prey.

Implementing Mirage Walk again, I hastily made my way toward the source of the sounds, grinning at my luck.

I stealthily tracked the silver panthers by sound, approaching until I spotted their distinctive coats near a small clearing of trees alongside a cliff. My speculation had been nearly correct—the two were circling around, getting ready to engage.

Inching my way closer to the two predators, I stayed behind the shrubs lining the edge of the cliff to remain out of sight. A quick peek down was all I needed to know that if those silver panthers fell off during combat, it'd be almost impossible for me to retrieve their bodies.

I hid behind a nearby tree and observed. The animals were clearly hostile toward one another, but I was surprised to see that one of the silver panthers was Clawed; the distinct scars on his back made him easily identifiable. His opponent, on the other hand, was unfamiliar to me. It was clearly larger, but judging by the fresh wounds on its face and side, it seemed like Clawed had the upper hand.

The two mana beasts slowly circled each other, letting out low growls and baring their sharp teeth.

The larger cat was the first to make a move. It gave a fierce snarl and pounced with its claws held high. Clawed reacted instantly, dodging the swipe and countering with his teeth.

I was captivated by their fight. Silver panthers had sharp claws that could easily create gashes in boulders, as well as thick fur that protected them like armor, but their strength actually lay in their innately accelerated reflexes and intuition. It was eye-opening to see these two becoming a blur of claws and fangs as each desperately tried to land a killing blow in their relentless flurry of continuous dodging and countering. Neither of them incurred any deep wounds, but for every gash the larger panther made, Clawed gave it three in return.

As their battle continued, my heart began pounding restlessly. I was anxious about something, afraid. I had been so caught up in their duel I hadn't realized how deadly quiet the forest had become—almost silent. There were no sounds—no birds chirping or mana beasts moving; even the wind seemed to have stilled, ceasing its constant rustling of the leaves, as if it was afraid of something.

Clawed seemed to have noticed as well; his fur stood on end, his tail sticking straight up as he sniffed the air. The larger cat, seemingly unaware of the disturbance, took advantage of the opening and pounced at Clawed. Dodging his opponent, Clawed turned and ran away.

I didn't understand. There was something going on, but I couldn't sense any other presence from here. Why had Clawed run away like that when he was winning?

Putting aside my wariness, I focused on the silver panther that still remained. It was injured, and its escape routes were limited because of the cliff.

When the larger cat spotted me, he began growling, lowering himself into a posture to flee. It knew instinctively that, wounded as it was, it had no chance

against me.

The air around us grew heavier and it became harder to breathe, but I maintained my stance.

Now!

The moment I lifted my foot up, the silver panther leaped to the side.

Got you, I thought.

I executed Burst Step from my standing position, using the fake step as a feint to get it to move. My surroundings blurred, my eyes focusing only on the movement of the wounded mana beast. I had succeeded in cutting it off, but the distance I had cleared was insufficient by just over a yard.

I lost my balance and tumbled, desperately grabbing onto the panther's neck. My body jerked violently as it attempted to bolt with me clinging to it with all my strength.

"You're mine!" I hissed between my teeth as I used mana to strengthen my hold around the beast's neck. My only hope was to choke it.

The silver panther let out a wheezing snarl as he whipped his body to the side, trying to throw me off, but I endured. Sharp claws tore at my clothes, ripping fresh wounds on my sides and legs before it finally began to buckle feebly from lack of air.

Just when I thought the panther was about to relent, it suddenly jerked. As if possessed, it used the last of its strength to throw itself backward. By the time I realized what had happened, we were already plummeting down the steep gorge.

Hurtling through the air, I was reminded of a very similar scene from when I was just a child and had been thrown off the edge of a mountain as I tried to save my mother.

A thousand scenarios ran through my head as I struggled to decide on the best option to take. The silver panther was motionless as we fell, having passed out cold from my choke. *But not before dragging me down to hell with it, the bastard*.

Uttering a string of curses, I carefully balanced myself on top of the unconscious mana beast and exerted mana into my legs. The scene around me was a blur from the speed at which we were dropping, and I had a flashback to Widow's Crypt. Was falling down deep chasms going to be some sort of recurring theme in my life? I knew I could suspend my own headlong plunge easily enough, but I wasn't sure what to do about the silver panther. A fall of this distance might damage the creature's beast core, rendering it useless and putting me back at square one.

Without time to think, I fell back on my previous experience and gathered a surge of wind into my palms while gripping the unconscious panther with my mana-reinforced legs.

"Windsom would understand!" I said aloud as I released the spell—Typhon's Howl—and a blast of wind surged toward the ground with a deafening screech that echoed throughout the steep ravine.

My entire body lurched from the whiplash, and the panther was ripped free from my grasp, continuing its downward plunge. The pain in my arms, which took the brunt of the strain from the recoil, was tremendous, but I continued exerting mana into the spell until I came to a slow hover. Once sure I was safe, I released Typhon's Howl and dropped the remaining few yards onto the ground in the center of the blast zone.

A thick cloud of dust had risen from my spell colliding with the dirt floor, and my vision was obscured. I had to mask my mouth and nose from the debris in the air as I began making my way out of the dust cloud—but I was brought to a sudden halt by the resounding noise of an earth-shattering roar.

The thunderous howl subsided, but the ground shook with heavy footsteps—which were approaching me.

The force of each resonating stomp was enough to throw me off balance, so I dashed toward the wall of the gorge, praying to whatever divine being that ruled this realm that I was wrong and these devastating sounds were just an earthquake.

WHAT LAY WITHIN

As I MADE my way toward the wall of the ravine, desperately looking for a place to hide, another deep thud shook the ground. A stray gust of wind blew through the valley, dispersing the cloud of dust and revealing a shadowed figure, now fully in view.

It was too late to hide. The suffocating pressure I'd felt at the top of the cliff was magnified tenfold by the creature's proximity. The weight of it left me speechless.

With another devastating roar, it took one more step toward me. "Two meals falling in front of my home, and just before my deep slumber? How lucky for me."

I'd never imagined coming face to face with a titan bear, but I sure as hell would never have expected it to be only half my size—perhaps three feet tall—or to have the ability to talk. 'Titan bear,' my ass—there was nothing 'titan' about it. Maybe he was just a cub? In which case, this was a good opportunity.

I stood my ground, not knowing how to proceed. I would have preferred to avoid a direct confrontation with this mana beast until I knew more about him. The pressure the beast had emitted was no joke, regardless of his appearance. If this titan bear was only a cub, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with a full-grown one. Or maybe he was an adult and had the ability to alter his size like Sylvie?

The titan bear regarded the dead panther in front of him before turning his gaze back to me. "This meal isn't going anywhere. I should start with you," the beast growled, licking his lips.

There was no way for me to get out of this without fighting. Lowering my stance, I prepared to defend myself. I had expected the titan bear to come charging at me, but he stood in place.

Abruptly, the mana beast thrust his paw in my direction, somehow propelling me backward.

The bell tied to my waist rang mockingly as I tumbled on the hard ground. I gasped for breath, relieved that it was only vomit I had just choked out and not blood. What the hell was that? It felt like I had been shot in the stomach by a cannon. Getting back on my feet, I concentrated on the titan bear, which was about ten yards away.

"Ooh! A tough meal," the bear snorted. The sight of a bear no higher than my elbow, standing on two legs and speaking coherently, was an odd sight, but I had no time to be amused.

His attack had definitely been some kind of long-range spell, but I didn't understand why I had felt no mana.

The bear slowly lifted his paw, as if mocking me. As soon as the bear swung, I activated Mirage Walk and used Burst Step.

There was a sudden sharp pain in my left leg. Looking down, I could see fresh blood flowing from a gash on the back of my calf. I had expected his attack to be like the last one, but this invisible spell had taken the form of something sharp.

I hadn't been able to sense the mana signature of this attack either.

The titan bear was no longer smiling. He hadn't expected me to dodge another of his attacks.

"Stop running!" he growled, swinging his paw once more.

Immediately dropping to the ground, I narrowly avoided the slash attack; wisps of freshly-sliced hair sprinkled down over my nose.

It had been a risky gamble, but after that last spell I had figured it out. When he slashed with his paw, the attack that was released was also a sharp slash. When he punched, as he had for the first move, it was a blunt force attack.

The titan punched toward me, sending another invisible cannonball my way. Even after I concentrated mana into my eyes, I wasn't able to see the attack—I had no choice but to blindly throw myself out of the way.

The mana beast's spell hit my side and I felt my ribs crack. Not giving me time to prepare again, the bear swung his other paw, releasing another spell immediately after the first one.

The movement I'd made to dodge the previous attack had been too wide for me to be able to avoid this one as well.

Gritting my teeth, I summoned more mana to protect my body, waiting for the impact.

The force of the titan bear's spell knocked me off the ground. Blood spurted from my chest as four horizontal gashes formed just below my collar bone.

"Damn," I choked out, suppressing the searing pain. I wouldn't be able to handle any more direct hits.

I needed to get close to the bear, but to do that I needed to be able to dodge his attacks.

The titan bear snarled confidently, clearly aware of my vulnerable state. I wasn't sure how he was able to manifest those nearly imperceptible spells, but there was one way of finding out.

Standing back up shakily, I waited. To the titan bear, it must've looked like I had given up—his toothy, animalistic grin got even wider as he licked his lips again in anticipation.

Just as the titan bear lifted its paw up, I firmly kicked the ground in front of me, creating a cloud of dust and blocking myself from his view.

Four claws immediately sliced through the dust cloud I had kicked up between the beast and me, allowing me—just barely—to see how wide the attack was. Then I used Burst Step to avoid it.

"Damn it," I spat, gritting my teeth against the sharp pangs of protest in my legs.

Rolling across the ground and springing back onto my feet, I prepared myself again. I knew the hitbox of one of his attacks now, and I could make do with that. However, I still needed to be able to completely dodge the attack with the least amount of movement possible if I wanted to dodge all his attacks and close the distance between us.

I grinned mirthlessly as I remembered Kordri's training. Either this was an incredible coincidence, or Windsom was indeed a calculating devil.

As the impatient titan bear released another attack, this time with a thrust of his paw, I kicked up another cloud of dust. I had to react immediately as the spell tore a hole through the cloud of dust, and I forced another Burst Step.

"The more you run, the more painful this will be for you and the less of you there'll be left for me to eat." The mana beast's predatory chuckle was followed by a pulse of suffocating pressure.

"Okay—I won't run anymore." I stood still, with my hands up.

The expression on the bear's face—a triumphant sneer—was almost human, and he casually released another slicing attack with the swipe of his paw.

I choked down a gasp of pain as I executed the modified Burst Step maneuver I had been working on.

My body shifted about a yard to the right, and the blow that should have caved my chest in just barely grazed my left shoulder.

The deep gash on my left leg began bleeding harder from the sudden pressure I had exerted to use Burst Step; a small crater had formed beneath my feet from the sheer force of the movement. Despite the success of my new movement skill, the pain deep in my muscles was growing increasingly unbearable, and I was filled with doubt—had I finally met a foe that was beyond me?

Drawing on sheer will and my own stubbornness, I concentrated more mana to my lower body. I hadn't fought through two lives to die in a ditch at the claws of a wild animal...

The titan bear roared his frustration, then charged toward me, each crushing step resounding within the ravine until it sounded like an entire cavalry squadron charged toward me.

Burst.

My vision blurred as I propelled myself to the right. The ground cracked once more with the force of my landing, about two yards away. The first step left me gritting my teeth in pain; using Burst Step again had sent an explosion of agony through my lower body, and my legs nearly gave out from the stress.

As the bell rang, giving away my position, I locked my mouth into a determined snarl, swallowing back the screams of pain that were building up in my throat. I executed Burst Step once more to reach my opponent. The titan bear's head spun at the sound of my bell, but by that time, I had already closed the gap.

The titan bear flinched as I appeared next to it, its dark eyes wide with surprise. I had already concentrated mana into my fist to such an extent that it was glowing slightly. My augmented fist buried itself into tiny bear's stomach, creating a loud thud on impact. The mana beast's body shot toward the wall of the ravine, crashing into the side of the rocky cliff I had fallen off of.

Numb with pain, my legs finally collapsed, and the cold ground was soon pressing against my cheek. My tasks at last completed, with the last of my remaining strength, I tore the bell from my waist and crushed it in my hand before my vision darkened and I faded into unconsciousness.

WINDSOM

Upon my arrival at the gorge, I inspected the scene. There was a silver panther sprawled out dead, the ground beneath it soaked in blood. There were craters in the ground and wall surrounding the nearby boulders, which were marked with deep gashes.

What exactly had happened here?

I spotted the boy on the ground and a crater depressed onto the side of the cliff.

The boy had come all the way down here?

Arthur was in a pitiful state. Tearing off the last of his tattered clothes, I could sense that he had at least three broken ribs, and the gashes in his chest were too deep to be considered a mere flesh wound. However, the most concerning injuries were on his legs, which were blotched a sickly purple and red color, apparently from internal bleeding. I couldn't fully assess the severity of his wounds, but I knew they had to be treated soon.

Was it wrong of me to have left Arthur alone like this? Lord Indrath had ordered me to give the boy some room to grow on his own, but seeing the state he was in now, I realized he could have died.

After treating the boy as best I could, I focused my attention on the creature in the center of the crater in the ravine's rocky wall. It looked like a titan bear cub, but that didn't make sense. A cub of this size wouldn't even have the strength to defend itself; it shouldn't have been able to injure the boy like this.

A full-grown titan bear stood at least ten feet tall, and its thick coat would offer it superior defense, but even a full-grown one wouldn't have been able to cause this much devastation.

Unless...

As I moved to take a closer look at the titan bear cub, its body started writhing unnaturally. Suddenly, its stomach bulged and a black tentacle erupted from inside the dead mana beast, wriggling frantically before it slumped over, motionless.

"Of course." Despite the situation, a contented smile formed on my face.

That explained everything, but to think that Arthur was able to defeat one! I sighed.

A demon leech. It was a truly rare specimen, as intelligent as it was foul, and native only to Epheotus. By itself, it was weak, but when it latched onto a

mana beast, it was able to possess the host's body and strengthen its core to an amazing degree.

Considering how large the demon leech had grown inside the cub, it was clear that this monster was definitely much stronger than a mere titan bear.

The boy had been lucky—the cub's body was still fragile. If the leech had possessed a full-grown titan bear...

There was no use postulating alternate possibilities. I was sure Arthur hadn't known this, but he had done right in aiming for the cub's stomach, since this was where the demon leech resided. If the leech had had the strength to make its way to Arthur's body while he was unconscious, even Lord Indrath wouldn't have been able to save the boy without crippling him.

I pried the demon leech free of the corpse and crushed the parasite in my hand.

"Here you are." I opened my hand to see a shiny white orb, which the demon leech had been refining inside the titan bear.

I returned to the boy and placed the white orb inside his mouth. "Your difficulties have paid off tremendously, Arthur."

STEPS FORWARD AND BACK

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Even before I opened my eyes, I was aware of the soft creaking of footsteps on old wood. Echoes of groaning floorboards resounded in my ears, giving me a vague idea of the size of the room I was in.

An array of intoxicating smells—rich with unfamiliar herbs and spices—bombarded my senses, distracting me from anything else. When I finally opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was the underside of a cottage roof. Aside from the parched coarseness of my tongue, I felt fine—or at least, so I thought, until I tried moving.

To my horror, there was no response when I tried to lift my legs. There was no sensation or feedback when I tried moving anything from the waist down. I immediately lifted the blankets covering my lower body and saw that my legs had been completely bandaged and fastened tightly to a wooden splint.

"Your legs are fine, child. I just had to numb them so you wouldn't be up all night from the pain," said a gentle if slightly brittle voice, stirring my attention.

Turning to the source of the kind voice, I was met with a tender smile from a woman well past her youth, seasoned with the signs of refined aging. Wrinkles marked her face, but they did not detract from her dignified and graceful demeanor. Dressed in a simple gray robe to match her hair, which was pulled tightly into a braid that fell down her back, my caretaker

approached me with sparkling eyes.

I gave a sigh of relief at her words and sank back down in the bed.

"How do you feel, child?" she cooed, placing a warm hand on my forehead.

I blinked, trying to focus my thoughts. The last thing I remembered before passing out was landing a solid blow on the titan bear. I turned my head, scanning my surroundings. I was in a spacious room, well-lit and heated by a fire crackling in a stone fireplace. Beside it was a small kitchen strewn with pots and pans of all sizes, either hanging on the wall or stacked high on top of each other. Besides the worn upholstered couches placed around the fireplace and a small dining table near the kitchen, there was little else inside this cottage.

"Confused, are you?" the aged woman chuckled.

"Yeah," I replied hoarsely, which caused me to break into a fit of coughs. The woman promptly crossed to the kitchen table and came back with a mug of lukewarm water.

After a few deep gulps of what tasted like liquid heaven, I felt confident enough to form coherent words. "Thank you, uh..."

"Myre. You can call me Myre, child," the lady finished for me, taking the empty mug from my hands.

As I lay there, a searing pain began creeping up my legs, as if they were soaking in liquid fire.

Mistaking my pained expression for fright, Myre let out a soft chuckle. "Don't worry, I won't eat you. Although, I did technically kind of steal you away from Windsom. Lucky I did, though—if I had gotten my hands on you any later, I'm afraid your legs would have needed much longer to heal."

I finally managed to speak through gritted teeth. "I-it's not that. My legs..."

"Has the medicinal rub lost its effect already?" After placing the mug down on the nightstand beside me, Myre reached for the sheet, which was the only thing keeping me from being completely naked.

I immediately reached down to cover myself, which prompted another soft

chuckle from my caretaker. Carefully folding the sheets so that only my legs were exposed, she began unwrapping the bandages, and I was finally able to see the full extent of the injuries to my legs—and I was puzzled at the sight. Both legs were covered in a network of scars, mostly around my knees and ankles. Strangely, these scars looked old, as if I'd had them for years.

A cold sweat began forming on my forehead as the pain in my legs got worse. After removing all the bandages, Myre carefully inspected every inch of my legs.

Nodding in satisfaction, she brought over a bucket filled with a very pungent herbal liquid. I wordlessly observed my caretaker as she diligently cut and soaked strips of cloth and bandaged my legs with nimble fingers. Her rhythmic and dexterous movements soon put me into a trance.

"Elder Myre—"

"Please, Arthur, I would much prefer if you just called me Myre," she cut me off, her attention still focused on my legs.

"Er, Myre, how long have I been unconscious?" I asked. Looking at my seemingly well-healed legs, I was afraid I'd been out for a long time.

"Just over two nights, my dear." She finished replacing the last bandage on my left calf, then turned to me, her misty green eyes studying me. "Now, how does that feel?"

"Much more comfortable, thank you," I assured her gratefully. The pain was already subsiding, an effect of the cold, gel-like liquid the new bandages were soaked with.

Accepting my gratitude with a placid smile, she gathered the used cloth and dumped it in a water-filled basin. After pouring some salt-like powder into it, she lifted her dress and stepped inside, using her feet to launder the soiled cloths.

"Myre, you must be exhausted. Let me wash that for you," I said hurriedly. I willed mana into my hand, preparing to manipulate the water in the basin.

"No, no, it's fine, my dear. This gives these old bones a chance to get some

exercise." She waved my help away with one hand, the other still holding up the hem of her dress.

I watched blankly as she stomped on the drenched cloth, then finally asked, "Myre, am I—are we still in Epheotus?"

"Why, of course we are, child. Where else would you have been able to mend the sorry state of your legs?" Myre answered, maintaining her rhythmic stepping in the basin.

"My apologies, it's just that..." My eyes fell to her feet.

"Oh. Well, I suppose it *would* be easier to do everything with mana arts, but what fun is that? Even for asuras, there are things that magic can't simulate—for example, the coldness of the water between my toes as the wet cloths wrap around my feet. What fun is it to move your finger and make the water move, to do that for you?" She gave me a wink.

Her words baffled me, but I couldn't hope to understand the perspective of an ancient race, especially one for whom magic was ingrained into their very being. "I'm sorry, it's just that waking up in this state was... rather confusing to me. Not to be rude, and I'm very thankful for your meticulous care, but I just thought that maybe healing mana art would have quickened my recovery."

"If I had cast a simple healing spell on you, you'd be barely limping, and your bones would've taken on an entirely different shape," the elder chuckled, willing a towel into her hands with a snap, then drying her legs.

I sat back up, covering myself a little better with the blanket. "Thank you for treating me, Myre, and for your hospitality. I know there isn't much room here."

"Don't mention it. Besides, this old cottage isn't where I live. I merely use this place to get some peace and, from time to time, treat a patient." She smiled, handing me a bowl of warm soup. "I don't treat just anyone, you know, but I wanted to meet the human boy who is supposedly the savior of the world," she declared grandly before shooting me another wink.

I gave a weak chuckle, then took a careful sip from the bowl. A savory broth, laced with subtle hints of herbs, immediately enveloped my tongue, and I greedily took another large gulp before setting it down on the nightstand.

"Don't even try to get up tonight," Myre warned. "The wounds on your legs weren't as simple as the little gashes on your chest. It took hours to get your legs knit back together into something resembling functional appendages, so just get some rest—that is your biggest priority. There is water on the counter within arm's reach, and if you have to relieve yourself, there is a chamber pot right beside the bed. Good night, my dear."

Myre left me to my thoughts with the flames, the only source of light, writhing in the fireplace. It seemed as if I had just closed my eyes for a second, but then I was jerked awake by another wave of sharp stabbing pain. It wasn't as intense as it had been when Myre had changed the bandages for me, but it was distressing enough to keep me from falling back to sleep. The cottage was almost completely dark aside from the few rays of moonlight that made it through the thatched roof.

The fire had long gone out, leaving only a faint smoky aroma. I wasn't sure how well my wounds had healed, but I grew restless at the thought of lying around idle for two days.

Abandoning the idea of going back to sleep, I sat upright and began doing the only productive thing I could do in this state: meditating.

When I concentrated on the mana core swirling deep in my sternum, a blast of unfamiliar energy welcomed me. Suddenly, the mountain I had been chipping away at to reach the silver core stage was a flat plain, rolled out like a map for me to cross.

Absorbing mana from my surroundings, I tentatively began refining; the alien energy hungrily sucked in the mana I absorbed and coalesced it with my mana core. The light yellow hue of my core glowed as mana surged throughout my body, filling my veins, muscles, bones, and skin with a fiery energy.

I could feel myself shivering uncontrollably, and my core began glowing brighter until it was no longer yellow but, instead, a bright silver.

The untamed energy that had been raging inside my body continued to chip away at the layers of my core, making my silver core grow brighter and brighter with each influx of energy. I held my breath, afraid that even the slightest movement would halt the rapid progression of my mana core. Eventually, when the mysterious energy source had refined my mana core to the peak of mid-silver stage, it subsided.

Just when I thought the transformation was complete, a sharp metallic ringing filled my ears. As if an invisible wall had been restraining my mind, but had just collapsed, my body forcibly shifted into the second phase of Sylvia's dragon will.

Prying my eyes open, I could see golden runes emerging on my arms and shoulders. To my surprise, the glowing runes began changing, their designs growing more complex as they shaped themselves into some kind of ancient language. A lock of my disheveled hair fell across my face, and I watched as it changed colors from my natural auburn to white, then back to auburn again. The furniture inside the one-room cottage trembled as straw and splinters fell from the roof, filling the room with more moonlight. However, despite the pots and pans clanging against one another, the most prominent sound that filled my ears was still the high-pitched ringing.

The sounds slowly subsided, and the newly-formed runes on my body glowed brighter as the color began to drain from the world. Soon, the only colors I was able to see were in the minuscule particles floating around me—but something had changed. The other times I had used Dragon's Awakening, I had only been able to see four colors—one for each of the four elements. Now, however, specks of purple were dotted abundantly within the array of blue, yellow, red, and green.

After using this form to kill Lucas, I had gotten better—or so I thought—at controlling the harsh impulses that came with using the second phase of

Sylvia's will. However, the will seemed to reject my body more than ever, until I could no longer bear the agony of my body ripping itself apart. I released Dragon's Awakening.

As if a bucket of water had been thrown to douse a raging fire, all the energy, power, and pain that had been growing larger and larger inside me abruptly vanished. An eerie silence surrounded me, and I was left feeling confused, powerless, and frail, despite the progress my mana core had made.

THE GLASS OF WATER

"SO IT'S TRUE."

I turned my head to see Myre leaning against the entryway. "You truly have inherited Realmheart..." The asura's voice was both solemn and sentimental as it trailed off.

"Excuse me? Realmheart?" I echoed as she approached me with slow steps.

"The physical manifestations displayed when you tap into Sylvia's powers, my dear—the iris glowing purple, those unmistakable glowing runes imprinted on your body. Even within the clan, it is rare. Realmheart—or the Realmheart Physique—is an ability that only the Indrath bloodline can possess. Tell me, child, were you able to see them?" the asura asked. Her eyes were glued to the faint markings now fading from my arms, and she reached out and tenderly ran her fingers along the runes.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand. See what?" I replied, snapping her out of her daze.

"Were you able to see all five of the colors that make up the physical realm?" I couldn't quite decipher her expression as she awaited my answer.

I thought back to the array of colors that had floated around me in my second phase. "I think so."

"The Realmheart Physique was so named by the ancestors of the Indrath clan because, in this state, the user's attunement with the physical realm is said to be unparalleled. While the ability does not offer much strength in and of itself, the power to activate Realmheart allows the user to gain knowledge and insight which those without it can never hope to have," Myre explained. "Which is to say that knowledge truly is power."

I reflected back to when I had first used Realmheart against the elderwood guardian. I had assumed that the form was a just a power boost, allowing me to gain access to more mana, but from what Myre had just explained, it seemed using Realmheart actually just allowed me to utilize mana much more efficiently. "There is one thing I don't quite understand. When I used the second phase—Realmheart—last time, I was only able to see four colors. Why am I now able to see the purple particles?"

Myre pondered for a moment.

"Are you not allowed to tell me about this either? It seems none of the asuras want a 'lesser being' learning their techniques and secrets," I sighed, disappointed.

"Mmm. We asuras are prideful beings indeed. Even amongst other members of our race, we stay secretive and greedy—the Indrath clan particularly so." Myre chuckled, then gave me an inquisitive look. "I won't say that I'm much different from them, but I've lived long enough and experienced far too much to care about such frivolousness. If you'll be content with an old lady like me, I'll be happy to teach you a thing or two."

I honestly hadn't expected her to go so far as offering to teach me, but I was taking no chances. I immediately bobbed my head in consent before she could change her mind.

"Good! Now, practical lessons won't be possible in your current state, but I think a more theoretical approach might be good in any case," Myre said, tapping her chin with a finger.

She began explaining the fundamentals of mana itself and how it affected the world, or what she referred to as "the physical realm." Much of what she said were things I had already known. However, the way she phrased things, explaining everything in such an easily digestible manner, it was obvious that

she was much more knowledgeable than any of the professors at Xyrus Academy.

She went on, clarifying that it wasn't natural for lesser beings—or even asuras—to manipulate raw mana. Mages with an affinity to a certain element had a much easier time absorbing the atmospheric mana that coincided with that element. However, in the end, it still had to be absorbed and refined in order to be utilized. To someone with the Realmheart Physique, a fire-affinity mage would appear to be absorbing only the red mana particles, but upon completion of the refining process, the mana would appear white when first used. This was why body-strengthening spells, which did not require absorption of a specific type of mana, could be used regardless of a mage's affinity.

"So if, in the end, mana turns white when it is absorbed and refined, why isn't it possible for them to utilize different elements?" I inquired.

"Good question." Myre seemed pleased by my interruption rather than annoyed. "It is impossible to control the specific type of element that a mage absorbs, so it is inevitable that the mage will naturally take in the mana particles that his body is most inclined toward.

"Let's say that a mage's affinity is for water. During the process of refining raw mana, the amount of water element his body absorbs will be disproportionately larger than the other elements. So, even though the end result is a purified white mana, while the mage refined the water elemental mana his body absorbed, the raw mana altered his body to become more predisposed, and his mind to become more insightful of, that particular element."

It must have been obvious that I was confused, because she began to explain it in more detail.

"Remember when you conjured your first remote spell? Whether it was a stream of fire or a sphere of wind, you had to concentrate much more than you were accustomed to in order for the spell to manifest in the proper form, right? Even infant asuras are taught to verbally chant spells to help them concentrate and visualize what they want. However, after spending enough time absorbing and refining a specific element, the need to visualize and chant is much less, and it comes more naturally.

"Going back to the water-affinity mage scenario, that mage would, no doubt, have to concentrate on the shape, proportion, density, and even the speed of launch if he were to execute a fireball. However, that same mage will have no trouble raising a stream of water, separating it into multiple orbs, and casting it to barrage an enemy with just a flick of his wrist. Why?"

"Because of the influence that absorbing a majority of water element had on the mage during the refining process," I answered.

"Correct! After being exposed to a particular element for so long, the mage would no doubt gain insight during his meditation."

Myre continued lecturing on this subject, stressing heavily again that asuras and lesser beings alike were unable to manipulate natural mana. We continued on like this for hours in our discussion of mana before Myre finally brought up what I most wanted to know about: aether.

Rather than start from the beginning, Myre asked, "Can you tell me what you know about aether?"

I proceeded to share what little I knew about aether and the times I had experienced the phenomenon aether produced, how I had been able to freeze time using the first phase of Sylvia's will and how I had trained using the aether orb.

"Aether is fundamentally different from mana; this much is clear to anyone. Both entities make up the world we live in, but aether works very differently than mana. To what degree, no one has a solid answer. Some have speculated that aether makes up the building blocks the world is made of, while mana is what fills it with life and sustenance. More simply put, aether would be the cup, and mana the water that fills it." Myre held up a drinking glass, filled halfway, for me to see.

"It is quite easy to manipulate the water inside without mana, but much more difficult to change the shape of the cup without breaking it. Quite a crude analogy, I know." The asura smiled as she began slowly shaking the cup, stirring the water inside.

Shaking my head, I responded, "No, it helps a lot."

"Good. Well, despite the many speculations and theories, even the Indrath clan—hailed as the most adept in utilizing aether—has no solid theory to justify what they are able to do. What they did have, which no one else had, was the ability to physically detect aether through the use of the Realmheart Physique." Holding the glass close to her face, Myre dipped a finger in the water. "Those in the physical realm cannot sense aether. Everyone knows there are laws that hold our world together, just as this glass holds the water. However, it is impossible for them to fathom the boundaries that exist to keep order in the world."

"Then the purple particles I saw when I used Realmheart..." I said, trailing off at the end.

"Yes, my dear. That was aether." Myre smiled. "Through the use of Realmheart, you are able to see the glass cup from within—the boundaries of this world.

"Now, I can go on to explain the history of how aether has been studied, but I doubt that will be of any use to you. You just have to know that you possess a skill even asuras would kill for. However, I suspect there will be certain limits, since your body is not of the dragon race. But the true power of Realmheart lies in the ability to gain insight while in the form."

"I noticed that while I use Realmheart, I become a lot stronger. At first, I thought it was some sort of power boost that the form gives, but it's more like a big improvement in control," I confirmed, and Myre nodded in reply.

"Yes, especially for you as a quadra-elemental, there is a vast difference in mana manipulation using Realmheart—but let's set aside the aspect of mana for now. Not to sound biased, but control over mana is much more linear than aether. For mana, the greater the capacity of your core, the more water you can manipulate," she continued, still using the glass-of-water analogy. "Your insight and mental aptitude determines how many ways you can manipulate the water inside. However, through the manipulation of aether, we can control the cup itself. Do you understand?"

"How would you manipulate the world itself?" I pressed.

"It's become habit to say 'manipulate,' but in actuality, it is important to think of it instead as *influencing* aether. And you've already had a taste of this quite a few times, my dear. Windsom mentioned you being able to stop time for a brief moment." Myre set the cup down and put some distance between us.

"Yes! That was actually the first ability I was able to use with Sylvia's will," I exclaimed.

"The control over time, *aevum*; the authority over space, *spatium*; and the influence over all living components, *vivum*," Myre recited. "These are the three components that make up aether."

This was knowledge I might never come across again, so I hungrily absorbed every word the asura was saying.

"No matter how powerful, how insightful, or how lucky a practitioner may be, he will only be able to master one path. Some ancestors of the Indrath clan spent their entire lives trying to gain insight on one of the three paths, only to realize they didn't have the innate capacity to master it. However, over time, we've discovered a way for some asuras to discern where their aptitude lies."

"How?" We had reached the climax of the story, and I was greedy for more.

"The runes that appear on the body when using Realmheart." Myre closed her eyes and went silent.

A palpable force suddenly pushed down on my shoulders, forcing me to brace myself with my arms to keep myself sitting up on the bed. The air turned thick and heavy and I looked at Myre in awe. The pressure she was emitting was neither violent nor ferocious—as Kordri's had been—yet, in terms of its power, it was much more overwhelming. I had no confidence that I could muster up the will to fight against her, that much was clear. I could almost see her transforming into her dragon form.

Golden runes began appearing down her bare arm, but they looked very different from mine. Where my runes had appeared complex and detailed, hers flowed like branches of an elven tree or interconnecting streams of water weaving together.

Myre finally opened her eyes, which shone a radiant lavender. "The runes are different for each Realmheart user, but these markings show that I am of the vivum path. That is why I was able to heal you."

I found myself unable to muster a response and simply stared in awe. Her very presence felt different than mine when I had used this profound power. The runes that ran down her arm were much brighter and more vivid compared to the dull glow of mine, and her eyes seemed to see right through my flesh and bones and into my soul; my insides squirmed as her icy gaze left me feeling naked and exposed.

The asura spoke gently, despite her intimidating presence. "Now, my dear, activate your Realmheart."

BEARER OF GRIM NEWS

An indescribably chilling sensation burst from my mana core as I activated Realmheart. Liquid frost coursed through my veins, desperately seeking a way out of my body. I watched the golden runes begin to form on my arms, glowing hotly against my frigid skin as my vision began to achromatize.

"I was only able to catch a glimpse of what your runes looked like earlier, but it truly is fascinating," Myre mumbled to herself as she studied me.

Remaining seated and motionless as my caretaker inspected the markings on my body, I was enthralled by what I was experiencing. This was the first time I had actually taken a step back to study the changes in my perception while using Realmheart; watching the different particles move, as if they each possessed intellect and had a goal in mind, made me realize why magic was more accurately described as "mana manipulation" in this world.

Testing out a hunch I had, I willed a small ember to appear at the tip of my finger. Sure enough, the red particles around me began to react as I conjured the fire. Even though I had used the refined mana from my core, there was a definite response to the particles around me. I repeated this, using spells from different elements to see the response in the particles; in each case, only the purple specks remained unchanged.

"Having fun, are we?" The asura was still in her Realmheart form as well. Her soft purple eyes peered at me as the corners of her lips curled upward in amusement.

"How is it that I've never noticed this?" I asked, more to myself than to her.

"It's understandable that you would assume this form was some power-up rather than a means to observe and study what cannot normally be perceived." She finished examining my arm and let go of it, then took a few steps back. "I'm not exactly sure how long you're able to stay in this form, but there are a few things I want you to see before you release Realmheart."

The asura raised a hand in front of her, drawing my focus as her eyes

narrowed in concentration. Suddenly, the purple particles around us—which had refused to comply to my will—began to drift slowly toward Myre. Each tiny glimmer of purple moved differently from the others. It appeared the asura was not so much manipulating mana as herding a legion of tiny fireflies toward her hand.

"As I mentioned earlier, aether behaves fundamentally differently from mana. You will be met with only failure if you try to manipulate aether as you have done with mana. Let me reiterate my point with the cup-of-water analogy, since it has worked so well for us until now: You can drink, gargle, and spit out water as long as you know how, but you would be a fool if you tried the same thing with the cup. Aether is present all around us, yet it is the very boundary that confines you and me to the limits we have." As she spoke, the particles of aether began drifting around the hand she held up, until it was completely enveloped. "Vivum, the influence over all living components—this is the power I used to piece back together your shattered legs."

She activated some kind of spell, and I could see the purple cloud surrounding her hand now that I was in Realmheart. However, when she released her influence over the aether, the tiny particles dispersed back to their original space.

"I saw the aether gathering in your hand, but how does that form into vivum? How did that heal my legs?" A million and more questions were running through my head. On one hand, I was truly fortunate to be able to witness this

spectacle, but on the other hand, seeing it filled me with frustration at my lack of comprehension.

"After learning that my affinity lay with the branch of life, I studied vivum for centuries. However, even so, I am not confident that I can explain to you what you truly wish to know," she confessed solemnly. "What I *can* explain certainty is limited."

"I want to learn." I stared at her, determined to grasp what I could.

Her eyes remained solemn, but a slight smile formed. "Very well. The first thing you need to know is that, unlike mana, you cannot absorb aether; you are merely changing its presence and influence on reality."

"Does that mean a core isn't needed to influence aether?"

"An individual's core is what connects the body to the physical realm, so while aether isn't directly manipulated in the way that mana is, the mana core is crucial," she responded. Myre's words were simple enough, but they reflected a wisdom far deeper than mine.

"You will realize your path when the time comes, but since you are still in the beginning stages of your cultivation, it is best not to overwhelm you with knowledge that is not yet necessary," she continued, smiling gently at me. "For now, just know that after a certain point, your cultivation will no longer depend on your rote ability to refine mana, but rather on gaining insight into knowledge that cannot be passed down."

I pondered over her cryptic words. My brain was itching with questions but I knew now wasn't the time to be asking them.

She nodded in contentment as I waited for her to continue. "I'm not sure if this is mere coincidence or fate, but there is a reason why you have the ability —as limited as it is—to utilize aether. Can you guess what it is?"

"I thought it was because of Sylvia's will," I answered.

"It is partly because of Sylvia's will that you are able to bear the burden of aether, but that is not the reason you are able to manipulate it."

There was only one other answer that came to mind. "Is it because I can

manipulate all four elements?"

"Precisely!" Myre exclaimed. "It was the insight into all four of the fundamental elements that allowed us to take a look beyond the water and become aware of the glass cup that we are held in."

"Doesn't the ability to manipulate—influence—aether, as the basic building block of our reality, mean dragons are much stronger than the other races?" I remarked.

Shaking her head, the asura clarified. "We certainly hold a fair advantage over the other races. We dragons have the ability to control aether, but to what extent? Even the most powerful dragons are only able to scratch the surface of aether's boundless possibilities. However, the other races hold much deeper insight into the element to which they are predisposed."

I had lost track of time as we talked, and now I began to feel my strength leaving me from using Realmheart for so long. Noticing my strained expression, Myre suggested that I withdraw the ability.

Color began permeating back into the world as I released Realmheart; as always, the runes were the last part of the transformation to disappear. "So, Myre, were you able to tell which quality of aether I am best suited for?" I asked, letting out a relieved breath.

"Yes, but before you get too excited, allow me to forewarn you that even I cannot predict whether or not you will be able to consciously control aether like we can. You possess the ability to manipulate all four elements and have gained both a dragon's will and the Realmheart Physique, but you are still a human." Her message was harsh, but her words held no pretension or condescension.

"I see," I muttered. I would have been lying if I said I wasn't disappointed. In a world where we humans coexisted with other, more powerful races, I was beginning to see that there was an invisible ceiling to my progress, something I had been ignorant of in my past life.

"As I mentioned before, you cannot compare aether to mana. Aether can be

thought of as an organism, almost sentient, which needs to be coaxed and coerced into action. The manipulation of aether therefore places a heavy burden on the caster. You've probably felt this every time you used the time manipulation ability."

"You're right. And no matter how many times I've used it, it doesn't get any easier," I confessed, leaning against the wooden headboard of my bed.

"And I doubt it ever will. My dear, I'm unsure as to why you were, albeit briefly, able to manipulate time, but you were never meant to go down the path of aevum." Taking out a pen and a small parchment from the nightstand drawer, she began drawing some symbols. "Arthur, you were able to tap into aether manipulation because of Sylvia's will, but I don't imagine you were able to get a grasp of how it works."

"In terms of theory, I still have no idea," I acknowledged reluctantly. Using the first phase of Sylvia's will had allowed me to stop time for a brief moment, but when I had used that ability it felt like I was simply looking at a manuscript in a foreign language: I could see what it looked like, but I had no idea how to read it or what it meant.

"This is why." Myre held up the small paper she had been writing on, revealing an array of familiar symbols. "Like Sylvia, you were meant to control the very fabric of the boundaries that keep the physical realm in place. You are of the *spatium* genus."

Despite the revelation, I wasn't happy. Not at all. "But, as you've said, regardless of this knowledge, it's still possible that I won't be able to consciously control this ability."

Myre regarded me with a solemn gaze but didn't respond.

"From what you've told me so far, I was only able to even use the time manipulation ability because it was pre-embedded into the will Sylvia imparted to me before she was killed." I was doing my best to contain my frustration, but my voice was growing steadily louder. "Please, Myre. Tell me what I need to do. So far, all I know about this grand ability is that I have the

qualifications for it, but because of the physical limitations of my species, I won't be able to handle the burden!"

The asura stayed quiet for a long time, doing nothing but combing softly through my ruffled hair. "I truly pity you, child. You have such an overwhelming potential for greatness, but your capacity is hindered by something you cannot control. The reason I have told you all these things is not to mock you for something you will never be able to accomplish, but rather to encourage you to do something beyond the ordinary. Even as you progress into the white stage and beyond, you may be unable to control aether like dragons can, but that does not mean you do not have that ability at your disposal. Knowledge is an immeasurable strength, and with it you may find a way past the boundaries of your birth, something even the asuras do not yet see."

"You're right—I'm sorry for taking my frustrations out on you. I know you only want what is best for me," I whispered.

"Yes, my child. Only what is best for you," she echoed. When I looked up at Myre, however, her face was deeply lined with an expression of sorrow.

"What's wrong?"

"Arthur, I have broken many rules by imparting all this knowledge to you. This knowledge can certainly be used against the dragon race if it falls into the wrong hands, so please believe me when I say this—I truly do want what is best for you."

I couldn't figure out why Myre had shown so much care for me, but if there was one thing I had learned in my previous life, it was how to read the intentions of those around me. The asura meant well, despite the fact that we barely knew each other.

"Even if Realmheart cannot be utilized to its full extent, it can be an incomparable asset in the coming battles because of its sensory functions. With Realmheart, your ability to manipulate all four elements, and your remarkable combat prowess, you have many tools at your disposal..." Myre's

voice trailed off, filling me with apprehension for her next words. "But?" I asked.

Letting out a deep breath, she took a moment and stared into my eyes. "But this movement technique that you've created, the one that brought you into my home in such a horrid state... it cannot be one of them."

As if her words weren't clear enough already, she spoke once more.

"Never use that technique again."

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

At Myre's ominous warning, I remained silent—numb, almost. I'd had a hunch that this might've been the case after ending up here, but her words made my predicament all too real.

My mind spun, trying to weave together a way to refute the asura's verdict. However, nothing came to mind. Regardless of how much mana I infused to strengthen my body, what I was doing with Burst Step was directly stimulating the muscles to such a degree that, apparently, it would tear them —and my bones—to pieces.

I'd always thought this world held the potential for limitless possibilities, with magic at the epicenter of it all. But now I saw that no matter where one wound up, there would always be a ceiling, keeping those who wished to venture into the unknown caged in.

I sighed, looking up at the wooden ceiling above us.

"I know you spent a lot of time developing this mana art, and it's rude of me to pry this secret out of you, but how does your movement technique work, exactly?" Myre asked, a twinkle of interest apparent in her hazy green eyes.

First I told her how I had come across the idea of the skill. Myre already knew the foundations of Mirage Walk, which the Thyestes clan had engineered, so that saved me some time. I then explained the basic mechanics of how I had improved Mirage Walk from its initial concept. To put it simply, Mirage Walk was a passive skill that was used to hide the user's

mana fluctuation. Recounting the months I had spent trying to get a consistent handle on Burst Step sent a painful ache down my chest as it finally hit me that all that work was for naught.

It had been the first time I had developed a mana art that went beyond the boundaries of this world, since it was only possible with the knowledge I had from my previous life. But I couldn't tell her that. Instead, I told her how I first came across the idea.

"Fascinating," said Myre, deep in thought. "To utilize the intricacies of the body to such a degree... I never would have thought of something like that.

"I was shocked to see your body in such a state at first, but now, hearing how this movement technique worked, it's a wonder your legs weren't permanently crippled," she continued, still in awe.

"It doesn't matter now, does it? I can't use the skill without shattering my body and tearing up my muscles, so I'll have to think of some other way to prepare for this upcoming war," I shrugged, trying to keep my bitterness from showing. "Feel free to use it, Myre. As a thank you for healing my legs."

"My child, I have to say I have very little confidence in being able to replicate what you've just explained to me. The sheer amount of control and intricate fine-tuning one would need to execute this Burst Step properly is beyond my grasp," she confessed with a chuckle. "I've grown complacent with old age. I have sought out the hidden mysteries of vivum, abandoning the practical uses of mana long ago. Rest assured, your secret skill will end with me."

"Thank you." But her words offered little comfort, in my current dilemma. "Myre, I'm feeling a bit drowsy..."

"Of course, my dear," the asura answered immediately. Casting me one last sympathetic gaze, she blew out the candles lighting the room and left.

The hut darkened, and my eyes could only make out the thin pillars of moonlight that made it past the thatched roof. The specks, dust, and ashes from the smoldering remains in the fireplace danced in the streams of soft, white light, filling the small space with an alluring ambiance.

Telling Myre that I wanted to sleep was a lie. Sleeping was the last thing I wanted to do; I had already wasted enough time as it was.

I closed my eyes, analyzing my current situation.

My breakthrough into the silver core stage was more than a pleasant surprise, since my core was refined to the mid-level stage. The amount of mana I could now utilize through this advancement, along with mana rotation, was several times higher than it had previously been. My hand-to-hand combat abilities had also taken quite a leap forward thanks to Kordri; coupled with my sword mastery, they would place me easily into the AA-class as an adventurer even without the use of elemental magic.

Despite all this, however, I had little to show in terms of improvement in magic or mana arts. I had hoped to learn a thing or two about how asuras manipulated mana, but so far I had learned next to nothing in that area. The asuras had provided me with excellent training in the best environment possible to make sure I was heading in the right direction, but they seemed unwilling to impart any secrets regarding their fluency in mana manipulation. Mirage Walk was the only technique I had managed to piece together, and while it was an important asset, it would have little impact in a large-scale battle.

There was a sense of mystery and wonder when it came to mana manipulation; not nearly as much as aether, but still there. Dicathen was a place of unimaginable experiences and possibilities compared to my previous world, but compared to Epheotus or even Alacrya, my home continent was an infant regarding knowledge and comprehension of mana.

There were actual asuras residing in Alacrya, and it was safe to assume that, throughout the ages, they'd shared some of their knowledge of mana with the inhabitants. From the perspective of a war leader, if Agrona wanted to take over Dicathen, he needed enough forces to not only successfully invade our continent, but also to protect his clan from the asuras of Epheotus who, I

could safely assume, were eagerly waiting for the Vritras to show some sign of weakness.

I thought back to the intel Cynthia Goodsky had provided to the Council of Dicathen, which Aldir has passed on to the asuras. I was sure they were taking proper defensive measures, but until I was briefed, I would be left to blindly wonder about the enemy forces' abilities. It was a daunting thought.

My mind shifted to the abilities of the Four Scythes and their retainers. The report Windsom had relayed claimed that a single retainer was capable of wiping out a team led by a Lance.

Could I kill a retainer with my level of power right now? I wasn't sure. Alea Triscan, the Lance who had been killed, had been at the white stage. Although her mana core development had been due to the artifacts bestowed on each of the Lances, she'd still had a considerable amount of raw power to utilize. If they could so easily kill her, I knew that even with the skills I had harnessed during my training here I could not risk underestimating a retainer.

The rest of the night was an indistinguishable mixture of vague lucidness and moments of fitful sleep. Before I knew it, the cottage was filled with the warm light of the morning sun.

I reached for the empty pail by the side of my bed, bringing it to my lap. I used mana to gather water into my palms, then splashed my face in hopes of stirring myself awake.

Myre's voice came from the edge of the hut. "I take it you had a rough night?"

"Can you tell?" I joked, feeling refreshed from the crisp water.

"The shadows beneath your eyes have practically reached your chin," she said with a chuckle as she approached.

Removing the sheet covering me, she began carefully unwrapping the bandages on my leg. She inspected me carefully, and I saw that her eyes had turned the same shade of lavender as they had been when she used Realmheart.

"Good—the bones in your legs have set well enough for me to fully treat them now. I had to work in stages in case the bones and muscles decided to start mending improperly." As she spoke, Myre ran her hands down my legs, leaving traces of silvery mist behind. Slowly, the mist began penetrating my skin and sinking into my legs, then thin wisps of silver fire crackled along the scar tissue.

At first, there was only a slight tingle as my once-numb legs began getting their feeling back. However, it wasn't long until that mild tingle intensified into an excruciating pain that seemed to sear every inch of my legs. If I hadn't known that Myre was actually mending my legs, I would've been tempted to cut them off right then and there. I was fighting the urge to urinate, which added another layer of discomfort to the waves of escalating pain.

It didn't feel like my legs were being healed. Instead, it felt like the asura was growing me a pair of new legs in the most painful way possible. I let out a choked cry as I clawed at the bed in hopes of distracting myself from the pain.

"I should have warned you about the pain. I'm basically forcing your body to heal itself at a hyper-increased rate. The torn tendons and muscles are trying to reattach themselves to the bones, which is why you're feeling the way you do." The asura kept her attention on my legs as beads of sweat formed above her thin brows.

It was approximately ten minutes before the pain began to slowly subside. By the end of the treatment, I was gingerly flexing my toes. With Myre's consent, I brought my legs to the edge of the bed, carefully putting weight on first one foot, then the other before I tried standing up. My legs immediately buckled under my weight, and I fell onto my side.

"Be careful. Your legs are fully healed, but you've lost a lot of musculature in your lower body. You are going to be weaker than you think," Myre said evenly.

"There's no pain or discomfort, at least," I replied, my excitement momentarily pushing away the dark pall of the previous night's conversation. My legs did feel weaker, but that would only be temporary. I had full control. "This does not change the fact that you cannot use Burst Step anymore. It would be harder for me to heal them each time, and I will not be able to mend you at all when you are back in Dicathen."

"I understand." Once more I tried the simple task of standing up; this time I was able to keep myself upright, although my legs trembled. After an hour or so of steadily hobbling around inside the cottage, leaning against the furniture and walls for support, I knew what I had to do. I went outside to the back of the cottage to relieve myself, then spent a few minutes stretching outside, taking in the crisp morning air, which smelled of dew.

"I thought about what you said yesterday, my dear," Myre called from the porch. "Concerning your inability to act on the information I shared with you."

Shaking my head, I replied, "I'm sorry about that, Myre; I said that out of frustration. You've told me things I would never be able to learn elsewhere. I have come to realize just how far behind Dicathen is when it comes to knowledge of mana."

"The inhabitants of Dicathen have come a long way, considering how short a time it's been since they began experimenting with mana through the artifacts we gave them." Walking out of the hut, she waved for me to follow, making her way toward a perfectly tended and trimmed lawn of grass.

"Even I am limited in what I am allowed to disclose, but since this is knowledge you already have, I can nudge you in the right direction a little," she said, standing a few yards away from me.

"I'm not following," I replied, looking around at our surroundings. There was nothing nearby except the dense clusters of trees that towered over us, making the cottage and trimmed front lawn look very out of place.

"Don't worry. I've already told Windsom that I'll be borrowing you for a bit

longer." The air changed around us as Myre activated her Realmheart. The light-gold runes glowed softly beneath her sleeves, and her misty green eyes shifted to radiant lavender. "Now, my boy, consider every magical spell you know, and, using whichever combination you like, hit me with all you have." I looked at Myre, standing frail and thin in the field of grass, and hesitated to follow her command. However, a dreadful pressure erupted from the delicate-looking asura that wiped out any concerns I had of injuring her. I felt more like I'd be the one in danger if I didn't comply with her instructions.

"All right." I gathered mana into my hands, but before I could begin to form the spell I had intended to conjure, Myre's voice rang out.

"In your right palm, you're preparing a compressed water sphere while your left hand will shoot a small gust of wind. Child, I told you to hit me with all you have."

She was exactly right.

Ignoring her taunts, I fired my two spells and immediately concentrated on the area beneath her feet.

"You are planning on rupturing the ground under me, which is a clever idea, but I would prefer you didn't ruin the grass," she said as she casually avoided my wind and water spells. Myre stomped the ground softly; before my spell could even take effect, she had already canceled it.

My mouth hung agape for a moment before I regained my composure. My mind shifted back to yesterday—she had explained that Realmheart could be used to heighten perception, but I had never expected it to be to this degree.

"As I said, this is an ability you already have," she chuckled, tapping her temple. "I'm simply nudging you in the right direction."

THE LAST MENTOR

"You don't look out for the spell behind you, my dear," Myre reprimanded. "Proper interpretation of mana fluctuation starts with sensing the spells just as they affect the physical realm. Then you utilize Realmheart to accurately determine what form they will take. Even if your opponent chooses to vocalize their spell, it is what they are imagining that will actually affect the size, shape, and duration of that spell. Some mages use a vocal projection as a feint to trick their opponent."

I was able to make sense of her advice, but it was becoming harder to stay conscious—I was losing a lot of blood from the gaping wound through my shoulder. The asura continued debriefing me on the mistake that had led to my injury as she healed me using aether. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened since I'd started my training—or even the seventh time, for that matter. I had failed numerous times to properly analyze the flow of mana before it had materialized into a spell, which had given me ample opportunity to notice that Myre's healing, through the use of aether, was fundamentally different than my mother's healing spells.

The limits that applied to my mother—or any other healing mage—didn't exist for Myre. She was able to heal ailments, close gaping holes, even regrow missing limbs, which left me wondering: why hadn't Myre simply cut off my legs and grown me new ones?

From what she had explained to me, it seemed that using aether past a certain

threshold came with costs. It didn't happen for all the spells she used—or even most, for that matter. However, using aether to grow a whole new limb would mean she had to extract the aether that was sustaining the life of something, or someone, else.

"I know what you're thinking when you're faced with the spells, child." The asura's voice startled me back into focus. "Don't get ahead of yourself and try to counter the spell before it manifests. It took me decades to get it right, and that was considered fast amongst us dragons. Now, shall we call it a night?"

I looked up at the sky; a thin layer of orange in the horizon was all that was left of the sun as night took over.

"Sounds good," I said with a smile, trailing behind her into the small cottage. It was surprising how quickly the weeks had gone by, thanks to the endless training and the elderly asura's company. One thing had become clear over these past few weeks training with Myre, however: The docile, mild temperament that the asura had apparently feigned while she had nursed me back to health was all a lie. She made for pleasant company on any other occasion, but on the training grounds, her true personality was exposed—a demonic entity that made even Kordri's training seem like a puppy-petting session.

Worst of all, because of her skill at healing through aether, there was little to hold her back. She had a favorite saying and repeated it often enough that it haunted my dreams: "The best treatment for an injury is to prevent it from happening in the first place. So if you don't want me to injure you, prevent it."

She would say that—each time with the same sly smirk—just before hitting me with a colorful array of spells, which I was forced to read and dodge using Realmheart.

It wasn't only theoretical training, though; she had taught me what to look out for when a spell was about to manifest. Depending on the type of spell that would form, the mana particles would start fluctuating differently, so it was crucial to know what exactly you were looking at in the brief window. Needless to say, it was a lot like learning a new language—except your life depended on it.

It was frustrating at first—so much so that I even asked if I could ask Windsom for the aether orb to conserve time, but she rejected the idea; something to do with the aether orb not allowing me to get an accurate grasp of how mana worked in the physical realm.

However, to Myre's surprise, I was able to progress by leaps and bounds in what I dubbed mana interpretation. According to Myre, I had accomplished in just under a month what had taken her half a year. I was nowhere near ready to use it in a real battle, but the fundamentals were there. Just like reading a book—I had the words down, but being able to speed-read would take months, maybe years.

These past six weeks, every morning would start off with mana analysis as Myre shot different spells of varying elements up into the air—and sometimes directly at me. Continuous use of Realmheart while training in this fashion had allowed me to increase the duration of the ability, but not by much.

In the afternoon, she would debrief me on the mistakes I had made and point out nuances that I should watch out for to get a better prediction of what the spell might form into. Myre was meticulous in her explanations about why mana behaved the way it did, which helped the progress of my training.

After that, I would train by myself, going through the different forms Kordri had instilled in me as I shadow-sparred. At night, before I went to sleep, I always made sure to train my mana core, but after the last huge breakthrough I'd made, there had been no drastic change in my core.

One evening, as the two of us finished eating our simple dinner of stewed beef, a clear knock rang from the wooden door.

"Come in," Myre called out, taking a careful sip from her mug.

"Excuse my intrusion," the familiar voice responded as the door opened. It was Windsom.

I couldn't say I was happy to see him, despite the fact that I hadn't had any contact with the asura for months. The ever-so-poised asura, his platinum-blond hair cropped short and trim, unexpectedly lowered himself to a knee, genuflecting toward Myre with obvious respect.

I had deduced that Myre had a certain level of influence within the Indrath clan, given her powers and the fact that she had been able to keep me with her despite the fact that I was supposed to be undergoing training with Windsom. However, this show of respect to the elderly asura raised some questions in my mind.

"I apologize for coming without notice, but Lord Indrath has already arranged for Arthur's next instructor, and he is waiting rather impatiently for his student." Windsom lowered his gaze as he spoke.

"Very well. I do wish to keep tabs on the child, so there will be no problem if I pop in every now and then, correct?" It was not so much a question as an irrefutable declaration.

"Of course not. Now, we must get going." Windsom's gaze turned to me, indicating that I should get ready. "If you'll excuse us..."

"You should go, Arthur. Remember to continue your training with Realmheart." Myre ran her fingers through my hair, which had grown long enough to be considered a mane.

"Of course. I'll have it mastered by the next time we see each other," I teased, giving her a childish grin.

I followed Windsom out of the cottage, and we made our way through the dense cluster of trees that surrounded Myre's little hut. Windsom regarded me curiously as we walked.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, stepping over an exposed root.

"For Lady Myre to take the time to not only heal you, but train you as well..." His voice trailed off and he shook his head. "Your luck continues to

amaze me."

I ducked under a low branch. "Who exactly is Myre, anyway?"

"Lady Myre," Windsom stressed. "And I'm not in the position to tell you if she hasn't told you herself."

"You know, when I first met you, I figured you were pretty up there. Now, not so much," I chuckled as we continued deeper into the forest.

"Watch your tongue, human. Even if I were among the lowest rank of asuras, I'd still be stronger than any of you lesser races in Dicathen," Windsom retorted.

"My bad. I guess I struck a nerve?" I held up a hand in concession.

Windsom merely shook his head in silent exasperation. We soon reached the teleportation gate he had set up, which glowed with a radiating light, reflecting the destination it was set to.

"Remind me again why you set the gate so far from the cottage?" I asked, approaching it.

"Lady Myre's protection field ends here," he said simply as his right foot entered the glowing circle. "Now come. Your instructor isn't one for waiting."

Windsom's body disappeared through the gate, and I followed immediately after. Over the years, I had gotten used to the dizzying sensation of traveling by the gates, thankfully.

I stepped out of the teleportation circle onto the sand-strewn ground and gazed in awe at the vastly different landscape we had traveled to. We were at the bottom of what appeared to be an enormous crater; imposing walls, carved by nature, towered over us on all sides. It looked like water had filled this giant hole at one point in time, but the only traces left now were the silvery, ribbon-like fissures that lined the walls at varying heights. Plant life —life in general—seemed nonexistent, and the harsh, arid air stung my face. The uneven floor, which spread across acres on end, appeared to be constantly moving as the wind blew and spun the sand in no particular

rhythm or pattern.

"So my next training session is going to be here?" I confirmed, my voice quivering at the thought of spending weeks or even months here. Because I had always teleported from one training ground to the next, I didn't have a clear grasp of the size or shape of the continent of Epheotus. If I had come here under better circumstances, I would have wanted to explore the land of asuras.

"You've spent this past half-year training mostly in augmented melee combat, honing various skills in the key aspects necessary for fighting a war. Now, you'll start fitting everything together into a cohesive style that utilizes your elemental magic and your melee combat skills." Windsom seemed to be searching for something, his eyes scanning over the distance as he spoke.

"And this instructor will help me do this?" I surveyed the area around us as well.

"Ah, he's here," Windsom announced, ignoring my question.

"So this is him? This is the pup who's supposed to be the hero, leading Dicathen to victory against the Vritra-raised armies and their disgusting little Lessurans?" A bass voice reverberated clearly from the top of the gorge. I wanted to ask what Lessurans meant, but I bit my tongue. I'd just assume it was a degrading slur for non-asuras. *How charming*.

There was an insect-sized figure standing on top of the crater's edge, silhouetted against the sun shining at his back. Then he leaped down, growing larger as he descended like a meteor toward us.

When he landed, Windsom and I shielded ourselves against the explosion of sand and debris that arose. As we waited for the dust cloud to clear, a large hand shot out from within the cloud and lifted me off the ground. I struggled, even using mana, but the giant hand's grip around my waist refused to relent. As I was pulled into the cloud of debris, a firm, deep voice resonated, shaking me to my very core. "Hello, Pup."

WREN KAIN IV

In Neither of my lives had I ever seen a beast like this. The creature that had grabbed me seemed to be made entirely out of polished stone. Instead of eyes, two hollowed-out cavities radiated a pale glow and studied me with intelligence. With a protruding mandible that reminded me of an ape's, the beast let out a deep rumble, making the very organs inside my body tremble. Judging by how the height at which he had me suspended, he was easily over five yards tall. However, despite the situation I was in and the terrifying presence emitted by my captor, I couldn't help but stare in awe at what I beheld.

There was no flaw in the beast's stone hide. It was as if the earth had painstakingly polished this monster for millions of years, etching away any of the flaws he might have once had. The glossy stone that made up the gigantic ape-like beast's body glittered like the ocean in the afternoon sun, enveloping him in an almost holy aura despite his grotesque form.

Suddenly, cracks began appearing on the beast's body, splintering off into endless branches as the same pale light from his eyes shone through the thin fissures.

The giant hand wrapping around me loosened as it crumbled into fine sand, as did the rest of the beast's body. I fell to my feet as I watched the stone figure turn into a mound of sand slowly spreading across the ground.

In the remains of the artfully conjured golem stood a thin, frail-looking man

dressed in a shabby white coat. "From your expression, I'm guessing that didn't scare you—only surprised you at best," he muttered, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

"Arthur, I'd like you to meet Wren. He's going to be your instructor for quite a while, so get acquainted." There was an amused sparkle in Windsom's eyes as he said this.

Of all the asuras I had crossed paths with, Wren was by far the most unremarkable. He had the body frame of a malnourished shut-in underneath his oversized coat, heavily hunched. He stared at me intently, and the deep bags that drooped beneath his half-closed eyes were almost as dark as the greasy black hair, obviously left unwashed for days, that fell over his face like wet seaweed. Coupled with the uneven stubble across his chin and cheeks, he presented the image of a man who would be looked down on by even the dirtiest of vagrants.

Still, I knew better than to judge a man, much less an asura, by his outward appearance. Hell, I hadn't had a decent shower or haircut in months myself; I had no right to say anything.

Dipping my head, I formally introduced myself to my new instructor. "Nice to meet you. My name is Arthur Leywin. I'll be in your care."

The asura shifted his gaze, ignoring me. "Windsom, what consequences does human society place on one who is tardy?"

"Excuse me? Consequences?" I asked.

"A severed finger or toe, perhaps? No, that seems a bit severe. Imprisonment or social isolation seems more appropriate," the hunched asura muttered as he rubbed his stubbled chin.

"What are you talking about? Those are ridiculous consequences for being a bit late!" I sputtered incredulously.

"What?" The asura looked genuinely surprised. "None at all? No punitive actions are taken whatsoever for such behavior?"

"It is looked down upon, but no, humans generally face no formal charges for

being late," Windsom intervened.

"How odd. For a race with such a minuscule lifespan, I would have imagined they placed more importance on time than anything else. Such a backward race, you humans," he murmured.

Despite his rude words, there was truth to them. I had to stifle a laugh at the apparent irony of us "lesser races."

As the thin, shabby-looking asura continued to take mental notes, I shot a questioning glance at Windsom.

"Regardless of my ignorance regarding the social intricacies of human conduct, we should move on to why you're here, and why I've come to this gods-forsaken crater at the tip of a mountain." Waving a hand as if to scatter his distracting thoughts, the asura approached me. "Arthur, was it?" my new instructor asked.

"Yes sir."

"I want you to strip." The asura's gaze was unrelenting as he tapped his foot impatiently.

"Of course you do," I muttered quietly under my breath.

"What was that?" he snapped.

"Nothing. Not a single thing." With a sigh, I stripped down to my underwear.

"Is this good enough, or would you like to study my family jewels as well?"

"The supposed savior of the lesser beings has quite the mouth," Wren replied sardonically. He began circling me, poking me with his finger now and then. When he saw the white feather that Sylvia had left me wrapped around my arm, he removed it.

"Hey!" I exclaimed.

"Dragon's feather. Truly too rare a crafting material to be wasted as an arm warmer, don't you think?" the frail asura said.

"Crafting material?" I echoed, curious.

"The feathers on our wings are a particular type of scale with many unique properties. From the day we are born, we never shed our wing feathers, so for a dragon to deliberately give someone his or her feathers signifies trust and affection," Windsom answered.

Wren handed the feather back to me. "I never knew," I replied, looking at the long, white feather. It felt silky between my fingers.

"Why didn't Myre tell me about this?" I turned to Windsom.

"She must have had her reasons," the asura answered dismissively.

Wren resumed his inspection, occasionally placing a finger or two over the major arteries of my body and counting to himself.

"Spread your arms out," Wren suddenly ordered. I did as I was told, hoping that following his commands would hasten the process. I tried to distract myself with the amusing and slightly embarrassing fact that I was almost completely naked in the middle of a barren crater, with two asuras examining me.

The hunched asura continued to study me, muttering random numbers to himself. The afternoon sun cooked my skin as he inspected me like some laboratory mouse until Wren finally spoke again.

"We'll start by firing a basic spell from all the elements you can conjure. Use only your right hand to release the spell." The asura placed his palm on my solar plexus and grabbed my right wrist. "Begin!"

I fired off a series of simple spells in no particular order: fire, water, ice, lightning, wind, then earth. When I had finished, Wren began muttering to himself once again.

We continued testing with increasingly complex spells. Wren instructed me on the precise form he wanted me to conjure the spell into, down to the diameter of the stone pillar I was to erect from the ground.

Windsom quietly watched throughout the whole process, never uttering a single word unless asked. Whatever discomfort or embarrassment I'd felt during the beginning of this in-depth analysis was gone by the time the sun fell.

"Basic measurements and calculations are completed," Wren announced with

a groan as he stretched his back and neck. "Moving on to effective use of mana arts in battle."

Suddenly, he whipped around and pointed a long, pale finger at me. "Boy! Fire a spell over there. Quick!" The asura's voice cracked like a whip as his finger shifted, pointing to a small earthen golem he had just conjured up about twenty yards away.

Without hesitation, I turned to face the golem as commanded. Gathering mana into my palm, I manifested it into a bolt of electricity and fired it at the target. The dummy golem shattered upon impact, crumbling into a small pile of rocks.

Displaying no change in his expression, the pale-faced asura whipped his body in a different direction and pointed again, erecting another golem about thirty yards away. "Again!"

I conjured another spell in my palm, but as I prepared to fire it, a heavy blow struck the back of my left leg, jerking me down to my knees. The spell I had manifested shot from my palm out into the sky, missing the golem entirely.

Behind me was another golem Wren had erected, standing with its arms crossed. Annoyingly enough, an arrogant grin was etched into the golem's faceless head.

Meanwhile, my instructor was staring at the bolt of fire as it sailed across the sky and waving it goodbye.

"You missed!" he gasped in feigned surprise, his eyes remaining half-closed.

"So you're one of *those* people," I cursed under my breath. I placed my palm on the golem and concentrated; after a few moments it glowed bright red, then crumbled into ashen remains. "Again," I echoed through gritted teeth, getting back to my feet.

"A tough one," he whistled, taking out a small notebook and pen from his coat and scribbling something down.

Wren had come off as an eccentric from the very beginning. He reminded me a lot of Gideon, but I now knew he was on a different level of weird than the old scientist back in Dicathen.

"Look, you've been making me do menial tasks all day. I'm fine with that, but I'd be more cooperative if I actually knew what you were trying to figure out with all your measurements and notes," I pointed out.

"I doubt you'd be able to comprehend what I tell you." Wren shook his head, waving a dismissive hand at me.

"Try me," I challenged.

He explained that he'd been making calculations and speculations based on how many milliseconds it took mana to move within my body before it manifested. If I ignored the supercilious tone he used throughout his explanation, his insights were brilliant.

"There's still a lot that you didn't measure, though," I interjected. "We need to account for the environment we're in right now. I find myself most comfortable using fire and water elemental spells, but water-affinity mana is lacking in this area."

"Of course I took all that into account. How long do you think I've been doing this for?" Wren's condescending gaze altered, however, as he stared at me curiously. "How old did you say you were?"

I calculated in my head how long it had been since I had come here. "Nearly fifteen now," I answered.

"Huh. Not entirely brainless, I guess," Wren said with a shrug.

I'd known the asura for less than a day, and I already knew that this was as much of a compliment as I would ever get from him. "So what's next?"

"More tests. We'll continue with a long-range mana manipulation analysis," Wren answered, looking around. The crater was dim, with only moonlight shining above our heads.

Suddenly, the ground trembled underneath us. Out on the edge of the crater to our right, more golems appeared. Even from here, I could make out hundreds of the human-sized stone creatures approaching us.

The golems, much like the giant one that had first appeared, glittered in the

dim moonlight as they marched in our direction.

"How many golems can you conjure at a time?" I asked in awe.

"Depends on the complexity of the golem. Those guys, a few thousand or so. Now, go all out." Wren pointed at the golems, indicating for me to blow them up.

As the army of golems drew closer, I activated Realmheart. I could feel my lips curl into a smile at the almost addictive feeling that filled my body—my senses integrating with the world's mana.

I unleashed everything I had in my arsenal, raining down an array of spells as Wren scrutinized me.

These golems were much sturdier than an average golem, but in less than an hour I had managed to destroy the few hundred that Wren had conjured. I controlled my breathing as my chest continued to heave. I was tired, but destroying a few hundred golems was just the trick to relieve some of my stress.

"It's as you said, Windsom. What a peculiar child he is—to have Realmheart, as well as a decent control over the elements at his age... He makes an excellent test subject." For the first time, Wren's face contorted into something akin to a smile.

"What's next?" I asked, letting out a deep, content breath.

"Having fun, are we? It'll start being less fun once they start hitting back," Wren snickered. "Anyway, I still have to take into account your physical abilities. Windsom told me you're quite adept with a sword, and you've recently learned combat under Kordri's instructions. So I'll be taking those facts into account as we begin our next phase."

"I understand, but how long do I have to stay naked?" I asked, looking at the pile of my clothes, which were now partially buried in debris.

"I'm analyzing every movement you make, so it's best if you stay unclothed," he answered. "Don't worry, I'm not exactly filled with pleasure looking at your bare skin."

With a faint smile, I responded, "Very comforting."

"Let me see the primary weapon you would use in a battle."

I always kept my sword in my dimension ring. I had given the ring to Windsom, but he had passed it on to Myre while she was taking care of me, and she had given it back to me when I was healed. I drew Dawn's Ballad—still in its scabbard—from my ring and handed it to Wren.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting from the thin asura when I handed him the blade, but I hadn't expected him to burst out laughing upon seeing my weapon.

The mysterious sword I had stumbled upon looked like an ordinary black stick when it was still inside its sheath. I thought Wren might've mistaken it for a toy. "Here, let me show—"

"I know what it is, boy! Windsom, did you know of this when you asked me to train him?" Wren turned to the white-haired asura behind me.

"I had an inkling," he confessed.

Wren gripped Dawn's Ballad in both hands and began to tug.

"It's not going to unsheathe. I'm the only one who can..." my voice trailed off and I watched, wide-eyed, as the thin asura effortlessly drew the sword—the sword that I had paired with, the blade that was only supposed to open at my command. However, even I had only been able to unsheathe it in the first place because of Sylvia's dragon will.

"H-how...?" I stuttered, before coming to a realization. "Is it because you're an asura that you can draw the sword I've bonded with?"

"No," he answered, holding my sword up as he inspected its translucent teal blade. "It's because I made this sword."

BATTLES IN VARIOUS SCENARIOS

"Wait, YOU MADE THIS SWORD?" I echoed, my skepticism obvious. Since coming across the mysterious sword and seeing the maker's mark, I had often wondered who this W.K IV was. More than once had I scoured the library of Xyrus Academy in hopes of finding the smith with those initials, only to be met with a dizzying amount of royal names and disappointment.

"Was I speaking a foreign language?" Wren replied curtly, his eyes still inspecting Dawn's Ballad.

Ignoring his quip, I changed my approach. "Okay, so assuming that you did forge this sword, what was it doing in Dicathen?"

Until now, I had assumed that my sword was of dwarven origin because of their specialty in the craft. When imagining the maker of Dawn's Ballad, I had always thought of a dark, bulky, bear of a man with a thick beard, hairy, bulging arms, and hands hardened with callouses—the typical stereotype associated with smiths and other metalworkers. Instead, this bony man who looked like he'd get tired holding a pen for too long was telling me he had forged this sword.

"Dawn's Ballad was one of my experimental weapons—more or less a failure. I tossed it away in the Beast Glades of your continent on one of my visits to gather minerals, assuming no one would be able to tell it was anything other than a black stick, much less open it. To think that it has somehow ended up in your possession... What are the odds?" The asura

actually began to calculate the probabilities before I interrupted him.

"A failure? I've never seen a sword of better make and quality in my life. What makes it a failure?" I pressed.

"As complimentary as your words may be, comparing my weapons—no matter how poor their quality—to the primitive tools you lesser races use only insults me." He clicked his tongue. "I forged this sword as more of a one-size-fits-all weapon. I must have been drunk when I thought that was a good idea. It just came out to be a sharp tool—nothing more, nothing less." Wren finally pried his eyes away from the sword and exchanged glances with Windsom. "But this makes things interesting."

Looking over my shoulder, I could see Windsom's stoic face break into a smile. "I thought it might," he replied. "So what do you think, now that you've met him? Will you do it?"

"What's going on?" I interrupted, confused. I was beginning to be afraid that the asura might reclaim his weapon—or even dispose of it completely for the sake of his pride. I had no doubt—I would never again find a sword of this quality, despite its maker considering it a "failure."

"Arthur, I brought you here to Wren to accomplish two things. The first is as I mentioned earlier: While his methods are unconventional, Wren has an unusually keen eye for the practical art of combat. The second was that I hoped Wren would produce a sword that is a better fit for your own unique form of combat."

"Is that true?" I turned to Wren. "You'll really forge a sword for me?"

"I don't forge swords, brat. I create them. And I agreed to train you only because I owed a favor to Lord Indrath. His favor doesn't extend to me wasting my time making a sword for a lesser being." Wren slid Dawn's Ballad into its scabbard. "I'm going to hold onto this sword for now."

"For now? So you'll give it back to me?" I confirmed, still apprehensive.

"Boy, Dawn's Ballad might be just a sharp tool, but it still chose you. I'm not proud of this particular piece, but I'm not going to take it away from you," he

replied. The asura then stretched his arm out in front of him, and a sword suddenly emerged from the ground below. Grabbing the sword by its hilt, he tossed it to me. "For now, you can use this for your training. I created it to measure the movements the user produces and the force of the impact it receives."

"And you can just summon it from the ground at any time?" I asked, holding the seemingly normal short-sword in my hands.

"Out of everything I've done so far, you're surprised by *that*?" Wren shook his head, motioning toward me with his hand. "Let me also hold onto the dragon feather."

"What? Why this too?" I took a step back, clasping my hand over my arm to cover the white feather.

"Do you have an innate urge to question everything I do?" the hunched asura snapped.

I reluctantly handed the white feather over to Wren, scratching the scar I had received after being bonded to Sylvie. Without the feather to cover it up, I felt exposed, as if my skin had been removed.

Wren tucked the feather into his coat. "Now, I'm aware that you lesser beings need much more sleep than we do, so get some rest."

"Wait—we're spending the night out here in the center of this barren crater?" I looked around apprehensively.

"Who said anything about 'we'? Windsom and I have matters to attend to. And besides, there's not always going to be a fluffy bed waiting for you during war, so I'm doing this for you." There was a wicked smirk on the asura's face as Windsom conjured a teleportation gate.

"Try to get some rest, Arthur," Windsom advised, then stepped into the gate. The glowing runes marking the teleportation circle faded, and it grew eerily quiet, the occasional whistles of wind the only sounds to be heard. Sighing, I slipped my dusty clothes back on and conjured up two slabs of earth to form a makeshift tent.

I must've fallen asleep as soon as I laid my head on the pile of sand I had gathered, because a violent trembling caused me to smack my head against my stone tent, jolting me awake in pain. I lowered the barrier that I had created and was startled by the sight of countless golems encircling my camp. Each of them wielded a different type of weapon, and they all raised their weapons above their stone heads and swung down in unison.

My body acted on autopilot and I instinctively raised a dome of earth to protect me. With an explosive thud, the dome crumbled, debris falling on top of me. I was still dazed by the situation when Wren's amplified voice boomed from above.

"You will never truly be at rest while you're in the middle of a war, kid. You need to get used to fighting effectively in a suboptimal state. Now, strip and resume battle."

"That damned lunatic," I cursed. I could still hear the movements of the golems around me, waiting for me to come back up.

Gathering mana, I waited for them to draw in closer. Once their footsteps were in range, I released a Gale Force spell.

Instead of aiming it at them, I targeted the ground below me, creating a large cloud of sand and debris to cover my movement and ejecting myself from the shattered remains of my dome barrier. Some of the closer golems were forcefully shoved back, giving me enough space to maneuver as the sand obscured their vision.

I lunged toward the nearest golem, raising my testing sword in one fluid swipe. I knew Wren wanted to mimic the environment of war, so I acted as if the golems were actual humans. I slashed at the golem's jugular, and as I had expected, it fell to the ground, spewing a red liquid from its wound.

Another golem, this one wielding a large halberd, charged at me from behind. As it lowered its stance to thrust its weapon at me, I pivoted with my sword in position to parry the head of the halberd. However, even though my body had been strengthened with Sylvia's will on top of mana, I was thrown off

balance by the force of the thrust. I spun to discharge some of the momentum from the blow, but I had no time to breathe before another golem shoved me with his iron shield.

Annoyed, I punched out at it with a lightning-clad fist. The metal shield crumbled and the golem was thrown to the ground. I twisted away as the golem wielding the halberd swung his weapon at my head, but not fast enough.

The blade whistled as it cut the air, then clanged viciously as it rebounded off an iron shield held by another golem, this one of a different color, which had stepped in to block the attack.

"You'll have allies in battle, Arthur. As one of the main players in the battle, it'll be up to you whether you choose to be on the offensive and plow through the enemy, or stay near your team, keeping them alive." I saw Wren overhead, sitting on an earthen throne that floated in the sky.

The battle went on, and the golem corpses continued to pile up, stacked one on top of another all across the battlefield. I imagined human bodies instead of the anthropomorphic summons made of stone; the scene from the Widow's Crypt dungeon flashed to mind, leaving me a little nauseous.

As the hours marched on, the mock war that Wren was making me endure began to take its toll. I understood more clearly why this experience was so crucial.

Until now, I had experienced wars only from the rear, strategizing for different scenarios on a macro level. Now, in the middle of a battlefield, there were so many factors that differed from the duels I was accustomed to in my previous life: the corpses and severed limbs that one could trip over, the blood pooling on the ground and forming puddles one could slip in... Even with the bright colors of the golems, indicating which side they were on, it was easy to accidentally swing at an ally in the heat of a battle. The red liquid that the golems bled was very similar to human blood; as the corpses of both enemies and allies piled up and the blood-like liquid stained the ground, a

foul smell soon exuded from the battlefield.

As much as I hated giving credit to the eccentric asura, Wren had done a good job of creating an optimal learning environment.

As the hours of continuous battle dragged on, I realized how precious my mana reserves were. Even with my mana core at the mid-silver stage and my use of Mana Rotation, I had to know how to conserve my usage of magic. Flashy, long-range spells were better left to the conjurers on the back lines; my mana was better spent protecting myself and those around me.

Throughout the battle, Wren shouted out pointers, like advising me to avoid being herded into a corner as I fought. Every now and then, unusually powerful golems would appear, throwing me off guard as they massacred my allies. Watching these creatures wreak havoc across the battlefield, I was positive Wren could have easily conjured a golem capable of killing me if he wanted to.

Finally I managed to take down the last of the golem generals, which Wren had helpfully identified with golden crowns on top of their heads.

"That was brutal," I sighed, lying flat on the ground. I had been in a near constant state of battle from the moment I was rudely awakened, with no chance to eat, drink, or even pee.

Dinner was spent sitting around a fire and discussing the day's training, after Wren cleared the scene of dead golems and fake blood with a swipe of his hand. Windsom had yet to return from wherever he and Wren had gone last night, so only Wren was present to point out the mistakes I had made, from the minor ones to the potentially fatal ones.

"The total number of casualties on your side was two hundred seventy-one, while the other side had five hundred twelve," Wren read from his notes. "Not an impressive victory considering the level I made the golems on the enemy side. You let too many of your own die, boy."

"Maybe it's because they look like stone gorillas. I feel no empathy for them, regardless of whether they're on my team or not," I countered, biting into the

tofu-like substance Wren had given me to eat.

"I'll keep that in mind. Go to sleep now. Tomorrow isn't going to get any easier," Wren replied as he jotted down notes.

I had grown used to Wren's sharp way of talking, as if even his words were a scarce commodity. Turning away, I conjured a makeshift bed of soft sand and hoped that the next time I was awakened it wouldn't be by an army of golems.

My thoughts ran amok during this period of rest. While there had been many flaws in the way the world was governed in my past life, I had to admit things had been simpler there. When the outcome of nearly all problems rested on just one battle, it was black or white. Wars almost never happened unless there was a multi-country dispute. Even then, large scale battles were carried out in controlled environments to minimize the death count. This upcoming war wouldn't have that. There were too many shades of gray to be accounted for.

What would the casualties be? How many of the dead would be non-combatants? And to what extent should the end outweigh these casualties? I had no one I cared for back on Earth. In this world, though, was I willing to sacrifice my loved ones for the greater good? Undoubtedly not.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I then, I rarely did these days. To my surprise, I was able to get a good night's rest. When I awoke, my arms and legs ached from the extended battle. There were no golems in sight, but that made me more suspicious than relieved.

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream from behind made me whip around. What I saw left me both bewildered and horror-stricken.

Its two black horns gleaming menacingly in the morning sun, an asura of the Vritra clan stood not twenty paces from me. Covered from the neck down in black-plated armor, this basilisk in human form opened his lips into a triumphant grin to reveal a row of jagged teeth, and in his grasp was someone I never thought to see here.

I was barely able to form a word as another gut-wrenching scream was ripped from the Vritra's hostage.

"Tess?"

PREPARATIONS

"ARTHUR! PLEASE HELP!"

Tess choked out a desperate scream as I stood there, petrified by the turn of events. It really was Tessia Eralith. Her long gunmetal-gray hair, her bright turquoise eyes brimming with tears—my childhood friend had somehow been dragged here from Dicathen.

Tess sputtered out a series of pained coughs as the basilisk tightened his grip around her waist.

I wasted no more time. I charged at the black-horned asura with the practice sword Wren had left me. The repercussions of such a reckless course of action went unheeded as I drew in, sword ablaze, and summoned Realmheart. The familiar burning sensation spread through my body as I activated the rare blood-trait skill of the dragons. My sight shifted into an enhanced, manafocusing vision, and golden-white runes glowed brightly beneath my clothes, as I drew on the rampant energy within Sylvia's dragon will and cast Static Void.

This was the first time I had used the skill, which I had unlocked with the first phase of Sylvia's will. I could see the purple specks of aether suddenly trembling around us as they buzzed into formation. The world stopped around me. The Vritra's face was frozen in a menacing smirk and Tess's in mid-scream with her hair flailing about her head.

I could feel my energy draining away as the seconds past... I dashed toward

the Vritra. As soon as I was in position to strike at the hand grasping Tess, I released Static Void.

The horned asura had no time to react to my attack, and the blade of my sword sliced right through his forearm. He let out an infuriated roar as he clutched his wound and stumbled back away from me. Tess had crumpled to the ground when the fiend's hand was severed, though it still clung to her fiercely. She was unconscious and ghastly pale, but still alive and breathing. I watched the basilisk careful as I pried the severed hand free and tossed in into the sand.

As I watched, liquid metal flowed from the basilisk's wound, forming into a hawk-like claw. I kept close to Tess, my right hand gripping my sword and my left hand preparing a spell. I could see the yellow, earthen particles gathering at the tip of the basilisk's false hand. I used the full extent of the limited knowledge I had gained from Myre about reading mana movement and readied my counterattack as well.

As I had expected, the tips of the basilisk's metal claws exploded toward me. Just as the five jagged spears—each the size of a ballista bolt–accelerated, I raised my hand and fired a condensed burst of electricity. Three of the spears shattered upon impact as I parried a fourth with the flat of my blade. I began gathering mana into my legs to charge at the basilisk, but an unsettling sensation seized me.

The last spear was much too far off-course to have been aimed at me. Without even turning to look, afraid I may have already been too late, I activated Static Void once more.

It felt like someone was stabbing needles into my heart as I raced toward Tess. My mind whirled with fear as I considered my best course of action: I could step into the path of the spear and shield Tess with my body, but the injury I would sustain from the blow would leave me unable to protect her from the basilisk afterward; or I could extend Static Void to encompass Tess and push her out of the spear's path, but including another person in Static

Void would take a massive toll on my body.

I chose to go with the third option. Dropping my sword, I grabbed the spear, which was paused mid-flight, with both hands and braced myself as I released Static Void.

My body lurched forward as I tried to stop the earthen spike, which was nearly the size of Tessia herself, with my bare hands. With a desperate spurt of strength, I managed to hold onto the speeding spike long enough to drive it off-course.

The spear buried itself into the ground just inches away from where Tess lay, creating a web of cracks from the sheer force of the impact. My hands were bloody and raw from grabbing onto the speeding projectile, and my breath was pained and unsteady.

Myre had been right. No matter how much I practiced Static Void, it would always put an enormous amount of strain on my body. My body just wasn't designed for using aether to affect time.

However, at my current level, I would need to use all the tools at my disposal to have a fighting chance against the basilisk. The thought of both Tess and me being left in the same cruel state that a Vritra retainer had left Alea—the former Lance down in the dungeon—filled me with dread.

It felt like there was fire in my lungs with each breath, as I positioned myself between the approaching basilisk and the unconscious Tess. I picked up my sword, grimacing at the pain, and poured mana into it. Despite the strain on my body from activating Realmheart and using Static Void twice, my mana reserves were still abundant, thanks to my constant use of Mana Rotation.

I thought I might be able to last long enough for either Wren or Windsom to arrive, but the problem was that, for whatever reason, this basilisk was focused on harming Tess. I was contemplating my next course of action when it all clicked.

"Wren, enough of this!" I roared, stabbing my sword into the ground.

Nothing happened at first, and, for a split second, I was afraid I had been

wrong, but the towering basilisk stopped abruptly, then crumbled into fine dust.

I turned to find another mound of fine sand where the golem in the shape of Tess had been.

"You caught on rather quick. I was hoping to let the situation play out a bit more, to see how you handled it." Wren emerged from the rocky ground, dusting off his shabby white coat.

"It's hard not to catch on to such an absurd scenario, Wren. I hope you're not doing this just for kicks," I retorted, disgruntled.

"How does one receive a kick from training? Improper teaching methods, perhaps? Is it a disciplinary action you lesser beings employ on one another?" "No, it's an idiom—never mind," I sighed, shaking my head at the confused asura.

"Regardless of your illogical expression, what I did was for your benefit. Look at the state you're in now—you've expended most of your energy on a reckless attempt to save that elf," Wren grunted.

"Look. I know it wasn't the best course of action, but there are people I consider more important than anyone else, including myself." I held Wren's gaze firmly as he continued to study me.

"Hmm. Well, familial bonds and mates are important, even for asu—"

"Wait, what? 'Mate'? Tess isn't a mate."

"Oh? From what Windsom told me, and judging by your reaction, I was sure that her importance to you went beyond mere infatuation. You two haven't yet engaged in carnal intimacy?"

"No! I haven't engaged in... Look, this is beside the point, Wren." I could feel my face beginning to burn as the asura pondered his miscalculation.

"My apologies, then." Wren shrugged, his expression as apathetic as before.

"My point is that, in war, there will come a time when your enemies will try to exploit whatever weaknesses they can. Considering that you will be one of the main powers on Dicathen's side, this is all the more true." "Trust me, I know that." Flashes of my previous life came to mind. I knew there would be a point when the values of this life—the ones that went against my principles as King Grey—would come to hinder me.

"Then I suppose it'd be pointless for me to go on lecturing you. Expect more training and trials like these, boy. This is part of why I was tasked to nurture you out of your diapers—I can single-handedly create all sorts of scenarios," the hunched asura explained.

I wanted to object to his statement about me being in diapers—I had two lifetimes' worth of experience, after all—but then I realized that even combining both lives, I was still much younger than any of the asuras I had met so far.

Taking a deep breath, I sat down on the ground. "So you can just create a dummy of anything using the earth?"

"Not anything—I wouldn't be able to mimic the properties of water using earth, for instance—but mostly, yes," the asura answered, taking a seat on the extravagant golden throne he had just conjured without even snapping his fingers.

I thought back to the fake basilisk. Almost every detail of both the black-horned asura and Tess had been spot on. However, there were two things that should have given it away. One was that the golem couldn't emit the amount of pressure and killing intent a real asura normally would. However, that wasn't what tipped me off. Aside from the likelihood of a basilisk dragging Tess all the way to Epheotus being almost nonexistent, under the influence of Realmheart I had been able to see the fluctuation of yellow earthen mana particles all over both of them. I hadn't figured it out right away because I had been too focused on rescuing Tess, but as I processed what was happening, the ruse became clear.

"Is it impossible for lesser beings to reach such a level of insight as to perform mana arts at the levels asuras are capable of?" I wondered aloud.

"It goes against my nature to deem anything 'impossible,' but I will say it is

highly improbable. But you of all people shouldn't be worried about that." "Why not?" I asked.

"Well, the fact is that you're a walking collection of statistical improbabilities. You have an innate ability to comprehend the workings of the four main elements, as well as some of their deviating elemental forms, coinciding so neatly with the fact that comprehension of all four elements is necessary to unlock the mysteries of aether, which the very princess of dragons just so happens to have kindly bestowed upon you. Everything about you is an outlier, boy," Wren explained. "Even asuras don't have that much innate talent and luck."

"If that's your way of cheering me up, thank you," I chuckled, getting back to my feet. "Now, what's next on our to-do list?"

"Before that, give me your dominant hand." Wren rose from his makeshift throne and approached me.

Spreading out my right hand, palm facing up, I stared at the asura curiously. I could never read his face; he always wore the same tired expression, like he might drop to the floor snoring at any moment.

He pulled a fist-sized black case from his coat pocket, then opened it and removed a small, pyramidal, opaque gem. "This is a mineral called acclorite. By itself, it's a rather rare but useless piece of rock. However, with the right refining and synthesizing process—which I will keep unto my grave, so don't bother asking—it is capable of something remarkable."

"Like speeding up the training process for whoever uses it?" I guessed, thinking of the elixirs Windsom had given to Tess.

"Remember when I said I don't forge swords, but create them?" the hunched asura asked.

I nodded in reply.

"With this little gem and the right tools, I can essentially grow a weapon."

"Grow? As in, grow like a tree?" I asked, sure that I had heard wrong.

"Yes," the asura sighed, scratching his head. "And no, not like that at all—

but if that's what you must think to wrap your lesser mind around it, then so be it."

Grunting in annoyance, I motioned for him to continue.

"Normally, I would have spent years or even decades constantly observing how you fight," Wren clarified, "then analyzed that feedback for the information I needed to create a weapon perfectly suited for you. But because of the circumstances surrounding your training, I'm taking a bit of a gamble and doing it this way."

"What do you me—" I yelped as a sudden, sharp pain cut off my words; the asura had suddenly stabbed the gem into the center of my palm. "What are you doing?" I winced as Wren forced the opaque gem deeper into my flesh, until it was completely submerged under my skin.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to count to three," he jibed, rubbing his finger on my shirt to wipe off the blood from my wound. "I synthesized the acclorite with a portion of Lady Sylvia's feather, as well as a scale from Lady Sylvie. These are both indispensable components of what makes you who you are. I hope this will account for some of the unpredictable aspects of your nature."

"What would be so unpredictable?" I asked, studying the small hole in my palm where the gem was buried.

"Every movement, action, thought, and change in your body will factor into how your weapon will manifest. Even I have no idea how it will turn out," the asura confessed. "If it even comes out as a weapon."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not quite following, Wren. Why do it this way if the outcome is uncertain? And anyway, I thought you weren't going to make a weapon for me."

"If you're going to be facing the Vritra clan and whatever spawn they conjure up, you're going to need more than just a sharp stick to get by," he grumbled. The asura's face turned solemn before continuing. "And it's because we don't have that much time."

"Wait, I thought that I had about two years left before the war is expected to

begin?" I stared at Wren as an uneasy feeling crept up from the pit of my stomach.

There was a hesitant pause as he deliberated on what to say next.

"Kid, Windsom just received word from Aldir with the most recent news from Dicathen."

"And?"

"Before I say anything else, know that I'm telling you this against Windsom and Lord Indrath's wishes. I want you to make a logical decision. With the help of the aether orb during some portions of the training, it'll still take about a year before the acclorite manifests itself into a weapon. You'll need at least that long to strengthen yourself for the war." Wren's face creased with something akin to worry as he explained.

[&]quot;Just tell me," I pressed.

[&]quot;Arthur, although the full army has yet to arrive... the war has already started."

THE CALM OF WAR

TESSIA ERALITH

- "I can fight, Grandpa!" I yelled, slamming my palms on the table.
- "And I'm telling you that you can't," he snapped, keeping his eyes glued to the document in front of him and refusing to meet my gaze.
- "Enough, Tessia," Master Aldir's commanding voice cut in. "Your grandfather is right. The risk of putting you out in the field is much too high, and unnecessary right now."
- "But Master! Even you yourself said that I'm much stronger than I was!" I argued, ignoring my grandfather.
- "And that is still not enough." The three-eyed asura's tone was matter-of-fact. I could feel my face burning hot as I struggled to keep my tears at bay. Refusing to let them see me cry, I stormed out of the study as Grandpa called after me.

I marched down the long, narrow hallway, which was lit by widely-spaced torches that flickered brightly against the cobblestone walls. I banked left near the end of the hallway, reaching two solid iron doors, guarded by an armored augmenter on one side and a well-dressed conjurer on the other.

- "Princess? What brings you here?" the conjurer asked, her voice laced with concern.
- "Please open the doors," I ordered, my eyes focused straight ahead. Even my sour mood couldn't detract from my admiration of the beauty of the unique

doors that guarded this castle. When Professor Gideon had first completed them, even Master Aldir had been pleased by the craftsmanship.

"I-I'm sorry, we haven't received word from Commander Virion or Lord Aldir that anyone would be leaving," the armored augmenter muttered, trading uncertain glances with his companion.

"Open the doors. She's running, an errand with me," a familiar voice echoed from behind me.

"General Varay!" Both guards saluted in unison before lowering themselves into a respectful bow.

Turning around, I smiled in relief at Varay, who had become almost like an older sister to me these past two years. Elegant yet intimidating, she approached me with a steady and purposeful gait, her navy coat trailing gracefully behind her. Her left hand rested on the pommel of the thin sword strapped to her waist, and she nodded at me with her usual cool expression.

The two guards immediately went to work opening the double doors. The conjurer mumbled a long incantation as the augmenter set about pulling the various knobs and levers that covered the intricate doors.

"Thank you, Varay." I squeezed her arm as we headed into the room, the iron double doors closing behind us with a loud thud.

Though the room was heavily secured with a unique mechanism on the door that required a complex pattern of spells and precise sequence of locks to open, the area the doors were guarding wasn't nearly as noteworthy. The small, rather musty cylindrical room was all but empty except for a single teleportation gate and the gateman in charge of controlling the gate's destination.

The elderly gateman stood up straight at the sight of us, dropping the book he had been reading. "General Varay, Princess Tessia, what can I do for you?" Varay glanced over at me, waiting for me to speak.

"Etistin City, please," I responded.

"Certainly!" The gateman went to work, mumbling over the ancient runes

that allowed such complex magic.

The gate—a stone platform with a complicated sigil at its center—glowed in several different colors before it focused on its directed location.

"All ready. Please take these emblems for identification when you use the gate at Etistin. The gateman over there will not let you return to the castle without them," the elderly gateman said as he handed us each a small metal locket with the three-race insignia on it.

"Surely they know who we are," I said as I tucked the emblem into the inner pocket of my robe.

The gateman shook his head. "Security has been tightened throughout the continent since outside attacks have become more frequent. Even though Etistin is quite a distance away from the Beast Glades, Commander Virion is implementing stricter measures just in case."

"I see." I let out a sigh as I stepped up to the platform where the teleportation gate stood. "Are you sure you want to babysit me, Varay?"

"I just finished my lessons with Princess Kathyln, so a little break is fine with me," she answered curtly, stepping up behind me.

Our surroundings distorted when we stepped into the gate, and my vision filled with a blurry montage of luminescent colors.

In moments we had arrived at Etistin, once the humans' capital in the country of Sapin. I remembered learning in school that the city had been built on the western coast of the continent so it would be out of reach of the dwarven and elven countries, as well as to keep it as far away from the Beast Glades as possible.

However, after the news of impending war was announced to the public, King Glayder had torn down the city—and built it back up as an armored fort in anticipation of the Alacryan army's impending assault, which would most likely come straight through Etistin should the front lines fall.

Caught by surprise at our appearance, the two gatemen gave a deep bow as they welcomed us. "We're not here on official business. Please, relax." I

smiled at the guards, hoping to ease their concerned expressions.

We left the secured room holding the gate and stepped out into the busy streets. We both hid our faces underneath our woolen hoods to keep from attracting unnecessary attention.

Outside we were met with a panorama of bustle and noise. Merchants wheeled their carts through the wide street, while vendors and entertainers haggled with housewives from the tents and canopies lining the road. Ever since Etistin had been demolished and rebuilt as a military city, its economy had been dependent on the soldiers stationed here with their families. Smiths and other craftsmen travelled here knowing that their work would be in high demand. Merchants soon came out of their way to set up shops here because of the ever-growing military population, not to mention the workers, builders, and craftsmen who were part of the war effort.

As we made our way down the street we saw the soldiers—burly augmenters and lean conjurers alike—marching with their weapons in hand. They all wore the same moss-green and silver uniform embroidered with the Triunion emblem, which had become the official symbol of Dicathen.

"Was there anything specific you wanted to do?" Varay asked, slowing her pace to match mine.

"Not particularly." I shook my head. "I just wanted some fresh air and to be away from everyone in the castle."

"Keep your sword out and ready at all times, Tessia," Varay said, glancing at my hip, where my weapon should have hung.

With a sigh, I replied, "You're here with me, right? And besides, this city is just about the farthest point from all of the fighting."

Etistin had been rebuilt to be the very last line of defense against the Alacryan army, seeing as it was the city farthest away from the battle and in an ideal defensive location, with three of its sides bordered by ocean.

When our forces had been sent out into the Beast Glades to explore the dungeons—because that was where the Alacryan forces had been popping

out from—Grandpa Virion had deduced that the unnatural occurrences over the past ten years—including the death of our Lance Alea—were a symptom of the Vritra's presence there.

"In times of war, it's necessary to be ready for the worst case scenario," Varay stated.

I didn't want to argue, so I took my sword from my dimension ring and strapped it to my waist underneath my wool cloak. "Happy?"

She nodded.

"So how are Kathyln and Curtis doing with their training?" I asked quietly, stopping by a stall selling particularly beautiful handcrafted jewelry.

"Bairon tells me Curtis is determined and hardworking, but that his progress is slow. His comprehension of mana is only average at best, despite his being a beast tamer. Princess Kathyln, on the other hand, is moving along well in her training. I've been told she was always a bit more gifted than everyone else, and after these last two years, I understand why," Varay answered, looking disinterestedly at the jewels she clearly had no fondness for.

"Well, not more than *everyone* else," I corrected, a dull ache gripping at my heart.

"You're right. I forget at times that the boy is your own age. Arthur is an anomaly of an entire different sort, no doubt." Varay nodded to herself. "I can only imagine what he will be like when he comes back after training with the asuras."

Even with her expressionless face, it was easy to see that Varay was envious of Arthur. After all, training with the asuras of Epheotus, who were on a higher level than even Master Aldir, was something most of us could only dream of.

However, I knew firsthand how harsh the asuras were, from the dozen or so lessons I had received from Master Aldir over the past two years. Imagining myself under constant supervision by Aldir sent shivers down my spine.

As we walked down the main road, I admired the imposing outer walls

surrounding the whole city. From where I stood, I could barely see the small figures of the guards patrolling the top of the wall. Etistin had been rebuilt so that the buildings near the center of the city were the highest, and the entire city sloped down toward the outer walls. This allowed conjurers and long-range augmenters in the heart of the city to have a clear shot at their enemies from the rooftop of nearly any building. Of course, our enemies would first have to break through the thick, mana-reinforced walls that surrounded Etistin.

"Do you think the Alacryan army will be able to make it all the way here?" I asked, still staring at the outer walls. "I heard from Grandpa that Director Cynthia said Alacrya is to the west of Dicathen. Doesn't that mean Etistin is the closest city to our enemy?"

"Yes, but she also said that they had no effective way of transporting significant numbers of soldiers across the ocean, which is why they're going for a more discreet method—coming through the teleportation gates they have hidden throughout the Beast Glades. The Vritra could bring in a considerable force and keep it safely hidden in the endless maze of tunnels and dungeons until ready to strike," she answered as she veered off to look at some of the weapons on display at a nearby forge.

"I see," I mumbled. I felt bad for Director Cynthia, who had been confined for the last two years. While Master Aldir was able to partially break the curse that bound her from releasing any information about her homeland, allowing her to provide some intelligence, Director Cynthia still ended up comatose. Now the woman who had once been in charge of Xyrus Academy was simply lying in a room somewhere, barely alive, under the constant care of a nurse.

The business regarding the war had caused a strain on my relationship with my grandfather. He had always looked scary, but Grandpa had only ever been a nice, embarrassing man who just wanted what was best for me. However, after he had assumed command of the combined military forces of the Triunion with Master Aldir, who operated only in the shadows, his personality had become darker and much more strict.

I hated that it had to happen, but I didn't blame Grandpa; at least I was able to see him often, unlike my mother and father. The remaining members of the Council were working the social front, doing everything they could to encourage the individual cities to prepare for military action. With King and Queen Greysunders both dead, the dwarves were in rebellion, so the Council was also working to regain their allegiance.

"Watch out!" someone suddenly yelled as they ran headfirst into me.

My thoughts had been elsewhere, and I reacted instinctively. I grabbed their wrist and pivoted my body. Placing my foot in front of theirs, the person tripped and I had them pinned down with my sword half-unsheathed, pressed against their throat, before I saw the person's face.

"Emily?" I sputtered.

CALM OF WAR II

"Princess?" Emily exclaimed, even more surprised than I was.

I quickly sheathed my sword and released my friend. Emily Watsken was the only girl my age I had spent any amount of time with, other than Kathyln. Her master, Gideon, came in and out of the castle regularly, at least when he wasn't engrossed in new gadgets and inventions that he believed could help out in the war.

"I'm so sorry, Emily. You just kind of came out of nowhere and my body reacted on its own," I said, helping her gather the tools and books she had been carrying before I threw her to the ground.

"No, I should have been more careful!" she gasped, laughing. "I was carrying way too many things, and my glasses slipped so I couldn't really make out where I was going. Besides, that was kinda fun. You know, in an abrupt and slightly brain-rattling sort of way." Then, noticing the dark-haired Lance next to me, she stiffened before bowing. "Hello, General Varay."

"Greetings, Miss Watsken," Varay nodded, remaining upright and attentive of our surroundings, barely seeming to have noticed Emily's belongings scattered across the street.

Emily tied back her thick, curly hair, which had exploded out of its ponytail. As I stacked several books in Emily's arms, I noticed the worn pieces of scribble-covered paper that had fallen out of her tattered notebook.

"What are you and Professor Gideon working on nowadays, anyway? I

haven't seen you at the castle in a while." I took on some of Emily's load once the stack of books reached her face.

"Ugh—don't call him 'Professor.' My nutjob of a master can hardly be considered sane, let alone an educator of future generations," Emily huffed.

"Well, he was still a professor at Xyrus for a period of time before all this happened," I pointed out, walking alongside her.

"Yeah, so you know as well as I do how many students were taken to the infirmary because of the explosions and fires he caused in that limited 'period of time,'" Emily muttered. Her glasses had already slipped again, and she used the stack of books she was holding to push them back up.

"You've had it rough, haven't you?" I chuckled, bumping her gently with my shoulder.

"I swear, I've lost count of how many times I've had to dig my master out from under a pile of debris and useless junk after an explosion he caused. Anyway, these observation notes were written by a team of adventurers, and I'm supposed to get them back to Master Gideon. Do you want to come along?"

"Can I?" I asked, turning my head to Varay for consent. She gave me a curt nod in response, and I headed off with Emily.

"How have you been these days anyway, Princess?" Emily asked as we weaved our way through the main road.

"Drop it with the 'Princess,' Emily; you know I hate that," I scolded. "And I've been terrible. You have no idea how suffocating it is inside the castle."

"Oh sure. The halls are pretty narrow, and the ceilings are much too low for a castle," she agreed, clumsily sidestepping a passerby.

"Ha ha. You think you're so clever." I rolled my eyes.

"Hey, I'm a delight!" she said proudly. "Besides, try being stuck with someone like Master for hours every day and see what that does to your sense of humor."

"Oh, woe is you! You're a real damsel in need of a better social outlet." I

stuck my tongue out at her. Emily did the same, and we eventually broke out into a fit of giggles.

"I'm serious, though. You have no idea what it's like being stuck in a castle with an asura and an overbearing grandfather who can make taking a breath of air seem like a dangerous activity."

"Ew, that does sound suffocating," Emily said, cringing.

"Tell me about it," I sighed.

"But don't be so rough on your grandfath—I mean, Commander Virion," she amended, casting a quick glance back at Varay. "After how you were kidnapped and almost killed, I can only imagine how he and your parents must worry."

"I know. I try not to be, but when he has me caged up like a bird, I can't help it. Training has been the only way for me to relieve my stress, but with more and more sightings and attacks from the Alacryan forces coming out of the Beast Glades, no one has the time to train with me."

Emily puffed out her cheeks, trying to think of a response. We eventually took a turn onto a less crowded street, Varay sticking close behind us like a shadow in case anything happened.

"Any news about Arthur?" Emily asked.

"You mean besides the same old news that Master Aldir repeats like a neurotic mimic bird?" I shook my head.

"He is training. That is all you need to know," Emily recited in a deep voice, exactly as she had when I'd told her the last time.

"Yup!" I giggled.

There was another gap in our conversation. After a few long moments of silence, Emily asked in a whisper, "What about Elijah?"

A sharp pang ran through my chest at the mention of that name. I couldn't imagine how guilty Arthur must be feeling about his best friend being abducted, and yet he wasn't able to do anything about it.

"No news. Honestly, I have no idea why Elijah was taken alive," I confessed,

clutching the books tightly.

What happened to Elijah was my fault, in a way. I barely knew the guy aside from the fact that he was Arthur's closest friend, but from what others who'd witnessed the scene had described, it seemed he had been trying to save me when he was taken.

For all we knew, he could've been tortured for information, or taken hostage to lure Arthur into a trap, or maybe even killed. I knew some of the possibilities were a bit of a stretch, but it was upsetting to think that this had happened to him because of me.

What was worse was that, although I felt sorry for Elijah, I was more worried that Arthur would hate me because of what had happened to his best friend. I'd thought I was strong; ever since I had received the elderwood guardian will from Arthur, I'd felt invincible—even when I couldn't fully control it. How foolish and naive I was. I should've listened to Arthur when he'd told me he would come with me to school. I should have been better prepared.

These were the thoughts that made my nights often sleepless, but they were also the thoughts that drove me to train harder—train so I would be strong, so that I wouldn't be a liability to anyone.

As we approached Professor Gideon's and Emily's workplace, I couldn't help but marvel at the structure. It wasn't impressive in the traditional sort of way, but it really was a sight to see. With its thick, imposing walls, it seemed more like a disaster shelter for civilians than a research facility. The visible

[&]quot;—ssia? Tessia?" Varay's voice jolted me out of my thoughts.

[&]quot;Yeah?" I looked up, suddenly face-to-face with the Lance.

[&]quot;You okay?" Emily asked from my side, her voice laced with concern.

[&]quot;Huh? Yeah, of course I am. Why do you ask?" I muttered as Varay wordlessly placed a hand on my forehead.

[&]quot;Not sick," she said simply before giving me some space.

[&]quot;You seemed kind of dazed," she said as we approached a large, square building. "Anyway, we're here."

building was only one story high, but you had to go down a flight of stairs to reach the front entrance, indicating that there was at least one level underground.

"Come on. These books are getting heavier by the minute," Emily called over her shoulder.

The three of us went down the stairs and through a metal door similar to the one that guarded the teleportation gate inside the flying castle.

Emily set her things on the ground and placed both palms at precise points on the door. I couldn't hear what she was mumbling, but streams of light were soon glowing brightly from where her hands had been placed, and the door unlatched with a loud click.

Going inside, my senses were overwhelmed. There was a frenzy of movement from workers and artificers, and the sounds of clanging metal echoed from every surface. The entire area was one gigantic space, separated only by moveable partitions dividing the different projects that were simultaneously underway. I pinched my nose at the indescribably pungent smell.

"What is this stench?" I asked, my voice coming out nasal and strange.

"What *isn't* this stench!" Emily shook her head. "So many different minerals and materials are being either melted or refined here that it's hard to tell the smells apart."

Even Varay cringed as we went further down the stairs.

"Damn it, Amil! How many times do I have to drill into that thick skull of yours that you can't keep those minerals in the same container? They'll draw out each other's properties, and I'll be left with two useless hunks of rock!" The shouts exploded all the way from the back corner of the building.

"Ah, there's my lovely master's voice," Emily sighed, motioning for us to follow.

As we made our way to the source of the harsh voice, we bumped into a man —Amil, I assumed by his shaken expression and the fact that he was holding

a box full of rocks.

"E-excuse me," he croaked, his voice cracking. "Oh, hello Emily. Tread carefully around Master Gideon; he's a bit on edge today."

The poor man gave us all a quick bow, barely even looking at us as he hurried off to fix his mistake.

We continued our little tour of Emily's workplace, and I spotted an elderly gentleman talking with a group of several men, who wore the traditional brown robes of artificers. He turned around as he heard us approaching. His eyes lit up and he made his way toward us, abruptly dismissing the group of men.

Considering his outfit, I would normally have assumed he was a butler, but something about the way he carried himself and the respect the men had shown him told me it wasn't that simple.

"Good afternoon, Princess, General, Miss Emily. I'm glad you came back so quickly; Master Gideon is waiting for you." The gentleman dipped his head in a little bow and relieved Emily and I of the items we had been carrying, then led us farther into the workshop.

"Thanks, Himes. Is Master in one of his moods again?" Emily asked, following closely behind the butler.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Emily. I'm sure he's only agitated waiting for these," he answered, indicating the pile of leather-bound notebooks.

We made our way through the maze of partitions until we arrived at a -space in the corner that was enclosed by high dividers. When we entered through the tiny opening between them, we were met by Professor Gideon, who practically pounced on the notebooks Himes was carrying. The genius artificer and inventor looked the same as he always had, with the same lightning-struck hair, beady eyes, and brows that seemed permanently furrowed together. The wrinkles on his forehead seemed to be even deeper than before, just as the dark circles under his eyes had somehow continued to grow darker.

"It's nice to see you too, Master," Emily mumbled. She turned to me and Varay, giving us a shrug.

At first, I wanted to explore the facility, but Professor Gideon tore into the stack of notebooks at breakneck speed, practically ripping the pages as he flipped through them, and my curiosity drove me to stay and wait. It seemed Emily and Varay had the same thought, because they were both staring intently at Professor Gideon as well.

Finally, after going through about six notebooks, he stopped suddenly on a particular page.

"Shit!" Professor Gideon slammed his hands on his desk.

We stayed silent, not knowing how to respond. Even Emily stared wordlessly, waiting for her master to say something.

"General, can you make a trip with me?" Professor Gideon's eyes were glued to the notebook as he spoke.

"I'm currently with the princess," she answered simply.

"Bring her along too. Emily, you come as well," Gideon responded as he gathered the pile of notebooks and scattered papers from his desk.

"Wait, Master. Where are we going?"

"The eastern coast, on the northern border of the Beast Glades," he answered curtly.

"Commander Virion has prohibited Princess Tessia from venturing out. Having her come—"

"Then leave her here. I just need you or another general to come with me in case anything happens, although that's unlikely," he said, cutting her off as he continued gathering his things. "We just need to leave as soon as possible. Emily, bring me my usual inspection kit."

Emily scurried out of her master's makeshift office. Varay took a communication artifact from her dimension ring, but I quickly grasped her hand and squeezed it.

"Varay, I want to go," I said.

She shook her head. "No, your grandfather would never allow it. It's too dangerous."

"But Aya is out on a mission, and Bairon is still busy training Curtis. Please—you heard Professor Gideon; he said nothing's going to happen," I insisted. "Besides, he's in quite a hurry."

"Damn right I am. Now let's go. I need to confirm this with my own eyes. We'll be back before the day is over," Professor Gideon reassured us as he put on a coat.

I could see the Lance hesitating so I drove in one last nail. "Varay, you've seen me train for the last two years. You know how strong I've become," I said, my gaze relentless.

After a moment of deliberation, Varay nodded curtly. "Then you must obey my every command while we are on this trip. If you fail to do so, this will be the last time I help you leave the castle."

I agreed immediately, eager to explore a part of the continent I had never visited before, regardless of how short the trip would be. As soon as Emily returned, a large black bag in tow, we set out.

WASHED UP OMEN

THE ONLY STOP we made was at a stable to pick out a few horses. We needed to go a bit out of the way to find horses accustomed to going through teleportation gates, which caused Professor Gideon to fidget with impatience. The man was a nervous wreck throughout the trip. He said very little after we went through the gate, only snapping at the reins of his black steed, urging it to go faster. Soon we arrived at a narrow trail, with the Forest of Elshire to our left. A thin fog spilled over onto our trail, making the road look kind of creepy. To our right was a narrow stream that acted as a fence, marking the border between the Elshire Forest and the Beast Glades.

Emily sat behind Himes on a white stallion, and I rode with Varay on a particularly gentle brown horse. We rode in silence most of the trip; the eerie atmosphere and the urgency in Professor Gideon's demeanor cast a pall over our troop.

Eventually the familiar, briny smell of the ocean filled the air; I could taste the salt on my tongue from the gusting breeze that whipped against my face. While the weather was cool, it was rapidly growing much more humid. My shirt began sticking to my skin, leaving me feeling uncomfortable and grimy. "We're almost here!" Professor Gideon yelled over the rising howl of the wind and thud of hooves. Soon, the trees that made up the dense, magical forest began thinning out and eventually ceased entirely, exposing a wide plain of wild grass and shrubs.

The ocean came into view, quickly widening from the horizon as we drew closer to the shore. The winds grew stronger and faster the closer we got to our destination, soon drowning out the sound of our trotting horses. The field of grass continually grew more rocky and treacherous until we came to a stop on the edge of a rugged cliff that overlooked the shore.

I had to shield my face with the hood of my cloak against the sharp, sand-filled winds that cut against my body. I was about to ask if we had arrived when I spotted something unnatural on the coast.

It was a humongous boat—or rather, what was left of it. The waves lapped against its metal exterior, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I had seen it before, then it popped into my mind.

"Wait, isn't that the *Dicatheous*?" I gasped, peeking out from underneath my cloak as I turned to Professor Gideon.

"No," he said, his voice barely audible against the wind. "It's worse."

"Wait, it's *not* the *Dicatheous*?" I asked, taking another glance at the familiar ship to make sure.

I hadn't seen the departure of the monumental ship—it coincided with the start of my second year at Xyrus Academy—but I had seen it when it was being constructed. I remembered quite clearly the first time I had laid eyes on the mysterious craft that spewed black smoke like some sort of metallic dragon. To be able to carry hundreds of people and traverse the unknown dangers of the ocean—it was hard to believe it at the time.

"What do you mean, worse?" Varay asked. She surveyed our surroundings, her hand resting firmly on the pommel of the thin sword strapped to her hip.

"Leave the horses here. We'll need to go on foot if we want to get to that wreckage site," Professor Gideon said, ignoring us both. He swung his leg over his horse, dismounting rather clumsily. "Emily, Himes! Grab the bag!"

I opened my mouth to ask again, exasperated at how the professor constantly did things at his own pace, disregarding everyone else. But Emily gave me a consoling squeeze on the shoulder, so I just let out a sigh and we followed

Professor Gideon. The old inventor was already making his way down the rocky slope to the shore, moving rather nimbly despite how wet the rocks were. Varay and Himes brought up the rear, both watchful, looking for any signs of danger as they easily hopped from one stone to another.

"I'm going to need the ship completely out of the water. Can either of you ladies do the honors?" Professor Gideon turned his head, looking from Varay to me, and back again.

My hand shot up in the air.

"Let me tr—" I volunteered excitedly before remembering Master Aldir's constant warnings against overextending myself. "I mean, Varay should do it."

The Lance gave me a sympathetic look before getting to work. It was an easy task for her; with a simple wave of her hand, she swept the tides back enough to reveal the whole ship, then took a moment to conjure a wall of ice around the remains of the wreckage to keep the water from spilling back in. Finally, she made an opening in the ice fortress for us to enter through.

When we emerged on the other side, I stopped to stare in awe.

I had only seen the *Dicatheous* during its construction, but many of the features I remembered about the ship, from its large metal frame to the multiple cylindrical pipes, clearly resembled this large contraption. Regardless, neither the *Dicatheous* nor this similar metallic monstrosity looked anything like the wooden sailboats I was accustomed to.

Further inspection of the large craft showed why it had been stranded here, partly sunken, in the first place. Apart from the more obvious dents that deformed the base of the ship, there were rows of puncture marks as well.

"Don't those kind of look like... bite marks?" I marveled, walking toward the side of the ship.

"Imagine how big a monster it would be to have a mouth that could take a chomp at this," Emily said in amazement.

I grew more and more curious the longer I studied the giant boat. If it truly

was not the *Dicatheous*, then what was it? Who had built it? For what purpose had it come to this continent?

I observed that, while the thick metal frame had incurred fairly substantial damage, it didn't seem *old*. There weren't any signs of rust, which I knew would soon affect most metals left in a place like this.

"Well then, on we go," Professor Gideon grunted, stepping through one of the larger puncture holes at the bottom of the ship.

"Wait." Varay held up her arm to halt the professor. Before he could respond, she sent a large pulse of mana through the abandoned ship.

"No signs of life," she confirmed.

"An unnecessary precaution, but thank you," Professor Gideon grumbled, climbing into the hole at the base of the ship.

"Don't get too far ahead, Master!" Emily ran in after him, her eyes practically twinkling with excitement.

Looking at Varay, I saw faint traces of concern on her normally expressionless face. Although she had checked for any potential dangers, there was still something worrying her.

I stepped into the ship after Himes, and my nose caught the acrid smell of rotting wood. The air was heavy and warm, and bitter to the tongue, forcing me to breathe through my nose despite the less-than-pleasant aroma of molding lumber.

The lower levels were spacious, with not much inside except the columns of iron—some broken, others bent—that had once supported the ceiling. Shattered remains of wooden crates littered the floor, but whatever had been inside had either perished or been washed away by the ocean.

The old inventor studied the remains of whatever he could find as he made his way to the metal stairs leading to the next floor, then he and Himes went up. This left me, Emily, and Varay to explore the abandoned vessel on our own—but we had no idea what it was we were searching for, or why we were here in the first place. Finding little else of interest, we weaved through the mounds of seaweed and sand that had infiltrated the ship and climbed up after Professor Gideon and his butler to the floor above.

It was easy to see that the bottommost levels of this abandoned ship had been primarily used as storage, but the strange thing was that everything had been destroyed. Varay pointed it out, but after she did it was quite clear. Shattered remains of items lay scattered on the metal floors amid blackened marks of what looked like soot. Someone had deliberately wiped the ship clean of anything resembling a clue to its origins.

"Looks like whoever was on this ship didn't want anyone knowing who they were," I said, kicking some debris in hopes of finding anything of value.

Varay looked around but stayed close to Emily and me in case of danger.

"What's weird is that even the upper floors here are soaked through. How did the water get all the way up here when the ship was only half-sunken?" Emily pointed out, running her hand along the wooden floor and bringing it back wet.

"That's because, until a few weeks ago, this ship was fully submerged in the ocean." We all looked over our shoulders to see Professor Gideon and Himes approaching.

"Which is why no one had seen this ship, despite its size, until recently," Varay concluded.

The inventor simply nodded. "The journal I was reading earlier was written by a group of adventurers on their way back from a scouting mission. They had taken the same route to reach their destination, but when they returned, the tides had receded enough to reveal this."

"I see, Master. What do you think happened to all the crewmembers that were on this ship?" Emily asked. "Do you think they all drowned?"

"No." Professor Gideon shook his head. "There would be at least some remains left."

Emily and I exchanged a glance, not quite catching what the old inventor was

getting at.

Sighing dramatically, Professor Gideon squatted in front of the blackened mark on the floor and scratched at it with his finger. "It means you're right, Princess. The crew definitely did not want anyone seeing this ship, let alone whatever or *whoever* they had inside."

"That means—"

"Yes. Either they all escaped and are out there somewhere—or perhaps their captain killed and fed them to the beasts of the ocean rather than risk discovery."

"I had a hunch when I first saw the ship, but does that mean...?" Varay's question trailed off as she stared intently at Professor Gideon.

"After reading the report, I prayed to whatever divine being was watching over us that my guess was wrong, but I don't think it is," he sighed.

"What—what is it? What's going on?" I interrupted, their solemn tones filling me with unease.

"I had assumed that the crew of the *Dicatheous* went through some troubles when we lost contact with them a few years back, so when I read the report, I thought maybe—just maybe—the crew had somehow repaired the ship and almost made it back. But the materials used to build this ship, and its design, are just slightly different. After examining it, I'm positive that this ship isn't, and never was, the *Dicatheous*."

Somberly, Professor Gideon continued, "It's a little rough around the edges, but the technology put into the *Dicatheous* was top secret, known only to me and a few of the key designers."

Emily drew in a sharp breath, her eyes wide with fear as the horrifying reality began to dawn on her. "Master, you can't mean to say—"

"It's exactly what I mean to say," Professor Gideon interrupted. "Think about it! There are no corpses, no personal belongings left behind, almost no discernible traces that anyone has ever been here. Why? Because the captain of this ship didn't want their enemy to know that they are capable of making

this, and with good reason; the fact that this exists changes the fundamental dynamics of this war."

"And by war, you mean..." My voice trailed off into silence. I locked gazes with Varay and she nodded, her eyes stern and grave. My hands trembled as I brought them up to my mouth.

Professor Gideon sprang up from the ground, handing his bag to Himes. "Yes, Princess. It means that Alacrya has, in their arsenal, the ability to build ships capable of carrying whole battalions across the ocean to Dicathen."

NECESSARY RESOLVE

VIRION ERALITH

"Damn it!" Glayder cursed, slamming his fists down on the long rectangular table we were gathered around. "And you're *absolutely* sure about this, Gideon?"

"As I said, Your Majesty, the part about the ship belonging to the Alacryans is merely speculation on my part. However, I am absolutely sure that the ship we have just come from is *not* the *Dicatheous*," the old inventor answered.

It hadn't even been an hour since Gideon, Varay, and my granddaughter had arrived at the castle. After Varay explained what they had found, everyone, including King and Queen Glayder, was summoned. With the arrival of the asura, Lord Aldir, and my son and his wife, who had been in negotiations with the dwarves, the meeting had been hastily set in motion

"What makes you so certain?" Glayder pressed, eyeing the inventor seriously.

Gideon let out a harsh sigh before replying. "Because during the construction of the *Dicatheous*, I had placed markers throughout the base of the ship—a sort of signature, if you will."

"A signature?" my son Alduin echoed.

"The *Dicatheous* was an invention in which I took much pride. I wanted future generations to know of my work," he confessed, scratching his nose in embarrassment. "At any rate, I scoured all the exposed frames in this ship,

and none of them had the marking. In fact, the frame was constructed of entirely different materials."

"Damn it all!" Blaine Glayder swore once more, getting up from his seat.

"Calm yourself, Blaine," I said firmly.

"Calm myself? Did you not just hear Gideon's words? I'm sorry, but I can't just keep calm after finding out that our enemy is capable of sending tens—no, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and mages across the ocean. It's bad enough that we've been having trouble sniffing out those bastards from inside the dungeons of the Beast Glades, but—"

"Enough," Lord Aldir said, silencing the human king at once. "Varay, what are your thoughts on the matter?"

"While I have no extensive knowledge about the construction of the *Dicatheous*, I agree with the artificer. Just the lack of evidence on the ship is enough to tell us that whoever was on it didn't want anyone finding out who they were," the Lance confirmed, standing against the wall behind Priscilla Glayder.

"What do you suppose is the likelihood that this was a trap—or rather, a strategy on their part to get us to *think* they have the technology to send ships filled with soldiers to Dicathen?"

"Hmm, it's possible. That might be the case," Gideon answered, mulling it over.

"That's right!" Blaine came back to the table, delighted with the idea that the worst-case-scenario might not be the only future of this war. "It makes sense. If the Alacryans made us think they had the ability to make these ships, we'd be forced to split our troops."

"That might be so, but the location where the ship washed up makes me uncertain. If the Alacryans' goal was to divide our forces, it would make more sense for them to leave it somewhere along the western coast—where they would want us to think they'll attack. Also, the cove where the ship was found is much too inconspicuous of a place for them to hope that we would

stumble across it. With the tide levels changing so frequently and the bedrock constantly eroding, it's a miracle we ever found the ship in the first place," Alduin rebutted.

The meeting hall was quiet for a moment, then Lord Aldir spoke up. "Whatever the probability might be, the question is, is it worth the risk? The Alacryan, Cynthia, was under the impression that her people were trying to amass an army over time in the depths of the Beast Glades, but it would be foolish to believe that was the only move the Vritra had planned. I have known a few from the Vritra clan; they are intelligent and cunning adversaries. It would be unlike them to adopt so linear a strategy."

"So we have no choice but to prepare ourselves for a two-pronged attack," I concluded, rubbing my temples. "Alduin, Merial, how are the discussions with the dwarves faring?"

"They're still skeptical about the notion of fully cooperating, but they've agreed to send some of their shapers to help with the fortification of the walls along the Grand Mountains," Merial answered, handing me a pile of papers.

"Good," I nodded. "It's a start. We'll need as much help as we can get from their mages to reinforce the gaps that the Grand Mountains don't cover between Sapin and the Beast Glades."

Blaine Glayder spoke up. "Merial, please allow Priscilla and me to join you on your next visit to the kingdom of Darv. With this news, we'll need help from the dwarves if we're going to fortify the cities along the western coast in time. Besides, we were closer to the Greysunders than you and Alduin. Perhaps the dwarves will be more inclined to cooperate with us there." Blaine and Priscilla looked uneasy, their glances flickering from my son and his wife to Lord Aldir, who had killed the traitorous dwarf king and queen.

"That sounds like a good idea. We'll need the dwarves' help if we're going to win this war. I think they'll be more inclined to help us after they find out our enemies are capable of sending thousands of soldiers across the ocean," I said. "Now, if everyone will excuse me, I'm going to get some rest." I dipped

my head to Lord Aldir and dismissed everyone else with a wave.

Walking out of the meeting hall, I let out a deep breath. Despite the fact that I had grown accustomed to Lord Aldir's presence—he had been here for two years—it was still stifling being near the asura.

He had done much to prepare us for the war and had been tactical in his approach. He barely showed himself at meetings, often teaching me one-on-one so I could be the one to officially head the war. With his insight on both large- and small-scale battle tactics, we'd been doing a good job keeping the fighting away from the general public. However, if Gideon's speculations were true, then it wouldn't be long before everyone, soldier or not, would be involved one way or another.

"Commander Virion," a soft voice said from behind me. I turned to see Varay walking toward me, her expression full of concern. "Commander, allow me to apologize for allowing Princess Tessia to come along. I know you gave specific orders for me to keep her away from danger but—"

I held up my hand to stop her. "Varay, it's fine. I know how she can be, and to tell you the truth, I've been expecting something like this from her. Now, off you go; little Princess Glayder must be waiting for you."

The Lance's face still showed traces of concern and guilt, but she lowered her head in a bow and went off in the direction of the training grounds.

Taking a left down the long corridor, I stopped in front of an oak door. After another deep breath, I brought my fist up and knocked thrice.

"Who is it?" the muffled voice of my granddaughter called from inside.

I cleared my throat. "It's your grandfather."

"I want to be alone," she replied instantly.

"Come now," I sighed. "Don't say that."

There was only silence at first, but after a few seconds, I heard the faint sounds of approaching footsteps. The reinforced wooden door opened just a crack and my granddaughter's eyes peeked through from the other side.

"Are you going to scold me for going to the ship with Varay?" she asked, her

mouth hidden behind the door.

"No, I'm not."

The child regarded me silently, her brow raised in suspicion. "Because I was the one who forced her to take me."

I nodded. "Yes, I figured as much."

"And I'm not going to apologize for that," she continued, trying to hold her stern gaze.

"I'm sure you won't."

"Well, good." Her expression faltered, her confusion clear.

I took a step back from the door. "Now, will you take a walk with your grandfather?"

I waited for her as she slipped out of the room, closed the door behind her, and timidly trailed behind me like a shadow.

"This way." I gestured with my head. "There's something I want to show you."

As we walked, I began humming a small tune to break the silence.

"Hey, that's the lullaby Father used to sing to me," Tessia exclaimed.

"Well, who do you think taught it to him?" I chuckled. "My mother, your great-grandmother, used to sing it to me when I couldn't sleep at night. I sang it to your father when he was too scared to go to sleep—but don't tell him I told you that."

The child giggled as she nodded. "Where are we going anyway, Grandpa?"

"You'll see soon enough, child." We took another turn and descended a flight of spiral stairs, stopping in front of a set of doors large enough to easily admit giants.

Placing a palm in the center of the door, I released a wave of mana. The locks and mechanisms that kept the room secure clicked in rapid succession as scores of intricate patterns unraveled themselves and fell into place. When the sounds receded, the door slid open to reveal a large earthen field surrounded by mana-enhanced metal. Off to the side was another door, which was made

of the same material as the walls around it.

"We're almost here," I said, pointing to the door.

"I've never been here before. What's this room for?" Tessia asked as she looked around.

"This is where the Lances, guild leaders, and I receive our training from Lord Aldir. The asura set it up himself so that it could withstand even the attacks of white core mages. But before you go on exploring, there's something you need to see." I pushed open the door to the room inside the deserted training arena.

The room was empty but for a few chairs, a drawing board, and a blank screen with a visual recording artifact in front of it.

"Take a seat, ch—" I stopped myself as I stood next to the artifact. "Take a seat, Tessia."

My granddaughter planted herself in the chair in front of me, facing the white screen. She looked at me with uncertain eyes, and for a moment I just wanted to take her back to her room, where she'd be safe.

Letting out a deep breath, I turned on the visual recording artifact. A bright light shot from the front and onto the screen, projecting a moving picture that had been recorded on the battlefield.

"This, Tessia, is what the war is like." I moved out of the way and let her watch.

It was a particularly brutal battle in the depths of a dungeon where the Alacryan soldiers had been setting up camp. There had been hundreds of mages and warriors there, waiting for further orders. Our men had had little idea of what they would be walking into, while the Alacryan side had already received warning from their scouts that enemies would soon arrive.

I could see the horror in my granddaughter's eyes as the massacre went on. Our side had lost more than fifty in the first few seconds, but even after we recuperated, the battle had been bloody and intense. Fresh corpses lay sprawled all over the ground as mages and warriors continued to attack each

other with spells and weapons alike. Even without sound, I could clearly imagine the screams from the injured and dying.

The video ended abruptly as the mage holding the artifact was killed by a stray spell. There was a moment of silence as my granddaughter and I mulled over the images on the screen.

"This was a real-life recording from a battle just five days ago. We lost two hundred men and twenty mages in that battle alone, out of the four hundred we sent down into that dungeon. I was the one who gave them the order to go down, and it's on my shoulders that they're all dead." I locked eyes with my granddaughter, my gaze cold and unyielding.

"The war has only just begun, but I have already done things—made choices—that I will never forgive myself for. As your grandfather, this is what I want to keep you away from," I said, pointing to the screen. "It is my selfishness as your grandfather that makes me want to keep you safe and away from harm, regardless of how much of an asset you may be in battle." Tess lowered her gaze. "Grandpa..."

"Tessia. You are, no doubt, a tremendously talented mage and, with the training that you've undergone these past two years, would be a force to be reckoned with in the war. But no matter how powerful you are, you are only one person. All it takes is one mistake, one small blunder—that is why I've forbidden you to take part in any of the battles. Until now."

"Until now?" She looked up. I could only stare at her tiny face. It felt like just a week ago she had been sitting on my lap, chirping 'grandpa' with her hands held high.

"Tessia, even after seeing just a glimpse of what you will have to endure, do you still want to be a part of the battle?" I asked, walking to the back of the room.

My granddaughter's expression hardened as she stood up. "Yes."

Picking up two dulled training swords from the rack, I tossed one to her. "Then prove your resolve."

CONCEALED BURDENS

"So you understand the rules of this battle?" I confirmed, gripping the practice sword in my right hand.

"Grandpa..." My granddaughter's eyes softened as she hesitated. However, perhaps responding to my unrelenting expression, she hardened herself and raised her sword. "I understand."

I nodded my approval. "Integrate."

My body burned with untamed excitement as I released the second form of my beast will. As my skin and even my clothes darkened, wrapped in a veil of shadow, I took a step toward Tessia.

With my heightened senses, I could hear the quickening pace of my granddaughter's heartbeat as she waited for me to make a move.

As far as I was concerned, the battle had already begun.

Closing the gap between us, I thrust the pommel of my sword into Tessia's stomach. I lurched forward, suddenly off balance, and I could tell from the force of impact that she had taken a step back in time to lessen the strength of the blow.

Any trace of uncertainty had been wiped off the child's face. Her eyes now regarded me as an opponent as she put distance between us.

"Good." I let out a growl as I slowly circled around her. Tessia's heartbeat steadied as she prepared herself.

"Acquire," she muttered, and a thin layer of emerald green enveloped her like

a second skin. The aura around her exploded out from under her feet, spreading through the grass.

I jumped back in time to avoid a root as thick a tree that erupted from the ground beneath me. The entire area within the effect of the aura soon became a web of dense vines that spread around the child like snakes protecting their master.

Tessia was already advancing toward me, dashing atop a trail of vines, her sword shining a brilliant green.

In this form, I could sense her intent like the pressure from an oncoming thunderstorm.

I held my sword up as I easily sidestepped another thick tendril. Using the roots as stepping stones, I augmented my sword in time to meet Tessia's blade.

Our weapons clashed, producing a shriek as sparks were sent scattering into the air. I fell back, grabbing her sword hand as I stamped on her leading foot to stop her from regaining balance, using her own forward momentum against her.

She fell forward and I prepared to twist her into a throw—but then a thin vine wrapped itself around the child's waist, preventing her fall.

Using the vine to keep herself upright, Tessia lashed out with both feet to send me flying back.

I blocked her kick with the flat of my blade, but was unable to contain my excitement. With a laugh I exclaimed, "Your control over your beast will has gotten much better!" I'd have been impressed if anyone else had managed to defend against her unorthodox counter.

Releasing more mana into my limbs, I flashed toward Tessia, avoiding the barrage of tendrils meant to keep me at bay.

We exchanged blows on an ever-changing terrain of roots that wriggled and convulsed at my granddaughter's beckoning. Tessia moved gracefully atop the vines, easily using them as platforms to maneuver in all directions. Her

movement and swordplay, utilizing both her beast will and wind-attribute spells, resembled an elegant dance in the air, as if every step, swing, and lunge she executed had been choreographed. I couldn't have been prouder of my granddaughter—she had matured so much as a mage, and come so far. However, letting her win too easily would only make her complacent.

Her ability transformed the surrounding area to her advantage. However, if her opponent was as quick and agile as I was, he'd be able to take advantage of the vines as well, and use them as a route to get to Tessia. My fighting style especially, which consisted of erratic movement to utilize the full potential of the shadow panther's innate stealth, excelled in this environment. Soon, both the tendrils and Tessia were having a hard time keeping up with my movements as I constantly flitted atop the waves of vines my granddaughter had conjured.

The child was nearly in range of my sword. She had lost track of me, but just as I stretched my arm out to swing, she sank into the depths of the vines below us. As Tessia disappeared inside, the countless tendrils beneath me began retreating, congregating in one spot.

I quickly hopped away as the green vines gathered, forming a protective sphere around what I assumed was Tessia.

For a moment, I was afraid she had lost control again. But when the shell of vines burst apart, I whistled in admiration at the sight of my granddaughter.

"You did it!" I exclaimed, my voice coming out much huskier than normal because of the integration.

Giggling, Tessia pointed her sword at me with a wide grin on her face. "Be careful, Grandpa!"

An emerald aura shimmered over Tessia's fair skin, which had lightened to an ivory tone while her hair and even her eyebrows had changed to a forest green shade. Her turquoise eyes shone brighter, with intricate markings spreading around her eyes making her seem otherworldly—celestial, almost.

I had already known that Tessia's beast will was much more powerful than

mine, and that, in direct combat, my beast will was at a disadvantage. However, I couldn't resist the urge to go head to head with my granddaughter at her strongest.

Tessia had no use for the training sword; the translucent green aura surrounding her molded itself into two emerald blades in her hands. As she spun into a flurry of slashes with her dual mana swords, I couldn't avoid being overwhelmed by the never-ending whirlwind of attacks. She hacked and twirled relentlessly, sometimes looking for openings, other times making them. Tessia wasn't a master in the art of dual-wielding and left herself open to my darting counter-attacks, but each time I moved in to strike, the aura enveloping her would mold into another weapon to block my blade, and Tessia was able to continue her bombardment uninterrupted. Her weapons were not just the two blades in her hands—she was able to mold her aura into almost whatever shape she saw fit.

Fresh nicks and cuts appeared all across my body, splashing drops of blood on the grass around me as I moved and dodged with all my skill, wondering why I had been stupid enough to think it would be a good idea to confront her head-on. However, it seemed the child was incurring damage as well; blotches of red spread from underneath the blouse she wore for fighting.

The emerald aura surrounding her was fading, now thinner and more transparent. The glowing runes embellishing the child's face receded and her expression crumpled into a painful cringe.

As her movements slowed and her attacks weakened, I grabbed her by the arm and buckled her legs from behind the knee, gently bringing her to the ground as the rest of her beast will aura dissipated.

"I... I lost. I couldn't do it, Grandpa. I couldn't even land a clean hit after all that," she said, gasping for breath. As my granddaughter lay sprawled on the field of grass, covered in cuts and bruises incurred not by me, but from the intensity of her beast will, I couldn't help but imagine her out in the battlefield. What state would she be reduced to in battle, where her opponent

had no intention of looking out for her well-being?

Clearing my mind of these poisonous thoughts, I sat down beside her and studied the child's face silently for a moment, then, with a resigned sigh, I shook my head. "On the battlefield, you are to address me as Commander, not Grandpa."

Tessia's eyes lit up, even brighter than when she had released her integration phase. "Does that mean...? Th-thank—"

"But!" I interrupted. "I have a few conditions."

"All right," she replied, her gaze firm.

"You must still get consent from both your mother and your father. You must also keep in mind the gravity of who you are. Whoever is leading your team or battalion will definitely mention it, but it is up to you to not become a liability. If your teammates feel you cannot take care of yourself, I will have you removed from the fighting immediately. Is that clear?"

"Yes!" Tessia nodded feverishly.

"And try not to be caught in a situation where you need to use your second phase. It may be because you haven't fully learned to control it, but that form makes you too reckless," I added, thinking about that mad whirlwind of attacks and how she had relied solely on her beast will to defend her.

"Master Indrath told me that too. He said that the beast will I've assimilated with is different, although he couldn't really put a finger on why," she admitted.

We both got up and headed back out of the training room, but I stopped her to say one last thing. "Child—Tessia. From here on out, I can no longer be your grandfather. The actions I have taken and the decisions I have made concerning you have always been for your safety and happiness. However, now that you're a soldier, I must treat you like one. Whether it is me giving you an order directly or another person in charge of your team, you must keep in mind that the orders given will be for the good of Dicathen, not for your personal safety. This is my final warning to you."

My granddaughter looked at me, studying my pained expression, then buried her face into my chest as she embraced me. "It's okay Grand—I mean, Commander. Dicathen is my home, and I will do whatever it takes to protect it and the people I love."

"Yes, I know," I mumbled. "That is what I am afraid of."

After shooing her away, I headed down into the lower levels of the castle.

Far down in the bowels of the castle, beneath even the basements and dungeons, the sharp smell of various medicinal herbs filled the halls.

I found my way to a plain door at the very end of a long, narrow corridor, and I pushed it open.

"Commander Virion! My apologies, I was not expecting anyone to visit," the middle-aged nurse said as she frantically scrambled out of her chair.

"No need to apologize, Anna; I came here on a whim. How is she?" I asked, lowering my gaze to the woman lying unconscious in bed.

"I've just finished administering the necessary supplements to keep her body healthy. Physically speaking, she is in great shape, but no matter what we try, we can't get her to wake up," Anna sighed, placing a hand gently on Cynthia's arm.

"Same as always, then?" I gave a faint smile. "Anna, do you mind giving me some time alone with her?"

"Of course. I mean, not at all. I'll get out of your hair. Take your time," she answered hurrying toward the door.

Slumping down on the wooden chair beside the bed, I closed my eyes. This was far from the first time I had come here. It seemed like, these days, I came to this room whenever I wanted some time alone or needed to get away from the suffocating pressure of the war effort.

"My old friend. How goes your slumber? I'm not sure if you knew this, but I think the Alacryan army is capable of building steamships and is most likely using them to transport tens of thousands of soldiers to our shores. I'm sure you didn't know. After all, you were already here when we began

construction on the *Dicatheous*." I sighed, staring blankly at Cynthia's peaceful face.

"You know, I just gave Tessia permission start fighting in real battles. Can you believe it?" I laughed humorlessly. "I'm sure you'd be pretty surprised by my decision. But... I'm afraid. I know how much she wants to make a difference and be a part of the fight, and I know how stubborn she is. I'm afraid that she'd run away and go off to fight even without my consent. So I decided that, since she is probably going to take part in this war anyway, it should at least be under supervision."

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "That's probably a lie. I think, more than that, I just don't want her to keep hating me. Pft! And I told her I'm going to treat her like a soldier, not my granddaughter. What a load of crap, right?" I scoffed, shaking my head.

"But still, it's hard, Cynthia—doing all this, I mean. I stepped down as king because I wanted to *avoid* doing what I'm doing right now. And what I'm doing now is on a *much* bigger scale. I have an asura making sure I'm fit—emotionally, mentally, and physically—to lead this war while all the Lances and guild leaders are at my beck and call. Is it pathetic of me to want nothing more than to sit in my garden, watching my granddaughter grow up peacefully? What sort of cruel joke is it to send my own granddaughter to battle?

"Alduin and his wife, Blaine and Priscilla—they're all doing what they can to help, but in the end, they turn to me for orders now that Lord Aldir has pronounced me the only fit leader of the Triunion's joint military forces." I let out another deep, trembling breath as I dragged my hands down my face. "Cynthia, I've already outlived my wife. I don't want to live longer than my child and grandchild, too. I don't think I can take it."

I reached out a hand toward Cynthia, afraid that she might crumble at my touch. Finally, I gathered the courage to place my hand on top of hers. "I never apologized to you. Even after Lord Aldir removed the curse on you, I

had the feeling something was wrong. You knew, didn't you? You knew it wasn't fully removed, that you might die if you revealed information about Alacrya, about the Vritra, didn't you? I think I sensed it too, but I didn't stop you. For a chance to gain the higher ground in this war, I allowed you to succumb to this state..."

I stopped talking for a moment, trying to keep my voice steady. "And I'm sorry for that. I shouldn't have let you do that to yourself. There might be people who shun you for being a spy, but I would never. You chose to stand up to your own people to help ours. Making that choice makes you stronger than anyone else here."

I rose from the chair, quickly rubbing my eyes on my sleeves. "The true war is going to start soon. I won't be able to come down here for a while, my friend, but I promise you that, after this war is over, I will do whatever it takes to wake you back up."

FROM PRINCESS TO SOLDIER

TESSIA ERALITH

- "Darvus, switch positions with Stannard!" I swung my blade, creating an arc of wind that knocked away the armored gnoll—a nasty mana beast that was more like a bipedal, rabid dog—that had tried to catch me off guard.
- "Careful, Leader! If you die on us, your grandfather will murder us all," Darvus warned, a wide grin visible underneath his dented helmet.
- "Bite me," I snorted, parrying the downswing of another assault mage's axe.
- "Do you want me to count all the times I've saved your ass?"
- "Don't start a battle you can't win, Darvus!" Caria mocked as she nimbly dodged a spiked club, following up with an uppercut at a fanged orc's jaw.
- "Stannard, have you found the pack leader yet? These gnolls just keep coming out of nowhere." Darvus twirled two hatchets before launching them at a nearby gnoll.
- "Not yet," our blonde-haired mage called from behind.
- "Hey, Leader, I'm thinking we should fall back. There are too many of them for just our team to handle without overexerting ourselves." Darvus unclipped his two large battle axes from his back and decapitated a large orc.
- "I think you're right. This was supposed to be a scouting excursion, not a full-blown assault. We should fall back to camp. The conjurers will take care of any stragglers that follow us." I thrust my thin blade underneath the seam of the armored gnoll's breastplate. Its rabid, dog-like face contorted in pain as

it crumpled to the floor.

"Those lucky wand-wavers, sitting behind the lines and firing off spells while they gossip with each other," Darvus grumbled as he used the blunt end of his axe to cave in a gnoll's chest.

"Hey!" Stannard exclaimed. "That's degrading!"

Ignoring my team members' banter, I hopped back, taking up a position next to Stannard. "Stannard, I'm going to hold them down. Go all out, okay?"

"Understood," he acknowledged. "Darvus, Caria—better get out of the way!" Sheathing my sword, I released the first phase of my beast will to strengthen my spell. With my palms on the ground, I whispered, "Ivy Prison."

A wave of vines shot up from the ground, entangling both the large orcs and the gnolls coming through the opening on the far side of the cavern.

Stannard aimed a device that looked like a narrow crossbow at the horde of mana beasts now rooted to the ground. His pale blue eyes narrowed in concentration as he inserted a small orb into the tip of the contraption.

The embedded gem glowed bright red as he waited for the right moment. As soon as both Darvus and Caria had cleared the line of fire, Stannard unleashed his attack—Propulsion Blast. More like a cannon than a crossbow, a fiery blast exploded from the end of Stannard's weapon, nearly blowing the small mage off his feet.

We all stared grimly at the scene in front of us; the first wave of orcs and gnolls burned like matchsticks, trapping their comrades behind a wall of fire.

"Another new spell you mixed up?" Darvus asked, his eyes fixed on the fiery blaze just a dozen yards away.

"Yup," Stannard replied, strapping his weapon across his shoulder. "The recoil is a bit painful though."

"That's why I keep telling you that you should train more with me." Caria wagged her gloved finger at him.

"And I'm telling you there's no way in hell I'd train with you, you compact package of savagery," Stannard retorted. "I still have nightmares about that

day."

"Guys, let's save the banter for when we're back with the other teams," I cut in. "That fire won't hold them back for long." With that, we headed down the narrow corridor we had entered through, making sure there weren't any mana beasts following us.

It wasn't long before we saw the flickering purple light that indicated the main base—the place I'd called home for the past few months.

"I wonder what they've prepared for supper," Darvus mused, licking his lips.

"It's always the same old mush, and yet they keep calling it 'food.' I swear, the cooks purposely make it as unappetizing as possible so no one will want seconds," Stannard grumbled.

"Any chance that our leader, whom we love and appreciate so much and who also happens to be a princess, can hook her precious teammates up with some real food?" Darvus asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Gross!" Caria cringed beside me. "If you want to beg for favors, you're better off covering your face while you do so."

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful, shorty." Darvus stuck out his chin. With his rugged but sharp face, he could be considered objectively handsome despite his unkempt appearance and inflated ego.

"I'm not short, I'm *petite*," Caria snapped back at him. "And I'm cute too. Right, Tessia?" She turned to me and grabbed my arm.

"Oh, please. Stannard here is petite. He could pass as a ten-year-old. You, on the other hand, are just short and barbaric." Darvus grinned.

"Is there really a need for you to include me in your squabble?" Stannard sounded offended. He was always sensitive about his height, and objected to anyone calling him short or small.

"Guys! Who cares if we're pretty or cute or handsome? We're in a dungeon, covered in blood, sweat, and grime. Is there really a need to look attractive down here?" I sighed in frustration as we reached the iron wall protecting the camp.

- "As expected of someone who's been blessed with true beauty. You'd never understand the hardships normal girls have to go through to find a man," Caria said with a pout.
- "Stop it," I scoffed, shaking my head. "What true beauty?"
- "It's true," Darvus said. "If it weren't for the fact that you're Commander Virion's precious granddaughter, and the fact that you could easily beat me up, I'd have already made a move on you."
- "If you don't knock it off, I still might beat you up—again," I retorted.
- "Alas, our love is not meant to be. I prefer my women flirtatious and fun," Darvus said, sighing with exaggerated longing.
- "Gross," Caria and I said in unison.

We knocked on the mana-enhanced iron wall, and a slit opened in the middle. A pair of sharp eyes regarded us for a moment.

When the eyes landed on me, they widened. "Princess Tessia!"

"Yes. Now please open the door," I replied, looking up at the flickering purple light coming from the lantern bolted to the ceiling.

The metal slit closed and the purple light changed to red, warning us to stand clear.

The dark wall split apart at the seam in the middle. The harsh grinding of metal on stone echoed off the walls of the narrow cavern as the doors opened enough to admit us.

As we stepped through the doorway in single file, the warmth of burning fires from several earthen pits and the smell of indiscernible herbs and meat greeted us. The narrow hallway we had been in opened up to a massive cavern with a naturally-vaulted ceiling high above us. High up near the ceiling, large holes were dug into the walls, and archers and conjurers lay inside, ready to fire at any intruders.

Artificial light from orbs lined the walls to brighten the immense cavern in which over a hundred soldiers and mages had set up camp. An underground stream gurgled along one side of the cavern, providing fresh water for all the

soldiers stationed here.

"Welcome back, Princess." The sentry guarding the door bowed. I waved him off with a quick nod. My teammates followed close behind me as we headed for our own little campsite. When we arrived, I went directly inside the tent Caria and I shared and gathered a new set of clothes and a towel.

Opening the flap of the tent, I could see Darvus trying to light a fire while Caria watched Stannard disassemble and clean his crossbow-like weapon. I thought of how far the four of us had come in these past three months and smiled.

I had first been introduced to this group shortly after gaining my grandfather's approval to go out to battle. Darvus, fourth son of House Clarell, was a lazy, spoiled, arrogant ass—but he was also an exceptionally talented prodigy in mana control and had the reflexes to match.

The mission briefing I'd received on Darvus had been quite the read. The Clarells had been a distinguished family for centuries, known for their unique and secretive style of augmented axemanship. Despite a history of fooling around and skipping out on training, the wild-haired Darvus was still a far better axeman and fighter than any of his older brothers. His father, tired of his son's lackadaisical attitude toward everything, had sent Darvus into battle as soon as he reached the solid-yellow core stage.

It was a nightmare in the beginning; Darvus had taken one look at me and decided I was a liability, someone to be looked down on. Even after I'd resorted to using my beast will to defeat him in a duel, he still considered me unfit as a leader and did as he wanted. He only really cared about two things: flirting with women and watching out for his childhood friend, Caria.

"Tessia? What are you doing? You look pretty silly with just your head sticking out of the tent," Caria said, smirking.

"I was just heading out. I'm going to take a bath," I replied, somewhat flustered.

"Don't be too long, Princess. Remember, this is a war camp, not a day spa,"

Darvus called out lazily, lying on his side by the fire.

"Maybe not, but there's nothing wrong having a wash. You should try it sometime," I quipped, carrying my clothes and towel over my shoulder.

"Can you stop with the stupid taunts?" Caria snapped as she kicked the arm that Darvus had been leaning his head on, causing his head to slam into the hard stone ground.

"Gah! Can we *not* always resort to violence, you vicious little mouse?" Darvus cried, rubbing the side of his head.

"You were asking for it," Stannard chuckled from his seat, putting down his weapon. "Darvus, where did you put the beast cores we collected?"

"Over there," he grumbled, pointing to the bag by their tent.

As I made my way toward the stream, I glanced over my shoulder to see Caria rubbing her childhood friend's head, making sure he was unharmed. I wonder when she's going to gather the courage to confess to Darvus.

Caria Rede was just as headstrong as Darvus, if not more so, but was also bright and optimistic, despite the harsh environment she had been raised in. The Rede family had served the Clarell family for many generations, but when Caria's mother had failed to produce any sons, Caria—the oldest of the daughters—had been raised as if she were a male and trained to fight with a unique artifact that took the appearance of a pair of gloves. However, when activated, they transformed into gauntlets reaching all the way up to her shoulders. Eventually she'd been assigned to protect a member of the Clarell family: Darvus.

This girl, who looked like a thirteen-year-old but was actually a few years older than me, had been the glue that held the team together. Caria was cheerful and sensitive to her surroundings, and had been a great help in keeping Darvus in line. It was only after a month or so that she had confided in me, and I'd learned she was helplessly in love with her perverted, lazy childhood friend. I was shocked at first, of course, but as someone who had feelings for a boy who only saw her as a little girl that needed protecting, I

empathized with her.

Apart from her role as the mediator in our group, she truly shined on the battlefield. Even after more than three months fighting in the dungeons, I'd yet to see anyone as agile, nimble, and flexible as Caria.

Going into one of the stalls that had been conjured at the edge of the stream, I stripped off my filthy clothes, careful not to irritate the scratches and bruises I'd gotten from our last battle. Dipping my body into the cold, flowing stream at the far end of the enclosed room, I hurriedly wiped myself with the cleansing herb I had brought. I had to be constantly moving to fight the chill from the brisk water. After washing myself and the clothes I'd fought in, I dried myself and changed into fresh attire, keeping the towel wrapped around my head.

Arriving back at our campsite, I huddled closely beside the fire, gingerly defrosting myself from the torturous bath. Darvus was nowhere to be found —most likely flirting with some of the female conjurers assigned to guard the main base. I could see Caria's butt sticking out from our tent as she rummaged through her belongings, leaving only Stannard and myself by the fire.

"You should wash up as well. You don't want your wounds to get infected," I advised, turning my back toward the fire so my body could be evenly roasted. "Ugh. I swear, fighting mana beasts is less painful than taking a bath in that near-frozen stream." Stannard grimaced. "I guess I should, though. Let me finish up with this beast core first."

I watched the blond-haired boy as he clutched firmly at a beast core we had extracted from one of the gnolls and chanted a spell over it.

Stannard Berwick, the last member of our team, had made a very distinct impression during his assessment. He had been introduced to my grandfather by Professor Gideon. When the dainty-looking boy, who appeared no older than Caria, had stepped onto the training field, all three of us had our concerns. He was a dark-yellow stage conjurer at the time, and had a dual

affinity for fire and wind. This was all well and good, but Stannard also had a deficiency in his mana core which prevented him from storing the amount of mana a yellow core mage would normally have been able to.

At first, because of his condition, I thought it would be better to have Stannard on the back lines—with the other "wand wavers," as Darvus called them. However, Gideon had guaranteed that the boy would be useful to have as a teammate on the frontline. As it turned out, Stannard was a very peculiar type of deviant.

He had the unique ability to somehow store actual spells into beast cores. He was the only one who could activate the prepared spell, though; otherwise, we'd all have been carrying around bags of loaded beast cores.

Seeing Darvus returning to our camp, I called out to him. "Is that the son of House Clarell I see, returning alone to his cold camp bed?"

"Ah, the sheltered elf princess is getting better at sarcasm," he snorted. "And it's not that I *couldn't*. It's just that there were no girls worthy of me."

"I can think of one," I sighed, purposefully not looking toward Caria, who was still inside the tent.

"I'm sorry, Princess. You're really not my type," Darvus said, smirking. I shook my head. "Never mind, you dolt."

Caria came out of the tent at that moment with dried fruit and meat in her arms. "I finally found where I hid these!"

Darvus let out an eager gasp as he eyed the food. "Why would you hide these?"

"So our ever-so-sexy-and-suave teammate doesn't inhale it all at once," Stannard said, putting down the beast core he had just finished imbuing.

"Not you too," Darvus groaned.

We all laughed as Caria handed us each a piece of jerky. As I took a bite of the chewy, salty meat, a familiar voice called out from behind me. "Princess!"

When I turned around, I broke into a smile at the unexpected surprise.

"Helen?"

REUNION

SEEING the familiar face of Helen Shard, leader of the Twin Horns—the group Art's father had once led—I waved excitedly at her. Then I noticed the rest of the Twin Horns behind her. "Hi everyone!"

I gave Helen a big hug, then greeted the rest of her party.

"Team, I'd like you to meet Helen Shard, Durden Walker, Jasmine Flamesworth, Adam Krensh, and Angela Rose of the Twin Horns. I've told you about them before, right?" I introduced my teammates, pointing to them in turn. "And this is Caria Rede, Darvus Clarell, and Stannard Berwick."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, madam." Darvus rushed over to shake hands with Angela, the Twin Horns' conjurer. "Darvus Clarell, fourth son of Darius Clarell, and I must say you are a sight for these sore eyes of mine."

"Ugh, typical," Caria whispered. "He goes straight to the one with the big tits."

"How long have you been here, Princess?" Helen asked, redirecting my attention away from Darvus and his antics.

"We've been here for about three months now, I think," I replied. "And please, just call me Tessia."

"Sorry. We've only met a few times and they were all brief, so I didn't want to be rude," she said with a chuckle.

"Did you just get here?" I asked, trying to follow her lead and ignore Stannard and Darvus, who were both trying to flirt with Angela. I motioned for her to have a seat beside me next to our crackling fire.

"This afternoon. We were at the Wall for about four months, but our party has been sent here to help out with the scouting," she said.

'The Wall' was what everyone called the stretch of forts that had been built along the Grand Mountains to make sure the battle didn't reach the more populated areas of Sapin. While I knew that the Alacryan forces might be invading from the western coast, Grandpa had explicitly told everyone with knowledge of the sunken ship to keep it a secret until proper preparations had been made.

Fortunately, communications with the dwarves had been going well over the past few months; they had agreed to let the humans and elves take shelter in their underground kingdom if needed. We all hoped it wouldn't reach that stage—especially the elves, because the distance between the kingdoms of Darv and Elenoir meant that teleportation was the only means of travel. For now, many of the tribes along the southern half of Elenoir had migrated through the Elshire Forest and Grand Mountains near the central cities of Sapin. The current plan was to get as many civilians as possible away from the western coast and the Beast Glades.

"What is it like fighting along the Wall, Helen?" I asked, curious about the main war zone. "Have you actually fought against Alacryan mages?"

"Yes," she answered grimly. "The Alacryan forces are strong. Out at the Wall, it's not just the Alacryan soldiers we have to fight against, but the mana beasts that they somehow put under their control as well."

"I see." I looked at my sword, unhappy that the only fighting I'd done since I had joined the war had been against the mana beasts rampaging through the dungeons.

Spotting the look on my face, Helen added, "But the battles going on here are just as important, maybe even more so—trust me. The more mana beasts we kill here, the fewer there are up on the surface. And if we find and kill a mutant, the Alacryan forces lose hundreds of their puppets."

I nodded silently. I knew that winning the fight down here was crucial to the war. The main task of the soldiers gathered here was to find the mutants in the depths of the dungeon. Mutants, mana beasts controlled by the Alacryans, were mostly leaders of their own dungeons. Through the mutant, the enemy was able to control the hundreds of mana beasts that served it. As long as these mutants existed, other mana beasts of their species would follow them, fighting alongside the Alacryan soldiers.

There were dozens of squads out there, deep inside various dungeons, trying to find and kill the mutants before they gathered a significant number of mana beasts and began advancing toward the Wall.

"Because the mutant hiding here is supposedly an S-class mana beast, your grandfather sent more mages in, which is why we're here," the large man named Durden chimed in, overhearing our conversation. I already knew that, of course; usually, there wouldn't be so many soldiers inside one dungeon.

"Thank heavens for that. And thank dear Grandfather for bringing such a fair angel to my arms," Darvus added, inching an arm across Angela's back.

Angela just giggled, apparently regarding Darvus as nothing more than a cute pet. Caria smacked Darvus upside the head and dragged him a safe distance away.

Stannard, who had seemed embarrassed when Angela had cooed and patted his head as if he were a child, moved to stand next to Durden. He fiddled with his weapon, a scowl on his face.

I turned back to the leader of the Twin Horns. "Tell me more about the fights happening at the Wall, Helen."

"Look, *Princess*," Adam Krensh spat. "Fights at the Wall aren't bedtime stories that your nanny reads to you in your fancy canopy bed. It's war! People die—on both sides."

Adam had a head of red hair that looked like the burning fire we were huddled around, and he glared at me as if he were scolding a schoolgirl. I was about to say something when Durden got in between us. "Don't take Adam's

words to heart. If we did, we'd all have all killed him in his sleep—more than once."

I hadn't even realized I was already standing up, but Durden's intervention and dismissive words quelled my anger just enough to keep me from exploding. I sat back down, but I was still glaring at the lanky emberhead. Arthur had mentioned how Adam could be when he'd described the Twin Horns, but I hadn't realized how much of an understatement his words were.

"Adam, find an empty fire pit and go set up our tents," Helen ordered, a surprising amount of authority in her voice, which hadn't been there when she was talking to me. "Angela, can you go help him out?"

With a cheery salute, Angela herded the grumbling Adam away from our camp. That left only Helen, Durden, and Jasmine—who had been silent since they had arrived.

"Despite how the words came off of that defective muscle he calls a tongue, Adam only said that because he didn't want you to know," Helen sighed. "You're over here fighting beasts, but the Alacryan soldiers are much more monstrous than any mana beasts here. At least the creatures you battle here fight for survival, on instinct. They fight to kill, and to some extent, that's merciful."

"What do you mean by that?" Stannard asked.

Helen's expression was hesitant, and I knew she was thinking of a way to sugarcoat whatever she was about to say. Then Jasmine stepped up and answered for her.

"Information is the most important thing in a war," she said evenly. "Both sides, they're trying to get information out of each other. That means kidnapping... torturing."

We were all silent for a moment, and even Darvus's usually aloof expression hardened.

"Battles here are black and white—beasts are bad, you are good. When you're fighting other humans—elves and dwarves who can all talk, scream in

pain, and beg for mercy—things become more gray. It's harder to distinguish between right and wrong," Jasmine continued, her face a stone mask despite the horrors she was describing.

The once-lively atmosphere of a reunion had turned tense, and I exchanged glances with my teammates.

Suddenly, a series of loud crashing noises made us all turn our heads toward one of the gated entrances leading deeper into the dungeon.

"Please, hurry, let me in!" a muffled voice yelled from behind one of the doors. The sentry in charge of that entrance quickly verified the man's identity, then unbolted the door and hauled it open.

The entire cavern was deathly quiet. Everyone, whether they were stationed inside or merely resting after an excursion, was on their feet, hands gripping their weapons and their gazes focused on the entrance.

As the two heavy doors slid apart, the man who had been shouting on the other side tumbled through, falling to the ground, apparently unconscious.

"Does this happen often?" Helen asked, her bow ready, her free hand at her quiver.

"No, it doesn't," I answered, my hand resting on the pommel of my sword. The sentry immediately pulled the scout inside before closing the doors.

"Get me a medic!" the sentry roared, hoisting the bloody scout on his shoulders. There weren't any emitters stationed here—most were at the Wall, healing the wounded there. However, there were always a few people on call who were adept at medical treatment.

"Do you want to see what that's all about?" Stannard glanced up at me.

"Do we have clearance to go inside?" Helen asked, craning her neck to see.

"Being a princess is a kind of clearance, right?" Darvus shrugged, eager to know what was happening.

I rose. "Not everyone, though."

Helen and Stannard volunteered themselves to come with me. When we arrived at the white-canopied tent at the wall opposite the entrances, closest

to the exit back to the surface, two guards stopped us from going inside, then recognized who I was.

"Princess. What brings you here? Are you injured?" The slightly larger of the two armored guards dipped his head to get a better look at me.

"No. I know the scout that just arrived," I lied, giving him a solemn look, "and I'm worried about him. Do you mind letting us through?"

The two guards exchanged hesitant glances, then, but eventually they opened the removable tarp that served as the door.

I'd expected there to be a lot more noise inside, especially considering the scout's shocking entrance, but the tent had no other patients. The medic, her assistant, and the leader of our expedition all stood around the scout—who was lying unconscious in bed.

When we stepped inside, the leader of the expedition, a barrel-chested augmenter named Drogo Lambert, rose from his seat, along with his assistant.

"Princess? What happened? Are you injured?" Drogo asked, worry etched on his face. He looked at Stannard, then his face lit up when he saw who was with us. "Helen Shard?"

"Nice seeing you, Drogo—or I guess I should call you 'leader,' right?" Helen stepped up and shook hands with the hulking man, whose armor seemed designed to contain his muscles rather than protect them.

"Please, you're more than fit to take my place." His smile faded as he regarded us worriedly. "So what brings you two here? Is everything all right?"

I nodded. "Don't worry, Leader, everything's fine."

"The princess here is probably curious about what news our little slumbering prince has brought, am I right?" said the medic, an elderly woman with a hunch and a naturally scowling face.

"I can't hide anything from you, Elder Albreda." I said, smiling awkwardly.

"Bah! Does this poor excuse for a treatment center look like a gossip wing to

you?" she grumbled as she turned to the shelf full of herbs and plants behind her and began tidying it.

"Of course not," Helen chimed in. "But I was brought here with my team to help find the S-class beast that was turned into a mutant, and I'm to send updates to my superiors back at the Wall periodically. I thought the fastest way to find out what was going on would be talking to this man," she said, indicating the unconscious scout.

"You'd be right in thinking that, but unfortunately, it may be awhile before we can get any answers out of him," Drogo grumbled.

Stannard carefully approached the man. "What happened to him?"

"Dehydration and massive fatigue. The lad isn't injured that I've found yet, but he doesn't seem to have had anything to eat or drink for a day or two. And by the state of his feet, I'd say he's been running nonstop for quite some time." Elder Albreda lifted the sheets to reveal the scout's raw, bloody feet, and began quickly but thoroughly cleaning the wounds.

"I see," Helen responded. "Drogo, can you let us know as soon as he gets up?"

He nodded.

We turned to leave the tent, but a sharp gasp made us turn back around. The scout was struggling to sit up and was coughing dryly.

"How long have I been out?" he managed to ask.

"Calm down, soldier. One of the sentries said your name is Sayer, is that right?" Drogo slid his arm behind Sayer's back, supporting the scout.

"Yes, sir," he answered in a croaky, weak voice. The medical assistant handed him a small glass of water, which he downed in one gulp.

"Well, Sayer, it's been about ten minutes or so. What happened? Where's the rest of your team?" Drogo asked.

"Dead, sir. I'd stayed behind..." The scout hesitated. "I had a disagreement with my teammates so I stayed behind."

"Disagreement?"

"I felt terrible for letting them go deeper by themselves, so I trailed behind them almost immediately after they left," Sayer said, guilt practically etched on his forehead. "But they'd walked into an ambush of gnolls—far deadlier than the ones up here, sir."

Everyone in the tent was silent as we processed Sayer's words.

"There must've been hundreds of them, sir—and there was this huge door behind them, like they were protecting whatever was on the other side," he stammered. "I think we found it, sir. I think we found the mutant's den."

DRAWING CLOSER

STANNARD BERWICK

My stomach lurched at the scout's foreboding words.

This is it, I thought. This was what we were down here for. After this was over, I would be able to go back home—sleep in a real bed, eat a meal that had been properly cooked and seasoned for taste, not for sustenance. Yet why was I so afraid?

"But I did it, Leader." The scout let out another pained breath. "I managed to set up the mass-teleportation gate near the entrance, just like we'd been instructed."

"You did good, Sayer." Drogo squeezed the scout's arm, then headed out of the tent.

"Come on, we should prepare as well." The short-haired woman, Helen Shard, turned and walked out behind him.

Tessia nodded firmly in response, and motioned for me to follow. But I couldn't.

My legs felt like they were anchored to the ground, as if my very body was protesting against the fact that following them might just lead to my death.

"Stannard? You okay?" Tessia tilted her head, locking eyes with me as she lifted the tent flap.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I said it more to convince myself than anything else.

When we arrived back at our campsite, Tessia relayed the scout's news.

"Finally!" Darvus groaned in relief. "I can take a hot bath after all this is over."

"Can you at least try not to sound like a spoiled child?" Caria shook her head as she headed to her tent.

"What? Everyone's thinking it anyway, right?" Darvus turned to me. "Tell her, Stannard. You're just itching for a hot bath after this, right?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure," I replied blankly as I sat down, my mana launcher held weakly in my hands.

"Something wrong, Stan?" Darvus asked, raising a brow.

With an annoyed sigh, I replied, "No, I'm fine. I just want this to be over."

It was pointless to say anything. Darvus, Caria, and Tessia were all genius mages and combatants. They didn't need to feel fear in situations like these. They wouldn't understand.

"All right. Well, we'll head to our camp and prepare as well. Samantha and Adam have no clue what's going on, after all," the leader of the Twin Horns announced. The rest of her team trailed behind her as they left.

A few minutes after the Twin Horns had gone, Drogo's voice echoed through the large cavern, alerting everyone of the scout's message. Soon, the entire place was filled with a frenzy of movement as over a hundred soldiers scurried around to prepare themselves for the impending battle.

Beside me, Caria had already donned her battle gear, which consisted of light leather armor that covered her vitals without hindering her mobility. She lay sprawled out beside me, stretching her limber body in ways I would've thought impossible if I hadn't seen them for myself.

Sitting across from me by the fire, Darvus was juggling the smaller axes he used for throwing. The spoiled fourth son of the Clarell family had lost his normal relaxed expression, replaced by the calm and focused mask he wore during a serious battle.

I turned to Tessia, who was actually the youngest on our team—I was older by just a year—but the most composed. She had already equipped herself for battle. She wore a tight-fitting black leather wrap underneath a chainmail plate to protect her chest. An elegantly curved spaulder, decorated with an intricate design of flowing branches, rested on the shoulder of her dominant arm. Her vambraces were of the same design as the single shoulder plate armor and the faulds that protected her hips and thighs.

Tessia tied her hair back, revealing the cream-colored nape of her neck, and I had to avert my gaze. I could feel my face growing hot as the image of her elegant figure burned itself into my skull.

Get yourself together, Stannard. She's out of your league! Besides, she's in love with that Arthur guy. I shook my head as I tried to concentrate on counting the ammunition I had. We wouldn't be leaving for a few more hours, which gave me some time to load more beast cores with spells.

I had twenty-five low-damage rounds and eight loaded with high-damage spells. After some rough calculations, I concluded that about five more low-damage and two more high-damage rounds should suffice.

Looking up, I observed as the mages began preparing the connection between the teleportation gates so we would be able to arrive right where the scout had placed the artifact. As the shimmering portal enlarged, I felt my body growing heavier by the second.

I had done well for the three months we'd been here. However, this was the real thing. I had fought mana beasts before all this, but this would be my first time fighting against a mutant.

"Come on, Stannard. You should stretch too. It'll be bad if you cramp up in battle."

Caria's voice shook me out of my daze. Her bright eyes looked down at me from beside the fire as she held out her hand.

A smile managed to escape my lips as I accepted her hand. "Go easy on me." After about two hours, the gate was ready and teams were heading toward it, eager to be the first ones through. I gripped the handle of my mana launcher tightly to keep my hands from trembling.

- "Let's go," Tessia finally announced. A newfound fire burned in her eyes, determination practically oozing from her pores.
- "Aye, Captain," Darvus responded, a snarky grin on his face.

We approached the mass of people gathered in front of the teleportation gate, which was capable of transporting a few dozen at once.

- "Are you ready?" Helen Shard's voice chimed in from the left.
- "As ready as we'll ever be," Tessia responded, her eyes on the portal.
- "Vanguard teams, brace yourselves upon arrival. We're not certain how many mana beasts will be on the other side," Drogo yelled beside the portal. He had specifically chosen certain teams to lead the charge, clearing the way for the rest of us. It was dangerous going into the middle of an active battlefield through a teleporter; we didn't know what was on the other side, and those who'd gone through couldn't turn the rest around if things went bad.

"Charge!" Drogo roared, unsheathing this longsword and taking the lead. The crowd began dwindling as teams charged through the gate, weapons at the ready.

Tessia looked back at us over her shoulder. "We'll all get out of this alive and eat a nice, delicious meal after. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" we shouted in unison, then we stepped through the glowing gate.

I let out a crazed yell as I came through the gate, just in time to see an augmenter from one of the teams ahead of us being hacked down by a pair of hyena-faced gnolls.

"Grannith!" the woman beside him cried desperately, before the gnolls turned on her.

My weapon was loaded with a low-damage core, but Darvus had already sprung into action. With a powerful leap, he cleared the distance and landed between the gnolls, his two short axes whirling. The air around him swirled, coalescing into the axes, and both gnoll's heads were severed clean. Blood spurted from their necks a second later, but Darvus was already checking on

the conjurer.

"Damn it!" he swore, sending one of the decapitated bodies tumbling away with a firm kick. "She's dead."

"Keep together, and keep moving!" Tessia ordered as she looked around us.

It seemed like a fair-sized group of gnolls and orcs had been waiting for us; the teams that preceded us were all locked in battle with mana beasts.

The cavern we were in was about half the size of the main encampment. For a second, I thought we had arrived in front of the towering doors—where the scout had speculated the mutant was—but peering ahead, there was only a narrow entrance to a hallway darkened by shadows.

"Stannard, to your left!" Caria called from behind.

Immediately, I whirled around, taking a step back just in time to dodge the crude head of a halberd. Raising my mana launcher, I took aim at the orc's chest and fired, burning a hole into the center of the creature's heart.

The monster crumbled to the floor, dropping its weapon with a heavy thud, but I had no time to rest; another gnoll charged recklessly toward us.

"Got it," Caria called out, already in motion. She bolted forward, close to the ground, both fists tucked closely to her chest, ready to attack.

At the last instant she raised a small earthen platform to maximize her acceleration, and, with a yell, she exploded up at breakneck speed. Caria brought her arms over her head, her fingers pointed like the tip of a spear, as if she wanted to dive straight into the approaching gnoll, twice her size.

With a squelching thud, Caria's gauntlet pierced through the gnoll's stomach. The giant dog-faced monster faltered, its grotesque face crinkled in shock, and I delivered the final blow with another low-damage core between its eyes.

Caria landed deftly on her feet, not even losing her balance, then shook the blood off of her metal gauntlets before bolting off in another direction.

An agonized growl behind me caught my attention. Turning around, I caught a glimpse of Tessia taking down a pair of orcs and a large gnoll. She was a

flurry of blades as she zipped from beast to beast. Each step, each swing, had a purpose as she slashed and lunged at the gnolls as if in a choreographed dance.

I was amazed every time I saw her fight. I had always been jealous of Darvus and Caria for their innate talents in mana manipulation and fighting prowess, but Tessia's skill and grace were at a level I could only revere.

"It's about time you made yourself useful, right, Stannard?" Darvus called as he pried a hatchet from the skull of a dead orc.

"Shut it!" I retorted with a smile. "How about we start mobbing them up?" I took out a large beast core that radiated an orange-red glow.

"Conjurer cross-fire!" Darvus yelled out, a warning to the other soldiers who would be in range as he began herding a group of orcs.

The rest of the soldiers knew what to do. Some began backing out of the way, while others steered their opponents toward my line of fire.

A large conjurer approached me, giving me a nod as he raised his staff in preparation. A few more conjurers joined and we readied our attacks as our companions drove more and more of the orcs and gnolls toward the center of the dim cavern. The few strays who managed to break away from the group were quickly hacked down by the augmenters protecting us.

Taking a deep breath, I loaded the glowing beast core into my mana launcher. Steadying the tip of my weapon and aiming at the center of the mass of gnolls and orcs guarding their cavern, I waited for the signal.

A deep, baritone voice sounded from the edge of the group as a soldier hacked and pushed a stray gnoll into the cluster of beasts. "All clear!"

The conjurers positioned around me fired their most powerful spells at the mass, while I waited calmly for the right moment. As the last of their spells was fired toward the monsters, I launched my own—Hell's Prison.

The recoil from launching a sphere of fire three times my own size sent me tumbling back into the cavern wall. The burning orb swelled to three times its original size as it flew into the mob, and the blaze encompassed them and the spells that the conjurers had cast.

When the flaming sphere died away, it revealed the charred remains of the few dozen mana beasts that had been trapped within, and a wave of cheers went up from the rest of the soldiers. The few scattered mana beasts that remained were easily dealt with by the augmenters, giving me a few minutes to breathe.

"Good job, you odd little mage." Darvus winked at me as he helped me back to my feet. There had been twice as many mana beasts as soldiers, but by the end of the battle, we had incurred fewer than ten deaths.

"This was an overwhelming triumph, despite the surprise attack on us from the army of mana beasts." Drogo's firm, commanding voice echoed throughout the cavern. "We will continue forth—our comrades' deaths will not be in vain!"

A fervent cheer went up from the soldiers, including Darvus and Caria. Tess merely cleaned her blade and returned it to its sheath with a solemn face. Her turquoise eyes watched hollowly as an elf was carried out through the portal. She stared intently at the jagged spear protruding out of the lifeless elf's back.

I didn't know whether Tessia had known that elf, but I empathized with her. Was it truly a victory if, to some people, the weight of those ten deaths meant so much more than a simple number?

BEYOND THE DOOR

THE ATMOSPHERE in the cavern was tense and gloomy; this battle had caught us all by surprise. We were usually capable in battle, but these past few months of repetitive excursions, hoping without success to find any signs that a mutant might be close, had left us dull and sloppy.

A few teams had already regrouped and were taking a rest while the injured and deceased were sent back to be properly cared for. Some of the augmenters were restlessly sharpening their blades, while conjurers meditated to be in top shape for whatever lay ahead of us.

Our leader surveyed the battlegrounds like a zombie, until I finally called out for her to join us.

"What's wrong, Tessia? Are you okay?"

She turned to us and revealed a faint, and obviously forced, smile. "It's nothing. It's good that we won... but we still lost ten soldiers."

"Our ever-so-compassionate princess exuding kindness and grace to us peasants," Darvus cried. "We are not worthy!"

"Zip it," Tessia said, her voice softer than usual.

"We did our best, and we won," Caria said consolingly, gently patting her back.

"She's right, Tessia. We all know what's at risk every time we go into battle. It's impossible to save every soldier," I added. However, rather than comforting her, my words seemed to have the opposite effect, as her

expression dropped.

- "I guess you're right. I can't save them all," she repeated glumly.
- "Nice going," Darvus whispered beside me.
- "Hey! It was better than your stupid sarcastic remark," I hissed back.
- "At this rate, I'll only bring him down," Tessia continued, almost too quietly for us to hear.
- "By *him*, do you mean that guy you're always talking about? Arthur, was it?" Caria asked, leaning in.
- "Ugh, not *him* again," Darvus groaned. "Princess, when are you going to snap out of that delusion of yours? Besides, don't we have more important things to be doing?"

Tessia calmly shook her head. "It's not like that, and I—"

But Darvus continued, "You describe him as if he's some all-powerful, inhumanly charismatic hotshot without a single flaw."

"Oh please. You're just jealous because Arthur is everything you wish you could be, *plus* better-looking," Caria said accusingly. Then she turned back to Tessia, eyes twinkling. "Is he really that handsome and charming?"

"I think he is," Tessia said. "He was pretty popular in school, although I doubt he knew that."

"I'm hating the guy more and more," Darvus grumbled.

Tessia shook her head. "He isn't perfect, though. Honestly, Arthur was kind of scary when I first met him."

"You said he saved you from slave traders after you ran away from home, right?" Caria asked.

"Yeah." Tessia's face reddened at the embarrassing memory. "Though to be honest I felt like it wasn't really out of the goodness of his heart, but some logical scheme. Of course, I was only a child so I could have been wrong, but Arthur has always had this scary side where he seems cold sometimes—heartless, even."

"Ooh, a bad boy," Caria cooed.

"I'm going to barf," Darvus grumbled. "He doesn't seem like that great of a guy to me. I mean, he left you alone and in danger a few times, right? And he went off on his own after you got kidnapped when that Alacryan mage invaded Xyrus Academy. He didn't even make sure you were okay, just went off to who knows where."

"He checked in with Grandpa to make sure I was okay, but he was in a hurry," Tessia said, lowering her head.

"Oh right, to go 'train' somewhere in secret." Darvus rolled his eyes. "If you ask me, he just ran away from the war because he was afraid he would die."

I expected Tessia to be mad, but she seemed calm when she answered. "You're wrong, Darvus. Arthur may be a bit clueless when it comes to expressing his emotions, and a bit naive in some other areas"—Tessia blushed slightly—"but he's not one to run away in fear. His desire to protect his loved ones is too strong for that."

"Yes, yes. Arthur will be the hero who saves us from the wrath of the Alacryans." Darvus threw his hands up, surrendering in the face of Tessia's determined gaze.

"He can't be *that* strong though, right?" I asked. Over the last few months, I had grown more and more curious about this boy Tessia cherished to such a degree. Despite our current situation, I wanted to hear more about him.

She smiled as she gazed off into the distance. "He's strong."

"Well, I can't wait to meet him," Caria said. "You will introduce us, right?"

"Yeah." Tessia's smile dimmed. "Hopefully soon."

Darvus shook his head. "Blech. Count me out. I feel like I already know way too much about the guy. Besides, you've been fighting alongside me for so long I bet he'll seem like some second-rate mage when you see him again."

"Is there a limit to how pretentious you can be?" Caria shook her head, and I chuckled.

The rest of the teams had gotten reorganized, so we got up. Drogo did a headcount for the team leaders, then we departed through the dark corridor on

the far end of the cavern.

The teams began marching into the narrow hallway, swallowed up by the shadows one after the other. Finally our team went in. The atmosphere changed drastically once we stepped into the passageway. The air was dry, still, and somewhat sour, and the only sound echoing along these walls was the sound of footsteps.

I was barely able to discern the figures of the soldiers ahead of us, a tiny light bobbing in the distance. I looked back in confusion; the light from the cavern we had just left seemed to retract from the hallway.

"This is some spooky crap," Darvus's hushed voice echoed from behind me.

"Tell me about it," I said. Some conjurers ahead of us tried to illuminate the hallway with a spell, but its light was soon eaten away by the darkness.

"It looks like only the illuminating artifact up in the front works in this place," Caria said from my side.

Everyone walked in silence or spoke in hushed whispers, paying careful attention to our footing and the bobbing orb of light guiding our way.

After what felt like hours of marching, another speck of light came into view. The orange light from the illuminating artifact stopped moving as the conjurers came to a halt, and Drogo called for our attention.

He spoke in a low voice, perhaps afraid the mana beast would pick up on our conversation despite the distance. "We'll soon reach the point where our scout Sayer and his team were ambushed by mana beasts. Based on his report, we should expect at least a few hundred gnolls and orcs, some larger than the ones we've faced up until now. Prepare yourselves, and may the ones watching over us be with you."

We broke into a steady jog, the white light growing larger as we advanced through the dark corridor. Fortunately the path was smooth; if anyone in the front tripped, it would undoubtedly create a domino reaction.

The speed of the bobbing orange light ahead of us grew faster as we picked up the pace until, finally, the illuminating light was almost upon us.

My eyes needed a moment to adjust as I stepped out of the dark corridor and into the cavern. I brandished my mana launcher, ready to blow apart anything that came my way.

However, my battle-readiness was unneeded. There was nothing in the cavern but an eerie stillness and the orc and gnoll bodies lying sprawled on the ground.

They had been massacred by the hundreds. I had to watch my step to avoid accidentally stepping on a severed limb or dead body as I moved farther into the cavern, trying to deduce what had happened here.

I looked around, somewhat comforted by the fact that everyone else seemed just as confused as I was.

"What in the world?" Drogo's head swiveled as he scoured the cavern, his hands gripping his longsword.

"I'm not sure whether to be relieved or scared," Darvus said, looking around suspiciously.

Drogo snapped out of his daze. "To the door!"

All heads turned to face the towering doors at the other end of the circular cavern. The metal that covered them was thick and covered with dents and scratches, making them seem ancient and threatening.

As we headed toward what we presumed was the den of the mutant, the tension began to rise. No one spoke as we took our positions in a semicircle around the enormous doors. There were a hundred or so of us, all braced to attack or defend, and ten augmenters positioned themselves to haul the entrance open.

"The door," one of the men said. "It's not fully closed."

We all looked around at one another, uneasy, but Drogo snapped everyone to attention with a firm stomp.

"Open it!" he ordered, bracing for combat with whatever lay in wait on the other side.

The harsh screech of the metal doors grating against the stone floor echoed

until they had been completely pried apart.

For a brief moment, not a single word was spoken. The entire band of soldiers, ready to fight for their lives, stood frozen, jaws slack.

A hill of corpses loomed high above us, and a lone man sat atop it. His arms rested on the hilt of a thin, teal sword. It shone dimly beneath a coating of blood, apparently from the body of the orc the sword was embedded in. Scattered around the foot of this mountain of carcasses were more bodies—orcs and gnolls—some frozen, some burned, others simply bisected.

At first glance, the pile of corpses seemed to blend into indiscernible remains of mana beasts, but as I looked closer, I saw a figure near the top which stood out against the others. With the head of a giant lion and a monstrous gray-scaled body, it lay sprawled in a bloodied mess. It was lifeless, and the unnaturally black horns sprouting from its head had been shattered.

There was no doubt about it. That was the S-class mutant we had ventured all this way for, that we had laid down our lives for—but it was already dead.

I focused my gaze on the man, sitting tiredly atop a throne of corpses, and he finally lifted his head.

He wasn't even staring directly at me, yet I could feel the pressure of his domineering presence weighing down on my very soul. Every fiber in my body screamed at me to run away, to get as far as possible from this man. My sense of fear grew as his azure eyes gleamed balefully from above.

This wasn't anything like the diminutive fear I had felt back at the tent; no, this was true dread.

I knew—most likely everyone in here knew—that advantage in numbers didn't apply to someone like him.

From my side, I spotted a figure stepping forward. I almost lashed out, fearing for the person's life—then I realized it was Tessia. The dread that had overcome me grew even stronger as I stood helplessly, frozen in the unbreakable shackles of terror, and watched Tessia take another step forward. Time itself seemed to slow as our leader dropped the thin blade in her hand.

A single tear rolled down Tessia's cheek as her face contorted with emotion. Then she uttered a single word that left me more overwhelmed than the man sitting on top of the mountain of corpses. "Art?"

HIS RETURN

Tessia took another step forward, less hesitant this time. "Arthur? Is that you?" she asked again, her voice seeming to catch in her throat.

Everyone there—each of the soldiers, augmenters, and conjurers alike—turned to watch our leader as she approached the man sitting atop the hill of corpses.

Then the silence that had filled the cavern was broken by a bright chirp. As if out of nowhere, a streak of white shot toward Tessia and landed in her arms. It looked like some sort of miniature white fox.

"Sylvie!" Tessia exclaimed, embracing the creature before looking back up at the figure on the hill of bodies.

"You! State your name!" Drogo's usually confident voice wavered at the sight before us.

The blue-eyed man regarded him in silence for a moment and Drogo took a step back. Finally he answered: "Arthur Leywin."

Prying his bloodied sword out of the corpse it was embedded in, he leapt deftly down to the stone floor, coming to a stop in front of the large doorway. He stepped out of the shadow, and I could finally make out his features,

which had been shrouded in darkness.

He appeared young despite the aura that emanated from him. Tousled, shoulder-length auburn hair contrasted with his bright eyes, which seemed composed—casual, almost—even in this situation. The splatters of blood and

grime that darkened his face and clothes did nothing to diminish his looks.

He wasn't glamorous. Nothing like the noblemen I'd seen, who carried themselves with chests puffed out and noses pointed so high up that they might as well have been looking at the sky. No, behind his nonchalant gaze and slightly curled lips was an air of sovereignty that transcended any of those peacock nobles fluttering their power like colorful plumage.

Sheathing his teal sword in an unadorned black scabbard, he took a step toward us with his hands upraised. "I'm on your side," he said wearily.

The soldiers all exchanged uncertain glances as Tessia took another step forward. Then several members of the Twin Horns ran up with cries of, "Arthur?"

Tessia, however, remained where she was. Tessia and Arthur stared at each other for a brief moment, and I thought I even saw him give a faint smile, but neither of them approached the other.

Tessia's behavior had caught me off guard, but the Twin Horns' actions seemed to dissipate the tension and suspicion that had filled the cavern. At the same time, it raised more questions in my head.

Assuming this really was *the* Arthur Leywin Tessia had told us so much about, what was he doing here? How did he get here? Had he killed the Sclass mutant by himself?

I turned to look at Darvus. By his furrowed brows and perplexed gaze, it seemed he was curious about the same things. Caria, on the other hand, had a goofy smile plastered to her face as she stared at the man surrounded by the Twin Horns—apparently ignoring the fact that there was a giant pile of bloody and stinking corpses just behind them.

"While I hate to interrupt your reunion, there are more pressing matters at hand," Drogo said loudly. "What exactly happened here? I was not informed that anyone would be joining us in this operation."

"I'm sure no one was informed, since I arrived less than an hour ago," Arthur replied, stepping away from the crowd of friends that had surrounded him. "I

hadn't really expected to land in the middle of a massive swarm of mana beasts, but I guess it's a good thing I did."

"Are you saying you single-handedly killed all of those mana beasts behind you—including an S-class mutant?" a soldier stammered.

"Do you see anyone else in there?" Arthur tilted his head.

"That's impossible!" another soldier yelled. "How can a mere boy do, by himself, what a whole battalion of mages set out to do?"

Arthur simply raised a brow, seeming unaffected. "It really doesn't matter whether you believe me or not. The fact is, the mutant you were ordered to kill is now dead."

More soldiers began shouting questions and accusations, but the mysterious man ignored them all. He extended a hand to Drogo and said, "You seem to be the leader of this expedition. Do you mind letting me stay at your camp tonight? I'm rather spent and would like a decent night's rest before heading out."

Drogo seemed dumbfounded, but he just accepted the handshake and nodded wordlessly.

"What about all the beast cores?" a bearded conjurer asked, pointing at the mountain of mana beasts.

Once again, everyone exchanged glances in the hopes of somehow finding answers. Usually, beast cores were collected after a battle and divided amongst the soldiers. Looking at the sheer number of corpses stacked up into that hill, even the most unambitious man would drool at the potential to be gained.

"They're all gone," Arthur answered quietly. "Sorry, but my bond has quite a large appetite for beast cores." He pointed to the furry white fox cleaning itself at Tessia's feet.

"Are you saying *that* little thing just devoured hundreds of beast cores?" a burly augmenter asked in disbelief as his hand gripped tightly at the handle of his sword.

- "Yes," Arthur responded matter-of-factly.
- "What about the S-class mutant's beast core? What happened to that?" Drogo asked, regaining his composure.
- "I have it." Arthur let out a sigh. "Any more questions? I'll be happy to debrief later, but standing around answering everyone's questions isn't exactly the best use of our time."
- "We'll escort him back to base, Leader," Tessia said, and the members of the Twin Horns all nodded in agreement.
- "Very well. For now, I want a few teams to stay behind to look for any stragglers and collect anything worth selling. The rest of us will go back to camp and wait for further instructions," Drogo ordered, placating the dissatisfied soldiers.

The trip back to the main camp was almost as tense and stifling as the trip down had been. Caria, Darvus, and I all stayed silent, but the sour mood of almost every soldier present weighed down on our shoulders. Even Tessia and the Twin Horns kept their conversations with Arthur down to hushed, indiscernible whispers.

Behind me, I could hear the soldiers talking to each other. Some were glad there had been no battle, others disappointed at the fact that they would leave with no beast cores or other bounties; a few were downright angry that they hadn't been able to battle a strong mana beast. However, despite the mixed feelings everyone had regarding Arthur's appearance, we all shared one emotion: fear.

Upon arriving back at the main camp, Arthur headed straight for the bathing stalls by the stream, while Tessia and the Twin Horns followed Drogo into his personal tent.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Darvus sighed as he slumped down next to the smoldering remains of our campfire.

"I'd say it was pretty eventful," Caria countered. "Did you see that pile of mana beasts? And that giant mutant? Even with all of us combined, I doubt

we'd have come out unscathed from a fight like that."

"Exactly!" Darvus exclaimed. "That guy, Arthur—how the hell was he able to kill them all... if he really did kill them in the first place?"

I shook my head. "What, you think the guy was sitting there, posing, waiting for us to show up so he could take the credit?"

"Well, I'm not sure about that, but I mean... it's not natural. Tessia said he was around her age, which means he's a bit younger than us. What kind of fiery pit did he have to grow up in to become a monster like that?" Darvus gave a sigh, looking down at the pair of axes he had been fumbling with. "If he really was able to singlehandedly kill all those mana beasts, along with an S-class mutant, what are guys like us needed for?"

"Do I smell a hint of jealousy?" Caria smirked, lightly prodding Darvus with her elbow.

"You mean envy, Caria," I corrected on impulse.

She turned to me. "What's the difference?"

"Jealousy is what you feel when you worry someone will take something you possess. Envy is longing after something someone else has." I shook my head. "You know what? Never mind; it's not important."

Caria just shrugged and placed a hand on her childhood friend's shoulder. "Anyway, he's just one person, Darvus. No matter how strong he is, it's not like he can win the war by himself. You saw the state he was in. He wasn't really hurt, but he seemed pretty worn out."

Darvus rolled his eyes. "Thanks. At *least* he was tired after single-handedly wiping out an army of mana beasts and an S-class mutant."

"No need to get snarky with me, Darvus. I'm just trying to help," Caria snapped, her cheeks turning red.

"Well, don't! I don't need your pity. Besides, that guy isn't natural. No point in comparing myself to a freak of nature like him."

"I don't know, he seems pretty normal to me," I chimed in. "Putting his strength aside, he seemed like a decent person while he was talking to the

Twin Horns."

"Yeah, I even spotted a smile when he saw Tessia," Caria added, smirking. "Although I was expecting something more, like a passionate hug or something."

"Please, you saw the way he talked to everyone. He was a snobby jerk," Darvus said, shaking his head.

"Well, everyone was kind of a jerk to him," I countered. I didn't know why I was defending Arthur, but sometimes Darvus really rubbed me the wrong way. Whenever a situation didn't go his way, he always pointed fingers and made assumptions to feel better about himself.

Darvus's eyes narrowed. "Why are you taking his side?"

"I'm not technically taking his side." I shook my head. "I just think it's naive to form impressions of the guy without even holding a conversation with him. You've heard how Tessia always talks about him. Don't you think we should give him the benefit of the doubt?"

"Tessia's mind is probably clouded by her childhood memories," Darvus scoffed. "You saw the tension between them. Hey, maybe you finally have a shot with her."

I couldn't take it anymore. "Are you *that* petty? You sound like a child, bringing me into this. You're drawing conclusions about Arthur based on what, exactly?"

"Boys, let's not fight," Caria said, her eyes shifting from me to Darvus.

"I'm basing it off my instinct, *twerp*!" Darvus hissed, standing up. "Maybe that's something you can't do because of your deformed mana core."

I could feel the blood rushing to my head at the insult. "Well, at least I don't need to convince myself and everyone else that someone better than me must be a monster just so I can keep my worthless pride intact!" I spat.

Darvus's face turned red too, and he shook with rage. He threw the hatchet he had been white-knuckling down to the ground, then whipped around, stomped to our tent, and slipped inside.

"Stannard..." Caria came over to me after watching her best friend go. "You know he didn't mean that, right? You know how he gets when he's all riled up."

With a sigh, I mustered up a faint smile for her. "I'm fine. It's not like it's the first time we've had one of these fights. I don't but heads with him as often as Tessia does, but that's mainly because I just hold it in. But sometimes I can't endure it and I explode."

"You're right, though," Caria replied after a moment of silence. "Darvus is much better than he was back then, but being born into nobility, he was handed everything: wealth, resources, attention—even talent."

"A whole lot of good that does him if he's still an ass." I rolled my eyes. "Look, Caria, I'm not mad at you, I'm not even mad at what Darvus said. I'm just tired of his narcissism—that ego that pops up no matter how much you try to shove it down."

Caria giggled. "Tell me about it. I've known him more than twelve years, and I bet a rabid mana beast could mature faster than Darvus. But he's gotten a lot better since he met you and Tessia. That's a fact."

"Yeah, I know." I nodded, already thinking of a way to break the ice with my egocentric teammate.

Caria and I stoked the fire until it was blazing again and sat around it for a while longer, just talking. We stood up when we noticed two shadowy figures approaching the campsite.

"Hey guys," Tessia's voice rang out. As the shapes drew closer, I could make out her form, and the man next to her.

"I'd like you to meet my childhood friend, Arthur," she said once they reached us, putting a hand on his arm. As I approached them, I noticed that her eyes were a bit red.

His hair still damp from his bath, Arthur dipped his head. "Stannard Berwick and Caria Rede, right? Nice to meet you, and thank you for taking care of my friend. I know she can be quite a handful."

This got a giggle from Caria, and Tessia jabbed an elbow into his ribs. Seeing the two of them like this made me question the feeling I'd had when I had first seen Arthur. Without the blood covering most of his face, it was safe to say Arthur was indeed the enemy of all single men. His features were sharp, but not overly so, with a subtle charm that went beyond just the textbook standard of 'handsome.' His reddish-brown hair was long, as if he hadn't gotten a proper trim in years, but it only served to highlight the untamed, wild quality he had about him.

He was a head taller than Tessia, which made him quite tall for his age—our leader was just a few inches shorter than Darvus. Though he wore a loose-fitting robe, I could tell that his physique was that of a fighter. The way Arthur carried himself, the way he walked, and the way his eyes seemed to take in everything around him confirmed that the aura he exuded wasn't just my imagination.

As Tessia and Arthur prepared to take a seat around our fire, Darvus stormed out of his tent. When he passed by me, he shot me the embarrassed look he always wore when he was about to apologize, but I stopped him with a hand. With a smirk, I mouthed, "It's fine, twerp."

Darvus rubbed the back of his neck as he flashed me a wry smile, but then his gaze hardened as he faced Arthur.

Tessia, Caria, and I all looked at him, wondering what he might say.

Then Darvus lifted a finger and said loudly, "Arthur Leywin. I, Darvus Clarell, fourth son of Clarell House, formally challenge you to a duel!"

A WARRIOR'S MAIDEN HEART

TESSIA ERALITH

The image of Arthur on top of that mountain of corpses, drenched in blood, looking down at us with a cold glare, had been burned into my head for hours now. I had recognized him almost immediately, but my voice had stuck in my throat. I couldn't call out to him; I was scared to.

Even after I'd gathered the courage to finally say his name, he stayed silent. Fear—a worry that something had changed in him during his training—immediately filled my mind as he faced us. I was delighted when Sylvie popped out, but I couldn't get rid of the unease in my chest, even when Arthur finally spoke.

The sight of him stepping into the light made my heart feel like it had twisted into a knot. He was filthy and his exhaustion was clear in his eyes, but it really was Arthur. I wanted to embrace him right there, just as the Twin Horns were doing, but something held me back. Looking at my childhood friend, I sensed a clear distance that went beyond the few yards that separated us. And so I stood still, anchored, and just gave him a hesitant smile, one that didn't even reach my eyes.

He smiled back, but it was only for a moment. Then the soldiers began questioning him.

Throughout the trip back to the main camp, Arthur stayed relatively silent while the Twin Horns chattered around us. They were all excited to have him

back, despite the obvious discontent of the soldiers. Arthur smiled when spoken to and responded, but his replies were brief, and he didn't initiate any conversations.

As soon as we arrived at the camp, he spotted the stream and went to wash up with Sylvie. I went straight to the main tent with Drogo and the Twin Horns, hoping to dispel the tension our leader, and the rest of the soldiers, felt toward Arthur.

He came to the main tent after he had washed up, but even without the blood and filth covering him, he was just as unapproachable. He debriefed only what was necessary, otherwise stating that he would report directly to my grandfather. I stayed silent throughout the short meeting, while Drogo and the Twin Horns bombarded him with questions.

Drogo left first, to inform the rest of the soldiers of their next course of action. The Twin Horns reluctantly agreed to let Arthur rest only after being promised a more detailed account of the battle later. Then Arthur and I were the only ones left in the tent.

I remained tense, staring at my feet and feeling Arthur's gaze boring into me. I didn't know what to say, how to act, or even how to feel. I was at a loss—Arthur had suddenly appeared in front of me after more than two years, and he was acting so... distant. Whatever confidence I might have had went out the window as I considered my pitiful state. Here I was, dressed like a man, layered from head to toe with grime and soot. Worst of all, my hair was a bird's nest and I smelled like week-old garbage. How could I approach my—How could I approach Arthur in this state?

He walked over to me, each of his footfalls making my heart beat just a little bit faster—but I refused to look up. As he came closer, I could smell the faint aroma of herbs clinging to him. *Don't come closer*, I prayed. Surely he'd be repulsed by my stench.

His feet stopped just in front of mine but my eyes stayed glued to the ground, and I squirmed awkwardly. For a moment, we were both silent. The only

sound I could hear was the beating of my uncooperative heart.

"It's been a while, Tess," Arthur finally said. "I missed you."

At those few words, the ice that had stiffened my body melted. My vision became blurry, but still I refused to look at anything but my feet. I clenched my fists to keep myself from shaking. Then my eyes betrayed me, and I saw the teardrops darkening the leather of my boots.

Art's warm hand gently touched my arm, and part of me marveled at how large it was. I had known him since he was shorter than me, but now, the simple touch of his palm filled me with a sense of safety. I felt... protected.

I tried my hardest to stay firm, but I found myself sniffling uncontrollably as my body began quivering.

I didn't exactly know what it was that had reduced me to such a state. Maybe it was finally seeing my childhood friend again. Maybe it was that his words had confirmed that he was still truly himself, not the cold killer I'd thought he had turned into when I first saw him. Or it might not have had anything to do with that at all; I couldn't truthfully explain why every barrier I had unconsciously raised to help me endure these last two years had just come crumbling down. All I felt was a wave of relief that everything was okay now, that I didn't have to worry anymore. It suddenly felt like everything Grandpa, Master Aldir, and all the rest had been worrying about would all be okay, now that Art was here.

It was funny how a person could do that—how one person could make you feel truly safe.

"Art... you... idiot!" I choked out between sniffles. I raised my fists to hit him, but by the time they reached his chest, there was no strength behind them.

I must've shouted every profanity I knew at him, yelling at him for just about everything: his cold attitude; his tastelessly long hair, which made him look scary; his lack of contact until now; on and on, down to how my current state of mind was his fault.

And Art just stood there, silently taking it all as his large hand continued to warm my arm.

I was angry, I was frustrated, I was embarrassed—but I was relieved. The barrage of emotions turned me into a puddle of tears as I continued assaulting Art—mostly because I hated myself for how I was acting in that moment.

I cried until I was exhausted, then rested my head against his chest, staring down at his feet—which were also spotted with my tears—and subsiding into hiccups and sniffles.

Finally, when we had both been quiet for a minute, I worked up the courage to look at his face, only to see him staring right back at me.

I was about to turn away to hide my face, but his smile stopped me. It wasn't like the smile he had given me when we'd seen each other at the entrance to the mutant's lair. His eyes crinkled into two crescent moons and his lips parted ever so slightly.

"You're still a crybaby, aren't you?" he joked, removing his hand from my arm to wipe away a stray tear that clung to my cheek.

"Shuddup," I replied hoarsely.

With a soft chuckle, he motioned with his head for me to follow him. "Come on. Your friends must be waiting."

I gave him a nod and picked up Sylvie, who had been rubbing against my leg and humming softly, almost like the purr of a cat. As we walked, my gaze constantly shifted between the sleeping Sylvie to Art.

"You got taller," I said.

"Sorry I can't say the same for you," Art teased with a faint, weary smile.

I stuck out my tongue. "I'm tall enough."

I spotted Caria and Stannard talking around our fire, and we picked up our pace while I tried my best to hide any signs that I had been crying. After I introduced Art, we were situating ourselves around the fire when Darvus suddenly came stomping out with a determined expression.

"Arthur Leywin. I, Darvus Clarell, fourth son of Clarell House, formally

challenge you to a duel!" he announced. There was no particular anger or spite in his face; he simply looked resolute.

"What?" we all exclaimed in unison—everyone except Art.

My gaze immediately turned to him to see how he would react. Given that he was physically and mentally drained from the past few hours, I didn't know how he would respond to such a confrontation. However, to my relief, I spotted an amused expression on my friend's face.

"Nice to meet you, Darvus Clarell, fourth son of Clarell House. May I ask the reason for this duel?" Art replied without getting up.

Caria had already jumped up and was holding Darvus by the arm. "Don't mind him, Mr. Leywin—"

"Please, just call me Arthur."

"—Arthur," she amended. "He's just being foolish."

"I'm fine, Caria. I'm not mad or anything." Darvus shook her away before facing Art again. It was weird to see Darvus speaking to Art in such a formal and respectful manner, since Arthur was a few years younger than him.

"As for my reason..." Darvus paused, then said, "With all excuses aside—a man's pride."

I was utterly baffled by his response, and judging by the stunned expressions on Caria's and Stannard's faces, so were they.

However, Art covered his mouth to stifle a laugh. His shoulders shook as he tried to hold it back, but he finally broke out into a guffaw.

We looked at each other with expressions of even greater confusion; even Darvus looked bewildered. Soldiers, drawn in by Art's uncontained laughter, gathered around our fire, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend," Art finally said, choking back his laughter. "It's just that, after spending what felt like a lifetime with those old coots, what you said was quite refreshing."

"Thank you?" Darvus replied, trying to decide whether to be offended or pleased at Art's remark.

"Anyway, sure—as long as lives aren't at stake, I'm fine with a duel," Art said with a contented smile, getting up from the stump he was sitting on.

The two men began making their way toward the southern wall of the cavern, the group of curious soldiers eagerly following behind them.

"Do you know what this is about?" I asked Caria as the three of us trailed along behind them.

My petite teammate sighed and shook her head. "I think he's feeling insecure because Arthur is younger than him, but supposedly stronger."

"He's pretty bitter that Arthur is better-looking than him, too," Stannard added.

"What? So that's what he meant by a 'man's pride'?" I blurted, dumbstruck.

"Yeah, I know." Caria nodded. "He's hit a new low. I wonder if all men are like that?"

We turned to Stannard, who looked back at us with a raised brow, clearly unamused. "On behalf of men, allow me to say that we aren't *all* like that."

"Maybe not all, but it has to be a majority, right?" Caria asked, making me giggle.

Stannard nodded and let out a defeated sigh. "Probably."

We got to the makeshift dueling grounds just in time to see them begin. It seemed the entire camp had stopped what they were doing to watch the two go at it. I could understand the soldiers being curious about Art's strength since we had only seen the aftermath of his fight, but I hadn't expected to see Drogo at the front, eagerly waiting next to the Twin Horns. Their leader, the usually impartial Helen, was enthusiastically rooting for Art along with the rest of her party. Soldiers from our expedition, who had all seen Darvus in action and knew of his prowess, cheered for him with whistles and hoots.

Beside me, Caria groaned. "Who am I supposed to root for?"

"Shouldn't it obviously be your childhood crush?" I teased, snickering at the sight of Darvus receiving the cheers with his chest puffed out pompously. Sylvie, who had fallen asleep in my arms, stirred at the noise from the crowd,

taking a quick peek before deciding that her sleep was more important.

"We don't always have to side with our friends," Caria replied, shaking her head at Darvus's unseemly attitude.

"You kind of do, Caria," Stannard snorted, then turned his gaze toward Sylvie. "I didn't want to ask before but it's been on my mind—what sort of mana beast is Arthur's bond, anyway?"

"You wouldn't believe me even if I told you," I said with a grin, focusing on the duel.

Art stood leisurely, his left hand leaning on the pommel of his sword, as Darvus began juggling his axes, putting on a show for the crowd.

"Just before you came, Tess, he was in such a sour mood. Now look at him. God, I swear, he has the emotional stability of a four-year-old," Caria grumbled.

"Probably not even that," I chuckled, remembering how mature Art had been at that age.

One of the soldiers, a seasoned augmenter, volunteered himself to be the referee. He stood between Darvus and Art with an upraised hand.

"I'm sure the consensus is that we'd like to keep this cavern in one piece, so I want you both to keep mana usage strictly to body augmentations. Is that clear?" the soldier asked, glancing at Drogo for confirmation.

Drogo nodded in approval. When Darvus and Art both nodded their consent, the soldier said, "First to yield or otherwise be incapacitated loses. Begin!" and swung down his hand.

AS QUICKLY AS HE HAD APPEARED

STANNARD BERWICK

At the referee's signal, the match began.

All traces of Darvus's pomposity disappeared as he carefully circled around Arthur. Tessia's childhood friend didn't change his position, and Darvus side-stepped around him, warily looking for an opening.

Darvus held two axes, nearly identical to each other—they differed only in color. These two weapons were precious Clarell family heirlooms and had been passed down, generation after generation, to the strongest practitioner of their particular style of axe-wielding. They looked more like misshapen swords, with the blades affixed right above the handle, not near the top. The flats of the blades were etched with strange markings that didn't match the simple, unadorned handles of the weapons.

I knew Darvus was serious just from the fact that he had taken these weapons out. I'd only seen this pair of axes once, and that was only because Caria had begged him to show us.

Darvus continued to slowly circle Arthur, always keeping a steady position, never crossing over his legs in between steps. Arthur, on the other hand, stood completely still even as Darvus inched behind him.

Sweat beaded down the sides of Darvus's face as he stopped directly behind Arthur, facing his exposed back. The crowd seemed to be holding its collective breath; the only sound inside the cavern was the faint rushing of water from the stream. Everyone stared anxiously at the two contestants. Despite his advantageous position, no one questioned the reason for Darvus's hesitation.

After another slow sidestep, Darvus lowered his stance and launched himself at Arthur's back. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the scene as Darvus closed the five-yard gap in just two quick steps.

Darvus was holding both his axes to his right in preparation for what looked like an upward swipe, but just as he was about to reach his target, he abruptly changed course. Veering away from the seemingly still Arthur, Darvus retreated to his original position. His forehead was drenched in sweat and his chest heaved.

"What was that, Darvus?" a soldier cried out.

"Stop being a wimp!" another voice shouted.

Tessia, Caria, and I exchanged glances, unsure what was going on with Darvus. It had been barely a minute since this duel had started, yet he seemed to be in worse shape than I had seen him after being locked in a battle for several hours. It should have been impossible for Darvus to become fatigued so quickly—but that wasn't the only thing that concerned me.

I'd been with Darvus as he mercilessly hacked away at A-class mana beasts with cruel efficiency. I'd see him beat down adventurers in his own class but twice his size with a contented smile on his face. Now, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Even from here, I could make out the distinct markers of an emotion I had thought the battle-hungry Darvus lacked: fear.

After some discontented shouts from a few more soldiers, Darvus snapped at the crowd, telling them to shut up.

Taking a deep breath, he lowered his center of gravity. There was renewed fervor in his eyes as he stared fixedly at Arthur—who may as well have been a statue at this point.

The edges of both axes glowed amber as Darvus lowered them so that the tips were touching the ground. He stomped his right foot as if he were about to

leap toward his opponent, but he stayed rooted to the spot, swiping both axes upward in a cross. A trail of sand rose into the air behind his blades before shooting out in a cross-shaped attack, speeding toward Arthur.

It was a remarkably effective spell—while normal grains of sand didn't strike fear into my heart, at such breakneck speeds they could put dozens of small holes in unsuspecting opponents.

The earthen barrage reached its target almost instantly, but rather than poke holes or even graze his skin, the fine grains bounced off of Arthur harmlessly, as if a toddler had thrown sand at him.

At first, I thought Darvus had failed to properly cast the spell. Then the remainder of the spray of grains, the sand that hadn't landed harmlessly on Arthur, dug into the cavern wall behind him with an explosion of consecutive crashes. Luckily, the spray hadn't hit any of the spectators near it, because the area where Darvus's spell had struck was now a crumbled layer of cavern wall.

Everyone's gaze shifted back and forth in shock from Arthur—who had taken the brunt of the attack with no harm—to the wall, where a small cloud of dust had formed from the sheer force of the impact. The entire cavern was frozen in a silent display of surprise and awe—everyone except for Darvus. He had a resigned grimace on his face, as if he had known that something like that would happen.

Arthur, on the other hand, finally turned around to face his opponent. He casually dusted off his sleeve where Darvus's spell had bounced off of him—not even his clothes were damaged.

With an annoyed click of his tongue, Darvus leapt back, digging his axes into the ground for another attempt to lash his opponent with sand. However, as Darvus swung his priceless weapons, Arthur raised a hand.

Suddenly, the trail of grains that were trailing behind my teammate's blades all fell to the ground instead of fully manifesting into a spell. Darvus's eyes widened and I knew that somehow, Arthur had invalidated his spell—or

maybe even kept it from ever forming.

Darvus's frustration was clear as he bit down hard on his lower lip, his eyebrows furrowed into a scowl. He continued to try and conjure his spells, but from here, it looked like he was flailing his axes at a ghost in front of him.

"Damn it!" Darvus finally howled, locking gazes with Arthur, whose lips curled up just a tad at the corners. My wild-haired friend finally gave up on the attempt to attack from afar and moved in. He closed the gap and swiped savagely at the bare-handed Arthur. His glowing axes left streaks of mana behind them, but his opponent easily parried them with the back of his hand.

Darvus struck again—simultaneously swinging both axes this time, hoping to catch his opponent off guard, but Arthur merely shifted the angle of his stance so that both attacks missed by a hair's breadth.

My teammate kept his composure. He mixed it up, feinting to his left before veering, his other axe rising to quick-strike from the right. Arthur dodged the attack beautifully, maintaining a steady balance as his body dipped and weaved into a rhythmic trance.

Darvus's flurry of attacks, mixed with off-timed kicks and elbows, was relentless. The crowd—myself included—silently gawked at the spectacle: one attacking with monstrous speed and control, the other dodging or parrying everything perfectly without even damaging his loose clothing.

My attention had been tightly focused on the two fighters for the entirety of the duel, so when Darvus suddenly dropped his axes and fell to his knees, I couldn't make sense of it. It looked like my stubborn and prideful friend had simply given up, but I could tell by his wide-eyed, stupefied gaze that it wasn't so simple.

Still on his knees, Darvus struggled to raise his left shoulder, as if to swing his arm, but the arm remained limp, dangling at his side. Then he tried to get up, but his legs merely trembled, then gave out, and he fell to his back.

The crowd murmured to one another, exchanging raised brows and looks of

confusion.

"What's going on? Why can't I move?" Darvus stammered, still sprawled on his back.

"You'll be fine, boy," a husky voice called out reassuringly. "Right, Arthur?" The voice that came from behind us was filled with power, and Darvus immediately fell silent while the rest of us whipped around toward its source. I let out a frightened gasp before immediately dropping to one knee.

Drogo's voice, laced with surprise and apprehension, rang out from the crowd. "We salute you, Commander Virion."

I kept my gaze locked to the ground, not daring to look up until I had permission.

That was just the kind of figure he was to all of us.

I had read about Virion Eralith in textbooks and documentaries from the time of the old war between humans and elves. He had been king at the time, and from what I'd read, an exceptional one. It was through his leadership and cunning that the human army, despite having the advantage in numbers, was ultimately forced to retreat. It was no wonder the Council, which comprised the current kings and queens of their respective nations, had turned to Commander Virion for guidance in this war.

I'd had the honor of meeting him once, when I was first chosen to be placed in the same team as his granddaughter. At that time, I had imagined she would be a spoiled, ill-mannered girl who wanted to chase after some lunatic fairy tale. But I was wrong. She was stronger, more mature, and more dedicated to the war than I would ever be. If this was the girl he had raised, I could only imagine what kind of person Commander Virion must be.

We all remained where we were, genuflecting, but I kept my ears open and heard two pairs of footsteps approached.

"He's right," I heard Arthur say from behind me. "You'll be back to normal soon."

I'd gotten a brief glance but didn't recognize the peculiar-looking man beside

Commander Virion. Most of his face was covered underneath a woolen hood, but his face was clean-shaven and sharp, a pair of thin, pursed lips hiding any sign of emotion.

"Arthur, Tessia," Commander Virion's rough voice sounded once more. "With me."

Footfalls—Arthur's, I assumed—approached me from behind, while Tessia made her own way toward her grandfather.

After a few moments, our expedition leader told us to rise. The commander, his companion, Tessia, and Arthur—all were gone.

"What was all that about?" I asked Caria in a hushed voice.

She shook her head. "I have no idea. I've never seen Commander Virion out on the field—and coming all this way just for one person?"

"Seriously," I agreed. "Even the high-ranking leaders back at the Wall rarely get to communicate with Commander Virion directly."

"Well, it makes sense—his granddaughter is here, right?"

"I don't think he's here because of Tessia," I murmured. Then I remembered my injured friend. "Darvus!"

Caria and I hurriedly made our way over to our teammate, who was still lying on his back. Kneeling beside him, Caria lifted his head and placed it in her lap. "Darvus, are you okay?"

"Yeah," he huffed. "I can move my fingers and toes now, at least. What happened? I thought I heard a familiar voice. Who was it?"

"It was Commander Virion," I said, rolling up Darvus's sleeves to assess his condition.

"What?" he cried. He struggled to get up before falling back into Caria's lap with a groan.

"Stay still, idiot. You're hurt," Caria chided him. "Anyway, you heard Commander Virion. He said you'll be okay. I don't think Arthur hit you with the intent to cripple you."

"Thanks." Darvus rolled his eyes. "Because the one thing a guy wants to hear

after getting his ass handed to him is that his opponent wasn't even trying."

I looked more closely at his arm and noticed a strange welt between his wrist and the inside of his elbow. Even more strange was the trace of mana I felt coming from the reddening bruises.

Without a word, I ripped open Darvus's shirt, eliciting a shout of protest from my friend and a squeal from Caria. Just as I had expected, more red welts marred his torso.

"Darvus, did you not feel that you were getting hit while you were attacking?" I asked.

"No. I didn't feel a thing," he answered. "Why? Is it that bad?"

"It's not that." I shook my head. "But these welts you have are all located in very important places."

"What do you mean?" Caria asked, taking a peek underneath Darvus's shirt.

"I've read a few books on mana flow anatomy—you know, the theory behind the movement of mana inside a mage's body. There are areas where clusters of mana channels are known to coalesce. These areas are naturally more protected when an augmenter strengthens his body, but a well-aimed strike can inhibit the flow of mana to that particular region."

"Oh, right!" Caria exclaimed. "I studied that too. My trainer taught me about it. But he couldn't have been able to hit those, right? My trainer said it was impractical—almost impossible—to target them in battle because of how small and protected these points are."

"True," I said, "and I read that the location of these coalition points differs from person to person. Still, I can't help but think these marks are related to that."

"Well, it would explain the marks, but it doesn't explain why Darvus suddenly fell down like a broken doll—"

"Hey!" Darvus glared from the ground.

"Excessive mana discharge," I said, looking at Darvus's fading wounds.

"You mean backlash? Isn't that when a mage uses too much of his mana?"

Caria asked. "I've seen Darvus use much more mana-heavy spells for longer periods than this."

"Well, if Arthur was able to hit all these coalition points, the mana leakage from these areas could potentially cause backlash. Of course, this is only assuming he was somehow able to locate these miniscule points," I said, wondering how in the hell Arthur had managed to hit him without anyone—not even Darvus himself—realizing.

"How about we stop admiring the man who left me in this state and help me up? I think I can walk with some help now," Darvus interrupted, gingerly wiggling his legs.

Caria and I helped our friend to his feet, and we slowly made our way toward the tent Commander Virion was in—with Arthur and Tessia. We hoped to be among the first to hear any new updates.

But as we neared the large white tent, Tessia stormed out, an unhappy scowl etched across her face.

"Tessia! Over here," Caria called, but the princess ignored her. Moments later, Commander Virion and Arthur came out of the tent, along with the commander's mysterious companion.

The hooded man lifted an arm, and a teleportation gate materialized in the space in front of him. The soldiers lingering nearby, probably also hoping to hear a bit of news, all jumped at the sudden manifestation of the gate.

"Are they leaving?" Darvus asked, his arms wrapped around our necks.

My eyes were fixed on the three figures as they approached the gate. Commander Virion was the first to go through; the hooded figure followed him. Carrying his bond, Arthur stepped through the gate—but only after he gave us a regretful, almost apologetic, look. I couldn't hear his voice from such a distance—and I wasn't even sure he had actually spoken aloud—but I clearly understood the words shaped by his lips: "Take care of her until I return."

He disappeared into the light as the teleportation gate closed behind him.

ARRIVAL

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I stepped into the large white tent and was immediately pulled into a bear hug by Grandpa Virion.

- "Damn you, boy! Why didn't you tell me you came back?" He loosened his grip on me, holding me at arm's length to get a better look.
- "Nice to see you again, Gramps." I turned to acknowledge the hooded asura. "Aldir."
- "Arthur. Lady Sylvie," he responded. "Much has changed in both of you."
- "I certainly hope so," I chuckled. Sylvie nodded slightly in response. I turned back to Virion. "How did you learn I had arrived so quickly?"
- "Lord Aldir received a message from Lord Windsom," Virion answered. "He said you had been sent down here somewhere, so I came right away."
- "To think you were sent where Tessia was stationed. Tell me, was this Wren's doing?" Aldir chimed in, an amused tone to his voice.
- I nodded, glancing at my silent childhood friend as I answered. "Has his sense of humor always been so... droll?"
- "Wren has always seen himself as whimsical despite his often indifferent attitude," the asura replied.
- "I was so surprised to see Arthur when we were expecting to battle a mutant," Tessia said, shaking her head.
- "Yeah. As soon as I arrived, a horde of mana beasts attacked me and Sylv.

We didn't even have time to catch our breaths until after we killed all of them," I said, scratching my bond behind the ears.

"But what about the door? When we arrived at the scene, the mana beasts outside the room you were in had all died," Tessia pressed. I knew she had been curious about a thousand things since my arrival, but we were short on time.

"Not now, chil—Tessia," Virion said, placing a hand on his granddaughter's shoulder. "There are things I must discuss with Arthur, and this isn't the right place to do so."

"We're leaving?" Tessia asked, glancing from her grandfather to Aldir.

The asura shook his head. "Not you, Tessia. You are to stay here."

"What? Arthur just got here a few hours ago and you're already taking him away?" Tessia replied, fear evident in her eyes.

"Tess," I cut in. "Don't worry. I'll be right back after debriefing."

"Besides, you have your team to look after. With this dungeon cleared, I'm sure everyone will soon be gone. You have your own battles to be responsible for, right?" Virion added. "That is what we agreed upon when I allowed you to take part in this war."

"Yes. 'Work your way up from battles using your own strength," Tessia quoted with a defeated sigh.

If she'd had a tail, it would have been drooping in sorrow at this news, but I knew that whatever Virion had to tell me was important.

"Then let's head out immediately. Tessia, you've gotten stronger these past few months. The battles you've been through are certainly molding you well," Aldir said, giving her an approving nod.

"Thank you, Master." Tessia dipped her head, but her bitter expression didn't change.

I was surprised to hear her refer to Lord Aldir as Master. I never would have expected the three-eyed asura to take Tessia under his wing, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

Tessia gave a quick bow to her grandfather and her master before leaving the tent. As she lifted the tarp flap, she looked back at me with a gaze that held a myriad of emotions.

"I'll see you soon," I said with a smile as she left.

"Shall we go?" Aldir asked, and we followed Tessia out of the tent.

Outside, before stepping into the teleportation gate Aldir had conjured, I locked eyes with Tessia's teammate, Stannard, and muttered for him to take care of Tessia for me.

I knew he couldn't hear the words, but Stannard seemed to understand. He nodded meaningfully.

Moments after stepping through the gate we arrived at the floating castle that the Council had made their base. The flying fortress constantly moved miles above the ground, with no pattern or destination, so as to prevent intrusion even by Vritra spies.

After our distorted surroundings came into focus, I saw that we had arrived inside a small, cylindrical room. There were no windows, and only one set of iron double doors.

How come you didn't talk to Tess back there? I asked my bond as she scampered along next to me. Sometime in the last two years, Sylvie had gained the ability to speak out loud, but for some reason, she chose not to speak unless there was no one else around.

'A lady needs to have a secret or two,' Sylvie replied coyly.

Oh, you're a lady now? I shook my head.

'I'll surprise Tessia with it next time,' she said with a giggle.

Virion and Aldir looked back, perhaps sensing my nonverbal communication with Sylvie. I just winked at them.

Speech wasn't the only ability Sylvie had gained throughout her training, but because of her young age, most of her time had been spent fortifying her body so her mana and aether abilities wouldn't tear her physical form apart.

Lord Indrath had personally taught her how to strengthen her body, an ability

unique to the dragon race of asuras. Apparently, almost all young asuras faced the danger that their body would be unable to withstand their innate abilities.

"Well, since we're all here, let's go out," Virion announced with a smile.

At the signal from the gateman, the large iron doors clicked and squealed as the locking mechanism released. The groan and scrape of metal on gravel filled my ears as the thick doors opened from the center.

I had expected a guard or two to be on the other side of the doors, but instead, a large dark bear towered over me. It gazed down viciously, the two white markings above its eyes shaping its expression into something of a scowl. It stood about nine feet tall, with its hind legs rooted to the ground and its chest exposed to reveal a tuft of white fur just below the neck. Despite its angrylooking eyes, its exposed teeth gave the impression of a smile, two rows of white daggers protruding jaggedly from its mouth.

"Brother!" a melodious voice chirped.

For a split second, I thought it was the bear that had spoken, but then Ellie, my little sister, appeared from behind the beast with goofy grin on her face.

My sister had definitely—if subtly—changed over the past few years. In place of the pigtails she had sported when she was younger, her ash-brown hair fell freely over her shoulders. While her dark eyes still shone with innocence, her thoughtful gaze contained a notable maturity.

"Ellie!" I picked my sister up into a hug and swung her into the air as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Arthur!" another pair of voices called out. My parents.

After putting Ellie down, I turned to my mother and father. I held myself still, tense. Feelings of uncertainty and remorse kept me from giving them a hug. I didn't know how to greet them after how we had parted.

"Come here, son!" My mother and father both ran toward me, wrapping me in their arms as they squeezed tightly.

"I—I don't understand," I stammered, taken aback by their greeting. "I

thought—"

"Thought what?" My father cut me off. "That just because you have memories of some previous existence, you could stop being my son?"

"I'm sorry, but I put way too much time and effort into raising you to be the person you are today. I'm still waiting for the return on my investment," my mother added. Though she tried to make a joke of the situation, her quivering voice gave it away.

"You're right," I said, choking back tears. "I have yet to give you everything you truly deserve."

I felt as if a stone shell around my body had shattered, and a wave of happiness and relief washed over me as I accepted their embrace.

"Brother!" my sister chirped, holding Sylvie in her arms. "Say hi to Boo!"

When my parents released me from their grasp, I took another hard stare at the giant mana beast.

"Boo?" I repeated incredulously, looking at my parents and then back at Virion and Aldir. I knew the mana beast wasn't an enemy, but I hadn't realized he belonged to my family.

"Yup," Ellie said with a nod. "Boo, say hi to Brother."

Boo and I locked gazes for a second, then the mana beast smirked at me. Raising a giant paw, Boo swung down at me.

I raised an arm, immediately willing mana into my body. The ground below my feet cracked with the force of Boo's attack.

I stared at my sister in shock, the bear's paw still weighing down on my arm.

"I see *Boo* has quite a temper." I grabbed the beast's wrist and pulled, bringing him down to my eye level.

"He just wanted to see if you were as strong as I told him you were. He's competitive like that," she said with a shrug as her bond struggled to free himself from my grasp. "Bad Boo!"

"Wait—Ellie, you can talk to this beast? Are you bonded to it?" I sputtered.

The beast's strength had surprised me, but the fact that my sister was able to converse with it mentally meant that Boo was quite a high-level beast.

"Lord Windsom didn't mention this?" Virion asked from behind us. "He gave this mana beast to your family as a gift before you departed to Epheotus."

"No, he did not mention anything of the sort." I shook my head, dazed. "So Windsom just handed this giant stuffed animal to my sister so, what, she can ride it into battle?"

Boo gave a disgruntled sniff at my words.

"Yes, I called you a teddy bear," I retorted, still gripping his paw.

"No, he was just a baby when Windsom gave him to us," my mother said with a smile. "Though I have to say, Boo has grown quickly over the past two years."

"I'll say," my father agreed, chuckling to himself.

"Well, I'm sure you would like to catch up with your family, Arthur, but it will need to wait until after our discussion," Aldir said in a serious tone.

"Your family is living here for the time being, as I thought it would be in your best interest."

"Right. Thank you." I nodded, turning back to my family. "I'll talk to you soon, okay?"

I gave everyone a hug—except for Boo—and followed Virion and Aldir down the narrow corridor to the meeting room.

Sylvie trotted close behind, taking another look back at Boo. 'Do you want me to beat him up for you?'

I can take care of him myself, I thought with a smirk, reaching down to pet my bond.

We passed by two guards stationed to either side of an unassuming oak door, and sat around a large circular table in the sparsely decorated meeting room. It was only the three of us, so there were quite a few empty chairs.

"Just us?" I looked around. "What about the kings and queens, and the

Lances? I thought I'd at least be seeing Director Goodsky here."

The asura, Aldir, pulled back the hood that had covered most of his face, revealing the purple eye that glowed in the center of his forehead. He turned to Virion and nodded at him.

As Tess's grandfather began speaking, I realized just how tired and burdened he looked, compared to before the war. "Cynthia is currently in a state of selfinduced slumber to cope with the effects of the curse she activated when she disclosed intel on the Alacryans."

"It's that bad?" I exclaimed. The report Windsom had shown me did mention the director's condition, but I hadn't realized she was actually comatose.

The elderly elf nodded solemnly. "I'll show you where she's resting later, but I'm sure there are quite a few other things you're curious about."

I nodded and began bombarding the two leaders with all the questions I had. They patiently answered each one. I learned that, while my family was being held here for their protection, the Helstea family had gone elsewhere. Vincent was using his resources in trade to assist the war efforts. It was a bit worrisome to think they might be in danger, but the Helsteas seemed to stay mostly in the background—never getting involved directly in the war and staying well clear of the battles.

As for the former king and queen of Sapin, they reported back to the castle every now and then, but they'd actually been focusing most of their efforts in the kingdom of Darv, hoping to regain the allegiance of the dwarves, while Curtis and Kathyln Glayder did what Tess had done—formed or joined a team to get some real battle experience on the front lines.

"Have my father or mother thought about fighting as well?" I asked.

"Your father has," Virion said. "But I told him to restrain himself until either you returned or Eleanor is a bit older. He was insistent on helping out, but I made a strong case."

"Thank you. I can't imagine how I would have felt if my father had died in the war while I wasn't even here." Virion continued discussing the state of the war and the strategies implemented to keep the citizens safe, while I silently listened, staring idly at my bond, who was paying careful attention as well.

"Is something the matter, my boy?" Virion asked. "You've been awfully quiet."

"It's nothing," I said. "Although I am a bit anxious to hear what you actually brought me all this way for, seeing as you wanted to keep your own granddaughter in the dark about it. And I know you didn't bring me here just so I could reunite with my family."

"Yes, well, Tessia is ambitious and has trained diligently to be able to make a contribution in this war..." Virion's voice trailed off.

"But you still worry about her safety more than anything else," I finished for him. "So that whole speech you apparently gave her on working her way up to the main battle was just a way to stall for time?"

Letting out a sigh, Virion nodded. "Can you blame me?"

I shook my head. "I would've done the same thing. How bad is this 'main battle' anyway?" I asked, looking back and forth between Virion and Aldir.

"As of now, the main fight is at the Wall, where a fortress has been built that spans the Grand Mountains. Not a single mutant or Alacryan soldier has been able to leave the Beast Glades so far, thanks to this defensive line." Despite the good news, Virion let out a deep breath.

"I'd like you to weigh in here, just based on what we have told you so far," Aldir said, in a tone that suggested he was testing me.

I thought for a moment. "Let me see if I have this right. From what you have dealt with so far, it seems the Alacryan army's plan is to somehow infect certain mana beast leaders, so they can force the beasts to lead their own hordes to fight for the Alacryans. Additionally, the Alacryan mages have been using hidden teleportation gates set up by spies to boost the numbers of their soldiers here on Dicathen—which all adds up to a pretty dangerous fighting force."

"Agreed," Aldir said.

"But it's suspicious." I studied Aldir's and Virion's faces. "I mean, I understand that the Beast Glades is the perfect place for them to establish, especially if they have a few S-class or SS-class mana beasts under their control, but it seems too straightforward. If *none* of them were able to get through this defense, it either means that our side is that much stronger, or that they're stalling for time. And by the look on your face, Virion, I'd say it's the latter."

"Evidence has recently come to light that has confirmed our suspicions," Virion said sympathetically. "Now, Arthur, I can't have you blaming yourself for what I'm about to tell you."

"What is it?" I raised my brows.

Aldir pulled out some items from underneath the table and slid them over to me.

They were pictures of an abandoned ship. Looking at its structure and frame, I was certain I had seen something like this before.

"It's not the *Dicatheous*, if that's what you're wondering," Aldir said. "After seeing this, Gideon the artificer finally admitted where he got the ingenious idea for the so-called 'steam engine' he was so proud of."

I looked over the pictures once more, trying to convince myself that what my brain had already deduced was wrong.

"That was a ship built by the Alacryans—using your designs," Virion said, his voice grim.

Before I had the chance to respond, the door to the meeting room suddenly flew open, and an armored soldier stumbled desperately into the room.

"Commander, Lord," the soldier said hurriedly, still trying to catch his breath. "What is it?" Virion snapped.

"They've been sighted, commander—approaching the western coast." The soldier's voice quivered with restrained fear. "The ships."

TO RIGHT MY WRONG

I BOLTED UP from my seat at the soldier's news. "Where exactly did you see them?"

"Just a few miles south of Etistin... sir," he replied, seeming uncertain how to address me, perhaps because of my age.

I rushed out the door past the guard. "Come on, Sylv."

"Wait! Arthur, what are you thinking?" Virion called, his voice laced with concern.

"I want to see exactly what sort of mess I made," I replied without turning.

Sylvie and I sped toward the teleportation gate room, dodging several surprised workers and guards.

Upon reaching the double iron doors we had come through earlier, I saw two guards, a man and a woman, on either side of the doors. They hadn't been there before.

"Please open the doors," I said impatiently.

The male guard—clad in heavy armor, with a longsword strapped to his back and two smaller blades bound to either side of his waist—stepped forward with a stern expression. "All entries and exits are to be authorized by either Commander Virion or Lord Aldir. We haven't heard anything from either of them, so no can do, kid."

"I just came back to this castle with Virion and Aldir. They know I'm heading out. I insist that you let me through," I argued.

"Commander Virion and Lord Aldir," the guard said. "No matter how lofty you royal kids think you are, you need to learn some respect for your elders." The other guard, a female conjurer who appeared middle-aged and was wearing a lavish robe with a hood that covered her hair, quickly intervened, perhaps hoping to quell the situation. She spoke in a gentle voice, as if to a child. "It's dangerous for you to go out alone in these times. If you have a guardian, you—"

She stopped speaking as she choked on her last words. Both guards crumpled to their knees, clawing desperately at their throats. They gasped for air like fish out of water as I took another step forward, looking down at them with an innocent smile. "It'd be wise of you not to patronize me."

"Arthur." I turned to see Aldir standing down the hall. The cold disapproval in his tone was enough for me to withdraw the pressure I was releasing, and both guards gasped in relief.

To the guards, Aldir said, "Arthur is free to leave, if he wishes it." He turned his purple eye on me. "Don't do anything foolish. It would be a shame to have wasted Windsom's time."

The guards scrambled to their feet and toward the door to release the lock. The heavy doors groaned against the gravel floor, and I hurried to the center of the room.

"Sir, set the gate to Etistin, please," I said. Looking back at Aldir, who hadn't moved, I felt guilty for being so harsh toward these people, who were just doing their duty.

The elderly gateman exchanged concerned glances with the disheveled guards, but quickly complied. The glowing portal buzzed and hissed, and Etistin came into focus.

Without a word, Sylvie and I stepped through the gate, my heart thumping more heavily the closer I got to my destination.

I arrived on the other side in an unfamiliar room filled with guards. I stepped down from the elevated platform that held the gate, Sylvie just a few steps behind.

"Who let a child through the secured gates?" the barrel-chested leader barked at the gateman.

"He's from the castle, sir," he responded meekly, staring at me curiously.

It was troublesome that everyone thought of me as a child even though I was well into my teens. I was taller than many of the guards present, but my long, unruly hair and adolescent appearance seemed to keep the soldiers from taking me seriously. But I lacked the patience to explain my situation.

I made my way toward the exit, walking past the large soldier.

"Kid! What's your business here? Don't you know this city is in a state of emergency?" The armor-clad soldier stood at least a head taller than me, and he gripped my arm tightly, jerking me back.

"Commander Virion sent me. Now, please open the doors before I make my own," I said.

The leader scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, sure. Commander Virion sent the likes of this thin pretty-boy here. I bet you're just some runaway noble brat who had a tantrum and thought he'd run off. Well, wrong time, wrong place. Lest, Scraum, take the boy back through the gates. I don't need any more civilians to take care of here."

Scoffing, I willed mana to surge out of my body as I had done back at the castle.

Many of the soldiers present were augmenters, so they knew exactly what was happening as everyone fell helplessly to the ground. The very air in the room seemed to freeze as the soldiers stared in wide-eyed shock at one another. The gateman, an ordinary civilian, couldn't handle the pressure and had been knocked unconscious.

"Let's get out of here, Sylv."

'But the door—'

Looking around the room, I saw some of the more capable mages already calling for backup.

"I'll make one," I replied curtly, not wanting to create an even bigger scene. 'Sounds good.'

My bond's white fox-like body began glowing until she was fully enveloped in a shroud of golden light. A thunderous burst of mana radiated from her body as Sylvie's form changed into that of a pitch-black dragon.

Over the past few years, her form had become much more distinguished and mature. Small details like the shape of her horns and her scales, which now looked like thousands of small polished gemstones, combined to make her appear fearsome yet ethereal.

The soldiers who were still conscious gave stifled cries, but I didn't waste any time feeling guilty about their distress.

Lifting my hand, I condensed and shaped the mana gathered in my palm, and cast Lightning Surge.

A barrage of blue lightning blasted through the ceiling above us, shaking the entire room. I jumped on top of Sylvie as her wings beat, lifting us up.

We flew through the hole I had created, the gasps and screams from the civilians and soldiers below us fading as we went higher into the sky.

The crisp winter air bit my cheeks, and we ascended above the clouds until we could see the setting sun, orange against the horizon. The beauty of Dicathen was in full view, laid out like a canvas below. I took a brief moment to relish the peaceful sight—from the snowcapped mountains and grassy plains to the sparkling ocean and lush forest—then directed Sylvie southward.

Let's make it there before nightfall, I said, leaning forward on Sylvie's large back.

'Just don't fall off,' she replied, her voice still chirpy despite her intimidating appearance.

For a time, the clouds cleared and the land sped by below us in a colorful blur, as if the earth were only a background being pulled away from underneath us. Eventually, though, we were enveloped in thick winter clouds, heavy with unfallen snow. I hunched my shoulders and thickened the layer of mana around me to protect myself and my clothes from the sharp winds.

Let's get lower, Sylv. We should be near Trelmore by now.

Tucking in her massive wings, my bond fell into a steep dive. We barreled through the clouds that obscured our vision, shooting down like a black meteor. As we descended, the glittering sea came into view, and along with it, the direct effect of my thoughtless blunder.

I cursed aloud at the nightmarish sight ahead, but my words were lost in the wind. Sylvie landed on a vast, snow-covered precipice at the edge of the forest overlooking Trelmore City and the ocean. I jumped off my bond, cursing once more—and this time my voice echoed around us, as if mocking me.

I could only stare in silent, impotent rage.

Hundreds of ships approached from the glowing horizon, not more than a few dozen miles away from shore, making their forces stationed in the Beast Glades seem like nothing more than a speck.

Virion's last piece of advice popped into my head at that moment. He had told me not to blame myself, but this could not have happened without my interference.

This being my second life, I had insight and knowledge the people of this world didn't have. Despite that knowledge and my wisdom, I hadn't thought about the consequences that might arise from introducing an entirely new technology into the world—I'd thought only about how a seemingly harmless act would benefit those around me.

Memories of the day I had given Gideon the blueprints for the steam engine were all too clear and agonizing. Because of my advice, a ship that could traverse the ocean had been built and had obviously ended up in the wrong hands. I had to ask myself: Was the Vritra clan getting their hands on this technology what had expedited the war?

"This doesn't look too good," Sylvie muttered as she gazed at oncoming

fleet.

"No, it doesn't. And it's my fault." I ground my teeth, a mix of dread and guilt churning in the pit of my stomach.

I stared ahead, millions of thoughts ran through my mind. I had shed tears, sweat, and blood these past two years in order to protect this land and the people in it, and to stop the Vritra from taking over this entire world. But it wasn't that simple anymore.

Hopping back onto my bond, I gently patted her neck.

"Let's go back, Sylv. There's nothing we can do here," I said through clenched teeth.

I wasn't some righteous hero out to save the world. Hell, I couldn't even call myself a good person hoping to do his best to fight for his people.

No, it was my fault that the war had progressed to this state. It was my fault that this fleet of ships was almost upon us, and it would be my fault when those ships arrived and unleashed a horde of Alacryan mages.

I had a reason to fight, and it was not just to protect the few I held dear. It was to right my wrong.

CYNTHIA GOODSKY

I was in some sort of room, I thought—some sort space blanketed in complete darkness with only a single beam of light shining down on me.

"It is imperative that you give us as much information as possible," a deep voice spoke from the shadows.

I felt my lips moving and my tongue forming words, but my voice would not come out. Instead, a sharp ringing pierced my brain.

"Your knowledge can win us this war, Director," muttered another voice, this one thin and hoarse. "Think of the millions of lives you can help save by cooperating."

I agreed. I wanted to speak, but I could produce no sound. I fell to my knees as the ringing became unbearable; the voices hidden in the shadows

continued to pester me.

They wanted answers, regardless of cost. They were desperate, but so was I.

"It's all right if you die from the aftereffects of the curse. As long as we get the answers we need, your job is done," a particularly melodic voice cooed.

'I thought Lord Aldir had lifted the curse,' I wanted to say, even though I knew, deep down, that my life had always been in danger. However, my voice betrayed me, and the torturous sound overtook my senses. My vision turned white as the pain lessened.

If this was what death felt like, I thought, I would welcome it wholeheartedly. I closed my eyes, yet my vision was still completely covered in a slate of white.

I wondered what would happen next; then a darkened figure approached me. The figure drew closer and closer, but I still could not distinguish its features. My only comfort lay in the fact that its outline seemed human.

Finally the featureless figure arrived in front of me, and it bent down and extended a hand to help me up.

Truthfully, I was reluctant, even in whatever stage of death I was experiencing. However, my curiosity bested my mistrust and I held out my hand, waiting for him to take it.

Our hands touched, and the veil of shadow that had shrouded my mysterious helper disappeared.

I squeezed harder, realizing that it was Virion's hand I held.

His hand was so warm. I wanted to reach out and embrace him, but my body wouldn't listen. Instead, I remained on the ground, his hand on top of mine. He held my hand so gently—like a new-hatched chick, as if my fingers would crumble at the slightest pressure.

I wanted to grab hold of him with my other hand, but still I could not move.

"I never apologized to you..." he began. He muttered softly about how he hadn't stopped me, even when he had realized what could happen to me. Virion's voice, normally so strong and confident, cracked and wavered as he

spoke.

I pried my gaze away from his hand and looked up at the blurry face of my old friend. I couldn't tell what his eyes were focusing on, but I could see the tears in them so clearly.

Suddenly, Virion released his grip, and he was once again shrouded in darkness. He walked away and I shouted for him to come back—but no voice came out.

Virion—now again a featureless shadow—stopped for a moment and spoke. It was hard to hear, and I couldn't make out many of the words, but I felt comforted nonetheless. When he resumed walking, I no longer tried to shout for him to come back; I accepted his departure.

As his figure disappeared into the white abyss, the scene shifted, and a memory I had often taken comfort in came to life.

It was just after the end of the war between humans and elves. Both sides had suffered tremendous losses and had agreed upon a treaty.

A much younger Virion was walking alongside me. It was all exactly how I had remembered it, down to the field of wilted tulips spreading out to our left. We walked along the paved path, my body moving on its own, but I didn't mind.

"What do you plan on doing, now that the war is over?" Virion asked, his gaze fixed ahead.

I had planned on quietly observing the state of the continent after the war ended—that had been my duty, after all. But I couldn't exactly tell the king of the elves that, so I just shrugged mysteriously and hoped my charms would distract him and allow me to change the subject.

"I've known you for quite some time now. For some of those years we were enemies, and for some we weren't—but always, I kept thinking to myself one thing." He held out a finger to emphasize his point.

"Oh?" My voice came out on its own. "And what was that? Your undying love for me?"

- "Sorry, but no," he chuckled. "Did you forget I'm married?"
- "That hasn't stopped any of the human nobles yet." I shrugged my shoulders, feigning innocence.
- "We elves are loyal," he replied, shaking his head. "But I digress. What I kept thinking was what a great mentor and inspiration you would make. Hell, I could see you as the head of some prestigious academy, leading the up and coming youth to a greater future."
- "Well, that came out of nowhere," I responded, genuinely surprised. "What brought you to that conclusion?"
- "A lot of things," he said. "But seriously, you should think about becoming a teacher. I know you'll grow to love it."
- "Maybe I'll just open up an academy of my own," I said, smirking. "I've taken a liking to Xyrus City."
- "An academy for mages atop a floating city," he said thoughtfully. "I like it!" I stopped walking, watching Virion as he continued. "What do you say we open the school together?"

Looking back over his shoulder, he stifled a laugh. "Yeah—we can call it the Goodsky and Eralith School of Mages."

I could feel my face flush with embarrassment.

- "No," he said, "but maybe I'll send my kids, or perhaps my grandkids when they come of age. That is, if your school is good enough for them." He gave me a wink before turning back.
- "I'm really going to do it, you know," I huffed. "Just wait and see. Xyrus Academy will become the greatest institution for mages the world has ever seen."
- "Xyrus Academy? In Xyrus City?" Virion tilted his head. "Not very original."
- "Well, I can't call it the Goodsky and Eralith School of Mages, now can I?" I retorted, puffing out my cheeks. "And you'll be darn lucky if I let any of your descendants attend."

"Ouch." He chuckled. "Well, here's hoping for the success of Xyrus Academy." Virion raised a hand with an imaginary glass in a toast. "Here's hoping..."

I remembered it clearly. I had wished, then, that the moment would never end. Clear, cold regret had trickled through my veins as I watched Virion walk ahead of me. If only I had met this man sooner, perhaps my loyalty to Alacrya and the Vritra would have wavered

No sooner had I thought this than the reality of it struck me like a crashing wave: my heart had wavered—no longer was I the Vritra's to control.

"I'm the old man here," Virion called out from ahead. "Keep up."

I stepped forward to catch up with him—but there was a piercing pain boring a hole in my chest. The flower-filled scenery shaded to red. I looked down to see a black spike protruding from my body, with my heart at the tip.

"Hurry up," Virion called again, and this time his voice was more distant.

I reached out to him, called for him, but I remained anchored by the pitch black spear jutting out of my chest.

As if the spear was reeling me in, the once-pleasant scene I had been reliving was sucked away from me. My world faded into darkness, and the sight of Virion walking away was the last thing I saw before I was enveloped in a bone-chilling grip. As I sank further into the depths of the abyss, I could've sworn I heard a childish voice, apologizing to me.

VIRION ERALITH

A bloodcurdling scream jolted me awake. I didn't know when I had fallen asleep, but I immediately got up from my desk chair. Rushing out of my study, I narrowly avoided plowing into a guard rushing in the direction of the shriek.

"C-Commander Virion," he saluted, skidding to a stop.

"What is going on?" I looked around, watching the other guards, all heading in the same direction.

"I'm not sure, Commander. The scream seemed to come from one floor below."

"There shouldn't be anyone—Anna!" I gasped. The only occupied room immediately below this level was Cynthia's room, and Anna was taking care of her.

The guard's eyes widened as he turned and headed down the stairs. Following immediately behind him, I pushed through the horde of armored guards. Arthur's family was standing outside the door, but they were all just staring inside.

Everyone was staring inside.

I turned my gaze to the room, but my eyes froze on the scene just a few feet ahead.

"No," I murmured as I hobbled closer, unable to believe my eyes. "H-how? Who?" I stammered, but Anna simply shook her head, just as shocked as I was.

My head spun and all the noise and murmurs around me became muffled. I took another step, but my legs gave out underneath me and I stumbled against the bed.

A wordless howl was ripped from my throat as I sank to my knees, clutching tightly at my old friend's cold, lifeless hand.

Cynthia Goodsky lay peacefully in bed, her arms by her side and a thin white sheet over her body. From her chest jutted a pitch-black spike, covered in blood—covered in her blood.