

THE **BEGINNING** AFTER THE **END**

by TurtleMe



TRANSCENDENCE

VOLUME SIX

THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

BOOK 6: TRANSCENDENCE

TURTLEME

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WARRING PREMONITIONS

“YOU’RE CLEAR, NICO. HURRY!” I whispered, looking over my shoulder in case someone passed by. Two adolescent boys huddled up in front of a house door could only spell trouble.

“Just stay on guard, Grey. I’ve almost got it,” my dark-haired companion hissed back as he worked on the doorknob.

I watched doubtfully as Nico fumbled with the hairpins he had stolen from one of the older girls. “Are you sure you can open it?”

“Picking locks,” he said through gritted teeth, “is a lot harder than that guy in the alleyway made it seem.”

Suddenly, the doorknob clicked and both our eyes brightened. “You did it!” I exclaimed in a loud whisper.

“Bow down to my powers!” Nico held a colorful hairpin high in the air.

I smacked him on the shoulder and pressed my finger to my lips. Nico shoved the hairpins back in his zippered pocket and nodded at me, then we tiptoed in through the wooden door.

“You made sure the owners are out today, right?” I asked again, scanning the meticulously furnished house.

“I scanned this house last week. Both the husband and wife go out every week at this time and don’t come back for at least an hour. We have plenty of time to grab a few things and go,” Nico answered, already looking for anything of value that we could stuff into a bag.

Letting out a deep breath, I reasoned to myself that it was necessary. Stealing from someone—however rich they were—didn't sit right with me, but I had overheard the conversation between the orphanage's headmaster and those government people. I'd only caught a few comments, but it seemed our orphanage was in danger because we didn't have enough money.

"This should be enough," Nico said with a nod, looking at the contents of the backpack we had brought.

Peering over his shoulder, I asked, "Now what? How are we going to get money for this? We can't exactly just give Headmaster Wilbeck all this jewelry."

"Way ahead of you," he smirked. "I found a guy willing to pay cash for anything he finds interesting."

"And this 'guy' is okay buying off two twelve-year-olds?"

"He doesn't ask questions, I don't ask questions. Simple as that," Nico shrugged as we headed out the door.

Taking the back route toward the far end of the city, we blended in with the crowd of people walking along the cracked sidewalk. Keeping our heads low and paces brisk, we veered left into an alleyway. Weaving through the piles of trash and stacked boxes of who knew what, we stopped in front of a faded red door, protected behind another gated metal door.

"We're here," Nico said, motioning for the bag. I slipped it off my shoulders and handed it to him, and my friend knocked on the door in an unfamiliar rhythm.

Slicking back his black hair and puffing his chest out, he coughed a few times and narrowed his eyes to appear more intimidating—as intimidating as any scrawny twelve-year-old can be, anyway.

After a few seconds, a rangy old man in a worn suit opened the red door. He stared down at us from behind the metal gate with a scrutinizing eye.

"Ah, the rather persistent child. I see you brought a friend," he said, but made no move to open the gate.

Nico coughed again and deepened his voice. “I’ve brought some items you might be interested in.” My friend’s unusually deep tone didn’t sound fake, surprisingly. He opened the drawstring bag in his hands to give the lanky, narrow-eyed man a peek at some of the jewelry we had just stolen.

Raising a brow, the man unhinged the lock on the gate, and it gave a shrill creak as he opened it slightly. He scanned the area around us, then bent down to examine the bag. “Not a bad collection. Did you steal this from your mother, perhaps?”

“No questions, remember?” Nico reminded, tightening the string to close the bag. “Now can we come in and discuss prices?”

The thin man looked around once more with suspicion in his eyes, but after a moment he let us in. “Close the door behind you.”

As we entered the dainty shop, a thick layer of smoke greeted us. From the other side of the room, two men, each with a cigarette between their fingers, were puffing out clouds of smoke. While the dense cloud of grey covered much of their facial features, I could at least distinguish their general shapes. One of the men was burly—muscles clearly displayed underneath his tank top. The other man was much rounder, but with thick, firm limbs that showed he wasn’t any weaker than the first man.

“Come, children. Let’s get this over with,” the thin man said as he scratched his unshaven cheeks.

Nico and I exchanged glances, then he went up to the counter. I hung back, looking around at the various books and gadgets displayed on the shelves. My gaze fell on a thin, tattered book. From the few words I could make out from the spine of the book, it seemed to be an old instruction manual on ki. Gingerly removing it from the shelf, I saw that half of the front cover had been ripped off.

My first instinct was to put it back; after all, the orphanage had books in much better condition on core development for ki use. However, my fingers seemed to move on their own as they flipped through the pages. Inside it

were pictures and diagrams of a person in different poses with arrows and other lines around the figure. I wanted to take it with me, and was half tempted to ask for the price, but I held myself back. This book was a luxury when we needed the money to save our home.

I continued trying to make out the vague instructions, but soon lost interest. My eyes kept returning to the two men playing cards on the folding table, who kept taking glances at Nico as he and the shop owner did business. I buried my face in the old book, taking a peek from behind the pages. I wasn't sure what they were up to, but I didn't want to stay long enough to find out.

Fortunately, Nico soon finished his transaction and approached me, flashing a quick smile before putting his stoic face back on.

"Did you find something interesting?" he asked, eyeing the book in my hand.

"It's nothing," I said, putting the thin, coverless book back on the shelf.

"You can take it if you want," the rangy store owner said, leaning his elbow on the front counter. "No one knows how to read it and it's just been collecting dust here."

"Really?" I asked, my suspicion showing on my face.

He revealed abnormally white teeth in something akin to a smile as he nodded.

Without another word, I quickly tucked the book in the bag and murmured a thanks to him. Nico and I left the store, and my friend unzipped his jacket and showed me the wad of crinkled cash.

"See, I told you it'd all work out," he beamed.

"I guess so," I replied, still skeptical about this whole endeavor. I felt bad for the couple we had stolen from, but comforted myself in the fact that we didn't take much of their jewelry. Nico had explained that, while taking a few items might make them suspicious, they'd be hesitant to call the authorities and report the theft. After all, the couple were both well past retirement age, so the cops would most likely assume that they had just forgotten or misplaced the items.

I sighed with relief as we began heading back to the orphanage. The further away we got from the scene of the crime, the better I felt.

“What did I even come along for, Nico?” I asked, dodging people as we walked down the street. “Feels like you did this all on your own.”

“Hey, you got a free book out of it, right?” Nico nudged me with his shoulder. “Besides, it’s more fun—”

“We’re being followed,” I whispered, cutting him off. I kept my eyes straight ahead. I had felt two pairs of eyes practically boring a hole in my back almost as soon as we’d left the shop, but I hadn’t wanted to assume. But I’d caught a glimpse of one of the guys, and I instantly recognized him as one of the smokers from the shop. They were still behind us after two turns, and I no longer had any doubt.

“This way,” Nico ordered in a hushed tone.

As we reached the outskirts of the city, we took a right into an alleyway, hopping on top of a trashcan to reach the other side of the locked fence.

I landed nimbly on my feet, and Nico clawed at the fence to keep from losing his balance as he tumbled over. We raced down the old alley, which smelled like a mixture of rat turds and rotten eggs, and was darkened by the tall buildings on either side of us. Hiding behind a particularly large pile of trash, we waited.

Soon we heard two pairs of footsteps, growing louder as they approached.

“Little rats made it easy for us,” a hoarse voice snickered.

“A fitting grave for them,” came the gravelly reply.

Nico darted his head out to take a peek. “It’s the men from the shop.” He cursed as he quickly hid behind the trash again.

“I know.” I was already scanning for anything I could use as a weapon.

“They’re either here to get the shop owner’s money back, or they’re going to steal it for themselves.” Nico clutched the money in his jacket tightly.

Suddenly, a dark figure leaped up from the other side of the pile of trash we were hiding behind, casting a giant shadow over us.

“Surprise!” the barrel-chested thug exclaimed with a sinister grin.

“Run!” I screamed at Nico, giving him a shove.

He wasted no breath on a retort as he rushed down the narrow alleyway.

The muscular man swung his beefy hand, and I stepped back out of reach. A gust of air from the force of his swing tickled my nose as I swung the broken plank I had plucked from the ground toward his ribs.

The burly man buckled, more from surprise than pain. I took the opportunity to bolt toward Nico, who was being chased by the burly thug’s round companion. But before I could get there, the man smacked Nico to the ground, knocking the wind out of my friend.

Nico gasped for breath, and the pumpkin-bodied goon raised his leg over my friend’s body.

“Over here, pig!” I roared, hoping the provocation would make him turn.

“What did you say?” the thug snarled, turning around to face me.

I bolted past the heavy thug just as he lurched toward me, his fat fingers clawing in the air. He might have caught me, but his muscular companion careened into him an instant later, and I heard both men grunt from behind me. My mind whirled, thinking of possible ways to get out of this hopeless-seeming situation, and my eyes darted left and right. Then I spotted a long, bent nail protruding from the brick wall of a nearby building, about three yards off the ground.

Cursing under my breath, I feinted to my right just as the musclehead behind me grabbed at me. Sidestepping without even glancing back, I leaped up, hoping to reach the nail.

As my body launched upward, everything around me seemed to fall silent. It felt like the world had slowed, and I could hear my heart thumping erratically, as if every other noise had been tuned out.

Behind me, I could sense the grasping hands ready to drag me to the ground, but I was surprisingly calm. My peripheral vision all came into focus, as if I were able to see everything around me all at once. The muscled thug had

tripped and was crashing to the ground just behind me. Wedging a toe into a deep crack in one of the lower bricks for leverage, I sprang upward, reaching for the rusted nail. The iron nail felt rough and cold as I snagged it between my index and middle finger. I had it. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was something. As I pulled the nail free of the crumbling brick, I pushed off the wall with my feet to accelerate towards the hefty thug, who had only narrowly avoided tripping over his partner and was moments from catching me. I watched the man's expression change from surprise to grim concentration. His right shoulder twitched, and I realized clearly that he was about to intercept my attack somehow.

I used my free hand to vault off of his right arm as it arced toward me. In that same instant, I jabbed the nail in my hand directly into his eye. I felt the sensation of iron passing through soft tissue, watching as his face shifted from concentration to surprise, and then to agony.

At his shrill howl, the world resumed its normal pace. I tumbled gracelessly into a pile of old boxes as my opponent frantically clawed at his face, too afraid to go near the nail in his left eye.

"Come on," I urged, pulling a stunned Nico back to his feet. I looked back once more and saw the muscular thug rushing to his friend's aid. We ducked out of the alleyway and bolted, running for our lives.

Out of breath and sweating from every pore in my body, I collapsed next to Nico behind a convenience store just outside the city.

We leaned against the wall, too tired to care about how many drunks and homeless people had vomited and peed here. Nico ripped off his jacket and lifted up his shirt to cool himself off.

"*That* is what you came here for," he panted, smacking my thigh. "Oh man, you should've seen yourself, Grey! You flew around like those kings fighting in duels!"

I shook my head, still trying to catch my breath. "I don't know what I did. Everything just started moving really slow."

“I knew you had it in you. Remember that time Pavia dropped all those dishes next to you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You caught them. You caught three plates and two bowls, Grey!” Nico exclaimed. “And you hadn’t even been paying attention.”

“I admit, that was an impressive catch, but it has nothing to do with fighting,” I argued, sagging further down against the wall.

“You’ll realize soon,” he replied, seeming too tired to argue. “Now let’s go, I don’t want to get extra chores for being out past sundown.”

We arrived at the old two-story house that served as the orphanage just a bit before dinner—plenty of time to wash up and be on time so we wouldn’t look suspicious. Nico slowly opened the back door, wincing at the creaking of the old hinge. Keeping the lights off, we tiptoed down the unlit hallway, but just before we reached our rooms, the clear voice of the orphanage’s headmaster called out from the living room.

“Grey, Nico. Can you come here for a moment?” she said in a quiet yet frighteningly stern voice.

Nico and I traded glances, fear evident on both of our faces. Nico quickly threw his jacket and the drawstring bag into his room and closed the door.

“Do you think she already found out?” I whispered.

“I’d normally say it’d be impossible, but it’s the Sorceress we’re talking about,” Nico replied, his normally confident demeanor shadowed by dread.

We arrived in the brightly-lit living room, our clothes and faces dirty and our hair disheveled.

Sitting on the couch, her posture perfectly erect, was our Headmaster Wilbeck, the elderly woman we all called the Sorceress. Standing next to her was a girl about our age with dusty brown hair that fell over her shoulders and a creamy complexion. She wore a luxurious red dress that not even the money we had just acquired could have purchased.

The headmaster regarded us with a raised brow but didn't question our untidy state. We approached cautiously, and when the brown-haired girl lifted her gaze to meet mine, I shivered at her cold, emotionless eyes.

"Grey. Nico." The headmaster nudged the girl softly. "I'd like you two to meet Cecilia. You three are the same age, so I hope you can show her around and become friends."

ARTHUR LEYWIN

My eyes opened as if I had just blinked, yet it felt like I had been sleeping for days. I sat up in my bed, a mixture of feelings weighing on my shoulders.

Why was this memory coming to me again after so long? My insides twisted in guilt at the thought of Nico and Cecilia.

'Is everything all right?' Sylvie asked from the foot of my bed, where she was curled up in her miniature form.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lied, running my fingers through my hair. It was long and messy now, past my chin.

The dream had been so vivid. It had felt like I was back on Earth, reliving my previous life.

I lay there, dazed and unable to get out of bed, until someone knocked at my door.

"Come in," I answered, expecting it to be either my parents or my sister. Instead, the man who entered appeared to be in his late twenties, dressed in black clothes underneath the thin leather armor used by scouts. He dipped his head in a respectful bow before relaying his message.

"Sir, the location for the meeting with the Alacryan messenger has been decided. Commander Virion has asked me to request that you to prepare to meet with the messenger with him and Lord Aldir."

"Got it. I'll be out in ten minutes," I replied, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed.

"Shall I send over a maid to help you get ready?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No need."

“Very well.” The man left after another bow, closing the door behind him.

I quickly washed up and tied my hair back at the crown of my head, leaving my bangs to fall just past my forehead. I dressed in a fine white tunic trimmed with gold to complement the dark mantle I wore over it. Properly clothed, with my hair pulled back neatly, I looked like a very dashing noble. My dream was still fresh in my mind, and it had brought with it a flood of memories from that life. Even the clothes were so very different. The pants in this world were incredibly tight, by comparison—but I had to admit, they offered great mobility and freedom when fighting.

“A dapper appearance for one about to fight in a war,” Virion remarked as I approached him and Aldir.

“Thanks.” I winked, smoothing my sleeve. Aldir’s clothing practically glowed with all the gold and gems decorating it, but Virion wore a simple black robe, as he was still in mourning after Director Cynthia’s murder.

It had only been a few days, but Virion appeared to have aged a century.

By the signature black metal spike that had been found jutting out of Cynthia’s chest, it was obvious that the assassination had been carried out by one who possessed the powers of the Vritra Clan. It was unlikely that an actual clan member had performed the attack—that would have jeopardized the no-asura agreement in the war—but that didn’t mean one of their descendants couldn’t have done it.

The question that ate at my mind—and Virion’s—was *how* they had done it. According to the guards and the nurse caring for her, nobody had seen anyone leave or enter the floor Director Goodsky had been housed on. The door, which had been closed and locked, hadn’t been tampered with either. Everything remained a mystery except one fact: that somehow, the Vritra Clan was involved.

“The ships are about a day away from our shore, Arthur. Are you ready to meet this representative?” Virion asked.

“I am. But are *you* ready?” I responded, genuinely concerned. “You’re not

going to kill the messenger, right?”

With a faint smile, Tessia’s grandfather shook his head.

Aldir stepped toward the glowing teleportation gate. “Good. Then let us depart.”

ULTIMATUM

MEMORIES I THOUGHT I had forgotten flashed in my head with every blink, the scenes haunting me in broad daylight as we prepared to make our way to the location we had designated to meet with the messenger.

'Are you okay, Arthur?' Sylvie's concern touched my mind.

I'm fine, Sylv. Though I'm still getting used to the fact that you call me by my name now, I replied, scratching her small ears.

'Grandfather said it's important that I uphold the dignity of the dragons.' My bond held her tiny snout up high, sauntering beside me as we exited the teleportation gate Aldir had conjured. It had brought us to a small clearing on a rise just above a remote fishing town called Slore, more than a dozen miles south of Etistin.

Well, I can't say you weren't cuter before, when you called me "Papa." I smirked.

'Don't worry. I still see you as my papa!' She rubbed her side against my leg while we walked, as if to comfort me. The occasional moist breeze carried with it a strong smell of the sea, and I felt sticky despite the frigid air.

"I still don't feel right about having this meeting without any backup," Virion said warily.

"If this messenger has the audacity to act against us, I will have every right to intervene," Aldir assured the commander, one corner of his mouth twitching up in the barest hint of a smile. Though two of his eyes were closed, the third

—a single, vivid purple eye—stared down the path ahead, ever watchful.

“Considering everything the Vritra have done—breeding asura half-bloods, turning our mana beasts into mutants, and now the ships—I can’t imagine how long Agrona has been planning this. Despite the extensive preparation, though, I can’t shake the feeling that this war is just some sort of game to him. The choices he’s made, the risks he’s taken...” Commander Virion trailed off, shaking his head.

“If Agrona were easy to predict, he never would’ve gotten this far,” Aldir acknowledged reluctantly. “Since he, like all the other asuras residing in this world, is prohibited from directly participating in the war, he’s been coming up with ways to work around that by being the almighty hand that moves the chess pieces—at least for his side.”

“And who is the almighty hand moving the pieces for our side?” Virion asked with a raised brow.

“You *are* the one leading this war, are you not?” Aldir retorted.

Virion shrugged. “That’s what I tell myself at night.”

“All right,” I interrupted. “Is this the meeting place?”

“Of course not,” Virion said with a weary sigh, tying back his long white hair.

“This is the farthest I can take us. From here we’ll travel to our real destination,” Aldir clarified. “It’s in the middle of the ocean.”

“Lead the way,” I said.

Aldir’s feet slowly rose from the ground as a milky aura surrounded both him and Virion. After a moment, the aura lifted Virion into the air as well. Virion’s lips shut tight and he curled in on himself slightly, like a cat picked up by its scruff.

As the two of them picked up speed, rising quickly above the clouds, Sylvie scampered towards the edge of the cliff.

‘*Jump!*’ Sylvie chirped, then leaped off.

Without a second thought, I followed my bond. As I propelled myself up and

over the steep edge, I took a moment to admire the bird's-eye view of the bustling town directly below me.

Just as I began to fall, Sylvie's massive figure appeared below, scooping me up from the air with a snap of her powerful wings. I patted the base of her long, black neck as we sped through the clouds.

Sylvie, have you gained weight? I joked.

'That joke is getting old, you know,' Sylvie grumbled.

Not to me. I let out a refreshing whoop at the top of my lungs, and it was blown away by the harsh wind slicing against us as we gathered speed.

I spotted the tiny figures of Aldir and Virion ahead of us. Sylvie caught up to them, but stayed a few dozen yards behind Aldir as we surfed along the top of the clouds. This far up in the sky, the only sound was the sharp whistle of air around us, making the journey peaceful despite the purpose of our trip.

As I stared in a daze at the blue and white of our surroundings, my mind wandered back to that day in Epheotus after I had finished my training. The brusque king of the asuras had wanted to see me before I headed back to Dicathen. It was the second encounter I'd had with Lord Indrath, and also the moment I realized who Myre was.

The elderly asura, who had healed me and taught me how to read spells using Realmheart, had been seated next to the stone-faced Lord Indrath, an amused grin on her now-youthful face.

I'd stood there speechless, my mouth ajar, until Lord Indrath beckoned me forward, saying simply, "I'm sure you remember my wife, Myre."

Needless to say, the meeting hadn't gone as I had thought it would. For one, Lord Indrath had been much less critical this time compared to the first time we had met; he'd even—barely—acknowledged my improvement, although he had added that if it weren't for Myre's help, I would've been a lost cause.

Before leaving, Lord Indrath had given me one piece of advice. Oddly, he had activated his aether ability, freezing time for everyone present—even his wife—except for the two of us. I'd stared blankly at the king of the asuras as

Myre, Sylvie, and the guards remained static, and he had left me with a cryptic message:

'It's wisest to close your heart to the elf princess.'

That was all he had said before withdrawing his powers and having the guards escort Sylvie and me back to Windsom and Wren, who were waiting for us outside.

'We're almost here,' Sylvie announced, snapping me back to the present.

Aldir and Virion had stopped above the clouds, waiting for us to catch up.

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you this but I will anyway. No one knows how much the Vritra actually know so it'd be wise to keep your true strength hidden during this meeting." Aldir's voice tickled uncomfortably in my ear as if he was whispering right next to me.

"What about Sylvie?" I shouted over the sound of the asura's dragon wings beating at the air.

"Lady Sylvie will have to transform back into her miniature form," Aldir answered. "I will carry you down, Arthur."

'I'll lay low for now, but I'm not going to stay hidden during the war. If I want to protect you, I'll do so with you on my back,' Sylvie declared as she turned into her white fox form.

I began free-falling but Aldir dipped underneath Sylvie and me, wrapping us in the same aura that enveloped Virion.

We descended beneath the layer of clouds below us, plummeting through the blanket of white, the moisture in the air dampening our clothes, until we spotted the shimmering ocean gently rippling in all directions.

Despite the phenomenal view of the never-ending stretch of water, my gaze instantly focused on the dark specks littered across the ocean to my right. A few dozen miles north, I could see the fleet of Alacryan ships heading toward the shore near Etistin City, the capital of Sapin.

'Look there,' Sylvie pointed out. Floating on the water below was a pitch-black platform about the size of a small house.

As we descended, moments behind Virion and Aldir, I could make out two small figures. From a distance, they had blended in with the platform they stood on.

A shiver ran down my spine. Every hair on my body stood on end, and I could feel my heart beating faster the closer we drifted toward the platform.

“They’re there,” I said aloud to no one in particular. “But I don’t think they’re ordinary messengers.”

Making a soft landing onto the platform, the three of us walked toward the center, with Sylvie following behind me. My jaws clenched at the sight of the two supposed messengers. By their familiar pale grey skin tone and striking red eyes, I knew they had to be part of the Vritra Clan.

“Welcome to our humble abode,” the taller of the two sneered, his lanky arms spread wide.

Virion narrowed his eyes. “We assumed we’d be meeting with a messenger. That role seems to be beneath both of you.”

“I’m flattered, but at this moment we *are* mere messengers,” he replied with an exaggerated smile. His companion remained silent.

Examining the two Vritra, despite their ancestry and blood, the two couldn’t be more different. The one on my left stood just a bit taller than me with a ramrod straight posture. He had deep-set eyes underneath heavy lids, giving a mysteriously charming quality to his stern face. With his neatly-cropped head of ash black hair and his tight-fitting black armor underneath a lavish purple cape, the Vritra would have looked like something out of every woman’s dreams if it weren’t for the pair of horns jutting out just above his ears.

The other Vritra—the one who had been talking—stood well over six feet tall, towering over us all despite his hunched posture. His long, thin arms dangled by his sides as if they had popped out of their sockets. This Vritra didn’t wear armor; instead, his body was wrapped completely in thick dark bandages underneath a shabby black mantle that hung from his shoulders. Messy bangs peeked out from underneath his tattered hood, accentuating his

peculiar appearance.

This was the first time I had come face-to-face with a Vritra, so I was surprised to see how much smaller the horns of the purple-caped Vritra were compared to the one that had attacked Sylvia in the cave during my childhood. But I couldn't sense the level of either of these messengers, which could have meant they were purposely hiding their auras, or simply that they were that much stronger than I was.

"I am Cylrit and this is Uto. It is an honor to meet you, Aldir. We retainers have heard much about the famous asuras in Epheotus." Cylrit's gaze locked onto Aldir's as if Virion and I didn't even exist, but it wasn't out of respect.

"I trust that you will uphold the pact and remain a noncombatant?"

I was surprised at how casually he had mentioned that he was a retainer. That meant he was one of the leading figures in this war who were actually allowed to fight—just beneath the Four Scythes.

"Assuming your side will do the same? Yes," Aldir answered, his stare just as piercing as Cylrit's.

"That's a shame. I wanted to try fighting an asura, but I guess I'll have to settle for slaughtering a few thousand of you lessers," Uto spat, glaring at me. The lanky Vritra took a step toward me, craning his neck down with a sneer. "I get why Mr. One-Eye and Grampa Elf are here but I didn't expect the boy wonder, Arthur Leywin, to grace us with his presence."

I wasn't sure how the Vritra had heard of me, but I maintained my cool façade. "I could say the same for you. To what do we owe the pleasure of the retainers showing their faces here?"

"Like Cylrit said, we are here as messengers. We didn't want to give you the opportunity to capture and torture an innocent messenger for information. Because that's what I'd do." Uto's slanted red eyes peered into mine, searching for signs of fear or anger.

Instead, I returned his provocation with a nonchalant smirk. "I can't wait to find you on the battlefield."

He replied with a murderous gaze, his lips spreading into a wicked grin. “Why wait? I love slicing through children’s flesh the most.”

“Uto! Enough,” Cylrit reprimanded him.

“What?” Uto shrugged innocently. “Mr. One-Eye here can’t touch us anyway.”

“Nor would I want to touch any filthy lessurans,” Aldir answered calmly, holding the lanky Vritra’s gaze. “Now. Since we didn’t come here to exchange frivolities, get on with your message and disappear from my sight.”

By the slight twitch in Uto’s brows, I could tell he was annoyed that his attempt at provoking Aldir had backfired. However, before he had the chance to respond, Cylrit stretched out an arm to restrain him.

“The message that His Majesty has tasked me to deliver to the leaders of Dicathen is simply this: Surrender the ruling families and mercy will be given to those who deserve it. Continue resistance and our army will eradicate everyone on this continent without discretion,” Cylrit recited, still looking only at Aldir.

“You call those terms?” Virion burst out. “That’s a one-sided ultimatum!”

Uto bent down to be at eye-level with Virion. “Be thankful you even have the choice. Don’t worry. If you decide on the first option, I promise to be extra gentle when slicing off your head.”

Cylrit stared daggers at his companion. “We weren’t sent here to incite a fight, Uto.”

“That was never my intention, just a friendly warning about the upcoming battle,” the lanky Vritra replied, but then he turned to back to Virion with a perverse grin. “I hope to meet you again, Elf King. You and your granddaughter. I’ll make sure to enjoy myself thoroughly while you watch.”

Disregarding Aldir’s warning, I stepped forward, ready to draw the sword in my dimension ring, but Virion moved first.

In a flash, his fist made contact with Uto’s jaw. Tessia’s grandfather had already activated his second phase, a shroud of black covering his entire body

and head, but I could still make out the rage in his eyes.

Uto's head immediately snapped back at the blow, lifting him off the ground and knocking loose the hood that had been covering his head.

"That kinda tickled," the lanky Vritra growled, cracking his neck. Uto's nose jutted out at a weird angle, but my eyes were glued to his horns.

It wasn't the shape or the size of his horns that stunned me.

No, it was the familiar chip on his left horn. The chip that the Lance, Alea, had made in the battle that cost her her life.

WHAT WAR MEANS FOR EVERYONE

THE HAUNTING images of Alea's bloody corpse, her limbs brutally severed and core destroyed, flooded my mind as I stared at the chip in Uto's left horn. Any form of inhibition that had kept me from killing the Vritra disappeared as I advanced toward him.

"Was it you?" I asked, my voice dripping with malice.

Sylvie's concern seeped into my head from behind, but it was no use.

With each step forward, the self-control that had enabled me to remain neutral during this meeting faded. Mana surged from my body like a storm, shocking the Vritra and snapping Virion from his outrage.

"Were you the one who killed Alea?" I took another step.

"What was that, pup?" Uto snapped, his eyebrows furrowed with impatience.

"The Lance in the dungeon who had all her limbs cut off before dying," I clarified, my voice icy. "Was it you?"

"Ahh," the Vritra said, his lips curling upward.

Just from the tone of his voice, I already knew the answer. Taunting Virion and using his granddaughter as ammunition was one thing, but the fact that he was the one responsible for Alea's horrible torture and death now gave gravity to his threats.

He had to die.

"That pretty little elf? What if it *was* me, brat?" Uto spit.

I opened my mouth to respond, but Aldir gave me no chance to act on my

impulse. He moved in front of me with a stern gaze. “This is what he wants you to do. Don’t let him provoke you.”

I let out a deep breath. Of course I knew Uto was provoking us on purpose—anyone with half a brain could see that. As for whether it was with forethought or because he was just that impulsive... I had a feeling it was both.

Swallowing the bitter taste in my mouth, I ignored Uto. Facing Cylrit, I asked, “Was there anything else that needed to be discussed? Or was that predictable threat all you came here to say?”

“You will be given two days to decide,” Cylrit answered callously. “If the royal families of Dicathen have not been surrendered by then, we will take that as your answer.”

I looked back at Virion, who had finally gathered himself.

“We’ll show ourselves out.” Virion’s words were clipped as he glared at the Vritra, but he smoothed over the creases on his robe casually.

As I turned to leave with Virion and Aldir, Uto’s voice rang out.

“You should’ve heard her scream,” he laughed. “Almost made me want to not kill her—keep her alive so I could keep making her scream, you know?”

I could feel my blood flowing faster, pounding in my head as I stepped toward the edge of the platform.

Aldir caught my gaze and prepared to lift me up with his aura, but I stopped him. Sending ice, lightning, and wind attribute mana into my palm, I raised my arm and whipped around to face Uto.

The thin, translucent beam of fused elements pierced the narrow gap between the two Vritra, creating a crackling gale in its path. The ray shot past them and into the water, and the ocean split from the force of my spell. The waves instantly froze over, then a current of electricity shattered the ice into shards of sparkling glass.

I could see Uto’s expression crumple, slowly giving way to one of doubt and shock. Even Cylrit’s cold face showed surprise as the shower of ice shards

rained down on us.

“Whether or not we decide to proceed with the war, I really hope to meet you again, Uto.” I turned my back on him as the shadowy platform we had been standing on convulsed.

Aldir lifted Virion, Sylvie, and me into the air, and I fought the urge to turn back around. Staring at Virion’s face, lined with worry and frustration, I could tell he was thinking about the Vritra’s words.

“You’re not really considering their offer, right?” I asked as we rose above the clouds.

“No—but if they were to keep their word, imagine how many innocent lives could be saved,” Virion said, the creases between his brows thickening.

I scoffed. “That’s a big *if* to be sacrificing your and your family’s lives for.”

“Arthur’s right,” Aldir chimed in. “You know what becomes of the world under the Vritra’s rule. Even Epheotus won’t be safe from harm if Agrona is able to populate two continents with his half-breed descendants. It’ll be only a matter of a few generations before they strike against the rest of the asuras as well.”

“I know,” Virion sighed. “I’m not looking forward to the protests that will undoubtedly greet my choice, though.”

“You’re going to tell everyone?” I asked, surprised.

Tess’s grandfather nodded solemnly. “Trust is a fickle serpent; laboriously gained yet so easily lost. A leader must be trusted by his people, but how much do you think they’ll trust me after realizing I’m basically using their lives as a gambling token?”

“Not much,” I admitted, still reluctant toward the idea. I wouldn’t question Virion’s decisions, though. As far as leadership went, he had much more experience than me, even with both lives under my belt.

I could have offered a different perspective, but ultimately I trusted his choices, as did Aldir. When the asura had first come to Dicathen, killing the Greysunders in one sweep as soon as he had arrived, I’d assumed he would

try to control Virion like some sort of puppeteer in the background. However, Aldir simply protected and advised Virion, never forcing him to take action. This said a lot about the asura's respect for him.

As we flew back to the western shore, Virion used a mental transmission artifact to coordinate the arrangements for the public appearance that would supposedly take place tomorrow. From the bits and pieces I managed to pick up as Virion murmured into the artifact, it seemed all the major figures in the war would be present at the speech. The Lances, the royal members of the three races, and other influential noble families were to be gathered and stand beside Virion as a sign of respect while he made his speech.

We came through the teleportation gate and into the circular room in the castle just a few hours later. Before leaving the bland brick chamber, Virion patted my back.

"Get some rest, Arthur. Lord Aldir and I will handle the rest from here," the white-haired elf said with a tired smile.

"I can help," I protested. "There's a lot you need to plan if the announcement is to be made tomorrow, right?"

"Let me worry about that," he countered. "Your family is here, right now, waiting for you. After the true war begins, I'm afraid the amount of time you will be able to spend with your loved ones will be limited."

"Listen to Virion," Aldir agreed. "Judging by your little parting gift to those lessurans, you've prepared your body. Now, use this time to prepare your mind and heart."

Tired and dirty from the journey, I relented, and we went our separate ways. I headed for the living quarters, which were on the upper floors. With the castle always shrouded by clouds, it was hard to imagine how large this floating structure must be to accommodate almost a hundred people while still having space for luxurious amenities.

Walking up the stairs with Sylvie silently scampering behind me, I thought about how everyone's lives would change during this war. Until now, the

battles had been isolated, taking place well past the Grand Mountains and never reaching civilization. There hadn't been any civilian casualties, only military ones. But once the ships landed on the western border, that would all change—and for the civilians, it would come as an unpleasant surprise.

I feared how the inhabitants—the non-nobles—would take Virion's announcement. At best, they would reluctantly accept the news; more likely, protests would arise, and it was even possible that the citizens the soldiers of Dicathen were trying to protect would betray us for the blind hope that the Alacryan forces would let them live if they cooperated.

I exited the stairway on the fourth floor and made my way down the wide corridor, warmly lit by orbs mounted on both walls. Narrower hallways branched off, with doors every few yards or so.

“How do you suppose we find our parents, Sylv?” I asked, veering right into a random hallway in hopes of running into someone who would know.

‘Searching for mana signatures seems over the top here and would probably alarm some of the mages,’ Sylvie chirped. *‘How about knocking on every door until we find someone who can tell us?’*

I took another right at random and kept walking until a familiar sight caught my eye. A wide archway led to a patio garden outside the castle. I never thought I'd see such an open deck on a flying castle but the vast orange sky of a beautiful sunset, dimmed by the transparent barrier surrounding it, illuminated the area. Playing on the neatly-kept grass lawn were groups of children, some sparring with friends, others simply chasing each other.

What had made me stop, though, was the towering dark-brown bear playing amidst the scampering children. I spotted an uncomfortable Ellie just beside her bond, talking to a blond-haired boy about her age.

Puffed-out chest, chin held high, a fake smile that didn't reach his eyes... If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was trying to flirt with my precious sister.

“Sic him, Sylv. Make him scream like a castrato.” I grinned evilly.

My vicious bond was scampering to my sister, sending a mental message

asking me what a castrato was, when Ellie's mana beast picked up the blond boy by the back of his collar and flung him away.

I locked eyes with the bear—Boo was his name—for a brief second. I gave him a stern but approving nod as I raised my right thumb.

Still seated next to my sister, Boo responded with a furry thumbs-up as well. At that moment I decided Boo wouldn't be such a bad companion for my sister after all.

"Sylvie?" Ellie exclaimed when she saw the little white fox scampering towards her. She looked up, and her face lit up when she saw me. "Brother?" The children—all nobles, who had come here for safety—whipped their heads around, dropping whatever they had been doing. Some of the parents, seated nearby on the patio chairs talking to one another, turned to look at me as well.

I walked toward my sister, feeling everyone's eyes following me. Ellie scooped up Sylvie and embraced her tightly before looking back up at me.

"Brother, you're back already?"

"Yup." I smiled, glancing around at the onlookers. I hugged my sister in greeting, whispering into her ear, "Why are they all staring at me?"

"There's not a noble in Dicathen that doesn't know who Arthur Leywin is," she giggled. "You should see how those nobles treat me."

"So that's what it was. I thought I had done something wrong to your friends here." I gave a relieved chuckle. Turning to Boo, who remained seated on his hind legs, I raised my hand. "Good to see you, Boo!"

The giant mana beast responded with a low grunt and received my hand with a large paw.

"When did you two get so close?" Ellie marveled.

"Men with common objectives tend to bond fast," I answered as Boo and I nodded at each other once more.

"What? No—never mind, that's not important," Ellie amended, shaking her head. "It's good that you're here right now. You've got to stop them."

“What? Stop who from what?” I could hear the worry in her voice. Ellie pulled me inside, off of the patio and away from the other children and parents. Her eyes darted nervously left and right.

“It’s Mom and Dad,” she said solemnly. “They’ve decided to join the war.”

UNEXPECTEDLY

LEAVING SYLVIE WITH MY SISTER, I made my way to my parents' room. I strode down the corridor, my gait growing faster with each step as I arrived in front of the door labeled *Leywin Family*.

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. The thought of what Ellie had said, that my parents really planned to take part in the war, filled me with unease. A dull thud resounded as I knocked on the wooden door.

"It's open," the warm voice of my mother chimed from the other side.

The hinges creaked as I turned the knob and slid the door open. Bags lay open on the floor with clothes folded neatly beside them. I stepped inside, looking around to see my father polishing his gauntlets with a set of chainmail armor spread out beside him. My mother, who had been walking toward the door to greet their visitor, stopped when she saw me. She masked her surprise with a weak smile, and my father dropped his gaze as soon as he saw my expression.

"So it's true," I muttered, picking up a polished shin brace from beside my father.

"Son." He put down the gauntlet and rag but remained seated.

"We weren't expecting you back so soon," my mother added, taking another step toward me.

"Were you planning on leaving without saying anything to me?" I asked, my gaze still focused on the shin brace in my hand.

“Of course not. But we wanted to finish preparing before you got back.” My mother lifted her hand, hesitating just a bit before she placed it on my shoulder.

A mixture of feelings welled up in me as I squeezed tightly at the metal armor—confusion as to why they had suddenly decided to fight, irritation that they hadn’t even bothered to discuss this decision with me, and anger that they’d be willing to risk their lives when Ellie was so young—barely twelve.

I finally lifted my gaze from the armor in my hand and looked at my father. “I thought you were both going to wait until Ellie was older before joining the war.”

“Commander Virion advised us to stay until Ellie was older—*or* until you came,” my father said, his gaze firm.

“I don’t believe you’ve suddenly decided to fight just because I came back,” I replied doubtfully.

“We didn’t,” my mother answered, her hand squeezing my shoulder more tightly.

“I just got a transmission from Helen.” My father stood up, his gaze unusually hard as he tested out his gauntlets. “They were attacked in a dungeon as everyone was leaving. They stayed back to buy some time for the younger soldiers to escape, but...”

“But?” I echoed.

My father, Reynolds Leywin, the man who had always endured every hardship with an optimistic smile, looked up with an icy venom in his eyes.

“Adam didn’t make it.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That’s impossible. I was there just yesterday. I was the one who cleared the dungeon and killed the mutant holed up inside.”

My father nodded solemnly. “Apparently after you left, as everyone prepared to depart, another horde of mana beasts, led by a mutant, attacked them. Helen thinks the bottom floor of the first dungeon was connected to another

dungeon.”

“The fight was a mess—no one had been expecting a battle,” my mother said.

“The Twin Horns and some other veteran soldiers stayed to give everyone else time to get away. Luckily, the mutant was only B-class, but because its army was larger and caught them off-guard, there were more deaths than anyone expected... including Adam’s.”

A barren silence lingered in the room after my mother finished speaking. I couldn’t believe that someone I had just seen yesterday was dead. Then a sinking realization made me bolt upright.

Tess had been in that dungeon!

“Who... who else died?” I asked. Despite my worry, I didn’t want to seem insensitive of Adam’s death by asking if Tess was okay.

“That was all I was able to get from Helen. It was an emergency transmission, so the message was short. But she didn’t name anyone else, so I figure the others who died were soldiers we don’t know,” my father said, letting out a slow, weary breath. “Commander Virion probably knows more about the situation than we do.”

Surely Helen would have mentioned if something had happened to Tess, but I was still uneasy, to say the least.

“I’m sorry about Adam,” I said, trying to console my father. Adam wasn’t my favorite of the Twin Horns—I had found his quick temper and cynical sarcasm to be distasteful—but he had been loyal. Underneath his impatient and cranky exterior had been a trustworthy comrade who stood by my parents’ sides when they had been members of the party.

I could see now why the atmosphere surrounding my father was so heavy.

“Don’t misunderstand, Arthur. We’re not doing this out of guilt—a soldier’s life is always in danger,” my father said.

“Even so,” I said, shaking my head.

I knew I was being unreasonable. My father had every right to fight the battles he chose. But it was my own selfishness—wanting to keep the ones I

loved safe—that made me want to try.

It didn't matter what level your core was or how knowledgeable you were about mana manipulation. No matter how much you strengthened your body or heavily you equipped yourself, death could come at any moment in a battle. No matter how strong I became, I firmly believed that. Yet my father was willing to risk his and my mother's lives when it was not only unnecessary, but reckless.

"Arthur, it's not his fault," my mother consoled me. "I'm the one who wants to go back to the Twin Horns and help out in the war."

"What?" I blurted, completely taken by surprise. "*You* want to go to war?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"B-But you can't." I turned to my father, certain my bewilderment was written on my face. "I mean, Dad said you avoid using magic because something happened in the past. Why now...?"

My mother cast a glance at my father, who dipped his head in a solemn nod.

"Arthur, sit down."

I obeyed, taking a seat at the foot of the bed as my mother gathered her thoughts.

"What else did your fath—your father tell you?" She eyed me guiltily as she tripped over her words, but I didn't take it to heart. She had told me she would need time to accept the revelations about who I was; it was clear that she was still conflicted, but I could tell she was trying.

"That was about all," I said. "He said you would tell me the rest when you were ready."

"What we never told you about the Twin Horns, Arthur, was that there was actually one more member."

My brows furrowed and I glanced over at my father, who remained silent.

"Her name was Lensa. She was a talented young augments," my mother continued. She told me the story of a very bright and hopeful mage who had joined the Twin Horns shortly after my father had brought in a young Alice

from Valden City. My mother's eyes glazed over as she described how she and Lensa had hit it off immediately, Lensa's brash nature and straightforwardness meshing well with my mother's timidity. Lensa had done well for herself as an adventurer even without the help of a party, and she was already fairly well-known. So when she had asked the Twin Horns if she could join their party, it came as a surprise to everyone.

My mother closed her eyes and paused for a breath. "It was only about two years after she joined that the accident occurred."

I tensed in apprehension as I imagined what sort of accident had transpired, but my mother faintly smiled. "It wasn't some dramatic calamity that befell us; not everyone's life is as exciting as yours."

Embarrassed, I laughed uncomfortably and scratched my cheek.

"We got careless and ran into an ambush by a pack of stingers. None of us had sustained any major injuries and I thought very little of it. I healed everyone's surface wounds." My mother pursed her lips to keep from crying. "The thing about being an emitter is that everyone expects you to know how to heal every injury—that your magic is a one-spell-cures-all when that really isn't the case."

My father placed a consoling hand on my mother's back as she shuddered.

"I didn't know that either, at the time; it hadn't been that long since I had awakened and I'd never fully trained in the different aspects of healing. I didn't think I needed to." Wiping away her tears, she looked up at me with red eyes. "I closed everyone's wounds, but the venom from the stingers' tails had infected the flesh below. Everyone else, including your father, was able to get treated in time, before it could do any serious harm, but Lensa's wound was close to her mana core, and, although I closed her wounds, the venom spread."

I drew in a breath sharply. "Then..."

"Yes. Her mana core got infected to the point where she could no longer practice mana manipulation. I had robbed my friend and teammate of the one

true joy in her life.”

“At least she survived,” I said, trying to comfort her, but she shook her head.

“She went off into a dungeon by herself and never came back out,” my mother said. “She had always said she wanted to die gloriously in battle, but she went into a high-risk dungeon knowing she couldn’t use magic. She wanted to get herself killed. And you know what the funny part is?” My mother looked up, trying to keep the tears from falling as she laughed bitterly. “If I hadn’t closed the wound, the doctor would’ve been able to extract the poison easily. She probably would have been fine if I hadn’t *healed* her.”

I opened my mouth, hoping words would form, but none did. My father remained silent as well, his hand still gently stroking my mother’s back.

After a few minutes, my mother composed herself. “I’ve been scared to properly use magic for anything more than minor injuries since then. When we were attacked on our way to Xyrus, I was barely able to bring myself to heal your father. But after you told us about your... secret and went off to train, while we were holed up in that cave, Elder Rinia helped me. I doubt Adam’s death was a sign, but after everything the Twin Horns have done for your father and me, I think it’s time for us to be there for them.”

The resolution in my mother’s eyes made it clear that she wasn’t saying this to gain my approval.

“That’s not the only reason though,” my father said in a hushed tone. “Now that you’re back, it’s been killing me to think about you fighting in the war while we’re here, safely twiddling our thumbs and waiting for good news.”

“But what if something happens to either of you? What will happen to Ellie?” I argued, still uneasy about them going into battle. “You could...” I cut off, unable to finish that thought out loud.

“The same goes for you, Arthur. No matter how strong you are, death rarely comes from just weakness; it sneaks up when your guard is down. I’ll protect your mother, and you can bet that our goal in this war will be to make it out

in one piece and come back to you and your sister, but you have to do the same.” My father paused for a second as his gaze hardened. “We may not have raised you as we thought we had, with your past-life memories and all, but you can be damn sure that Ellie sees you as her loving brother, so don’t be too eager to sacrifice yourself for some vague ‘greater good.’ You need to come out of this war safely. Even if we lose this war, there will always be a chance to fight back. You only truly lose when you die, because there are no second chances after that.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle softly. “Well...”

“You know what I mean!” my father snapped, eliciting a faint smile from my mother.

Just then, a hurried knock drew our attention to the door. After trading glances with my parents, I said, “It’s open.”

The wooden door swung open to reveal Virion, still in the black robe he had worn for our meeting with the Vritra. “Boy, have you heard?”

“Commander Virion!” My parents bolted up from their seats.

“Please. Just ‘Virion’ is fine for Arthur’s parents,” he replied with a quick wave of his hand.

“The attack?” I guessed, judging by his perturbed expression.

“Good, you have then.” Virion nodded. “And have you told your parents?”

“My parents were the ones who told me.”

Virion’s brows rose in mild surprise, but he merely shook his head as he regarded my parents. “Then you must’ve heard what happened to your ex-party member.”

My father responded with a solemn nod.

“You have my deepest condolences,” the commander said somberly. “Some of the soldiers who were there have just arrived at the castle. I came to get Arthur, but I’m positive that at least the leader of the Twin Horns is here. Would you like to come with us?”

I sent Sylvie a quick transmission telling her we were going to be on the

lower floor and that she should stay with Ellie, and the four of us hurried to the teleportation room.

The towering iron doors that protected the teleportation room had been left open. Soldiers, exhausted from battle, stumbled out of the glowing gate in the center of the chamber. Some still had their weapons drawn and bloody.

Guards lined the walls in case anyone other than Dicathen soldiers made their way through the portal, and handmaids and nurses waited with fresh gauze and vials of antiseptics and ointment to treat the badly injured soldiers as they were led or carried away on stretchers.

I spotted Helen first and nudged my parents, pointing in her direction.

Needless to say, the leader of the Twin Horns was in a miserable state. Her metal chest guard was cracked, and only a fragment of her shoulder brace was still attached to her. The leather armor that protected the rest of her body had gashes all over it, lined with dried blood, but her expression wasn't one of weariness or pain. There was a raging tempest in her eyes as she walked down the platform, her broken bow still in hand.

"Helen!" my father called out. My parents immediately rushed toward Helen. Her expression softened at the sight of my parents, and she returned their embrace.

I left Virion, who was still anxiously waiting for Tess to walk through the portal, and made my way toward Helen.

"I'm glad you're safe," I said, giving her a gentle hug. "I'm sorry for what happened to Adam... If only I had stayed down there with you—"

"Don't," Helen stopped me. "No good ever comes of thinking like that. What happened, happened. The best thing to do is focus on how we'll make those damn Alacryans and their mutant pets pay."

"What you have to focus on right now is resting," my mother said. "Come, we'll have a nurse look at you."

Helen insisted she was okay but let my mother guide her out of the portal room, following the trail of wounded soldiers headed toward the medical

wing, my father trailing closely behind them. I wondered when they would tell Helen about their plans to re-join the Twin Horns, but I stayed near the teleportation platform, waiting for Tess to come back.

The soldiers who escaped had managed to reach one of the hidden teleportation gates within the Beast Glades, but they hadn't had time for a headcount. It was possible that the horde of mana beasts could still ambush them outside the dungeon. Each minute that passed by without Tess showing up made me worry even more.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity passed as I watched the unfamiliar faces stagger out of the teleportation gate. Finally, a familiar face popped out of the portal—it was the boy named Stannard.

He had a few scuffs on his tunic and pants, and his face was smeared with dirt, but there was no blood on him. I took that as a positive sign.

I didn't hesitate; I dashed over to him, pulling him aside the instant he stepped out of the gate.

“Whoa! What giv—”

“Where's Tessia? Was she with you?” I bombarded him with questions, gripping his arm tightly.

“Arthur Leywin?” A twinge crossed his face. “Ouch. Your grip is a bit tight.” I immediately let go, my gaze darting from Stannard to the teleportation gate just in case Tess came out.

“Sorry, Stannard. I heard about the ambush in the dungeon. Where's the rest of your team?” I asked impatiently, forced to raise my voice over the increasing noise of groaning soldiers, shouted orders, and hurried conversations as friends and comrades found each other in the chaos.

“Th-They should've been behind me,” he replied, looking back. “It was too crazy. We had to keep running in case they chased after us.”

Stannard was shivering and his knees buckled. I let him lean against me and helped him to the side of the room, where he could sit and lean against the

wall.

Looking at everyone's state, I realized that Helen had clearly understated the severity of the ambush. As I peered over the crowd of soldiers, I spotted the rest of Tess's teammates.

The girl named Caria was carrying Darvus, the boy I had dueled against, on her back, despite her own multiple wounds. His feet dragged on the ground because of their difference in height. Her curly brown hair was tangled and caked with blood at the ends, and her leather armor was tattered beyond repair.

Rushing to them, I lifted the unconscious augments from Caria's back and carried him myself, which seemed to surprise her. She thanked me, sounding exhausted, as I guided her to Stannard.

When I put Darvus down, he stirred awake with a pained groan. He tried to focus on me from under his wild hair, and as soon as he realized who he was staring at, his glazed eyes narrowed. "You... because of that bloody technique of yours, I couldn't muster up any mana to fight!"

Despite his anger, his voice came out hoarse and weak.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

Darvus sank back against the wall before falling back into unconsciousness, joining the sleeping Stannard.

I snagged a pitcher of water from a passing handmaid and gave it to Caria. She immediately raised the glass pitcher to her lips, sloshing water down her front as she clumsily gulped down the entire contents before passing the empty container back to me. She slumped down next to Darvus, clearly spent. "Caria." I gently shook her shoulder to keep her from falling asleep. "I need to know what happened to Tessia."

Caria's eyes were already half-closed. She seemed about to speak when, instead, her lips curled into a grin and she pointed behind me wordlessly.

Confused, I looked over my shoulder. Hobbling out of the portal—dirty, her clothes tattered, hair in disarray, armor dented and cracked, but alive and in

one piece—was Tessia.

NUMBERS BEHIND AGE

TESSIA ERALITH

I stepped through the teleportation gate and onto a platform, feeling weary and frustrated. I could've helped back there, but they wouldn't let me. The soldiers who stayed behind to fight had all echoed the same words—that I needed to go; my safety was the priority.

What the hell was the point of training so damn hard if everyone treated me like some glass sculpture?

I let out a deep breath, hoping to expel the frustration from my system, but all it did was remind me of how thirsty I was. I looked around the crowd of soldiers, guards, and nurses for anyone with the water I needed to quench my parched throat. Then I caught sight of my teammates.

Stannard and Darvus were asleep against the wall. Caria was sitting up, speaking to someone, and then she pointed at me. The man she had been talking to turned his head.

My chest tightened as he stood up from his crouching position. His furrowed brows and the sharp gaze with which he regarded his surroundings instantly relaxed as he locked eyes with me.

It was Art.

I stared mindlessly as he walked towards me. The first time I had seen him, two years ago, he had been covered in blood and grime, looking somewhat like a monster himself. However, the Art approaching me now looked like a

completely different person. Dressed in a sharp white tunic which was trimmed luxuriously with gold, and a long black mantle that seemed to shroud him in mystery, he exuded a sort of grand aura that belittled every royal family in Dicathen. His long hair was bound up, accentuating the sharp lines of his jaw. His auburn bangs fell messily over his forehead and past his azure eyes, which crinkled with his breathtaking smile.

He was almost upon me before I snapped out of my daze. There were soldiers and guards nearby that I had to keep my composure around. It had barely been a day since the last time I'd seen Art, and judging by his demeanor then, I was sure he disliked emotional reunions in public.

With a hoarse cough, I tried to stand taller, puffing myself up to muster as much poise and dignity as I could, despite my unkempt appearance.

I stuck my hand out for him to shake, keeping my expression stoic. "Good to see you so soon, Arth—"

But my gesture was ignored. His powerful hand wove underneath my arm, landing firmly on my back as he pulled me toward him. I stumbled forward at the sudden force and my face pressed against his thin tunic, bathing me in his warmth.

I stood motionless in his embrace. I'd been approached, pursued, and courted by almost every man brave enough to look past my lineage, and the only things I'd ever felt for them were pity and annoyance. But now my body felt as if it had been both frozen and melted at the same time.

Whether the entire room had fallen silent or my sense of hearing had just disappeared, I couldn't tell, but my other senses had become overwhelmed. Within the safe haven of his sturdy arms, a faint hint of oak and a crisp ocean breeze filled my nose as I felt him bury his face into my neck.

My limbs remained frozen, but my empty stomach fluttered uncontrollably when Art's arm squeezed just a fraction tighter.

Art finally spoke. "I'm glad you're okay." His warm breath blew against my neck, sending shivers down my spine. My arms twitched, instinctively

wanting to hug him back, but the piercing stares I felt from everyone around us made me stop.

“Of course I’m okay,” I said, somehow mustering up the strength to push him away despite every fiber in my body urging me to pull him closer. I could feel blood rushing all the way up my neck to the very top of my head as I stared at Art, his face just inches away from my own.

I could see his eyes moving, tracing every feature of my face as he studied me. Taking a deep breath, as if a large weight had been lifted, he looked at me with a gentle smile. “Come on. I’ll take you to your grandfather.”

It felt as though I was swimming in some sort of thick, viscous liquid in my head. The world around me blurred with muffled conversations and shadows of people I couldn’t quite make out. My body seemed to move on its own, acting and responding on instinct as my mind kept replaying my arrival at the castle. Now that I was just remembering it, I started analyzing every action and inaction of the scene, trying to put meaning into each thing Art had done—the firmness yet tenderness of his hug, the desperation and relief that had poured out of him when his eyes locked onto mine.

I replayed the scene over and over again in my head, nitpicking every little detail. However, the conclusion I reached every time was the same. I hated how composed he was every time we met. And, after all of this time, I hated how weak and helpless I still felt around him.

I wasn’t able to see much of Art after our initial reunion at the castle. I was swept away and escorted to my room by a team of nurses as soon as my grandfather had released me from his embrace. After checking to make sure my teammates had been tended to, I plopped gingerly into my bed, finding comfort in the fact that my simply furnished room was exactly as I had left it. While the nurses removed my armor and wiped me down with scented towels, I felt my body sinking deeper and deeper into the sheets until the world faded to darkness.

“—should tell her, Virion.” Art’s familiar voice pulled me out of my slumber. Rubbing my eyes, I squinted at the morning sun just barely peeking above the layer of clouds below us.

I took a second to assess the situation, then a frightening thought struck me. I immediately peeked underneath my covers, giving a sigh of relief to find myself clothed.

“She’s going to find out eventually. You can’t hide something like this from her; it’s impossible.” Art’s muffled voice came from the other side of the door. He spoke in a hushed tone but his words rang clearly in my ears.

“It’s fine if she finds out later, but she’s not ready for this. Now shush! What if she hears?” my grandfather whispered back.

“She’ll listen to you if you respect her enough to tell her. If she finds out from anyone else, what do you think she’s going to do?” Art argued back, his voice growing sharper.

“Damn you, boy. What if she decides to go? Then what?”

“We’ll figure it out after we hear her response. Virion, you and I both know what your granddaughter is capable of once she puts her mind to something.”

“I know,” my grandfather snapped back. “I just can’t... those Vritra bastards murdered Cynthia right here in this castle, Arthur! What if...”

I couldn’t hear the rest of their conversation over the sound of my heart, which was beating louder and louder. *Master Cynthia is dead? That’s impossible, right?*

Master Cynthia had always been leagues above anyone I knew in terms of magical abilities. Her expertise in mana manipulation was on par with—maybe even above—Grandpa’s. She had taught me everything from basic control to advanced execution of spells while sword fighting. *There’s no way she could be killed by Vritra thugs.* I tried convincing myself of this, but my hands trembled as I gripped my blanket.

I sat up in bed, wiping away a stray tear that had managed to escape, and waited for them to come in.

I answered immediately when they knocked on the door. Dressed simply in a grey tunic and black pants with his hair tied up into a knot, Art came in first. He was followed by my grandfather, who was wearing the same black robe he had been wearing yesterday.

After one glance at me, Art sighed and closed his eyes. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough,” I answered matter-of-factly.

My grandfather took a step forward, his face furrowed in concern. “Child—” I cut him off, saying, “Take me to her, please,” as I slipped out of bed to find something to wear over my nightdress.

I stayed silent as we descended the flights of stone stairs, the only sound coming from our echoing footsteps. My grandfather led the way and Art trailed closely behind me.

My grandfather kept glancing back at me, but he didn’t say anything until we reached the bottommost floor, where the dungeons and cells were.

“Why is Master Cynthia holed up in such a filthy and degrading place?” I demanded. “These rooms are for murderers and traitors.”

“We don’t have a burial ground in this castle, Tessia. We’re keeping her here until circumstances permit us to safely give her a burial,” my grandfather answered patiently. “And the dungeon has been empty since the start of the war, when we moved all the prisoners to more remote dungeons on the ground.”

While the rest of the castle was well-cared-for, the dungeon level seemed purposely designed to repulse those who might be held here. Dim light, provided by a handful of artifacts attached to the walls along the main corridor, revealed fungus growing between the stone blocks and thick nets of dusty webbing draped from the ceiling. Foul, musty smells blended with the near-toxic odor of decay and waste, and I, despite my father’s words, felt again that this was hardly a fitting resting place for such a renowned conjurer. At least she wasn’t also surrounded by the screams and moans of prisoners—

only a hollow silence lingered.

At the farthest end of the corridor, there was a single metal door with a soldier standing guard.

“Open the door,” my grandfather ordered.

The armored guard nodded, his expression hidden underneath his helmet, as he stepped to the side and turned the rusted handle without turning around. The metal door screeched against the uneven ground. A flawless stone casket lay in the center of the empty cell with a small pile of flowers resting on top.

“Only a few people know of her death,” my grandfather explained, walking up and gently laying a hand on the top of the stone coffin.

“She deserves a public ceremony. All her students, the professors who taught at Xyrus... she doesn’t deserve to be here,” I muttered.

My grandfather nodded. “I know—”

“Then why?” I said harshly. “Why is my master rotting away in a corner of this foul dungeon? For everything she did for this continent, she deserves a diamond coffin and a countrywide funeral! She—she deserves anything but... *this*.”

“Tessia...” Grandpa rested his hand gently on my back, perhaps hoping to quell my anger.

“How could you keep this from me, Grandpa? If I hadn’t heard you through the door, when would I have found out? After the war?” I scoffed, shrugging his hand away as tears blurred my vision. “Is there anything else you’re hiding from me? Despite everything I did to show you that I was mature, you still treat me like a child—”

“That’s because you *are* a child,” Art snapped.

“What?” I blurted, my face going red with anger. “How can you—you should know better than anyone else how I’m feeling, but you call me a child? *You*, of all people?”

Arthur’s face settled into a hard-edged mask as I huffed in frustration, the

stern eye with which he regarded me casting into doubt my memory of yesterday's affectionate hug.

"Maybe I'm saying this because I know both you and Grandpa Virion so well, Tess. What you're doing right now—needlessly putting yourself in harm's way just to prove a point—is no better than a child throwing a tantrum," Art continued.

"Arthur," my grandfather cut in. "Enough."

"How *dare* you!" I seethed, tears rolling down my cheeks.

"If you took a minute to think this whole situation through, you'd realize why your grandfather had to keep it a secret. What do you think would happen if he were to announce that someone had been killed by our enemy in what's supposed to be the safest location on the continent?" Art said, his gaze unrelenting.

"Well, I'm sorry that not everyone is as smart as you!" I retorted.

Art's gaze softened. "You're only seventeen, Tess—"

"And you're only sixteen. Yet Grandpa, Master Aldir, and even Master Cynthia have never treated you like a kid, even though you're younger than me," I argued.

"If they see me as an adult, that's something they've come to realize on their own. I haven't been deliberately trying to prove it," he answered.

"How is that even fair?" I choked back a sob. "You get to do what you want because you're good enough, but no matter how hard I try or what I accomplish, I'll always be some damsel in need of protection!"

"That's not it, Tessia. Your grandfather and I—"

"What?" I cut in, my face numb with anger. "You want me cooped up and isolated from anything potentially dangerous or distressing so badly that you can't even tell me my own master was killed? Or is it because—"

"Because if we told you, the first thing you'd try to do is find the Vritra that killed Cynthia so you could take revenge, and get yourself killed!" Arthur exploded.

This was the first time I had ever heard him raise his voice to this extent. It stunned not just me and Grandpa, but even the guard standing outside.

“You... you don’t know that,” I denied.

“Don’t I?” Arthur pressed. “Because I know for a fact that you acting this way isn’t because Virion didn’t tell you about Director Goodsky dying. You’re not mad at him, you’re mad at yourself for leaving your master to go prove to everyone how strong and helpful you’d be to the war.”

“This isn’t about...” But I couldn’t finish my sentence. I broke down, falling to my knees and sobbing uncontrollably.

“Arthur! I think you’ve said enough,” my grandpa growled. “Guard. Escort him out.”

I didn’t look up as Art left. I didn’t know what kind of expression he had on his face, or whether he was sorry. It was too much.

“Tessia. Let’s take some time together to pay our respects to Cynthia. I’m sure that, instead of having millions of people at a ceremony, she’d rather have the few she truly cherished mourning for her.”

Mustering up a shaky nod, I whispered hoarsely, “Thank you.” We both turned to face the smooth stone casket that my master resided in. Waves of emotion continued to toss and turn within me.

Grandpa knelt down beside me, gently stroking my trembling back. “After this, I’ll tell you everything.”

INVALUABLE ALLIES

“I UNDERSTAND YOUR PROBLEM, Grey, but I’m not sure I’m the best person to help you with this,” the headmaster said. “No matter how lacking your ki pool may be compared to most kids your age, you’re still a child with plenty of time for that to change. However, and I say this as a general life lesson, if you find yourself lacking in resources, save what you have for when you need it the most.”

I pondered over her cryptic solution to my ki problem.

“Thank you, Headmaster Wilbeck,” I grinned before heading out the door.

“Oh, and Grey?” the headmaster called from behind her desk.

I halted, peeking my head around the doorway. “Yes?”

“How is Cecilia getting along with you and Nico?”

“Well...” I paused. “Besides her little accidents, I’d say we’re slowly getting through to her.”

“She hasn’t said a word to you two, has she?” Headmaster Wilbeck sighed.

“Nope. Not a single one.”

“Very well. I really do hope you keep trying to break her out of her shell, though. If anyone can do it, it’s you two.”

I came back into her office. “Headmaster?”

“Hmm?”

“Why are you pushing so hard for us to be friends with Cecilia?” I asked.

The headmaster’s lips curled into a gentle smile as she stood up from her

chair. “That, my child, is a story that I’m hoping she’ll tell you herself.”

“I mean, she looks normal enough, but everyone’s scared of her because of those accidents, even though they only happen every once in a while.” I scratched my head. “Not that Nico and I are scared or anything but... you know. A few kids have been sent to the infirmary because of her, so I just thought it’d be better to know more to help her.”

Walking around her desk, Headmaster Wilbeck tousled my hair. “Your job isn’t to help her; it’s to be her friend. Let me take care of helping her.”

“Yes, Mother.” I saluted.

The headmaster’s gentle, downturned eyes widened in surprise at my words.

“It’s Headmaster Olivia or Headmaster Wilbeck to you, Grey.” Her voice was firm but her eyes betrayed her.

I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to stay in her office and help her with the pile of papers that never seemed to diminish, but I knew she would never let me. Like a broken record, she always said that it was her job, not mine.

Dragging my feet as I left the small office, I trudged down the hall toward my room.

I often imagined my life as Headmaster Wilbeck’s son. Her stern, yet loving voice scolding me every time I got into trouble. I’d do what I could to help her around the house: do the dishes, take out the trash, mow the lawn. And when she came home, I’d massage her shoulders, which she always seemed to be rubbing.

Nico said it was weird for me to want to do so much for her, saying it was usually a daughter’s job to spoil the mother, but I didn’t agree. If I had a mother like Headmaster Wilbeck, I’d make sure to pamper her. I’d help dye the white streaks of her brown hair, and once I was old enough I’d make a lot of money and buy her fancy clothes, and even a car and house.

Maybe that was the difference between someone who had known their parents, like Nico, and someone like me. I didn’t have a single memory of what my parents looked like. Nico hated his parents; just the mention of his

last name, Sever, would set him off like a fuse. But I didn't even have a surname. For me, there was an odd comfort imagining myself as Grey Wilbeck, son of Olivia Wilbeck.

The sharp creak of the floorboard underneath my feet snapped me out of my fantasy, and I puffed out a long, defeated breath. I kneeled down over the old, misaligned floorboard and snapped it back into place. Testing the floor with my feet, I gave a satisfied nod at the plank's silence.

A group of kids came running through the hall, chasing one another. "Grey! I'm going to tag you!" a little girl named Theda giggled as she skirted toward me with her arms stretched out.

"Oh yeah?" I stuck out my tongue. "I bet you're not!"

Theda accepted the challenge and picked up her pace. As soon as she was within range, she swiped at my waist, hoping to grab my shirt, but I easily twirled out of reach.

I laughed victoriously. "You're going to have to try harder than—"

I swayed to my right, just in time to avoid Odo's hand.

The rest of the kids Theda had been playing with joined in, deciding that they were all "it" in this impromptu game of tag.

The boys and girls flocked toward me with arms stretched wide to cover more ground, but I easily dipped and weaved around them. They flailed desperately and tried to use every part of their bodies in hopes of tagging me, but it was useless.

Finally Theda and her friends got smart and circled around me, slowly closing in on me as they giggled excitedly. Once they got close enough, they got impatient and sprang at me.

But just as they were about to touch me, I jumped up, grabbing the broken chain that had supported the old chandelier before it had to be sold. Using the momentum of my leap, I swung from the chain, gripping tightly so I wouldn't slip.

Theda, Odo, and their friends bumbled amongst themselves, surprised to have

missed their target.

Launching myself from the old chain, I landed a few feet away and planted my hands on my hips, laughing victoriously. “You guys are five years too young to best the mighty Grey!”

“Not fair,” Odo groaned, rubbing his head.

“Yeah! You’re too fast,” Theda agreed, prying herself out of the tangle of kids.

“Shush. Only weaklings complain when facing defeat,” I said, deepening my voice. “Now off I go! My heroic powers are needed elsewhere.”

I dashed away as the kids laughed amongst themselves.

“The mighty Grey has arrived!” I announced, opening the door to my room.

“Yeah, yeah. Close the door on your way in,” Nico replied, not even turning to look at me. He was fumbling with something on his cluttered bed.

“The kids are more fun than you,” I said, and clicked my tongue. “What are you doing anyway?”

Nico held up his right hand, covered in a fuzzy black glove. He had a proud grin on his face.

“You’re into knitting now?” I asked with a smirk, reaching for the glove.

Nico stretched out his gloved hand, gripping my forearm. A sudden wave of pain, like an intense muscle cramp, radiated up my arm from Nico’s grasp. My roommate immediately let go, but he had a smug look pasted on his face.

“Never underestimate the power of knitting.”

“What the hell?” My gaze shifted from his glove to my sore arm and back again.

“Pretty neat, right?” Nico stared contentedly at his gloved hand. “After the run-in with those thugs, I was researching a way to defend myself in case something like that ever happened again. And after compiling the notes I took on a rather interesting book I found about ki-conducting materials, I was able to design this glove.”

“How does it work? Why did my arm suddenly cramp up when you grabbed

me?” I asked, my fingers itching to grab hold of Nico’s newest creation.

“It’s pretty cool, actually,” Nico said, slapping my hand away. “There are these microfibers on the palm of the gloves that can conduct ki to a certain degree. The microfibers lengthen in reaction to my ki and reach into the muscles when I grab someone. There’s a small conducting stone on the inside of the glove that harnesses the ki I emit, and it shoots out through the microfibers and into my enemy’s muscle. In this case, it was your arm.”

“That *is* pretty neat, but why don’t you just learn how to fight like me?”

“First of all, you never learned to fight. And I need to have toys like these because, unlike *someone*,”—his eyes darted to me—“I don’t have the reflexes of some primitive carnivore. If I had to say, my reflexes range somewhere between a sloth and a turtle.”

I chortled at the comparison. “Well, the glove looks useful and all, but it seems like it’d only buy you some time,” I pointed out, flexing my cramped hand.

“Yup. And another downside is that the microfibers are expensive, and don’t last very long.” Nico said as he took off the fuzzy black glove. “I spent some of the money we got from pawning the jewelry to buy the materials.”

I looked at the stacks of books piled all over his side of the room. “I’m sure you’ll think of some way around it. How did you get the rest of the money to the headmaster?”

“Ah! I gave it to a guy I know. He gave it to Headmaster Wilbeck as a ‘generous donation’ in return for a percentage as his cut.”

I groaned. “How much of the money actually ended up in the orphanage anyway? With you buying your books and material and giving a cut to ‘a guy you know,’ I doubt even half of it made it to the headmaster.”

“I didn’t have any other choice. No way in hell would Olivia take money from us. She’d just start bombarding us with questions.”

“It’s Headmaster Wilbeck,” I corrected, thumping my friend’s head.

“Besides, I got a few books that you can use too. Check it out!” Nico

exclaimed, using his thumb to indicate the small pile of books behind him.

“Oh!” I could feel my eyes light up as I reached for the books. “Very well. This magnimous gentleman will forgive you.”

“It’s *magnanimous*,” Nico said, shaking his head.

Unable to think of a witty comeback, I decided to let it go. Just then, the room began shaking.

I groaned. “Don’t tell me—”

“Yup, Cecilia again. She’s having another accident,” Nico said.

We remained in our beds while the rhythmless waves of shaking continued.

“It’s longer than usual this time,” I pointed out.

Nico got up and put on his glove. “Let’s go check it out.”

“It’s dangerous! Remember what happened to that volunteer who tried to hold her down?”

“Yeah. He couldn’t even make it near her. He was a bear of a man, too.” Nico shook his head at the painful memory. “I just can’t stand having to wait like this until she passes out. I can’t imagine how much it’s hurting her.”

I got up with a resigned sigh, ready to join him; then a thought struck me.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“No way! I don’t even know the girl.”

I didn’t respond, but couldn’t help the smile creeping onto my face.

Nico’s brows twitched. “All right, I just think she’s a little pretty. That’s all!”

“Mhmm.” I dodged a slap from my friend.

Pieces of broken plaster fell from the ceiling, raining down the hallway as the entire orphanage shook.

On our way to Cecilia’s room, I spotted Theda and Odo hiding underneath the dining table with some of the younger children.

Veering left at the end of the hallway, Nico and I stopped in front of an iron door that stood isolated, away from all the other rooms in the giant house. Headmaster Wilbeck was already there, with a few of the adult volunteers who helped clean and maintain the orphanage.

The shaking had intensified. One of the volunteers, Randall—a kind and burly man in his prime, who helped out with the garden—prepared to go inside while another worker tried to open the heavy door.

But with the intensity of this episode, there was no way Randall would be able to make it to Cecilia. Snatching the glove off of Nico’s hand, I bolted for the door.

“Wha—Grey!” Nico called out.

Before anyone had a chance to react, I zipped past Randall and into the room as soon as the door opened. Once inside, I sidestepped on instinct, barely dodging a force that sent Randall crashing against the corridor wall.

I had heard about Cecelia’s peculiarity, but going against it head-on made the stories seem like bedtime tales.

Bracing myself, I ran toward the center of the large room where Cecilia lay convulsing. A look of panic struck her face when she spotted me. The mysterious girl Headmaster Wilbeck had brought in was an irregularity amongst ki users. Even the most capable practitioner would, at most, be able to produce a small gust of energy with his ki, but Cecilia’s ki pool was so vast that she was able to send torrents of ki.

But she wasn’t able to control it, and from what I’d heard the others say, the outbursts of ki were caused by even the slightest disturbance of her emotions. While many ki users would consider this power a gift, for a teenage girl like her, I could only see it as a curse.

Going solely on instinct, I awkwardly dodged the blasts of ki that shot at me. One hit and I would be unconscious at the very least.

Cold sweat rolled down my face as I played tag with a near-invisible force that had the power to break my bones like a twig.

I felt a slight breeze and rolled instinctively to my left, narrowly dodging another burst of ki. A loud thud resounded on the wall behind me where it struck.

I stretched out my gloved hand, hoping I would be able to reach Cecilia, but

my instincts kicked in once more and I jumped clumsily to the right. Another thud echoed behind me.

“You can’t!” Cecilia said through gritted teeth. “You’ll get h-hurt.”

She was lying on her bed, which had been demolished; pillow stuffing and mattress foam lay scattered around the floor. I began crawling toward her, immediately rolling when I felt another burst of ki coming. This time, though, the edge of the blast managed to skim my right arm.

I restrained my shout and forced myself to crawl faster, ignoring my throbbing arm. Desperately reaching out with my left hand, I willed as much ki as I could muster into the glove Nico had made and prayed that my idea would work.

I placed my palm just above Cecilia’s stomach, where her ki center was. Exerting all my ki, I felt Nico’s glove throb.

Cecilia gave a pained gasp, her almond-shaped eyes growing wide, then closing as she fell unconscious. Locks of her blonde hair fell over her face and her flushed cheeks began draining back to their original creamy color.

I tried to stand up, but my body refused to listen. I had overexerted my ki.

How pitiful, I thought, before joining Cecilia in her slumber.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

“Sir! Please, wake up!” An unfamiliar voice startled me awake, dragging me out of the unwanted memories in my dreams.

My vision focused and I was able to make out the shape of a woman, her features cast into shadow by the light behind her. “Sir! I’m begging you. Please, we need you bathed and prepared for Commander Virion’s speech!”

The handmaid shook my arm gently, but I turned away from her, still half asleep.

“Move out of the way. I’ll wake him up,” a familiar voice grunted, and a loud crackle resounded from its direction.

I immediately sprang to my feet, catching the projectile of lightning in my hand.

“Bairon. A displeasure to see you again,” I said sharply. I was still in a foul mood from my argument with Tessia yesterday.

“I see you’ve learned some new tricks,” Bairon responded, his hand still outstretched.

It had been over two years since I had last seen the blonde Lance. He hadn’t changed much, except that he had cut his hair short and the scowl on his face was even harsher.

“Don’t you know it’s dishonorable to attack someone from behind?” I asked, hopping off my bed.

“Well, we’re at war,” he shrugged, then turned to head out the door. “Now get changed. The rest of the Lances are already at the teleportation gate.”

I watched as Bairon, whose brother I had killed, walked out of my room. He and I would always have our differences, but I understood what he meant when he said that we were at war: both of us were invaluable.

The handmaid timidly approached me. “Sir, please. I hate to keep nagging but—”

“It’s all right, Rosa. I just got direct consent from Commander Virion to speed up the process,” another, much bulkier handmaid interrupted as she stomped in, pulling a large cart covered by a sheet.

The handmaid named Rosa glanced back and forth between her coworker and me. “Are you sure, Milda? I don’t think we should do anything to offend—”

Milda held up a meaty finger to silence her associate. She then turned to me with a stern gaze as she began rolling up the sleeves of her blouse. “Now, sir, if you’re not in the mood or you’re not capable of washing yourself, I’ll be more than happy to get into the shower with you and wash you.”

I inadvertently took a horrified step back. “No, no. I’m very much in the mood to wash myself.”

“Very good,” she said. “After you wash, please dress in this set of armor Lord Aldir prepared for the speech today.”

Milda dramatically removed the sheet from the cart she had brought in,

revealing a mannequin dressed in a stunning suit of armor—which I would soon be wearing.

FROM THE BALCONY

“I LOOK RIDICULOUS,” I grumbled, hobbling closer to the mirror to study myself.

The plated armor was gaudy and inefficient in design. My chest and shoulders were protected by silver pauldrons and a gorget that reached up to my chin, allowing for only minimal movement of my neck. Even more restricting, my hip and thighs were guarded by tassets that prohibited me from raising my legs. The subtle detailings on my gauntlets and greaves matched those on the breastplate, and a blazing red cape fell down to the back of my knees, covering the large, decorative sword strapped to my lower back.

“You look awe-inspiring, sir,” the timid handmaid said as she began tying up my hair.

“Anyone who can fight proficiently while wearing this death trap deserves my respect,” I replied, trying to lift my arms above my shoulders.

‘Well, at least you’ll look impressive to the crowd,’ Sylvie pointed out from my bed, still half-asleep.

Zip it! You’re lucky I’m not making you wear any armor, I shot back.

‘My scales are my armor.’ Sylvie arched her back, stretching like a cat as she nimbly hopped off the bed.

“There! All done,” the handmaid announced, carefully placing a golden band to secure my hair in place. “Your armor isn’t just majestic to look at; I see it has protective runes engraved into it as well.”

“I understand the armor, but must I wear this sword? I have one of my own, and it’s a pretty nice one too.” I took Dawn’s Ballad from my dimension ring. The timid handmaid touched her short brown hair, and her eyes shifted away uncomfortably. “It’s... it’s very pretty, sir, but—”

“It’s too thin! It doesn’t make you look *powerful!*” the bear-like handmaid cut in, firmly securing my pauldrons with her meaty hands. “Perfect. You’re good to go!”

I gazed down at my teal-bladed sword, masterfully forged by an eccentric asura, and slid it back into its sheath. Then, with a deep breath, I put it back into my dimension ring.

As I walked stiffly out of the room, Sylvie, still reluctant to speak out loud unless we were completely alone, chirped in my head. *‘I bet your new armor is really going to impress the crowd.’*

I’m hoping to stay on the sidelines through this whole speech. I know Virion wanted all the main players here today to raise morale, but I think the Lances are enough for that, I sent back as we made our way down the empty hallway.

The residents and most of the workers inside the castle had been allowed in earlier this morning so they could find a seat in the crowd. I hadn’t gotten a chance to see my family today, but they’d left a message with the timid handmaid saying they looked forward to seeing me up on the balcony.

‘I can’t believe Virion decided to hold the speech at Etistin, though. Isn’t that where the Alacryan ships are heading?’ Sylvie sounded concerned from her spot, nestled on my shoulder.

I think it makes sense. It’s a bit of a wild card, but if done right—and I’m sure that’s what Virion is shooting for—the crowd will see our force as much more imposing up close than their ships from afar.

‘I guess.’

Even walking down the stairs was a task in the bulky armor, and I became more and more tempted to just jump down the center of the spiral staircase,

regardless of who might inconveniently be at the bottom.

The sharp ringing of my metal greaves on the stone pathway echoed throughout the narrow corridor, alerting the two guards stationed at the teleportation chamber entrance to my approach. When I reached the familiar iron doors, each guard welcomed me with a courteous bow before they began unlocking the imposing entranceway to the circular room.

“Everyone is waiting inside,” the augments guard announced. Then he slid open the metal door, revealing the central figures of this war.

It was an impressive sight. Bairon Wykes, Varay Aurae, and Aya Grephin, the three remaining Lances, were clad in decorated white armor just as gaudy as mine. Closest to the teleportation gate, Virion had shed his black mourning robe, replacing it with a lavish olive tunic that draped down past his knees over a pair of silken white trousers. The tunic’s adornment made it clear he was a noble; it was trimmed in ornate golden embroidery to match the golden sash wrapped around his waist. A bronze circlet lay snugly just above his brows, and his hair fell loosely over his shoulders in a curtain of white.

Standing adjacent to the commander, the pinnacle of authority in this war, were his son and daughter-in-law, Alduin and Merial Eralith, Tessia’s parents.

Alduin wore a silver tunic of similar design and decoration to his father’s, while Merial wore an elegant silver dress obviously meant to match her husband’s outfit.

“Look who finally decided to show up,” Virion said with an approving nod as he gazed at my attire.

“Commander Virion.” I dipped my head respectfully, then turned toward Tess’s parents. “King Alduin, Queen Merial. It’s been a while.”

“That it has,” Alduin smiled, rubbing his chin as he regarded me with a scrutinizing eye. Merial responded with only a faint nod.

I then turned to Blaine and Priscilla Glayder, the former King and Queen of Sapin.

“King Blaine and Queen Priscilla. It’s been even longer,” I said with a polite smile, bowing as much as my armor would allow.

Blaine had aged since the last time I had seen him. More streaks of grey lined his mane of fiery maroon hair. His silken black tunic, underneath large gunmetal pauldrons that covered his shoulders and collar, gave him an intimidating aura. His wife, Priscilla, on the other hand, had chosen to wear a fluttery black dress, heavily embroidered with delicate silver flowers in a metallic thread that twinkled as it caught the light. Her black hair that glimmered in a hue of blue was tied up, exposing her neck, which seemed almost pure white in contrast to her dark attire.

The two kings and queens couldn’t have seemed more different from each other, but each of them carried an air of dignity that I knew could only stun the crowd waiting for them.

“You’ve grown,” Merial pointed out, her sharp eyes seeming to look through me rather than at me.

“Growing comes with age,” I replied.

“Of course it does,” Blaine grunted. “And you’ll continue to grow, not just in height but in strength, which is what I need from one of my best soldiers.”

I glanced back at Bairon and Varay, Blaine’s Lances, and shook my head. “Regardless of my roots or race, with a war of this scale, I’d like to consider myself a soldier to this *continent*.”

“It’s finally nice to you meet you, Arthur.” An elderly dwarf who had been standing alongside Virion and the two kings and queens stepped forward, getting between Blaine and me as he extended a hand.

Though he only came up to my sternum, he stood ramrod straight with his shoulders squared, making him seem taller than he actually was. A scar ran down the left side of his face, going through his closed left eye and all the way down to his jaw. However, the eye that was open exuded a gentle quality, belying his rugged appearance.

I accepted his large hand, noticing the sandpaper-like texture of his palms. “I

apologize for my ignorance, but I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you."

"No, we haven't met," he chuckled. "But I've heard quite a bit about you from the letters Elijah has sent back. I am Rahdeas."

My eyes widened in recognition. "You're—"

"Yes. I've been Elijah's guardian since he was an infant." He looked at me with a solemn smile that sent a sharp pain through my chest.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get there in time to help him," I said, lowering my gaze. Rahdeas shook his head. "It's not your fault. That child was always a magnet for trouble."

Clasping his hand in both of mine, I stared straight into his eye. "If he's still alive, I'll bring him back to you. I give you my word."

"Thank you," he whispered, letting go of my hands, which somehow seemed so fragile now.

Virion spoke into the silence. "Rahdeas is the new delegate for the dwarves. We'll be going on ahead first," he said. "The gatekeeper will receive my transmission and signal you to go through when the time is right."

The six of them walked through the gate, and the teleportation room became silent. I made a mental note to spend some more time with Rahdeas. I was curious as to what young Elijah had been like, and about the man who had raised him.

I felt a light tap on my shoulder—or rather, I heard a light tap on my shoulder plate. Turning around, I came face to face with the elven Lance they called Phantasm.

"We've seen each other before, but I've never given you the pleasure of introducing myself." She smiled coyly, tucking her wavy black hair behind her ear as she dangled a hand for me to accept. "My name is Aya Grephin."

There was something off about her voice—an enticing timbre of faint sweetness, spoken at a volume that made you want to lean closer to hear what she had to say. Everything from the allure in her voice to the way she carried

herself made her seem irresistible. Every motion she made with her hands and fingers made my eyes focus on them, but it didn't feel natural. I felt the magic in her voice.

"Well then," I said with a smile, taking a step back. "It's a pleasure being formally introduced, Aya Grephin." I knew she was waiting for a kiss on the back of her hand, but I grabbed it and shook it instead.

"I hope we can get along," she said, her smile unwavering as she snatched her hand back. As I watched her turn around and stride back to her original spot, hips swaying, I began to grow uneasy.

Aside from her conspicuous seductiveness, I knew the remaining elf Lance was no joke just from being near her. I had seen for myself that Varay was stronger than Bairon, but I'd yet to see Aya fight. From what I'd been told, she was supposedly one of the deadliest of the Lances. Now, having been up close to her and having her stare at me, it was clear those claims weren't baseless.

Varay, who had been silently studying me, finally spoke. "I see your training has gone well. You've just stepped out of the initiate silver stage and into mid-silver."

In contrast to Aya, Varay held herself in a very reserved and dignified manner. I noticed that she had cut her long white hair off—it came to just past her neck now. Her bangs were pinned to the side, revealing a scar just above her right brow, small enough to be missed if you weren't looking closely. Her dark brown eyes were sharp and her brows seemed to be perpetually furrowed as she continued peering at me.

Sylvie hunched over, baring her small fangs at the Lance. *It's okay, Sylv. She's an ally, remember?*

"I've yet a long way to go if I want to get into white stage," I said to Varay, prying my eyes away from her intense gaze.

"Not as long as you might think," the white-haired Lance responded.

"What does you—"

“Gatekeeper! How much longer are we to wait?” Bairon interrupted, impatiently tapping his armor-clad foot on the ground.

The elderly gatekeeper flinched. “General Bairon, Commander Virion has not—Ah! I just received word from him now. Please enter!”

Bairon made his way toward the teleportation gate first, apparently eager to be free from either the confines of the chamber or the company of the other Lances. I understood how he felt.

‘Well, that was uncomfortable,’ Sylvie thought.

Tell me about it. I motioned for Aya and Varay to go ahead of me. The curvy elf threw me a wink as she swayed past, while Varay’s expression remained stony.

As I stepped through the teleportation gate, the scene around me blurred. Upon arrival, I cringed at the sudden difference in noise level. Cheers erupted from below, and the floor trembled beneath us.

We had arrived in a large rectangular room that led out to a spacious balcony where Virion and the kings and queens stood, waving down at the crowd. They weren’t alone—next to the adults were Tess, Curtis, and Kathyln, all waving at the immense crowd which I could see even from where I stood.

“Please, Generals, be ready to go on Commander Virion’s signal,” a thin handmaid instructed as she tidied Aya’s hair, which had been blown back by the frigid ocean wind.

“Generals?” I looked at the handmaid in confusion.

“Arthur, Lady Sylvie, I see you are finally here,” a familiar voice called from behind me.

Looking back over my shoulder, I spotted Aldir. He was seated in front of a tea set, a cup in his hand while his third eye stared at me.

“And I see that *you’re* staying in the shadows,” I greeted the asura as Sylvie dipped her head in a nod.

“That is my job,” he said, holding up his cup in a solitary toast.

“Well, can you tell me what *my* job is right now? Because I’m not a Lance,

which means I'm not a general."

"Patience. You just have to wait five seconds," he said, pouring himself another cup from the pot.

The cheers had died down by now as Virion began speaking. "Many of you have traveled far to be here, and that fills me with pride. As I'm sure you have noticed, standing beside me are your leaders, the very people who have protected this continent and the ones who will protect us in the future."

Another wave of cheers erupted as Rahdeas, the Glayder family, and the Eralith family waved once more.

"However, while these are the heroes you see in the light, there are heroes in the shadows who constantly risk their lives to fight for this continent. I'd like you all to help me welcome the Lances of Dicathen!"

Varay, Aya, and Bairon marched out to the edge of the balcony with their heads held high and shoulders square. Virion and the royal families turned to greet them.

An even louder ovation exploded as the three Lances came into view. The chaotic array of shouts and cheers soon became a collective chant that grew louder and louder: "Lance-ES, Lance-ES, Lance-ES."

After several moments of chanting, Virion raised a hand, silencing the hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of people immediately.

"Everyone! We are in a time of war," Virion spoke sternly after a moment of silence. "I know that half of the Lances are absent, and that is not by mistake. Some are in the middle of a mission and were not able to come."

I exchanged glances with Aldir at Virion's lie, but I made no remark. I knew what the revelation that one of the Lances had already been killed would do to the crowd.

Virion continued. "The Lances have constantly shed blood and tears to keep Dicathen safe, but in these uncertain times we can no longer rely only on the strong. We must fight together in order to keep our homes safe.

"At the inauguration of the Lances almost four years ago, we made a promise

that the title of Lance would not be limited by birth or status, but could only be earned through hard work, talent, and strength. Today is the dawning of a new era, and with that new era come new heroes. One such hero has been discovered and is here with us today. Please, welcome with me, our newest Lance: Arthur Leywin!”

SPEECH AND STATEMENT

VIRION, Rahdeas, the Lances, and both royal families all turned to me as I walked toward the balcony edge. The applause rose to a deafening crescendo at my appearance. Virion waited for me at the very end.

Bairon's and Varay's expressions were callous as they let me pass, but Aya's lips curled into a coy smile and she nodded approvingly.

Tess gave me a sharp look—I assumed she was still upset from yesterday's argument—while Kathyln's eyes creased in a rare smile. Her brother, Curtis, waved while his parents and the rest of the central figures on the balcony joined the crowd's applause.

I stepped out into the open. The morning sun shone brightly overhead, covering the world below in a blanket of light. As my eyes adjusted, I marveled at the sight.

The people gathered there—humans, elves, and dwarves alike—stretched as far as I could see, as if they were touching the horizon. They clustered tightly, hoping to get even an inch closer to their continent's leaders. The excitement, respect, and jubilation in the air could be felt all the way up here.

“What?” Virion said, smiling warmly. “Never had a crowd of over a million people cheer for you?”

I simply shook my head and smiled, remembering how many times I had experienced just that in my past life. “Was this your idea?”

“Why? Are you angry?” Virion turned to the crowd, nudging me forward so

the people below could get a better view of me.

“If it was anyone other than you behind this, I would be.”

“Good. Now keep smiling and wave at them. They can see you on a wide-scale projection behind us.”

Taking a quick glance at the enormous screen behind me, I thought of Emily Watsken, who had disclosed to me in class one day that she was the one who had designed this artifact. I raised an arm and waved to the masses, Sylvie following suit atop my shoulder.

The thundering cheers slowly softened to a buzz of excitement as everyone stepped back from the balcony railing except Virion and me. “Now,” he said after removing the voice-amplifying artifact clipped to his collar. “You wouldn’t happen to have a speech ready about the upcoming war, would you?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” I struggled to maintain a calm smile.

“I want you to be the one who presents the announcement,” Virion said, his voice unwavering as he handed the artifact to me.

“Virion. I can’t.” My voice faltered as I looked at the people below, waiting excitedly for someone to speak. “I wasn’t even prepared to be offered a position as a Lance, let alone give a speech as one.”

“I didn’t want you to prepare. These are your people, Arthur. You grew up among them and they’ll listen to you with much more openness and empathy than if some spoonfed noble spoke.”

“That’s only if I deliver a well-thought-out speech,” I argued. I turned to shake Virion’s hand, an attempt to delay the inevitable.

“I trust you. Just speak from your heart.” Virion stepped back as the trickle of cheers turned into an anxious silence.

Even the closest people in the crowd were no larger than the nail of my thumb from where I was standing, but I was still able to spot my parents among them, and my sister, who was riding atop Boo’s large shoulder.

I was completely unprepared, but my apprehension dwindled as I locked eyes

with my mother. Even with my augmented vision, I was barely able to make out the gentle smile on her face, but that was enough.

I knew what to say.

Letting out a deep breath, I stood at the edge of the castle balcony and turned on the voice-amplifying artifact.

A loud buzz sounded, telling me the artifact was now on. I took another step forward so I was leaning on the balcony rail, and waited patiently for the fresh round of cheers to subside.

“Despite my age,” I began, “I’ve read countless books on this continent’s history and economy. Yet, none of those books explain what makes a citizen love their country. Some historians have speculated that it’s simply because they were born there that they have a natural inclination toward their homeland. One author by the name of Jespik Lempter argues that there is an intricate trickledown effect that starts with the leaders being able to provide for their people, and continues down to parents being able to feed their children. As long as that flow of security in livelihood is maintained, he states, natural loyalty to the providing country is sustained.

“I tell you this because I disagree with both claims. I choose to believe that loyalty isn’t a calculated decision by the citizens, nor should it be diminished by the assumption that loyalty is framed purely by the accident of our births. Loyalty to one’s country is born of mutual respect between a country’s leadership and its people; from the support of friends, neighbors, and strangers; from the promise to protect one another and progress together. Perhaps it is presumptuous to even try defining the term, as we each carry in our heart our own definition, just as we each show loyalty to our country in our own way.

“But one thing is certain: Loyalty is always easier when times are easy. It’s easy to cheer for your king when your children are well-fed and your land is prosperous. It’s easy to rally behind an army when you know it’s going to win. But it is unlikely that this war will be easy. Your loyalty to this country

—to this entire continent—will be tested. There will be times when you’ll be faced with a choice between dying with your people or hoping to live with your enemies.” The atmosphere among the crowd darkened as my voice fell into a whisper, but I continued.

“The fact that I’m up here right now speaks for the choice I’m going to make when that time comes for me—and it isn’t because of my title as a Lance. My loyalty wasn’t bought, but neither was it freely given. My loyalty to this continent, and to everyone on it, was nurtured during my childhood in the countryside, then as an adventurer, a student, and then a teacher. Now, it’ll be proven as a Lance.

“Sure, Dicathen and its leaders have their flaws, but what no one can say is that they haven’t tried. The joining of the three kingdoms to form the Council would’ve been unheard of only a few generations ago, yet the leaders of the three races put aside their pride and differences to unite, to share their resources with one another, in order to better the lives of all who live here. While discrimination may still exist, this land we live in belongs to all of us.

“Just beyond this city is an army—over a hundred ships approaching our shores. We’ve been given the option to either give up the lives of all the royal families who have served this continent in exchange for our enemy taking our land without a fight, or to proceed with this war on a greater, much more devastating scale.

“Commander Virion was ready to give up his own life to protect this continent—to protect you—but I said it wasn’t his call. This doesn’t only affect his and his family’s lives, but the lives of everyone here.”

I turned around and motioned for Virion and everyone else to come forward.

“I would rather fight and risk dying for the life I’ve come to love here than betray my brethren in hopes of a promise that our enemies—enemies who have already separated families—may or may not keep.

“But I dare not speak for everyone on this continent. The only thing I can say with full confidence is that, if given the chance, every one of us up here will

fight to our last breath to protect Dicathen from the likes of those who dare invade us.”

It was utter quiet for what seemed like hours until a single voice broke the silence.

“Long live Dicathen!”

That single proclamation set off an eruption. As if the crowd had choreographed their cheer, a thundering chant began, shaking the ground and the very castle we stood in.

“Long live Dicathen. Long live Dicathen. Long live Dicathen!”

I turned off the voice-amplifying artifact and gave a deep breath of relief. Sylvie hopped off my shoulder, and as the cheer grew to its climax, my bond transformed from her pearly fox form into that of an almighty dragon.

When she spread her wings, I realized once again how much she had grown over the years. Her wingspan surpassed the width of the balcony, and gales blasted down on the crowd with each beat of her black wings.

While I was startled that she would reveal herself now, and without giving me any notice, I played along. I unsheathed the giant sword on my back and held it high in the air, just as my bond faced the sky and let loose a thunderous roar that drowned out all other noise, resounding from the stones around us and out over the gathered crowd, instilling fear and awe in all who heard.

Sylvie’s theatrics immediately intensified the crowd’s chanting, and an even louder cheer erupted at our powerful display.

I turned back around to see wide eyes staring at me after this turn of events.

“I thought you didn’t have anything prepared,” Virion said with a raised brow.

I shrugged in response as Sylvie shrank back to her pup form and hopped onto my shoulder. “I improvised.”

‘I did good, right?’ Sylvie chirped in my mind.

You got the message across, show-off, I replied, tousling the fur on my

bond's little head.

Curtis came up to me, beaming in excitement. "That last bit was terrific. I mean, I heard that Sylvie was a dragon from the students who were at school when we were attacked but..."

The prince gazed wistfully between Sylvie and me, then he stepped forward to wave at the captivated mass roaring our names.

After several minutes of receiving the crowd's cheers, we headed back into the castle. As I slowly retreated, I saw Tess striding off, heading for the teleportation gate we had come from, without a word to any of us.

"I take it that Tessia is still mad at me?" I asked Virion, who was walking alongside me.

"Mad, frustrated, annoyed, offended—I'm not sure which, but I do know that whatever she's feeling towards you, it isn't good," he said, holding back a chuckle. "Now, I'm sure you have some things to take care of with your family, but I need you back at the castle as soon as you're done."

"I'll be back as soon as I send my parents off, but I'm still not sure whether it'd be best to keep my sister here or have her go with my parents," I said.

"There are quite a few mothers and children who are going to be in the castle. Some of them are even teachers at magic academies, so it might be beneficial for her to stay, but only if she's okay with being separated from you and your parents," he noted.

"Yeah, you have a point. I'll try to convince her."

Virion nodded as he dug into the inside pocket of his robe. "There's one last thing you need to think about."

He pulled his hand out and opened it in front of me to reveal a black coin the size of his palm. The coin glimmered at the slightest movement, drawing my attention to the complex engravings etched all over it. "This is one of the artifacts that were handed down to me. I had given them both to my son when I resigned from the throne, but after Alea's death, he gave this one back to me, saying I should choose the next Lance."

I stood there silently for a moment, mesmerized by the oval coin that seemed to pulse in Virion's hand. "So this is the artifact Alea had?"

"Yes. Bonding it with your blood and mine will trigger it, giving you the boost that allowed all the other Lances to break into the white stage. I know you're not an elf, but I'd be honored if you'd serve as a Lance under me."

My hands twitched, tempted to accept this gift that would give me a better chance to fight the Four Scythes and their retainers.

But I shook my head with a resigned shrug. "I'll fight for you even without this bond, but I can't accept it. I may regret this, but it doesn't feel right for me to cheat my way into the white stage. I'll get there on my own."

"Good choice," the familiar, hoarse voice of a certain asura chimed in from behind me.

I looked back over my shoulder to see the purple-eyed asura walk over, his arms behind his back.

"Lord Aldir." Virion bowed curtly, his palm still open for the asura to see.

Aldir lifted the coin from his hand and studied it. "While this artifact may give you a tremendous boost in strength, it also greatly inhibits the potential to grow further."

The asura tossed the coin back to Virion as he continued speaking.

"Normally, I'd recommend that any lessers take the opportunity to use it, especially in these dangerous times—but Arthur, you're a different case. Your talent aside, Lady Sylvie's dragon blood courses through your veins and the powerful will of her mother inside your mana core. It may be a disadvantage during the war, but I'd suggest you don't take it."

"Thank you for the heads-up," I replied. Taking a look around, I saw that while Blaine and Priscilla Glayder remained here, Curtis and Kathyln were gone, along with Tess and her parents.

"Are you heading back to the castle right now as well?" I asked Virion.

Virion nodded solemnly. "There's much to prepare for. Blaine and Priscilla, with the help of their Lances, will prepare the city in the meantime. We won't

know where exactly they'll land or how spread out they're going to be, but it's vital that we protect this city. Fortunately, the ships are still a few days away."

"I understand. I'll meet you as soon as I've taken care of everything here."

Virion and Aldir prepared to go through the teleportation gate, but then the white-haired asura turned back, meeting my gaze with his single purple eye.

"Arthur, are you ready for this war?"

"No," I replied honestly, "but I don't plan on losing to those damn Vritra."

Aldir smiled. "Good. That's what I like to hear."

ROLE

VIRION AND ALDIR headed back to the castle, while I stayed behind to see my mother and father off. They were insistent about rejoining the Twin Horns and helping out in the war. As we said our goodbyes, I tried to dissuade them from going near the western shore where the fighting would be the heaviest, but they were adamant.

As frustrated as I was, I couldn't blame them for it. For me, there may have been a certain amount of detachment despite growing up here, since I remembered my previous life. I considered Dicathen my home because this was where my family was, which was a large factor as to why I decided to fight against the Vritra. But for them, this land was truly their home. Protecting it was only natural.

After they'd gone, I removed the last of my armor, then sank down into my seat and let out a deep breath. "Damn it," I cursed, rubbing my temples.

"Getting into an argument with them wasn't the best way to part," Sylvie spoke as she lay down, resting her head on her paws on top of the polished tea table.

"Thank you for enlightening me." I rolled my eyes. "I just don't understand why they wouldn't listen to my advice. I didn't say anything wrong."

"You basically told them to go off into some remote area and stay hidden," she replied.

"Those were not the words I used," I retorted, kicking off my boots.

“But that’s what you meant.”

“I just want them to stay safe,” I murmured, conceding her point.

Sylvie hopped off the tea table and onto the armrest of my chair. “If your parents were concerned about their own safety, they wouldn’t have joined the war.”

“Well, *I’m* more concerned about my family’s safety than this war. I’m thankful that they’re at least leaving Ellie behind, but that doesn’t mean they should just go out risking their lives.”

My bond nodded her head. “I know.”

“I just hope they know that I’m concerned for them as their son, not as some...” I let my voice trail off as I gave another deep sigh.

“It’s going to be hard for them to discern, now that they know,” Sylvie said softly, placing a comforting paw on my arm.

I sank lower into my seat and stared at my bond for a moment. “When exactly did you figure out what I was, anyway?”

“I think I’ve always known, but I just could never come up with the term to describe it. We do share thoughts, after all.”

“Every thought?” I asked, stunned.

“Mhmm.”

“But you only answered when I spoke directly to you. And I don’t hear your thoughts unless you’re speaking directly to my mind.”

“For me, speaking to your mind is much like speaking out loud. I’ve learned to keep some thoughts hidden; I can’t say the same for you, though,” she giggled.

My eyes grew wide in horror. “That means—”

“Do I know about your constant emotional turmoil when it comes to Tessia? Yup,” she grinned.

I groaned.

“Don’t worry. I’ve listened to all your fleeting thoughts since I was born. I didn’t start understanding until a bit later, but I’ve grown used to it over the

years,” she said consolingly, her sharp teeth still showing as her grin remained.

“Well, I haven’t ‘grown used to’ anything at all,” I grumbled.

Sylvie’s grin faded as she stared at me with her bright yellow eyes. “We’re going to battle soon. Grandfather told me during training that, while I’m far from reaching the level of a true asura, his blood still runs through me. This means that, though I can fight alongside you in this war, I’m not invincible. The best way to stay alive is to rely on each other.”

“Of course,” I said, a bit confused. What had brought this on?

“I’m saying this because there are things that I’ve hidden from you—things I’ve just found out recently, and I feel like you’re the only one I can trust with my life,” she said, reading my mind.

“Sylv, you know you can trust me with whatever it is. I’ve raised you since you were born, after all.”

“Thank you.” My bond hopped off the armrest and onto my seat and rested her head on my lap.

There was a moment of silence as I pondered what she had said. I knew she could read my thoughts but, as she mentioned, it really didn’t matter. As curious as I was, I didn’t bother asking her what these ‘things’ were that she had found out; she would’ve already told me if she wanted to. What worried me was the fact that this was the first time she had expressed any sort of fear for her life. Despite our numerous encounters with dangerous situations, she had always remained strong and fearless, but now, I could feel her apprehension toward this war.

I gently stroked Sylvie’s soft head. “How did you get so smart anyway? It seems like ever since coming back from Epheotus, you’ve grown at a remarkable rate. And don’t get me started on your growing ego.”

“You’re just bitter because you’re taking life advice from a fox younger than you. And I’ve always been a fast learner—why do you think I always stayed on top of your head?”

“So you were learning by observing our surroundings?” I asked.

“Yup. It helps that you know a lot and that I have free access to your thoughts,” she confirmed as she nestled in closer to my leg.

I could tell she was tired; although I had a thousand questions about her sudden apparent change in demeanor, I knew I had to wait.

I watched my bond as she slept soundly, her breathing steady. She hadn’t really changed much. There was still a sense of immaturity in her voice despite the change in the way she spoke. It felt like she was forcing herself to become more mature. I wasn’t sure what Lord Indrath had drilled into her while training her, but one thing was for sure—she had become aware that she was an asura.

As Sylvie’s breathing became slower and more rhythmic, I leaned my head back on the chair, staring up at the ceiling of my room while I organized my thoughts.

Virion and the others didn’t know this, but Windsom had told me what Agrona and his clan were like. He and the rest of the Vritra had been experimenting on what the asuras called ‘lesser races’ even before they had escaped to Alacrya. From what I’d heard, the first mages to appear at the Wall weren’t anything special, but it was likely that they were simply cannon fodder meant to create mayhem and divide our forces with the mana beasts under their control.

If what Windsom said was true, then the horde of ships approaching our shores would include mages with asura blood coursing through their veins. And they’d had centuries to explore that bond. I could only imagine how much they had progressed since then and what they would do to the people of Dicathen if the Vritra won this siege. This place could become a breeding ground for soldiers, which Agrona would use to conquer Epheotus.

“Arthur.”

The hoarse baritone voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Isn’t there some sort of etiquette about knocking when entering someone’s room, or at least

using the door?”

“The tone of your response tells me things didn’t go well with the business you had to take care of,” Aldir said as he calmly took a seat on the couch across from me.

“Why are you here? I thought you would be with the Council,” I said, ignoring his comment.

“There is something I need from you,” Aldir replied, his piercing gaze directed at me.

I stared back, unwavering. “And what is that?”

There was a tense silence, then Aldir sighed. “Your help,” he admitted. “Lord Indrath told me to rely on your judgment throughout the course of this war, and after your speech earlier, I think I understand why.”

“What did he mean by ‘rely on my judgment’?” I asked. Sylvie stirred awake as I sat up, but drifted back to sleep almost immediately.

“Lord Indrath realized that your contribution to this war shouldn’t be limited to just being a sword. While there will be times when you’ll be needed in the field, sending you out to every battle will only tire you out. When you aren’t absolutely needed, you’ll be by my side in the Council, strategizing with us and giving us your input.”

“Let me get this straight—you want a sixteen-year-old making life-changing decisions with the Council?” I scoffed.

“Aside from the fact that you are just a lesser, you’re not a normal child. Don’t think that this eye is just a pretty decoration. I knew there was something different about you the first time we met, but only by Lord Indrath’s words did I realize just how much.”

“Is there something I get in return for helping you?” I asked, resting my head on my hand.

Alidir’s eye narrowed. “I came in good faith to ask for your help, but it benefits us both if you cooperate. Losing this war means dying, being enslaved, or worse. Not just for you, but for your loved ones as well.”

“You could’ve at least thrown me a bone,” I said, smiling at his seriousness. “Yeah, I’ll help, but I’m not sure how much of my advice the Council is willing to listen to. Virion might listen, but everyone else...”

“Let me worry about that,” Aldir replied. “Besides, you won’t only be in meetings. I have other plans for you as well.”

“When you say ‘other plans’ like that, it sounds kind of ominous.”

“As I said, you are a powerhouse in this war—maybe more so than the Lances, given a few years. I would certainly not waste your abilities by having you do nothing but sit and listen to those lessers—I mean the Council—bicker with one another.”

I shook my head with a helpless laugh. “It must be frustrating for you, being here and restrained from helping despite the amount of manpower you could provide just by yourself.”

“My time will come. If we defend against this siege successfully, then, with the help of the Dicathen army, our asuras will be able to take care of Agrona and his weakened force.”

“It seems like this war is far from over,” I said, absentmindedly brushing my fingertips across Sylvie’s back, drawing comfort from her sleeping form.

“Yes, but this fight will be the start of a new era. If Dicathen wins and fights alongside us asuras, Agrona and his clan of traitors and mutts will fall, and we will all gain access to a new continent.”

Aldir sounded hopeful, almost excited, despite his usual calm demeanor.

“You’ve lost someone to Agrona, haven’t you?” I asked, seeing the expression on the asura’s face.

“Many of us lost loved ones in that battle—no, it would be better described as a massacre,” Aldir answered, the brow underneath his third eye twitching.

“Well, you heard what I told Virion; I have no intentions of losing this war, but if you’re going to ask my help in this, you need to trust in the advice that I do give.”

Laughing through his nose, he replied, “Never in all my years would I have

imagined a lesser would speak to me like this.”

“Well, these *lessers* are fighting your battles for you, so at least have the decency to call them by the names of their actual race,” I replied.

“You ask for a lot, Arthur Leywin, but very well.” The white-haired asura stood up, smoothing out the creases in his ivory robe. “It’s about time I headed back down to the meeting room. It worries me every time I leave those less—people alone for too long. We will be expecting you shortly.”

“Sure, I’ll be down soon, but I’m curious about something.”

“What is it?” the asura replied, looking back over his shoulder.

“The two remaining Lances who couldn’t join us today. I know you said two years ago that they’re working under you, but... you didn’t kill them or anything, right?”

Aldir shook his head. “Even I wouldn’t be so rash as to kill a Lance on a whim. While political envoys can be replaced, a Lance’s power can take years to develop, even if they have a particularly high compatibility with the artifact. I had planned on bringing up the subject at the meeting, but since you mentioned it, I’d like your input on this matter.”

I nodded eagerly as the asura revealed his plan for the two missing Lances. Then an idea struck me. I let out a devious laugh and grinned wickedly at Aldir. “Not bad, but I have a better idea.”

FIRST ASSIGNMENT

A CLOUD of frosty fog formed with each breath as I made my way toward the bustling encampment. Underneath a cliff by the shore, the soldiers had set up their tents and lit fires behind a rock formation standing more than two dozen feet high. The soft light of the flickering fires and the trails of smoke were visible from a distance, but the towering barricade of boulders served as a natural defense from anyone coming from the water.

I could just barely make out a few watchmen stationed atop the cliff overlooking the camp, obscured as they were by the dense haze surrounding the entire beach.

Wrapping my woolen cloak tightly around me, I shrouded myself in another layer of mana to keep the sharp winter winds away.

Almost there, I informed Sylvie, who was buried deep within the layers of my clothes.

My bond peeked her head out, let out a sour grumble, and immediately hid herself back inside my cloak.

For such a mighty being, you're sure weak to the cold, I teased, continuing the last leg of our trek.

'You're not the one who had to fly through that cursed wind. It feels like my wings have holes in them even in this form,' she complained. *'And I'm not weak to the cold; I just hate it.'*

I chuckled softly and picked up my pace. Since we had declined any sort of

truce with Alacrya, Aldir couldn't risk breaking the asura's agreement by creating teleportation gates anymore. This meant I had to rely on Sylvie for long distance transportation anywhere that wasn't served by the already-existing teleportation gates. I'd had her transform only a mile or so back, so as to not draw attention.

As per Virion's request, I would be staying with this division and aiding them in the unlikely event that Alacryan ships were sent this far down the coast. However, unbeknownst to him, I had added another item to his agenda.

Walking along the bottom of the cliff, I hid my presence. While most mages did this by rescinding their mana, my training in Epheotus had taught me that a perfect balance of mana output through my mana channels and mana input through my mana veins would allow me to stay hidden from even the most alert mana beasts, while still being able to use mana.

I spotted a conspicuously large peaked-roof tent near the foot of the cliff where the formation of boulders met. Given that the tent was located in the safest area of the semi-circular encampment and that it was three times the size of any of the other shoddy tents around it, I could only assume it belonged to the captain.

As I approached the edge of the camp, I picked up a few broken pieces of wood, then walked casually past the resting soldiers.

No one seemed to mind; with my hood up and an armful of branches and twigs, I probably looked like any other earnest young soldier hoping to earn a title by contributing in the war.

Some of the seasoned soldiers, polishing their weapons and armor by the meager firelight, glanced in my direction with little regard, while a group of younger soldiers—obviously conjurers of noble descent, based on their embellished gear and flashy staffs—sneered at my plain attire.

'Those ignorant clowns have no idea who they're scoffing at,' Sylvie hissed as she peeked at their expressions. *'They'd be better used as bait.'*

Easy, I soothed. *You sure learned some colorful insults from Lord Indrath.*

Walking deeper into the encampment, I passed through the cooking station. Large fires blazed inside earthen pits formed by magic; they were lined neatly with stews bubbling tantalizingly inside pots as large, barrel-chested men hacked away at chunks of meat.

“Clear the pots for the skewered meat! Benfir and Schren, get ready to start handing out the stew!” A small-framed woman with a fierce expression roared orders, holding a ladle in her hand, more like a weapon than a tool.

The ladle-wielding woman looked over her shoulder at me as I passed. She gave me a respectful nod, which caught me by surprise—I had assumed no one would recognize me this far out from civilization.

I had almost arrived at the large tent in the farthest corner of the camp when the high-pitched clash of metal on metal drew my attention. Dropping the branches in my hands, I inspected a group of soldiers that had formed a circle around the source of the sounds—two augmenters engaged in a friendly bout. The sharp shrieks of their weapons drew sparks even with the layer of mana covering their blades, and they parried each other’s strikes with obvious deft. “You’ve gotten better, Cedry,” said the short-haired soldier. He seemed to be a bit shorter than me, but his arms looked almost unnaturally long. He used his slender frame and long, flexible limbs to his advantage by delivering fast, irregular strikes with dual daggers.

“And yet, you’re still a pain to fight against, Jona,” the girl named Cedry replied confidently as she ducked Jona’s swipe. She was clearly at a disadvantage, fighting hand-to-hand with heavy gauntlets against an opponent who excelled in long-ranged strikes, but she wasn’t losing.

She nimbly ducked, weaved, and parried Jona’s dual-wielding assault, and something about her held my interest.

It wasn’t until I focused on her ears that I realized what it was.

She’s a half-elf, I pointed out to Sylvie, who had lost interest in the match and was back inside my cloak.

At my observation, my bond peeked her head back out. *‘Oh! She is. We*

haven't come across one other than that ill-tempered Lucas.'

'Ill-tempered' is putting it lightly, I chuckled, my gaze still on the fight.

'Shouldn't we notify the captain of our arrival?' Sylvie reminded me.

You're right. I got side-tracked, I thought, turning away from the duel.

'You always do when it comes to these kinds of fights,' she teased.

There's something about close combat that makes a fight exciting, unlike long-range conjuring, I agreed, walking back.

When we reached the large white tent, I was stopped by an armored guard gripping a halberd. "What business do you have in here?"

"Is this the captain's tent?" I asked, my hood still covering half my face.

"I said, what business do you have in here?" the guard repeated, his gaze unrelenting.

Exhaling deeply, I held out a medallion.

At the sight of it, the guard's narrow eyes widened in shock. His gaze shifted from the gold medallion back to me with a look of horror at the blunder he had made. "I-I'm so sorry, Gen—"

"Shhh," I mouthed before he could finish speaking. I held up my hand. "I don't want my visit to cause a stir, so let's just keep this between us."

"Y-yes, sir," he said, nodding furiously as he opened the flap to allow me entrance.

I stepped inside the spacious tent and a gust of warmth flooded my body. It felt as if a layer of ice was melting off my face as I removed my cloak. The first thing I noticed was the flare hawk nestled near the entrance.

'I remember her,' Sylvie chimed in my head as she hopped to the ground.

I turned to the woman sitting behind a small wooden desk, unconcerned by the intrusion.

"Professor Glory," I greeted her, giving a faint grin as she finally looked up, her face brightening at the sight of her old student. My old Team-Fighting Mechanics professor looked the same as always, with her tanned complexion and brown hair tied tightly behind her head. She was wearing light armor

even inside the tent, and her two giant swords were close by, leaning against a drawer behind her.

“It’s good to see you, *General Leywin*,” she said, coming around her desk.

“Please, just call me Arthur,” I said helplessly.

“Then I’d prefer if you just called me Vanesy,” she said, spreading out her arms. “After all, I’m not your professor anymore.”

Accepting her hug, I realized that this was the first time I’d heard Professor Glory’s first name. When she released me from her firm grasp, I said, “Well then. Do you mind giving me a brief report of the situation here, Vanesy?”

Vanesy acknowledged Sylvie with a polite nod before reaching behind her desk. After a moment of rummaging, she held out a rolled-up parchment, but started speaking even before I could open it.

“Right now, it’s just me and my division of three thousand soldiers. My division is on the smaller side but we have with us fifty-eight mages, twenty of whom are conjurers while ten are long-range augmenters, to make up for the numbers,” she recited.

I nodded in understanding while I skimmed through the parchment. “There’s supposed to be one other captain along with you, right?”

“Captain Auddyr and his division are making the march up here from Maybur City. I can send out a transmission if you’d like,” she answered.

“No need. Truth be told, I’m not even expecting any ships to veer off this far south,” I admitted, handing Vanesy back the parchment.

“I heard about your big plan set up for those Alacryan bastards up the coast,” she said, eyeing me. “You think it’s going to work?”

“It’ll slow them down, and with any luck, sink a few of their ships.”

“A shame we won’t be there to see it,” she said regretfully. The bright-eyed professor, whom I had fought next to down at Widow’s Crypt, removed a leather flask from her drawer, pulling out the cork with her teeth before gulping down what I assumed was alcohol.

“Care for a swig, General Leywin?” She winked, holding the flask up.

“I’m a minor, you know.”

Vanesy scoffed. “If you’re old enough to go to war, you’re old enough to drink.”

I grabbed her flask and took a gulp. The smoky liquid seared my throat as it made its way into my stomach, warming up my insides.

‘Is it smart to inhibit yourself like this before a battle?’ Sylvie asked with a tone of disapproval.

Relax. It’s just one sip, I replied.

Stifling a cough, I handed the leather bottle back. “That’s got quite the kick.”

“Mhmm,” Vanesy agreed. “Although you’re going to need a bit more than that to keep yourself warm out there. Aren’t you freezing in that outfit?”

I looked down at my attire. While I wasn’t expecting a battle, I was dressed for one. My inner gray garment was skin-tight, with the sleeve reaching to my wrist. While thin and elastic enough for me to freely move in, it was also strong enough to withstand sharp edges to a certain degree. The only thing I wore over this was a simple black tunic that draped loosely over my shoulders. The sleeves stopped at the elbows, allowing unimpeded movement of my arms.

I shook my head. “I’ve grown used to constantly surrounding myself with mana to keep me warm. Honestly, even the cloak is just for appearance’s sake.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. Commander Virion wanted me to have you speak in front of the soldiers—you know, for motivation.”

“About that...” I grinned. “Let’s hold off on that until Captain Auddyr arrives. I was hoping to have a little fun in the camp.”

“Uh-oh,” Vanesy groaned. “What are you up to?”

I shook my head disapprovingly. “Now is that any way to speak to your superior?”

“Fine,” she said, relenting. “Just don’t mortally wound any of my soldiers.”

“What kind of person do you take me for?” I replied innocently, putting my

cloak back on as I headed back toward the cloth door. “Are there any soldiers who’d recognize me?” I asked, remembering how the head chef had bowed to me.

“We’re pretty far out from any sort of mass communication. I just had a letter delivered by carrier with the latest updates, but I haven’t announced any of it,” she answered. “With your shaggy hair and those plain clothes, you’ll easily pass as a new recruit picked up from the countryside.”

“There’s an old saying that a wise man appears weak when he is strong and strong when he is weak,” I replied, pointing at the dazzling armor she wore, engraved with intricate decorations.

“It’s for protection, not for showing off,” she argued.

“Not when the design on the armor matches your bond’s armor,” I teased, glancing at the silver armor hanging on a stand next to Torch.

“You’ve turned into a wise-ass since they made you a Lance,” she grumbled.

“Oh please, I was a wise-ass long before becoming a Lance,” I rebutted.

Vanesy leaned back against her desk and gazed past me, as if looking far into the distance. “‘Appear weak when you’re strong.’ I like that.”

“Feel free to steal it,” I said as I headed out of the tent. I couldn’t tell her that the quote was from an ancient general from my previous life, but she didn’t seem to be curious about its origin.

‘What did you want to do?’ Sylvie asked curiously as she nestled on top of my head.

Evaluate the current level of our soldiers’ competency, of course.

Sylvie’s sense of doubt flooded my mind. *‘You mean play-fight with them?’*

Just for a little bit.

‘Even as your bond, I sometimes find myself worried that the fate of this continent relies so heavily upon you.’

A SIMPLE COOK

LIFTING THE TENT FLAP, I caught sight of the guard stationed outside. As soon as our eyes met, his giant body stiffened into a salute. “Gen—”

“Remember...” I said, winking at the guard as I pressed my finger to my lips. Without waiting for a response, I made my way back to the growing cluster of soldiers, who were cheering louder than before.

The fight between the half-elf girl Cedry and the long-armed Jona seemed to have come to an end, and a new pair of fighters now brawled on an earthen platform conjured by one of the mages.

The two soldiers’ casual spar had escalated into a full-blown event, and the audience moved logs and tree stumps to make seats. Some of the more enthusiastic members of the crowd were making wagers with their peers, from the meat slices of their next meals to more precious resources like the alcohol they had smuggled into camp inside hidden water pouches. All in all, there was a jubilant atmosphere in the camp, unbecoming the continent’s current circumstances.

Blending into the crowd, I made my way toward the front of the makeshift arena, where I found Cedry and Jona watching from the ground.

“It was a good fight,” I remarked, taking a seat next to Jona, the dagger-wielding soldier. “Who ended up winning?”

The half-elf who fought using gauntlets—just like my father—gave me a victorious smile as she raised up her hand, flaunting her victory in front of

Jona.

Jona ran a hand through his short, disheveled hair in frustration. “One time, Cedry. You’ve won *one* time.”

“The first victory of many to come,” she snickered.

I nodded to the half-elf in acknowledgement of her success. “I wish I could’ve seen how it ended.”

Laughing, Jona stuck out a hand. “My name’s Jona, and this immature girl next to me is Cedry. I don’t think I’ve seen you around. Are you a new recruit?”

“I guess you could say that.” I shook both their hands. “You can call me Arthur.”

“Well, Arthur, judging by how things are going, we should be able to enjoy a lot more fights tonight,” Jona said, returning his focus to the fight currently taking place.

It ended nearly as soon as it began, with a large, bear-like augments landing a finishing blow on his light-footed opponent. As the defeated soldier jumped off the stage, nursing his stricken cheek, my gaze turned to Jona and Cedry once more. Jona’s features were ordinary, with sharp angles and a slight, beaked nose. Cedry, on the other hand, stood out a bit more. With her radiant gaze that seemed full of life and her playful demeanor, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was popular with both men and women. Just in the short time I’d sat down next to them, at least a dozen of her peers had walked by, making jokes or congratulating her on her win.

“—country bumpkin! Get your head outta yer ass,” a loud, gritty voice snapped.

I turned toward the source of the voice to see the bear-like augments staring back down at me.

I looked around until I realized he was talking to me. “Do I really look like I came from the countryside?” I asked Jona.

“Stop going after fresh recruits, Herrick—and grow the balls to at least spar

with someone in your own weight class,” Cedry hissed at him, eliciting a howl of laughter from the rest of the crowd.

I got to my feet. “It’s okay. We’re just having fun, right?”

“Yeah,” the balding Herrick quickly agreed. “I’m using this time to show the new recruits some pointers.”

Taking off my cloak with Sylvie inside, I hopped up to the elevated stage and held out my hand. “Well then, please give me lots of pointers.”

Herrick grabbed my hand, squeezing a little too tightly for it to be a warm gesture. “I’ll give you the first move.”

Letting go of my hand, he spread his arms out, a smug grin pasted on his greasy face as he glanced over toward a group of women seated in the audience.

While Herrick’s body seemed a bit too round to be efficient in battle, the layer of mana enveloping him told me he was a competent mage.

Wanting to see how he fought, I willed forth only a limited amount of mana into my body, then stepped in to attack.

As my fist approached his abdomen, I could see the mana gathering where he thought I’d hit. The giant augments barely flinched as my fist sank into his heaping stomach.

“You’re going to have to try harder than that, country brat,” he grunted as I pulled away.

I shook my hand. “So strong.”

“Now, let me show you some pointers.” His smile grew as he glanced again at the group of women watching us.

He swung a giant hand to swat me off the platform. Taking the hit, I landed on my bottom rather embarrassingly, but without any injuries. “Oh man, I couldn’t even react.”

Irritation flickered across my opponent’s face as I failed to go sailing off the platform. “You’re lucky I held back or you would’ve gone flying. Those Alacryan bastards aren’t going to go easy on you, though.”

“You’re right. Thank you.” I tried to sound enthusiastic, like a country bumpkin who was now part of a military filled with mages of noble blood—but it was becoming tiring.

The fight went on for several more minutes with Herrick trying to swat me out of the arena using his meaty hands, while I pretended to get the full brunt of his attack only to stumble a few feet.

“Come on, Herrick. I know you’re going easy on him but don’t baby him all day!” cried a soldier, and his peers agreed.

“I just don’t wanna hurt the twig, you know?” he replied, frustration evident on his face.

So far, by the calluses on his hands and the way his arms naturally attacked, I’d gathered that he used a heavy axe as his primary weapon. However, other than his decent control in body-strengthening, he had no tricks up his sleeve. Deciding that my assessment was over, I took my chance when Herrick reached over to grab me.

I twisted my body and tossed him over my shoulder and out of the arena. The whole act looked like one big blunder. Even Herrick was surprised to find himself looking up at me from the floor.

“Wait, I tripped!” he cried, looking around desperately as he waved his hands. “That doesn’t count.”

The crowd erupted in laughter and jeers, and they mockingly booed Herrick as he stomped away, cursing.

Even using only ten percent of my mana, and without employing any elemental spells, Herrick was a joke. But I couldn’t say that out loud, of course.

“Looks like I got lucky,” I said helplessly up on the stage, scratching my cheek.

“I wanted to beat Herrick’s giant ass, but I guess that can’t be helped.” A tall woman with her black hair tied tightly behind her head jumped up onstage.

“Let’s see if you really were just lucky, greenhorn.”

“Please go easy on me,” I said placatingly.

My opponent was well over six feet—a few inches taller than me—but her thin, toned frame made her look even taller than she actually was. With her dark complexion and sharp, narrow eyes complementing her straight black hair, she looked like a panther ready to pounce.

“I’m used to fighting with a staff so I’d appreciate it if you used a weapon as well,” she said as a wooden staff appeared from the dimension ring on her finger. By the ring she had just used and the rich colors of her clothes, it was obvious that she was a noble, but that fact seemed trivial to her.

“Don’t kill the kid, Nyphia!” her friend cried, sounding genuinely concerned. I feigned a timid chuckle. “Sorry, the smith is repairing my sword right now, but I can—”

“Someone give the boy a sword his size,” Nyphia snapped impatiently as she stretched her neck.

Almost immediately, an unfamiliar soldier threw me his short sword, still in its sheath. I carefully slid the blade out of its scabbard and covered it in mana to dull the edges.

Unlike Herrick, my new opponent didn’t let her guard down. She dropped to a low stance, and held her wooden staff out with its tip aimed at the ground while her feline eyes peered straight into me.

“Poor boy, getting marked by Nyphia,” someone muttered behind me.

I took my stance as well. I had hoped to use this casual event to get a sense for some of the soldiers here, but this girl seemed to have other plans. “Are you ready?”

The dark-skinned augmenter let out an irritated scoff, as if I’d somehow offended her. “Are *you* ready?”

I nodded to show that I was. She struck like a bolt of lightning. Her body remained low as she lunged into striking range, her staff pulled in close to her body, affording her the freedom to attack high or low. She went low, the base of her staff whistling through the air toward my chin. My shortsword rang

against her staff as I parried the blow aside, stepping back and taking on a defensive posture.

Just from her first strike, I could tell what sort of fighter Nyphia was. Her control over mana was excellent—on a different tier than Herrick—but she lacked real experience. Her moves were fast but also obvious. Most likely, she only had experience fighting against guards or other professionals who were afraid to hurt her, which didn't help her short temper and over-inflated confidence.

I parried or dodged each lunge, swipe, thrust, and swing she threw at me—but just barely. From the outside, it looked like I was being pushed back as I desperately tried to keep up. Nyphia's temper reached new highs, escalating after each failed attempt to land a solid hit.

With my back foot leaning off the edge of the platform we were on, I used the momentum from Nyphia's over-emotional thrust to send her out of bounds to end the match—but she kept her balance with the help of her staff. Leaping back to the center, she shook her head. “Not this time. Amber, raise a cage around the arena!”

“This is just a friendly competition, not a death match,” I argued.

She disagreed. “No, this is practice for the war that's right in front of our noses. And in war, there are no ‘out-of-bounds.’” She whipped her head around to look over her shoulder. “Amber. The cage.”

Her friend, or lackey, raised an earthen gate around the arena with a short chant and a wave of her wand, locking me up with this rabid cat who thought herself a mighty tiger.

I looked around; while some of the soldiers shared glances of concern, none of them spoke up. I was beginning to regret this whole idea of ‘blending in.’ I was tempted to just blow apart the arena and walk out, but I held myself back.

With the experience from my past life, I'd come to realize that people become complacent in the presence of a powerful ally. They expect to be

spoonfed victory from the comfort of the backline when someone as revered as a Lance is amongst them. At least, that was the case in my old life. I might have it backward here—who knows, maybe having a Lance with them would give them the confidence and zeal to fight harder—but I was skeptical of that. And with the possibility of an Alacryan ship, or several, veering down to this shore, I didn't want to take any chances.

“You make a good point.” I faked a smile, staying in character. “Please, teach me what you can.”

With our weapons at the ready, we began once more. A real fight, especially one involving a sharp-edged weapon, took only a matter of seconds to draw to a conclusion. But with mana as abundant as it was in this world, making mistakes more forgiving than in my previous world, and fighters did little to correct their flaws. Instead, they focused on making their strengths even stronger. Even I had succumbed to that mistake when I first came to this world—that is, until that was beaten out of me by the asuras back in Epheotus.

Nyphia dashed toward me once more, this time feinting left before using the other end of her staff in a quick, ascending swipe.

I dodged close enough to detect the oaky smell coming from her polished staff, and countered by pushing it up with my free hand. This threw her off balance, and I finished by sliding my foot behind her back foot and pushing forward.

Between the strength of my assimilated body and the added mana, Nyphia was sent tumbling backward. The crowd of soldiers—which had become tense since the cage had been conjured—cried out in dumbfounded amazement at the turn of events.

Glaring at me balefully as her face reddened with embarrassment and anger, Nyphia was unable to form the proper words to express herself. Then a mellow, husky voice rang from the crowd. “Mind if I join in on the fun?”

“You're not joining anything! I just trip—” The dark-skinned noble's words

caught in her throat as she realized whose voice it was. “M-Madam Astera!” Nyphia lowered her head as she spoke. “Forgive me for my rudeness.”

The woman my opponent referred to as Madam Astera was none other than the head cook who had regarded me with a respectful nod when I’d first arrived. The chef hopped up over the cage with a nimbleness that made Nyphia’s movements seem infantile.

I gave a quick bow, remembering to stay in character. “May I have the pleasure of knowing who I’m sparring with?”

Madam Astera bobbed a quick curtsy with her apron. “Just a simple cook.”

RUMINATION

“JUST A COOK?” I repeated. “Somehow I have a hard time believing that.” The head chef shrugged, untying her apron and tossing it over to Nyphia. “Titles are merely an embellishment stuck in front of your name to establish a hierarchy, so yes, I am Chef Astera. Nice to meet you.”

Surprised by her words of wisdom, I dipped my head in response. “And I am Arthur. The pleasure is mine.”

“Well then, *Arthur*, let’s put on a show for these antsy soldiers here before they start throwing a fit.” Her lips curved into a confident smile as she held up the ladle in her hand.

“Of course. Will that be your weapon?”

“Don’t be silly. It’d be disrespectful to fight with a tool used to cook.” With a hearty laugh, Madam Astera motioned to one of the soldiers up in the front for his weapon—a short sword, much like the one I was borrowing. “Now, do go easy on an old lady like me.”

With that, she disappeared from view at a speed that no ‘simple cook’ could have managed. Madam Astera blinked into view in the air above me, already in position to swing down, her handsome face glowing with savage excitement.

With a quick sidestep, I brought up my sword as well. Sparks danced around us as the edge of my blade met hers. Before Madam Astera’s sword hit the ground, she kicked off the guard of my sword to gain distance.

With only a minimal amount of mana infused in my body and sword, my hand became numb from blocking her attack. “A simple cook?” I confirmed. “Just a simple cook,” she answered with a wink, before rushing at me once again.

Our swords became mere blurs in the space between us as Madam Astera and I each unleashed a flurry of attacks.

Her petite body moved with a coordinated agility that would even impress Kordri, the asura who had trained me. We dodged each other’s strikes and swings with minimal movement. If not for the sweat flooding down our faces and necks, it might have looked as if we were missing on purpose.

I raised my mana output to twenty percent, but she seemed to have been holding back as well because we were still at a stalemate.

Neither of us had the luxury to speak—it took all our focus to keep up with each other’s attacks—but our emotions showed on our faces. This wasn’t a duel of magic, just a contest of pure mastery of the sword.

Madam Astera wore an ecstatic grin on her sweaty face as she continued her relentless assault, and somewhere along the way I realized I was smiling as well.

I countered each strike she delivered with another, but she flawlessly dodged until her back was against the earthen cage. I decided not to raise my mana, but instead used the field to my advantage. Dipping below her waist, I brought my sword close, in position to swing up.

She had nowhere to move but to her right—at least, so I thought.

When she was barely an arm’s length away from me, she kicked off the wall and propelled herself directly at me. I quickly pivoted on my right foot, whirling just in time for her blade to whiz past my cheek. The tables had turned; now it was my back that was against the wall.

“I’m sure there was a saying—something along the lines of, ‘Even a mouse will attack when it’s cornered,’” Madam Astera said, her sword raised closely in guard.

I smiled. “Well, it looks like I’m the cornered mouse now.”

“Hence my caution.” She smirked, tightening the grip on her raised sword.

“Now, why don’t you stop holding back, Arthur?”

“I think bringing any magic past basic augmentation into the midst of such an exciting duel would be disrespectful to the way of the sword,” I replied.

“Wise words from one so young.” She nodded in approval. “Then shall we kick things up a notch?” A surge of mana suddenly burst from my opponent as she took a step back.

The soldiers in the front row winced from the sudden thick gust of energy, while others had to lean forward to keep from toppling over in their seats.

With a smile, I increased my mana output to forty percent. A thick wave of mana burst out of me as well, but it was different from Madam Astera’s. While her mana took the form of a sharp and chaotic gale, mine manifested as a refined wave-like pulse.

Madam Astera’s smile faded as she looked at me in awe. Then, shaking herself out of her daze, she molded her mana into a thick armor around her before lunging at me. The force of her initial step created a small crater beneath her feet, shaking the entire arena.

In the span of a single breath, her sword was already inches away from my throat, and the force of her strike had sent a spear of wind sailing past my neck to create a hole in the wall behind me.

I could see why Nyphia was so scared of this ‘simple cook.’ After her initial strike failed, she leaped back and repositioned herself, tightening her stance like a coiled snake, ready to strike.

But this time, I was the one to strike.

I dashed forward, creating no sound as I flashed beside her with my sword in mid-swing. She immediately ducked. With no time to prepare, her movement was sloppy, but the fact that she was able to react to my attack at all showed how keen her instincts were.

She lashed out with a sharp swing before leaping back again. This time, she

didn't wait for me to strike—instead she lunged once more. I brought up my sword but realized midway that her stab was a feint as she dipped into a wide swing at my leg; she *wanted* me to jump up to dodge so she could catch me mid-air.

Instead, I brought my sword down to parry.

A high-pitched ringing resounded from our two blades clashing. A deep tremor rose up my arm from the impact—and then my sword shattered.

For a moment, we just stood there, both of us winded and, perhaps, a little disappointed at the abrupt conclusion of our battle. Finally I said, “It’s my loss, Chef Astera.”

“No, I can’t accept that. It was just that your sword’s quality—”

I shook my head. “I think it’s time for dinner anyway, right?” I walked over to the soldier I had borrowed the sword from. “I’m sorry about your sword. I’ll get you a new one.”

“Wha—oh, yeah, sure. No problem...” His voice trailed off as he stared at me blankly. Noticing his awestruck expression, I realized how quiet the camp had become. I looked around to see everyone with the same expression as the soldier in front of me, the only sound the occasional crackle of wood coming from the fires.

“You heard the boy, move your asses or starve for the rest of the night!” Madam Astera roared. “We’re going all out tonight!”

With that, the silent crowd erupted into cheers, and the cooks began handing out plates stacked with steaming food.

The atmosphere quickly turned festive as Madam Astera brought out barrels of liquor. I spotted Vanesy trying to limit the amount of alcohol being passed around, but she finally gave in, taking a glass for herself.

I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to drink when we were supposed to be on the lookout for any stray enemy ships, but the chances of that happening were too meager to stop the soldiers from having at least one good night.

With a few drinks in everyone’s system, the soldiers became more outgoing.

Some began singing while others accompanied them, using a hollow log as a makeshift percussive instrument. The songs seemed like melodic tales of adventurers with no real thought put into rhythm, but it was enjoyable nonetheless—especially once I had a few drinks in me as well.

‘Should a Lance succumb to peer pressure and drink so much?’ Sylvie berated me, choosing to stay inside my cloak for warmth.

Who says it’s peer pressure? I replied, taking another sip, relishing the warm numbness spreading from the alcohol—and from the fire as well.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Madam Astera took a seat next to me by the dancing flame, a glass of liquor in her hand. “So who exactly is Arthur?”

“Not at all,” I replied. I was thankful for the chef’s presence, since the curious soldiers lingering around me began dispersing as soon as she came over. “And I thought you already knew.”

“I knew you weren’t just a normal boy.” She shrugged before gulping down the rest of the liquor in her glass.

I followed suit and took another sip as well. “Then may I ask who *you* are?”

“I told you, I’m just a—”

“Yeah, that ‘simple cook’ answer of yours isn’t going to cut it,” I interrupted. She burst out with a hearty laugh that didn’t match her small frame. “Fine, I’ll answer. But you could’ve probably found out from some of the soldiers here—a lot of them were my students, after all.”

“So you were a teacher? At Xyrus?”

“Oh please, I’d rather swallow a gallon of fire sand than teach at that school,” she retorted.

“I happen to have been a student there,” I replied, pretending to be offended.

“Then you know how stuck up most of those kids are,” she replied.

“Can’t argue with that.” I felt my chest tighten at the recollection of some unwanted memories, but pushed the feeling away.

“After the war with the elves, I decided to teach at Lanceler Academy,” she said, looking idly at the fire through her empty glass. “You’ve heard of us,

right?”

“Of course,” I answered, thinking back to the time I’d spent researching the once-famous school located in Kalberk City, near the center of Sapin. “The legendary school for any would-be elite soldiers.”

“Except that after the war, there was little demand for soldiers,” she breathed, fogging her glass. “More nobles wanted their children to attend Xyrus now that there is so little tension between the races.”

“I see,” I muttered. “Still, this war against the Alacryans should’ve brought quite a few new students to Lanceler. No offense, but what are you doing here as a chef?”

“That’s a story for another time,” she said, shaking her cup. “A time with more booze.”

I raised my glass. “I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Now, onto your story. What’s a talent like you doing here, and why in the world did you decide to go to Xyrus with that level of skill with the sword?”

“Because I could manage by myself with the sword. It was magic that I needed help getting better at,” I replied.

Her eyes widened as she stared at me. “No kidding?”

I shook my head and opened my mouth to continue, but the clank of armored footsteps caught my attention. “General—I mean, Sir.” The guard who had been stationed outside of Professor Glory’s tent covered his mouth at his blunder, his eyes wide and fearful as he shifted glances between me and Madam Astera.

Despite the clamor around us, everyone in the vicinity seemed to have heard, and they whipped their heads around toward us.

The guard continued speaking, lowering his voice in a useless attempt to amend his mistake. “Captain Auddyr has arrived and Captain Glory is nowhere to be found.”

I turned back to the head chef, whose brows were knitted in confusion. “Well, there’s my story.”

“He said ‘General.’” Madam Astera turned to the guard. “You said ‘General,’ right?”

Unsure how to answer, the guard looked to me for questioning, but I just stood up, careful not to wake my sleeping bond.

“Come on. Let’s go find your captain.” I turned back to the chef, holding my empty glass. “At a time with more booze.”

Her face relaxed as she managed a smile. “Aye.”

As we walked back toward the main tent, I surveyed the tops of the large boulders, hoping to catch sight of the captain. Knowing her, I doubted she’d be able to completely relax.

“Ah, there she is,” I said, squinting.

It took the guard a moment to spot her shadowed figure. She was sitting atop the boulder that made up the front wall of the encampment.

“Thank you.” The guard started in her direction, but I held him back.

“Let me. Tell Captain Auddyr I’ll meet with him first thing tomorrow morning.”

“But the captain—”

“It’s fine,” I interjected, handing him my empty glass. “There’s nothing going on, and I’ve had a bit too much alcohol to entertain a man I don’t know tonight.”

“Yes, General.” With a salute, the guard veered off toward the tent.

Letting out a deep breath that formed a cloud of fog in front of me, I enveloped my body in a shroud of wind as I readied myself to jump. The thin layer of frost underneath my feet crunched as I pushed off the ground.

‘Where are we headed now?’ Sylvie asked, sounding noticeably sleepy even through the mental transmission.

Making sure my precious subordinate is okay, I answered wryly as I walked up behind Vanesy.

She glanced over her shoulder before turning her head back toward the grey moonlit ocean. “Want another drink?”

“Should the lookout be drinking?” I asked, taking a seat beside her as Sylvie popped out of my woolen cloak.

“You’re one to talk, *General*, with your cheeks the color of ripe tomatoes,” she scoffed, idly petting my bond, who had curled up between us.

“Give me that.” Taking the flask from her hands, I took another gulp of the fiery liquid that tickled my throat.

Leaning back on her hands, Vanesy looked up at the crescent moon. “Do you think we’ll be able to win this war?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I’ll do everything I can to make sure we do,” I promised.

“Somehow, despite the fact that you’re barely half my age, I find comfort in your words—like you’ll actually make sure of it.”

I thought back to the event three years ago that had always weighed on my mind. “I’ve let a lot of people down before. I want to make sure I don’t do it again.”

“Are you talking about what happened at Xyrus?” she asked, her brows furrowed in concern.

I merely nodded in reply, and stared at the mesmerizing sight of the wide ocean. “What’s left of Xyrus Academy now?”

I could feel Vanesy’s eyes on me, but she stayed silent.

“Tessia doesn’t remember much,” I continued. “Curtis and Kathyln act like nothing happened—as if they don’t want to accept what happened. What exactly had happened before I arrived?”

“Arthur. What’s done is done. Me telling you this will only make you—”

“I need to know, Vanesy. I should’ve asked a lot earlier, but I made excuses not to.” I turned and met her eyes.

With a deep breath, my former professor nodded. “In the disciplinary committee, Doradrea was the first to be found dead. Theodore was injured gravely and didn’t make it, even with the help of the adventurers’ guild’s emitters.”

“What about Feyrith, and Claire—Claire Bladeheart? When I got there, she’d been stabbed... Did she make it?”

Vanesy nodded again. “Feyrith Ivsaar... I know he was badly injured, but he was taken back home safely. The Bladeheart family, though, is as secretive as they are old. I was told that Claire was alive, but as for what state she was in, I’m not sure.”

“I see. At least she’s alive.” I was relieved that the leader of the disciplinary committee had made it, but my brief sense of relief crumbled as Vanesy continued, listing the names of people I knew who were now gone. There were so many names that they seemed to run together, and while not every name rang clearly, the sheer number of people she mentioned struck me hard.

“And?” I asked, seeing her hesitate.

“Kai Crestless was one of the radical members that the Vritra, Draneeve, had with him. Kai and the rest of the robed lackeys disappeared with Draneeve, along with Elijah,” she continued. “He’s probably the reason Curtis didn’t want to speak of that disaster.”

“I see,” I muttered, shifting my gaze back to the ocean.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. The commotion going on below us and the faint crash of the night’s tide in the distance was all that filled the silence as I thought of my short time at Xyrus. Knowing what had happened now gave me a chance for true reflection. I often caught myself forgetting the old memories of my past life. More and more, my past self’s hold on me lessened, allowing me to become the person I wanted to be in this world. But at this moment, I found myself wishing to turn back to the old me—to the cold, rational me that had suppressed his emotions in exchange for having no vulnerability that could be used against him.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t guessed what had happened, but hearing it confirmed made it suddenly very real. My chest twisted, as if the blood flowing through my heart had thickened into tar and it struggled to keep a stable beat.

A warm drop of liquid rolled down my frigid face as I felt my chin tremble

like an infant's. Gnashing my teeth in hopes of suppressing my unwanted emotions, I turned to look back toward the camp. I wondered how many of the people I knew—even the people I had met today—would end up dead, with nothing I could do to stop it. How many of them would survive this war?

I turned to Vanesy to see her shoulders trembling as she clutched tightly at her flask. Quickly wiping a tear, I stood up.

Sylvie. Do me a favor and keep watch for the night.

'Sure,' she responded, with a soft, comforting tone I rarely heard. My bond turned to her original form, startling Vanesy out of her melancholy. With a powerful flap of black wings, Sylvie shot up, barely visible as she melted into the night sky.

"Come." I held out my hand to Vanesy. "The night's young, and it doesn't seem like the soldiers have any intention of stopping. As their captain, I figure it's your duty to join instead of moping around up here."

MORNING AFTER

I LIFTED my makeshift practice sword, a crudely carved piece of wood, wrapped in towels for weight. I counted in my head with each downward swing until a soft voice shook me out of my trance. “Grey. It’s time for breakfast.”

Looking over my shoulder, I spotted Cecilia by the door with a fresh towel folded neatly in her arms. “Oh, thanks!”

I walked over and Cecilia handed me the towel. “I still have to help get the table set up,” she announced before she briskly walked away.

I watched Cecilia walk back through the dimly lit hallway, remembering the incident almost a year ago, when I’d nearly died trying to save her from the outburst of her ki.

Despite her aloof manner of speech, her attitude toward everyone in the orphanage had definitely improved.

After I wiped myself down, I went back inside as well, making sure to close the mesh screen door against the summer bugs buzzing outside.

“Someone is apparently going through puberty, judging by the stink coming from his body.” Nico’s thin frame approached me from an intersecting hallway.

“Your sweat starts stinking when you go through puberty?” I asked, sniffing my sleeveless shirt.

“Supposedly, according to an article I read on hormones.” He shrugged.

Getting a good whiff of the rancid smell for the first time, I winced. “Cecilia probably smelled it too, then.”

“Did she react in any sort of way?”

“No, she just gave me a towel and left,” I said as I wiped my body with the towel again, hoping it’d get more of the stench off of me.

“Her determination to remain true to her indifferent character is strong.” Nico nodded.

I shrugged. “I don’t think she’s trying to be some character.”

“I beg to differ, my friend. Last week, after I finished tampering with the shock glove—working name, by the way—to turn it into a pendant she could carry around her neck, she refused!”

Raising a brow, I smirked at my friend. “Oh? You gave Cecilia a necklace?”

“How do you always manage to pick and choose what you want to hear? What are you going to do when you go to a real school?” He sighed, adopting an air of great disappointment. “And besides, I think she likes you more—what with her giving you a towel and all.”

“Well, I *did* save her life, you know,” I teased, putting an arm around my thin friend. I’d outgrown him, these past few months.

“Her knight in sweating armor,” he said, pinching his nose.

It had become more and more apparent, at least to me, that Nico had developed feelings for Cecilia, our orphanage’s ice queen. It wasn’t any secret that Cecilia was popular amongst the boys here, but everyone who’d gathered the courage to make a move had been rejected. With his particular blend of pride and low self-esteem, Nico found other ways to make Cecilia notice him without revealing his interest in her.

I leaned more heavily on my skinny friend, making him struggle to keep us from falling down. “I’m not so sure about going to school anymore.”

“What?” Nico finally managed to free himself of my arm. “Why? You know I only joke about your intelligence.”

“It’s not that,” I chuckled. “It’s expensive, and Headmaster Wilbeck already

has a hard time sending even a few kids to school.”

“Then what do you plan on doing?” Nico asked, brows knitted into a rare serious expression.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe just help out as staff at the orphanage once I’m old enough. I was even thinking about going to an institution to get better at ki. I know they offer free tuition and stuff if you’re qualified.” I shrugged.

“You’re joking, right?” he fumed, stopping in the middle of the hallway. “I know we owe a lot to Headmaster Wilbeck and I get that you want to repay her, but staying here to do that is short-minded. With your talent, you can do so much more once you’ve gotten a proper education!”

“Which brings me to why I was thinking of the institu—”

“That’s not education,” Nico interrupted. “Those institutions are designed to churn out mindless soldiers and find potential candidates for kings. I’ve read some journals about those places—how students there are worked to the point of near-death; how candidates get booted out if they don’t cut it.”

“You sound like the headmaster,” I grumbled as I started walking again.

“Because you don’t have any motivation to do something. Sure, you like training, but you have no goal past that,” he admonished. “School is a place where you can find out what you want to do while learning about this world—without restriction or bias, like the institution.”

“Well, money is still an issue,” I pointed out. “If we want to go to school, it’d have to be by next year.”

Nico’s expression softened at my compliance. “Well, lucky for you, you happen to have a friend that actually thinks and plans for the future. I’ve almost managed to save enough money from our little ‘missions’ for us to go school—of course, banking on the assumption that I get at least a partial scholarship.”

“Wait, weren’t you supposed to give the money to the orphanage?”

“I did”—Nico assumed an innocent expression—“some of it.”

I shook my head with a groan. “I should’ve known.”

“After we get a proper education, we can properly help Headmaster Wilbeck and the kids here. I guarantee it’ll be better for the orphanage that way.” My friend patted me on the back. “Come on. Let’s go to the dining area before our food gets cold.”

“Why not save enough money to take Cecilia to school with us as well?” I teased one last time as I followed Nico down the hall.

“Zip it! I’m telling you, I have no interest in her!” he retorted, refusing to look me in the eye.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I opened my eyes to the soft glow of the morning sun. Even hidden behind a layer of clouds, its rays somehow seemed to bore holes into my retinas. The aching in my skull pulsed rhythmically—a constant reminder of the glasses, if not bottles, of alcohol I had consumed during the previous night.

Squinting, I attempted to get up, but with a sickly moan I immediately retreated back underneath the woolen cloak I’d used as a blanket. My mouth was dry, sticky with thick saliva.

Suddenly my cloak—the only thing protecting me from the outside world—was ripped away from me.

“Morning, *General*,” Vanesy’s familiar voice chimed from above. The bright timbre of her voice was normally easy on the ears, but the strength of my hangover made it sound sharp and grating.

“As your superior, I order you to unhand my blanket and let me sleep,” I mumbled irritably.

“No can do. You were the one who decided to push the meeting with Captain Auddyr off until morning,” she said, pulling my unwilling body up. “Splash some cold water on your face and meet us at the tent.” Vanesy handed me a small stack of papers clipped together. “Here. Read this before you meet with me and Captain Auddyr,” she said before leaving.

Grumbling under my breath, I got up, taking in my surroundings for the first

time today. I'd somehow managed to get to the top of the cliff overlooking the camp.

'You didn't manage to do anything last night.' Sylvie's voice sounded in my head like a kick to the brain.

Easy, Sylv. My head is killing me, I complained as I spotted my bond in her dragon form, approaching from the forest behind me. *What happened, anyway?*

"I dragged your drunk corpse of a body up here to let you sleep, and to keep you from making a fool of yourself before even announcing your position to everyone," she chided in a mellow voice I hadn't heard in a few days.

"How was the watch last night? Nothing unusual?" I asked, attempting to change the subject.

She glowed brightly before shrinking into her pearly white fox form, then hopped on my shoulder. "It was quiet. There was a thick layer of fog throughout the western shore so I couldn't find any enemy ships. I would've gone further but I was afraid they might find me."

"You did good," I said. "Now, where can I wash my face?"

"There should be washing stations in the encampment, but there's a stream just a little ways into the forest that I think you'd prefer," she answered, a wisp of fog forming in front of her snout as she spoke.

"Stream it is."

The crisp air helped my recovery, but it was the first splash of cold water on my face that really cleared my head. I wished I could wash away the toxins in my brain as well, but at least I was fully functional by the time Sylvie and I arrived in front of the captain's tent.

I glanced up from the stack of papers, which I'd hurriedly flipped through on my way from the stream, only to see the familiar guard stationed outside the tent. "You. What's your name?"

"It's Mable Esterfield, sir—I mean, General," he stated. He kept his eyes aimed straight in front of him, and his posture rigid.

“What an unfitting, pretty name,” I commented, patting him on the shoulder as he regarded me with a confused expression.

I made my way into the tent, and was greeted by a gust of warm air from the small furnace beside the desk.

Standing next to Vanesy was a man primmed from head to toe in overly-elegant military attire. Next to him, Vanesy looked like a mere foot soldier, while, compared to the two of them, I was no more than a peasant boy.

With his silvery blond hair slicked back neatly behind his narrow ears, Captain Auddyr stood poised with his back ramrod straight. He looked to be no older than my father, but there were wrinkles lining his face that told me how much of his life he had spent scowling. His sharp brows and deep-set eyes seemed to pierce through me with an expression as if he were looking down at a rebellious son.

“Captain, this is General Arthur Leywin. Arth—General Leywin, this is Captain Jarnas Auddyr, of the 2nd Division.” Captain Auddyr and I locked gazes as we were introduced.

“It’s nice to meet you, Captain.” I smiled as I held out my hand, hoping I looked better than I felt.

Captain Auddyr returned my gesture and shook my hand. “The pleasure is mine, General,” he said with a grunt, then immediately turned to Vanesy. “Captain Glory. My division has made camp in the nearby woods up the cliffside. It’d be best for both of our divisions to get acquainted before we bring our forces together.”

She shot me an uncomfortable glance before answering. “I agree. We’ll need both divisions to be acquainted with each other as quickly as possible. General Leywin, what do you think is the best way to divide our forces in case of an attack?”

I looked back down at the bundle of papers Vanesy had given me that morning, which detailed the hard numbers for each division, as well as an inventory of armaments and supplies. . I was reading through the numbers of

riages and foot soldiers when Captain Auddyr spoke up.

“Integrating our divisions so that all our foot soldiers are lined up in position to receive an attack from the coast would be best,” he declared.

Vanesy shook her head. “Captain Auddyr, General Leywin has been entrusted with overseeing our divisions, so it’d be best to—”

“General Leywin is responsible, as a Lance, to make sure our divisions are ready in case of an attack, but *as a mighty Lance*, he should be aware that captains are the most knowledgeable about their own divisions,” Captain Auddyr cut in as I continued reading through the small bundle of papers.

‘I’m getting the urge to slap him with my tail,’ Sylvie grunted, almost making me laugh aloud.

After finishing my cursory read of the details of Captain Auddyr’s division, I gave the papers back to Vanesy. “It seems I’m not needed here then. I’ll just go grab a bite to eat.”

“General Leywin!” Vanesy called from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“Isn’t there anything you’d like to add?” she replied, seeming uneasy about how our meeting had progressed.

“Well, if you want my input, I’d say allocating a hundred percent of a force to one position is never a wise move.” I shrugged.

Captain Auddyr’s brow twitched as he attempted to mask his contempt. It was obvious that he wasn’t used to being defied, especially not by someone younger than him.

“We are the last form of defense on the western shore in case any stray Alacryan ships come from the ocean. Where else would they attack from, *General?*” he hissed, stressing my title as if it were an insult.

“Captain, I’m trying to be civil here,” I said, turning around. “As you said, Commander Virion asked me to be here in the unlikely event that the worst-case scenario happens, so that’s the perspective I’m coming from.”

I took another step toward him, my nonchalant demeanor dissipating.

“However, I suggest you not confuse my indifference toward this specific matter with some misguided notion that you hold the reins here. *Understand?*”

Captain Auddyr involuntarily took a step away from me, sweat lining the sides of his scowling face. “Understood.”

I nodded. “Good. I never intended to play a hands-on role in the decisions you make so I’ll leave it up to the two of you.”

As I prepared to leave, however, the howls of distant screams caught my attention. The three of us exchanged glances, all of us confused as to what was going on.

We dashed out of the tent to see all the soldiers—some still with bowls of food in their hands—staring up toward the cliff where the screams and cries were coming from. So still was the camp in that moment, that it felt as if time has stopped. Then, an oblong object flew off the edge of the cliff and rolled down, landing near us.

It was a bloodied sword—with a severed arm, clad in armor, still gripping the handle.

WAY OF MAGIC

BOTH CAPTAINS behind me seemed momentarily stupefied as we all stared at the severed arm—hand still clenching the sword, a pool of blood forming beneath it. Sylvie slipped free of my cloak and darted toward the gory remains.

“Soldiers on guard! Stand by for battle!” I roared, projecting my voice as loudly and distinctly as possible to get everyone’s attention.

The soldiers roused from their daze at my commands. The new recruits scrambled to their belongings, fumbling as they put on their armor. The veteran adventurers and experienced soldiers, already wearing their under-armor garments, deftly buckled on their protective gear as the screams and sharp clangs of metal continued echoing from above the cliff.

Captains Glory and Auddyr were already dressed in light armor and had snapped back to their senses, both a bit embarrassed by their poor response to the situation.

“Captain Auddyr. The armor on this arm isn’t something a passerby would have—it’s military attire. Didn’t you say your division was stationed up on the cliff?” The camp had grown loud with activity, and I had to yell.

The once surly-faced captain paled in horror as he studied the armor one more time. He was about to leap up the cliff, but I held him down by the metal gorget that protected his shoulders and chest. “Stay here until the division is ready.”

“Unhand me! My soldiers are under attack without their leader!” Captain Auddyr hissed, with no trace of his former haughty and composed self.

Tightening my grip, I pulled him close. “Captain. If you go in alone and are killed, your soldiers will be in a worse position than they’re in now.”

I surveyed the encampment as Captain Glory led her division into an organized formation. Most of the soldiers were already prepared and grouped based on their position. Rather than one large group, Vanesy had split her forces up into separate units, each composed of its own ranks of foot soldiers, augmenters, archers, and mages.

With a cursory glance, I saw that the ones at the very front of each unit were foot soldiers—regular humans and elves with thick armor and large shields, since they’d be taking the brunt of an attack. Along the flanks were augmenters responsible for guarding the conjurers and archers as they fired arrows and spells.

The head—the leader of a unit—was positioned just behind the footsoldiers, an ideal spot for giving orders and protecting the conjurers as well.

Vanesy looked at me and signaled that she was ready. Letting go of Captain Auddyr, I motioned for him to join his fellow captain as I moved toward the rear where the smiths and cooks were grouped, Sylvie at my heels.

As the division began making its way up the steep slope up the cliff, I pondered who could be attacking. We were near the southern border of Sapin, where the underground kingdom of Darv began. At first, my mind immediately went to a mana beast attack, but the point of injury on the severed arm was too clean of a cut for it to have been claws or fangs. It was possible that they were attacked by some of the nomadic bandits I’d read about, who travelled aboveground along the southern parts of Dicathen. It could also be a radical group that was opposed to the war with Alacrya, but there was no way to know for sure—and the fact that a severed arm had sailed down the cliff made me think there was something else going on.

“Madam Astera, will you be okay here?” I asked when I spotted the head

chef, who was now wearing plated armor.

“No problems here. Captain Glory ordered some of the augmenters to stay behind to guard us, but I’m also here, remember?” She gave me a confident smirk.

“You’re right. I’ll be heading off then.” I was about to turn back toward the cliff when Madam Astera gripped my arm.

“Arthur,” she said, her expression gravely serious. “You can never be too careful.”

“I hope you practice what you preach.” To Sylvie, I thought, *You better get ready.*

‘Is it okay for me to transform out in the open so soon?’ she asked, quirking her fox head to the side slightly.

No need to hold back right now. I need to know what’s going on up there, and fast.

Sylvie’s small body began glowing and expanded into the form of a mighty dragon. Her obsidian scales glimmered from the morning sun, putting the sparkling ocean to shame. Her translucent yellow eyes looked down at me with intelligence and an animal-like ferocity. The burly cooks and barrel-chested smiths with arms as thick as my torso gawked in reverence; some even toppled over like infants learning to walk.

I leaped to the base of my bond’s neck and grabbed onto a ridged spike. Looking over my shoulder once more, I saw the awestruck expression plastered on Madam Astera’s delicate face as Sylvie’s large wings beat down to produce a powerful gale.

Sylvie kicked off the ground and swung her wings once more to lift off. The powerful winds produced by this startled the marching units, led by their heads with Captains Glory and Auddyr in the front, but I was already too far up to make out any of their expressions.

I had planned on flying directly over where Captain Auddyr’s division should be, but instead Sylvie soared up into the layer of clouds overhead. *‘Arthur,*

before we engage in battle you should know that I'm limited in what I can do to help.'

Are you talking about the asura's treaty? I asked, afraid that I would not be able to fight alongside my bond.

'That's an area of concern Aldir has warned me about, but it's not just that. With the awakening process that Grandfather Indrath made me undergo for my aether powers, it'll still take a while before I'm able to assist you with any magic. Until my powers are fully awakened and under control, I'll be limited to what I can do physically in this form. I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier.'

I stroked the side of my bond's large neck, berating myself for not taking her condition into account. I knew I had cut her training short, but I'd never realized what a crucial time it had been for her. *No, don't be. At least I know now.*

It didn't take us long to reach our destination. We could hear the sounds of an ensuing battle but it wasn't until we dropped below the layer of clouds blocking our view that we realized the severity of the situation at hand.

'This can't be possible.' Sylvie's thoughts were laced with disbelief at the sight below, but as someone who'd seen the surprises war brought, I could only see this as a miscalculation—a rather severe one.

Down below, in a field of grass stained red and black with blood and smoke, was what could only be the Alacryan army.

Their forces, about five thousand strong, were currently engaged with Captain Auddyr's division. The soldiers were no larger than insects from here, but it was easy to distinguish them. Unlike the Dicathen army, the Alacryan soldiers seemed to have a standardized color of deep red emblazoned on their dark gray armor.

Sylvie's back lurched as she prepared to dive down, but I stopped her. *No. Let's stay hidden here for now.*

'Stay hidden? Allies are dying down there and you wish to stay hidden?' Her anger was evident in her words, but I knew she already knew my intentions.

We can't get involved in every battle. Right now, our priority is knowing what we're up against. I kept my gaze firmly locked on the scene below, regretting not having any transmission scrolls to communicate with Virion as I gritted my teeth against the knowledge that I couldn't act.

'How were they able to make it all the way here without us knowing? They may not have come across a major city yet, but the dwarves should've known that an army was marching through their land.'

"Maybe they did know," I muttered, taking note of the faint path they'd created during their march. *Change of plans. Sylv, can you stay hidden and follow the trail the Alacryans made on their way here? I'll join the fight while blending in as a regular soldier.*

'What if you get into trouble? I'll be too far away to help.' I could hear the disapproval in her voice.

Vanesy's division is going to arrive soon and I have a bad feeling that, even though we outnumber them, it'll be a losing battle unless I help.

'All the more reason for me to stay and help you,' Sylvie argued.

Please. If my suspicions are correct, this war might not be as simple as us versus them. You're the only one here who can make the journey there and back fast enough. I'll stay safe, Sylv.

'Fine. But the moment I sense you're in danger, I'm coming back and taking you away whether you're conscious or not,' Sylvie said with a grunt.

Thanks. I patted my bond before I let myself fall off her back. The crisp winter air felt like sharp whips lashing at me as I hurtled toward the ground. I intentionally veered away from the battle as to not attract attention.

Just before landing into a cluster of trees, I enveloped my body in mana, erasing my presence before casting a wind spell. Despite crashing through a few dry branches, I was able, with the help of magic to soften my impact, to reach the ground quietly enough.

"The things I do to blend in," I muttered, picking broken twigs and leaves out of my hair. I remained hidden within the thick cluster of trees until I heard

Vanesy's division arrive.

"Tred! Vester! Take your units around for a left flank. Dirk, Sasha, to the right!" Vanesy's voice resounded with confident precision. "Everyone else, we group with Captain Auddyr's forces and hit those Alacryan bastards from the front!"

Dashing out, I headed for Captain Glory. On instinct, Vanesy whirled both her swords at me before realizing who I was.

"Damn it, Arthur. Don't scare me like that!" she snapped. "What are you doing here? I saw you and your bond fly off."

"And leave my precious subordinate behind?" I smirked. "No. I sent Sylvie on an equally important side mission."

"Well, it's damn reassuring to have you with us. If we survive, we're going to have to find out how an Alacryan force of this size was able to get around us."

I nodded my head. "How about we leave a few alive to try and get the answer out of them?"

Vanesy's lips curved into a wicked grin as she raised her longswords. "Sounds like a plan."

Vanesy's soldiers roared, men and women alike, as they reached the Alacryan army. I stood behind for a minute, watching as steel cut into flesh. Indecipherable mutters sounded from the conjurers as they prepared their spells, while archers released volleys of arrows from behind the protection of the augmenters and foot soldiers.

But my focus was on the Alacryan soldiers. The uneasy feeling I'd had since watching them from the sky had only become worse as they began to retaliate.

For some absurd reason, I'd expected our enemies to be something like the Vritra—monsters of evil. However, looking at them, they were no different from our soldiers, except that they were adorned in dark gray and red. This fact only dawned on me as I locked eyes with an enemy soldier.

The soldier's eyes narrowed as he readied to strike. I picked up a bloodstained sword from the ground as he dashed toward me. I tried to sense what level his core was, and was surprised to find that I was unable to read it. The soldier spread his arms while his fingers curled like claws. Suddenly, without even the influx of mana to warn me, gigantic claws manifested around his hands. He lashed out with his mana claws at a ferocious speed.

I ducked, only to see a row of trees behind me topple at the strength of my opponent's attack. With the speed of his spell-casting and the power behind it, I could only assume he was at least a yellow core augments—maybe even a silver core.

I augmented my sword and countered with an upward swing, but a translucent barrier shimmered just below the mage, protecting the area underneath his chest where I'd been aiming.

What the hell. I whipped my head over my shoulder, sensing that the spell hadn't come from him. About thirty feet away from me was another soldier, his hands outstretched and brows knitted in concentration. Although I only had a moment, as most of my attention remained focused on my current opponent, it was clear that this second soldier realized that I was aware of him.

The translucent panel that had protected my opponent an instant earlier moved and enlarged, forming as a wall between me and the conjurer. I'd never seen someone manipulate a barrier with such efficiency, so it was obvious who my priority should be. However, the clawed soldier was already moving again, slashing at my neck, forcing me to lose sight of his companion and defend myself.

Dropping the scavenged sword, I grabbed the attacker's forearm, avoiding the claw, and stomped down with my right foot. A pillar of earth punched up from the ground like a battering ram.

This time, whether because the conjurer behind me hadn't expected the spell or was too worried about shielding himself, no barrier formed. The clawed

augmenter attempted to sidestep, ripping his arm free from my grasp, but the pillar still struck his ribs. I was surprised by the sound my spell produced on impact—the sound of bones cracking underneath his now-dented armor. *Did this idiot not augment his body?*

Gnashing his teeth with a pained expression, the augmenter ignored his obvious injury and lunged toward me, his mana claws extended. With my fists wrapped in electricity, I met his strike head-on. I expected him to counter or use another spell, but he didn't. My lightning-clad fist shattered his mana claws and broke his wrist on impact.

I held off on finishing him, my curiosity getting the better of me. He didn't pose a real threat to me, but something about how he fought—how *they* fought—didn't make any sense. I'd thought the opponent in front of me was an experienced augmenter, but his body wasn't even protected by mana. If not for the mana claw absorbing some of the impact, his arm would've been torn off completely.

The augmenter soldier was down on one knee, his left arm dangling at his side. A flicker of disbelief and awe crossed his face, then he clicked his tongue, turning his gaze toward the barrier-casting soldier. "Oi, Shield!" he barked. "Total body enhancement, now!"

A NORMAL SOLDIER

THE CHAOS of combat was all around me, the sound of metal clashing and spells firing resonant in the air. The musty stench of burning wood overwhelmed all other smells as a thin cloud of smoke enveloped the battlefield.

However, despite the chaos, my battle with the augments seemed confined—almost isolated—as if the soldiers around us deliberately left us alone. Perhaps the people fighting nearby were too focused on their own battles, but I was suspicious that there was some sort of illusion put in place. I couldn't quite tell, but it left me with more questions. How was their attack force structured? Why did their soldiers seem to manifest their mana in such singular ways? Clearly their fighting tactics were fundamentally different than ours. I knew I'd need to discover more—much more—about their forces if we were to win this war.

The conjurer manifested a thin veil of mana around the augments's body. While my opponent's injuries remained, he no longer looked fatigued as he rose from his knee with renewed vigor.

With a click of his tongue, he peeled his eyes from me and focused his gaze on a point in the distance. It was obvious he was signaling to someone besides the conjurer who had protected him thus far.

With a stern nod, his gaze fell back to me. Mana enveloped his hands into the same claw-shaped form as before and he readied himself to attack. As he did,

a faint hiss from behind warned me of an incoming spell.

Remembering my mana interpretation training with Myre back in Epheotus, I was tempted to activate Realmheart to finish this off quickly, but I decided against doing anything that would draw too much attention to myself.

I whipped around in time to see a blast of fire hurtling toward me. Condensing a gale of wind to spiral around my hand like a drill, I dispersed the fire spell while simultaneously pivoting away from the augments's strike, stepping into a defensive posture. The moss-covered roots nearby caught on fire from the scattered embers of the conjurer's spell. The once peaceful clearing within the forest was turning into a pit of blood and fire as more and more soldiers from both sides emptied their life onto the ground.

The augments's movements were rather concise and well-coordinated despite the uneven terrain, but years of sparring against Kordri made his attacks seem sluggish. The augments lashed out with a combination of strikes, but his mana claws hit only air.

Was he only capable of using those mana claws?

"He was right. You're not just some foot soldier," he spat as he whirled back around in preparation to pounce on me once more.

"He?" I asked, bewildered as to who could've possibly given him this information.

He remained silent and dashed toward me, using a tree stump as a foothold to leap off of with his mana claws poised to strike.

I positioned myself to meet the assault head on, and when his claws were just inches away from my face, I withdrew my own fist and swayed to the left. I drove my fist toward the augments's open ribs, but the veil of mana surrounding his body condensed where I struck.

The mana barrier protecting my opponent's ribs cracked, and the force of my punch sent the augments tumbling to the ground. When he got back up, his face was contorted with frustration and anger, but he seemed unhurt.

I looked around quickly to find the conjurer again. His brows were knitted in

concentration, his hands trembling. I could tell that he had used his power to block my attack again. Why was it that the soldiers around the conjurer—enemies and allies alike—seemed to ignore him entirely?

Is there really something like an illusion around us?

Just then, another fireball shot toward me. Before I dispersed it—such things were little more than an annoyance—I tracked the fiery trail back to the enemy mage’s location. Now I knew where the fire-thrower was hiding: fifty feet away, directly ahead, positioned somewhere on top of a cluster of large, moss-covered rocks, and largely obscured by the trees between us.

“She’s over there, right?” I asked with a smirk, pointing in her direction.

The augmenter remained silent, apparently not in the mood to exchange witty remarks. He pulled himself up to his feet with the help of a nearby tree, desperation evident on his rugged face. Keeping his deep set eyes locked on mine, he clapped his hands together. As he did, multiple images of himself appeared around me, resolving my suspicion—there was certainly illusion or deceptive magic involved.

Soon, there were at least a dozen figures of the augmenter all in different—very life-like—poses, all ready to attack.

I looked at the illusions manifested around me, making sure that both Dicathen and Alacryan soldiers were unaware of what was happening, and let out a stifled laugh.

“This is funny?” the augmenter growled, his voice echoing from twelve individual mouths.

“I’m sorry,” I answered, still smiling. Around me, the dozen or so identical augmenters, all with glowing mana claws, snarled in response. “Thanks to this illusion, I can let loose a little.”

Pushing my consciousness deep into my mana core, I activated Realmheart. A burst of mana exploded out of me, and my vision faded into an achromatic state. There was a warm, comfortable sensation as power washed over me; glowing runes flowed down my arms and my back, and my long, auburn hair

blazed into bright, silver-white light.

The clones that had moments ago seemed identical in my normal state were now no more than clusters of white mana particles shaped into the form of a man. Only one figure stood solid and real before me. I noted that the illusion wasn't invoked by the hidden mage but rather the 'Shield.'

Locking my gaze on the augments, it was obvious from his expression that he knew there was something dreadfully overwhelming about me. Beads of sweat rolled down his face as he regarded me with fearful perplexity. Despite his wariness, the augments—along with all of his clones—dashed toward me, clawed mana gauntlets ready to strike.

At the same time, the mage conjured another blast of fire—larger, this time—in sync with the augments's assault. Raising my output of mana, I ignored the illusions and aimed a lightning punch at the real augments's mana claws, shattering his spell. Grabbing a tight hold of his exposed hand, I used his momentum to redirect him toward the fire blast.

I caught a glimpse of my opponent's eyes widening in horror before being struck by the full brunt of his ally's spell. Several layers of barriers attempted to protect the augments, and even though they all shattered from the force of the blast, the augments survived.

The illusory clones flickered before disappearing as I turned my attention toward the mage, who was preparing yet another spell.

Wordlessly, I raised my left arm and coalesced mana into the tips of my fingers.

"Shiel—Cayfer! Protect Maylin!" the augments roared, still struggling to get up from the ground.

The conjurer named Cayfer, who the augments had previously referred to as 'Shield,' nodded furiously as I finished preparing my spell. Jagged vines of electricity coiled down my arm like a serpent, gathering at the tips of my index and middle finger.

Using my right arm to help stabilize my aim, I concentrated on the hidden

mage, who was clearly visible to me, thanks to Realmheart.

“Release,” I muttered.

The thin bullet of lightning shot out from the tips of my two fingers, piercing directly through the trees that stood between us.

The layers of translucent barriers that formed in the bullet’s path were instantly shattered, unable to prevent my spell from hitting the cluster of rocks I had been aiming at.

There was no dramatic scream or howl of pain in the distance, only the soft thud of the mage’s limp body falling off the boulder.

“No! Maylin!” the barrier caster cried out as he ran toward his fallen comrade, abandoning his post.

As the mage fell and Cayfer’s concentration broke, the illusion separating us from the larger battle disappeared. As if a window had been opened, the world became clearer around me and the near-muted volume of the battle going on resumed in full blast. It wasn’t long before I got swept up in the chaos.

I released Realmheart but brought out Dawn’s Ballad from my dimension ring. I turned to the mana clawed augments, but he was gone. There were plenty of other enemies around, however, and they could all see me now. As I was pulled into the battle proper, the translucent teal blade of my sword arched around me, drawing blood wherever it struck.

The battle between the two sides had gone on for less than an hour, yet the ground was littered with corpses and body parts—severed legs, lopped off heads, and chopped arms still spewing blood.

The cold winter air, filled with smoke from the many trees lit aflame by spell-fire, no longer masked the acrid stench of blood and burning flesh, while the tight quarters of the forest surrounding the battle further amplified the cacophony of screams.

While the enemy was fewer in number, they had many more mages than our divisions. Augments with mana-imbued weapons pierced through our foot

soldiers while conjurers struck from a distance.

Many enemies rushed me in the heat of battle, some with unique techniques like the mana-clawed augments, such as whips of fire or armor made of stone. There was one enemy augment that'd killed several of our soldiers by conjuring water down their throats until they'd drown.

Yet, none of that made a difference to me. My mind grew numb and my body seemed to move on its own. I stalked through the battlefield, killing any enemy who stood in my way, regardless of their powers. In minutes, I was red to the elbows with their blood. But as each man fell dead, a new enemy would step over his corpse to face me.

As I drew my blade from the bloody chest of another dead man, I had a thought; words were rarely spoken in the midst of battle. Words were useless here. Instead, the soldiers burst out with primitive cries or bestial yells, drunk on the battle-frenzy as they flailed their weapons about, hardly able to recognize friend from foe. There was nothing good about this kind of war. It resulted only in death. Perhaps, if men fought with words instead of weapons... but when a man has weapons, words are useless. And so the cycle of killing and death goes on.

I kicked away the limp body and used its clothes to wipe the blood from my sword. I'd conserved much of my mana but constantly fighting for almost an hour had taken a toll on my body.

I surveyed the other soldiers when the sight of a familiar person caught my eye. She had just parried her opponent's axe to the ground when her gaze landed on mine as well. Her lips were curved up into a confident smile as she positioned to drive her gauntlet into her opponent's face.

CEDRY

I dashed forward, slipping and swaying out of the Alacryan's reach until he was open. Then I drove my gauntlet into his side, the satisfying crack of his ribs indicating that he was down.

"Slut," the narrow-eyed man spat as he buckled over, blood leaking from his

lips. He desperately grabbed onto me to keep from falling, his hands clawing at the leather straps across my shoulder and chest, yanking them out of place and loosening my armor.

“Is that your last word, dog?” I said, spitting in his face. I swung my gauntlet down onto his hand, breaking his wrist, then put the ugly bastard out of his misery with a firm slam to his head. I couldn’t help but grin, elated and thrilled by the victory as an intense furor built up inside me.

Another fool tried to sneak behind my back but I dodged his sword and whipped around. The short, bearded Alacryan raised his shield as he prepared to strike again.

My heart pounded and everything seemed a bit sluggish—like the night before after ten mugs of ale. I swung my fist, augmenting my body and gauntlet, and punched straight through the soldier’s metal shield.

The resulting clash was so loud that it made my ears ring, but the force of my strike ripped the shield from the soldier’s arm. I didn’t give him the time to recover, pivoting off of my lead leg to gain momentum for a roundhouse chop.

His eyes widened as he desperately tried to bring his arm up to block my strike, but his shield arm wouldn’t lift, still numb from the shock of my earlier punch. Instead, he tried to parry with his sword, but he couldn’t stop the blade of my hand from reaching his prominent Adam’s apple.

The soldier fell back, squirming, with his hands wrapped around his neck as he struggled to breathe. After a desperate gurgle, his body felt limp before me.

I let out a fearsome roar. *No man can belittle me here. Only strength is absolute on the battlefield!*

My cry attracted the attention of a nearby axe-wielding Alacryan brute. While his body was much larger than mine, his movements were slow. As he swung down, his axe began glowing yellow and a layer of mana spread over his body. Looking at the different elemental affinity of mana surrounding his axe

compared to his body, it seemed like someone else had cast a spell to protect him, but I didn't have time to question. I didn't have time to be surprised. *Strength is absolute.*

I willed all of my mana into my right fist as I turned my body to the side to dodge his attack. I caught a glimpse of my reflection as the flat of his axe swung down; there was a euphoric—almost crazed—smile pasted on my face.

I used the momentum of his attack and parried the axe down to the ground. Over the brutes shoulder, I caught sight of the country boy that beat everyone he'd sparred against—even Madam Astera. There were talks of some of the soldiers mentioning the kid was a Lance. I'd scoffed at the ridiculous notion at the time, but as I stood here, just a few dozen feet away from him, and the pile of corpses strewn around him, I couldn't help but wonder if they were right.

My eyes finally met his, but rather than the calm, playful expression he'd worn all through last night, his eyes were widened as he desperately mouthed something to me.

I couldn't hear what he was saying, but it didn't matter, I'd ask him later. The axe-wielder was still struggling to pull his weapon out from the ground, when I felt a sharp searing pain in my chest.

In an instant, all of my strength and furor was snuffed out. My hands could no longer clench into fists. The ground was suddenly closer as I realized I'd fallen to my knees. I looked down at the source of my pain, only to see a gaping hole where my chest used to be.

I instinctively tried to cover the hole with my hands, only to feel a burning pain spread through my palms. I pried my gaze away from my wound to a scorched crater in the ground in front of me. A spell...

I lost feeling in my legs as I crumpled to the floor. My last thought as I grew sleepy and cold, was how tall the bloodstained grass looked from down here.

CHANGING TIDES

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I gnashed my teeth at the sight of Cedry's body falling limp on the ground. The enemy axe-wielder pried his weapon out of the ground and prepared to swing down. His arrogant sneer exposed his yellow teeth, then I saw a thin blade protruding from his gorget.

As the axe-wielder's body slumped, Jona—Cedry's friend—came into view. With a firm tug, he pulled his bloodied dagger free from the body of the man he'd just stabbed, then kneeled down next to Cedry.

Idiot. What are you doing—in the middle of a battle?

I was inclined to leave him; that's what Grey would've done. But I was reminded of last night—the talk we'd had before I went up to fight onstage, and the carefree night of drinking that had followed. I knew them hardly any better than the enemies I was facing, but the sentiments we'd briefly shared the night before—albeit half-drunk—tugged at my consciousness, nudging me to help him.

With an annoyed click of my tongue, I dashed toward Jona, who was cradling Cedry's corpse tenderly in his arms. An enemy augments, pulling the tip of his spear out of a soldier's head, caught sight of Jona. Even underneath the helmet that covered much of his face, it was obvious that he was grinning at his luck.

Concentrating on the ground just below his feet, I shot a stone spike at the

enemy. The spear-wielder narrowly avoided a fatal injury, flopping awkwardly to the ground as he clutched his bleeding side.

I increased the output of mana to my body and changed course, moving toward the wounded soldier. As he lay writhing on the ground in pain, I stepped on his chest to keep him steady.

Mercilessly, I drove Dawn's Ballad deep into the spear-wielder's breastplate and watched the light go out in his eyes.

With one fluid motion, I slid my sword out and drew an arc, flinging the blood free of the blade, before stomping over to grab Jona by the collar of his uniform.

"You need to get out of here," I growled, shaking him.

He looked back at me, his eyes flooded with tears. "Cedry, you're going to be okay," he mumbled, his gaze distant as he clung to the body of his half-elf companion like an infant.

The sharp whistles of incoming arrows and the faint hiss of spells approaching drew my attention, but with both my arms occupied I could only do so much. I'd been stingy in my usage of mana—against the unlikely scenario that I had to fight against one of the Four Scythes or a retainer—but if I wanted to get Jona and Cedry to a safe place, I needed to expend more mana than I'd wanted to.

Grey's voice echoed in my head, chastising me, urging me to leave them and conserve my mana for the worst-case scenario.

Cursing under my breath, I knocked Jona out with a firm punch to his solar plexus. His body spasmed from the shock I'd added to ensure that he'd be out cold as I heaved him over my shoulder and used my free arm to scoop up the half-elf's body by her waist.

Under my arm, Cedry's thin corpse seemed to weigh more than Jona's body. I couldn't do anything about her arms and blonde hair dragging on the ground, but Jona's unconscious body seemed to take offense, his arms dangling towards her from my shoulder, as if trying to scoop her up.

Ignoring the creeping desire to just drop them back on the ground, I freely released the mana I had been conserving. An intoxicating sense of power rushed out of my core, spreading through my limbs and filling me with renewed strength. Tuning out the chaotic clamor around me, I focused entirely on the mana suffusing me.

Because of the rapidly spreading smoke and fire, I willed a spiraling barrier out of the air and prepared to rush them back to base. A translucent layer of mana whirled around us as the torrent of wind and stone began shaping itself into a sphere.

Strengthening my body, I surged forward with the speed of a wild stallion. Immediately, I had to tighten my grip on Jona and Cedry to keep them from falling. The barrier I'd conjured remained strong despite the arrows and spells that bombarded it, igniting sparks each time an enemy hit it. The barrier was deflecting anything that came our way, but the spell was constantly eating away my mana reserves.

Thanks to the Mana Rotation technique I'd learned from Sylvia, though, I could recover from even a demanding spell like this in a fairly short amount of time.

I plowed through the battlefield, gritting my teeth to cope with the weight of my two passengers as I concentrated solely on keeping the barrier active despite the intensifying attacks.

My body jerked as a particularly powerful spell bombarded the sphere, but I held firm and channeled more mana into the spell. Cries echoed within the forest as the enemy soldiers ordered their subordinates to bring me down.

At least with all their conjurers focused on me, Vanesy and her soldiers will have an easier time, I thought.

As soon as I was clear of the main battle, I released my spell. Immediately, an augmented arrow skimmed my cheek, drawing blood, then crashed into a tree with enough force to topple it.

Jona's limp body sagged over my shoulder as I swung around to see who I

was up against, still surprised by the strength of the attack. I didn't have time to look for the archer, however, as two more arrows already whizzed toward me.

I had barely a second to react, but that would be enough. "Static Void."

The deadly arrows were only inches away from me when I released the first phase of my dragon's will. The world grew still as even the chaotic sounds of battle were silenced.

In one swift movement, I positioned my right foot on top of one arrow and bit down on the shaft of the other arrow. When I released Static Void, my neck immediately jerked from the force of the arrow in my mouth, and the arrow beneath my foot buried into the ground.

Turning in my attacker's direction, I released a torrent of pure mana. For a moment, the afternoon sky grew dark as terrified birds shot from the trees and scattered across the sky, sensing the malicious intent I'd let loose.

I stood there for just a second, staring at the space where I thought the enemy archer was, his arrow in my mouth, warning him—warning him what I was capable of if he got in my way.

My unspoken threat seemed to have done the trick, and no more arrows or spells headed my way. Turning back, I bolted into the dense forest, making my way toward the edge of the cliff where we'd come from.

"Arthur? What happened?" a voice called out as I lowered Cedry and Jona to the ground at the edge of the encampment.

I looked up to see Madam Astera, blood on her face and her once-white apron. Noticing my gaze, she shook her head with a faint smile. "Don't worry, it's not my blood. I'm just helping the medics and emitters patch up some of the wounded that were brought back."

I nodded. "I see. In that case, please take care of her"—I pointed to Cedry—"and look after Jona."

Without waiting for the head chef's response, I turned back to the cliff, ready to head back. But something tugged at my boot.

“Why? Why couldn’t you have saved her like you saved me?” Jona’s hoarse voice trembled as he tightened his grip around my ankle.

“I can’t save every soldier in a war,” I replied, unable to face him.

“Liar. I bet you could’ve if you really wanted to. You’re a Lance, right? I wasn’t sure until you caught that arrow with your mouth. For a second, I thought I was dreaming because the arrow stopped in mid-flight.”

I gritted my teeth in frustration—not at him, but at myself—and kicked my leg free from his grip. “Like I said, my priority isn’t to save every soldier I come across in war.”

“We might not’ve known each other that long, but if Cedry was alive, there’s no way she would’ve thought of you as ‘just a soldier,’ *General*.” There was venom lacing his voice as he emphasized my title.

Spinning around, I lifted Jona up by the scruff of his shirt once more and pulled him close. “I’m sorry for your friend, Jona, but pull your head out of your ass. There are enemies out there stronger than you can imagine—stronger than any adventurer you’ve ever worshipped—and you want me to expend all my energy to save everyone here? If I do that, who’s going to stop them? Who’s going to stop the enemy leaders that can level a mountain with a twitch of their fingers?”

The hate and blame in Jona’s eyes disappeared, replaced by guilt and sorrow as tears rolled down his cheeks. “What am I going to do? I promised her when we were little. I was finally going to keep the promise... I was going to ask her to marry me.”

My chest ached at his words, twisting into knots as my breath became short and ragged. I struggled to stay composed as I stared into Jona’s grief-stricken face.

“I’ll take care of him, Arthur,” Madam Astera whispered, pulling Jona back by his shoulders. “Go on.”

I gave a curt nod and turned away from Jona. Heading back up the cliff, my mind was clouded with thoughts of Jona and Cedry. I had seen them spar,

seen them bicker; I'd seen them laugh together, but I'd never thought much about their relationship.

"Damn it," I cursed as I weaved through the dense array of trees. The sounds of battle grew louder but my thoughts were focused on Jona's parting words. The faint whistle of an arrow snapped me back to reality. I spun out of the path of the projectile and conjured several throwing knives out of condensed ice, throwing them at the enemy archer without breaking stride. The pained grunt of the archer and the hollow thud of his body falling from the tree sounded behind me.

A few feet later, a bolt of electricity crackled toward me. The spell was powerful but, by the way it branched out and weakened, I could tell the caster was inexperienced in the deviant magic. Sidestepping away, I gathered mana to the tips of my fingers once more and released the spell.

Unlike my attacker's lightning, mine shot out like a bullet. However, just before my spell reached its target, a metal wall rose from the ground, deflecting the streak of lightning harmlessly into the sky where it dissipated.

Annoying. I was beginning to see a pattern. For every Alacryan augments or conjurer fighting, there seemed to be a different conjurer whose sole duty was to protect them. The archer earlier didn't seem to have been an augments, which would explain why he went down so easily.

Because the enemy conjurers and augments weren't focused on protecting themselves while fighting, their attacks were much more relentless and brash. My mood had turned sour since dropping Jona and Cedry back at camp, and my temper grew as more and more enemies attacked.

"Fine! You know what? The more of you I kill, the fewer of my soldiers will die!" I spat, my face a mask of wild menace. "Realmheart!"

Conjurers and augments who had been hiding now stuck out like sore thumbs as they prepared their attacks. The particles gathered around them, swirling and spinning in preparation, and it was all too clear what sort of spells they were conjuring. I needed more time to counter them.

All thoughts of mana conservation were gone as I once again released the first phase of my dragon's will. The world froze once more and I quickly assessed the spells needed to counter the attacks of twelve different enemies. "Three blasts of fire, a barrage of sharpened rocks, augmented arrows, a lightning spell, condensed bullets of water, and a spell to draw my feet into the ground and immobilize me. Easy enough," I murmured. As I had thought, conjuring the barrier to save Jona had drawn a lot of attention.

Seconds ticked away inside the suspended realm of Static Void. My body felt heavier, but I didn't care. This was nothing. As soon as I was ready, I released Static Void and retaliated.

Immediately, spells detonated from all around me, a cacophony of screams and wails mixed in as well. Enemy and ally soldiers alike looked around, confused by the sudden explosion.

As I heaved out a breath, I smiled in satisfaction. Rather than canceling the enemy's spells by using mana interpretation as Lady Myre had taught me, I had overloaded the Alacryan soldiers' spells, causing a deadly backfire.

"How's that, Jona? Are you satisfied?" I fumed.

"Arthur!" called a clear voice from behind me.

Looking over my shoulder, I spotted Captain Glory. She wore a hardened expression and her two longswords dripped with blood. Her hair had come loose from its ties and was caked with mud and dried blood, and her armor wasn't any better off, but there was still a fire raging in her eyes.

"You look like crap, Vanesy."

She scowled in mock outrage. "That's not something you say to a woman, even during war."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, managing a pained smile.

"Did you do that?" Vanesy asked, looking around.

I nodded. "I was testing something."

"Testing something during battle? You never change." She said, eyeing me thoughtfully. "Do you think you can do it again?"

“Probably,” I answered. Suddenly, Sylvie’s thoughts poured into my head. *‘Arthur, I’m coming back.’* There was a flood of emotions laced together with her message: worry, desperation, and fear.

What happened? Did you find something already? I sent back to my bond, her emotions affecting mine.

‘No, I had to stop midway...’ She was silent for a moment, but there was a grim sense of foreboding that made my heart beat faster until she spoke again. *‘Someone is headed your way. Arthur, he’s... he’s strong.’*

WHY I'M HERE

MY HEARTBEAT QUICKENED and my palms grew slick with sweat as Sylvie's emotions leaked into mine, but I had no time to rest. With their conjurers and archers nearby sustaining serious injuries, the enemy augmenters and soldiers were quick to approach us.

"We got some headed our way. Don't get cold feet on me now," Vanesy quipped. Her lighthearted tone didn't suit the screaming and clashing of weapons resounding in the background.

"Cold feet? I've been taking the brunt of attacks from their conjurers and archers, trying to establish a pattern in their attacks," I answered, just as an Alacryan soldier reached us. I drew Dawn's Ballad, parried a wild thrust, and drove its sharp blade through the breastplate of an enemy soldier in one swift motion.

"Is that how you were able to set off those explosions just now?" Vanesy asked as she dodged a crushing blow from a large warhammer, wielded by a brutish fighter who stood at least a foot taller than her. It was compelling watching my former professor fight up close without holding back. Her fighting style, combined with her unique utilization of both earth and fire to conjure glass, produced an array of glimmering attacks. By creating a layer of sharpened glass around her swords to extend her reach, she was able to cleave through enemies several yards away.

"No, that was something else." I shifted slightly, letting a spear point move

past me as the charging soldier behind it impaled himself on my sword. “Vanesy, we should end this battle soon, or at least take it away from here.”

“You say that as if we were”—Vanesy ducked, narrowly avoiding the head of an axe—“purposely prolonging the battle.”

I swung Dawn’s Ballad, sending a sharp crescent of wind at her attacker. With a sharp hiss, blood splurged out from the barrel-chested Alacryan’s unprotected neck. He was only able to gurgle wetly before collapsing to the ground, his eyes wide and frantic as his hands pressed down on his fatal injury.

We appeared to have a moment’s reprieve from the fighting, so I turned to Vanesy and put one hand on her shoulder. My tone grew stern as I replied. “I’ll admit my priorities may have been a bit different until now, but we’re out of time. Take the battle elsewhere—anywhere away from here.”

Her forehead creased. “What’s going on?”

“There’s someone coming, someone as strong as—if not stronger than—me. Get everyone away from here so they don’t get caught in our crossfire.”

The furrows on Vanesy’s brow deepened. “Our? You can’t mean—”

I nodded gravely. “This is why I’m here—in case something like this happened. Get everyone away from here.”

“I know you’re strong—I can’t fathom how strong you actually are—but damn it, that doesn’t mean you can’t use anyone’s help!”

I remained silent, knowing with absolute certainty that Vanesy would die if she stayed to help me in the coming battle, but unwilling to say it out loud.

“Shit,” she said under her breath, surveying the battlefield. She looked back at me resolutely a moment later. “Fine, but you better come back alive, or I’ll pull you out of hell myself just to send you back.”

“I promise.”

Vanesy took a step back and saluted me as Torch swooped down from the sky. The captain jumped onto the flare hawk and bellowed, “*Dicathens! Retreat!*”

Just like that, the tide of battle shifted. Vanesy flew overhead, rallying her men who might not have heard, but already our soldiers had begun edging back, defending themselves from our enemies as best they could.

I couldn't just watch as our soldiers withdrew, however. I threw myself back into the fray, holding back as many of the pursuing forces as one man could. There were far too many, however, for me to stop them all.

It's okay, I told myself. The Alacryan soldiers weren't the real problem. Vanesy's and Captain Auddyr's divisions were going to have to manage.

As the battle moved away from me, I put away Dawn's Ballad and made my way toward the edge of the clearing. Jumping up onto a tree, I conjured a cushion of wind underneath my feet and made my way southward, hopping from one branch to another.

Just beyond the clearing, the orderly trees, evenly spaced and maintained by woodcutters from the nearby town, became wilder and denser. There were large trees strewn below, fallen in storms. The harsh winter had stripped away much of their bark but, judging by the thin layer of frost on the untouched ground, the Alacryan Army hadn't passed by here when they'd made their way up.

The only sound around me was the rustling of leaves and the occasional snapping of branches from the wildlife.

Sylvie. Are you there? How close are you?

My repeated attempts at establishing contact with my bond were met with only silence. She was either too far away, which shouldn't be the case, or intentionally ignoring me.

'Aren't you a cute boy. Could it be that you're lost?'

I flinched at the unfamiliar voice that rang in my head, nearly falling off the branch I was perched on. Scanning quickly to the left and right, I tried to locate the source of the sound.

I wanted to move, but my body was frozen with a tangible fear. A deep sense of dread crept up like a rising tide, slowly but surely, as I surveyed the area.

Even with augmented vision and hearing, I couldn't find her. Yet I knew she was there—her high, grating voice still scratched the insides of my ears.

'Are you, perhaps, looking for little ol' me?' Her shrill voice screeched inside my head like a coarse blade being dragged against ice. I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. My mind knew she was intentionally intimidating me, but my body couldn't help but fall victim to her tactic.

Her voice seemed to come from all around me and, at the same time, within me. My limbs stiffened and my heart beat hard enough to break out of my ribcage.

Struggling to maintain control, I bit down on my lower lip. As the pain and metallic taste of blood washed over my tongue, freeing me from the hold of her killing intent, I immediately activated Realmheart.

The dull browns and whites of the end-of-winter scenery washed into shades of gray, the only speckles of color radiating from the mana around me.

Unable to see any sources of mana fluctuation, I began to doubt what I'd heard—no, I *wanted* to doubt what I'd heard. But then a flicker of light whizzed past the corner of my eye like a green shadow. It was almost impossible to follow the shadow's movement, but if I kept my eyes unfocused I could catch glimpses of it.

The green shadow stopped. It looked like she was inside the trunk of a tree about thirty feet away.

'Sharp eyes, little boy. Sharp eyes.' She moved once more, inhabiting one tree after another, using branches as if they were tunnels and leaving behind traces of sickly green mana. My eyes darted, trying to follow her movement. Her cackling laughter echoed in the thick forest.

"Your eyes look like they're spinning, dear," she teased, her shrill voice just as earsplitting out loud as it was in my head.

"Am I here?" she asked, sounding farther away this time.

"How about here?" Her grating voice sounded to my left.

She let out a childish giggle. "Maybe I'm here!" Her voice seemed to grow

more distant. Was she trying to avoid me?

“I could be over there...” she taunted once more, her voice coming from several yards away to my right.

“Or I could be right here!” Suddenly, an arm shot out from inside the tree I was perched on.

I had no time to react as her hand gripped my neck, spreading a searing pain across my throat. I was lifted into the air, held by my neck, as the source of the shrill voice came out of the tree.

I gripped her bone-pale arm, splotted with discolored marks, and tried to break free from her hold. She was wearing a sparkling black dress that accentuated her tall and sickly-thin frame. I could practically see her ribs through the thin piece of fabric, which would’ve looked elegant had it been worn by any other woman.

I struggled to lift my gaze high enough to see her face, but what stared back at me was a ceramic mask masterfully drawn with a doll-like face. Long, scraggly black hair was pulled into two ponytails behind her head, each with a bow tied at the end.

“My, what a handsome young boy you are,” she whispered from behind her mask, the drawn eyes looking straight at me.

Like a bolt of electricity, a shiver shot down my spine at her words, making me struggle harder. My neck felt like it was being branded, the burning pain almost unbearable. Fighting to hold on to the last of my consciousness, I willed mana into my palms.

With Realmheart still active, I could physically see the specks of blue mana gathering around my hands, turning into a shimmering white as I formed a spell. Tightening my grip around her wrist, I released my spell: Absolute Zero.

She immediately let go of my neck and pulled her arm away from my grasp. Upon release, I fell from the tree, crashing through a hollow log on the ground.

“The little puppy has a bit of a bite,” she reprimanded me from atop the tree. I hurriedly got back up onto my feet, ignoring the burning pain still radiating through my neck, but the woman was already in front of me, looking down at me through the small eyeholes of her mask. Her right arm was discolored and swollen from where I had briefly touched her with the spell.

She shook her head. “No matter. I’ll just have to be a bit more strict in your training.”

I involuntarily took a step back. She had no intention of killing me; she just wanted me as some sort of pet.

“What’s your name, my dear?” she whispered, looking away as she buried her right arm inside the tree behind her.

“My mother told me not to talk to strangers, especially ones as... strange as yourself,” I answered, wincing from the pain as I gingerly touched the wound on my neck. Usually, thanks to assimilating with Sylvia’s will, I’d have already felt my body healing, but the injury she had inflicted was different.

“Not to worry. We’ll get acquainted soon enough,” she replied, pulling her arm back out of the tree, the marks from my spell seemingly vanished. But the tree she’d put her arm into now had a gaping hole in it, as if someone had branded it with acid.

She took long strides, her scar-marked legs sinking into the ground as if she were wading through water. “Unfortunately, we don’t have much time—I have tasks to finish. Any chance that you’d willingly be this beautiful lady’s slave?”

I drew Dawn’s Ballad from my dimension ring. “Sorry, I’ll have to refuse.”

“They always do.” The bony woman sighed dramatically as she shook her head. “That’s all right; breaking the will of a disobedient slave is half the fun.”

As she said the final words, mana the color of rotted seaweed began gathering beneath my feet. Immediately, I jumped back, just in time to avoid a cluster of murky hands that shot out from the ground. The humanoid arms

of mana clawed the air before corroding and shriveling back into nothing.

The woman tilted her head but I couldn't see her expression through her disturbing mask. Through Realmheart, I could sense that these spells, much like Tessia's, had a similar attribute to wood, but every spell this creature conjured left a mark of corrosion.

I slid my fingers down my burning neck, wondering what I'd see in my reflection. More of the murky green mana gathered around my mysterious enemy, but before she had the chance to finish her spell, I sent a stone spike shooting up from the ground beside her. The earthen spear dissolved the moment it made contact with her.

"You're just prolonging the inevitable, my dear," she cooed in that high, grating voice that made me want to claw my ears off.

She raised both arms, conjuring more pools of mana on the ground and the trees around me, only visible to me because of my unique vision.

My first thought was that I should conserve mana during this battle. Then I realized, for the first time in a long while, that I had no reason to hold back. Most likely, she was either a retainer or a Scythe, one of the key enemies against whom I had spent years training to fight in the land of asuras.

Breaking open the metaphoric wall I had built to control my mana, I felt it pour out of my core in a rush. The once-dim runes that ran down my arms and back glowed brightly, clearly visible even through the thick mantle I wore over my undershirt.

Particles of mana in blue, red, green, and yellow flowed from my body while the mana in my vicinity swirled and gathered, drawn to me like moths to a flame.

"Looks like I found someone special," the woman effused as she crossed her raised arms, invoking her spell. Dozens of vine-like appendages erupted from the ground and shot out from the trunks and branches of nearby trees.

My expression remained calm, her imposing intent no longer affecting me, as the disfigured mana-hands reached for me with their spindly fingers. A small

crater formed in the ground below my feet as I dashed toward the slender witch-woman, ignoring her spell.

I ducked and swayed, dodging the vine-like hands that followed my movement, never breaking my stride as I reached the witch, yet the woman didn't even flinch, confident in the aura that had dissolved my earlier spell.

"Absolute Zero," I whispered, coalescing the spell completely around my body.

The spell's effect was instant. The murky green hands froze whenever they came within a foot or so of my body, transforming the area around me into a nightmarish landscape of horrific statues.

My first instinct was to swing Dawn's Ballad, but I was afraid that my sword would be destroyed like the stone spear, so I took one last step, coming to stand just in front of her, and willed the aura of ice to form into a claw-like gauntlet around my left hand, as the augments had done back at the start of my earlier battle. As my spell collided with her aura, a cloud of steam rose up with a hiss, blocking my vision.

It only took one breath for me to realize that the steam was toxic. My reaction was immediate, and I fell to my knees in a fit of coughing as both my innards and skin began burning. The toxic gas surrounding me had already melted a lot of my clothes, exposing my arms, and it was the fading of now exposed the golden runes that snapped me out of my daze.

The runes—imparted to me by Sylvia, the very symbol of how this had all started—pulled me out of the cold grip of darkness.

I promptly created a small vacuum to suck the toxins out of my searing lungs. It helped, but with no air to breathe and the oxygen from my lungs sucked out, I was left with just a matter of seconds before I blacked out.

As toxic as it was, the fog at least concealed me from the witch's eyes. She was probably assuming I had fainted by now—or worse—so I used that opportunity. Locating her mana signature, I fought to stay conscious and waited for the right moment.

The seconds seemed like hours, reminding me of the time I'd spent with my consciousness in the aether orb, before she finally drew close enough. While she shouldn't be able to sense the mana fluctuation around me from the effects of Mirage Walk, I could only pray that she wouldn't be able to see the dim glow of my sword.

With the last bit of my energy, I triggered Static Void, stopping time around me as I exploded to my feet and struck her with Dawn's Ballad. My sword crackled as it tore through space, imbued with a gleaming white lightning that seemed almost holy as I released time just before my blade made contact with her face.

The force of my swing dispersed the cloud of acid covering us both, but even without looking I knew I'd somehow missed my target. I shuddered as my gaze fell to the blade in my hand—or rather, what was left of it. The tip of Dawn's Ballad, forged by an asura, had been corroded flat, and an inch of the teal blade was gone. Then, spotting the faint trace of blood on my blade, I shifted my gaze to the witch.

I could only see the point of her sharp chin. Her head was thrown back, a thin trail of blood rolling down the side of her neck. The entire forest seemed to hold a fearful breath, broken only by the sound of her mask shattering on the forest floor below.

A LANCE'S BATTLE

“WHERE’S MY MASK?”

The witch had realized her face was now bare, and her hands fumbled over it, though she kept it turned away from my line of sight.

“My mask. I need my mask,” she kept repeating. She tore at her unruly black mane, clawing at her ponytails and using her undone hair as a curtain to cover her face. She kneeled on the ground, muttering as she gathered the small shards of her shattered mask.

I breathed raggedly and slowly inched away, fearful of what she might do next. I had used Static Void with Realmheart activated and in return, the tip of my sword was now gone.

The thatch of unruly black hair that fell over her face rustled as she began fitting the broken pieces together in a desperate attempt to make them whole. Then she clutched the pile she had so desperately gathered, clawing the ground along with it.

“My mask!” she screeched, gripping at the shards until her hands bled.

Watching the particles of mana congregating to form a murky green aura around her, I had no time to think.

The faint purple particles of aether started vibrating as I activated Static Void once more. Ignoring my body’s protests, I rushed forward to strike the witch before the corroding aura completely enveloped her again.

With time stopped, I could close the gap without fear that she would be able

to react to me, but on this attempt, I wouldn't be able to utilize the mana in the atmosphere as I had done before—only the meager reserves in my core.

Jagged vines of white crackled around the teal blade of my sword as I advanced on the witch. My spell was considerably weaker now, however, and a sense of doubt began creeping up inside me.

I released Static Void just as the flattened tip of my sword buried itself in the opening in the green aura, just above her left knee. The familiar sensation of metal piercing through flesh was accompanied by the crackle of electricity spreading through the witch's body. Yet the blood that leaked from her wound wasn't the same red that came from her hands and neck but rather a muddy green.

The site where the wound should have been hissed as the murky green blood began congealing around Dawn's Ballad.

As the witch raised her gaze from the ground, her thick wiry hair parted, revealing what she had been so desperately trying to hide.

I tugged at Dawn's Ballad, wanting nothing more than to retreat. It wasn't just her gnarled skin, which looked more aged than the bark of the centuries-old trees surrounding us, or the two narrow slits between her sunken cheeks. It wasn't even her thin leathery lips, darker than her hair, or her jagged yellow-stained teeth.

It was her blood-curdling stare, radiating from a ghoulish pair of misshapen eyes, that filled me with a sense of dread. Unlike any monster or beast I'd faced since coming to this world, the dark hollow eyes, which seemed like they had been gouged out and shoved back deep inside her skull, made me wonder if this was the sort of demon that spawned from the depths of hell.

"Now that you've seen me in this state, I'm afraid I can't keep you as a pet," she muttered, nearly whispering as she gripped my sword with one of her bloody hands.

I winced involuntarily as she spoke. My mind spun as I tried feebly to pull Dawn's Ballad out of her grasp, trying to figure out what to do in this

situation.

I tore my gaze away from her terrifying stare, and watched in despair as her aura enveloped almost her whole body.

Unable to muster up the strength to trigger Static Void again, I looked down at my legs. I could still hear Lady Myre's voice warning me not to use Burst Step. Glancing up, I saw the murky green cloud spread slowly, until only faint gaps the width of a feather were left.

I made my decision.

Letting go of my precious sword, I drew a shuttering breath, bracing myself for the pain soon to come. Like the pistons of an engine from my old world, mana burst into specific muscles in rapid procession, the timing precise down to the span of a millisecond, and I flashed from my original position almost instantly.

I gritted my teeth against the mind-numbing pain—it felt like the bones in my lower body were slowly smoldering in a fire—and stabbed my hand through the faint chasm in her aura. Even with Absolute Zero coalesced around my hand, the deteriorating effects of her defenses seeped into my flesh when I made contact with her skin.

The witch growled in pain as she tried to pull herself away, but my grip around her right arm stayed strong.

The skin of my bare hand soon became red and painful as more and more layers of flesh began to corrode. However, the effects of my spell were beginning to show, so I knew it was working. Her right arm, which had been gripping my sword impaled in her left thigh, turned a dark sickly color. Unlike naturally-occurring frostbite, which would begin in the fingers, her arm had begun to freeze from where I was gripping her. The layers of skin and tissues had frozen, and she could no longer move her arm.

Before the effects of Absolute Zero could spread to her body, the witch slashed down at her frozen arm with her other hand, tearing the limb completely from the shoulder.

A sharp, burning pain spread through my hand, a reminder of the injury I had sustained in exchange for her severed arm. The limb shattered like glass when I dropped it on the ground.

I wasn't sure whether or not it was a good thing, but the wound on my hand looked worse than it felt. Almost as if my left hand had been dipped in a vat of acid, yellow pus formed on the raw flesh of my hand, and a surge of pain went through me with even the slightest twitch.

Ripping a piece of cloth from the end of my mantle, I gently wrapped it around my injured hand, keeping my jaw clenched against the pain throughout the entire process.

"How dare you!" the witch snarled. With a deranged fire in her hollow green eyes, she tore off chunks of her thick black hair to reveal a small stump just above her forehead.

"I am a Vritra! I'll make sure you feel the consequences of making a lady go through such... disgrace!" she screamed while she ripped off more of her mangled hair. "I'll melt your limbs off and keep you as a trophy! I'll cut off your tongue and feed you through a tube so you can only dream about dying!"

"Oh? You'll have to be at least a Scythe to even think about doing that," I huffed, hoping she'd take the bait.

"A Scythe? A *Scythe*?" she howled, hobbling toward a nearby tree, Dawn's Ballad still impaled in her left knee. "I'll wipe that condescending woman off the face of Alacrya and take her place! Just because she's a little attractive and her grunts fawn over her, she thinks she's better than me? I'll show her how degrading it is to be her retainer!"

Remembering how the witch had healed her hand earlier by submerging it inside a tree, I ignored the shrieks of protest from my legs and rushed to her. She swung her remaining arm, releasing another gust of the smoke that had nearly melted my lungs.

I activated Burst Step once more, dodging the poisonous smoke and closing

the gap between us in a blink. Tendrils of black lightning coiled around my right arm. Rather than attempting to break through her corroding aura and risk mutilating my other hand, I gripped the handle of my sword, which was still embedded in her thigh. The sword acted as a conductor, and the branches of electricity coiled down it and into the witch's body.

Her limbs immediately stiffened and jerked in a fit of convulsions from the current of lightning passing through her body. I could see her trying to fight back, but I became hopeful as her hollow eyes went dim.

Despite the spasms jolting her thin frame, there was still strength in her when her glossy eyes slowly came back into focus. The witch's gnarled face cracked like dry soil as splotches of charred skin spread over her body.

Please, just die, I pleaded in my head. My decreasing mana reserves were making me fear for the possibility of backlash.

Suddenly, I was wrenched back from the witch. As if I had been prodded by an iron brand, a searing pain radiated from my shoulder and I was sent tumbling back on the ground. Without looking back, I coated my hand in an icy aura and reached over my shoulder to pry off the fingers of mana she had conjured.

The witch was once again desperately trying to reach a nearby tree, just a few feet away, so I conjured an earthen wall.

Despite the thick wall surrounding her, she pressed on, staggering but unfaltering. Despite her apparent weakness, the green aura that surrounded her still managed to easily dissolve the wall. I knew I had no choice but to rely on Burst Step once more to keep her from healing her wounds.

Then a wonderfully familiar voice rang in my head.

'Arthur!' Sylvie cried, just as I saw her shadow ripple across the forest floor.

Perfect timing, I replied, my voice sounding strained even in my head. Gathering up as much mana as my body would allow without succumbing to the harsh effects of backlash, I conjured a torrent of wind underneath the witch's feet.

“Catch!” I roared, and sent my opponent spiraling up into the air toward my bond.

Sylvie immediately dived to grasp the witch in her long claws. In her weakened state, the witch’s aura had little effect on the dragon’s tough hide. Sylvie’s armored scales protected her long enough for her to soar up into the sky.

The two of them were lost in the clouds, but still Sylvie carried the Vritra higher.

‘She’s lost consciousness,’ Sylvie stated, the mental transmission sounding distant and muffled.

Drop her here, I transmitted from my spot on the ground.

‘I’ll do a little more than drop,’ she sent with a growl.

After meditating a bit longer for one last spell, I struggled up to my feet, my trembling legs barely keeping me standing.

Raising my good arm, I converged mana to form the head of a spear. The runes on my arms flickered and dimmed but remained, helping me utilize as much of the mana in the atmosphere as possible. I could feel the temperature drop as the spear of ice expanded to the size of a tree.

I steadily condensed the ice until the crude pike that I’d conjured took shape: a mighty lance large enough to be wielded by a titan. The lance continually changed, further refining itself as I condensed and molded it with the surrounding mana.

Feeling my legs beginning to give out, I quickly raised the ground around me to support them, planting me to the ground in an earthen splint.

I compressed and sharpened the spell so that the spear of ice, once the size of a tree, was now just a few feet taller than me. Suspended in the air, it glimmered like the sky during the Aurora Constellate.

The taste of metal filled my mouth as blood trickled down my chin, my body warning me of the wretched state I was in.

Moments later, I caught sight of the witch. The once-mighty Vritra, who had

seemed almost untouchable, was hurtling down like a meteor fragment. Sylvie must've thrown her, judging by the speed at which she was plummeting toward me; it took only the span of a few heartbeats for her to be close enough that I could calculate where she'd land.

The Vritra's mangled body plummeted right into the tip of my spear, impacting with the force of a catapult stone. It took all my remaining energy to hold the form of the spear together as it buried itself into the witch's body. The earthen brace collapsed and I slumped to the ground at the same instant that the witch struck the earth.

Shattered rocks and splinters of wood bombarded me as a thunderous explosion resounded throughout the forest, shaking every tree in the vicinity. I fell in and out of consciousness as I tumbled across the ground, blown away by the ferocity of her impact, my body barreling through old logs and branches and whatever else was on the forest floor, until the trunk of a large tree finally stopped me.

'Hang on, Papa!' Sylvie cried.

I thought... it was beneath you... to call me... Papa, I managed, my consciousness faltering.

She remained silent, but I could feel the rampant emotions leaking out of her—desperation, guilt, anger, sorrow.

My perception of time was unreliable, and I couldn't tell how long it had taken Sylvie to arrive, but suddenly I realized she was by my side, her large black snout hovering over me.

Her translucent yellow eyes were lined with tears as she slowly opened her jaw. She let out a soft breath, but rather than air, a shimmering mist of purple enveloped me.

The cacophony of pains all over my body soon dulled as the soothing mist seeped into me.

"Vivum," I muttered weakly.

'Don't talk,' she scolded as she continued healing me.

Just like your grandmother. I managed a weak smile. *For such a scary-looking dragon, your powers turned out be rather... docile.*

A faint sense of amusement sparked in her at my comment. *'If you have the energy for such lame humor, I'm sure you'll be fine.'*

Of course; who do you think I am?

'A rash and idiotic child with no sense of self-preservation,' she grunted as she closed her jaw. *'I warned you of the enemy coming your way, yet you still decided it was necessary to fight her on your own!'*

A fit of strained coughs racked my body as I reached out to stroke my bond's snout.

I'm sorry. At least it's over—it is over, right?

"See for yourself," Sylvie said aloud, the gentle, mellow timbre of her voice soothing after the witch's shrieks.

Using my elbow, I propped myself up on the base of the tree I had collided with, and my bond moved to the side.

Less than fifty feet away was a crater the size of a home, a thin layer of dust still apparent. In the center of the large depression was the spear of ice buried halfway into the ground. The witch's lifeless body lay dangling in the air, the spear impaled straight through her chest.

Steam still hissed from the witch's corpse as her corrosive skin tried to eat away at the ice, but to no avail.

She was dead.

PINNACLE'S HEIGHT

CAPTAIN JARNAS AUDDYR

“Ulric,” I whispered, signaling him to move out left as I crouched down low behind a fallen log. The massive augmenter silently gathered his small team of five mages, and they began making their way through the dense trees.

“Brier.” I tilted my head in the direction of the small path to our right, signaling for him and his troops to come with me. Brier nodded in reply as he unsheathed both of his serrated daggers. The well-built augmenter quickly navigated through the dense forest, his stride long and confident. I followed at the rear of the quiet procession, my fingers anxiously positioned on the grip of my artifact, ready to strike.

I’d come to be thankful for the frigid gale that constantly howled through the trees, tearing through the branches and stripping their foliage. It served to cover the sound of our footsteps as we made our way deeper into the forest.

Clearings were frequent but I navigated my troops away from them, lest we be exposed to this great danger Captain Glory had warned me about. I suppressed the urge to scoff at her ridiculousness—believing the words of a teen who had somehow snaked his way into being a Lance! He’d probably made up the story about this powerful foe so he could escape by himself to avoid battle.

I’ll apprehend him on sight if I catch him running away, I thought. Perhaps my role in driving off the Alacryan forces and capturing the rogue Lance will

earn me a well-deserved promotion.

I'd grudgingly followed Captain Glory when she abruptly started ordering her troops to retreat. It had been a mistake to so blindly trust her judgment.

After Captain Glory had informed me of what that Lance had instructed her to do, I immediately turned my troops back. She had some nerve to throw away the battle and risk bringing the entire fight to the cooks and medics back at the encampment—but I was not her subordinate.

The battle had become chaotic after the troops started retreating, leaving only my men to fight. However, taking advantage of the fact that the Alacryans tried to go after the retreating troops, it was easy for my soldiers to subdue many of the preoccupied enemy forces.

Better yet, Captain Glory had received her consequences for such poor judgment in battle; she'd sustained a sizeable injury to her side that left me in charge of both allied forces. I used my expertise as a commander to quickly mesh together the disjointed troops, and we resumed the fight—until an explosion sounded just a bit south of the battleground.

Unexpectedly, the enemy leaders began ordering their men to fall back, giving us a remarkable victory. The sound of my cheering troops filled me with a sense of satisfaction and reminded me of what it meant to be a figure of power.

Resuming my duties as the acting general in charge of both divisions, I ordered every able-bodied soldier to retrieve an ally's body and head back to camp. I also ordered the capture of any Alacryan soldiers found alive, so they could be interrogated later.

I had wanted to go straight to the Council and debrief them on what had happened here, but Captain Glory stopped me. She suspected that the explosion had something to do with the boy Lance and the foe he was supposedly fighting, and wanted me to take some troops to see what happened.

If not for the possibility of apprehending the boy and bringing him in for

punishment for running away in the midst of battle, and the chance to take his place as a Lance, I would've refused.

Perhaps the deities were finally rewarding me for my service to King Glayder and, now, the entirety of Dicathen. I would achieve the pinnacle of power in this continent.

The further south we trekked, the more careful we had to be with our footsteps. As the sun set, mist began pooling between the thick trunks of the trees, obscuring the ground even directly below us. Of more concern than the possibility of an imagined foe, I wanted to catch the boy off guard—accidentally snapping a twig might make him run and complicate the task.

My sources up in the Council's castle told me Arthur had not accepted the artifact granted to each of the Lances to enhance their powers; nevertheless, it would be a mistake for me to be careless. However much of a coward he might be, the boy was still a Lance, after all.

Brier, my right-hand man, stopped and wordlessly motioned for me to come. Walking past the soldiers in his unit, I arrived at what seemed to have once been a tree.

Looking at the dark sludge pooled in the center of the tree trunk, I reached out to touch it, but Brier swatted my hand away. My eyes narrowed as I shot my subordinate a glance, but Brier merely shook his head, unstrapped a spare knife from his thigh, and dipped it into the puddle.

With a faint hiss, the blade of the knife completely dissolved in a matter of mere seconds. Shifting my gaze to the rest of the tree, which seemed to have toppled over fairly recently, I pointed to it, wordlessly asking Brier if he thought this acid was what caused it.

Brier nodded in reply, and we continued our trek until one of his men—a woman, actually—pointed out a few more trees with the same corrosion in the middle of their trunks. Some trees were still standing, the acid making only a small hole, while others were melted down to the roots.

A sharp *snap* from above caused us all to immediately whirl toward the

sound. The woman swiftly nocked an arrow on her bow and fired.

The arrow struck the source of the sound... a branch. Letting out the breath I hadn't meant to hold, I studied the branch that had fallen, realizing that parts of it had been corroded by the same acid on the trees. I shot a menacing glare at the archer, who immediately dipped her head apologetically. *Incompetent*. I signaled for everyone to continue, but stayed close to the rear of the team in case anything were to happen.

Though the winds continued to buffet the trees around us, the forest was eerily quiet. There was no scuttering of nearby animals, and I had yet to hear the call of a single bird—it was almost as if the inhabitants of the forest had all run for their lives.

Suddenly a pained scream pierced the silence. We stopped again as everyone looked toward me for guidance.

From the deep timbre of the scream, it sounded like Ulric—but was it really worth giving our position away if he had already been caught? Whether it was the Lance or the supposed enemy he was facing, the element of surprise was one of our only advantages.

Brier, who had been close friends with Ulric since long before he'd joined my division as a head, stared at me with knitted brows. His eyes seemed to be asking me to let him go, but I motioned for him to wait. I separated our team of five into two groups, with Brier in the team of three, and the archer staying by my side, then we fanned out and slowly made our way toward the sound of Ulric's scream.

The density of the trees dwindled as we approached a large clearing, with more and more signs of the acid evident around us. The ground beneath us abruptly dipped, almost causing us to tumble downhill into a mysterious fog that grew thicker as we got closer to the glade. With the archer covering me, and Brier and his group a few paces ahead to my left, I unclipped the handle of my artifact, Stormcrow, and imbued mana to transform it into a mighty halberd.

With the ghastly green mist blocking our view and the ground uneven below, I suppressed the temptation to turn back, keeping my thoughts fixed on my goal of becoming a Lance. I raised my arm, then, holding up three fingers, I silently counted down.

Three.

Two.

One.

With a roar, Brier slashed out with his serrated daggers, unleashing a torrent of sharp gales to dissipate the potentially dangerous mist.

What in the...

My will to fight all but vanished as the green fog cleared. Stormcrow nearly slipped out of my loosened fingers as we all stood and stared, jaws slack, at the scene just a few yards ahead.

We had unknowingly stumbled on the edge of a massive crater. In the center stood an enormous and awe-inspiring spear that made my priceless artifact, handed down through my family for generations, look like a used toothpick. Impaled on it was what seemed to be a lanky imp-like fiend.

The ground sizzled underneath the suspended monster, the same murky acid dripping from its grotesque body. A faint *hiss* sounded from the green fog continuously spewing from the gaping wound, but it was undoubtedly dead.

Perhaps the only thing more striking than that scene was the sight of the obsidian dragon so casually sleeping next to the boy slumped against a tree on the other side of the crater—a boy who could be none other than Arthur. If it hadn't been for the fact that I had seen the dragon when Arthur was first knighted as a Lance, the fear currently gripping at my chest might have just squeezed the life out of my heart.

For a second, I thought the boy and his bond had both died during the fight, but the steady rise and fall of the dragon's body said otherwise. I pried my gaze from the black dragon to see Ulric on the ground on the other side of the crater. His troops—minus one—were huddled around him, nursing the

stumps where his left arm and leg used to be.

Perhaps the boy died in battle, I thought, hopeful. I assessed the situation as best I could from this distance. It was hard to see the state of the boy from here, but by the ragged breathing of the imposing beast beside him, it was safe to say they both had incurred some kind of damage.

I loosened my grip on Stormcrow. “Retrieve the general’s body.”

Brier signaled for one of his men to go forward—then Ulric, who’d now spotted us, flailed his remaining arm.

“Don’t!” Ulric and his troops screamed—but Brier’s subordinate had already leaped into the crater to make his way to the other side where Arthur was.

As Brier’s man dashed past the lanky fiend, a murky tentacle erupted from its body and clamped onto his ankle. The soldier howled in pain, but rather than pulling at him, the tentacle severed his mana-protected foot, sending him tumbling down toward the center of the crater. The soldier’s arm landed in the puddle of green sludge—almost immediately, the acid worked its way through his armor and flesh until not even bone was left.

The soldier, still shrieking in agony, pulled away from caustic substance, but the tentacle wrapped itself around his legs and dragged the rest of his body into the puddle.

We stood there, horrified and silent, the only sounds coming from the acid working through the soldier’s body and the archer retching behind me.

“Don’t go near the monster!” Ulric huffed, his voice labored from pain. “The general said it won’t attack if you keep your distance.”

“What is going on?!” I roared, losing my composure. “Give me a report!”

“We don’t exactly know, Captain,” one of Ulric’s troops sputtered. “We sensed mana fluctuations nearby so we scouted around the area; then Head Ulric and Esvin slipped and fell down into the crater. Head Ulric was able to make it out, but Esvin...”

“Is that monster still alive?” I asked, taking a step back in case another tentacle sprouted out of its body.

“No, it’s not.”

I whipped my head around toward the source of the hoarse voice. The boy was now awake. “You!” I raised Stormcrow, pointing it at Arthur. “Did you have anything to do with this?”

The Lance’s hard eyes, his irises nearly glowing with an azure radiance, focused on me from beneath his auburn bangs.

“With the death of that retainer? Yes.” His gaze remained harsh, his voice even. “With your soldiers’ deaths? No. That would be because that *thing’s* automatic defense spells are still active even after she’s died.”

I could feel my cheeks burning in embarrassment—the boy was talking to me as if I was a fool. “Why didn’t you help them, then—or warn us?”

“I’m sorry; did you want me to put up a caution sign?” the boy mocked.

“Quite frankly, I’m having a hard time staying conscious, let alone warning mages who obviously didn’t want to be found.”

“General Leywin, you were under suspicion for fleeing in battle, but now that this new information has come to light, we’ll ask that you come with us so we can take you to the Council for further questioning,” I announced, afraid to take even a single step, despite Ulric’s reassurance.

But the boy remained seated against the tree. “I’ll go to the castle on my own accord. Right now, I have other matters to attend to,” he replied.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, General,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Information on the enemy leaders is crucial. The Council needs to be informed at once.”

Gathering my wits, I started to make my way toward the boy—steering clear of the tentacles’ reach—when the obsidian dragon’s eyes shot open, freezing every one of us in our tracks.

Its shimmering topaz gaze bored directly into me, making my body shrivel reflexively. The dragon’s eyes contained a ferocity and wisdom that made every mana beast I had bested seem like a plush doll.

“Take another step if you wish to lose your head,” the dragon rumbled,

baring its fangs.

“I-It speaks!” Brier cried out, stepping back in fear.

Gripping Stormcrow’s handle tighter to suppress my instinctive desire to retreat, I replied, “My apologies, mighty dragon. We have no intention of hurting your master. We simply wish to bring him safely to the Council and see to it that his wounds are treated.”

The dragon huffed out air from its snout, almost as if it scoffed at my words.

“My promise still stands, *Captain*. Take another step—”

“Enough,” Arthur cut in as he leaned against the dragon to get to his feet. He came toward me with slow steps, but clearly had no intention of stopping.

He was tall for one his age, standing just a few inches over me, but it felt as though he were somehow towering over me. Unconsciously, I stepped out of his path as he walked past me without a single word, and made his way down to the center of the crater where the tentacle had killed one of my soldiers.

I cursed in my head—not at him, but at myself for being so ignorant. Only now did I begin to realize the gap between me and this boy.

I stood silently as he trudged carefully down the sloping ground. He came in range of the corroding vine, which seemed to be made of some mysterious mana, but the tentacle simply froze and shattered on contact.

The boy approached that puddle, capable of melting even armor and bone, and casually placed a foot over it. The acid froze into a solid state, and the boy stepped on it and reached up toward the monster. He pulled out a worn teal sword and said, “Sylvie, let’s go.”

The obsidian dragon beat its wings, creating a surge of wind below it. The dragon hovered over its master and lowered its tail for him to grab onto.

Mounted atop the mighty beast, the boy sheathed his sword and peered down at me, his look harsh and disapproving. “Get Captain Glory or someone else *capable* to take the retainer’s corpse to the Council.”

There was a sharp sting to his words that I would have punished anyone else for, but I held my tongue. The fear still lingering in me, and the

overwhelmingly imposing pressure that he radiated as he gave his instructions, made me lose all the remaining confidence I had.

He truly was a Lance.

I sheathed my weapon and dropped to one knee. “Yes, General.”

COVERT

NICO, Cecilia, and I remained silent as we sat around the shoddy patio table, staring at the words printed on the fabric-like sheet of paper in our hands.

“We... we got in,” I finally muttered, not taking my eyes off of my acceptance letter. “I can’t believe we got in.”

“Speak for yourself. The only one Cecilia and I were worried about was you, Grey,” Nico teased, but even he couldn’t hide his excitement at the news.

“I can’t believe it either,” Cecilia whispered, her voice trembling.

“Whoa! Are you crying, Cecilia?”

“No. I just have something in my eye—that’s all.”

I finally pried my eyes from the acceptance letter in my hand to see Cecilia hurriedly wiping her eyes with the ends of her sleeves, her usually creamy cheeks flushed bright red.

“Congratulations, you three,” Headmaster Wilbeck’s clear voice sounded from the entrance to the backyard.

“Headmaster!” Nico exclaimed, proudly holding his letter up like a trophy for her to see.

“I’ll need to find some spare frames to display those letters,” she said with a smile as she walked toward us, then gave each one of us a hug.

Looking at the gentle smile on her face, a pang of guilt struck my chest. She was the woman who had raised me like a son ever since I could remember, yet I was selfishly going away to a distant city. “Headmaster... are you sure

it's okay for us to go? I can stay and help out at the orphanage. It's no big deal. I'm no good at studying like Nico and Cecilia anyway; besides, it's expensive and you're getting old so—ouch!" I yelped, rubbing my stinging forehead.

"I'll take you to the academy if I have to drag you in your underwear myself," she scolded, her finger curled up, ready to flick me again. "All these years of raising a troublemaker like you has finally paid off and you want to—what? Stay here? Not on my watch."

"*Nico* is the troublemaker. I just get dragged along!" I protested, raising my hands to protect my forehead from the assault.

"Then I guess Mr. Sever deserves one of these as well," the headmaster declared, flicking my best friend's forehead with the speed and accuracy of a trained soldier.

"Ow! Grey! What gives?" Nico cried, vigorously rubbing his forehead.

I heard a soft giggle beside me. Nico and I both snapped our heads around to see Cecilia smiling for the first time.

The two of us stared, wide-eyed and jaws agape. Even the headmaster was surprised.

"Did she finally break?" Nico whispered, leaning close to my ears.

I stabbed my friend in his side with my elbow, my eyes glued to the strange sight of Cecilia laughing. My chest tightened and I felt my face getting hot, but only when Cecilia noticed that we were all staring did I realize I was blushing, just like she was.

I quickly turned around and stood up to avoid her gaze, stretching for no reason other than to draw attention away from my face.

Headmaster Wilbeck must have seen through me, because she gave me that devious grin that made her look ten years younger.

"I'd better head back inside, kids. School doesn't start for a few weeks, but make a list of things you'll need so you don't forget anything when one of the volunteers takes you all to town." The headmaster made her way back to the

sliding door she'd come from, turning around once more before stepping inside. "And congratulations again, you three."

ARTHUR LEYWIN

'We're drawing near the border.'

Sylvie's voice rang in my head, pulling me out of my slumber. The white clouds, still blurry to my tired eyes, slowly came back into focus as I blinked. I peered down below, seeing that we'd just passed the Sehz Canal, which flowed through Carn and Maybur City and into the western coast.

How are you feeling? I asked, stretching my sore neck and back with my legs dangling off the side at the base of my bond's neck.

'I should ask you the same. I admit using my powers drained me more than I had expected but you definitely overexerted yourself,' Sylvie chided, extending her large wings to slow our descent.

My groan was swept away by the rushing wind. *I know. It seems I have a ways to go if I want to actually go head-to-head with a Scythe.*

'We're both young; time is a luxury that we are fortunate to have. We just need to remain careful and not do anything rash... like trying to go up against a retainer alone.'

I promise not to let that happen again. Besides, you saved the day there at the end, I said comfortingly, patting her scaled neck.

My bond didn't reply, responding instead with a wave of frustration and helplessness. I didn't say anything, but I didn't have to. She knew how I felt.

We landed on the unsettled land just above the border to the Kingdom of Darv. The once-damp soil of the forest had turned dry and hard, with cracks lining every inch. The trade route that the dwarves and humans used to exchange their goods was near the eastern corner of Darv, by the Grand Mountains, so there were no visible roads this far out toward the coast.

"It's still cold," I grumbled as my cloak billowed in the wind.

'You should grow scales like me,' Sylvie joked as she lowered her body to let me down.

“I’m just glad I’m still able to muster up enough mana to keep from freezing.” I raised my leg and brought it around my bond’s neck, but as soon as my legs touched the ground, a sharp pain coursed through my entire lower body and sent me crumbling into the dirt.

‘The injuries in your legs aren’t getting better.’ Sylvie’s voice was wrapped in concern and guilt, as if she were the one responsible for my pain. *‘Maybe it’d be best if you keep riding me.’*

“No,” I gasped, willing more mana into my legs as a temporary solution. “If my suspicions are correct, we’re going to need to lay low, and we’ve already taken a risk of being exposed by riding this far down.”

‘Very well.’ Sylvie’s large body began glowing as she shifted back into her fox-like form. Rather than riding on top of me like usual, she trotted beside me.

“Looks like Lady Myre’s prediction was right,” I said, taking careful steps. “Even after being healed with the vivum aether art, my lower body feels like it did when I was a newborn.”

‘Grandmother’s control and knowledge of aether in the vivum path is much greater than mine. Maybe if she was here...’ Another wave of guilt washed over me from my bond as her pointed ears drooped.

Stop sulking, I chided, picking up the pace as we ventured into the dwarven territory. *Your grandmother’s warning was rather vague, but I think, with some rest, that my assimilated body will begin to heal itself. I should be fine.*

I chose my words with care, trying to hide my lack of confidence, but it was obvious that my emotions had leaked into her. The explosion of mana inside each of my muscles was so intense, I should have been thankful I was even able to walk, but I couldn’t help but be frustrated at how weak I was. Using Burst Step, three times no less, had left me with shattered bones and shredded muscles, which would have been almost irreparable if not for Sylvie. I winced at the mere thought of my mother’s expression if she were to see the state I was in... would she—or any emitter—have been able to heal me?

Swallowing down the dispiriting thoughts, I surveyed the area. Ahead of me was a vast expanse of varying shades of brown and yellow. The scant plant life scattered around consisted of either broken branches and shrubs, carried by the wind from the forest, or weeds sprouting from the cracks on the ground. I made note of the large boulders spread about, in case we needed to hide or take cover from the harsh winds, but there were no signs of activity.

The jagged plains dipped and rose to form ravines. From the books I'd read and what Elijah had told me, many of the gullies and ravines strewn across the Kingdom of Darv hid entrances to the underground cities where the dwarves actually lived.

I took a deep breath. "Let's get started."

Reaching into the depths of my mana core, where Sylvia's beast will resided, I activated Realmheart once more.

The familiar sensation washed over me, and my body immediately protested. I lurched over to the side and retched out whatever partially-digested food I had in my stomach. When that was all gone, I spewed a dark bile.

My chest heaved and the world spun around me, but fortunately, I was still able to maintain Realmheart—which was crucial for this task.

'Maybe we should come back next time. With my lineage, I'm almost positive I'll inherit Realmheart once my powers fully develop. We can come back then and both of us can search—'

I shook my head. *It doesn't work that way. By then, the mana fluctuations from the soldiers and the retainer will have equilibrated. The search has to be done now.*

'Equilibrated?'

The mana in the atmosphere will return to its original state, I explained, turning my attention back to the particles of mana in the vicinity for any signs of abnormalities.

When I had first experienced this perspective while in Realmheart, the particles had appeared chaotic—like specks of dust pushed and pulled by

even the slightest breeze—but that wasn't the case. During the short time I had spent with Lady Myre, she'd explained to me how mana and aether behaved in their natural state.

Each element of atmospheric mana followed its own pattern. Earth-attribute mana remained near the ground, faintly shifting like fine sand rolling down a hill. Water- and wind-attribute mana moved similarly, flowing in lazy streams, but water particles were much more scarce. Fire-attribute mana was scattered throughout, throbbing and pulsing, almost as if it was giving life to the planet.

Aether, however, behaved as if each particle had its own consciousness. Some moved alongside the particles of earth, while others congregated around the wind- and water-attribute mana, herding them as if they were sheep. What Lady Myre had said about aether being the glass that held the liquid—this force seemed to interact with mana in a special way.

Because of the sheer number of Alacryan soldiers that had somehow snuck into the Kingdom of Sapin, I had hoped there would be some lingering trails of mana fluctuation, but the task of actually singling out minute discrepancies in the endless sky of particles proved even harder than I had thought.

To make this task even more difficult, I had to limit my use of mana to nothing more than strengthening my body. The very act of absorbing mana from the atmosphere would create fluctuations that would interfere; I wouldn't be able to tell my mana use from the Alacryan's.

Taking long strides, Sylvie and I skirted one of the rock formations along the border between Sapin and Darv. Luckily, the soldiers hadn't been able to hide their trail in the forest. Sylvie was able to find where they had moved, but in this rocky desert, where the wind constantly wiped all sign of activity, I was left with the cumbersome task of locating traces of mana fluctuations.

After an hour had passed, Sylvie finally lost her patience.

'Shouldn't we be making our way toward the coast for signs of Alacryan ships? I don't understand why we're wasting time here. If anything, you

should be getting rest, not wandering through this miserable desert.'

I thought you were able to read my mind, I quipped, turning my head away from a strong blast of sandy wind.

'That's not how it works. It's mostly emotions that come through, and very basic thoughts. Right now I feel a strong sense of suspicion coming from you, but other than that—'

I found something. I nearly said it aloud as I came to an abrupt halt. I had been looking at the sky this whole time, but I hadn't noticed anything odd until I spotted a dark spot on the ground. A thin layer of dry sand covered it, but there was an undeniable small puddle of moist earth.

Dropping to my knees, I rubbed the wet dirt between my fingers just to make sure. I looked up at the sky once more and finally spotted what was missing. There was an absence of water-attribute mana in the vicinity of the moist soil.

'What's going on?' Sylvie chimed, staring at the dirt in my hand.

Looks like someone got thirsty, I replied.

Surveying the area, I found more patches where the atmosphere was devoid of water-attribute mana. Following this faint trail, we headed southeast, away from the coast, until we arrived at the edge of a narrow ravine.

Come on. Let's go down.

We carefully climbed down the steep slope, the whistling wind masking all other sounds. At the bottom of the ravine, the faint trail of missing water-attribute mana disappeared—but it didn't matter.

"Damn it," I muttered softly, peering down the cliff. "I was actually hoping I'd be wrong."

'Your suspicion... don't tell me...' A wave of realization emanated from my bond as she felt the rumble of the hollow ground beneath us.

Yup. I'm still only eighty percent sure, but I strongly suspect that the Alacryan army we fought got into Dicathen with the dwarves' help.

DOWN WITHIN

THERE WERE radical implications if the dwarves were really allied with the Alacryans, but regardless of my hunch, I needed to make sure I wasn't being overly suspicious.

It took me another hour or so to locate one of the hidden entrances to the dwarves' underground kingdom—and even that was only possible with the help of Realmheart. I carefully ran my fingers along the faint crease, camouflaged to look like an ordinary crack in the steep cliff.

'Your breathing is strained,' Sylvie noted from inside my cloak.

It's fine. I just used Realmheart for too long, that's all, I replied as I stared down at my arms. Without the golden runes etched into my skin, and now that my vision had returned to normal, I realized how pale my body had become. It wasn't the creamy sort of pale that girls wished for, but the sickly kind of pale that made you worry for your wellbeing.

'I feel like I shouldn't need to remind you, but you do know that there is a concept called "moderation," which works wonders on both mind and body, don't you?'

Ignoring my bond's nagging, I pushed at the concealed entrance once more. Despite the mana I added to strengthen my body, the earthen door still refused to move.

There should be some sort of way to open it. I'm definitely missing something. I continued sliding my hands, which were surrounded in earth-

attribute mana, across the length of the hidden door.

'Maybe you need to be a dwarf to be allowed to enter,' Sylvie mused.

No. I highly doubt that there's a specific mana signature that only dwarves can have, besides perhaps the occasional deviants, and if entry were based on the manipulation of deviant mana, more than eighty percent of their population wouldn't be able to get in through their own doors. No, there has to be a different—I think I got it!

I quickly kneeled, sending Sylvie tumbling out of my cloak at the sudden movement.

You may not need to be a dwarf, but a dwarf definitely built this, so I should act as if I were one. I ran my hands over the rocky wall once more, pushing aside the shrub that covered much of the bottom half of the hidden door.

'Ah, the height!' she exclaimed, her excited voice ringing in my head as she climbed atop my shoulder.

After several minutes of searching for the handle—or button, lever; anything—to open the lock mechanism, I finally found it. About two and a half feet from the ground, near the ridge of the door, my left hand sank into the cliff. At first, it felt like I had accidentally touched some sort of sap or glue-like substance, but when I increased the output of mana into my hand, the viscosity of the wall changed.

As I played around with the unique mechanism of this door, I realized that it wasn't about how much earth-attribute mana you put into your hand, but the precise pattern of mana levels you invoked as you inserted your hand deeper into the hidden lock. I needed to find the right combination of mana output levels to successfully unlock this entrance.

Every time I guessed the output level wrong and attempted to push my hand deeper into the lock-hole, the earth surrounding my hand turned more viscous, pushing my hand out of the lock.

"Damn it," I cursed under my breath after the twentieth failed attempt. Half-tempted to blow open the door, I took a deep breath and released Realmheart

once more.

Immediately, a searing pain flooded out of my core and into my body and limbs. I buckled and fell to my knees with a series of intense coughs. I didn't just vomit food and bile this time, but blood as well.

A wave of distress and concern washed out of Sylvie.

I swear, if you say anything about moderation again...

'Let's just get this mission over with. Then you can get some rest,' she replied.

With a feeble nod, I tried to put weight on my legs and prop myself back up, only to end up flat on my back. With the little mana I had spent on maintaining Realmheart, I rescinded the mana I'd coalesced into my legs to save for unlocking the entrance.

I could feel my bond's emotions once again as she peered down at me. Staying silent, Sylvie helped me into a sitting position, using her head to push me back up.

Taking breaths felt like I was swallowing needles, but I was thankful that I could even activate Realmheart again. Wasting no time, I focused on the area where the keyhole was, my hand barely reaching it with Sylvie's help. Using the last bit of mana that I'd saved, I willed earth-attribute mana into my hand. Immediately, I could see the fluctuations of mana particles gathering around the concealed keyhole. When I willed the correct amount of mana into my hand, the particles lit up and dispersed. I was able to put my hand further into the hole without fear that I'd have to start over.

I bet you dragons never thought of using Realmheart for things like this, I said, grimacing as my hand submerged into the wall, now up to my forearm.

'Things like unlocking a door? No, that'd be beneath us,' she grunted.

Situations call for adaptation, my furry little dragon, I retorted, tugging on the handle buried deep within the lock mechanism of the concealed door. With a satisfying *click*, the earthen wall rumbled before sliding open.

Sylvie was still propping my broken body up; I turned and shot her a proud

wink.

'I get embarrassed at the thought of ever referring you as "papa."' Even in her furry little fox form, there was a palpable sense of mockery as she rolled her eyes.

Hey, you were the one who hatched for me. Withdrawing Realmheart, I wiped at the trail of blood that ran from the corner of my mouth and down my chin, then reallocated my miniscule mana into my legs once more.

Working with a single-digit percentage of my mana barely allowed me the luxury of using my mangled legs—even standing was an arduous task.

Using the wall as a support, I got up and spared no time heading down the narrow corridor. The passageway was about five feet wide and the ceiling scraped the top of my head even when I hunched; it was more like a crude tunnel than an actual hallway. Fortunately, there were candles casting a dim light inside little cubbyholes dug into either side of the walls. Without the need to use mana for anything other than strengthening my legs, I was able to take advantage of this brief down-time to use Mana Rotation to replenish my empty core.

I could feel the heat from the candles, but after venturing through the harsh, sandy winds, I wholeheartedly welcomed it. I stuck to the left side of the hallway, partly to be somewhat hidden and also because I desperately needed the support. I leaned against the jagged wall as I walked down the small slope. Meanwhile, Sylvie trotted carefully a few steps ahead, checking and testing anything remotely suspicious to be sure there were no hidden traps.

'Is this really a good idea? You're in no state for battle if we happen to encounter an enemy. I'm limited to what I can do in this form and even if we do see that the dwarves are allied with the Alacryans, what can we do?' My bond bombarded me with questions as we slowly made our way down the hallway.

It's not a good idea, but we need to do this, I replied seriously. *You're right; I can't fight, and there aren't many places to hide if we do run into someone,*

but we can't waste time recovering. If I'm right, even if I can't gather proof, I know at least Virion and Aldir will listen to me.

'Fine, but our arrangement still stands. The moment we run into trouble, I'm breaking these walls and we're getting out of here.'

Sure, I agreed. We proceeded down the dimly lit hallway until something luminescent—something that wasn't a candle—appeared in the distance. Exchanging glances, my bond and I made our way toward the light.

The tunnel curved slightly as we got closer to the still light, and my ears were able to pick up distant echoes of sounds. The sounds grew louder as we continued down the tunnel, but there were too many things going on at once for me to pick apart specific sounds. There were conversations and echoes, and multiple sharp footfalls, as well as the clanging of metal. Finally, after a few more minutes of steady staggering, the exit of the tunnel lay just ahead.

With my back against the wall, I sidestepped toward the exit, careful not to accidentally kick any pebbles or create any other noise that might alarm any guards who might be around the corner. Sensing no signs of activity just outside the tunnel, Sylvie and I shuffled quickly to the edge of the exit, where a curtain of shadow hid us from any prying eyes.

We gazed blankly at the magnitude of what we had stumbled onto. The hallway opened up into an enormous cavern with a domed ceiling so flawless that, for a second, I doubted that we were still underground. Rather than candles, massive torches lined the walls, revealing just how large the cavern actually was and who was within.

I let loose a string of curses in my head as I peered down. In the center of the cavern floor—roughly two stories down—was a massive teleportation gate surrounded by dwarves, and steadily trickling out from the shimmering gate were Alacryan troops.

Before I was able to get a closer look at what was going on, the sound of footsteps made me turn back. The massive cavern was like a beehive, with dozens of tunnels uniformly dotting the wall. Staircases carved of stone lined

the walls, each one leading to a different tunnel, and approaching the tunnel that Sylvie and I had come through was a platoon of Alacryan soldiers.

'I'm getting us out of here,' my bond stated, her body already beginning to glow.

Not yet! Focusing on an entrance to another tunnel several yards away, I managed to will a few rocks to dislodge. I immediately heard the flurry of movement as the platoon whirled around, weapons and armor clanking.

Seizing the opportunity, I picked up my bond and held her tightly against my chest. Flattening myself against the corner of the entrance and wall as much as possible, I mustered more of the mana I had gathered on our way here and willed a curtain of rock from the wall to surround us.

"Just a loose rock. Let's go," the soldier leading the platoon grunted.

Hold your breath, I ordered Sylvie as I activated Mirage Walk. Coalescing the atmospheric mana around us to hide our presence was a technique I hadn't needed to use since coming back to Dicathen, but in this situation—where enemy mages would be marching just inches away from us—I didn't want to take any chances.

Inside the coffin of earth, I was surrounded by complete darkness. I could hear the synchronized steps of the soldiers as they went past us, their deliberate footfalls echoing against the tunnel walls. They were so close I could hear the hushed conversation of the soldiers.

"When do you think we'll go back home?" one voice murmured.

"Why? Miss your family already?" a husky voice mocked. "Just focus on racking some achievements through this war. Your blood will be thankful if you can finally afford to move them out of that little hut you call a home."

"Great Vritra, shut up back there," a gruff voice bellowed. "Shut your mouths and march or your whole team is going to be on night watch."

I was fascinated by their conversation. Their way of talking was similar to ours, but certain terms—like 'blood' and 'Great Vritra'—I had to guess at by their context. This got me thinking: *How can two different continents that*

had almost no contact with each other have languages so eerily similar?

‘Grandfather told me it was due to the asura’s intervention,’ my bond chimed in, her voice tense even in my head. ‘Asuras often sent representatives to secretly help advance Alacrya and Dicathen when needed. He said they would take the form of a lesser being, albeit an exceptionally smart one, and help them progress through the centuries.’

Sort of like how you asuras granted us the artifacts way back then? I asked.

‘Yup. Except that, apparently, we had been doing it long before then. The artifacts were supposedly a drastic change, something the asuras chose to do to keep the lessers from going extinct.’

I see, I pondered. It was scary to think that perhaps the geniuses of my old world had actually been deities sent from above to help us survive and progress.

As the minutes slowly trickled by, the discomfort of our situation built toward agony. We took only shallow, inaudible breaths, and even then I could feel the oxygen in our conjured stone coffin diminish, as there were no cracks to provide breathable air. It quickly became almost unbearably stifling and hot, enhancing the suffocating feeling. I tried to focus solely on keeping up Mirage Walk to hide us from anyone with a keen sense of mana, but nearly lost my hold on the spell when a loud *thump* shook the crevice we were enclosed in.

“What are you doing?” a soldier whispered impatiently.

The earthen crevice shook once more as something hit the wall I had conjured.

‘I’m ready to fight. Just stay behind me,’ my bond informed me, her voice dropping to a fierce growl in my mind.

Just hold still, I snapped, trying to keep my heart from bursting out of my ribcage.

“This end of the entrance was different from the other side,” another soldier replied, hesitantly. “And it sounded a bit hollow when I hit it.”

There was a brief pause and I was afraid they might investigate further, but, to my relief, his comrade just scoffed.

“Merciful Vritra. I know you’re green but don’t hold the others back just because you see something weird. We’re on a different continent.”

I held in a grateful sigh as the marching steps resumed, slowly subsiding as they made their way up the tunnel we had come down through.

After I felt sure the soldiers had all passed by and no one else was coming, I opened a tiny hole to survey our surroundings. Only after another few minutes did I revoke my spell.

‘We got what we came here for. Now let’s go back to tell Virion so you can get some rest and heal your wounds,’ Sylvie pleaded.

Yeah, let’s go, I agreed. Even with Sylvie’s unique healing techniques using aether, my legs were on the verge of collapsing, and the only rest I had gotten was when I’d briefly passed out on her back on our way here.

I was already contemplating the best way to break this critical news to Virion and Aldir, and thinking of the precautions I would need to take just in case things went south and I needed to fight against the two dwarven Lances. Preparing to leave, I glanced back at the domed-ceilinged cavern—when suddenly the Alacryan soldiers there all kneeled, facing the transportation gate.

After confronting two retainers and even defeating one, I’d thought I’d be prepared to face a Scythe. Even with the suspicion that the dwarves were betraying Dicathen, I was confident we would be able to win this war. But when that dark, horned figure stepped out of that gate, I was shaken right down to my mana core. Being here, barely standing on my own two feet, I felt like a gnat staring at an oncoming hurricane. I felt despair.

HEALING PROCEDURE

THE MYSTERIOUS FIGURE cast a suffocating pressure throughout the cavern as it stepped out of the gate. Even Sylvie, who had been so eager to leave, was frozen stiff as she helplessly peered down at the sight below.

This oppressive aura had come from a girl that looked no older in appearance than Tessia. She possessed elegant features—dark eyes and a thin frame underneath a fur-trimmed robe of midnight black—yet even amongst a crowd of dwarves, she appeared small and petite. It was her horns, most of all, that set her apart, however.

The horns I'd seen on all of the other Vritra so far had looked menacing—as if they were part beast—but the two spikes protruding from above the creature's temples and veering back toward the crown of her skull exuded a sense of prestige and regality, like a tiara placed gently on her head. Unlike the murky black horns I'd seen up until now, this Vritra's obsidian horns all but glowed like precious stones, contrasting starkly against her pearl-colored mane, which flowed back past a set of narrow shoulders.

The Vritra indifferently surveyed her surroundings, and I was able to catch a quick glimpse of her face before I retreated back behind the entrance of the tunnel, fearful that the Vritra would be able to sense me even with Mirage Walk activated. There was something beautiful about her. Terrible, but beautiful.

After a few seconds, I mustered up the courage to look down once more.

“Lady Seris?” A confused, barrel-chested Alacryan soldier greeted her, but remained genuflected in front of the crowd of kneeling dwarves.

“Where is Cylrit?” the female Vritra asked coolly, facing one of the many Alacryan soldiers surrounding the gate and the kneeling dwarves.

The female soldier Lady Seris had acknowledged immediately rose to her feet. “Commander Cylrit is currently stationed near the northern coast of Sapin, awaiting you before he begins his attack, Lady Seris.”

“Very well. Let us depart.” Her soft voice spread like a cold breeze, sending shivers down my back despite the distance between us.

“Yes, Lady Seris!” The female soldier saluted, instructing her troops to follow the dainty Vritra.

As she walked past the soldier who had first called out her name in surprise, he spoke. “Forgive my rudeness, Lady Seris, but what of the new Scythe? I was instructed to take him to Commander Uto.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone in the vicinity anxiously shifted glances between Lady Seris and the large soldier. She peered down at him with a cold, emotionless gaze before finally speaking. “He’s not ready. Melzri and Viessa are still working on him.”

“I see,” the soldier replied, his shoulders visibly relaxing. “My apologies for wasting your time.”

By her speech, it was obvious that she herself was a Scythe, but a part of me didn’t want to believe it—that such a being, comparable even to an asura, was an opponent I would ultimately have to face. Not to mention, it appeared that number of Scythes we had to worry about had increased.

‘Another Scythe?’ Sylvie echoed, her voice filled with worry.

Come on, let’s get out of here. Now that a Scythe had entered the war, I had to get this information back up to the castle quickly.

I took one last quick glance at the Scythe named Seris—just as she looked back over her shoulder as well.

For a split second, her gaze passed by the tunnel where we’d been hiding and

our eyes met.

Her gaze eventually swept past me but in that flashing moment, her cold eyes had locked onto me with the focus of a predator.

There was no doubt about it: She knew I was here.

My body stiffened as if every ounce of blood in it had congealed. My hands grew clammy and my heartbeat rose to the point where I feared the entire cavern would hear it thundering in my chest. Yet she turned back and continued up the stairs, displaying the same curt manner as before—unfazed and uncaring.

‘What’s wrong?’

I stood still, afraid to move. Only after the Scythe had left the cavern did I release my breath. *I think she saw me.*

Feeling my apprehension, Sylvie knew I wasn’t joking, which made her all the more restless. *‘Now can we leave? Or do you want to wait until the rest of the Alacryan army knows we’re here?’*

Yeah. Let’s go, I thought wryly.

Exiting the tunnel, we were greeted by the ever-present desert wind. Sylvie and I had agreed to hold off on flying until we’d reached the forest on the border of Sapin and Darv. However, after a mile of careful trekking, I had succumbed to a fit of shivers. Constantly using Mirage Walk, in case nearby Alacryan soldiers sensed my mana fluctuations, had drained my meager reserves. Using the rest of the mana to strengthen my legs left me with only my cloak to protect me from the sharp, sand-embedded winds.

It’s been a while since I’ve been this cold. I clenched my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering. Leaning my back against a boulder for temporary shelter from the wind, I wrapped my cloak tightly around me.

‘Just a little more. We’re almost there. Should I use aether once more?’ my bond asked as she gazed up at me in my pitiful state.

No. I can barely keep Mana Rotation active in this state. Using aether might set off the soldiers, or worse, the Scythe.

‘Okay.’ She pressed against my leg to do what she could to keep me just a little warmer, and we stayed still for a brief moment until the wind died down just a bit.

After painstakingly walking back toward the forest, zigzagging from one boulder to another in case of any Alacryan soldiers hidden from the faint light of the crescent moon, I almost broke into tears at the shadowed figures of trees in the distance.

When we entered the forest the wind died down significantly, and in just a few minutes—despite it being the same temperature—my body slowly began to thaw.

‘Let’s rest here for a bit,’ Sylvie said, pointing with her snout at a nearby hollow log.

We should... get back to the castle, I replied, my eyelids growing heavier with each word.

My bond nudged me toward the log. *‘We need to put some more distance between us and the soldiers ahead anyway. Just a one-hour nap. At this rate, you’ll freeze without mana to protect you while flying.’*

There was a comforting power to her words that seemed to drain the rest of what little energy I had left. Suddenly overcome by a wave of fatigue, I stumbled into the hollow log. My consciousness slowly faded into darkness, and the last thing I witnessed was Sylvie dropping a mouthful of leaves on top of me for warmth.

Despite my feeble state, deep sleep eluded me. I was still tense about being out in harm’s way with so little strength to protect myself and the recent turn of events, and my mind worked overtime to stay at least half-conscious.

After about an hour of resting, Sylvie and I climbed out from the comfort of our blanket of leaves and departed. I no longer needed to use mana to strengthen my legs while riding Sylvie, so I was able to protect myself from the prevailing winds.

Aside from the howling gales, the journey back to the castle was silent.

Conversation was almost nonexistent between us, as we had both become lost in our own thoughts.

Now that we knew the dwarves were aiding the Alacryan forces, this war had gotten exponentially more complicated. It wasn't as simple as *us versus them* now. There was still the possibility that only a single faction of the dwarves were aiding our enemy, but if Rahdeas—Elijah's foster guardian, and now leader of the dwarves—had something to do with this, then that meant we were potentially down two Lances.

Assuming the worst, the only positive in all this was that Rahdeas was still acting as if he were on our side. This meant that he either had more to gain from being a double agent, or that he wasn't confident enough to openly defy the rest of the Council.

'*We're here,*' Sylvie announced.

Looking up, I could see the castle, floating amidst the layers of clouds. Dotted around the large structure on all sides were soldiers mounted on flying mana beasts. The sun shone directly above, casting shadows on the sea of clouds below the castle and flying guards. It was an awe-inspiring sight—for anyone who had never visited, it would surely have made their jaws drop—but for me, all I could think about was getting inside and hibernating on the first comfortable surface I came across.

Most people entered through teleportation gates, so when we approached, the guards immediately gathered between us and the castle. Weapons glowed brightly, held at the ready, as the bonds the soldiers were riding also prepared for battle. However, once we got close enough for the soldiers to make out who we were, they formed two lines, creating an aerial path for Sylvie and me to follow into the entrance.

"General Leywin!" The guards saluted in unison from atop their flying beasts. We made our way up the pathway, and the double doors—which towered over even Sylvie—slowly creaked open just ahead.

It was obvious that Captain Auddyr had already arrived, since there was a

team of medics and emitters waiting for me in the landing chamber, having been instructed to remain there until I returned. Some of them were casually playing cards, but as soon as the large double doors opened, they all dropped what they were doing and immediately prepared to treat me.

The area quickly burst into a flurry of activity with indecipherable noises bombarding my ears from every corner of the large room. By the time Sylvie landed, the medics had already brought over a contraption similar to a gurney.

“I’m okay,” I croaked, my voice barely audible. “Let me talk to Virion first.” “Strap him in and don’t let him walk,” Sylvie rumbled, startling everyone in the room—including me. My bond had always refrained from talking to anyone but me, and even then she preferred to communicate telepathically.

Taken aback by her sudden commands, I complied with Sylvie’s wishes and allowed myself to be carried on the gurney, while both medics and emitters began examining me. My bond transformed into her fox-like form, and trotted along beside me as they moved me from the landing chamber to a proper medical facility.

It didn’t take long for the medics to determine where my injuries were; in fact, I heard one of the medics suggest that it would probably be easier to list the parts of my body that *weren’t* damaged.

That was always reassuring.

Coming from a place and time that was more technologically advanced, I had always looked down on the medical field in this world—but it turned out I had underestimated it. What this world couldn’t achieve through technology, they made up for with magic. Teams of deviant mages, all specialists in the medical field, were waiting for me as I was pushed into a large square room with vaulted ceilings.

As time trickled by, I could feel my injuries and deprivations catching up to me. The adrenaline that had been keeping me able was dwindling, and it felt like my limbs had turned into lead weights. I struggled to stay awake as the

medics and emitters carefully probed my body.

After another round of preliminary examinations, an elderly mage entered the room. The thick, square-jawed mage introduced himself as Mendul, and said he was a deviant capable of using mana to adjust and fine-tune his vision so that he could perceive the individual layers of any living thing's body. Whether it was the skeletal, muscular, or even nervous system, he was able to see them all.

Mendul scanned my body, using an ink pen to draw directly on my skin in dozens of places as he took notes, while I focused all my efforts on staying conscious.

"Where's Commander Virion?" I asked after Mendul had finished marking up my body like some sort of map.

"My apologies, General Arthur. Commander Virion is currently away from the castle," said a thin, middle-aged man dressed in a pale green robe.

Judging by how he had been coordinating the actions of the medics, emitters, and other deviants in the room, I assumed he was the head of the medical team here. While I'd normally be a bit more courteous to the man in charge of healing me, a tone of impatience slipped out when I spoke. "He's *away*? Where? When's he going to be back?"

"He did not say," the man replied apologetically. "I saw him leave with Captain Auddyr and Captain Glory, along with General Aya."

I sank further down into the elevated bed they had moved me to, careful not to keep my eyes closed for too long lest I slip into slumber. If Virion had left with Auddyr and Vanesy, and had taken a Lance with him, they were most likely going back to the forest near the southern border of Sapin, where I had defeated the retainer.

The sense of dread I had felt while looking down upon the Vritra Scythe crept through me, raising gooseflesh across my exposed skin. *They might run into the Alacryan platoon that was marching up north. Worse, that Scythe might try to find the retainer I killed.*

‘I’m not too worried about the Scythe, since she seemed to be headed in a different direction, but you’re right about the platoon,’ my bond replied.

Maybe you should go and warn them.

‘And leave you here alone? After finding out that the dwarves are allied with the Vritra? Has your brain left you?’

I took a quick glance around the room. There were elves as well as dwarves working alongside the human medics, all busily preparing tools and medicines.

Damn it, I thought, knowing she was right. Fine. I guess we can only pray for their safety.

‘Virion has a Lance with him, after all. Don’t try to handle everything alone. They’ll be fine without you,’ she comforted me. ‘I’ll be right here, making sure these medics aren’t doing anything suspicious. Just rest and focus on healing.’

“What about Aldir?” I asked the head medic hopefully.

“Once again, I’m sorry.” He dipped his head. “Only Commander Virion knows the whereabouts of Lord Aldir. I, myself, have only seen him once—very briefly.”

I heaved a sigh of frustration as the last ounce of strength left me. “It’s fine. So what’s the plan here? Were you able to come up with a diagnosis for my injuries?”

The head medic turned to Mendul, who stepped forward and looked down at his notes before speaking. “General Arthur, your injuries are unique in how complex they are. To be frank, it’s only because of your assimilated body and the level of your mana core that you’re even able to remain conscious. Even so, I can’t help but say I’m surprised to see you so lively—all things considered, of course.”

I managed to shift my gaze to look down at Sylvie, who was sitting on the floor beside my bed. *I have you to thank for that.*

‘You’re welcome,’ she replied curtly. ‘Although I fear I’ll have to do this

again in the future.’

I shot my bond a weak grin before looking back to Mendul. “So what will the treatment be?”

The deviant shifted uncomfortably as he stroked his short beard. “The injuries to your legs and lower body have healed, but not perfectly. For you to be able to walk without the use of mana, we’re going to have to, very precisely, break your bones and tear your tissues in very small increments, then guide them to heal properly.”

Prying open my tired eyes, I locked gazes with the head medic, who had been silently waiting for further instructions. Whether because I was so desperate to be in full health again or because I had undergone countless surgeries after battles during my time as a king in my previous world, my mind was at peace.

I gave Sylvie one last meaningful glance before closing my eyes. In these circumstances—anyone in this room could potentially harm me—I was thankful to have her with me.

“Go ahead.”

“Yes, General Arthur!” The thin medic nodded vigorously. “Rest assured; upon hearing news of your condition from Captain Auddyr, Commander Virion spared no effort in gathering the most elite mages of all three races to restore you to full strength.”

“I’m in your hands.” At my whispered words, the mages and medics in the room immediately bowed.

“Seldia, you’re up,” Mendul barked.

A young female elf approached me, giving me a gentle smile. She extended her hand, pressing on my forehead with one finger. “Excuse me for the intrusion.”

As she closed her eyes, a soothing wave radiated from her fingertip into my head and down the rest of my body. My eyes fell shut as a gentle blanket of darkness wrapped around me.

WHY ARE YOU CRYING?

“WHERE TO NEXT, NICO?” I asked, cheerfully swinging the plastic bags filled with school supplies by my side.

“We still have to pick up our uniforms, right?” Cecilia answered, cradling a textbook in her arms as if it were a baby.

“It hasn’t been two hours yet since we got ourselves measured. We’ll make that our last stop,” Nico replied. He looked down at his little notepad. “We need to buy backpacks and calculators.”

The three of us strolled casually down the city sidewalk. The streets were old and crooked, with paving stones that wobbled and shifted out of place from the weight of passing pedestrians. Dull buildings towered over us, blending in with the murky gray sky. A recent rain shower had replaced the usually grimy stench of the area with a fresh, earthy smell, while puddles had gathered in the dips and potholes of the neglected streets.

Arcastead was by no means a pleasant or appealing city. Yet, at this moment, everything around me was at least bearable. From the homeless people lurking behind the trash bins in back alleys to the scowling soldiers threatening to arrest any passerby who accidentally bumped into them, the usual sights—and everything about this place that I hated so much—somehow seemed charming.

The sun had fallen by the time we finished purchasing all the supplies we needed to start our new lives as students. As we headed toward the outskirts

of Arcastead, both the patrolling soldiers and street lights became scarcer, keeping us on our toes. Nico and I knew the area well enough to outrun any potential thieves or kidnappers, but having Cecilia with us made the walk back to the orphanage all the more tense.

“Are you excited to go to school, Cecilia?” Nico asked quietly, hoping to fill in the tense silence.

Her brows furrowed in thought but she ultimately nodded, with a smile that had become more frequent as of late. “I’m nervous and scared, but yes.”

I was about to chime in when a faint rustle drew my attention. Pretending to be digging through the plastic bag of school supplies, I took a peek behind us and saw a shadow flit into an alleyway.

“—right, Grey?” Nico nudged my arm.

“Huh?” I looked up at him.

“Sheesh, don’t space out on us,” Nico admonished. “I know we’ve been through this area hundreds of times, but it’s still dangerous to be daydreaming like that.”

Scratching the back of my head, I smiled sheepishly. “My bad.”

“And I was just telling Cecilia that we’ll be there in case anything happens to her,” Nico said.

Walking on the other side of Nico, Cecilia giggled, and I heard another faint noise.

A shiver ran down my spine. I could feel my heart pound against my ribcage as if trying to break free. Suddenly, I was all too conscious of my breathing—the same shallow, ragged breathing I’d heard so many times in movies when the main character was scared.

I was afraid. I didn’t know of what, but my instincts were telling me to run—to get out of here.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw something move—fast, just a twinkle against the flickering street light—and once again, the world seemed to slow down around me.

I lunged sideways, knocking Nico and Cecilia into the grimy street.

“Run!” I roared as I heard the *click* of another projectile being loaded from the shadows.

Although startled and confused, Nico was able to gather his wits. Abandoning his bags, he pulled our disoriented friend into the nearby alleyway.

It felt as if someone else was taking control of my body as I instinctively dipped down and picked up Cecilia’s textbook. I raised the thick hardbound book up to my chest, just as the force of the projectile sent me staggering back.

I glanced down quickly and saw a syringe-like object embedded into the textbook. The dart contained a clear liquid that quickly oozed into the pages of the book.

It wasn’t a bullet. I knew that for sure. Then a memory of my trip to the zoo with Headmaster Wilbeck sprang to mind. It was one of those needles they shot at animals in order to make them fall asleep.

Yanking the needle out of the textbook, I followed Nico and Cecilia into the narrow alleyway.

A gruff voice barked out orders from behind me. “After them! I don’t care what you do with the boys, just keep the girl alive.”

“Keep running!” My voice echoed off the worn stone walls as I ran, ducking under the rusted fire escape ladders and vaulting over trash bins.

It didn’t take me long to catch up to my friends, which meant the crooks behind us would soon reach us.

Nico was fine, but there were trails of blood running down his legs and arms from scrapes and scratches he’d gotten while running. I knocked down metal trash cans and discarded boxes, throwing anything hard I could get my hands on at the pursuers in a desperate attempt to slow them down.

“They’re... going to... catch up,” Nico wheezed. He was running out of breath.

“Why are they after us?” Cecilia panted. She was exerting all her energy and focus into not tripping over anything.

I shook my head. Other than what the man had said, I had no idea. “Nico, do you still have that glove on you?”

“I should—wait, you’re not seriously—”

“Can you think of any other way?” I said, cutting him off, my voice laced with impatience.

At Nico’s signal, we veered left into a narrow alley. Our pursuers’ footfalls were growing louder as they gained on us.

Grudgingly, Nico dug through his jacket pockets. After finding the glove, he reached out to give it to me, but Cecilia snatched it out of his hand.

“Cecilia?” Nico exclaimed.

“I-I’ll do it,” Cecilia stammered, putting on the fuzzy black glove.

Dumbfounded by the girl’s sudden courage, I nearly tripped over a pile of discarded clothes. “It’s too dangerous. And you still can’t control your ki!”

“We heard what that man yelled earlier,” Cecilia huffed. “They aren’t allowed to kill me, right?”

I looked to Nico for assistance, but he couldn’t come up with an argument either.

Cursing under my breath, I tightened my grip around the syringe in my hand.

“Fine. Nico, got a plan?”

My friend’s eyes narrowed the way they always did when he was thinking.

“We make a right over there,” he ordered softly.

I looked back over my shoulder; two pursuers dressed in black were less than twenty feet away from us.

We turned sharply into a wide back alley behind an old restaurant. I had expected that we would keep running, but Nico pulled me back by my sleeve.

“Cecilia, fall on your belly like you just tripped over something. Grey, with me,” Nico hissed, dragging me behind a cluster of metal trash cans.

My heart thrummed like a drum, so loud that I worried our pursuers might

hear.

It only took a couple of seconds for the two men in black to skid to a stop around the corner.

The one on the right spoke into his wrist. “Sir, we have the girl in our sights.” “The girl tripped and it looks like the boys have abandoned her. Permission to proceed?” the other man said.

Unlike the crooks who had tried to mug Nico and me a few months back, these two were obviously professionals. They cautiously moved toward Cecilia, but to our surprise, our timid and quiet friend began bawling.

“Guys! Don’t leave me,” she wailed as she began crawling away. “Please!”

The man on the right scoffed and shook his head. He walked forward and stepped on Cecilia’s leg.

I gnashed my teeth as Cecilia cried out in pain, but, for once, Nico looked even angrier than me. His eyes were fierce in a way that made even me fearful.

The man who had asked for permission to proceed remained a few feet away, while the other pursuer reached down and pulled Cecilia up by the back of her coat.

He raised his other wrist and spoke into the communication device. “We have her.”

Cecilia took full advantage of the opportunity. She lashed around and planted her gloved hand on the pursuer’s face.

A shrill scream tore from her throat. Like the other times she had gone out of control, a blast of ki erupted out of her. However, some of her rampant ki had flowed down her arm to her hand. A current of electricity flashed out of the black glove, lighting the dingy alleyway.

The pursuer who had grabbed hold of Cecilia wasn’t even able to scream. His body spasmed and a puddle formed on the ground between the man’s legs as Cecilia pried herself free from his grasp.

Nico squeezed my arm and we rushed into action. Nico dived for the

uninjured pursuer's legs while I went for his sternum.

I'd thought the flash of light would have disoriented him enough that we could end the fight quickly, but he had recovered in time to react to our attack.

Sidestepping out of Nico's reach, he kicked my friend away while bringing his right arm swinging down at me. I backstepped away from the blow, then closed in to strike his exposed throat, only for him to dip his head. His left hand shot toward my neck at frightening speed.

I gagged as the man's cold hand gripped my throat and lifted me off the ground.

"You have potential, kid," he sneered, bringing me close to his face. "A waste you have to die here."

At this distance—less than arm's length—I was able to see the man's face for the first time. His nose and mouth were covered by a mask, but it didn't matter: His scarred left eye was brown, and the right eye green. I would have known him anywhere.

My vision was darkening and I could feel the strength leaving my body, but despite the situation, I didn't panic.

Praying to any higher being that might help me, I drove the point of the syringe into the man's neck.

"What—" he gasped, letting go of me as he fell to the ground.

With no time to waste, I hurriedly roused the unconscious Nico and helped Cecilia back to her feet.

"We did it," Cecilia whispered as she leaned on me for support. Her legs were shaking—not from the cold, but in fear—and her cheeks were lined with tears.

"Good job, you two," Nico muttered weakly, putting Cecilia's other arm over his shoulder for support.

"Yeah, we did it." I nodded. "Now, come on. We need to get out of here before any more of them show up."

“You’d best kill us and run far away, brats.”

I spun around to see the guy with the brown and green eyes squirming on the ground.

“You have nowhere to go,” he mumbled, his voice slurring from the effects of the drug. “I made sure of that.”

“Let’s go, Grey,” Nico urged, tightening his arm around Cecilia to keep her steady.

None of us spoke as we made our way back to the orphanage. Even the streets were quiet, except for the sirens that screamed in the distance. It was as if we didn’t want to accept what had happened to us—that we had almost been killed for no reason. I wanted to look forward. I wanted to think, instead, about the fact that we were going to be attending a school in a new city soon. We would have to buy new supplies, but that was fine. Everything would be okay once we got to the orphanage and Headmaster Wilbeck got us out of Arcastead.

Cecilia was able to walk on her own after a few blocks—a vast improvement from her earlier ki outbursts, which used to knock her out cold for hours.

“Thanks for the help,” Cecilia muttered, breaking the silence as she shyly handed the black glove—or what was left of it—back to Nico. The shock glove my friend had made had been reduced to a clump of wool from the overload of Cecilia’s ki. “Sorry about your glove.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Nico stuffed the remains of the glove into his tattered jacket and looked at me with a grin. “At least I was able to see what it was capable of, thanks to you. Grey wasn’t useful at all.”

“Make fun of me all you want; I was the one that saved you guys today,” I gloated, sticking my tongue out at Nico.

To my surprise, Nico responded seriously. “You’re right. I wasn’t any help in that fight.”

“Hey, I was just kidding,” I said, a pang of guilt ringing in my chest.

“Nico, it was only thanks to your glove that we were able to escape them,”

Cecilia consoled him.

“Yeah!” I quickly agreed, walking ahead of them. “And I bet you can learn to make a lot more, and better, tools and weapons after going to school!”

Nico’s sullen expression brightened at our words. Taking out the remains of the shock glove, he gripped it tightly, a newfound fervor in his eyes. “We’ll need to get new supplies first. Headmaster Wilbeck is going to blow a fuse!”

Cecilia’s face contorted into a fair imitation of the headmaster’s serious frown. “She might even make us go back tomorrow morning to find them!”

The two of them burst into a fit of laughter behind me, and I let them enjoy their moment. The summer nights were usually warm, but I thought the heat felt different tonight. The air was dry and there was a smell of smoke that was only getting stronger... Why?

I turned the corner onto the street our orphanage was on, and found my answer.

Behind me, Nico and Cecilia drew closer, but their footsteps seemed to echo and their voices were muffled, as if coming from a very long way away.

Suddenly, the words of the man with the brown and green eyes rang in my head: “You have nowhere to go.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, my gaze locked on the sight of the orphanage burning to the ground. Police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances were clustered in front of our home.

And then I saw her.

She was being carried on a stretcher. A paramedic had just put a tarp over her, covering her face, but I saw her. I saw Headmaster Wilbeck.

I ran, leaving Nico and Cecilia behind. I evaded the policemen securing the perimeter and pushed aside the paramedics.

People shouted around me but I couldn’t hear what they were saying. All I could hear was my blood pounding in my ears.

I tore off the tarp covering Headmaster Wilbeck.

Blood—too much of it.

Her eyes were closed. *Why are they closed?*

I shook her. She needed to wake up.

Nico, Cecilia, and I had been attacked by bad people, but we'd gotten away. Everything was supposed to be okay now.

I shook her too hard. Her arm fell limply off the edge of the stretcher. Her eyes were still closed.

Hands were grasping for me, words tumbling like fall leaves around me, but they were lost behind the man's words, which burned like a hot iron rod against my skull.

"You have nowhere to go."

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"Arthur!"

My eyes shot open; tears were streaming down my face.

Everything was still blurry, but I could tell I was in my room now, inside the castle. My breaths were still short and erratic, and my left hand gripped something soft and warm.

"Arthur," the familiar, soothing voice called out to me again.

I turned my head, blinking away the tears still forming in my eyes.

Next to me, holding my hand, was Tessia. Her eyes were red and wet with tears as well.

"Tessia?" My voice came out dry and raspy. "Why are you crying?"

"Dummy." She choked back a laugh, smiling as the tears rolled down her cheek. "I could ask you the same thing."

INTERMISSION

MY GAZE LINGERED ON TESS. She was smiling—laughing, even—with relief and embarrassment as she wiped away her tears.

This was the first time I had seen my childhood friend since the ceremony where I'd been given the title of a Lance, but it had been even longer since the last time we had spoken.

The elven princess had changed since then. There was a faint scar just along her hairline above her right ear; it might have gone unnoticed had she not tied up her hair. Battle scars were visible all over her arms, and a fresh bandage was wrapped around her left forearm.

“You’re hurt,” I noted, gently tracing the line of blood seeping through her bandage with my fingers.

Noticing my worried expression, she grabbed my scarred hand, taking it tenderly in both hands. “Oh, please. I have more injuries from attempting to cook than from actually fighting.”

I laughed, glad to have her there, speaking to me, holding on to me. Despite the calluses on her palms and fingers, her hand felt soft and warm compared to mine.

Shaking her head, Tessia said, “Do you have any idea how scared I was when I heard the news from my captain?”

“Your captain? Does that mean you got promoted to head?” I asked, staring at the princess’s stunned expression.

“You’re unbelievable. Your thoughts immediately go to whether I got promoted? You almost *died*, Arthur!”

“I’m just glad you’re doing well,” I replied.

Tess took a deep, resigned breath, and leaned her head on my arm. “I don’t even have the strength to argue with you.”

I felt her hands squeeze mine, and the gesture was so warm and comforting that I nearly burst into tears again. Time seemed to slow down for a brief moment, and we stayed there, silent and contemplative and together.

“You took such careful measures to make sure everyone would be safe that I never even thought about how dangerous this war would be for you.” Tess lifted her head, gazing up at me with her brilliant turquoise eyes. “Seeing you like this—in bed, full of injuries—it was a cold reminder that you’re only human and not some indestructible warrior mage.”

I snorted. “Is that how I look to you most of the time? Some indestructible figure?”

“With the emotional maturity of a toddler,” she finished with just a hint of a smile.

“Is that any way to talk to a general?” I scolded, trying to keep a serious face as she struggled to do the same.

“My apologies, *General Arthur*,” she replied, laughter in her voice.

A knock at the door interrupted our playful banter, but it opened before either Tessia or I responded. Virion stepped confidently into the room, along with his son Alduin Eralith. They were followed by Alduin’s wife, Merial. Alduin and Merial didn’t stay long—they had to depart due to problems in one of the elven cities up north—but I thought it very kind of them to take the time to visit me.

“What’s been happening?” I asked of Virion once they had gone.

“We’ll get to that, Arthur. First, I need to make sure that Dicathen’s newest Lance is being well cared for. I’m glad Tessia has come to keep you company,” the commander said, a twinkle in his eye.

A grunt from the open door drew all our attention to my sister, Eleanor, who had just arrived with Sylvie and Boo, her eight-foot-tall bear, who was grunting with pleasure as he casually chewed on a slab of meat.

Virion cleared his throat. “I’ll give you moment with your family. When you’re done, though, I think it best that we discuss what has happened.” With a wink at Tessia, and a respectful nod to my sister, Virion marched from the room.

‘Your sister has been patiently waiting for you to wake up,’ Sylvie informed me as Eleanor carried her into the room.

It hadn’t been that long since I had last seen Ellie, yet it felt like I had never before noticed how big she’d gotten. I couldn’t call her my baby sister anymore.

“Come here, Ellie,” I said gently.

My little sister’s lower lip trembled as tears began flooding down her face. Letting go of Sylvie, she bolted into my arms, nearly knocking the wind out of me.

“I was so worried!” she said angrily, her voice breaking into sobs. “What would’ve happened if you had died?”

“I’m okay, El,” I said soothingly, but her face remained buried in my chest. I reached up to stroke her brown hair, and noticed that the injuries I had gotten from the witch-like retainer were still there. My expression darkened at the sight of the ugly red scar that spread all over my left hand and up to my wrist, as if the skin had been burned off. The injury had diminished greatly thanks to Sylvie’s vivum abilities—the scar already looked like it was a few years old—but my entire hand had turned a sickly shade of pink.

Boo regarded me with a suspicious eye as he gnawed on his bone, but he allowed me to continue embracing his master.

Sylvie casually hopped onto my bed and curled up beside me. She didn’t say anything, but a wave of relief flooded from her.

Rubbing the tears from her eyes, Ellie's gaze landed on my scarred hand. "How could you let yourself get hurt like this?"

"Scars fade," I said with a weak smile, hoping to dismiss her concerns.

Physical appearances had never been of great importance to me, but it was still a bit nerve-racking to see how bad a mark my injuries had left. I worked up my courage, then carefully got out of bed, first making sure my legs were able to carry me.

Standing up on my own two legs without the help of mana was a blessing I had always taken for granted. I took slow, steady steps toward the mirror while Tessia, Ellie, and Sylvie watched apprehensively. Boo looked on with disinterest.

I took a deep breath, then looked up to study my reflection. Even without taking off my robe, I could immediately see the toll the battle with the retainer had taken on my body. My gaze immediately went to my neck. The same red scars that covered my hand and wrist had been branded across my throat.

Untying the band across my waist, I slipped out of my robe so I was only wearing my undergarments.

Wow, I'm a mess.

'You could've been a lot worse off,' Sylvie chimed in, her usual curtness gone.

Scars of varying lengths were littered all over my toned body, like the chips and cracks on an ancient statue weathered by time and the forces of nature. More of the red scars were visible across my shoulder and part of my back. The scars that ran from my waist down to my knees were particularly gruesome—as if someone had torn apart my legs piece by piece and crudely stitched me back together.

"Consider it a godsend that you were able to recover even to the state you're in now," a clear voice said, rousing me from my thoughts.

Casting a sideways glance toward the door, I caught sight of the three-eyed

asura, Aldir, stepping into my room. He was followed by Virion, who quietly took a seat on the leather couch.

“Master,” Tess greeted him, getting up from her seat. My childhood friend’s cheeks were flushed as she awkwardly positioned herself away from me.

Realizing that it was probably my lack of clothing that made her uncomfortable, I slipped back into my robe before greeting the asura.

“Aldir.”

“Arthur Leywin.” He nodded before dipping his head at Sylvie. “Lady Sylvie.”

“What you said just now. What did you mean?” I asked, taking a seat beside Virion.

Sitting down across from us next to Tess, he pointed at a ring on a finger of his left hand. “Do you remember the elixir pearl Windsom gave you a few years ago? The one you never used?”

I looked into my dimension ring, but couldn’t find the gold-flecked pearl that I had saved to help me break into the white core stage. “What happened to it?”

“It’s what gave your body the strength to recover to the state you’re in now,” the asura said matter-of-factly. He straightened his deep lavender robe. “Even with a team of lessers specializing in medical mana, as well as Lady Sylvie using her aether arts—albeit inexperienced—it still took the full effects of the powerful elixir to heal you.”

“I’m guessing you and Windsom aren’t allowed to give me another elixir, right?” I asked.

Aldir shook his head. “Since the war has started, we can’t risk the treaty being broken.”

“Damn,” I said, leaning my head back on the couch.

“Sorry to kick you while you’re down, but I thought you might still want this,” Virion chimed in, taking Dawn’s Ballad from his dimension ring. “I was able to secure your sword from the retainer’s corpse.”

My heart sank as he handed me the once-stunning sword. The translucent teal blade of Dawn's Ballad had dulled, and its tip had been melted away by the retainer's corrosive abilities, throwing off the sword's delicate balance.

After sheathing it in its scabbard, which I had been carrying inside my ring, I idly stared at the palm of my right hand, where Wren had embedded a gem. It was a stone he had refined himself called acclorite, and it was supposed to somehow turn into a special weapon.

Now would be a great time for a new weapon, I thought to my hand.

'Arthur,' Sylvie's voice sounded. 'I told Aldir some of what happened, but I think it'd be best if you went over it with him and Virion in detail.'

Right.

Slowly getting up from my seat, I walked over to my little sister, who'd been silent the whole time. "Ellie. Can you wait for me outside while I talk over some stuff?"

Raising a skeptical brow, she replied, "Only if you promise not to leave without at least saying goodbye."

Looking into her eyes, I promised.

"Fine." She got up from her seat and walked toward the door before looking back over her shoulder with a proud expression. "I want to show you what I've been working on."

"Oh?" I raised a brow. I assumed there was a spell she had been practicing. "I can't wait!"

My sister closed the door behind her and Boo, and the only ones left inside my room were Commander Virion, Aldir, Sylvie, and Tessia.

"Let me catch you up on what happened since the battle with the retainer," I began.

"Wait. Let's call an official meeting with the rest of the Council," Virion interrupted, getting up.

"No. I want this to be for your ears only. What you choose to do with this information is up to you."

Tess raised a timid hand. “Should I leave?”

“It’s fine.” I shook my head. “Before I start, though, I want to know one thing.”

“And what would that be?” Aldir replied, taking note that my gaze was directed at him.

“Who has control over the two dwarven Lances, Mica Earthborn and Alfred Warned—you, or Rahdeas?”

The asura’s single purple eye, which was open, narrowed in thought as he continued staring at me. “I’m still in control of those two Lances. Why do you ask?”

It took longer than I expected to debrief them on the events that had transpired after my battle with the retainer.

As expected, Virion and Tessia were dumbfounded at the dwarves’ evident betrayal. Aldir’s expression remained steadfast; if he was surprised, he did a perfect job of concealing it.

Despite his initial surprise, however, Virion recovered quickly. “If the dwarves are in alliance with the Alacryan army, it’ll be much harder to prevent battles from reaching civilian cities. Were you able to discern whether it was just a separate faction of dwarves or if it was more widespread than that?”

“I can’t say with certainty until I get some answers out of Rahdeas,” I said through gritted teeth, regretful of the circumstances implicating Elijah’s former guardian.

“The news of a Scythe appearing is troubling,” Aldir added. “If she intends to wreak havoc with her retainer by her side, as well as an entire division of troops, then this isn’t something one or two Lances can take on, even with an army backing them.”

“Which is why I need to know where the allegiance of the dwarven Lances lie,” I replied. “A large-scale battle is nearing, and I don’t want any unforeseen obstacles.”

FROM LANCE TO BROTHER

LEAVING Sylvie in my room to rest, I ventured through the brightly-lit halls of the castle, looking down at my feet as I took careful steps. It was the first time I had noticed the vibrant patterns of the thick carpet in the upper residential halls. It was a funny thing to note; I'd always been in such a rush, chasing whatever goals I had, that I'd never even looked around to enjoy the subtle pleasantries around me.

It didn't take me long to find Ellie. She was sitting by a large window, gazing outside at the sea of clouds and idly combing her fingers through her bond's thick fur. Boo opened an eye, sensing my presence, but went back to his nap when he saw that it was me.

"May I join you?" I asked.

"You don't need to ask." She smiled weakly, taking a glance back at me before returning her gaze to the sky once more.

I sat down next to her on the ground, admiring the rolling clouds, and the twinkle and shine from the rays of sunlight above. I could see the tip of a mountain in the distance, but other than that, only an endless expanse of white and blue.

"Do you miss them?" Ellie spoke in a soft voice. "Mom and Dad?"

"Not as much as I should," I admitted. "I worry for them—I know they're safe out there, but so many things have been going on."

There was a moment of silence, and my sister simply continued petting the

bear.

“You know, there are a lot of people—adults and kids—who come up to me saying how lucky I am to have a brother like you. The ones who aren’t jealous of me are jealous of you—that you’re a Lance, that you’re so talented in magic and fighting, and that you have the recognition of all of this continent’s leaders. Some even say that you might become one of the next leaders when you get older,” she scoffed. “But it’s funny. I never told you this, but there was a time when I hated you. I felt like it was because of you that my life was like this now. I blamed you for Mom and Dad feeling like they needed to help out in the war too, and I blamed you for the fact that I couldn’t have a regular life in school with classrooms and a bunch of friends.”

My sister was looking away from me, her body turned toward Boo, but I could see that the hand running over his course fur was trembling, and her shoulders quivered.

“Ellie...”

“But the funny thing is, I don’t blame you anymore. How can I blame you when your life was worse than mine? Most of the memories I have of you were you coming in and out of the house full of injuries, with unbelievable stories of how you faced this monster or that monster. It was really fun and amazing to hear back then—I thought you were so cool and strong—but I know better now. The things you had to give up to get where you are today...”

My sister hurriedly wiped her face on her sleeves and turned back to me with red eyes and a wide, forced grin.

I reached for her, but she grabbed my hand and shook it before getting up.

“Whew! Now that I got that off my chest, come on. I want to show you something.”

“What is all this?” I asked when we reached the outdoor terrace of the castle.

My gaze swept through the dozens of wooden planks hanging from various

tree branches. There were some arrows protruding out of the planks, but more were on the ground and the tree trunks around them.

“What I’ve been working on,” my sister proclaimed proudly as her bond curled up on the ground beside her with an aloof yawn. Ellie seemed abnormally perky after our conversation by the window, as if she were trying to forget about it.

Trying not to dwell too much on my sister’s inconsistent behavior, I watched as she picked up a peculiar-looking short bow propped up against a pillar, then retrieved a stray arrow whose tip was buried in the nearby grass.

Raising the flexible bow so that the nocked arrow was at eye level, she held her still-trembling breath and took a moment to aim before letting go of the string.

The thin arrow whistled as it sliced through the air, curving ever so slightly around a plank and hitting a different wooden target behind it.

I applauded her, genuinely impressed, but she held up a hand and shook her head. “Now, watch *this*.”

Raising her bow once more, she mumbled a brief chant. The tip of her guiding finger, on the hand holding the bow, began emitting a soft glow. When my sister slowly pulled the string back, the mana took form into a thin glowing arrow.

I remained silent—half from focus, half from surprise—as Ellie fired the mana arrow at a nearby target plank. The arrow let out a soft hum, rather than a sharp whistle, as it hastily approached its target—but before it reached the plank, the arrow dissipated.

My sister’s shoulders sank in disappointment. “I swear I was able to reach the target a couple days ago.”

“That was amazing!” I exclaimed.

“I failed, though,” she replied, disappointed.

“You’re barely twelve, Ellie! Most kids your age can hardly even conjure a ball of mana, let alone shoot one out that far away,” I said, my voice still

laced with enthusiasm.

My sister was silent for a moment, absentmindedly staring at her bow.

“Aren’t you glad that your dear brother is impressed, after all that practicing?” a voice chimed in from behind us.

I looked over my shoulder to see a rather odd duo walking out into the terrace: Emily Watsken and Helen Shard.

“Surprised, *General*?” Helen said, one eyebrow raised.

While it made sense for Emily to be in and out of the castle since she was apprenticed under Gideon, seeing her with Helen—the leader of the Twin Horns and current head of a large platoon of soldiers—made for a head-tilting moment.

However, considering the peculiar bow in Ellie’s hand and her sudden skill at archery, I quickly put two and two together.

“I won’t deny that,” I replied with a smile.

Emily had noticed my injuries. “You look like you’ve been through a lot.”

“About as much as any other soldier out there,” I said with a shrug.

After Ellie and I properly greeted the two friends, we all sat around the patio table chatting. We discussed how my sister was struggling with mana manipulation, despite having awakened at an early age.

“You’re having a hard time?” I asked my sister. “Why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve helped.”

“You’re a general now, and even before then, you were always busy. I didn’t want to bother you with it. Besides, Mom and Dad were helping me before they had to leave.”

My sister tried to sound cheerful, but the faint sullen tone in her voice—especially after our conversation earlier—made my chest ache.

“I stopped by one day to check up on her after finishing a dungeon tour and she asked me for help,” Helen chimed in, trying to lift the mood. “I’m not a conjurer so I couldn’t exactly help her, so I asked the artificer, Gideon, to run

some tests on her. He pawned off what he called ‘a chore’ on Emily here, and that’s when we found out about your sister’s little gift.”

“I wouldn’t call it a gift,” Eleanor said, suddenly shy.

“What gift?” I demanded, my curiosity growing.

“I think it’ll be easier for you to just show your impatient brother, Ellie,” Helen encouraged.

“Okay,” she agreed. Raising her hand, she concentrated on the center of her palm until a faint orb of mana manifested. There were no attributes, but the spherical orb of pure mana slowly began changing shape until it had turned into a seven-pointed star.

“You see, after *I* assessed Eleanor”—Emily stressed her role as she leaned forward—“I realized she has a real knack for molding mana into detailed shapes. Normally, whether you can make a fire ball into a fire cube doesn’t really matter—but if you’re able to conjure the exact shape of an arrow along with a particular arrowhead, then you can potentially have an infinite arsenal of arrows that enemies won’t be able to predict.”

“Well, coming up with the arrow solution was my idea,” the leader of the Twin Horns said.

“It’s a clever technique, for sure,” I said, glad that Ellie had found a way to train herself and occupy her mind while mother, father, and I were all off to war.

“They’ve both been a great help! Helen has been really strict but helpful in teaching me archery, and Emily made me this bow to train with.”

“That’s me being easy on you,” Helen replied, looking at Ellie with a warm expression. She turned to me. “I’ve been in and out of the castle so she’s been learning on her own, but her growth is actually quite scary. It’s like these gifts run in the Leywin family.”

Clearing her throat to get our attention, the freckled artificer adjusted her glasses, then explained the mechanism for the bow she had customized for my sister. “The bow is still in the testing phase, and it requires a certain

amount of finesse, but like Helen said, your sister catches on frighteningly fast.”

“I still have a long way to go,” Ellie demurred.

Looking carefully now, I noticed fresh blisters on her fingers and palms—proof of her effort.

“Thank you—both of you—for helping my sister like this.” I turned to my little sister, tousling her hair. “And I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you.”

“Like I said, I don’t blame you. You’re just doing what you have to.” Ellie shrugged. “Besides, Helen told me Mom and Dad are far away from battles, so I’m not too worried about them, but I’m just thankful when you come back in one piece.”

My heart lurched once more with guilt, and I understood why she said she had blamed me for our parents participating in the war. That was why they’d left—they didn’t want to just sit safely, waiting and praying that they wouldn’t hear news of my death.

“I’m sorry for always worrying you,” I said softly, unable to do anything but apologize.

Ellie’s gaze settled on the scars around my throat, but she said nothing—and in some ways, that pained me even more.

My little sister had indeed grown up much more quickly than I had wanted her to. Her childlike innocence and selfishness were gone.

“What are you doing here back at the castle so soon anyway, Helen?” my sister said, changing the subject.

“Ah, right! The heads and above got called into the castle for a big celebration tonight,” she answered. “The reason for the event was supposed to be a secret, but it’s already been leaked—apparently a retainer has been defeated!”

“Really?” Emily’s eyes lit up. “Do you think it was a Lance?”

“Nothing’s confirmed, but that’s probably the most likely scenario. All I know is that Commander Virion himself took a small crew to retrieve the

body,” Helen answered.

“Things are looking up then.” My sister perked up. “I’m glad.”

Glancing from Helen to Emily, then to my sister and back, I thought at first that they were teasing me. But after a few minutes of listening, I realized that they were seriously just gossiping. *Do they really not know who killed the retainer?*

But after giving it more thought, I wasn’t too surprised. I had arrived in the castle several days after the retainer’s body had been retrieved. There’d been a team of medics waiting for my arrival, but I doubted whether anyone had been told how I’d been injured.

“Wait, so this celebration is happening *tonight*?” I asked, steering the conversation back to its original path.

“Yes. Isn’t that why you’re back at the castle, too?” Helen replied with a raised brow.

My sister answered in my stead. “My brother came back because he got hurt.”

“What? How? Where? Are you okay?” Emily bombarded me with questions.

“I was just careless. It’s no big deal.” I was tempted to tell them the truth—especially my sister—but I assumed Virion had a reason for keeping it secret.

“It *was* a big deal!” My sister pinched my side. “You were out for more than a day, and you still have those scars.”

Wincing as she twisted my skin even further, I apologized to my sister once more, assuring her that I wouldn’t make the same ‘mistake’ again. The conversation shifted to other topics, but for the rest of our little gathering that afternoon, Helen regarded me with doubtful eyes.

Coming back into my room, I was greeted by my bond. *‘How was spending time with your sister?’*

“Ellie’s all grown up now,” I said, letting a hint of bitterness seep into my words.

‘You make that sound like a bad thing,’ Sylvie replied.

“I just wish she didn’t have to be. Wisdom and maturity stemming from enduring hard circumstances is a painful thing to see, as a big brother. But I was able to at least catch up with her and learn a bit more about what’s happening in her life. Did you know she’s learning archery from Helen? She and Emily even came up with a new practice for Ellie, a combination of conjuring and archery!”

Sylvie let out tiny puffs of air from her nostrils, and it took me a moment to realize she was laughing. *‘I haven’t seen you this excited in a while.’*

“That’s not true,” I rebutted.

‘Oh?’ Sylvie raised her head, looking up at me from the bed. *‘Tell that to your grinning lips.’*

“Shush,” I said, dismissing her. Despite my sister’s heavy words, it had been enjoyable to spent time with her. “How are you feeling?”

‘Sluggish, heavy, sleepy, and weak,’ Sylvie sent, curling back up into a ball. *‘It’s like being a hatchling all over again.’*

“Well, there’s supposedly a big event happening later tonight. Do you feel up for it?” I asked.

‘I’ll pass,’ she replied, her voice listless. *‘Save me some food though.’*

Taking a seat on the couch, I closed my own heavy eyes. “I’ll have the maids bring some up.”

‘Make sure it’s meat.’

“Go to sleep.”

With Sylvie’s soft hum making the otherwise cold and silent room a bit more homey, I took some time to sort out my thoughts. Reaching into my dimension ring, I pulled out Dawn’s Ballad and placed it gently on the tea table in front of me.

An involuntary groan escaped me as I looked at the poor state of my weapon. This sword had been by my side for nearly five years. I hadn’t needed to polish, sharpen or even clean the blade, and it had been able to withstand just about anything. Dawn’s Ballad was truly a valuable asset.

Studying the sword, I decided that—even damaged—it was better than any other sword I'd be likely to come across.

The quirky asura, Wren, had implanted a weapon on me, but I had no idea if or when it would manifest. It would be reckless to count on having it during this upcoming battle.

My thoughts then shifted to my recent journey to Darv. I needed to be sure whether Rahdeas was the leader of this treason, and if he was, to decide what I should do. Even if Eljiah's foster parent didn't control the two dwarven Lances, according to Alduin and Merial, he still held a large amount of support from the dwarven citizens. The dwarves' overall dissatisfaction with humans, especially the Glayder family, ran deep, so if we had to kill him, it would mean a mass uprising.

Pulling myself out of my thoughts, I noticed that the room had become dim. I couldn't tell how much time had passed, but it clearly wouldn't be long until the event.

“Arthur? Are you in there? We're coming in!” With a loud bang, the door to my room burst open and a crowd of maids and guards filed in, with Virion at the back.

I had no time to prepare or even react. The guards were already pushing the furniture aside to make space in the center of the room, while a horde of maids began undressing me.

What disturbed me more, though, was how accustomed I was to being thrown into situations like this. *Shall I call this the Virion Effect?*

Virion stepped up, already elegantly dressed in a black robe. Its silver trimmings accentuated his silver hair, which was tied neatly behind him.

“Now, you're probably surprised by—”

“—Nope,” I cut in. “What is it you're planning this time, old man?”

A few maids gasped at my crude response, but Virion just waved for them to continue. “I see that barging into your room and having a team of maids abruptly strip you naked doesn't put you in the most amiable of moods. No

offense taken. I've taken the liberty of arranging this event as a sort of trap—harmless—for our dear Rahdeas, and you, my soon-to-be-grandson, have the lead role.”

OLD FACE

TESSIA ERALITH

The figure standing in front of me, her head tilted ever-so-slightly in scrutiny, wore a lavishly decorated dress of shimmering black. The silky fabric came up just above the base of her neck, with subtle frills adding a girlish touch. The sleeves covered the length of her arms with the same delicate frills at the ends, while the dress fell on the shorter side—coming up just short of her knees.

Locks of gunmetal hair flowed down on one side in perfectly arranged twirls that contrasted starkly against the dark color of her attire.

After wearing armor and being covered in grime for the past several months, I couldn't believe the person in the mirror was me.

"You look beautiful." My mother's glance shifted from me to my reflection with a warm smile on her face. Looking at her as she sat properly in a chair beside me, however, I couldn't help but lose confidence, even in my new dress.

Though I knew she was much younger than my father, my mother should still be past her prime. Yet her bright silver hair was still lush, her blue eyes still radiant, and her skin still youthfully supple. She and my father had already finished preparing for the event, and in contrast to my dark gown, my mother wore a beautiful dusty rose dress which flowed gently, emphasizing her slim waist and the swell of her hips, while still maintaining a reserved elegance.

I studied myself, turning left and right so I could see every angle while a team of maids nodded in quiet contentment. “I’m not so sure about this. The dress is a bit bleak, isn’t it? Maybe I should wear something a little brighter?” “I think the black makes you look mature,” she answered. “What do you girls think?”

“I agree,” the head maid quickly replied. “This was made by a famous silk weaver in Kalberk City, who designed it specifically for you, Lady Tessia. The lacing and frills add a playful touch while the overall shape and color of the dress gives a very—excuse my language—sensual appearance.”

“Sensual?” I pondered, twisting left and right once more.

“Laylack, the designer, believes that the clothing itself shouldn’t be beautiful. Rather, he feels the clothing should bring out and accentuate the beauty of the wearer,” a younger maid added. “I think this dress does a fine job of that. If I didn’t know better, I’d think your hair and eyes were actually glowing in contrast to the dress.”

“Oh please. You girls said the same things when I first tried on my armor! I can’t trust any of you,” I argued, but I was unable to keep the smile from creeping across my pouting face. A wave of laughter filled the room as the maids hurriedly added the finishing touches.

Stepping out of my room, I spotted Stannard, Darvus, and Caria chatting with one another.

“Your Majesty.” The three of them stiffened at the sight of my mother before greeting her in unison.

“Mr. Berwick, Mr. Clarell, and Ms. Rede,” my mother responded with a soft smile then looked at me before turning toward the stairs leading to the uppermost floor of the castle, where the event was being held. “Tessia, I’ll see you up there. I have matters to attend to with your father and the other Council members.”

My mother was escorted toward the stairwell, through the gathering crowd, and out of sight. I remained in the hallway with a couple of castle guards, and

my three friends and team members, who had silently waited as my mother and her maids departed. Then they turned back to me with cheeky grins.

“Lookin’ good there, *Princess*,” Darvus, dressed in a sleek black suit, nudged me with his elbow as we made our unhurried way to the stairs. His usually unruly mane was slicked back with oil, and the structured cut of the suit did a nice job of toning down his burly frame.

“You’re being gross, Darvus,” Caria said, rolling her eyes as she turned to me. “But he’s not lying. You look gorgeous.”

It was obvious my petite friend had put in a lot of effort for the occasion, and it had paid off. Complementing her youthful appearance and curly, bobbed hair, her fluttery green dress came down to mid-thigh—a length that’d be frowned upon by the older generation if not for the tights she wore underneath.

“Thanks, but I didn’t realize how uncomfortable I’d be in this getup.”

“At least you look good in your *getup*,” Stannard complained from behind us.

“I look like some ornamental bird.”

The rest of us laughed as Standard fluttered his bright blue robes like they were wings. Rather than a fitted suit like Darvus, Stannard had chosen to wear a more luxurious conjurer’s robe, which looked to be more decorative than functional.

“Anyway,” I said, turning back to Caria, who was walking beside me. “You look rather charming yourself. Are you trying to snag one of the noble boys at the event?”

Caria’s face immediately reddened, but she tried to look calm as she answered. “Please! Most of the younger nobles attending are probably their family heirs, which means one thing: They’re super pretentious! Seriously, hiding safely here in the castle to protect their lineage while sipping on wine.”

“My oldest brother happens to be one those heirs you speak of,” Darvus said.

“And you are absolutely spot on about him.”

“Then maybe help Stannard find a nice lady to settle down with after the war is over,” I said.

“Yes, please.” He nodded fervently. “I’d like that very much.”

“Hey! Why don’t you help *me*?” Darvus complained.

“Shush!” Caria reached over and smacked her childhood friend’s arm. “Why would the princess of Elenoir introduce anyone to such a crass lump of muscle?”

“Excuse me?” Darvus clutched his heart as if he’d been stabbed. “After I so kindly invited the two of you, this is the thanks I get?”

“Tessia would’ve invited us even if you hadn’t,” Stannard retorted.

“Regardless! I’m just going so I can hear the big announcement and eat some good food,” Caria said.

“I’m also curious as to what the announcement is going to be,” I said.

“Your grandfather didn’t even tell you? Must be big,” Darvus said, his brows raised.

By the time we reached the stairwell, traffic was at a standstill due to the sheer volume of people trying to get up, but with our pointless banter and talk of recent missions, the time seemed to go quickly.

Unlike some of the past events held by the Council, this one was open to people from outside the castle as well, so the large spiraling stairway was packed with nobles. Unaccustomed to being crammed in such tight quarters, many were loudly voicing their complaints. Some used the opportunity to casually brag to their peers—at a not-so-casual volume—about their families’ large expanses of land and wealth, hoping to impress potential suitors nearby. While I noticed some glances come my way, few nobles had the audacity to try and approach me. Those who did were easily scared away by my guards.

It was clear how uncomfortable Caria and Stannard were, in the middle of so many nobles. While Caria had had some exposure, since her family had served Darvus’s family for generations, Stannard came from a humbler background.

“I’m tired already,” he mumbled as he was pushed and pulled by the crowd.

“You think it’s bad here, imagine how packed it is on the lower floors, closer to the teleportation gate,” Darvus consoled him.

Caria agreed. “Yeah, I heard there are a lot of people coming from outside, since this is the first time since the war started that the castle’s been open to anyone other than the residents.”

As we inched slowly toward the top floor, I glanced around every now and then, hoping to maybe spot Arthur. Chances were that he was either still resting or would come later on, but my eyes seemed to subconsciously search for a head of long auburn hair.

As if reading my mind, Caria asked, “By the way, where’s your handsome lover?”

“He’s not my lover!” I said a bit too loudly, causing heads to turn around us.

“And he got injured recently so I think he’s resting... probably.”

“Mister Lance got hurt?” Darvus gasped mockingly. “I guess he’s not as strong as they say.”

“Yet you still got your ass handed to you,” Stannard chimed in innocently.

“Shut up!” my burly friend retorted, then, glaring at Caria, said, “And he’s not *that* handsome. With that long hair, I bet a lot of people mistake him for a girl.”

“Aww, is someone jealous?” Caria grinned. “I’ve heard that after Arthur’s appearance at the dungeon, quite a few girls were smitten by him.”

“Looks like our princess now has to fend off competition as well as Alacryans and mutant mana beasts,” Stannard teased.

“You guys know I can demote you all now, right?” I threatened in return.

After half an hour of inching up the stairwell, we finally reached the top floor of the castle. The view was met with a collective gasp of amazement. Like the terrace on the residential floor, the top of the castle was enveloped in a transparent dome-shaped barrier so that the entire venue appeared to be taking place outdoors.

The sun was just beginning to set, and the entire castle was surrounded by an endless expanse of serene magenta and burning orange. Orbs of light floated above us inside the dome, casting a gentle glow. Hundreds of nobles were there—elves and humans and dwarves, all dressed meticulously—and an orchestra played a variety of flutes and stringed instruments to fill the gaps in conversation. Stepping up to the top floor, I felt as if I'd been transported into a mesmerizing fairyland.

Darvus let out a long whistle of appreciation, while Stannard's gaze darted from one place to another in wonder.

"It's beautiful," Caria breathed.

"Ugh, I spotted my family," Darvus groaned. "Caria, come on. Let's greet them now and get it over with."

As Caria was being unwillingly pulled away by her friend, I spotted Emily. Wearing a bright yellow dress that appeared to have some smudges and stains on it, she was pouring herself a drink near the empty stage. The apprentice artificer seemed unbothered by the looks of disdain and disgust from the nobles nearby as she casually finished her drink in a single gulp.

"Emily!" Stannard shouted before I had the chance to call out to her.

"Ah! Little Stannard! Princess!" Emily greeted, waving her empty glass.

I broke into a fit of laughter at the sight of her running awkwardly while she held up her dress, with no care for her outward appearance.

Emily was breathing heavily by the time she reached us. "Finally, people I know!"

"I didn't expect to see you here," I said after greeting her with a hug.

"Who did you think was responsible for setting up all these lighting artifacts?" She rolled her eyes.

"*You* did all this?" Stannard exclaimed.

"Well, it certainly wasn't my carefree and lazy master," she mumbled sourly.

"Is that how you got those stains?" I giggled.

Emily looked down and gasped. "Oh no! I didn't even notice! Must've been

when I was adding more of the mana-conducting fluid.”

“Hey, Emily. Isn’t that your master over there?” Stannard pointed near the tables where, lo and behold, the master artificer, Gideon, was alternating between biting into a large leg of some bird and sipping on a glass of wine.

“Damn old coot,” Emily muttered before stomping off after him. “Master Gideon!”

At Emily’s outcry, the old artificer choked on his food. Stannard and I followed her, ducking our heads in embarrassment.

“You old bat! After pushing off all the work on me because you were ‘feeling unwell,’ you show up here to drink and eat?” Emily huffed, snatching away the gnawed hunk of meat, which Gideon was trying to take another bite of.

“Must you raise your voice so, dear apprentice? I’m standing right in front of you,” Gideon grumbled, taking a sip from his glass before acknowledging our existence. “Princess Tessia, Stannard. Glad to see you two are still alive. That’s always a good thing.”

“It’s been a while,” I responded, while Stannard bowed respectfully.

Emily huffed out a defeated breath as she handed back her master’s food.

“You usually don’t care for these sorts of events. What brings you here—besides the free food and liquor?”

“I was given a rather interesting task by your grandfather”—he looked at me—“so I’m just killing time until then. Plus, I get to see the one person on this entire continent who, I daresay, is smarter than me.”

“There’s someone smarter than you, Master Gideon?” Stannard asked, genuinely surprised.

Meanwhile, Emily leaned in, eyes glowing with curiosity. “What’s this task?”

“The princess’s lover boy, Arthur.” Gideon said in wonder. “Boy, what I’d give to be able to extract all the secrets from that boy’s head.”

“What. Is. The. Task?” Emily pinched her master’s arm.

“It’s. A. Secret,” Gideon said mockingly, then slapped her away before rubbing his arm.

The eccentric old artificer wandered off after a butler holding a plate of finger foods, and Emily chased after her master to try and get more information.

So you are going to be here. A faint smile crossed my lips.

“How is that possible?” Stannard muttered to himself. “There’s no way Arthur can be smarter than Master Gideon.”

“If I hadn’t known Arthur since we were both children, I probably wouldn’t believe Gideon either,” I consoled him.

As I followed Emily and her mentor, my gaze drifted toward a crowd gathering near the top of the stairwell where we had first entered.

I recognized the head sticking out of the crowd. With his black hair still parted down the middle and his sharp eyes softened by thick glasses, it was undeniably the Xyrus guild hall manager, Kaspian Bladeheart.

“Tessia?” Stannard said, snapping me out of my daze.

“Yes? What is it?”

“I was just asking if you wanted to try to look for Darvus and Caria.” His pale blue eyes shifted between me and where I had been staring.

“You go on ahead,” I said, already walking toward the small crowd. “I’ll meet up with you guys later.”

Pushing aside the people gathered there, I headed toward the familiar man. Then my eyes landed on the girl. She was about my age, and he and several guards were protecting her from the crowd.

“Claire!” I blurted.

The former leader of the disciplinary committee, whose condition and whereabouts had been kept hidden by the Bladeheart family, was standing in the center where the nobles had gathered.

“Princess Tessia,” Kaspian Bladeheart, Claire’s uncle, greeted me.

“It’s been a while,” I replied.

“Uncle, it’s stifling in here. Let me get some fresh air with Princess Tessia,” Claire said.

The usually expressionless guild hall manager frowned, his brows furrowed

in concern. “But—”

“It’ll be fine.” She gave her uncle a soft smile before pulling me through the crowd.

I remained silent as we made our way to the edge of the roof of the castle, where a small set of stairs led down to a deck overlooking the sky.

Neither of us spoke for a moment; we simply leaned against the railing. The medley of noises surrounding the big event were muffled by the whistling of the wind against the barrier surrounding us.

“You look great,” I finally said.

I wasn’t lying. Claire had been an upperclassman and I, along with many other students at Xyrus, had looked up to her—always bright and never afraid to take challenges head on. Seeing her tonight, wearing an ivory dress with a thin shawl draped over her shoulders, it seemed a gentle, calm air had replaced her normally lively and spirited aura. It wasn’t just that, though. I couldn’t quite place my finger on it, but *something* felt different about her.

“I appreciate it.” She smiled faintly. “And I think you’ve probably heard enough how beautiful you look tonight.”

“Mostly from friends and family,” I said, looking down at my dress and wishing for a moment that it was a suit of armor instead. “Their words are more obligatory than anything else.”

I swallowed down all the questions I, like so many of the nobles who had gathered around her, wanted to ask, choosing instead to let the silence linger.

“I heard you’re leading a team out on the field,” she said.

“Yes. Although it’s been fairly recent.”

“I’m jealous,” she continued. “You must’ve gotten a lot stronger.”

“Oh no, I still have a lot to learn,” I replied. “I’ve yet to control my beast will completely, and my long-range conjuring is a mess since I’ve been focused on getting better with my sword.”

“I see,” she nodded.

“I don’t think I’ve ever told you this, but the Bladeheart techniques played a

big part in shaping my swordplay,” I continued. “Speaking of which...”

Noticing my hesitation, she shook her head. “I still practice with the sword every now and then, but not nearly as much as before.”

“Are your injuries still...?”

She shook her head. “My injuries from Xyrus are mostly healed.”

“That’s great!” I said, a little too loudly. “Will you be taking part in the war, then?”

“No,” she answered flatly.

“Oh.” I was surprised by Claire’s answer. She’d always had a strong sense of justice, which was a big part of why she had been selected as the leader of the disciplinary committee. “Did your family not approve because of... what happened at school?”

“It’s not that.” She gazed overhead at the stars surrounding us.

“Do you mind if I ask why?” I pressed. “If your family’s okay with it, and your injuries have gotten better—”

“My *physical* injuries have gotten better,” she interrupted, leveling her gaze at me.

Taking me off guard, she began removing the straps of her dress. She turned around so that her back was to me, then lowered her dress to reveal the large scar on her lower back.

She had other scars from past wounds, but none of them compared to the large disfigurement next to her spine. Then, lifting her dress, she turned back to me, her expression hard. “But the one thing the emitters and medics couldn’t fix was my mana core.”

My hand came up to my mouth as I inadvertently gasped. I now realized what was different about her. The thing that I couldn’t place my finger on.

“Then...”

She nodded, her face masked with an expression that told me she had accepted this long ago. “I can’t use magic anymore.”

CENTER OF ATTENTION

DESPITE SPENDING much of my life learning how to behave properly—what to say and how to say it in various situations—I was still unable to muster up the appropriate words to respond to Claire.

Any sort of apology or attempt at consolation could only come off as pitying or insensitive; how could I dare tell her ‘it’ll be okay’ after complaining about my lack of progress in the one part of her life she’d never be able to get back, let alone improve?

To my surprise, Claire breathed out a soft laugh.

“I’m sorry—it’s just your expression,” she explained, noticing my confusion.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d just swallowed a bug or something. Don’t worry. I’ve pretty much come to terms with it.”

“But still...” I muttered.

“It’s fine,” Claire said dismissively, shaking her head. “I’ve told my uncle that I plan on helping out where I can at the Bladeheart Sword Institution. I figure training new soldiers can be my way of helping out in this war.”

I didn’t—couldn’t—respond. She was the one who had almost died and was now unable to practice magic, yet she was trying to lift the mood while I stood here, disheartened.

“Claire!” a clear voice suddenly boomed from behind us.

The two of us turned to see the eldest son of the Glayder family at the top of the steps, his sister standing next to him. Prince Curtis’s eyes were locked on

Claire, his sharp brows furrowed in concern and frustration. Princess Kathyln was wrapped in a shimmering white dress; though she was known for being expressionless, her eyes were red and lined with tears, her delicate pale hands clenched by her sides.

Before Claire could even say a word, the two of them rushed down and embraced their former leader.

“It’s nice to see you both, too,” Claire puffed, struggling to breathe.

Prince Curtis released her, his expression still a mixture of worry and anger.

“Do you know how worried we all were? Your being here means you’re okay, right?”

“What happened?” Kathyln asked.

I took a seat and listened as the three of them got caught up. Claire told Curtis and Kathyln the same thing she’d told me. I watched their faces darken, and imagined that I must’ve looked very similar to how they looked now.

As I had done, Curtis froze, unable to form a response when Claire revealed her inability to manipulate mana. But to my surprise, Kathyln spoke up.

“You’re very strong,” she said, then lifted her watery gaze and locked eyes with her former leader. “I think being able to overcome such a huge obstacle and move forward with a smile says much more about you than the color of a mana core ever could.”

Touched by her powerful words. I shifted my gaze and saw that Claire had stiffened at the princess’s response. Tears began rolling down her cheeks.

Seeming surprised by her own reaction, Claire hurriedly wiped the tears away with her palms, but they refused to stop falling. “This is embarrassing. I can’t believe I’m crying.”

My chest throbbed, watching her cry while Princess Kathyln embraced her once again. Curtis turned to me and dipped his head, but remained silent.

Claire’s sniffles soon turned to giggles as she laughed at her own state. “Look at me. I was barely presentable before, and now I’m a teary, snotty mess!”

“Who are you trying to be presentable for?” I teased, eliciting a laugh from

all three of them. Just like that, the ice had melted.

“Princess Tessia,” Curtis smiled, nodding politely as I approached again. “I apologize for not greeting you right away.”

“Princess Tessia,” Kathyln echoed, dipping her head.

“No problem.” I smiled back. “And we should be able to be a bit more comfortable with each other, considering we were once schoolmates. Right, *Curtis, Kathyln?*”

“You’re right,” Curtis grinned. “And yes, it has been a while, *Tessia.*”

“It’s nice seeing you again,” Kathyln said, with a smile so faint I almost mistook it for a twitch.

The three of us eventually settled around a patio table nearby. I wasn’t particularly close to any of them, but all four of us quickly bonded over our mutual friend, Arthur.

They all had much to say about him and soon enough, we were sharing laughs and stories about his exploits.

“He always seems so put together and mature,” Claire said. “And then I spot him doing weird things, like fighting with his bond over the meat on his plate at the cafeteria.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve known him for more than a decade and I still can’t always tell what he’s thinking,” I said, my mind going back to our argument in the dungeon.

“What was Arthur like when he was younger?” Kathyln asked.

I had to think for a moment before answering. “I remember him being much colder. He kept his distance from everyone. Even when we were laughing together and teasing each other, there always seemed to be some restraint on his part. Of course, I had no clue back then, but looking back now, Arthur has come a long way as a decent person.”

“There’ve been moments when I was truly jealous of him, though,” Curtis admitted, looking slightly embarrassed.

“I can certainly see how most young men would be jealous of him when it

comes to magic and fighting, but he's rather lacking in other aspects," I replied.

"And what aspects might those be?" Claire grinned deviously. "Perhaps knowing the female heart?"

"I didn't have anything specific in mind!" I looked away, hoping the evening sky would mask my burning cheeks.

Claire turned her head to the quiet princess. "Your most fearsome rival in love can't even admit to her feelings, Kathyln."

"What? Rival in love?" Curtis exclaimed, also turning to his sister. "Who? Arthur?"

The princess's pale face turned such a bright shade of red, I feared she might pass out. "No! I mean, it doesn't matter. I think Arthur is much better suited to Princess Tessia."

"That won't do!" Claire continued teasing. "You can't give up without a fight."

Curtis jumped in, lecturing his sister about being too young to date, while Kathyln denied everything Claire was saying and shot me quick, uncertain looks.

I smiled along, but I also took a good look at the princess sitting across from me. Large, dark eyes with long, thick lashes, on a face so small you could cover it with one hand. Milky complexion and such a small, delicate body that even I wanted to protect her. In addition to the fact that she was an extremely gifted deviant conjurer, she had no flaws.

I wonder if Arthur prefers the cute, reserved type.

"Tessia?"

I snapped out of my daze at the sound of Curtis's voice. "Ah, sorry. I was thinking of something else."

"It's okay. I was just curious where Arthur was. I haven't seen him around anywhere."

"I saw him this morning," I answered. "He was still recovering so I didn't

think he'd make it to the event, but it turns out he will be here."

"Arthur got hurt?" Kathyln blurted, surprising her brother and Claire.

I nodded. "He's okay now. Supposedly it was some sort of blunder on his part, but I feel like they're not telling me everything."

"Arthur isn't the type to make a blunder during a fight," Curtis noted. "I wonder what happened."

"You know..." said Claire, suddenly melancholy, "I really have come to terms with my injury, but if there's one thing I regret, it's being unable to fight by Arthur's side during this war."

"I'm curious as to what he'd be like, too. If it's anything like how he was during the incident at Xyrus, I know it'd be worth it," Curtis said.

I thought back to the day the soldiers and I had found Arthur atop the mountain of corpses. Those memories still sent chills down my spine. It was a part of Arthur I wouldn't mind not seeing ever again.

We continued our conversation until it became apparent, by the drastic increase in the noise level, that something was going on.

"I think it's about time we went back to the main hall," Claire suggested, getting up. The rest of us began following her up the steps, but suddenly she came to a stop.

"What's wrong?" I called. She stood rigidly at the top of the stairs, but my concern had been answered by the time we reached her.

Wearing an elegant set of armor—composed only of a pauldron and greaves made of mithril—was the Lance, Varay Aurae; otherwise known as Zero.

"Master." Kathyln immediately bowed.

"General Varay," I said in greeting.

"Good evening." She nodded, her sharp brown eyes tracking from Kathyln to her brother and back to me. "I'm here to escort the three of you during tonight's event. Of course, Miss Bladeheart is welcome to join you."

"Claire. Are you okay?" I asked, shaking her gently.

Taking a step back, she turned to me with a wry smile. "Y-Yeah. It's just

that, since I can't use mana anymore, General Varay's aura—even suppressed—paralyzed me for a second. I'm fine now," she hurriedly added, seeing the concerned expressions on our faces.

We headed back inside, but my thoughts were on Claire and all the things that we had always taken for granted—things she was now incapable of doing.

"Even in a place like this, they stand out," a voice murmured a few feet away, pulling me away from my thoughts.

"You really have to rate them by a whole different standard," another voice whispered, this time closer. "And here I thought the girls at Kalberk were pretty."

"You're into those prim and proper ladies?" his friend replied. "I've heard the girls down at Blackbend are more 'willing,' if you know what I mean."

His friend hid a snicker behind a gloved fist but immediately froze when he realized my eyes were on him. I repressed the urge to rebuke them; in the past, I probably would have done so—and at a volume that everyone could hear—but this wasn't anything new, nor was it worth causing a scene over. Besides, my glare was enough to shut him up for now.

Needless to say, walking alongside General Varay with Curtis, Kathryn, and the mysterious Bladeheart child who had, until now, not been seen since the Xyrus incident, I turned heads left and right. Looking around, I could see men of noble households nudging their companions, trying to be discreet—the same way the girls tried to be discreet while they ogled Curtis.

He and Darvus wore very similar styles of clothing, but the two couldn't have looked more different. While Darvus—with his hair slicked back and his attire ornamented with a bit too much gold—looked more like an overdressed thug than a noble, there was no doubt for anyone here that Curtis was royalty. Walking through the hall filled with staring nobles, I was grateful to have General Varay by our side. Even the bolder nobles didn't dare step in our direction with a Lance beside us.

Claire leaned toward me. “How do you guys get used to this much attention? It’s absolutely nerve-racking.”

I smiled and whispered back, “Just don’t trip over your own feet.”

“Great.” She looked down. “Now, I’m conscious of my walking.”

Arriving near the front of the stage, I caught sight of my parents, along with the rest of the Council, seated against the wall. Suddenly, the entire hall darkened.

Gasps of surprise and mutters of confusion erupted. While I wasn’t able to enhance my vision like augmenters could, assimilating with the elderwood guardian had greatly improved my senses—to the point that I could see the members of the Council trading puzzled glances with one another.

Most people seemed to assume that this was part of the event. The noise inside the hall slowly died down until only the soft rustling of clothes could be heard.

Footsteps echoed across the wooden stage, creating even more suspense amongst the guests. Then an illuminating artifact, floating above the stage, activated to reveal my grandfather, now standing in a pillar of light.

“Thank you all for waiting!” His sharp voice rang with authority, evoking applause from the nobles, but I could only groan in embarrassment.

Everyone seemed to love the theatrics, but I found them tacky. My grandfather, the highest authority in Dicathen during this war, had certainly dressed for the part, with a rich burgundy robe embellished with gold trim and gleaming black jewels. Even his hair seemed to shimmer like pearls—most likely with the help of the lighting—and he stood straight with his hands clasped behind him.

After the applause died down, my grandfather spoke. “First, let me apologize to everyone here. I know that little has been said about the purpose of this event. This was done intentionally—not for security, and certainly not for safety. No, this was done for the sake of surprising each and every person here today.”

Heads turned as nobles looked at one another in confusion, uncertain if they had heard right.

“Yes, you all heard correctly,” he chuckled. “Some positive news—in the form of a surprise—is something we could all use in these times of duress.”

Murmurs of agreement sounded from those around us.

“So, since I’ve kept you all waiting long enough, allow me to present to you our first step toward victory in this war! We have come together today to commend the one responsible for eradicating a central power of the enemy side—a retainer!” My grandfather stepped to the side as a whirring noise sounded from below. The stage split in half and a gruesome figure, locked in a tomb of ice, was raised into view.

The nobles closest to the stage all took several fearful steps back, some of the weaker ones even stumbling.

Falling into a stupor as I gazed at the Vritra, I felt someone tugging on my arm. Looking back, I saw Claire barely managing to stay standing, her face deathly white. “Claire?”

I hurriedly grabbed hold of my friend by the waist to keep her upright. “Do you want to go further back?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I need to be able to at least endure this much.”

It pained me to see her so helpless—especially because she was someone I had once looked up to—but I let her be and turned back toward the stage. Considering it was able to emanate such a noxious aura even after death, I could only imagine how strong it must’ve been in life.

As I looked in wonder and horror at the display, I was struck by a thought. The Vritra had been encased in ice, and to such a degree that I felt its chill from back here. I looked instinctively at General Varay, but she looked as stunned as everyone else in the room.

And her gaze wasn’t fixed on the disfigured monster.

I peered at the stage and saw another person coming from the back, hidden in the shadows behind the column of light shining down on the ice-encased

retainer.

I should have been expecting something like this, after all these years, but I wasn't. I was as stunned as General Varay, and everyone else in this hall, when Arthur stepped into view for everyone to see.

MEANING

EVERYONE in the hall held their breath as Arthur came into view, and silently waited for him to speak.

He stood wordlessly and surveyed the outdoor gallery from atop the stage. Every person present seemed entranced by the image as their hero stood before them, bathed in light, posing dramatically next to the block of ice.

I had seen Arthur just hours before, and was stunned by how different he looked now. His long auburn hair was tied loosely in a knot. Rather than the usual formal human attire, he wore a silky decorative robe like us elves. However, unlike our traditional garb, the loose sleeves of his robe hung barely past his elbows, and the visible portions of his arms were covered by thin, tight-fitting gloves. Completing his refined ensemble was a rich fur pelt, as white as snow, slung over one shoulder.

It hadn't been too long since he had appeared in front of the world, adorned in extravagant armor that had dazzled everyone who'd come to watch. Now, seeing him up there standing in the column of light in his elegant attire, he didn't seem just dazzling. He radiated an otherworldliness that I had only felt in the presence of Master Aldir.

I was distracted by his transformation, and it was only when Arthur turned his head, peering deeply at the Vritra retainer encased in ice, that I realized the red burns that had scarred his neck were no longer visible.

He turned back to face us before speaking, his voice low and steady.

“Displaying a corpse as some sort of trophy or keepsake for the masses to gawk at is something I deeply disapprove of, but those of you attending this event tonight aren’t part of the masses. Each noble here knows that the workers, civilians, and inhabitants of your lands are waiting impatiently for news regarding this war—until now, vague assumptions and baseless theories were the only things you could give them.”

Arthur paused, but the crowd remained quiet, patiently waiting for him to speak again. “Born to a humble background, I have been able to climb to where I am now thanks to my family—as well as the friends I met along the way. I am now a Lance, and the youngest one at that, but I’m not the strongest. The Lances out there, some whom are fighting battles as we speak, are far above me in power—yet even I was able to defeat a retainer, one of the so-called ‘highest powers’ of the Alacryan army.”

Arthur paused once more, and excited murmurs began sounding from the crowd. I realized that his speech patterns were intentional. He was a year younger than me, and with his background, he had neither been taught nor prepared for things like speeches or the intricacies of public appearances, yet he utilized every breath, word, pause, and gesture to perfectly take control of the crowd.

“As you can see, I’ve sustained no injuries from my battle with this supposedly powerful force, and am healthy enough to chatter on like this amongst a crowd of nobles,” he said with a smile, eliciting laughter from everyone around me.

Placing one of his gloved hands on the tomb of ice, he shifted his gaze to where the Council was seated. “This is not only my offering to the Council, who has granted me this role, but is also a gift that I hope you can all take home and share with your people—figuratively, of course.”

Cheers and laughs erupted after Arthur bowed, signaling the end of his speech. The illuminating artifacts turned back on as Arthur left the stage and

my grandfather took his place.

“Please feel free to get a closer look at the Vritra, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.” With that, a few guards replaced my grandfather on stage, and the crowd burst into chatter and shuffling movement.

The Council came up first. Though they tried to hide their astonishment, it was obvious by their expressions that this was the first time any of them had seen the corpse. I watched as my parents, along with the elder Glayders, studied the frozen tomb. Only the dwarven elder, Rahdeas, kept his distance, his expression subtly strained.

“Princess Tessia, would you like me to escort you to the corpse?” General Varay asked, a rare hint of anticipation in her sharp eyes.

I didn’t want to disappoint the Lance, so Curtis, Kathyln, Claire, and I followed her toward the stage where nobles were already beginning to surround the frozen Vritra.

Reaching the front, I looked past the soldiers standing guard and examined the corpse inside the ice. It was hard for me to look at the Vritra for too long, though. In terms of its physical attributes, it—she—looked human, but staring at the two hollowed-out cavities where her eyes should have been filled me with a fear that couldn’t be blocked by mana.

I watched as Varay stared intently at all angles of the Vritra, her hands moving along the ice tomb as Claire studied the corpse wearily. Suddenly I remembered.

“Claire.” I gently tugged on her sleeve. “Wait right here! Let me go get Arthur!”

“What? Tessia, no—”

Ignoring Claire, I quickly made my way to the back of the stage, behind the curtains.

“This area is off—” The female guard stationed behind the stage retreated a few steps when she recognized me. “Princess Tessia?”

I smiled, quickly making up an excuse. “My grandfather is expecting me to

meet him.”

The guard’s gaze shifted toward the narrow staircase beside her. “General Arthur and Commander Virion have ordered me to allow no one down these stairs, not even the rest of the Council,” she replied hesitantly.

“I know. They told me not to tell the Council that I’m here, either,” I lied. “Now please—they are expecting me.”

She hesitated for a moment longer, then stepped aside with a nod, motioning for me to go down.

I didn’t thank her—that would’ve been suspicious. I just nodded back and headed down the staircase.

It was wide enough for only one person at a time, and seemed to spiral down endlessly. So long and repetitive was the staircase, it would have seemed like an illusion if not for the slight nuances in the design of each of the illuminating artifacts.

I quieted my steps with wind magic as I went further down the stairs. I knew what I was doing was wrong—even if it was just Arthur and my grandfather—but I was too curious about what these important matters were and why they needed to keep them secret, even from the Council.

Once I got close enough to hear faint voices muttering behind closed doors, I withdrew my magic. Both Grandpa and Arthur were freakishly sensitive to mana fluctuations, so if I wanted to eavesdrop, I would have to rely on just my hearing. Thanks to my enhanced senses after my beast will’s assimilation, I was able to make out what they were saying. From the sound of it, the artificer Gideon was there as well.

“Don’t push yourself, brat,” my grandfather grunted.

“I’m fine. I didn’t need to use magic, so it’s just physical fatigue more than anything else,” Arthur replied. His voice was weak, compared to how he had sounded up on stage. “This paste is rather stifling though.”

“Best not touch your neck, or it will wear off more quickly,” Gideon muttered. “You wouldn’t want your scars showing during the party.”

“Right,” Arthur responded, his voice taut as a bowstring. “I still have to go back out there.”

“Of course you do. You’re the star of the event,” Grandpa replied. “Your speech was convincing enough, though, so it might not be necessary for you to stay until the end.”

“Good. Gideon, how did the recording go?” Arthur asked.

“It was a hassle trying to capture the images at the exact moments you specified. There’s still a bit of a delay between the moment I press the trigger and when the image is—hold on, let me take note of that so I can fix it.”

“Focus, Gideon,” Arthur snapped, his voice impatient.

“I know you just had your legs forcefully torn into a mess and put back together, but that’s no excuse for being grumpy with me,” Gideon grumbled.

“Anyway, I was able to capture the images of Rahdeas’s face when Virion first announced the Vritra, then when Arthur first came into view, and when Arthur said he had sustained no injuries,” Gideon noted.

“Here, let me see that,” my grandfather said. “What’s Rahdeas looking at in this picture?”

“Not what, who,” Arthur answered. “He’s looking at General Varay, who was in the crowd. I suggested to Tessia’s father that we have the Lance look after the royal children.”

“So Rahdeas thought General Varay was the one who killed the Vritra?” Gideon asked.

“Wait. Is that why you froze the retainer’s corpse? To make him think it was Varay?” My grandfather sounded surprised.

“I wanted him to think that it had taken the strongest Lance to kill one of the strongest forces in the Alacryan army before it was revealed that I killed her,” Arthur explained.

“You always have a few tricks up your sleeves, don’t you?” my grandfather said, a touch of pride in his voice.

“Look at Rahdeas’s face when he first saw the Vritra come up encased in ice.

He's surprised and looks immediately over toward Varay," the artificer pointed out. "Then look at this image, after Arthur comes into view, and then when Arthur announced that he, the weakest of the Lances, had kicked the retainer's ass without even sustaining an injury."

"Shock and anger," my grandfather noted. "Most would be surprised and grow progressively happier to learn that the weakest Lance is stronger than one of the supposed Alacryan powerhouses."

"This still doesn't prove that Rahdeas is actively helping the Alacryans, but this does give us a good idea of what his stance is on all of this," Arthur added. "We'll know for sure in the next battle when..."

Arthur's voice trailed off. I couldn't hear any of them anymore.

Lord Rahdeas is helping the Alacryans?

I needed to hear more. Just what was Arthur planning in this next battle?

I inched down a few more steps to get closer, but I still couldn't hear them.

Damn it. I knew it was risky, but I decided to take the chance, hoping that Arthur's weakened state would allow me to use just a tiny bit of magic. Before I could do so, however, a surge of mana erupted in front of me, and I covered my face with my arms on instinct.

"So, we had a little mouse sneaking around outside our door." My stomach sank as I realized Arthur's voice was now just inches away from me.

"Surprise," I said weakly.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I very much enjoyed the surprised look on Tessia's face when she realized she had been caught. Virion, close behind me, grumbled a curse under his breath as *he* realized it was his own granddaughter who had been eavesdropping.

"You know, boys don't like girls who snoop around like this," Gideon quipped.

Tess's gaze flickered to me before looking away. "I wasn't snooping. I came back here to look for Arthur and the guard let me in rather easily."

“Yes, I’m sure the guard did,” Virion replied, then cast a barrier around all four of us. “Now—how much did you hear?”

“Enough,” she answered, her expression turning serious. “Is Lord Rahdeas really—”

“We’re not sure yet,” I cut in. “It’s too soon to assume anything or act on any of the information we’ve gathered so far.”

Her gaze fell, downcast. “I see.”

“Is there anything else we need to go over, Virion?” I looked over my shoulder at the old elf.

“I think we’ve shaken Rahdeas up enough for today. Good work, brat,” Virion answered with a nod.

I turned back to Tess. “Then would you like to accompany me for the rest of the event?”

She was taken aback at first, but then her face lit up in a bright smile. “Sure!” We headed back up the stairs, where we were greeted by lively music and laughter, along with the frequent clinking of glasses.

“The mood sure turned festive,” I noted.

Tessia casually linked her arm through mine. “If I don’t do this, every nobleman within eyeshot will try to either ask me for a dance or to have a drink with him,” she explained, looking the other way.

“*Every* nobleman, huh?” I teased. “My meek childhood friend has sure turned confident.”

She tightened her grip on my arm, pinching it as she waved to the nearby nobles who greeted her.

Unable to express my pain with so many eyes watching, I casually leaned toward her, prying her fingers from my arm as I whispered, “Same old Tessia, resorting to violence, I see.”

“It’s because only violence seems to work on someone as slow as you, *General*,” she replied with a feigned smile.

As we walked through the large open venue of the party, I was greeted left

and right by nobles from cities all over Dicathen. Despite her childish antics, Tess was a big help throughout the evening. She pointed out notable guests whom I should greet and share a drink with, and others who would be plenty satisfied with just a sincere greeting.

While I had experience with events like this from my former life, I knew very little of the politics involving the three kingdoms. Tess, on the other hand, knew exactly who was important, and knew their various personalities. By subtly leading the conversations and keeping them brief, while making sure not to offend anyone, Tess made my night much easier.

Perhaps the only downside to having her beside me was the occasional glare and pinch she gave me whenever she caught me returning a smile to the many ladies who greeted me.

She seemed to think I should only extend courtesy to those members of society outside my potential dating range.

“Brother!” Ellie called from the crowd.

Looking around, I caught sight of her—she was excitedly waving her arm amidst a group of friends. Even from here I could see the glimmering bracelet she wore, embedded with the pink beast core of a phoenix wyrm I had gotten for her and Mother. I waved back, and headed over to them. When I reached the group, my sister unexpectedly wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Ellie?” I said, startled.

“H-He really is your brother!” a pig-tailed girl in a puffy dress stammered as she tugged on Ellie’s sleeve.

“Girls, I’d like you all to meet my brother Arthur, and Princess Tessia,” Ellie announced, puffing out her chest as she wrapped her arms around my free arm.

“It’s an honor, General Arthur! Princess Tessia!” said a curly-haired girl in an overly-embellished white dress.

“You were so cool up there, General Arthur,” another girl exclaimed, inching closer to us. “Is it true that you took no injuries at all when you defeated the

retainer?”

Looking at these little girls’ sparkling gazes, I suddenly felt embarrassed.

“As pretty and fragile as he looks, he’s actually one of the strongest mages in all of Dicathen,” Tess answered for me.

“You’re so lucky to have him as your brother,” a small girl with bobbed hair and a frilly dress said jealously. “My oldest brother wasn’t able to get into Xyrus, so he’s going to some no-name academy in Carn City, and my father sent my second brother to fight in the war after he caused trouble with another noble’s daughter.”

I watched silently as my sister resumed gossiping with her friends. It was a relief to see her laughing and smiling, as opposed to shedding tears over my injuries and our parents being far away.

After I gave my sister another hug, Tess and I walked away from her group.

“It’s funny how my sister always finds the need to introduce me to everyone she knows,” I said with a smile. “Even on her seventh birthday party at the Helstea Manor, she told every one of her little friends.”

“She just wants to show off her older brother,” Tess giggled, lightly holding onto my arm. “Even girls her age love to gossip and brag about what they have, and for Ellie, her one and only brother is a great source of pride.”

“Well, I’m just glad she seems to be surrounded by girls.”

“I’m sure your sister is pretty popular with the boys,” Tessia teased.

I froze, glancing back at my sister and her friends, just in time to see a small group of noble boys approaching them.

Tess tugged on my arm. “Come now; don’t be overbearing.”

My eyes shifted toward the back of the venue, where a large brown bear was gnawing on a thick bone. As if sensing my gaze, Boo stared at me with intelligent eyes. I jerked my head, pointing toward Ellie and her group.

Boo turned, and after noticing the group of boys, nodded once.

I nodded back.

He knew what had to be done.

“What are you doing?” Tess asked as I turned back and resumed moving across the room.

Behind me, I heard a loud growl and the frightened screams of little boys. “Nothing.”

After greeting a few more nobles, I excused myself and found a chair, where I slumped down to rest. My legs were on the verge of shaking, but I was still pleased at how well they’d healed.

Tess seemed to be searching for someone, stretching her neck as she tiptoed to see over the people around us.

“Wait here,” she blurted, before bolting off into the crowd. After some time, I spotted her heading back with General Varay beside her, a downcast look on her face.

“General,” I greeted her, getting up from my seat.

“General,” she echoed tersely, her eyes examining me.

“I’m so sorry, Arthur,” Tess apologized. “General Varay said she left. She didn’t want to see you.”

“What are you talking about?” I replied. “Who didn’t want to see me?”

Tess sighed deeply. “Claire Bladeheart. She was here today.”

THE CONFIDENCE TO

ARTHUR LEYWIN

“How many troops do you need?” King Blaine asked as we studied the detailed map spread across the round table.

“Three—no—two divisions should suffice,” I answered.

“General Arthur, the western coast is where we need to be allocating most of our forces,” Rahdeas countered, placing his finger near Etistin and Telmore City. “Sending nearly twenty thousand troops up north will make this area too vulnerable.”

“I have to agree with Elder Rahdeas,” King Alduin added. “There are several battles near the coast that have been going on for days. Withdrawing even a single division would tip the balance in the enemy’s favor.”

Queen Priscilla rolled up the transmission scroll she’d been reading. “We are still evacuating civilians from both Telmore and Etistin. If forces on the coast are withdrawn, our troops will be pushed back and the battles will move to the cities.”

“Commander, we can perhaps send some of the elven troops stationed near Asyphin City down toward the edge of the border. Two divisions seem feasible,” Queen Merial advised, her brows knitted in concern.

Seated in front of me, Virion turned his gaze to the Lances, all standing upright behind their respective artifact holders. “Generals? What do you think?”

“General Arthur’s vague suspicion based on the loose evidence of what he thinks he ‘saw’ doesn’t justify sacrificing a city or two.” General Bairon nearly spat the words.

“Bairon’s nasty tone aside, he makes a good point,” said Mica, the female dwarven Lance, who looked no older than my sister. “Moving that many troops a few hundred miles will take time, even with the help of teleportation gates.”

“General Aya? General Varay? General Olfred?” Virion asked. “Do you all agree?”

General Olfred, the oldest of the Lances, nodded. “It is too much of a risk.”

“Sorry, General,” the elven Lance beside me whispered before speaking up.

“I agree—it isn’t wise.”

We all looked to Varay, who was the only Lance here that I wasn’t confident I could defeat.

“If General Arthur’s claim is true, the right choice would be to send two divisions—if not more—up north,” the Lance answered curtly.

It was surprising to have General Varay’s support, but it worked against me in this case. However, Virion took advantage of her words to introduce the idea I really wanted to go with.

“General Varay is right in that, if what General Arthur claims is true, troops must be sent. After all, there has only been one sighting of a retainer since the war started—if a retainer and a Scythe lead this next attack, the damages would be catastrophic without appropriate measures.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Therefore—” Virion paused, his eyes shifting from one Lance to another—

“I propose we send two Lances along with General Arthur to investigate whether or not there really is going to be a major attack led by a retainer and a Scythe up north.”

The rest of the council exchanged glances, each of them waiting for someone to come up with an argument against it.

“Commander.” King Blaine spoke up. “The Lances are the central figures for the divisions out in battle right now. If they are gone for too long, morale will decrease. And if a retainer or Scythe shows up in battle—”

“King Glayder,” Virion interrupted, his sharp stare piercing the human king. “Why do you think the Lances have refrained from partaking in most of the battles so far?”

The red-haired king remained silent.

“It’s quite simple. It’s not worth it,” Virion continued. “Large-scale destructive spells cast by any of our Lances would kill not just the enemy’s army but our own as well. Even if we had everyone retreat, this is home ground. Land will be destroyed and left uninhabitable. Even if the Lances withheld their power and fought with the soldiers out on the field, sword in hand, there would still be casualties and deaths—on top of the risk of attracting the Alacryans’ retainers or Scythes.

“Always keep in mind when fighting that our citizens have to live on this land. The goal is to win this war, but we must also preserve as much of our civilization as possible.” Virion’s authoritative gaze shifted from one ruler to another, directing this lesson to everyone present in the room. “That being said, if we can avoid a large-scale battle, with both Scythes and retainers fighting on the other side, by simply sending two Lances, then I’d say it’s a small price to pay. Our troops can go a few days without their leaders holding their hands.”

Although the Council’s reluctance was evident on their faces, they slowly nodded in agreement.

Virion clasped his hands together with a smile. “Good. Now which two Lances will accompany Arthur on this investigation up north?”

A thin hand rose from across the table. “Lord Aldir is the artifact holder for my two Lances. Although he is not here, I think it’s safe to assume that I can volunteer to send them with Arthur.”

I resisted the urge to smile. Everything was going as I had planned.

Virion played it cool as well, acting as if he was pondering Rahdeas's decision.

"Indeed! Since Lord Aldir is not present, I think it's only sensible to have the dwarven Lances under Elder Rahdeas's command," King Blaine seconded.

"The battles are taking place in Sapin, so I agree that sending General Olfred and General Mica would be the ideal option," Queen Merial added.

Virion nodded slowly, as if almost reluctant. "Very well. General Olfred and General Mica, temporarily under Elder Rahdeas's command, shall head up north with General Arthur to investigate the possibility that a retainer and a Scythe are planning an attack."

Both dwarven Lances bowed respectfully, as did I.

"This is a reconnaissance mission, but I leave the situation to your best judgment. Priority is to not alert our enemies, especially if a retainer or Scythe is present. If circumstances permit a realistic chance of averting a full-scale battle, you may engage. Remember, our priority is to keep the battle away from civilians," Virion added. "Prepare to leave tomorrow at sunrise. Rest of the Lances, dismissed."

Walking through the dim hall outside the meeting room, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the tension release from my chest. I had always hated meetings like these—tense and full of roundabout ways to say no or invent reasons not to take action unless certain that there was a personal benefit. While the Council appeared to present a united front of leaders from all three races to the public, their deep-rooted ideals and selfishness toward their own kingdoms were immediately apparent when you stepped into a Council meeting. Aldir's execution of the Greysunders for their betrayal had inspired a certain amount of fear in the other royal families, but King Glayder, in particular, had grown bold since the war began in earnest. It was only the force of Virion's leadership that allowed any consensus to be found within the Council meetings.

Though Virion and I had achieved our desired result, this was just the

beginning. I scratched at my neck; Gideon's concealing paste made my skin itch profusely, but I couldn't take it off until I was alone. Despite the discomfort, I had somewhat enjoyed the rest of the evening. But one thing weighed heavily on my mind: Claire had been at the party.

She had seen me, but hadn't wanted me to see her. I hadn't seen her since Xyrus; the last memory I had of her was the sight of her being impaled. I tried to think of reasons why she was avoiding me, but the sound of footsteps behind me snapped me back to reality.

"Looks like we'll be on a mission together!" a high voice sounded from several paces behind me.

"General Mica, General Olfred," I greeted them politely, turning to face them.

"Just call me Mica." The childlike dwarf smiled, while General Olfred simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"I'd prefer to preserve the formalities," I said, gently refusing. "You are my seniors as Lances, after all."

"At least the boy has some manners, despite his meager upbringing," General Olfred said with a raised brow.

Boy, we're really going to get along.

The only real impression I had of General Olfred was from when I had first been taken to the floating castle after the incident at Xyrus Academy. He had saved me from Lucas's brother, General Bairon, back then. However, he had only been following orders.

"Well, if you'll excuse me. I should get some rest for the long journey tomorrow." I bowed lightly before turning back to the main staircase.

As I walked up to the residential floors, I probed Sylvie's mind to see whether she was awake. Seeing that my bond was deep in slumber, I took a small detour.

When I reached the room at the end of the hall, I knocked on the thick wooden door.

“Coming,” Tessia’s voice called out.

The door slid open without a single creak, and Tess stood on the other side. She was dressed in sleepwear but her hair was still dripping with water.

“You’re la—Arthur?” Tess gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“Sorry.” I smiled. “Were you expecting someone?”

“Yes, Caria was supposed to come over. Arthur, what’s wrong?” she asked, noticing my blank gaze.

“Nothing. You just look a lot different from when you were at the event.”

Tess wrapped a towel around her head as she scowled at me. “Wow! Thanks for pointing that out!”

Realizing my mistake, I quickly shook my head. “No, I meant it in a good way. You look more like the Tessia I spent three years with way back then.”

“You need to work on your flattery skills,” she said, her tone flat. “Wait—no, actually. Don’t work on them.”

I laughed self-consciously. “Do you want to take a little walk with me?”

She pulled a thin robe over her sleepwear, and accompanied me down the hall toward the balcony where my sister had set up her target planks. Neither of us spoke as we walked side by side. Our arms weren’t linked as they had been at the event, but this somehow felt more intimate.

We reached the grassy terrace surrounded by trees, but continued walking until we were at the very edge. Sitting against the thick trunk of a nearby tree, I stared out at the night sky. The clouds below us moved slowly, dimly lit by the large moon overhead.

“The stars are beautiful,” I said admiringly. Coming from a world where brightly-lit cities masked the stars, being able to see such a serene spectacle was a blessing I had come to appreciate.

“It’s quiet nights like these when I wonder if there really is a war happening down below us,” Tess said softly. “I sometimes come out here and imagine that the clouds below us are the ocean, and I’m floating aimlessly on a boat. Childish, right?”

“I think you have the right to be a little childish at times,” I said. “You’re the head of an entire unit now. You’re responsible for the lives of the people you lead. That’ll never be an easy burden to carry, no matter how much experience you gain.”

“You say that as if you’ve been one,” she replied, bringing her knees close to her chest. “You’re technically a general, but the Lances don’t really lead soldiers.”

“You’re right, and in that regard I have it much easier. The main duty of a Lance is to single-handedly overpower an opposing enemy of their own caliber.” I turned to my childhood friend. “Which brings me to why I wanted to see you.”

“Does it have something to do with what you were talking about with Grandpa and Gideon?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“You’re not the type to do something as sentimental as this without reason,” she pointed out. “You either have to go away for a long time, do something dangerous again, or both.”

“Am I that much of an open book?” I asked, looking away from the stars and into her twinkling eyes.

“You’re more like an open chapter.” Tess smiled. “There are some parts that are so obvious, yet there are times I feel like I don’t know you at all.”

“Such as?”

She shook her head. “Well, for one thing, I want to know how you’re such an expert at everything you choose to do. What’s your secret?”

“Secret?”

“Magic, fighting, artificing, giving speeches—hell, even espionage and military strategy,” she listed. “I know complaining how unfair it is won’t do anything. I’m just curious.”

I held my tongue. The temptation to reveal everything about my past life had been growing each time I saw Tess, but now wasn’t the time. “I just read a lot

of books when I was younger.”

“I don’t know what I expected.” Her expression was full of doubt and disappointment, but she didn’t question me any further.

“Tess, you don’t need to be in such a hurry to get stronger. You’re doing fine,” I comforted her.

“It’s just frustrating.” She said wearily.

“Frustrating?”

“I try my best to catch up to you. My mana core is just a half-step behind yours, I’m a beast tamer just like you, and I’ve studied under some of the best teachers in the continent, as well as an asura, just like you. Yet, I feel like the closer I get to reaching you, the farther you slip away from my grasp.”

“Tess...”

“Just promise me you’ll return back safely.” She gently ran her finger across my neck, where my scar had settled. Using a simple water spell, she loosened and peeled away the bandage that I had applied to hide the unsightly mark. “I don’t care how many scars you come back with, as long as you’re breathing and in one piece.”

I could feel my face beginning to burn at her words. I tried to think of something to distract us both; then I thought back to our argument in front of Cynthia Goodsky’s grave. Then and now, she had gotten worked up about the same thing. “Why is it so important for you to catch up to me, Tess?”

For a moment, the world around us was quiet as she stared off into the night sky. “Because only then will I have the confidence to tell you that I love you again.”

Before I could even process her words, Tess turned to face me. Her expression softened and she gave me a smile so genuinely sweet, and with just a hint of shyness, that a sudden warmth rushed through me.

VIEW FROM THE SKY

OLFRED WAREND

It didn't surprise me when Elder Rahdeas came to visit me, telling me he had brought home an infant human boy. I was familiar with his kindness; I myself had been a recipient of his goodwill, after all.

He had taken me away from the cruel streets of the upper caverns, giving me food and shelter in his own home. Treating me as if I were his blood, he taught me to read and write and, after discovering my natural inclination toward magic, even taught me the basics of mana manipulation.

But even then, I was cautious. Growing up without a home or family taught me to be suspicious of everyone. There was always the nagging thought that maybe this man was just nurturing me to sell me off one day. However, that wasn't the case.

Years passed happily and my suspicions had long since evaporated—I had come to consider myself his son. After graduating as one of the top conjurers at Earthborn Institute, located in the capital city of Vildoral, I had been selected to train to become a guard with the royal family.

The Greysunders were greedy and looked down on their entire race, always discontent with how they were perceived—inferior to the humans and elves. But I served the king and queen faithfully and with the highest respect; that is what Rahdeas taught me.

After decades of dedicated service to the royal family, I heard talk of

choosing the next two Lances, and it soon came to light that I had been selected as one of the candidates. At first, I had planned to drop out of the private tournament; if I had wanted my life bound to someone, it would be no one but Rahdeas.

Rahdeas had respected my decision—until the day he brought home the boy he named Elijah. Without giving me any details about how he had come across a human infant, Rahdeas urged me to become a Lance and to represent the dwarven people as a general, to forge the soulbond with the royal family and serve them faithfully. I argued, saying that I did not wish to chain my life irrevocably to the Greysunders, but Rahdeas assured me with utmost confidence that it would only be temporary—that I would be bound to him in the end.

I had learned during my time as a guard for the royal family that the Greysunders had been in power since the creation of Darv, yet Rahdeas was somehow able to guarantee their downfall.

He was the man I respected as a father and savior. Even if I disobeyed the king, I would never disobey Rahdeas.

Another decade passed. The human boy grew under the care of Rahdeas, and for the first time in history, the Lances were knighted in public.

Rahdeas was kind, but he was a man who, despite his love for his people, kept his thoughts to himself. He never told me what he meant when he said my soulbond with the Greysunders wasn't permanent, or why he kept our ties a secret from the boy. He never explained who exactly it was who had told him that this boy was supposed to be the savior of the dwarves.

"You're quiet, Olfred," Rahdeas said from the other side of the large circular room, drawing me out of my contemplation of the past and back into the present. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, my lord." I pried my gaze away from the window and faced the man who'd raised me.

"Olfred, I've told you to call me Rahdeas when we're alone," he scolded

gently. “Now take a seat and have a drink with this old man.”

“I have grown old as well.” I took a seat across from him, accepting the goblet he handed me.

“The view of the moon is magnificent, is it not?” he said, taking a swig from his goblet, which seemed tiny in his large hand.

“It is,” I agreed.

“What an ignorant misconception of the humans and elves—they think that just because we live underground, we prefer caves over buildings. With the unbearable gales that batter Darv constantly, did they never stop to think that we didn’t construct tall towers and buildings because we *couldn’t*?”

I nodded, looking out the window as I took a sip. “Ignorance leads to false assumptions and interpretations.”

“Very true. But times of change are upon us.” Rahdeas idly traced the scar running across his left eye. “The time has come, my child.”

Reaching over the table, Rahdeas gently grabbed my wrist, then clasped my hand in his. “Are there any doubts or hesitations clouding your mind?”

“None... Father.” The word felt foreign to me. I had never said it aloud, despite always thinking of him that way. But I knew I would regret it if I didn’t say it before my time came to an end.

The corners of Rahdeas’s eyes crinkled in a gentle smile as he held my hand firmly. “Good, good. My only regret is that you won’t be here to see the triumph of our people. If only you had been bound to me instead of that asura.”

I shook my head. “There are some things we cannot change. But there is one thing I want you to know.”

“What is it?”

“I know your ambitions for our people, but that is not why I am doing this. Our people were the ones who scorned me and beat me while I was on the streets. I just want you to know that the reason I can do all this, without hesitation, is because it is what you desire.”

Closing his eye, Rahdeas nodded slowly. “Good child. Very good.”

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I sat down at the edge of my bed, removing the pin that held my hair up. My bond let out a soft grunt of acknowledgment before falling back asleep, leaving me to the silent peace of the night.

Tess’s voice echoed in my head, her words conflicting with my priorities.

“To tell you that I love you again,” I repeated softly to myself. There were only a few things I truly wanted in this lifetime. Not fame, power, or wealth; I’d had that and more during my previous life. What I wanted—the reason I was fighting this war—was something I hadn’t been able to do as Grey: simply to grow old with my loved ones. For that, I was willing to go up against any enemies, asuras or not.

But I had trouble fighting the temptation to throw everything away. There were times I wanted to just escape to the edge of the Beast Glades with Tess and my family.

Selfishness made me question my every move.

This isn’t your war, Arthur.

Your legs are near-crippled and you have scars all over your body; haven’t you done enough?

You’re fighting for your people again. You did that in your last life, and look where it got you.

I realized why I was constantly pushing Tess away, giving her excuses or roundabout answers for a later date.

I was afraid.

I was afraid that if I let her in, my selfishness would become uncontrollable—that I would throw away Dicathen to save the few I truly loved.

Time trickled by while I was lost in my thoughts and before I knew it, the rising sun, still hidden by the clouds below, had painted the skyline a vibrant orange.

Removing the luxurious attire I had worn to the event last night, I slipped into

a comfortable shirt and vest. I tucked the ends of my pants into my boots before draping a thick cloak over my shoulders. “It’s time to go, Sylv.”

Sylvie’s bright yellow eyes fluttered open. Hopping off the bed, she came to stand beside me, watching me as I carefully applied the special paste to hide the large scar on my neck. *‘I’m ready.’*

Before heading downstairs, I stopped by my sister’s room and knocked on her door. “Ellie, it’s your brother.”

The door slid open, revealing my sister in mid-yawn, her hair frizzy on one side and flat on the other. Behind her, lying on his belly beside the bed, was Boo. He peeked at us with one eye before going back to sleep. “Brother? What’s wro—”

She stopped in mid-sentence, staring at my clothes. “You’re leaving again? Already?”

I forced a smile that didn’t quite reach my eyes. “I’ll be back soon.” I pulled my sister into my arms.

“You don’t have to come back soon, just come back alive.” She squeezed me tight before pulling away, then kneeled down and hugged Sylvie. My sister smiled widely but tears had already begun welling up in the corners of her eyes.

I tousled her nest of ash-brown hair. “I promise.”

I made my way down the stairs with Sylvie, and we were greeted by a chirpy Mica and stern-faced Olfred at the front of the corridor leading to the teleportation room.

The gruff, elderly dwarf, who came up to my shoulders despite his ramrod straight posture, immediately turned away from me and headed down the hall. “We’ll be traveling by flight rather than through the gates,” he said over his shoulder.

General Mica, on the other hand, strolled leisurely by my side. By the smile on her small, creamy face, one might have thought she was on her way to a picnic.

“Mica’s excited to finally go on a mission with you,” she said as we trailed behind General Olfred. “The other Lances talk about you, although not all of it is good.”

“Do you always refer to yourself in the third person?” I asked.

“Most of the time; why? Is it making you fall for Mica?” She winked. “Mica may look like this, but Mica’s a little too old for you.”

“What a shame,” I said, unable to keep the sarcasm from leaking into my voice.

“Let’s hurry,” General Olfred barked as the soldiers standing guard in front of the landing room swung the doors open. “Time spent on this journey means time spent away from the battles already in progress.”

The artificers and workers inside dropped what they were doing and saluted upon our arrival. One person, however, walked toward us with an innocent smile.

“Elder Rahdeas,” General Olfred greeted him, bowing deeply while Mica and I simply dipped our heads.

“Lances.” Rahdeas’s smile deepened, the scar running through his left eye curving. “Excuse my intrusion; I merely wanted to send you all off in person.”

“It’s an honor,” General Olfred replied.

Rahdeas walked to me, staring at me silently. When he smiled at me, I couldn’t help but wish this person wasn’t a traitor—that I had suspected him wrongly.

I still regretted the fact that I wasn’t able to protect Elijah. The thought of indicting and, if my suspicions proved true, killing the man who had raised my friend as his own left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Rahdeas placed a large hand gently on my arm. “You must be fatigued from your previous battle. By the asuras, let’s hope your suspicions turn out to be false so you can hurry back and get some proper rest.”

While his expression and gesture seemed genuine, Rahdeas’s words seemed

carefully chosen. Nonetheless, I replied with a smile. “Yes, let’s hope so.”

Maybe I am being too suspicious of him, I thought. He was Elijah’s caretaker, after all.

‘While that may be the case, you shouldn’t factor that so heavily in regards to your suspicions now,’ Sylvie advised.

Rahdeas released my arm, then gave one more meaningful nod to his Lances before stepping out of our path.

Olfred led the way to the portal on the other side of the large room. “We’re ready to depart. Don’t fly beneath the clouds.”

“Will your bond be fast enough to keep up with Mica and Olfred?” Mica asked.

The prideful Sylvie, with a contemptuous snort, chose that moment to transform into a full-sized dragon. The floors of the castle trembled and the workers around us instinctively backed away, despite having seen my bond before.

“I’ll manage,” she rumbled as her long tail swept me off my feet and placed me on the base of her neck.

The wall in front of us, lowered by a drawbridge mechanism, leaned outward from the castle to create a large skydock.

I was nearly thrown off by the screeching winds that immediately buffeted Sylvie’s large body. The roof and the multiple terraces were protected by a transparent barrier of mana, but we were hit with the full force of the winds at an altitude of more than twenty thousand feet.

Our voices were lost in the wind, and General Olfred merely pointed in the direction we were supposed to head. Then he and Mica took off into the clouds.

I’ll never get tired of this view, I thought, looking out as the morning sun became more prominent, casting an ethereal glow on the clouds.

‘Agreed.’ Sylvie sucked in a deep breath before spreading out her wings. She let the wind carry her body off the dock, and we followed closely behind the

others, not knowing what the outcome of this journey might be.

A DWARVEN NIGHT

I SPENT the entirety of the first day on Sylvie's back. Without a word muttered to either of the dwarven Lances, we traveled until night fell and my legs, already taxed from the hours of gripping tightly onto the base of my bond's neck, could no longer take the strain of riding on bare scale, even with the protection of thick cloth and mana.

So, because of my limitations, we stopped for the night and made camp near the base of the Grand Mountains, just a few miles north of Valden City.

"Please, help yourself." I held out a skewer of grilled fish toward Generals Mica and Olfred.

The childlike dwarven Lance happily accepted the charred freshwater fish, crunching through the bones as if they didn't exist, but the older Lance merely shook his head.

"If you have enough energy to cook, perhaps we should leave soon," he said, ignoring my courtesy. His eyes remained fixed on a book he had brought.

"Don't mind him," Mica said, her mouth still full of fish. "The old man doesn't eat food given by anyone he doesn't fully trust."

I nodded, tossing the fish I had grilled for General Olfred to Sylvie. She snapped and the blackened fish disappeared inside her maw. My bond remained in her original draconic form, curled up at the edge of our small camp. With her black scales, Sylvie seemed to almost disappear despite her large frame—the only part of her that was visible were her bright, topaz eyes,

which seemed to hover in the dark.

'These small morsels do little more than get stuck between my teeth,' Sylvie grumbled in my head.

I know, but you'll have to make do with these for now. Besides, you can easily go for weeks without eating, I replied, helping myself to a skewered fish. The fish's charred skin carried a smoky sweetness from the fire, filling my mouth with flavor despite the lack of seasoning.

'Yes, but I eat for the flavor rather than the nutrients,' she retorted.

Maybe you can find some mana beasts further north. We're still too close to Valden.

The rest of the meal was quiet, except for the soft gurgle from the nearby stream, where I had caught the fish, and the occasional snap of a twig in the fire.

Olfred didn't say a word after rejecting my fish. He leaned back against the earthen backrest he had erected, sitting almost as still as a statue as he read his leather-bound book. The only time he looked away from the book was when General Mica began humming as she combed through her short, curly hair.

I nearly spit out a mouthful of my fish at the look of sheer disgust on Olfred's aged face as he regarded Mica, still humming the off-tune melody. Fortunately, General Mica was fairly quiet throughout the rest of the night, giving me time to refine my mana core.

Despite being at the mid silver core stage, I felt inadequate sitting there next to the other Lances. With Dawn's Ballad damaged and my legs debilitated, I felt like I had taken a step back, even after the training at Epheotus. I was certain of one thing: I couldn't afford to use Burst Step again if I wanted to retain the ability to walk.

After an hour of gathering mana from the atmosphere, refining it in my core, and repeating the process, I felt someone's gaze on me.

I pried an eye open to see Mica just a few inches away from me, staring

intently. Even Olfred had closed his book to observe.

“This is the first time Mica has felt something like this,” Mica whispered.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, glancing from one Lance to the other.

“Your refinement process,” Olfred answered, his eyes narrowed in thought.

“Usually it’s not very apparent when someone refines their core—”

“But when you do it, it feels like Mica’s body is being pulled toward you!”

Mica cut in excitedly.

“No one’s ever mentioned that,” I replied. “Is it maybe because I’m a quadra-elemental?”

Mica gasped. “Quadra?”

“So that’s how you became a Lance at such a young age. I heard this being discussed once by the Council, but didn’t think it was actually the case,” Olfred whispered as if talking to himself.

“What’s it like being able to utilize so many elements?” Mica asked as she leaned in even closer, her large eyes practically sparkling.

‘Careful what you reveal,’ Sylvie advised from behind me without moving. She appeared to be still asleep.

I know, I thought back. “There are still some elements that I have a hard time grasping, like gravity, but for the most part, it’s a lot of practicing and always reflecting on what spell and element to use under specific conditions.”

“Right, right.” Mica nodded fervently. “Knowing so many spells is useless if you don’t know when to use them.”

“There must be elements you’re more comfortable using,” Olfred said.

I nodded. “There are.”

“Hey, shall Mica teach you how to manipulate gravity?”

I scooted back to avoid the smell of grilled fish on Mica’s breath. “I think it’s more of a practical issue than anything. There are times when I can use it, but it’s just not something I’m confident in.”

“It’s really easy, you know,” Mica insisted, holding out a palm. “You just have to imagine the world going up or down. Then you grab it in your hand

and release!”

Unable to understand Mica’s incomprehensible explanation, I looked back to Olfred.

The old dwarf rolled his eyes. “You’d have an easier time learning from a pebble. Miss Earthborn comes from a long line of famous dwarven conjurers, but even among them, she’s considered a genius. She’s learned magic through intuition—she doesn’t even know the rudimentary concepts of mana manipulation.”

“Earthborn?” I repeated. “Where have I heard that name before?”

“Her ancestors founded Earthborn Institute,” he answered simply, going back to his book.

I stared at the childlike Lance in a daze. I knew that all the Lances had distinct strengths, but it had never occurred to me that this seemingly ditzy mage would be from such an influential family. Not much of dwarven history was taught or even written in Sapin, but Earthborn Institute still stood out as one of the main reasons dwarves were on par with the kingdom of Sapin, despite their smaller population and territory. Even after Xyrus Academy had begun accepting different races, many of the dwarven nobles still chose to send their children to Earthborn for their more specific disciplines and areas of study suited for dwarves.

“Mica’s amazing on top of being beautiful, right?” The small dwarf puffed out her chest.

General Olfred scoffed, his face hidden behind his book. “This again? I applaud your confidence, but if you’re so beautiful, why is it that you have no experience in relationships, even though you’re nearing fif—”

He couldn’t finish his sentence—he had to defend himself against a massive war axe that had seemingly appeared out of thin air. The ground beneath the old general split from the sheer force exerted by General Mica.

With an innocent smile that seemed to contain a ferocious demon inside, Mica swung her weapon down once more. “My, grumpy old Olfred is getting

ahead of himself. You should know that the reason I have yet to invest in a man is that my tastes don't run to standard dwarves."

I scooted back closer to Sylvie, not wanting to be a part of this dispute.

'I think I liked her more when she referred to herself in the third person,' Sylvie admitted.

I wholeheartedly agree.

Olfred, who had instantly erected a shield of solidified earth above him to guard against his companion's weapon, scoffed. "Please. The only reason you weren't blatantly ostracized is because of your background. Perhaps you'll find a human with a unique taste for little girls to sweep you off your feet."

The force of gravity increased around us, and I found it hard to breathe without the help of mana to strengthen my body. The fire had gone out, the wood that had been burning a few moments ago reduced to ash.

I stared at the two of them, dumbfounded at the sight of two Lances—the epitome of power in all of Dicathen—fighting like children.

Not wanting to get involved, but equally unsure how far the pair would take their scuffle, I said, "We'll attract attention if you two keep this up."

Ignoring me, General Mica swung her giant axe once more, but rather than cleave the stone golem that General Olfred had conjured, her axe obliterated it, turning it into pebbles. "I don't see you with a lover in your arms, *Oldfred!*"

"The fact that you were able to become a Lance despite your childish antics never ceases to amaze me," Olfred grunted as he erected another golem, this time much larger.

Feeling like an academy trainer breaking up a couple overexcited recruits, I gathered water particles from the nearby trees and hosed the dwarves down until they were both dripping wet.

They whipped their heads around at me, eyes glaring.

"Are you guys done or do you want to level a mountain while you're at it?"

Mica clicked her tongue. "It's Oldfred's fault, bringing up a lady's age."

“Those born sipping milk from silver goblets need to be educated about their ignorance,” Olfred muttered.

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I watched as they each retreated to their own corner of the camp. With a single stomp of her tiny foot, General Mica erected a cottage from the ground. Almost large enough to fit Sylvie, the stone house even had textured walls, and came equipped with a chimney that soon began puffing smoke.

General Olfred, on the other hand, chose to build his lair within the side of the cliff just a few feet away from our camp. The earthen cliffside in front of him glowed a deep red and began melting to form a pool of molten rock. A large area hollowed out almost immediately, and I was able to catch a glimpse of the detailed stone furniture inside before the Lance closed the gaping entrance without even glancing back.

“*Very* covert,” I muttered helplessly. Then I turned back and crawled underneath one of Sylvie’s black wings, using it as a makeshift tent.

‘You might be more comfortable conjuring a tent as well,’ Sylvie suggested. *‘I’ll feel safer here in case they decide to do something while I sleep,’* I replied sluggishly.

I drifted in and out of consciousness as scenes from my past life flashed through my mind, interspersed with the peaceful moments of slumber. Memories I wanted to forget resurfaced like worms on a rainy day.

After the night Headmaster Wilbeck was murdered, my goals had changed. Despite both Nico and Cecilia trying to convince me to go to school, I had no intention of trying to be a normal boy like the headmaster had wanted me to be. I hated myself for being unable to protect her—the woman who had raised me like a mother when every other adult had regarded me as a pest or burden. She had taken me in, wanting nothing in return except my happiness—and for a time, I thought I had found it.

During that short period in my life, with Nico and Cecilia by my side in the orphanage and Headmaster Wilbeck to watch out for us and scold us, I was as

happy as any normal child. She had no sins—she did nothing wrong. The headmaster was the type of person to give up her own lunch to a homeless man on the street, yet life had repaid her kindness with a horrible and bloody death.

The orphanage was left in the charge of another headmaster; after a few months, the other kids carried on like nothing had ever happened.

Not me, though. I had become obsessed with finding out who had sent those killers after me and Nico and Cecilia—who had killed Headmaster Wilbeck. Nico's words rang clearly. "What are you even going to do once you find them? You're going to take them out all on your own? With your ability?"

That was when I realized I had to get stronger. Withdrawing my application to the school, I enrolled in one of the military institutes, where they trained candidates for the army.

Both Nico and Cecilia tried to talk me out of it. They urged me to give the school a chance to break me free of my obsession. Looking back on it, I wished I had listened to them then. My life would've been much less painful and lonely if I had.

But the thing I regretted even more than rejecting their advice was allowing them to follow me into the training institute. I had advised them against it at the time, but if I had only tried harder—pushed them further away from me—perhaps my life would've been the only one affected.

'Arthur. We should depart before the sun rises.' My bond's voice rang gently, but I still woke up with a gasp.

'You were having nightmares of your past life again,' she stated.

You know about those? I asked, sitting up.

'Yes. Although they come in flashes, I'm able to make them out. You seem to be getting them more frequently,' she answered, concerned.

I'm sure it's nothing, I replied, crawling out from underneath Sylvie's wing.

'I certainly hope that's the case,' she said dubiously.

I responded with a smile, drawing our mental conversation to an end.

“We’ll shoot for reaching the northern coast by the end of the day,” Olfred announced. He was destroying the stone shelters he and Mica had conjured, while Mica was covering up our camp in case adventurers or hunters strayed too close.

My suspicions of the two Lances’ involvement in the betrayal of Dicathen had lessened after their behavior last night, but I remained cautious. Conjuring a small gust of wind, I helped the two cover our tracks, and we were back on our way.

OLD ROOTS

A HAZE of magenta and orange spread throughout the horizon, giving life to the tranquil ocean in the distance. Sylvie and I plummeted toward the edge of the Grand Mountains. The darkened figures of Mica and Olfred cast shadows over us as they levitated down above us, preparing to catch me when Sylvie transformed into her fox-like form.

We were still several miles away from the northern coast, but we couldn't risk flying any closer. Assuming the worst, a Scythe might be able to sense substantial mana fluctuations even from this distance.

Sylvie latched onto me as soon as she shrank. At the same time, I reached out, grabbing Mica's outstretched hand. We slowly descended, close enough to the massive mountain range to avoid any unwanted attention. While I would have been able to land on my own easily enough, even from this height, I'd likely have flattened the trees nearby and perhaps even cratered the ground from the sheer force I'd have had to use to stop myself. As reluctant as I was to admit it, it was much simpler to just rely on the Lance to carry me down.

"That's a pretty bad scar you have on your hand," Mica remarked, her voice barely audible over the wind.

"It's an old wound." I cracked a smile. I had made sure to hide the scar on my throat with the concealing bandage, but the scar on my left hand was of little concern to people who didn't know me well.

The small Lance nodded, her grip around my arm growing tighter despite her delicate-looking fingers.

We landed at the base of the Grand Mountains, on a field of dry grass and boulders. The frigid winds whistled around us.

“Mana should be kept to a minimum from this point on,” Olfred said as he scanned our surroundings for anyone nearby.

I nodded in agreement. With Mirage Walk, I was able to use mana without risk of detection, but that was information better kept to myself.

“I assume you have a plan for finding the retainer and Scythe in question?” the gruff Lance asked.

“Somewhat.” I took out the white mask I had gotten when I first became an adventurer, and the black coat made from the fur of a nightmare fox. I had worn it along with the mask, since it had the subtle ability to cast one’s focus away from the wearer. After putting the coat on over my clothes, I fished out a thick cloak from my dimension ring, dropped it on the ground, and stepped on it. After it was thoroughly soiled with dirt and grime, I picked it back up and threw it over my shoulders.

Olfred studied my black coat with a curious gaze. “An intriguing effect. Were you once an assassin or thief?”

“No,” I chuckled, looking down at my outfit. “I just didn’t want to stand out.” With a dismissive nod, he took out his own lavish cloak of rich mana beast fur. Mica began to do the same, but I waved for her to wait.

Without saying a word, I took a second cloak from my ring and walked over to Mica. Dropping it on the ground, I stepped on it as well, staining the brown cloak with dirt and grass, then handed it to the small Lance. “Wear this instead.”

“You just dropped it and stepped on it!” Mica exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“Yes, that’s sort of the point. The two of us are going to be Olfred’s slaves,” I said, indicating my own dirty cloak.

“Why can’t Mica be the master?” she huffed, holding my spare cloak

between two fingers.

“Because you have the appearance of a middle-schooler,” I answered bluntly with an innocent smile. Olfred grunted out a small laugh as he clasped his fur cloak around his neck.

Glaring daggers at her cohort, Mica reluctantly put her lavish cloak back into her ring and put on the dirty one I had given her.

“Sorry. This is a safety measure,” I said. Bending down, I dipped my finger into a muddy patch of dirt.

“No, please,” Mica begged, protecting her face with the hood of her cloak.

“We’re slaves who have been traveling a fair distance. It’s only natural that we would be dirty, and it’s a good way to get by unnoticed.” Without waiting for her consent, I pulled off her hood and smeared the moist dirt on her face before doing the same to myself.

I dipped my head down and tousled my long hair until it became disheveled and covered most of my face. After pulling up the hood of my cloak, I handed my white mask to Olfred. “Wear this along with your cloak—if anyone asks, it’s to hide a gruesome scar.”

Olfred nodded, accepting the mask. As he slid it on over his face and propped up his hood, I couldn’t help but be reminded of my time as an adventurer under the guise of Note.

The blue streak running down to the right eyehole of the mask had faded over the years, but Olfred was about as tall as I had been when I was an adventurer. Seeing him in the mask and cloak really brought back memories.

“It fits well,” Olfred said, his voice sounding deeper—an effect of the mask.

“Oh? It has this sort of function as well.”

“Mica wants to go home,” the small dwarf sulked, her youthful face caked with dried mud. Her short hair poked out in messy curls from under the hood of the dirty, tattered cloak.

How’s my disguise? I asked my bond, turning to face her.

It’ll have to do, although it worries me to think what would happen if

someone looked too closely. Her small feline head nodded in approval.

Why does that sound more like an insult than a compliment?

It's a bit of both, she said, her teasing laughter filling my mind as she hopped inside my cloak; she needed to be hidden from view since I was posing as a slave.

“You’re positive no one will suspect us?” Olfred’s deep voice rumbled from behind the mask.

“No one’s going to be out looking for Lances, and there are quite a few adventurers that like to use masks,” I replied, trailing next to Mica behind our temporary master. “Besides, there’s an old saying that the best place to hide is in plain sight. Who’s going to suspect a noble and his two slaves who were raided by bandits on their way up north to escape the battles?”

“While you do make a point, I’ve never heard such a saying. Perhaps it’s used only by humans?” Olfred asked.

“Something like that,” I replied, remembering now that I had learned it in my previous life.

We trudged for hours, silently. I constantly used Mirage Walk to strengthen my legs with mana while hiding the fluctuations, satisfied that not even Mica and Olfred were able to notice.

In my head, Sylvie and I went over the plan that Virion and I had come up with. Assuming that both Olfred and Mica were traitors, I didn’t know what they planned on doing to me. Worst case was them killing me as soon as they had the chance; another possibility was that they would take me to the Vritra. Whatever the case, the two dwarves wouldn’t attack me so brazenly with Sylvie around. Even if they were able to overpower us, it would be a hard fight and would attract attention even in the most remote areas. If I were them, I’d lead us to the retainer or Scythe in order to swiftly capture or dispose of us.

In order to make sure that the Lances, assuming that they were traitors, led us to their backup, I only had to intentionally act like I couldn’t find the enemy

force myself.

With Realmheart, I could make use of the visible mana fluctuations to find the Vritra's base. After a few days of leading them in the wrong direction, they would either give up and want to head back—which would prove my suspicions wrong—or they would provide me with suggestions or hints to lead Sylvie and me to our demise.

'Your plan rests on a lot of assumptions,' my bond noted, shuffling inside the pocket of my cloak. 'What if they forcibly take you to the Vritra?'

I highly doubt they'd want to reveal their position. You can't get much better than having one of the council members as a spy. Which is why it's safe to assume that they'll try to avoid suspicion until they're sure they can get rid of us without drawing attention.

'So we'll just run away if it seems like they're trying to lead us to them?' Sylvie asked, her tone doubtful.

The best case scenario is that we find the location of the Vritra's base and head back without fighting Olfred and Mica, I responded, following closely behind the masked noble posing as my master. *But just in case, Virion sent another Lance behind us.*

Sylvie didn't answer, but a wave of surprise flooded my mind.

You can't sense her at all, can you?

'No, I can't,' she admitted. 'Is it the elven Lance?'

Mm-hm. She was given the code name 'Phantasm' because of her ability to deceive and hide from opponents.

'An assassin,' Sylvie noted.

The two of us continued conversing mentally, making time pass more quickly as we trekked through the rugged plains.

Along the way, I activated Realmheart in brief increments, trying to catch any fluctuations of mana around us. I had to be careful to not let the two Lances see how my eyes changed from blue to light lavender, but my hood and long bangs helped me hide it.

As we continued our journey northwest, trees became more abundant as the plains slowly shifted into acres of woodland. I used Mana Rotation, the skill I'd learned from Sylvia, to constantly replenish my mana supply, and Mirage Walk to conceal the mana fluctuations around me caused by my use of magic. As a result, the time I spent walking had become a sort of training.

"We've made it," Mica pointed out as we finally reached the main road. The dirt trail was wide enough to accommodate two carriages with ample space in between, and though there were wheel tracks from use, there seemed to be no carriages in sight.

"Where to now, boy?" Olfred's deepened voice rang.

"We follow the road to the nearest town," I answered.

"More walking?" Mica groaned in protest.

"The closest town isn't too far off," I comforted her.

Mica and I kept our heads low as we followed behind Olfred on the side of the trail. After a while, I heard the faint clack of hooves and wooden wheels.

The other Lances perked up less than a second later, picking up on the sound as well. The three of us stopped and waited for the carriage to appear in our line of sight. Pulled by two brown horses, one speckled near its muzzle, the wooden carriage was driven by an older gentleman in green and brown traveling garb. A young man, seeming not much older than me, rode next to him.

As they got closer, it was apparent how malnourished the horses were. Their ribcages were clearly pronounced, while their coats and manes had lost all their luster.

Olfred waved his arms at the approaching carriage. "Hello there!"

With a swift pull of the reins, the driver brought the horses and carriage to a dusty halt.

"You lost?" the older man barked, his eyes scanning Olfred's garb, while the younger one eyed Mica and me suspiciously.

"My slaves and I were on our way north when our carriage was attacked by

bandits,” Olfred explained, his voice steady while he dramatically told the tale of woe. “They slit my horses’ throats and tried to rob us. Luckily my slaves were able to fight off the bandits.”

“These two munchkins?” The older man’s eyes narrowed.

Olfred shook his head. “No, no. Different slaves, but unfortunately they didn’t last long after the fight. Infection of the wounds.”

“Mmm. And the mask?” the driver asked with a raised brow. He and the younger man both gripped the hilts of the daggers sheathed at their waists. By their awkwardly placed hands, it seemed that their weapons were mostly for intimidation.

“My father insisted I hide my identity in these dangerous times,” Olfred answered with a weak laugh. He held up his hands in submission, having noticed the weapons as well.

“Dangerous times indeed, as you’ve already experienced.” The older man loosened his grip on the weapon. “Fighting slaves are hard to come by and even harder to afford since the war started. Pity for your loss.”

“A great loss,” Olfred agreed.

“Well, times are hard for all of us. I’m not sure my horses can handle the weight of more people.” The old man ran his fingers through his scraggly beard and coughed.

“Naturally, you’ll be compensated,” Olfred replied calmly. He dug into his fur cloak and pulled out two silver coins.

The younger man reached out and grabbed the silver coins, turning them slowly in the light as he examined their quality before nodding to the driver.

“Hop on then,” the older man said, motioning to Olfred. “But your slaves will have to walk.”

“Of course,” Olfred said without hesitation.

I caught a glimpse of Mica’s devastated expression before she lowered her head again. Without saying a word, I pulled her back and waited for the carriage to resume moving, then followed after it with her.

“Mica is going to kill that old man,” Mica muttered, her face hidden beneath her hood.

“Just bear it for a little longer. The next town is only an hour away.”

“You’re familiar with this rural countryside?” Mica asked.

“Of course,” I said softly. “It’s where my hometown is, after all.”

INSIDE THE TAVERN

THE FLICKERING FIRES of street lights glowed in the nearby distance, a sight for sore eyes after hours of nonstop walking. This was the first time I had come back to Ashber, the small town where I was born, in more than ten years.

“Mica is ready for a nice cold mug of ale,” the general whispered, licking her dry, cracked lips.

I nodded wordlessly, keeping my pace brisk to match the speed of the carriage we were behind.

“Just out of curiosity, sir, how many slaves do you own?” the younger man asked eagerly, his narrow eyes shifting between Olfred and me.

“I never counted,” Olfred answered with a shrug. “We have many at home, some owned by myself and others by my family.”

“Wow.” The younger man sighed. “If you have so many, how about you leave those two with us—ouch!”

The older man had leaned back in his seat and smacked the boy upside the head. “Are you hollow in the head? Who in their right mind would just give away their slaves?”

The boy rubbed his head and neatened his dirty blond hair. “I was just asking, old man. Sheesh!”

“Sorry about my boy. I’ve had to raise him on my own after his mother ran off, and manners weren’t always a priority on my list of things to teach him.”

“No offense taken,” Olfred said, obviously enjoying playing his role as master. “In other circumstances, I might have considered leaving them with you once I’d reached my destination, but these two offer at least a bit of security in these chaotic times.”

The boy clicked his tongue. “Unlucky.”

Something about the two men wasn’t sitting right with me. Aside from the fact that there were no other carriages on the road, even this close to town, there was no luggage on their carriage either. Their only weapons seemed to be the knives buckled to their waists, which provided barely any protection.

They had seemed reasonably suspicious upon first contact, but they’d opened up too easily, as if waiting for a reason to trust us. My guard had been up, but we were almost in Ashber and nothing seemed amiss.

“Well, here we are,” the bearded driver announced, pulling on the reins to halt the carriage. “We’re passing through this town so it’d be best if you walk from here.”

“You’ll be traveling through the night?” Olfred asked, skepticism lacing his voice.

“We’re in a hurry to reach a small outpost about an hour away,” the blond-haired boy answered with a laugh, releasing the latch in the back to let Olfred out.

“Well, regardless, thank you for the ride.” Olfred handed the boy another silver coin before hopping off the carriage.

The driver gave Olfred a wave before snapping the reins. With an annoyed grunt, the two horses started trotting, pulling the carriage onto a narrower dirt road that veered off to the left.

“They need to work on their acting skills,” Olfred said, shaking his head as we began walking.

“So it wasn’t just me,” I replied.

“Whatever. As long as there’s alcohol and a cozy bed, Mica will be happy.”

As we headed into town, I was unnerved to notice how empty the streets

were. One thing I remembered about Ashber was how lively it had been for such a small town. Adventurers were scarce this far north, but the small river flowing near the town made the area a great place to raise crops. After the death of Lensa, my father had brought my mother to this remote town and taken a job here, guarding farmers and their crops against the frequent wolves and stray mana beasts that came from the Grand Mountains. With farmers waking up early to tend to their crops, and afternoons spent either selling on the market streets or frequenting merchants, nighttime was when everyone found the time to unwind and have fun.

My father would oftentimes come home tripping over his own feet after drinking at night with the local farmers. I had expected some changes as a result of the war, but I'd never expected Ashber to be a ghost town.

The few street lamps scattered around were burning brightly, but there were no signs of people going about their daily business. I sensed someone in the alleyway, his features hidden by shadows, but after a moment, the person scurried off, his unrhythmic footsteps growing fainter until we heard no sounds other than our own breathing.

We glanced at one another, but remained quiet. Looking around, I saw that most of the buildings were either vacant or barred. Wooden planks were nailed over windows, while chains held together the front entrance of a store. I activated Realmheart to sense for mana fluctuations, not expecting much, but immediately I could see the distortions in the atmospheric mana all over the town. There had been mages here recently.

"I sense people scattered around, but there seems to be a congregation of forty or so just a few blocks away," Olfred grunted.

"Mica sensed forty-three," the little Lance muttered beside me.

"I thought we agreed not to use magic," I said irritably. "What if there are Alacryan mages or Vritra nearby who pick up on it?"

"Mana wasn't needed to sense them," Olfred replied cryptically.

What? I almost said aloud. If they were able to sense people this accurately,

my whole plan could be compromised.

“That’s good,” I lied. “Looks like we’ll be able to find the Alacryans’ hideout sooner than I’d expected.”

“It’ll probably still take some time. Mica can only sense people within a short distance, and even then it’s sort of fuzzy. Same goes for Olfred,” Mica explained.

“You’re both talking too much for slaves,” Olfred snapped, then dropped his voice to a whisper. “Just because *we* can’t use magic does not mean our enemies are bound by the same handicap. Assume our voices will always be heard.”

I knew no one was nearby—at least no one who was manipulating mana—and so should Olfred. I suspected he just wanted Mica to stop talking about their limitations, but the elderly dwarf did have a point. I nodded, following a few steps behind Olfred with Mica quietly simmering in frustration beside me.

When we turned a corner, after passing a particularly tall, worn-down building, I knew exactly where the “congregation” Olfred and Mica had mentioned was.

Clouds of smoke puffed from the chimney of what seemed like a tavern. The large shack had a crooked roof with missing tiles, but of all the other tattered edifices and hovels nearby, it was the only place with light coming from inside.

We approached with little hesitation, driven by the thought of a nice, well-seasoned meal and a plush bed.

‘I smell meat being grilled,’ Sylvie said as we got closer, rustling impatiently inside my cloak.

Olfred paused at the doorway, and the three of us exchanged glances before he opened the splintered wooden door. I hungrily breathed in the pungent smell of alcohol, smoke, and a variety of indiscernible foods and spices. The clamor of a dozen conversations, all trying to overwhelm one another,

resounded throughout the large tavern accompanied by the sounds of glasses clinking and palms pounding.

The people—mostly men—who were seated at the tables closest to the door all turned to face us. Some had flushed cheeks, others showed irritated scowls.

“Do we wait to be seated?” Olfred asked.

“You’re responsible for finding your own seat in establishments like this,” I said, pulling my hood down to cover more of my face.

I grabbed Mica’s wrist and followed Olfred as he weaved through the customers and tables. It was impossible not to notice the glares as we passed by. A burly man with long, tangled hair purposely leaned back, hoping to bump into one of us as an excuse to start a commotion.

“Never mind. It’s only forty-two,” Mica said. She pointed to a fanged hound standing next to its barrel-chested owner, drool leaking out of its flat muzzle.

I raised a brow. “What?”

“Forty-two people, not forty-three like Mica said earlier. Mica mistook that mana beast for two people,” she explained.

“Ah, got it,” I replied.

Winding through the maze of people, I listened for any bits of conversation that might alleviate my suspicions about this place. I was able to pick up part of one table’s dialogue amidst the clamor: “...were able to reel in some fish tonight.”

While the toned man, who had several missing teeth, could have simply been talking about catching trout for dinner, the suspicious glances of the people at his table told me that their conversation wasn’t so innocent.

Finally, we seated ourselves around a wobbly table in the far corner of the tavern, next to the bathroom. A vile stench—caused by the absence of proper plumbing—assaulted my nose, and every trace of the appetite I had built up vanished.

“What’ll it be for you tonight?” the barmaid asked, nonchalantly tugging on

her dirty gown to further expose her breasts. She leaned down on the table next to Olfred, blatantly inviting him to feast his eyes on her cleavage, while she herself scanned his fine cloak. Mica and I apparently didn't exist to her. She swayed coquettishly next to Olfred, waiting for him to order.

"Three mugs of cold ale and whatever stew you have tonight, along with some bread," Olfred said, unfazed by her attempts at wooing him.

"Right away," she cooed as she lightly ran a finger up his arm. Whether she was making another attempt at seducing him or gauging the quality of his cloak, I didn't know, but I could tell she wasn't the only one who had noticed Olfred's potential worth.

"Ugh. What's the point of showing off those lumps of fat anyway?" Mica mumbled, disgusted.

"For once, we agree on something," Olfred said with a nod. "A woman should have a firm and muscular build, and the coarse skin to match."

I opted to stay out of the conversation, instead scanning the room from under the cover my hood. With Realmheart activated once more, I could tell that magic had been used, and not that long ago.

A distorted aura of mana surrounded a particularly large table along the opposite wall. A robed, middle-aged man seemed out of place amongst the others. Unlike his companions, he was neatly groomed, and his beady eyes flickered lewdly at the scantily-dressed barmaids on either side of him, who were taking turns feeding him fruits and ale. With his thin arms, hollow cheeks, and receding hairline, I doubted the servers were cozying up to him because of his dashing good looks.

Considering how loudly and haughtily he spoke, and the way his peers laughed and nodded at whatever came out of his mouth, there was no doubt the beady-eyed man was important—perhaps even in control. By the way the particles gathered around him, it seemed he had conjured a layer of mana to strengthen and protect himself.

And he wasn't the only one. With just a cursory glance, I spotted a few

augmenters who were expelling a thin layer of mana over their skin for protection. However, the density and purity of the mana encompassing their bodies was at a level far lower than the Alacryan soldiers I had faced near the southwestern coast. If I had to guess, these were either mercenaries or lower-tier adventurers. The thin man, his arms currently around two scantily clad barmaids, was at a far higher level than the others, however.

But that wasn't what bothered me. It wasn't the subtle air of hostility in the tavern or the suspicious number of mages present, either. I knew that man. Something about his beady, perverted gaze and his crooked face brought up bitter emotions, but I couldn't place my finger on why.

'What's going on?' Sylvie asked, noticing my concern.

Sylvie, take a quick peek at the table to my left on the other side of the tavern. Do you recognize anyone?

My bond rustled inside my cloak, then her small muzzle popped out. Her intelligent eyes scanned the room, focusing on the area I had indicated. Then a blatant sense of distaste leaked out of her. *'He's that scoundrel who tried to use the king to forcibly take possession of me during the Helstea auction event. I believe his name was something like—'*

As she spoke, the man got up and hobbled toward the bar, putting minimal weight on his left leg and using a wooden staff to keep his balance. As soon as I realized his injury, his name immediately flooded into my mind—along with the rest of my memories of him.

It's Sebastian.

INSIDE THE TAVERN II

“WHAT’S WRONG?” Mica whispered, leaning in close and tilting her head down so only the bottom half of her face was visible. “Do you recognize someone?”

Shaking my head, I turned back to my table. “No one important.”

A different barmaid—this one much less affectionate—arrived with our order. She placed the three mugs of ale in front of Olfred, along with a single bowl of soup. A piece of bread was sloppily submerged inside the goopy liquid.

“Please bring two more bowls,” Olfred said as he slid two mugs across the table for me and Mica.

“There’s a stall a block down to feed your slaves,” she said with obvious distaste.

Ignoring her attitude, Olfred simply stirred the orange stew with the piece of bread. “It’s been a long journey. I’ll have them eat here tonight.”

I didn’t pay attention to her reaction, but she left wordlessly. My mind was focused on the cold mug of ale bubbling in front of me. I pressed the cool rim of the mug to my dry lips, relishing the slight burn down my esophagus as the carbonated liquid reached my stomach.

Damn, that feels good.

Mica finished almost her entire mug in one gulp. She shivered as she let out a blissful sigh. “Even this cheap ale tastes heavenly to Mica right now.”

I lifted my mug for another swig. Out of the corner of my eye, though, I spotted the same barmaid whispering to one of the men sitting at Sebastian's table. She was pointing a finger toward us.

"Looks like we'll be having guests," I muttered to the other Lances as I set down my drink. Sylvie rustled deeper into my cloak, and I pulled the hood a bit further over my face, just in case.

Just a few moments later, a large man with a scraggly beard came to our table. With him was a short, portly woman wearing a condescending expression and clothing just as revealing as, if not more than, the barmaids.

The bearded man regarded me and Mica with a raised brow and an expectant gaze. I got up without a word, pulling Mica from her seat as well, and moved to stand behind Olfred while the newcomers took our chairs.

The woman, seeing the two half-empty mugs, snorted. "You really shouldn't be spoiling your slaves like this. It makes them think they can act out."

"How I treat my slaves is none of your business," Olfred replied curtly, slipping another piece of bread underneath his mask. "Now what can I do for the two of you? I hope you can keep things succinct."

"Succinct?" the man scoffed. The wooden backrest groaned in protest as he leaned back on the seat, but it held out. "Some fancy words you got there. You should be careful around these parts, especially if you're traveling from the south."

I could see them trying to size up Olfred. Mica could pass as a human child but I was worried that they might realize Olfred wasn't human.

"Thank you for the advice," Olfred responded, locking eyes with the two of them.

"We wanted to give you a warm welcome," the woman said, leaning forward on her elbows.

"We came over after seeing the way you treated your slaves," her companion continued, shooting a pointed gaze at Mica and me. "We have a whole stable of slaves for sale that I feel you'd be interested in."

My jaw clenched at his words. I imagined a room full of children and adults alike, barely clothed and fed, kept only as commodities.

“I’ll have to politely decline,” the old Lance replied almost immediately.

“Don’t say that.” The portly woman slid to the edge of her seat to be closer to Olfred. “We’ve got a fine selection of women and girls if you’re not looking for a more practical slave.”

“We even have dwarves and elves,” the large man added, his cracked lips curling into a lewd grin.

There was a beat of silence before Olfred responded. “I thought interracial slavery had been banned since the formation of the Council?”

“That’s why it’ll cost you an arm and a leg if you want to buy one.” The man burst into hoarse laughter at what he considered his joke.

If the Lance was angry, he did a good job of hiding it. Mica, on the other hand, stirred beside me. I was able to sense the minuscule amount of mana leaking from her, but even that small amount was enough to fill me with unease. Not long after the union of the three races, the leaders of all three sides had made a collective effort to abolish slavery. However, getting rid of slavery in one fell swoop would not only have caused dissatisfaction amongst slave owners, but severely disrupted the economy by essentially eliminating a large portion of the kingdoms’ workforces. In order to remedy this, the Council had been working diligently to take a step-by-step approach: rewarding owners who freed their slaves, and heavily taxing those who kept them.

While slavery existed in all three kingdoms, there had always been high demand in Sapin for dwarven and particularly elven slaves. At least that’s what Vincent Helstea, the owner of the Helstea Auction House, had told me.

Olfred gently pushed the bowl of stew away. “On second thought, perhaps I am a little curious about what you have to offer.”

The woman inched a bit closer, her face contorted into something she probably considered coquettish. “I knew you’d be interested. I’ll let our boss

know.”

“I would like to at least get settled into an inn somewhere nearby first,” Olfred said. “Our journey has been somewhat rough.”

The woman locked eyes with her companion, then gave a twitch of her head. With a nod, he waved a giant arm at an old man with a slight hunch, who had been idly drying glasses with a towel. “A room for the gent and his two slaves!”

The woman didn’t give Olfred a chance to object, leading him toward the back door with her bearded companion close behind. This time, the seated men and women in our way scooted their chairs, clearing a path as their gazes bore holes in us.

Before following the hunched elder into the back hall, I looked back once more at Sebastian. He was smiling in our direction, with a barmaid whispering something into his ear.

Once we walked deeper into the scarcely-lit hallway, much of the clamor from the tavern died down. Mica and I trailed behind Olfred silently while the masked Lance responded to the portly woman’s idle chatter.

“Here’s your room, sir. That’ll be two silvers.” The old man held out an empty palm; his other hand held a rusted key.

Two silvers? For a dingy room up here in Ashber? I couldn’t believe it. Two silvers was a reasonable price for a plot of land up here.

‘I’ve never had an interest in this continent’s currency, but even to me it sounds ridiculous,’ Sylvie responded incredulously.

Nevertheless, Olfred played his role of the weary naive noble and produced two glimmering coins from inside his cloak.

Without even a thank-you, the old man dropped the key into Olfred’s hand and tottered back to the tavern. The woman, on the other hand, seemed even more flirtatious after Olfred produced the coins, going as far as squeezing Olfred’s arm before she and her companion headed back.

“We’ll meet back at the tavern in an hour.” She shot Olfred a wink as she left.

Once the door was closed behind us, I slammed my fist against the wall. Since my fist wasn't coated in mana, a jarring pain shot up my arm—but even that was welcome. The fact that I couldn't do anything for those slaves and for my town... I deserved the worst.

Pushing down the boiling anger I felt in my gut, I scanned the room, which was no larger than the bathroom at my old house here in Ashber. There was one bed and a dresser squeezed in; even taking Mica's small frame into account, she and I would have to sleep sitting up.

Mica pulled her hood off, then jumped on the bed, burying her face into the pillow before screaming in frustration.

"You did good holding back from those two," I praised her, removing my cloak as well. "That woman, especially."

Taking off his mask, Olfred replied, "Her charming appearance doesn't make up for the fact that she has captured one of my own."

I blinked, still unable to get used to the dwarves' tastes.

"If not for this darn mission, Mica would've flattened this entire tavern!"

Mica cried, her voice muffled by the pillow.

"My thoughts were the same," Olfred replied. "Our circumstances, however, force us to be discreet."

I turned to the older Lance. "Whether we decide to act, our mission takes priority. It's no problem going with them to see these slaves, though—in fact, it gives us a better cover to look around."

Olfred nodded in response as he unclipped his cloak and slung it over the wooden dresser.

I sat down at the foot of the bed. Sylvie fumed beside me.

Something on your mind?

'I don't understand why there is a high demand for slaves of different races. Is it because humans feel guilt for enslaving one of their own?' my bond asked.

No. Sickeningly enough, a lot of noble families practiced interbreeding with

their dwarven or elven slaves so their children would have better and a wider range of mage potential. Lucas Wykes was a product of that practice.

Sylvie didn't reply, but through our bond, I could feel her anger spilling out; I didn't blame her, though. When I'd first read about elves, I had thought of them as a mystical race with a high affinity for magic. That belief was further enforced by the fact that my stay in Elenoir had been mostly with the royal family. Thinking back to the time I had rescued Tessia from slave traders, I should've guessed that they either targeted children or weaker, unsuspecting adults.

The Council banned interracial slavery a few years ago, but it looks like it's still going on.

'What about the forest surrounding the elven kingdom? Isn't it supposed to deter most beings other than elves and native animals?'

Yes. That's why elven slaves are so rare. The traders not only need to be adept fighters, they need to have hounds capable of guiding them through Elshire Forest.

Contempt spilled from my bond. *'To go to such lengths...'*

I came from a modest household; my parents would never have been able to afford a slave, even if they had wanted one. I hadn't been exposed to the practice of keeping slaves when I was young, which is, perhaps, why I had grown to feel so strongly about the topic. The fact that this was happening in my hometown did more than just irritate me.

"If we can't handle this directly, Mica is going to inform the Council of what's going on here," the small Lance said abruptly, bolting up on the bed.

I nodded, not bothering to turn to face the dwarf. "Sounds like a plan."

The inn had one bathroom at the far end of the hall, and when Olfred left the room to use it, an unfamiliar man with a small dagger clipped to his waist escorted him there. Olfred said the man was nice enough, but it was obvious that a place like this didn't offer concierge service. We were basically being held prisoner here.

An hour passed by in the blink of an eye. We decided it was best for Mica to stay behind in case she wasn't able to control her temper. Despite her numerous complaints, the child-like Lance was out like a light as soon as her head hit her rolled-up cloak, which she was using as a makeshift pillow.

Olfred and I donned our disguises once more before opening our door. We had known there were people waiting just outside, so we remained casual.

"Had a good rest?" the portly woman asked, her voice a bit more slurred than when we had first spoken to her.

Judging by her companion's flushed cheeks, they had been drinking while they waited for us.

"Come! Follow us, this way. Our leader wants to meet with you," the woman said, cozying up to Olfred.

I remained silent and trailed behind my 'master.'

Then the bearded man spoke. "Your smaller slave isn't joining us?"

"She is unaccustomed to traveling such long distances," Olfred answered, "so I decided to just let her sleep in the room."

The bearded man's lips curled up into a snide grin.

"Ah! But I bet she is accustomed to other things," he said, nudging Olfred with his elbow.

I rolled my eyes. *Does this ape have no sense of decency?*

The muffled clamor of the tavern grew louder as we approached the entrance. The establishment was still busy, but the table closest to us was open, with only one person sitting at it.

Sebastian.

"Here they are, Leader," the woman said. The slur in her voice had vanished. *Leader?* I almost repeated it aloud, and glanced upward to get a better view of the balding conjurer.

I had no lingering resentment toward Sebastian. Even back then, when I was still a little boy in this world, I had seen him as greedy and shameless, but insignificant. The childlike desire he'd had for my bond—and the fact that he

had used the king to try and ‘coerce’ me into giving her up—had annoyed me, but I’d never thought he’d be up here.

Even if he had been punished back then for his actions at the auction house, I doubted it would have been anything more than a warning. He was a noble; he shouldn’t have any interest in a remote town like Ashber.

“You may leave.” He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Sebastian’s beady eyes inspected me and I could feel him probing for my mana core level. He wouldn’t be able to sense anything, of course. Even if I wasn’t at the white core stage yet, I was at a high enough level that his senses wouldn’t be able to detect traces of my mana. His gaze moved from my sternum up to my face, but upon seeing my disheveled hair and dirt-stained skin, his focus turned to Olfred.

“It’s a pleasure,” Sebastian said with a wide, seemingly innocent smile. “Allow me to welcome you to my town.”

CONDUCTING BUSINESS

“NICE TO MEET YOU,” Olfred said with as much courtesy as he could muster.

“My name is Cladence, from House—”

Sebastian held up a palm, interrupting the masked Lance. “Let me stop you right there. House names aren’t necessary in circumstances like this. I’ll simply refer you to as Cladence, and you can call me Sebastian.”

“Very well,” Olfred replied. “Sebastian.”

“Good.” The beady-eyed conjurer nodded in approval. “Now. Before we get down to business...”

Sebastian muttered a chant and waved his arm ostentatiously. After a few moments, a translucent shroud covered us, dampening the noise of the tavern. An obvious but not very impressive demonstration of wind-attribute magic. Still, I played my role as the naive slave and gasped in amazement.

The conjurer’s gaze shifted from me to Olfred, but upon seeing that his masked guest didn’t show any discernible awe at this demonstration, a ghost of a frown crossed Sebastian’s lips.

“It’s a little rowdy in here, and the folks present aren’t the most well-mannered,” he said, leaning forward for one of the mugs filled with beer in the center of the table. “Please excuse my subordinates’ behavior. Bothering you like that when you’d finally sat down to rest—I’ll have to reprimand them.”

Olfred reached forward, his large hand gripping the handle of the mug

tightly. “It’s not a problem. Thank you for the hospitality here at the inn.”

“Hospitality?” The balding conjurer looked at the masked Lance incredulously. “You and I both know that this place is fit for nothing but mud hogs.”

Olfred chuckled, the sound hollow and humorless behind the mask, before taking a swig from his mug.

It was obvious that Sebastian was staring at Olfred’s head, trying to see what his face looked like underneath the mask.

“Is something the matter?” the dwarf said when he noticed.

Sebastian shrugged nonchalantly as he sipped from his own mug. “Just curious about the story behind your mask. I’ve seen adventurers wear them from time to time, but never nobles.”

Olfred scratched his head. “Is it so obvious that I’m a noble?”

“Well, it takes one to know one,” Sebastian said proudly.

“I figured,” Olfred nodded. “With your tidy appearance and magical prowess, you seem out of place here as well.”

Compared to the nasty men, most of whom were dressed in rags, Sebastian really did stand out in his richly-dyed doublet and hose.

Sebastian’s eyes twinkled in delight at Olfred’s flattery. “Indeed. I’d take offense if you had thought me the same as those imps.”

Olfred banged his mug back on the table. “I’d be a fool if I did.”

Their conversation continued in this vein, and it seemed the two of them had really hit it off. Whether Olfred was a very good actor or actually found Sebastian amiable, I wasn’t sure, but after a few more mugs of ale, Sebastian was a red, hiccupping mess. That was when his true personality came out.

“So... what kind of girl ar-are you looking for?” Sebastian asked, his eyes glazed.

“What makes you think I’m looking for a girl?” Olfred responded, one hand practically glued to a mug of alcohol.

The balding conjurer giggled drunkenly as he pointed a finger at the masked

Lance. "Please. My subordinates told me how you practically lit up when they mentioned I had elves and dwarves in stock."

Olfred paused for a moment, and I was almost afraid the Lance was going to say something he shouldn't.

"And what if I am?" Olfred replied, his deep voice coming out slurred.

Sebastian held up both hands in a placating gesture. "I don't judge. What's the point of having money and power if you can't splurge on what you want?"

"Exactly!" Olfred slammed his mug on the wooden table. "It's because of all those damned entitled noble women looking down on me."

Where is he going with this?

Leaning forward on the table, Olfred pointed at his mask. "Do you want to know the real reason I wear this stifling mask? It's because I have scars all over my face from a house fire."

"Oh, really now?" Sebastian asked, intrigued.

"And the worst thing is, that happened when I was still a teen. The injuries to my leg stunted my growth, so not only is my face disfigured, but now I'm a head shorter than even my own damned slave!" Olfred shot a finger at me as I stood there, puzzled.

Despite knowing Olfred's true identity, his performance was so genuine that I had to wonder whether this incident had really happened.

'He's very believable,' Sylvie commented, overhearing their conversation. *I'll say.*

"Tell me about it!" Sebastian finished off another mug of ale and set it down, then wiped the foam from his lips. "When I served the royal family, women rushed at the chance to get in bed with me. But once I was relieved of my position, those same tramps treated me like some sort of insect!"

"You served the royal family?" Olfred exclaimed. "Why did you retire?"

Sebastian gnashed his teeth, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the mug. "Because of that damned brat."

“Brat? What brat?” Olfred asked.

The beady-eyed mage threw his mug on the ground, where it shattered upon impact. This drew wary gazes from the nearby tables. The noise from the tavern grew clearer; in his inebriated state, Sebastian wasn’t able to maintain the noise-dampening spell.

“I’m a dual-attribute conjurer, almost at the solid orange stage, yet the only respect I can get is from these dirty primitives!” he exclaimed, waving his arm around the tavern at the vile-looking men and the few women—who didn’t look much better.

Olfred raised his glass in the air. “Those shallow and wretched snakes! May they wrinkle and sag like the loose rags they are!”

Sebastian snorted gleefully as he laughed at the Lance’s toast. “I knew I’d found a good man when I saw you come in through those doors. Now let’s get you some brand new toys to play with!”

The two of them staggered out of the tavern. Sebastian was barely able to walk because of his limp—a souvenir of the broken leg I had given him when I was still a child.

“Hey, you. Come over here.” He gestured at me as he leaned against the wall of the tavern.

I silently obeyed, walking over to the intoxicated conjurer. He flung his arm around my shoulder, leaning heavily against me. “You don’t mind if I use your slave as a walking stick, do you, Cladence?”

“Of course not. That’s what slaves are for,” Olfred replied. I swallowed the ever-growing urge to break Sebastian’s other leg.

‘This man is really testing my patience,’ Sylvie said with a simmering anger that matched mine.

The three of us walked out of the tavern, the portly woman and the bearded man trailing closely behind. I practically had to carry the lanky conjurer as his limp leg dragged on the ground.

“You know... it took me months to be able to tolerate this tawdry outpost,

but I don't miss my old position," Sebastian droned as we made our way down the dim streets of Ashber. "The people here, they do more than just respect me—they fear me. I'm a god to them."

He patted my cheek condescendingly, peering into my hood and gazing at my face. "You saw my magic earlier, right? I can kill you with the snap of my fingers."

Endure it, Arthur. Just for now.

When I didn't respond, Sebastian struck my face a few more times, each slap getting a little stronger. "Are you deaf, or are you disrespecting me because of my leg?"

"Don't mind him," Olfred said, putting a hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "The boy can't speak."

"Bah! Cladence, what's the use of keeping damaged goods like him?" the balding conjurer spat. "How about I do you a favor and buy him off you? I have a few gents who have a thing for boys like him."

"Tempting!" the Lance replied, stumbling on his own legs. "But he's not mine. He's my father's, and the last time I pawned off one of his things, he cut off my allowance for a whole month."

"S-See?" Sebastian hiccupped. "That's the kind of thing I don't miss. Family money is well and good, but it's not truly yours. My wealth is my own. One hundred percent mine!"

Olfred nodded. "Truly enviable."

We traveled toward the other end of town, through unnamed streets littered with worn-down hovels and alleyways filled with piles of garbage. All along the way, the drunk conjurer tripped countless times on the cracks and potholes that filled the neglected streets, and each time, he would loose a string of curses at me.

"You should thank the heavens you aren't my slave. Something about you just pisses me off," he spat. He glared at me through glossy eyes, unaware that if he had been sober and bothered to look carefully, he might've

recognized who I was.

I could feel a violent fury building up, but it wasn't mine. Sylvie, still hidden in the depths of my cloak, was on the verge of exploding by the time we finally arrived.

In front of us was a wide, single-story building of solid stone. At a cursory glance, the structure appeared to be more than two hundred feet across and several dozens of feet deep. Two guards sat lazily against the wall beside the front entrance.

I was sure no buildings this big had existed in Ashber when I lived here, which raised the questions: Did Sebastian have this built? And if he did, how many slaves had he captured that he required such a large prison?

The guards scrambled up to their feet, awkwardly saluting out of sync. "Sir!" Their gazes flickered in suspicion between me, their boss who was leaning heavily against me, and the masked Olfred. One of the guards was already gripping the hilt of the crude machete-like sword that was strapped to his back.

"Open the damned doors, useless fools!" Sebastian barked. "We have a customer."

"Yes, sir!" they answered—in sync, this time—before pulling apart the sliding metal doors.

I guess we'll find out soon enough just how many slaves he's holding here, I thought, and lugged Sebastian in through the entrance with Olfred just beside me.

The smell hit me first. A concoction of foul odors was amplified by the damp air, sticky from the lack of proper ventilation. Even Olfred recoiled visibly from the stench, but Sebastian merely waved his hands in front of his nose. There was little visible other than the flickering lights and the trapdoor on the ground a few yards to our right.

'Something doesn't feel right,' Sylvie warned.

I feel it too—but then again, if you think about where we are, it'd be weird

for it to seem normal, I replied, taking another step. My chest tightened and the hair on my skin stood on end, but I ignored my body's protests. If I was going to come back and save the people held here, I had to know the layout and approximately how many were imprisoned.

"Did someone die in here again?" Sebastian said angrily.

A thin, scraggly man in a uniform of overalls and a dirty apron came running from one of the dimly-lit aisles. "Sir! My apologies for the smell. I was just cleaning up."

Sebastian finally pried himself away from me, standing on his own with the help of the wooden cane that the portly woman had been carrying for him.

"What's happened?"

The beady-eyed conjurer began limping down the center aisle, checking on each of the prison cells. It was eerie how silent this place was. There were no wails of sorrow or cries for help. I studied every one of the slaves as I followed behind Sebastian with Olfred. Each one was clothed in rags, huddled in the far corner of their cell. When they looked over at us, I got shivers from the dark, vacant eyes they all shared.

Don't look, I sent to Sylvie as she rustled up from inside my cloak.

'It's that bad,' Sylvie replied, more as a statement than a question.

I gritted my teeth. *They're treated worse than livestock.*

"It was one of the pregnant women," the cleaner replied, putting down the mop he had been holding before following his boss. "She died giving birth."

"The baby. Did it live?" Sebastian asked, unfazed.

"We'll have to wait a few more days to know for sure, but it seems healthy as of now. It's a girl."

Sebastian nodded in approval. "Excellent. A newborn will be worth more than that tramp anyway."

As the conjurer slowly hobbled through the aisles, I noticed the different reactions from each of the slaves. A few shivered uncontrollably as Sebastian passed by, while others glared spitefully; some just stared with distant,

hollow gazes.

“The dwarves and elves are held further down, but”—Sebastian spun around to face Olfred, a lewd smirk on his thin, pasty face—“do you see anyone you’re just dying to get your hands on?”

Olfred raised a hand. “As a matter of fact...”

Before I could even react, the earth beneath Sebastian began enveloping him, covering his feet and creeping up his legs.

“Huh?” Sebastian blurted as he tried to pry himself from the rising earth.

I whipped my head toward Olfred. “What are you doing?”

The Lance remained silent as he continued his spell. It was slow, but he was doing it on purpose. I could see the conjurer grow wide-eyed with fear and confusion.

“What are you idiots doing? Get them!” The conjurer readied his wooden cane to fire at Olfred, but instead of a spell, he released a shrill scream of agony. The earth that had consumed his legs, and was continuing to rise up his body, began turning a dark red. A faint sizzle could be heard amidst his screams, and the smell of burning flesh reached my nose.

The spell Olfred had cast on Sebastian wasn’t just to trap him—it was to slowly torture him.

“Olfred!” I called, but to no avail. The janitor had scrambled as far away as possible from Sebastian; I could hear the footsteps of the two subordinates behind us.

“Damn it,” I hissed, spinning around just in time to catch the burly man’s arm before his dagger struck Olfred in the back. I doubted the feeble attempt would’ve done him any harm, but nevertheless, these two were problems.

“Out of the way!” the brute spat, swinging his other arm.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I drove a fist into the man’s arm. A sharp snap rang out and his hand fell limp by his side. The bearded man howled in pain, dropping his dagger to cradle his broken arm.

I caught the rusty dagger as it fell, and swept my leg just below the portly

woman's knees. She crumpled to the floor, and before she could get back up, I drove her companion's dagger into her hand, skewering her to the ground. I looked over my shoulder to see how Sebastian had fared against Olfred, but all I saw was a statue of molten lava in the shape of the thin conjurer. He was dead, encased in a tomb of hardened magma.

"What the hell!" I snapped, grabbing Olfred's shoulder. "Even if you wanted him dead, you could've killed him without using deviant magic. What are you going to do if the Vritra sense what happened here?"

"Your worries are in vain," Olfred said calmly, taking off his mask.

Confused, I activated Realmheart. I wanted to see just how much mana fluctuation the Lance's spell had caused, and if it was possible we could remain hidden despite this setback.

But what I saw baffled me even more. Particles of mana moved erratically around Sebastian's corpse, but there were also mana fluctuations all around us. Either a wide-scale spell had been used or a battle had recently taken place here.

I whirled around, my vision shaky and palms clammy. My instincts had already alerted me to what was happening even before I saw the familiar Vritra approaching me.

MOTHER EARTH'S EMBRACE

THE FIGURE WALKED with a confident gait, his lanky arms wrapped messily in black bandages and dangling by his side. He had a slight hunch, which made him look a bit shorter than he actually was, but he still stood well over seven feet. Even before he had come close enough for me to make out his face, I already knew who he was.

How could I forget the retainer who had killed the Lance I'd replaced?

"Uto," I said calmly, despite the storm raging inside me.

His dark lips split into a sinister smile. "Hello, boy wonder."

"Retainer Uto." Olfred greeted him with an unnaturally stiff bow.

I restrained the urge to spit in Olfred's face. Despite the turn of events, I was actually relieved Uto was the retainer who had come. Unlike Cylrit or any other Vritra, his motive was obvious.

Uto ignored the dwarven Lance as he crept closer to me with outstretched arms. "You can't imagine how excited I am to have you here."

"Really?" I shrugged, playing along. "I was actually expecting a different retainer."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Olfred react.

"Oh?" Uto dipped his head so his gaze was level with mine, so close that we were practically touching. "You seem to know more than I thought you would."

With Realmheart still active, I could clearly make out his aura, the brilliant

nimbus of power crackling and popping chaotically like his very nature. But even without it, I could feel the pressure in the air around him—a palpable tension that was squeezing the air out of my lungs.

‘The two humans,’ Sylvie reminded me from within my cloak.

The subordinates of the now-petrified Sebastian seemed themselves frozen into stone as they stared wide-eyed at Uto. They didn’t know who he was, but they could feel the might of the being in front of them.

“Let’s take our fight elsewhere,” I said simply, turning my gaze back to the Vritra.

Uto tilted his head. “Fight? Why would you think a lesser like you is worth my time at all?”

“Because you’re here,” I answered, losing my patience. “If all you wanted to do was kill me or capture me, I’m sure Olfred and a few of your soldiers would have sufficed.”

The retainer didn’t answer. He simply gazed at me, looking... unamused.

Suddenly, he burst into laughter. “I can see why so many of you try so hard to keep your motives hidden. For times like these when it should be a surprise.” Then he made a dismissive gesture. “Lead the way.”

“Retainer Uto!” Olfred blurted. “Lord Rahdeas’s instructions were to deal with this one cleanly, to minimize the chance of—”

The Lance gave a nasal scream of pain before he even had the chance to finish his sentence. A black spike had shot up from the ground beneath Olfred, skewering his nose.

“Do you think I give a lesser’s ass what your traitorous master thinks is the best course of action?” Uto spat, then turned and walked toward the door.

Before following him, I checked on the two thugs, lying on the floor. They were unconscious but still breathing. I made my way toward the entrance I had come in from, checking on as many of the slaves as I could. The Vritra’s presence had overwhelmed their weak constitutions. Most of them were out cold; the ones who were conscious were probably no better off than the ones

who weren't. At the door, I turned back and took one last look at Olfred, who had erected a stone pillar below his feet to raise himself up enough to release his nose from the black spike.

Despite my suspicions, I had spent this short trip hoping they weren't correct. Now that I knew they were, it was difficult to wrap my head around the emotions manifesting inside me. I had never been good at it in my previous life, and I thought I had gotten a little better in this life, but apparently not quite enough.

I broke one of the three beads Aya had given me, activating it before tossing it into the large trapdoor by the entrance. Olfred's eyes grew wide when he saw this—he knew exactly what it meant.

OLFRED WAREND

I cursed, berating myself for the turn of events. To think *she* would be nearby. There was no time.

Rubbing my punctured nose—which had already begun to heal—I descended into the ground. The earth obeyed, parting beneath me and forming a path to the floor underneath the building, which served as a cover.

I dropped to the underground floor below, and several of the soldiers there shouted in surprise.

The underground level I had made was vast—far larger than the prison structure above it. Here, thousands of soldiers were able to rest on standby.

“Evacuate the premises immediately,” I ordered, my voice echoing off the large chamber walls.

A mixture of responses. Some of the Alacryan soldiers glanced at one another, while others blatantly ignored my command. Both they and I were fighting for the same cause, but because I had been born on this continent, they saw me as a traitor unfit to lead them despite my superior power and experience.

I repeated my order, this time causing the earth around us to quake. We had no time.

Soldiers began slowly filing toward the stairs leading back up to the surface. I tried to help by erecting a few more staircases, but when the light artifacts suspended from the walls started to burst one by one, I knew it was too late.

I cursed and erected a dozen magma knights around me, but the chamber had darkened to a near pitch-black state.

Shouts of confusion from the soldiers bounced off the walls that had once served as protection and concealment. Now I feared these men were in a prison.

I shrouded myself in a protective barrier of mana and sent pulses throughout the underground chamber in hopes of locating her.

“Come out, Aya,” I called, hoping to reason with her. “There will be another Vritra—a Scythe—coming soon. If you flee now, I can ensure that you’ll make it out alive.” I felt no remorse for the fate of these foreign soldiers; they were part of a bigger plan and time was running out. If Aya escaped and managed to notify the asura—Aldir—of my betrayal, it would be easy for him to kill me, simply by invoking the artifact I was bound by. At this point, though, I thought I might prefer that over what Aya might do here.

“So caring.”

Her whisper brushed against my ear—as if she were right beside me.

My magma knight promptly lashed out with its sword. A burning arc of lava launched in the direction of Aya’s whisper, but only crashed into the far wall. The lava scattered into glowing sparks upon impact, lighting up the darkened room for just a second. And that was when I noticed it.

Mist.

The entire underground chamber was submerged in a thick layer of swirling mist that almost seemed to have a mind of its own. And within this mist, chaos ensued.

Sporadic flashes of spells lit up the vast chamber as the soldiers retaliated against the intruder, but even those became less frequent as Aya got to work.

“I have to thank you for trapping so many Alacryans in one place,” she

whispered again, this time beside my other ear. “It makes my job much simpler.”

“Enough with your tricks and illusions!” I roared. “Come out and fight me face to face! Have you no shame as a Lance?”

“Shame?” Aya’s voice echoed in unison from at least twelve different locations at once. “It’s a matter of common sense, dear. Why would I throw away one of the few advantages I have?”

There was a levity in her words that came off as arrogance in this situation. She was always like that—not an ounce of seriousness in her ever-present façade.

“You leave me no choice,” I replied through gritted teeth. “Eliminating a Lance will at least make up for my error.”

I slammed my palm down onto the ground, creating chasms all around the floor and walls of the chamber. The temperature within my newly created domain rose drastically as glowing magma spilled out from the chasms, filling the underground expanse with fiery red light.

The mist was slowly evaporating, and my senses sharpened. Aya’s spell worked much like the mist in the Forest of Elshire, but it also served as an anchor for her to freely and near-instantly move about.

Despite the increasing amounts of fire and earth mana surrounding me, it didn’t look good. My first instinct was to escape into an open space where I could at least avoid the mist, but that would mean abandoning the thousand or so soldiers trapped here. I was tempted to just raise the entire underground chamber to the surface, but doing that would destroy the building above us. I would not shed innocent dwarven blood if I could help it.

I scanned my surroundings. Most of the room was obscured by the mist, but the earth told me how many were on their feet and how many lay either dead or incapacitated. In this short time, more than a fourth had already fallen.

I cursed once more, but regretted it immediately when an airy laugh sounded beside me.

“Is the impregnable mental fortress of Olfred Warend slowly crumbling?” Aya whispered—behind me this time.

I saw a group of soldiers in a defensive position, firing out spells, and watched as they began dropping to the ground, clutching their necks.

I won't be able to protect anyone at this rate, I thought, just before a stampede of horned wyrms suddenly appeared around me.

I ignored the illusions. Instead, I willed three of the rifts on the ground to erupt. Three blasts of molten lava coalesced in a fiery collision where I had sensed Aya's mana fluctuation.

My spell hit.

“As expected. Can't let my guard down against you,” Aya whispered, shimmering into view. She was clutching her burned arm.

Meanwhile, screams of horror and shock echoed through the room, from the soldiers who weren't able to distinguish between reality and her illusions.

“Your illusions are as sadistic as always, Aya,” I spat in disgust. “Your sick habit of torturing your victims is why you are always ostracized—even amongst your own people.”

“I saw that lovely statue you made up there,” Aya replied, fading from view.

“If you ask me, I'd much rather have my breath sucked out of my lungs than be slowly burned to death in a molten tomb.”

“That filth deserved it.” I erected another magma knight in the location of her voice. “I gave him the same fate as those he chose to enslave for monetary gain.”

“Is that the same logic that led you to betray Dicathen?” Her tone was sharp, which was rare for Aya.

“You elves have never understood the hardships our people go through. Even after your war with the humans, dwarves are *still* treated as lower class. Just because our people would rather hone our magical abilities to create rather than destroy, we are belittled and taken advantage of. I trust Lord Rahdeas's decision to join arms with the Vritra and the Alacryan army.”

“Do you think the Vritra would care for Rahdeas and your people? The Vritra and all the other asuras call us lessers because we’re nothing to them!” she hissed, displaying more emotion than I’d ever seen from her. “You’ve read the report we were given, haven’t you? How the Vritra experimented with the Alacryans in order to enhance their army to fight against the other asura clans. They want to do the same here, to your—to *our* people. Dwarves, humans, and elves alike!”

Now!

I siphoned as much mana as I could afford, creating a devastating blast of fire and stone around me.

The illusory mist dissipated, revealing the elven Lance.

She tilted her head. “Did you give up on protecting the Alacryans?”

“The ones left are dead. The others have escaped through the tunnels I created while you were busy lecturing me,” I answered.

Aya still wore her mask of apathy, but I could tell by the slight twitch of her brow that she had miscalculated.

Without hesitation, I rushed toward her. Aya retaliated, dashing back while hurling crescents of compressed air at me. However, I no longer had to worry about protecting others, which freed me to fully utilize my power.

Slabs of lava from the ground and walls began gravitating around me, enveloping me to form a protective suit of molten armor. The compressed blades of air chipped away at my magical armor, but new slabs of molten rock filled in the gaps.

The magma knights I had summoned all lunged toward the elven Lance, their weapons ablaze, but Aya was too fast. Even without the mist shrouding her movements, she was easily able to outmaneuver the golems and reduce them to pebbles with her counterattack.

Time seemed to slow as we fought. I couldn’t match her speed, but she couldn’t overcome my defenses.

“It seems we’re at a stalemate,” I said as I regenerated my armor to repair

another crack.

There were patches of raw skin on Aya's limbs where my magma had managed to burn through her defensive aura, but she was still relatively unharmed.

"Well, if this duel goes on for another hour or so, you might actually have the upper hand," she said with a cheery smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"As I said before, another Vritra is coming soon. It's not too late for you to run away."

She replied by hurling a barrage of air blades from all directions.

Ignoring the damage to my armor—which was already repairing itself—I shaped the magma in my left arm into a jagged lance.

I struck at Aya, simultaneously conjuring spikes of lava from the ground beneath her and the wall behind her.

For a moment, I thought my attack had landed successfully, but then her body faded into wisps of air.

Curse her illusions.

The battle continued, but it seemed Aya had no intention of beating me. Her attacks grew less confident. She seemed to be losing mana, but my instincts kept me cautious. She was planning something.

I let my guard down purposely, hoping she'd get in closer range.

She took the bait, flickering right above me with a whirlwind of air concentrated into a spear-like point around her arm. She struck the crown of my helmet, shattering it and nearly piercing my skull as well.

Reacting instantly, the suit of magma protecting me wrapped itself around Aya's arm, holding her in place. The elf's eyes widened in horror as I pierced her with a mana-infused hand.

Aya tried to speak, but only stuttered gasps came out as I twisted my bloodied arm inside her to ensure she wouldn't survive. "You're strong and resourceful, Aya, but patience was never your strong suit. If it is any consolation, I never wished for it to come to this."

I tugged back my arm but it wouldn't budge.

Then I saw it—the thin, hair-like strands of mana all over my armor.

I immediately tried to sever the mana strands, but my attacks went straight through them.

“You’re right,” Aya’s voice whispered beside me—and this time, it really was her. “I *am* rather resourceful.”

She had spoken to me once about a spell she had been developing, but to think she was able to do *this*—!

The strands of mana glowed and I felt the air in my lungs convulse. I was still breathing only because she willed it. I now realized that throughout our entire fight, she had been carefully biding her time, waiting for this moment.

“Surprised?” she said. “I needed the ever-vigilant Olfred to weaken his defenses, and the only way you’d do that is if you thought you had the upper hand. It also helped that your huge suit of rock kept your senses dull.”

The thin strands of mana, which were connected to the tips of her fingers, glowed once more and a sharp pain pierced my chest.

Rather than kill me, though, she kept talking, basking in her victory. “I know you’re fascinated by my magic, Olfred. You always have been. Even now, you want to know how I’ve done this, don’t you? Regardless of race, every body has a natural protection against foreign magic. It’s why water mages can’t just drain a person’s body fluids, why earth mages can’t manipulate the iron in someone’s blood.”

“Every capable mage knows that, but to establish a link to directly manipulate someone’s body using mana... how?”

“It is why air mages can’t draw the breath from your lungs,” she said, ignoring my question. “Unless...” She trailed off, letting the word hang in the air like a guillotine.

My lungs shuddered as I forced out a deep breath, sure it would be one of my last. Despite my strength, this feeling of my breathing being *allowed* by someone else was nothing short of terrifying.

I raised my hands in submission as I slowly turned to face Aya. Her usually gentle eyes were sharp—the way she looked at her enemies. “I know just by your gaze that my fate is sealed. It would be unreasonable for me to ask you to have mercy on Lord Rahdeas, but please spare Mica. She had no part in this. I had to drug her lest she somehow find her way here.”

Aya’s brows twitched ever so slightly in thought before she answered. “I’ll keep it in mind, but that’s not up to me to decide.”

I replied with a nod. That was the best answer I could hope to get. “Despite our disagreements, it was an honor working with you.”

I thought I saw a sliver of remorse in those cold eyes, but I knew I would never be able to confirm it. My breath left me as if it was being ripped out of my lungs, and my vision darkened as I felt the cold grasp of Mother Earth pulling me back into her embrace.

APPEARED

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I could see a glimpse of the dawning sun behind the Grand Mountains. It cast long shadows over the glades, a flat grassy plain scattered with large boulders and splintered logs.

This place appeared to have been part of the surrounding forest long ago, before an avalanche had struck. Snow still lingered, hiding in patches in the shadows of the debris and fallen trees.

Uto stood a dozen or so yards away, swinging his arms as if doing a morning stretch.

‘Arthur.’ Sylvie’s voice was filled with unease.

I know, I replied, taking off my woolen cloak. *I can already sense the difference between him and the other retainer we fought.*

“Do you know what most motivates an enemy?” Uto asked, stretching his long, thin neck.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I took Dawn’s Ballad from my dimension ring and withdrew it from its scabbard.

“You don’t know? I’ve found that it’s the enemy seeking revenge who retaliates with the most... gusto,” he answered nonchalantly.

An ethereal glow enveloped the teal blade of my sword despite the lack of light around us. Seeing the jagged remains of the broken tip still sent an ache to my heart, but I knew that even in this condition, Dawn’s Ballad was the

best weapon I could hope for right now.

I raised my gaze to match Uto's before answering. "You think this is a battle for revenge?"

"Isn't it?" He shrugged, taking a step closer as he tapped his chipped horn. "You were pretty riled up when you learned I was the one responsible for killing that elf."

"I met her when she was dying," I replied, taking a step forward as well. "So revenge wouldn't quite be my motivation. I simply consider you someone who needs to be disposed of."

Uto frowned. "Well, that's disappointing. Here I was, so excited that you'd be hell-bent on using every ounce of your being to seek vengeance for your comrade, companion, or possibly even lover—scratch that; you're a little too young for her, unless she was into that kind of..."

The lanky retainer mumbled on in his fantasy, then abruptly clapped his hands together. "Aha! Grandpa elf! His precious granddaughter is around your age, isn't she? Considering how close you are to that family, it would make more sense for you to fancy her than the elven Lan—"

The sickle-shaped blade of frost I had launched at the lanky retainer dissipated when it hit a black spike that manifested from the ground in front of him. The ink-stained metal spikes froze at the impact, but remained whole. "See? That's the kind of rage and impatience I was looking forward to." He snapped his fingers, as if in regret. "I should've killed the elf princess, or maybe a family member of yours, rather than waiting all the way out here for you to show up."

"Are you done?" I asked through gritted teeth, holding my sword out in an offensive stance.

Uto merely shrugged. "You may as well have that little bond of yours come out. You're going to need all the help you can get."

"Come out, Sylvie," I said aloud, keeping my gaze locked on the retainer.

She hopped out of my cloak, looking as fierce and fearless as I'd ever seen

her. I could feel her determination in my mind, fortifying me against the creeping sense of impending doom clawing at my gut.

“It’s a shame that the circumstances surrounding this battle aren’t as fervent as I thought they’d be, pup. That elemental blast you shot at me when we first met—that left a significant impression, you see. It made me think I had hurt you deeply—personally.” Uto let out a deep, exaggerated breath. “No matter. Let’s see if you can humor me for at least a few minutes.”

Uto took a step forward, but unlike the casual saunter he had used before, the space around him suddenly distorted. His presence became almost palpable in the air, and each step sent ripples of vibrations into the ground.

I immediately unleashed Realmheart, and Sylvie shifted into her draconic form.

“A wyvern?” Uto asked, tilting his head.

With Sylvie’s powers sealed since birth by her mother, she appeared to be a very powerful mana beast, but no more than that. I had stayed cautious since the war had begun, but it was a relief to see that even a retainer couldn’t tell.

“Why? Does that scare you?” I pushed.

He responded with a wicked sneer, then nonchalantly flicked his right hand.

With Realmheart amplifying my affinity to the ambient mana surrounding us, I *sensed* the disturbance in front of me before I could actually see anything. Sylvie and I dashed in opposite directions just in time to dodge the barrage of black spikes that had instantly manifested from beneath us.

The ground we had just been standing on now looked like the back of a large and angry porcupine. Each of the seven-foot spikes gleamed with menace.

“Brandish your weapon, *pup!*” Uto spat, drawing a large black harpoon from the center of his palm.

I brought Dawn’s Ballad close to my side, pointing the weapon’s fractured tip at Uto. The runes glowing on my arm burned with a comforting warmth as I began coalescing the mana surrounding me.

The blade of my sword shimmered in a scintillating array of colors as I

infused ice, fire, lightning, and wind. No weapon other than Dawn's Ballad could have held strong with such an overwhelming amount of mana being loaded into it.

Let's go! With Sylvie by my side, I charged.

I held my sword low as I raced toward the retainer. The ground beneath my weapon was splintered by its passing aura, but ruining nature was the least of my concerns.

With a manic grin, Uto charged as well, his harpoon arm drawn back, like a snake ready to lash out.

In an instant, my blade met his, creating a spherical wave from the sheer concussive force of our impact. The elements infused in Dawn's Ballad surged out, but Uto held on effortlessly.

He waggled his eyebrows at me, our weapons still intertwined. "Not bad."

'Duck,' Sylvie said.

I immediately obeyed, and my bond lashed out with her long tail, hitting him square in the side as soon as I dropped to the ground.

Uto flew away, slamming into a nearby boulder which shattered upon impact. The veil of debris had yet to clear when I flourished Dawn's Ballad. A polychromatic crescent of mana ripped from my blade, slicing the cloud of dust as it traveled.

The earth shook violently as the shockwave carved a trench into the ground before exploding through several trees, which fell in a series of splintering crashes around Uto.

'He's still alive,' Sylvie informed me. She was already prepared for her next attack.

I lowered myself, weaving more mana around my body in case of a surprise strike, but rather than a retaliation, a laugh rang from within the depression in the ground. Again, I saw the flickering fluctuations of mana around me. Thin spikes were conjured from thin air while large pillars of the black metal fired out from the shadows beneath the many boulders and fallen logs.

I parried the thin spikes, each one sending a jarring amount of force up my arms. Meanwhile, Sylvie knocked aside the thick pillars that had sprouted from the darker shadows. Her thick scales managed to withstand most of the attacks, but the sheer volume and intensity of Uto's sudden barrage left us both wounded and bleeding.

Don't heal us, I ordered when Sylvie gathered mana into her breath. *Not yet, at least.*

Fortunately, the spikes weren't laced with poison, but it was almost unfair how the retainer was able to conjure them out of thin air.

Even advanced earth mages had to shape the earth around them before firing them out. Uto seemed to be able to just manifest his attacks wherever he pleased.

"I expected more, pup," Uto sighed theatrically as he walked out of the depression of earth that I had created with my last attack.

Cover my back, I sent Sylvie, siphoning more mana out of my mana core and into my body. I could see my long hair turning white as I fell deeper into the Realmheart Physique. The runes became more complex and I could feel the mark branded on my back as well. The mana around me seemed eager to obey my thoughts. It twirled around me, forming seamlessly into spells that would normally require immense concentration.

Dawn's Ballad was emblazoned in a silver aura of frost, and my left fist crackled with tendrils of black lightning.

Uto's brows were knitted, but he had no time for thought as I arrived, unleashing a torrent of attacks. My crystalline sword was no more than a blur, leaving only streaks of silver in its path. I weaved in punches, elbows, knees, and kicks as Kordri had taught me in our years of training. Every time I swung Dawn's Ballad, he instantly countered with a black spike, which froze and shattered on impact. Meanwhile Sylvie stayed close behind, her limbs a flurry of scales and claws as she hacked and ripped away at the neverending barrage of black spikes Uto conjured. Soon, the area around us became a ruin

of frozen rubble and severed spikes of black metal.

'This isn't good, Arthur. Uto's attacks seem to get faster and stronger the longer we fight,' Sylvie grunted.

My eyes remained locked on the retainer, who had yet to receive a single wound. Every time it seemed like I was about to land an attack, a black slate of metal would form around the area, protecting him.

I'll have to kick it up a notch.

The thick tendrils of black lightning that coiled around my arm receded at my beckoning. I internalized the lightning magic, quickening my reaction time by reinforcing my very neurons with crackling energy.

The entire world seemed to slow. My senses were heightened—to an almost overwhelming degree. Colors seemed to pop, and the tiny particles of mana visible through Realmheart came alive.

I swung Dawn's Ballad once more and easily dipped under Uto's thrust. Just as my blade was about to connect with Uto's exposed side, I saw it.

The retainer's black spike magic, which seemed instant in normal time, was rapidly coalescing just where my attack was about to hit. I instantly redirected my strike upward, to just below his arm.

I could see the ghastly mana moving, reacting to my new attack. But it didn't reach in time. I feigned another attack, then drove my fist into his sternum instead.

The retainer buckled over from the blow. He took a step back to keep himself upright, and a thin trail of fluid too dark to be blood trickled down the side of his mouth.

I was surprised that my attack had actually connected. I paused for a beat before lunging forward with another strike.

It's in the shadows, Sylv! I screamed internally. Those black spikes can only manifest in areas of darkness. That's why his spells are always more powerful when they come from the shadows.

Uto's hand blurred. It *blurred*. Despite being in Realmheart and having

Thunderclap Impulse heightening my senses, I couldn't clearly see his strike. His fist hit me like a train. Even with the density of mana protecting my body, I felt myself flicker in and out of consciousness. By the time I had collected myself, I was twenty feet away, with my back up against the shattered trunk of a tree.

Sylvie was holding Uto off, the blood from her fresh wounds coating her black scales. Since her abilities had been sealed, she wasn't able to keep up with Uto any more than I could, even with her superior defenses.

I got up, pondering whether to try Burst Step once more to outmaneuver Uto. Sylvie's sharp tone cut off my thoughts. *'You'll be crippled for the rest of your life if you use Burst Step again!'*

'It's better than dying here, isn't it?' I sent back, frustration lacing my voice.

'There are other options to explore before we use that!' she hissed, twisting her large body to avoid Uto's attack. She batted the retainer away with her wing before launching herself directly at me. *'Get ready!'*

Realizing that she wasn't going to stop, I leaped and latched myself onto the base of her neck just before she kicked off the ground. Almost instantly we cleared a hundred feet, and continued to fly higher.

'What's your plan?'

'Like you said, it's the shade. He's able to manifest those metal spikes from wherever he wants as long as there are shadows,' she explained as we rose high enough that the mountain wasn't blocking the sun.

I winced at the bright rays, but immediately knew what Sylvie intended.

'We were fighting in a giant shadow!'

'Exactly. That's how he was able to conjure his attacks from wherever he pleased. If we fight him here, he'll be much more limited in where he can attack.'

I steadily stood up on Sylvie's back. She and I had never fought together like this. In my previous world, I'd had to spend hours training to fight on horseback, and I imagined that had to be easier than balancing hundreds of

feet above the ground on a flying dragon.

I barely had enough time to find my balance before Uto appeared just a few feet above us, a black spear in hand.

His shadow-magic spear, which had previously glistened like metal, looked dull now that he had to rely on the shadow his body cast as an anchor for his spells.

Careful not to hurt Sylvie, I pushed myself off her back and enveloped my body in a spherical whirlwind.

Activating Thunderclap Impulse once more, I barreled straight into the retainer's spear. Sylvie had been right; without the shadows, his attacks didn't come from all directions—only from the parts of his body facing away from the sun. Black spikes jutted from his body, but the spikes weren't nearly as dense or imposing.

“You're pretty smart, pup. I'm glad you found my weakness,” Uto said, his voice muffled by the wind.

It was awkward fighting in the air. Just as Uto was restrained by the lack of shade, I was limited by the fact that I couldn't fly. Sylvie maneuvered herself around me, acting as a platform for me to jump off of.

Try not to stay too close in case Uto tries to use the shadow your body casts, I sent Sylvie as I rushed in for another attack.

With Thunderclap Impulse's effects further enhanced by Realmheart, I thought we would be able to win. Trails of ichor leaked from the shallow wounds I managed to inflict on Uto, but his expression unsettled me.

His face, which had been the picture of manic glee, had mellowed into an expression of... boredom.

“Even with this handicap, you haven't been able to land a single meaningful hit,” he said, his voice somber. “It's disappointing.”

“Sorry, but I'm not fighting you to impress you,” I spat, spinning around. The fractured tip of Dawn's Ballad sunk into Uto's chest. I let the mana coalesced into the blade surge out, and Uto's entire body became engulfed in frost, fire,

lightning, and wind.

I kept my grip on my sword as I felt the two of us starting to drop. For a moment, I thought I had done it. I thought I had killed him.

Then I saw a black swirl manifest from where my sword was embedded into him. My attack had managed to destroy most of the bandages he had wrapped himself with, only to reveal what looked like piercings.

He had little studs of metal all over his torso and limbs, and, to my horror, each of those metal piercings cast its own little shadow around his entire body.

Uto's horn glowed with a purplish-black light while the shadow from his countless piercings spread entirely around his body.

I tried pulling Dawn's Ballad free of Uto's chest, but no matter how much mana I imbued into my body, I wasn't strong enough to pry it out.

"If you were able to notice my weakness in the short time we have been playing, don't you think I would've found out about it a long time ago?" His voice was muffled by the black mask that covered his entire head and face, except for his horns.

"Sylvie!" I said aloud, letting go of Dawn's Ballad.

My bond immediately repositioned herself to catch me, but a black spike suddenly shot out from Uto's body.

I siphoned more mana from my core, manifesting a gauntlet of ice around my right hand to strike the black projectile. I knew if I dodged it, the attack would hit Sylvie, so I smashed it aside instead, successfully redirecting the attack.

Or I thought I had.

Uto pointed a finger at me, as if warning me of something. I couldn't see his expression behind his shadow mask, but I swore I could feel his hateful sneer. An instant later, I felt the sharp prick of something against my skin—something coming up from below me.

With the internal lightning-attribute mana art enhancing my reactions,

tapping into the mysterious aether around me, I activated the first phase of my dragon's will.

Aevum, the control over time. With little mastery of and insight to this powerful ability, I was able to briefly stop time around me. Lady Myre had said aether could not be manipulated, only influenced—but in my case, it felt like I was merely tapping into the influence Sylvia had once had over *aevum*. Colors flipped and the purple particles of aether around me trembled violently. Uto, Sylvie, and even the black spike almost lodged into my back—it all stopped abruptly. With Uto's last attack no longer in motion, I was able to whirl away and avoid the full brunt of the impact.

Releasing Distortion—what I chose to call phase one—was much like letting out my breath after being underwater until the brink of drowning. I was barely able to gather my wits as the black spike flew past, disoriented as I was from the near miss.

My body hurtled downward, but just as I landed on Sylvie's back, Uto reacted. He flashed across the sky like black lightning and struck Sylvie and I simultaneously, throwing us into a downward spiral.

As we plummeted toward the ground like a comet, I flashed in and out of consciousness once more. My entire body was a bundle of agony; I couldn't discern exactly which part of me was broken.

Without even the luxury of screaming from the pain, I desperately tried to protect myself and my bond using magic.

Change into your fox form! I cried, but rather than obey, Sylvie scrunched her body into a ball, covering me with her arms, neck, torso, and wings. I could feel the warmth of her underbelly as she gripped me harder.

'You don't have enough mana to take the impact. At least my body will be able to block some of the force.'

Fool, I replied. Even in my thoughts I sounded weak.

I braced myself for the impact but it never came—or rather, I never felt it. By the time I regained consciousness, I was in the center of a crater, even more

exhausted.

Sylv? I tried to get up, but my body refused to listen.

Sylvie? I sent out once more. No response.

A weak moan escaped my mouth as I turned. Sylvie's body was still underneath me, but her limbs were splayed out and there were black spikes everywhere beneath us—some broken, some jutting out of her.

"No." I shook my bond. "Sylvie. Wake up." I shook harder.

"This isn't funny, Sylvie!" I rolled off her body, scratching myself on a nearby spike.

"Sylvie, please!" My vision swam and I could feel my heart trying to burst out of my chest.

A wave of panic rushed over me, numbing me to all the pain. I crawled desperately, trying to dislodge her arm from a large black spike. I gritted my teeth, holding back sobs while trying to think of a way to help my bond.

"Aether," I muttered breathlessly as I held my hands against her body. It was a long shot, but I had to try.

I activated Realmheart once more. Every inch of my body screamed in pain at the backlash, but I held on. With the particles of mana and aether visible, I desperately tried to somehow guide the purple particles into Sylvie's body.

"Please," I begged.

The purple particles of aether around Sylvie began quivering, as if answering my desperate cry for help. Slowly they swirled and seeped through her scales. I didn't know what would happen. Since Sylvie was able to heal me through aether, I thought maybe she could use it to heal herself as well.

Unable to keep Realmheart active any longer, I sank to my knees, pressing my face against the base of Sylvie's neck.

"You're going to be okay," I breathed. "You *have* to be okay."

Several black spikes had pierced Sylvie's body and limbs, but I didn't have the strength to pull them out. I tried hitting the black spike that had impaled her side, hoping it would come loose from the ground.

I struck at it. I struck again. I pummeled it until I couldn't condense mana anymore and my knuckles bled.

"Your beast will live," a female voice said from somewhere nearby. It sounded calm and mature.

Aya?

Desperate and hopeful, I turned around and looked up, but it wasn't her. It was a girl, but it wasn't Aya.

Far from it.

It was the girl I had seen at the cavern in Darv.

The Scythe. Except... in her hand was Uto. And he appeared dead.

THE FIRST SCYTHER

I STARED SILENTLY AT HER.

Sweat drenched my skin and my entire head throbbed. My tongue felt like a rag that had been wrung dry. My body felt fear, but my mind was lost in a web of thoughts. I could feel the gears turning as my brain tried to come up with a scenario that would make sense of this turn of events. The conclusion that it came to, however...

There was no way out.

With no mana left in my core, my body on the brink of collapsing from backlash, and my bond incapacitated, I did the only thing I *could* do. I waited.

The woman stood near the rim of the crater Sylvie's body had made. She looked fundamentally different from the retainers I had seen up to now.

Her hair was long and reflected the sun like liquid amethyst. Unlike the witch, Uto, or Cylrit, whose complexions had been varying shades of sickly gray, this woman's skin had the quality of polished alabaster. Her eyes were as piercing as the long black horns that spiraled up from her skull like an impala's.

Aside from her remarkable physical appearance, what struck me most strongly was her aura—or rather, her lack of an aura.

It wasn't like when I had learned to hide my presence. Rather, the Scythe's aura seemed to be there, but controlled—contained like a devastating bomb

ready to explode. The only time I had felt this was when I'd met Lord Indrath. Sylvie's grandfather—the current leader of the asuras—had the same suffocating presence; it made everyone wary of when he might explode.

I swallowed heavily, which was the biggest movement I'd made since I had become aware of the Scythe's arrival.

She remained still, though. That was a good sign. If she wanted to kill me, she could have done so by now. I wanted to ask why she was holding onto the dead or unconscious Uto by his hair, but couldn't quite work up the nerve.

I was pretty certain that neither Sylvie nor I had done Uto any serious harm; that meant either he had exceeded his limits with that last attack, or that this Scythe had something to do with his current state. Both options seemed unlikely.

Without moving, I kept using Mana Rotation to passively regain mana. My body burned and my core ached from backlash, but I held on. No matter how much mana I gained, there was nothing I could do anyway; I couldn't escape with Sylvie in this condition and there was no way I was going to leave her behind. My brain flickered with the notion that it might be worthwhile to fight against this Scythe, but that thought was quickly doused by every other fiber of my being.

So I remained in the same exact position, staring at the purple-haired Scythe. Dozens of possible scenarios ran through my thoughts, but then she did something I would never have predicted.

Reaching down with her free hand, the Scythe snapped off Uto's horns one by one, as if she were plucking flowers. Without speaking, she casually tossed them at me. I reacted instinctively, as if they were bombs—and for all I knew, they could be. I scrunched into a ball, protecting my vitals. I positioned myself between the severed horns and my bond in the feeble hope that I could somehow protect my two-ton dragon, but nothing happened. The two black horns clattered as they rolled down the side of the crater before

stopping anticlimactically at my feet.

I looked at the horns on the ground cautiously, then locked eyes with the Scythe. Her behavior didn't make any sense; from what I had gathered, the Vritra's horns were an important part of themselves. Why would she do that to her ally?

Just when I thought her actions couldn't be more unpredictable, the Scythe lifted Uto by his hair and pierced his body with a thin blade of what looked to be pure mana. The deadly purple blade jutted through Uto's sternum, but he didn't react at all. *Could he really be...*

Whether it was because I was exhausted—physically and mentally—or the Scythe was enacting some sort of scheme, I couldn't make sense of her actions. At this point, I was just shocked that she had been able to so easily pierce Uto's core.

Mana and beast cores were dense, hypersensitive parts of the body; the higher the user's stage, the more resilient they were. Being able to pierce through Uto's core without causing him complete agony meant that this Scythe had done something more than simply knocking him unconscious.

The Scythe tossed Uto like a ragdoll into the crater, toward Sylvie and me.

"It was a tough battle, but you managed to defeat Uto. You were able to keep him alive, but for safety measures, you pierced his core to ensure that he won't be able to use any mana art. You did this so you can take him back to interrogate him," the Scythe said, as if reading from a script.

My initial response was to ask what was going on, but this Scythe seemed like the sort of person who despised needless questions that wasted her time. Based on her actions, it seemed that she either didn't agree with this war or she had her own personal agenda. I could work with either option, as long as it meant I wasn't going to die today.

I asked a different question instead.

"Would it be too much to ask your name?" I muttered, my voice betraying me despite the confidence I was trying to project.

There was a slight rising of one of her brows, but that was the only outward change of expression she exhibited.

After a slight pause, she answered, her voice flat, “Seris Vritra.”

Pushing myself up off the ground, I managed to sit up, propping my back against Sylvie’s body. My own body felt like it weighed as much as Sylvie did, but I did my best to appear poised.

“Thank you, Seris Vritra. I won’t forget this kindness.” I dipped my head respectfully. It wasn’t clear whether this Scythe was an enemy or an ally. She seemed like neither, but whatever the case, she had saved my life—and Sylvie’s. For that, the least I could do was thank her, regardless of her race or stance in this war.

Seris cracked a slight smile. “Peculiar boy.”

The Scythe turned, preparing to leave. Then, over her shoulder, she said, “For both our sakes, get stronger—fast. Uto’s horns will be an invaluable resource for you if you can manage to extract the mana stored inside.”

Wide-eyed, I gingerly scooped up the two fist-sized horns and stored them inside my ring. By the time I looked back up, Seris had disappeared.

I wasn’t sure whether it was because Uto was unconscious or because Seris had destroyed his core, but the bed of black spikes—which Sylvie had used her own body to protect me from—had crumbled. Sylvie’s wounds were already closing, and her breathing became more relaxed. I thought white core mages healed fast, but Sylvie’s recovery was actually visible.

No longer worried that my bond might die out here, I turned my attention to the unconscious and bleeding retainer. Dawn’s Ballad still pierced his chest, but it slid out easily when I gave it a tug. My sword had left hardly a scratch on Uto, but Seris’s seemingly nonchalant attack had easily pierced his body and core.

“It looks like I have quite a ways to go before I try to take on another retainer, let alone a Scythe,” I muttered to myself. I hated to admit it, but, with the appearance of Seris, I had completely lost my will to fight. It had

been a while since I had felt so helpless. It wasn't a good feeling, and this time was no different.

When I had enough mana gathered, I attempted to use magic—but my core churned, sending me in a fit of agony. The mana burned as I channeled it through my body, but I was finally able to encase Uto's body in ice.

Despite having almost died just moments ago, a sense of calm surrounded me. There were things I should've been doing right now—helping Aya if her battle hadn't already ended, informing Mica about Olfred's betrayal—but right now, I couldn't. In my weakened state, I couldn't help them even if I wanted to, so I gave in to my body's demands and rested.

I leaned heavily against Sylvie's body, her rhythmic breathing almost therapeutic. I usually never let myself fall into daydreams or wistful fantasies, but right now, I felt like I deserved it. Letting my thoughts drift, I allowed myself to imagine my life after the war. I let myself have some happy thoughts, even if they wouldn't necessarily come true.

Thoughts of myself, grown up—maybe even sporting a beard—with a family of my own. Tess's face popped into my mind, and I immediately felt the urge to abandon my reverie. But I deserved this little fantastical break.

So I let the scenes continue. Tess looked older—more mature but still dazzlingly beautiful. She smiled brightly at something I'd just said, her cheeks coloring with just a slight tinge of red. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear before glancing upward at me coyly. She took a single step toward me, and then suddenly we were chest to chest. Tess raised herself up on her toes as she closed her eyes. Her blush deepened and her long lashes quivered.

Just as she pursed her lips to kiss me, Tessia was suddenly ripped from my arms. I was surrounded by darkness, but I could vaguely make out the figure standing in front of me, just a few feet away.

It was me. The *former* me.

What makes you think you can have this happiness—that you deserve this

happiness? The former me spoke, his voice echoing through the void.
After what you did to them, do you think you can just forget and move on?
They died because of your choices. They paid the price for your selfishness.
Whether you're King Grey or Arthur Leywin, you can only exist alone.
Whether you're King Grey or Arthur...
... Grey or Arthur...
... Arthur...
“Arthur!”

I jolted awake. In front of me was Aya.

Her expression immediately relaxed and a flicker of relief shone in her eyes.

“You wouldn’t wake up no matter how hard I shook you. I was beginning to worry something had happened during the fight.”

“I’m just a bit tired.” I mustered a smile to reassure her.

Aya nodded. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Staring at the elven Lance, I saw that she was much paler than normal, but she had no visible wounds. “How did it go on your side?”

Aya’s expression darkened. “A few of the Alacryan soldiers were able to escape. As for the traitor, I executed him.”

Traitor. Execute. I mulled over the elf’s choice of words. She was distancing herself from the fact that she had killed a former comrade. I couldn’t blame her; Olfred’s death left a bitter taste in my mouth too, but Aya had worked alongside him longer than I had.

“What about Mica?” I asked.

Aya shook her head. “I came here straight after finishing my job at the Alacryan’s hidden base. I thought you might need my help, but I see that it was unnecessary.”

For a brief moment, I thought of telling the Lance about Seris and how she had helped me, but I chose not to. There was no hard reasoning behind it; I just wanted to know more about Seris before saying anything. “It was a hard battle, but with Sylvie’s help, I was able to defeat him.”

There was a flash of doubt in Aya's eyes, but she immediately recovered with a curt nod. "I'm glad you both got through this in one piece. We've won."

"Thanks," I said, stroking Sylvie's body. "It doesn't feel like we won though. We managed to bring down a retainer, but at the cost of a member of the Council and a Lance—maybe even two."

"I think it's safe to leave it at just one Lance," Aya replied, staring idly at Uto, whose frozen body I had left upright.

"So Mica wasn't a part of it?"

Aya shook her head. "She still needs to be questioned, but I highly doubt it."

I rested my head against Sylvie's body, grateful for that bit of news, at least. I could feel my bond in my thoughts again—a mixture of the emotions she was feeling in her dreams.

"With Rahdeas's arrest and Mica's questioning, along with this retainer's interrogation, it's going to be hectic when we get back to the castle," I said, more to myself than to Aya.

"It definitely will be, so get some rest here while you can."

I smiled weakly at Aya, thinking there was too much on my mind for me to relax: what to think about Seris's actions; how to utilize the horns to get stronger; how to explain the recurring nightmares about my past life. But in the battle between my body and mind, my body prevailed, and I succumbed to the compelling lure of sleep.

GREYING GLIMPSE

“NEXT! Cadet Grey, no surname. Please step onto the platform,” said the researcher on the other side of the glass. He wore an immaculate lab coat, and his half-closed eyes never left his clipboard. “Please place your dominant hand on the globe and wait for further instructions.”

I did as instructed, broadening my shoulders and puffing out my chest—as if my posture was somehow going to help me on this test.

“Now, Cadet Grey, the globe is a sensor that will measure your ki level. Please imbue ki into the sensor until you are given the signal to stop.”

Taking a deep breath, I siphoned the ki from my sternum and let it flow up and through my right arm into the glass sphere. My ki looked like droplets of ink in water as it swirled and expanded in the sensor that was measuring it. I saw the researchers jotting down notes with looks of disappointment.

Barely a minute had passed and I was already sweating profusely, my hand trembling on top of the globe.

“You may stop,” the same researcher said through the intercom, his voice sounding even less impressed than it had before. “Please proceed to the training grounds for the final part of your assessment.”

I walked out the same door I had come in through, taking a peek back as the researchers discussed my score behind their glass window. The one who had given me the instructions was shaking his head.

Walking down the brightly lit corridor, I stopped at the back of a line of

cadets waiting their turn for the final portion of the assessment.

“Hey... do you know what the last test will be?” asked the bulky young man in front of me in line. He seemed nervous.

“We’ve been through the tests to measure our mental acuity, physical strength, and ki. Just by process of elimination, this last one can only be *that*.”

The muscular teen’s eyes lit up in realization and he grinned smugly. “Oh... *that*! Haha! I’m good at *that*.”

I let out a small laugh at the simpleton’s change in attitude. It was the same for me—I was also good at *that*.

The line started moving again, and we filed into a large auditorium with a ceiling at least a hundred feet high. There were already a fair number of cadets gathered in designated locations, with an instructor leading each group. I scanned the area in hopes of finding Nico or Cecilia, but I couldn’t see either of them.

Another instructor stood at the front of our line, guiding each of the new cadets to a different group. He pointed to his right, toward a crowd of nervous cadets near the far corner, and the bulky boy in front of me confidently swaggered to his assigned group.

“Cadet Grey, no surname,” the instructor read.

I stifled the urge to scowl every time a faculty member pointed out the fact that I had no family name. Why did that matter here?

“Proceed to Group 4C, halfway to the far left corner of the auditorium. The floor is marked for your convenience,” the instructor said, pointing in the appropriate direction.

I gave him a curt nod and walked to my group, which was a hodgepodge of approximately a dozen young men and women of all different sizes and builds. A petite girl who looked to be around my age stood confidently with her arms crossed. She was purposely leaking traces of her ki so everyone around her could feel it. A toned boy with neatly cropped hair and an

arrogant smirk stood tall, placing himself near the front of the group. Judging by the crest pinned to his chest pocket, he was from a military family. No doubt he had been raised to be a prominent member of the military—perhaps even a contender to challenge for the position of king.

In the middle of the group was our instructor—a heavyset man who looked to be in his forties, his mustache better groomed than his thinning hair.

“Cadet Grey?” the instructor asked with a raised brow as he read off his clipboard.

“Yes, sir.” I nodded respectfully. No point in being brusque with the man responsible for determining my status inside this military academy.

“Okay! Looks like everyone’s here then,” he said, tucking his clipboard under his armpit and clasping his hands. “Hello everyone. You may all refer to me as Instructor Gredge. Before we begin, I’d like to say a few words.”

The cadets in our group shuffled around him in a circle so everyone could see.

“As many of you have guessed, this last portion of the entry exam will be practical combat. I have the ki level results here for everyone in this group, and while I will not disclose anyone’s level, I’ll tell you now that they all differ. Practical combat means that you will not always have the luxury of being able to fight someone with the same level of ki as you. Sometimes you’ll be lucky and face an opponent who can barely strengthen his fist.”

A few cadets in our group snickered at that.

“Other times, you will be in situations where your opponent has a much larger ki pool than you do,” the instructor continued, holding up his clipboard once more. “Regardless, you will be judged on your ability to adapt accordingly and, most importantly, prevail.”

We exchanged glances with each other. Then a scrawny teen, who looked a few years older than me, raised his arm and spoke. “Are the rumors true—that cadets can die during this test?”

Instructor Gredge scratched his beard. “Highly unlikely. The weapons are

blunted and softened. Also, I'll be carefully monitoring the fights and will intervene when necessary."

A few cadets in the group were still anxious despite the instructor's reassurance. I couldn't blame them. The difference in ki levels made a huge difference in strength and agility—enough so that even a softened weapon could be deadly.

The instructor cleared his throat to get our attention. "As you all know, the entry exam is important for determining and securing a cadet's future in this academy. Those who do well here will be well-supported by the academy and be given resources to further their skills, while those who do poorly will be neglected and eventually expelled. It's unfair, but it's also the way of life. I'd ask if any of you have any questions but we're short on time, so let's begin."

Our plump instructor waved his hand, motioning for some of the cadets to get out of his way. He then dug out a key from his pocket and inserted it into the wall. That was when I noticed the faint seams in the ground.

"As this is an exam and not a class, we will not be debriefing you on these matches. You may choose to speculate amongst yourselves, however," he said. As he spoke, the wall slid open to reveal a weapon rack, and at the same time panes of glass-like material rose from the thin seams in the ground. Within seconds, an area roughly thirty feet on each side was enclosed by the clear walls, which rose dozens of feet high.

"First up will be Cadet Janice Creskit against Cadet Twain Burr. Select the weapon of your choice and enter the arena." Instructor Gredge motioned at the door and the panes slid open.

The small-framed girl who had been flaunting her ki picked out a blunted spear, while the scrawny teen who had just asked the instructor whether it was possible to die carefully selected a shield and sword. They followed the instructor into the enclosed area, the panes closing behind them.

"Glancing blows will be ignored; I will determine whether the match will stop or not. Until then, fight to your heart's content." Our instructor placed

himself in between Janice and the anxious Twain. “Begin!”

Twain jumped back and immediately fell into a defensive stance, holding his fiberglass shield up while keeping his blunted sword close to his body.

Janice, on the other hand, lunged at her opponent. A muted thud resounded as her spear clashed with Twain’s shield, but she didn’t relent. With no regard for her own safety, she let loose a wild set of thrusts, pushing Twain back with each one.

The petite girl lashed out like a cat, quick and agile, but too reckless. Although his knitted brows showed uncertainty, Twain seemed to realize her weakness and timed his next block to parry away Janice’s spear.

She staggered just a step, but that was all Twain needed. He quickly swung his sword, striking her square in the shoulder. I expected her to writhe in pain, or at least recoil from the direct hit, but a translucent layer of ki warding off the worst of the blow.

With a smug grin plastered on her face, Janice smacked Twain’s sword away with her hand and tackled him with the same shoulder that had taken the blow. Twain buckled. Janice followed up by swiping her weapon at Twain’s legs, sweeping him off his feet—literally.

The scrawny teen fell to the floor and Janice raised her spear. But before she could bring the weapon down into Twain’s face, Instructor Gredge grabbed it and intercepted her.

“Match over. Both cadets return to the group,” he said unceremoniously, releasing the spear.

There was a moment of silence as our instructor jotted a few things onto his clipboard while Twain and Janice walked out of the arena.

“Cadet Grey and Cadet Vlair of House Ambrose. Select the weapon of your choice and enter the arena.”

Murmurs went through our group at the name ‘Ambrose.’

The toned, good-looking boy—who also looked about my age—walked over to Janice.

“May I use the spear?” he asked, holding his hand out.

The girl, who had just fought like a feral cat, suddenly turned tame as she handed him the blunted spear. “Sure.”

I picked out a sword about half the width of the one Twain had used, then walked into the enclosed area.

“That’s it, Cadet Grey?” Vlair asked with a raised brow. “The type of sword you chose is usually paired with a brace or another sword.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine like this.”

“Suit yourself,” Vlair said with a shrug.

“Begin.” Instructor Gredge signaled with a wave of his clipboard.

Unlike Janice, Vlair took a much more neutral stance with his spear. I wasn’t too familiar with the forms for that particular weapon, but just on instinct alone, I knew he was much better trained with it than Janice was.

I tightened my grip on my sword but kept the blade low. Vlair’s eyes narrowed, almost as if he was insulted that I hadn’t taken a proper stance.

My opponent made the first move, lunging forward. His weapon became a blur, but I already knew where it was going to be. I dodged his first thrust with just the slightest twitch of my head, and ducked underneath the quick swipe that followed.

The match continued, with Vlair unable to land even one blow. I knew that a single hit would probably be the end of me for this duel, but I had to save my limited ki for when I could actually attack. Meanwhile, Vlair had a consistent aura of ki enveloping his body and weapon, which was impressive. The previous cadets had been able to protect themselves with ki to a certain extent—Janice more so than Twain—but Vlair’s ability to extend his ki into his weapon was something that came from both talent and hard work, especially at our age.

His blunted spear whistled past my cheek with practiced precision, but I allowed my body to do its work. His movements were blurred and he seemed to be using a technique that bent and curved his spear for a wider range of

attacks, but he was still slow—at least to me. He lacked the fear-inducing ferocity that the attackers who had tried to kidnap Cecilia had possessed.

I had gotten more used to this sensation over the years, but it was still odd the way my body moved seamlessly with my thoughts. I was glad for this talent, as it served as a way to even out the playing field, considering my shallow ki pool.

Cadet Ambrose kept attacking, and his precise combination of attacks soon became laced with emotion. Frustration and impatience took over, dulling his attacks and leaving his body more open. I took advantage of that fact and went in. Strengthening the ball of my foot with ki, I redirected his spear up, so his ribs were exposed on his right side, and darted forward.

I swung my sword, hitting him cleanly just below the armpit. Vlair reeled with the impact, but I could tell by the sensation that it hadn't done much. The rich layer of ki protected him.

"Enough. Match over," Instructor Gredge declared.

"What? That barely tickled! I can still fight," Vlair retorted, anger in his eyes.

"There is no victory in these matches, Cadet Ambrose. I have seen enough from both of you, which is why I'm concluding this match," our instructor said, annoyance evident in his tone.

Vlair glanced at me. "I disagree that you've seen enough. The kid just landed a lucky blow."

Instructor Gredge shook his head. "The 'lucky blow' was made *after* you failed to land a single strike for exactly one minute and eight seconds. Now before I dock you even more points, please make your way out of the arena so the other cadets can have their turn."

Vlair stared daggers at both me and our instructor, but walked out after tossing his spear on the ground.

The exams went quickly after that, giving us time to rest and eat while the results board was uploaded.

"Is this seat taken? Of course it isn't," a familiar voice asked and answered

from behind me. Nico nudged me with his elbow before sitting down across from me. He was carrying a tray with the same meal I had received and was currently eating. Cecilia followed close behind him, and shot me a smile before she sat down next to Nico.

I ignored Nico's little tease, swallowing my steamed vegetables before asking, "How did your tests go? Did the amulet work?"

Cecilia held up her right hand to show me the little coin-sized pin in the center of her palm. "It worked like a charm. Judging by the testers' reaction, I was probably somewhere between average and not significantly above average."

"I should've named it the not-significantly-above-average ki displayer," Nico chuckled as he pointed his fork at me. "I told you it'd work."

I respected Nico's resilience and ability to adapt. He had undoubtedly been affected by Headmaster Wilbeck's death, but he didn't let it get to him for long. He'd bounced back and pushed us—especially me—to keep working toward a goal. I knew that he often joked to cover his emotions, but I thought his wit was much needed in our group.

I nodded. "I'm glad it did... although I still think it would've been best if you two had gone to a regular school. It's not too late, I thi—"

"And I told you that we're sticking together," Nico cut in. His eyes flickered with intensity for a moment, but then he relaxed. "Besides, this place has a research facility and several workshops available to the engineering department students."

"Nico's right," Cecilia chimed in, fiddling with her food but not really eating.

"We all have things we can learn by being here."

"Fine, but we have to be careful." I lowered my voice and scooted closer to my friends. "We don't know exactly what group or organization was after Cecilia."

"You're worrying too much," Nico said dismissively. "The new ki restrainer I built should last long enough for me to scrounge around for a few parts here

and make a more stable one.”

We talked as we ate, but our eyes kept shifting back to the large clock above the kitchen. It wasn’t just us—everyone was anxious for the announcement.

Nico pushed away his tray of food. “Well, I can’t eat any more of this rat turd. Want to just head to the board now?”

“Sure,” I said. “We might be able to get a better spot.”

We made our way out of the hall and back outside. The sun shone brightly overhead, but with only buildings and artificial trees and shrubs surrounding us, the academy felt stifling.

“Are the engineering cadets separated into divisions as well?” I asked Nico as we walked.

My friend swayed his head side to side. “Yes and no. We—the more *intellectual* cadets—still have to use ki to create tools and gadgets, so they give priority to those who have a large ki pool, but it’s not as heavily weighted as for you martial cadets. I’ll either be placed in first division, which is the fast track, or second division.”

“I wish it was that simple for us,” Cecilia said. “Why do martial cadets have divisions that go all the way down to five?”

Nico shrugged. “The way of life. Anyway, I hope you two get into the same division, if not the same class. That way, Grey, you can mess up any boy who comes too close to Cecilia.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. Nico said it lightly but I could tell he was embarrassed by his words. Even after all these years, Nico still hadn’t said anything about his feelings for Cecilia.

By the time we arrived at the large courtyard where the board would be updated, there was already a large crowd of cadets trying to inch as close to the board as possible.

“Looks like everyone here had the same idea we did,” Cecilia muttered.

“No choice but to plow through,” Nico said as he pushed me forward. “Lead the way, cadet!”

After several minutes of squeezing through hundreds of cadets, we made it close enough to the board that we could read the large words being loaded up onto the screen.

“Nico, your bottom lip is bleeding!” Cecilia exclaimed. “Did you get hit?”

“Alas, I did not come out unscathed—I took a stray elbow to my face in order to protect you!” Nico said dramatically.

I shook my head. “Nico chews his lip when he’s nervous, frustrated, concentrating, or all of the above. He probably bit down too hard.”

Nico clicked his tongue. “Smartass.”

Just then, the screen flickered and lit up. Words—names and numbers—appeared on the screen in rows. The cadets behind us pushed us forward as they all tried to get as close as possible to find their names.

I found Nico’s fairly easily. He had been placed in division one, class one—the highest tier. I saw Vlair Ambrose’s name next; he was division one, class five of the martial cadet list, meaning he had barely made it to first division. Cecilia’s name came into view next, and the restrained squeal of delight told me she had found her name as well.

I looked down, searching for my name, but the lower my line of sight fell, the more my heart sank. The lower the names appeared, the lower their division and class was. Cecilia’s name had appeared fairly early, since she had been placed in division two, class four. By the time I found my name, I knew my goal of excelling in the academy and getting strong enough to find and take down the people that killed Headmaster Wilbeck was going to be much harder than I thought.

I mumbled my name and division, saying it over and over just in case I had read wrong. “Grey. Division four, class one.”

ARTHUR LEYWIN

My eyes crept open and I saw the familiar ceiling of my room back in the floating castle. I was thankful that I hadn’t experienced another nightmare, but the dream had still left an incredibly bitter taste in my mouth.

“Time to get up, Syl—” I caught myself, remembering that my bond was in the medical ward of the castle.

Yesterday seemed more like a dream than the dream I’d actually just had. Fortunately, we had only needed to travel to the nearest major city that had a teleportation gate. Several soldiers had to help carry Sylvie from the site of our battle to the gate and through it, but she made it safely back and was being treated.

They hadn’t let me see Mica at all—she had been taken into custody for questioning. Varay and Bairon had gone to meet with the dwarven Lance in case she’d decided to fight back, but she had come back willingly. By the time I had returned to the castle at about midday, Rahdeas had already been placed in one of the cells, to be interrogated at a later time, along with Uto.

Staring outside as I stood in the shower, I realized that it was early morning, which meant I had slept through the rest of the day yesterday, and all through the night. I still felt sluggish and hot from backlash, but sleeping for over eighteen hours seemed to have done wonders for me.

As I got out of the shower, I heard footsteps in the hallway. They stopped in front of my room, and I didn’t even give the person the chance to knock before I called out, “Who is it?”

An unfamiliar voice, a woman’s, sounded from the other side of the door. “General Arthur. I was instructed to help you get ready and escort you to the meeting hall.”

Looking down at the scars covering my dripping body, I suddenly felt uncomfortable at the thought of anyone seeing them. The scars the witch-like retainer had left on my neck and left hand were the worst, but they were just two of many that littered my body. Mana and Sylvie’s dragon will helped my recovery rate tremendously, but that only meant the scars formed faster to seal the wounds; it didn’t make my skin pearly new.

“I’m almost done; just wait there for a minute,” I said, hurriedly putting on trousers and a tunic with a high collar, and covering my hands with thin

gloves. It was no longer necessary to hide my scars, since the traitors had been captured, but I felt better doing so.

I made sure Dawn's Ballad was safely inside my dimension ring, along with Uto's severed horns, then readied my mind for the endless strategic meetings and questionings to come.

STRATEGIC CONDUCT

THE IMMACULATELY-DRESSED elven secretary accompanied me to the meeting room. Our short walk was filled with awkward silence.

I wanted to stop by my sister's room, but the elf insisted that the meeting took precedence. My eyes drifted through the halls as we walked and I found myself searching for any familiar face—but mostly Tess. Probably because of that damned scene I had imagined—us hugging each other, about to kiss.

When I asked, the secretary informed me—to my disappointment and worry—that Tessia and her team had gone back to their post in the Beast Glades.

“When did they leave?” I asked.

“Yesterday at sunrise, General Arthur,” she replied almost robotically, just as we reached the entrance to the meeting room.

The guards on each side of the entrance had slid their wooden door open upon seeing us approach, then immediately stepped aside, thumping the hilts of their spears on the ground in salute. “General.”

I dismissed the secretary and walked into the circular room, meeting the gaze of the Council members and other Lances.

It didn't take long for the meeting to begin once we had all gathered—minus Aldir, our missing ambassador for the asuras. However, with Rahdeas and Olfred no longer on the Council, the once-cramped meeting room seemed eerily spacious.

We had barely taken our seats before King Glayder unleashed his anger.

Slamming his fist against the circular table, the burly king roared, “What was the point of Lord Aldir taking control of the artifact if he was just going to run off to who knows where?”

“This isn’t the time to be blowing up about something we can’t change,” Alduin snapped in irritation.

“He’s right,” Priscilla Glayder agreed. “There are more urgent things we need to discuss if we are to recover from this setback.”

Blaine looked at his wife incredulously, but the queen ignored her husband’s gaze.

Merial, who sat beside her husband, finally peeled her eyes away from the stack of parchment she had been going through and spoke. “I’ve gathered and read through several accounts of what transpired, including one from Aya. But I think it’s best if we start with Arthur’s account of events.”

“I agree,” Virion spoke, turning his tired eyes to me. The man had been old for as long as I had known him, but these past few years had really taken a toll on his body and psyche. This was evidenced by the deep, dark bags under his eyes and the way his face had contorted into a perpetual frown.

Blaine’s deep red hair was practically ablaze as he leaned back in his seat, simmering like a flame eager to be fed the fuel that would allow him to unleash his anger once more.

“Sure,” I said, resting my arms on the table. Normally, the Lances stood behind their respective artifact holder, but considering the fact that there were extra seats available and that even standing took a toll on my fatigued body, I had been allowed to sit down.

Recapping the events since the day Olfred, Mica, and I had set off on our mission didn’t take long. The members of the Council stopped me when they needed clarification or further details, but otherwise they let me talk.

Aside from the detail that it wasn’t me who had defeated Uto, but rather his ally, I told the Council everything I knew. By the end of my story, Virion nodded thoughtfully.

“How is it that Arthur has not yet reached the white core stage, but was still able to defeat not one but two retainers, while another Lance was killed so easily?” Blaine asked, suspicion lacing his voice.

Virion’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you so skeptical of General Arthur?”

“I would simply like to know how he came out victorious in both cases. Perhaps with that knowledge, we can better prepare the rest of the Lances for future battles against the retainers and Scythes,” Blaine said with a shrug, but the hostility in his voice was clear.

Priscilla put a placating hand on her husband’s arm, trying to intervene. “Dear—”

“King Blaine has a point,” I cut in. “The first retainer I fought wasn’t as strong as Uto—the retainer we now have imprisoned. Even then, I came away with a broken asura-forged sword and these scars.”

There was surprise on the faces of everyone except Virion when I took the glove off of my left hand and pulled down on my tunic to expose my neck, but no one said a word.

I continued. “Uto, on the other hand, could have killed me—and Sylvie—on sight, but that wasn’t what he was after. His only motivation seemed to be enjoying a good battle. When I turned out not to pose that much of a threat, he lowered his guard to try and incite me into a fit of rage. Sylvie and I were able to capitalize on his carelessness and destroy his horns.”

Varay Auras’s clear voice rang out from behind Priscilla. “How did you know that destroying the Vritra’s horns would have any effect on his ability to fight?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t. I doubt even the asuras knew, otherwise they would’ve told us. But I remembered the late Lance, Alea, saying how furious Uto had been when she’d chipped off a fragment of his horn.”

It wasn’t the most well-thought-out lie, but mentioning Alea seemed to convince even Blaine and Bairon, who had both been studying me critically throughout my story. It felt wrong to deceive everyone, especially Virion.

But I didn't trust anyone else at this point, and I knew that telling Virion the truth now—without any idea of what Seris's goal was—would only burden the commander more.

“The retainer's power seemed to diminish significantly after we destroyed his horns”—I emphasized the word ‘destroyed’—“and we managed, barely, to overpower him. After securing Uto, the next thing I remember is General Aya waking me up.”

“Thank you,” Virion said after a brief pause. “Queen Priscilla, would you like to go over the next order of business?”

With a nod, the queen spoke. “The most crucial factor in this war right now is our alliance with the dwarves. With Rahdeas imprisoned and being held for questioning, we have no one to effectively lead the dwarves. Furthermore, after General Arthur's reconnaissance in Darv, it's obvious that either a faction or multiple factions of them are willfully assisting the Alacryan army.”

“What if we send forces from Sapin into Darv to oversee the dwarves?” Alduin suggested.

King Blaine, who had since calmed down, shook his head. “A human military presence would only frighten the dwarves more—convince them that we want to control them. Things will get even more out of hand if we force our way into this.”

An idea flickered to life in my mind, but the rest of the Lances were staying relatively silent and I wasn't sure whether I had the authority to weigh in. Perhaps, I thought, the three Lances present simply weren't knowledgeable in wide-scale military and political tactics, given their focus on combat. I decided to take the chance, and started off with a question. “Was Rahdeas's capture made public?”

King Blaine raised a brow. “No, it wasn't. One of the reasons we called this meeting is to discuss how to handle the traitor and the fact that we're down one Lance and can't replace him since our asura ambassador has gone on a

little vacation.”

“Then why not use that to our advantage?” I suggested, hoping someone would catch on.

Thankfully, Virion did. His face lit up the way it used to when Tessia and I were just children. “Brilliant! Arthur, remind me never to fight a war against you.”

Virion didn’t have to explain much before everyone else in the room caught on and began offering insights on actualizing my inkling of an idea. The people here were smart after all.

Basically, the Council would carry on as if Rahdeas had never been captured. They would have to make Rahdeas reveal how he communicated with his people, but then they’d be able to send orders as if they were from Rahdeas himself.

“We wouldn’t be able to make any radical changes right away—like having them immediately go against the Alacryans, since Rahdeas was so adamant about helping them—but we can at least secure information by posing as him,” Merial said excitedly. The atmosphere in the room became a bit lighter as hope slowly bubbled up.

The next item on the agenda was discussing how to proceed with General Mica’s questioning and Uto’s interrogation.

“I will conduct General Mica’s questioning, while General Aya will be handling the Vritra we have imprisoned,” Virion announced. “However, Rahdeas’s interrogation should take precedence at this point, to secure the dwarves’ allegiance. Anyone think otherwise?”

The rest of us shook our heads. We all agreed; getting control of Darv was crucial in winning this war.

“Good,” Virion continued. “Then we’ll table the details regarding General Mica’s and the retainer’s questioning until our next meeting.”

The Council continued, covering several more items on the agenda. Then Merial, who was organizing the stacks of parchment on the table, pulled out

the next document to discuss. Her glance flickered to me and she hesitated a second, then handed it to her father-in-law.

Virion's lips were set in a grim line as he read the report, but by the time he finished, there was a look of relief on his face as he passed the parchment back to Merial. "The next order of business is the supply road. There was another attack on one of our carriages transporting supplies to the Wall. Thankfully, the carriage was close enough to Blackbend City that reinforcements were able to get there in time."

"Any deaths?" Priscilla asked.

"Three deaths and four injured, all of whom were merchants employed by the Helstea group," Merial read aloud. "And General Arthur?" She looked at me, pausing for a beat. "You should know that the Twin Horns were involved. None of them were hurt—in fact, your mother was instrumental in the protection of the carriage."

The only thing I was able to muster at that point was a weary nod. I was overcome with a feeling of having barely avoided death, and the three deaths that Merial had mentioned now sounded much more real. It could have been my parents, and I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it.

"Damn those dwarves," King Blaine muttered angrily. "As if the Alacryans weren't enough of a pain in the ass! Now, because of them, our enemies have access to an underground network that leads who knows how far up the southern border of my kingdom."

The conversation continued, but I was lost in thought for a time, their voices muffled by my own internal dialogue.

I had a thousand questions, but they were all personal. My parents and I had parted on less-than-ideal terms. My selfishness in wanting them hidden safely within the castle hadn't helped to mend our relationship, which was still healing from my decision to reveal my secret. They'd told me they wanted to help out in the war, but the thought of them actually being in danger had never resurfaced until now.

I felt a growing temptation to just leave this room and go down to the surface to see my parents, but I knew they would disapprove of me abandoning my duties to just check in on them.

“Arthur?” a concerned voice said.

Snapping out of my daze, I looked back at the commander. “Sorry, I’m okay. Please continue.”

The Council was discussing better ways to optimize the supply routes from Blackbend, a major city near the southeast corner of Sapin, to the Wall.

“How about an underground route?” King Alduin suggested, pointing toward the center of the map they had unrolled.

King Blaine shook his head, leaning forward and indicating the area just below Blackbend. “The city is too close to the Kingdom of Darv. Our maps of the dwarven underground aren’t accurate enough for us to know what we’d be digging our way into. It’s too dangerous to try that until we secure our alliance with them.”

“What’s Blackbend like?” I asked, taking a close look at the map.

“Its economy centers around potato farmers from nearby villages and adventurers because of its proximity to the Beast Glades. The city is currently responsible for our supply of rations as well as the manufacturing of weapons—mainly arrows—for the soldiers, which is why it’s crucial for there to be a secure mode of transport to the Wall,” Queen Priscilla answered seriously.

“The terrain around it is mostly flat farmland, which makes it hard for carriages carrying supplies to go unnoticed,” Bairon added, speaking for the first time in this meeting.

“Thank you,” I said to them both. The queen’s information was interesting, but it also made me realize that my question had been vague. Bairon’s answer was what I needed to know.

While the Council discussed more ideas for how to better secure the supply route, my mind drifted to ways the people of this world wouldn’t be able to consider. Thinking back to the ship I had helped Gideon design a few years

back, I looked at the map. Unfortunately, there was no river near the Wall or Blackbend City—but I had an idea.

“King Blaine,” I said, interrupting their discussion. “How many dwarves do you have who are adept in metal manipulation and can help us?”

“There are numerous metal mages—or metal shapers, as they call themselves—among the dwarves, but those who are trustworthy enough for a large task...” The king paused to think for a second. “A handful, maybe.”

Queen Priscilla nodded in agreement.

I turned to Tess’s father. “King Alduin, how many elves adept in nature magic can you gather?”

The elven king looked at his wife as he rubbed his clean-shaven chin.

Merial began looking through another pile of papers, then Aya spoke up.

“Four, currently on standby. The rest are on missions.”

“What’s this about?” Virion asked.

“Let me get back to you once I sort out the logistics of this idea with Gideon,” I said absentmindedly, the gears in my mind working furiously. This plan I was working on would ultimately speed up the process of transporting supplies, as well as keeping the passengers and workers—namely, my parents and the Twin Horns—safe.

The meeting concluded shortly thereafter. I was eager to leave the stifling room, but Virion held up a hand. “Before we depart, I wanted to address something.”

All eyes turned to him. Curious, I stood silently and waited for him to continue.

“In times of war, it’s impossible to acknowledge every deed accomplished. However, slaying not one, but two retainers”—the commanders’ gaze shifted from me to Aya—“as well as eliminating a dangerous traitor and disrupting a scheme that could have potentially killed thousands of civilians... I think that calls for a reward of some kind.”

“Thank you, Commander Virion,” Aya said politely. “But what I did was to

help us win this war, not for a personal reward.”

Virion nodded. “General Arthur? What about you?”

I’d learned from my past life that, in situations like this, it was best to dismiss the reward. I was tempted to just thank him for his kindness, but this was the perfect opportunity to address something that had been weighing on my mind since my battle against Uto.

“Actually, there is something I would like—rather, a few things,” I said innocently.

The two kings and queens looked at me in surprise, but Virion simply laughed. “Very well, let me hear them!”

I made my way to Ellie’s room so we could visit Sylvie together, feeling much more light-hearted—happy, even.

Virion had been stunned at first when I’d said I wanted to put off going on any missions for the near future. I didn’t blame him; we had just lost a Lance, possibly two. Me saying I wanted a break would take a huge toll on our side. But I needed some time to train, and with the war escalating at the pace it was, I wouldn’t have much chance later on. Once I explained that, Virion agreed... somewhat.

“Two months is the most I can offer—even then I can’t promise you won’t be sent out if something major occurs,” he had said reluctantly.

‘Something major’ seemed a bit ambiguous, but it was fair.

“In addition, if you won’t be going on missions, I will expect you to take part in the Council meetings,” he had added. “If the past is any indication, I know having you here and weighing in with your thoughts will prove useful.”

This was a bit harder to swallow. Among the few things I dreaded—now and in my previous life—were meetings like the one today. However, I needed time to study and absorb those horns that the Scythe had called an ‘invaluable resource.’

“But how do you plan on training here in the castle?” Alduin had asked.

“It’s part of what I need next as my reward,” I answered, holding up four fingers. “I need four conjurers, each with a different elemental affinity.”

“Four?” Virion repeated. The members of the Council were obviously confused, but I knew by the glimmer in the Lances’ eyes that they understood what I had planned.

The halls were empty, so my walk to Ellie’s room went uninterrupted. I thought of how to greet my baby sister. I knew it was hard on her waiting for me and our parents, not knowing when we’d come back. So, being the considerate brother that I was, when I reached the large wooden door that had been remodeled to fit her bond, I knocked and wailed in a shrill breathy voice, “Ellie... it is the ghost of your brother. I have come to haunt you!”

I didn’t need to be a genius to deduce that my sister was less than amused when she coldly muttered from the other side of the door, “Boo, attack.” But it was only after the seven-hundred-pound bear came charging at me that I realized, perhaps, my sister’s sense of humor more closely resembled that of our mother.

Boo’s body slammed against me, sending me flying back to the other end of the hall. Impressed that the walls hadn’t crumbled from the impact, I pushed the hulking mana beast away and held him at arm’s length.

“Good to see you too, buddy,” I said, avoiding the pool of drool forming underneath him.

The beast grunted, spraying a mixture of saliva and froth on my face.

“Ghost? Really, Brother?” my sister grumbled, her arms crossed in mock anger.

I pushed Boo aside and wiped my dripping face with a sleeve. “I can’t say I didn’t deserve that.”

It didn’t take long for Ellie’s stern scowl to soften. She walked up and wrapped her arms around me. “Welcome back, Brother.”

I gently patted my sister’s head, and could feel the tension in my body

unwinding for the first time since I had returned to the castle. “It’s good to be back.”

LANDSHIP

A BOLT of light streaked through the trees, curving ever-so-slightly before reaching its target—a wooden post no larger than my head. There was a satisfying thud as the mana arrow lodged itself in the center of the post, creating a hole all the way through it before dissipating.

“Great shot!” I exclaimed, applauding.

My sister curtsied in response and her lips curved into a satisfied grin. “I know!” she said haughtily.

Stepping down from where she stood on top of Boo, her titanic bond lying lazily on his belly, Ellie skipped over to Sylvie and me. My sister picked up my bond. “What did you think, Sylvie? Are you impressed?”

“Very impressed,” she answered aloud, her gentle voice laced with fatigue.

“Sylvie’s still recovering, Ellie,” I scolded.

My sister set the white fox back down on the cushion she had been curled up on. “Sorry, Sylvie.”

It had been only two days since we had returned to the castle. Sylvie had just regained consciousness yesterday, but she was recovering at a remarkable rate. While Virion and the rest of the council gathered the four conjurers who would be stuck with me for the next two months, I was spending some time with my sister.

I was keeping the fact that our parents and the Twin Horns had been attacked a secret from Ellie. A part of me knew that she deserved to be told, but I also

wanted to keep her ignorant for as long as possible.

A selfish wish from a selfish brother.

“So, can you fire that accurately while Boo is actually moving?” I asked with a grin, my gaze turning to the mana beast still drowsing flat on his belly.

Ellie sulked at my jab. “Ugh, not yet. Helen made it look so easy when she showed me, but I haven’t been able to land a single decent shot while Boo’s moving. It doesn’t help that the klutz runs like he’s purposely trying to throw me off his back.”

The bear-like creature let out a grunt of denial.

“You do so!” my sister shot back, and bent down to pick up her bow.

My gaze fell to her hand as she reached for the weapon. Calluses covered her fingers, and freshly-formed welts filled in the few places on her hand that weren’t already hardened from overuse.

“How much time do you spend practicing, El?” I asked.

My sister thought for a second before answering. “I don’t really keep track, but the sun goes down while I train so—maybe about six or seven hours?”

My eyes widened. “Every day?”

Ellie simply shrugged. “I guess so.”

“What about studying, or playing with friends?”

“The classes in the castle are only once a week, and I can finish the study material they give me in a day,” she answered. Ellie hesitated, then continued. “And as for friends, I’ll have you know I’m very popular.”

“Really?” I said with a raised brow.

Caving under my unrelenting gaze, she burst out: “Well, it’s not my fault that I have absolutely no interest in the things they talk about. How is it possible for anyone to talk nonstop about boys and clothes for hours?”

“I’m sure there are a few kids your age with an interest in magic,” I prodded, trying hard not to laugh.

Realizing that our conversation wasn’t going to end soon, my sister pulled out a chair and sat down. “Well, there *were* a few—but when they awakened,

their parents moved out of the castle, or just sent the kids to one of the major cities to have them board at a magic school.”

Not many children would have had the connections my sister had to be taught by a mage in this castle. And it was understandable that parents would still want their children to be taught how to utilize their newly-formed core, even with the potential danger of the war reaching them.

I looked at my sister as she fiddled with the string of her bow, then carefully asked, “Did you want to attend a magic academy as well?”

“Of course,” she answered without hesitation, “but I know you, Mom, and Dad would all worry.”

I winced at my sister’s words. She was only twelve, but her words reflected a maturity that I wasn’t quite sure I wanted her to have. From my own experience, I knew what it was like to grow up too fast. It was yet another selfish wish of mine that my sister could remain the innocent little girl who worried only about what to wear to her friend’s birthday party.

Pushing aside my thoughts, I shot her a gentle smile. “I’ll talk to Mom and Dad when I get the chance and ask them about sending you to school.”

Ellie’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Assuming they give you the okay, I’ll still want to send a guard with you to protect you in case anything happens. I know it can be a bit stifling to have someone with you at all times, so I’ll try to find someone you’ll be comfortable with, but—”

My sister barreled straight into, throwing her arms around me in a firm embrace. “Thanks, Brother.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too high,” I replied, my voice coming out as a wheeze as she squeezed me.

“Too late!” she giggled, releasing me before picking up her bow. “I’m going to have to practice harder if I want to beat those snooty nobles.”

I continued my role as an enthusiastic spectator, relishing the clear skies and the sweet scent of morning dew on the grass field. Ellie continued to fire off

mana arrows at faraway targets with uncanny accuracy. It would be a long time before she would be as comfortable with the bow as Helen Shard, but she had her own strength that the leader of the Twin Horns couldn't hope to replicate.

Ellie had yet to develop an affinity toward an element, so she was limited to firing pure mana. It was a shame that there wasn't much I could do to help her develop an affinity—that was mostly dependent on her own insights—but it was exciting to see her grow and develop.

'Your thoughts make it seem like you wish to have offspring of your own.' Sylvie's voice suddenly intruding into my head startled me.

"Offspring?" I said aloud, startling my sister.

Ellie's mana arrow arched off-course at the sky, dissipating before it hit the castle barrier. "What?"

"Nothing," I smiled, sneaking a sharp glare at my bond when my sister turned away.

Sylvie shifted on her cushion, looking at me with an expression of amusement on her shrewd, vulpine face.

Go back to sleep, I sent, grumbling in my mind.

I continued watching Ellie's seemingly repetitive motions—murmuring, drawing her bow while a translucent arrow formed between her two fingers, steadying her aim, then firing.

She skipped the chanting process for the types of arrows she was more versed in, but sometimes she needed to describe the kind of arrow she wanted so she could shape the mana accurately. By the thirtieth arrow she fired, I wondered how Boo was able to sleep so easily with Ellie on his back.

"General Arthur?" a voice called from behind me.

My eyes snapped open and I turned around to see a middle-aged elf holding a clipboard. She was garbed in white attire which oddly resembled a lab coat from my former world. What really caught my attention, though, was the color of her eyes—or rather, colors. A ring of bright pink surrounded each of

her pupils, then shifted into a bright blue on the outer rim of her irises. Noticing my fixed gaze, she bowed, perhaps thinking I expected a formal greeting.

The elf straightened, standing as if her back was glued to a wooden plank, and announced, “Artificer Gideon has arrived at the castle and is expecting you.”

“You’re going?” my sister asked, slinging her bow over her shoulder.

“Yup. I have some things to discuss with the old man,” I replied. I headed off behind the unusual elf, then turned and said to my sister, “I most likely won’t be able to eat dinner with you, so don’t wait up.”

She nodded. “Gotcha. Say hi to Emily for me if you get the chance to see her.”

“Will do.”

‘I’ll stay here with Eleanor,’ Sylvie said groggily.

Sure. I’ll update you when I get back, Sylv.

I trailed silently behind the elven secretary as she led the way with confident steps.

“Is there a name I can address you by?” I asked.

The elf stopped abruptly, bowing so deeply that her blond hair, tied firmly into a ponytail, flipped over her head. “Forgive me for not introducing myself. My name is Alanis Emeria. I have been personally assigned by Commander Virion to be your attendant.”

I dipped my head in response to her greeting. “Well, Alanis, it’s nice to meet you, but I have a hard time believing you’re merely an attendant, considering the amount of mana you have concealed.”

The elf blinked, her multicolored eyes shining, but otherwise looked unfazed. “As expected of a Lance. Allow me to clarify. I have been assigned by Commander Virion to be your attendant while you undergo your training here. It was my wish to meet you as soon as possible.”

I didn't quite understand what her role as my attendant during training would entail, but before I had the chance to ask, I spotted Gideon's familiar frame running toward us.

"I came as soon as I heard from Commander Virion!" he huffed excitedly, his voice echoing as he ran down the narrow hall toward me. He was a sweaty mess. "What sort of ingenious idea do you have in that god-sent cranium of yours?"

The old artificer barely managed to wait until we reached one of the empty rooms used for meetings by nobles or military leaders. "Out with it, boy!" Gideon gushed as soon as Alanis closed the door behind us. "And is it all right for the elf to be hearing this?"

My elven attendant cast a disapproving gaze toward Gideon at his overly-casual address, but said nothing.

The old artificer fidgeted in his seat in anticipation, much like an excited child waiting for a present. Taking a closer look at him, it was hard to imagine I'd known this old grandpa for more than ten years. The wrinkles between his brows and around his mouth had deepened in that time, no doubt because of how much time he spent frowning or scowling in frustration.

"Everyone's going to know sooner or later, and she's apparently my personal attendant, starting today, so it's better to have her informed, right?" I asked, turning to Alanis.

"Part of my job is to lessen other burdens while you focus on training, so yes, it would be helpful for me to stay informed," she said, her pink-and-blue eyes seeming to change shades.

"More training? How much more can you train after being personally taught by gods? Asuras, I mean," he pondered, rubbing his stubbly chin.

"There's always room for more training," I said, dismissing the thought. "But getting back on topic, what's the current state of the mines where we excavated the fuel source for our ships?"

Gideon's eyes lit up. "Oh, the combustium mines? There are five major sites

still being excavated.”

I raised a brow. “Combustium?”

“I made up the name myself,” the artificer grinned. “You told me I’d need a mineral with set characteristics capable of fueling the steam engine we designed—I think you called it coal? Anyway, of all the minerals currently known, which aren’t many, only one of them produced the amount of energy needed to efficiently power an entire ship. The characteristics are a bit different from the ‘coal’ you mentioned, so I decided to name it something else. Anyway, this stuff is amazing. Ten pounds of combustium can power an entire ship for about a dozen miles at full speed!”

“That’s great to hear,” I said, cutting Gideon off. Afraid he’d go further off on this tangent, I got straight to the point. “What I have planned involves using coal—combustium for a different mode of transportation; specifically, a ship that’ll be used to travel over land.”

“A landship?”

I nodded. “Except I was thinking of calling it a train.”

“‘Train’?” Gideon echoed incredulously. “From what poor mana beast’s ass did you pull a name like that?”

“Do you want the blueprints or not?” I scoffed.

Gideon raised his arms placatingly. “Train it is.”

The old artificer quickly set up a small workspace, practically dumping an entire lab out of the dimension ring he wore on his thumb. Once he was ready, I started to walk him through the design. While Gideon caught on quickly to how the train would work, it still took a few hours to explain the details of how the railways and stops functioned. I didn’t realize how much time had passed until my stomach suddenly twisted and grumbled in hunger.

“I think I covered everything you need to get started,” I said, scanning the designs and specifications on the large parchment we had hung on the back wall of the meeting room.

“This is going to change everything,” Gideon muttered, more to himself than

to Alanis or me. “The rivers are going to be a pain in the ass if we want to connect Blackbend City to Kalberk or Eksire, but with a few water and earth mages—”

“Let’s focus on the railway from Blackbend to the Wall,” I interrupted. “Of course, creating railways to other major cities will be important, but first we need to create a secure route for supplies heading to the Grand Mountains if we want our troops there to survive.”

“Of course, but this...” Gideon paused for a second as he scrutinized the large map of Dicathen we had rolled out on the table. “We’ll be able to form new major cities with this.”

I respected Gideon for his boundless vision, but it was frustrating having to keep him on track. However, his last statement piqued my curiosity.

“What do you mean by forming new major cities?” I asked, looking over the map.

To my surprise, Alanis, who had been dead silent up until now, spoke. “I think what Artificer Gideon means is that, until now, the locations of cities in all three kingdoms were determined by where we found or excavated teleportation gates. If this idea comes to fruition, a secure mode of transportation that can carry mass supplies and goods in addition to people—even if it’s not nearly as fast as the gates, it will allow us to build major cities in any location.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Gideon said approvingly.

Feeling stiff, I stretched my arms and back. “Glad to see my ideas changing the course of history.”

“Boy, saying something like that so flippantly to a renowned artificer... I should just hand over my brown robe and take up a new hobby.” Gideon grumbled helplessly. “I’ve always had a knack for fishing.”

“You can’t retire just yet,” I smirked, heading to the door. “You’re in charge of pitching this idea to the Council at their next meeting.”

“Me? As much as I love the limelight, why are you letting me take credit for

this?” Gideon asked.

“It’ll be easier to garner the Council’s support if the idea comes from a ‘renowned artificer.’ We’ll need their help if you want to get a team of capable conjurers, and some merchants or adventurers familiar with the area, to help map out the best route from Blackbend to the Wall,” I answered, mentally checking off some of the things we’d need. “Anyway, I’m starving. I’m going to go see what I can scavenge from the food hall.”

“I can have the chef prepare a balanced meal and deliver it to your room,” Alanis suggested.

I waved my hand in dismissal. “It’s okay. No reason to trouble the chef just for me.”

“Wait! How soon are you going back out to the field?” Gideon asked.

I looked over my shoulder at him. “I’m staying for a couple of months. I’ll mostly be down in the training space, but I’ll stop by to check in and see how you’re doing, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The old artificer scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I’m honored, but that’s not what why I asked. Emily’s been working on a few things that need to be tested.”

“You’re asking a general to be your test dummy?” I asked, still smirking.

“Relax, O Great One. I promise they’ll be helpful to you as well. I looked over them myself—although I don’t like to admit it, if the artifact works, it’ll change the way both conjurers and augmenters train.”

I shifted my gaze to Alanis, who also showed a degree of curiosity. “Well, you’ll have to convince my training attendant.”

The old artificer laughed gruffly as I walked out the doors. Behind me I could hear him muttering to himself, “The kid’s come a long way.”

ALACRYAN GLIMPSE

WITH MY STOMACH filled with leftovers and Alanis, my training attendant, dismissed for the night, I retrieved Sylvie from Ellie and returned to my room.

“Are you ready?” I asked my bond, who had been waiting on the bed while I’d taken a shower.

“So. What is it you’re so excited about?” she replied, fidgeting in her fox form.

It hadn’t been easy to keep my thoughts away from the “loot” I’d gotten fighting Uto, but I had wanted to surprise Sylvie. I had distracted myself by thinking random thoughts and numbers on our way back to confuse her.

After making sure the door was locked and activating both earth and wind perception spells, I finally withdrew the two obsidian horns from my ring.

My bond’s sharp eyes widened as she gazed at the black crystals that had once been embedded in the retainer’s skull. “Don’t tell me...”

“Yup,” I said excitedly. “They’re Uto’s horns.”

“Why?” she asked, confused.

Realizing she had never heard the full story, I summarized everything that had happened after she’d been knocked out while saving me from Uto’s last attack.

By the time I had finished my story, Sylvie’s vulpine face was twisted with a mixture of emotions.

“It’s scary to think how easily we could’ve been killed,” she said after a long pause.

I nodded. “I couldn’t do anything when Seris showed up. But if she hadn’t, I’m not sure we would’ve been able to defeat Uto.”

“It seems like as we grow stronger, so do our enemies,” she sighed. Her gaze shifted back to the two horns on the bed. “So these horns supposedly contain vast amounts of mana that you can extract? Is it really safe to trust the Scythe?”

“Considering that the asuras are forbidden by the treaty from helping us anymore, and that Seris could have killed me on the spot if she’d wanted to, I don’t think it’s too much of a risk.”

Sylvie thought for a moment, and pawed at the horns. Each one was the size of her head. “Well... if they help you get into white core, it’ll certainly help us.”

I picked up one of the horns. “This will be enough for me. You extract the other one.”

My bond opened her mouth, ready to argue, but I cut her off. “You said you’re still undergoing the awakening process that Lord Indrath insisted on. I know you’ve been constantly extracting ambient mana, which is why you’ve been sleeping more. I’m sure extracting mana from Uto’s horn will help quicken that process.”

“To be honest, I haven’t been trying too hard to hasten the awakening process,” Sylvie replied. “I’m afraid that, when I awaken as a full asura, I won’t be able to assist you anymore.”

“You nearly died in that last fight, Sylv,” I said, putting my hand on her small head. “Besides, your mother cast a pretty powerful spell before you were born to conceal you. It’s why even in your draconic form, no one was able to tell you were an asura.”

“Grandfather mentioned that, but as I get stronger, it’s going to be harder to hide what I am,” Sylvie replied bitterly.

A wave of grief flooded my mind, and I could feel the bits and pieces of the story Lord Indrath had told Sylvie about her mother.

“I’m not exactly sure what’s going to happen when you get strong enough to awaken, but we’ll overcome that hurdle once we get there,” I comforted her.

“We always do,” she agreed with a smile.

Holding the black horn gingerly in my hands, I glanced at Sylvie. “So... should we start now?”

Sylvie placed a paw on the horn in front of her. “I don’t see why not.”

After repositioning myself more comfortably, I took a deep breath. I started slow, probing the insides of the horn with a thread of my mana.

With elixirs, the contents of a container would be distributed upon contact with a mage’s purified mana. With the horns, however, there was no noticeable reaction even after I searched deeper.

Minutes trickled by, but I found no sign of anything stored within Uto’s horns. I was beginning to consider the possibility that the mana might have dispersed when the horns were severed from the retainer’s head, when suddenly an indescribable *force* pulled at my very mind.

Unlike any elixir—or any *thing*, for that matter—I’d used in the past, this seemed to be sucking my consciousness in.

I felt a surge of panic as I realized I was blacking out.

Quite literally. A shroud of shadow spread, obscuring my vision and all my other senses, until there was nothing but darkness.

Calm down, Arthur. You’re still safely inside your room.

But that didn’t help me at all. The fact that my mind had been forced into a certain state and was vulnerable scared me. Coming to this world, I was born with a new body—new physical features that took me years to adjust to—but my mind had been the same through both lives. My brain—at least, the parts of it responsible for my memories and personality—had been mine throughout my years as both Grey and Arthur.

Right now, though, my consciousness was completely at the mercy of

whatever force had dragged me into... wherever I was.

I was surrounded in darkness, but it wasn't pitch black. The shadows around me warped and stirred, like various shades of dark ink. It was a surreal feeling—perceiving something without a body. Somehow, I could feel the force around me, slithering in the darkness, but I didn't have a physical form. After what felt like hours of floating mindlessly in the sea of darkness, the force surrounding me slowly began shifting. This was different from the erratic, chaotic movements it had made up until now; the shadows felt like they were being pulled away. The obsidian veil slowly began lifting, and what it revealed wasn't the view of my own room I had been expecting.

No. I was standing in front of an unfamiliar man, inside an extravagant cathedral with a vaulted ceiling, beautiful stained glass, and endless rows of pews packed with observers practically glowing in reverence. The man, who appeared no older than my father, wore a ceremonial robe and was kneeling in front of me in respect.

“Speak,” I snapped impatiently—but the voice that came out wasn't mine. It was Uto's. Even the word I had uttered wasn't my own choice.

“I, Karnal of Blood Vale, tier seven mage, humbly come before you to seek your guidance,” the man stated, his gaze lowered so I could only see the crown of his short ash-brown hair.

A feeling of annoyance bubbled up in ‘me,’ but was replaced with resignation.

The voice that had replaced my own spoke with restrained courtesy. “Vale... While your line is thin of Vritra blood, your ancestors have served us well. Remove your robe.”

Karnal bowed deeper in gratitude before slipping out of his black ceremonial robe. He then turned around to show me his back. There was an engraving down his spine—it seemed to be three separate imprints, by the spacing.

A thin figure standing off to the side, its face covered by a loose hood, took a step toward me and read aloud from a book, “One mark upon awakening, and

two crests: one earned for an act of valor and another unlocked through mastery of initial mark.”

Unceremoniously, I nodded and told him to dress.

Still kneeling with his back to me, Karnal put his robe back on before turning to face me. His gaze was still lowered, which seemed to bore ‘me.’ I was aware of the thoughts of the person I was inhabiting; they seeped into me, revealing his inner feelings. He—I—seemed to be vaguely impressed that the lesser in front of me had managed to unlock a crest by mastering the mark he had been given, but the fact that both crests were of defensive magic dampened ‘my’ mood.

“For your loyalty to the nation of Vechor and excellence in the last battle against the nation of Sehz-Clar, I—Uto, retainer of Kiros Vritra—grant your entry into the Obsidian Vault for the chance to earn an emblem.”

The crowd that had gathered to watch the mundane spectacle burst into applause and cheering. The man kneeling in front of me allowed himself to shed a single tear before he rose to his feet and finally met my eyes. He raised his right fist over his heart and held his left palm over his sternum in a traditional salute. “For the glory of Vechor and Alacrya. For the Vritra!”

“For the glory of Vechor and Alacrya. For the Vritra!” the audience behind him roared in unison.

The scene distorted, and I found myself sitting back on my bed. An umbral, haze-like substance was spilling out of the horn I held, and was being sucked into the center of my right palm—where Wren Kain had embedded the acclorite.

I quickly dropped the horn, moving my hand as far away from it as possible. I took a moment to inspect my mana core; to my dismay, there was no sign of my core improving even a shred.

“Damn it,” I grumbled. I had wanted the mana from Uto’s horn to be absorbed by my core, but instead it had been siphoned into the acclorite.

Just like Wren Kain had warned, the gem was capable of altering, depending

on the changes in my body, my actions and even thoughts. The acclorite was constantly feeding off the mana inside me, constantly molding its eventual form—so to say that the introduction of Uto’s mana to the gem filled me with unease was an understatement.

What’s done is done. I didn’t like the idea of my future weapon resembling Uto’s powers, but at this point, anything that hastened the process would help.

Turning to Sylvie, I wasn’t surprised to find her still absorbing the contents of the horn, and unlike me, she seemed to be having an easy enough time absorbing the foreign mana. What *did* surprise me was the fact that the sun was already coming up.

I had spent the entire night reliving one of Uto’s memories—which led me to the question: What did that memory even mean?

The actual event occurring in the memory wasn’t very cryptic, but there had been so many unknown terms thrown around that it felt overwhelming.

I knew from overhearing the word ‘blood’ inside the cavern in Darv that it was most likely their term for family, but other words—like mark, crest, and emblem—flew over my head. I knew what they meant in the context of my own world, but they had used them as if they meant something else entirely. These marks or crests—whatever they were—were apparently either earned or unlocked. Or was that only the case for the person kneeling?

But when Uto declared that the person—Karnal—would be granted a chance to earn an ‘emblem,’ everyone had seemed to be ecstatic. Ignoring the ominous name of Obsidian Vault—which frankly sounded like some storybook warlock’s evil lair where he held his stolen treasures—the man himself had clearly been proud. This meant that even the chance to earn an emblem was a big deal.

Another series of questions that came to mind pertained to the mention of Vechor—a nation presumably at war with Sehz-Clar, another nation. From the salute, I could extrapolate that the nation of Vechor was part of Alacrya.

And assuming that the asuras were correct that Epheotus, Alacrya and Dicathen were the only three continents in this world, that would mean Sehz-Clar was another nation in Alacrya.

Why would two nations of the same continent we were at war with be fighting amongst each other? Maybe the nations had sworn allegiance during this war? Or was there a separate international army, training together in order to dispel any enmity that members of the various nations had toward one another?

I shook my head, physically trying to get rid of the never-ending stream of questions and thoughts running rampant in my mind.

This memory had made me curious, though. I made a mental note to learn more about this—perhaps even from Uto himself. The Council had ordered our forces to take in prisoners when possible to interrogate them, but in most cases, the prisoner either committed suicide or was too low in the chain of command to know anything useful. This was the first time we'd had a potential source of real information in our hands—though knowing him, he'd make us work for it.

I was beginning to fall into another bottomless ditch of questions. Thankfully, just then there was a perfectly cadenced series of knocks at my door. The knocking sounded more like someone was hammering a nail into it.

“General Arthur. It’s Alanis Emeria. I am here to escort you to the training grounds to meet with the four training assistants you requested,” she said in a clear, clipped voice.

“Coming,” I replied, chuckling to myself. *It’s not just her speech; even her knocking’s robotic.*

Without washing up, I changed into a more close-fitting outfit, suitable for sparring, then followed my personal training attendant to the training ground on the lower floor. I debated whether to take Sylvie with me, but decided it’d be best not to disturb her.

On our way down, we ran into Emily Watsken—or rather *she* ran into *us*.

“So sorry!” she huffed. Most of her face was hidden behind a large box, which she was attempting to carry on her own.

“Here, let me get that.” I took the box out of her arms, surprised by its heft.

“Thank you... oh, Arth—General Arthur! Perfect timing!” The artificer was practically gasping for breath, but a wide smile crossed her face when she recognized whom she’d almost trampled.

Emily turned to Alanis, adjusting her glasses. “And you must be Alanis. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” the elf replied, but her manner in no way indicated this. “I assume you are Emily Watsken. I was informed we would be collaborating in our efforts to assist in General Arthur’s training.”

By the wrinkle between Emily’s brows, she seemed to have been processing Alanis’s string of words, but finally she nodded. “Yes! And as you’ll soon see, I think your particular magic and the set of artifacts I made will work nicely with each other.”

“I’m glad you two are getting along, but let’s get to the training room. This box feels like it’s actually gaining weight,” I joked, shifting the large box in my arms.

“Oh! Sorry, and thank you for carrying it. I thought my arms were going to fall out of their sockets,” Emily said, hurrying down the hall toward the entrance to the room, which was just up ahead. “Come on, everyone’s waiting!”

GADGETS AND MAGIC

I DIDN'T KNOW what I had expected of my sparring partners. My request had been fairly last-minute, so somewhere in the back of my head I had thought they would just be soldiers from inside the castle.

There were quite a few conjurers and augmenters who were assigned here, as a precaution to keep the castle residents safe. I had noticed early on that many of them were quite capable, so any one of them would have been a reasonable choice for a training partner.

But the presence of three elders, each of them obviously powerful, on the training grounds, alongside Kathyln and a smug-looking Virion, took me by surprise.

"Ah, you're here!" Virion bolted up to his feet, taking the box from my hands and setting it on the ground before guiding me toward the group. "I want you to meet everyone."

I looked back over my shoulder to see Emily waving me goodbye like a mother sending her son off to a battlefield.

"I know the two of you are already acquainted," Virion said, motioning to Kathyln. "But for formality's sake, this is Princess Kathyln of the royal Glayder House. This is her guardian, Hester Flamesworth."

An elderly woman, her gray hair pulled tightly back into a bun, dipped her head in a formal greeting.

"Flamesworth?" I blurted, surprised.

“Ah, so you’re familiar with my family,” the woman said, a hint of pride in her voice.

“Yes. Fairly familiar, actually,” I replied. The surname had caught my attention, but I dismissed the questions stirring in my mind and focused on the princess.

“A pleasant surprise to see you, Kathyln, but what are you doing here?” I asked.

“Princess Kathyln is an accomplished ice-affinity conjurer, now in the dark-yellow-core stage,” Hester answered. “I was asked by Commander Virion to help you with your training, General Arthur, but my primary job is to keep the princess safe at all times. By being here together, we can achieve both goals at once.”

I glanced back at Kathyln, who nodded in confirmation. “Not much else to do besides my occasional training with Master Varay, so I’m here to help.”

“The princess and a knight. Classic pair,” said a gruff dwarf sitting on a raised stone pillar. He scratched at his large bulbous nose, which stuck out of a thick bush of white beard covering the lower half of his face. He was tall compared to most dwarves I’d seen, but that might’ve been an illusion caused by his elevated seat. One thing was for sure, though: His body looked to be composed entirely of muscle. Thick, striated bulbs of hardened flesh covered his arms and chest, and I winced when he gripped my hand with his large calloused one.

“Pleasure to meet you, young General. I am Buhndemog Lonuid, but most call me Buhnd,” he said, his grip unrelenting. Whether it was to gauge me or to assert his dominance over a young—and potentially arrogant—Lance, I didn’t know, but in any event I reciprocated his greeting with a firm grip of my own.

The assimilation I had gone through as a child after inheriting Sylvia’s dragon will meant that I was stronger than I appeared. Combined with the fact that I had lived practically this whole life with a sword in my hand, it

meant that I could hold my own even against this bearded ball of muscle.

His mustache quirked in what could have been a smile, and he let go. “Not bad. Not bad.”

“Careful, Buhnd. The kid didn’t become a Lance with just a pretty face,” Virion said. “Arthur, this musclehead has been a close friend of mine for quite a few years. He may look like this, but he’s a genius when it comes to earth-affinity magic. I guarantee you’ll learn a lot.”

“What’s wrong with my looks?” Buhnd snapped. “I’ll have you know I’m quite the ladies’ man back home.”

“No one said anything was *wrong* with your looks,” Virion said dismissively.

“Stop being so sensitive.”

I watched as the two bickered, holding my tongue despite all the questions I had.

Just from the thick silver aura he emitted, which was almost visible to the naked eye, it was clear Buhnd was a powerful individual. If he was so close to Virion, I wondered why he hadn’t been selected as the dwarven representative, instead of Rahdeas.

Considering the recent events, it was obvious that Virion had introduced Buhnd as a friend to alleviate any suspicions I may have had of him. But just the fact that he was a dwarf I had never seen before put me on edge.

I guess that makes me racist. I thought, concerned at my own clear prejudice. Race in this world was much less subtle than back in my old world, but I had never considered myself one to discriminate based on a person’s outer appearances or location of birth. However, witnessing a large faction of dwarves cooperating with our enemies, as well as being personally betrayed by a powerful dwarf, did strain my previous fair-mindedness.

My attention was abruptly called to the only person I had not yet been introduced to when he gave a loud, surly yawn.

As if the yawn had been his cue, Virion spoke. “Arthur, this is Camus Selaridon. He’s a—”

“The boy doesn’t need to know any more than my name. I’m here to spar with him. Any information beyond that is irrelevant,” Camus said, cutting him off.

I was shocked to see Virion being told off. He was the leader of this continent’s entire military, after all. Seeing Virion’s unperturbed expression, I held my tongue, but made a mental note to ask the commander who exactly Camus was once we were alone.

Assuming the mysterious elder wouldn’t be impressed by an ostentatious greeting, I simply dipped my head and introduced myself while taking a closer look at him. Long silvery-blond hair fell down to his shoulders in disheveled locks, covering his forehead and eyes. Long pointed ears poked out of the hair, indicating he was of elven descent. Unlike most elves I had met, though, he took no care with his outward appearance—or, judging by the stench emanating from him, hygiene.

“Well!” Virion broke the silence. “I’m sure you are all going to get well acquainted these next several weeks. And while I’d love to stay and watch, I have the pleasure of spending my time looking over mountains of paperwork!”

With a tired sigh, our commander left the training room, his shoulders just a bit more slumped than before.

Virion’s departure was followed by a moment of silence, which I used to survey the training room.

The place wasn’t anything extravagant—just a large dirt field a little less than fifty yards long and no more than thirty yards wide, enclosed by walls and a ceiling of mana-reinforced metal. There was a small pond in the far left corner of the room, but other than that and the door on the opposite wall, there was nothing. It was just a large open space to train.

Emily was enthusiastically waving her arm at us, and I turned my attention to her.

“I finished setting up, for the most part. There’s a bunch of stuff I want to go

over before you start your training,” she said, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

Looking down at the equipment that had spawned from the giant wooden box I had carried inside, I was surprised to see how familiar it looked. It was a metal panel about the length of my arm, littered with gauges and knobs. It resembled some sort of ancient control center on a ship from my previous world, except for the crystals on either side of it. One was large and clear, while the other smaller crystal was tinted blue.

A cluster of wires led from the panel to the wall of the training room—more specifically, to a large disk attached to the wall. I hadn’t paid them much attention when I’d looked before, but the metal disks didn’t seem to be a part of the design. They looked to be embedded into the wall and were spaced out evenly.

“Ah! One more thing,” Emily exclaimed, practically diving headfirst into the box. She pulled out what looked like pieces of leather armor, but the different parts were connected by the same type of wires that connected the panel to the wall. Embedded in the bottom center of what appeared to be the breastplate was a blue crystal, identical to the one on the right end of the metal panel.

Emily heaved the leather armor in her arms and walked to me. “Miss Emeria, if you wouldn’t mind helping me put this on General Arthur.”

“Of course.” Alanis nodded, and I found myself being dressed in a rather ridiculous-looking getup.

The ‘armor’ seemed more like a sensory receiver than protective clothing. I would have to wear the gloves, breastplate, arm and leg bands, and shoes throughout the training.

“Perfect. You look great!” Emily said approvingly, adjusting the breastplate so that the blue crystal embedded there was directly over my sternum, where my mana core was located.

“Thanks,” I replied sheepishly, completely unconvinced. The armor looked

bulky, but it was soft and flexible enough that I wasn't too worried about it hindering my movements.

Kathryn and the three elders watched silently, enraptured by the sight of this unusual equipment, until Buhnd finally spoke up. "So exactly what is the point of all of these toys?"

Emily shifted her glasses and spoke. "I don't want to spoil anything, but I guess a bit of a heads up is fair. General Arthur is an anomaly on our continent—being the only known quadra-elemental mage and all—and while he excels in most aspects of mana manipulation, it's come to my attention that he has begun to plateau in terms of utilization of elemental magic."

"What about his training with the asuras?" Kathryn asked.

"That was mainly technical training for augmented close combat," I answered. "I did pick up a few techniques, but Emily is right—I've been relying heavily on ice and lightning magic these days. I'm hoping that by training with all of you, I'll get better at utilizing all the elements I'm capable of controlling."

"I see, I see." Buhnd idly stroked his beard, then shivered. "Yeah, even thinking about using *one* other element gives me a headache. To be a quadra-elemental on top of being able to use ice and lightning... ugh."

"General Arthur's mental capacity isn't as restricted as yours, so I'm sure he'll learn," Hester chimed in, smiling innocently.

Buhnd whipped his head around. "What'd you say, Grandma? My mental capacity is *fully* unrestricted!"

The fire mage just shook her head.

"Now, now." Emily carried the metal panel over and gently set it on the ground near us. "Instead of arguing, I'd appreciate it if each of you would place your hands here, and infuse some of your mana into the clear crystal to power up the device." She pointed to the left end of the metal panel.

Hester and Buhnd looked at one another, clearly trying to decide which one of them would go first. Then Camus stepped up and placed his palm over the

clear crystal.

“Like this, right?” Suddenly a vast whirlwind ripped free from his body and swirled around him protectively.

Emily let out a startled shriek and tumbled to her back from the sudden force. The rest of us were able to brace ourselves, and we watched as the fierce gale condensed into Camus’s hand on top of the crystal. The once-clear gem lit up in a shade of gray, and an instant later the entire panel whirred to life. The gauges swayed erratically before settling into place.

“Showoff,” Buhnd grumbled.

I was intently focused on the panel. When the room suddenly buzzed from all directions, I instinctively raised a layer of mana around my body.

“It’s just the apparatus powering on,” Emily quickly assured us. From the way the other mages had all assumed defensive stances, it seemed they were just as surprised as I was.

“I shall go next,” Hester said, stepping forward calmly.

After placing her hand on the crystal, she muttered a single word. “Burn.”

A blazing inferno erupted from her body, and her red robe appeared to be made completely of fire. The ground around her became scorched, but, to my amazement, there was no heat as one of the tendrils of flame lashed at me. What had seemed like a brazen display of strength turned out to have been a demonstration of her control over her element.

The metal panel whirred once more, this time a little less rapidly. It might have been just my imagination, but I swore I heard Hester clicking her tongue.

“My turn!” Buhnd declared, flexing his fingers before placing his hand carefully over the crystal, which had returned to its transparent state.

There was a beat of silence, then the ground beneath us began trembling. Loose pebbles and rocks hovered above the ground as an aura of brilliant topaz surrounded the bearded dwarf.

“Uh, Elders, I love the enthusiasm and all, but... this wasn’t meant to be a

contest,” Emily muttered weakly, her voice as unsteady as the shaking ground.

“To a real man, everything’s a contest.” Buhnd grinned. As he spoke, the earth split, cracks spreading from his feet while the yellow aura gathered into his hand.

The panel trembled and made its familiar noise, then the crystal absorbed and transferred the mana Buhnd had supplied.

The muscular dwarf stepped away with a satisfied grunt, and Emily began inspecting her apparatus to see if any of the elders had damaged it.

“Princess Kathyln,” she called. “If you please. I think just a bit more will be enough.”

The princess nodded, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear before sending out a wave of mana as well. Looking at the tense expression on Kathyln’s face, I knew all too well that she had no intention of backing down from the unspoken challenge between the elders.

The temperature dropped noticeably and a haze of frost swirled around the princess. Some of the rocks near her were already freezing when the frost began taking the form of what looked like translucent serpents. The frost serpents slithered in the air around her before coiling down her arm and disappearing into the crystal beneath her palm.

Emily’s apparatus buzzed with fervor, and a motley of colors swirled in the clear crystal.

The artificer turned a few knobs and flipped a few switches, then rotated the now-colorful crystal until a loud click sounded.

“I’ll turn it on now,” Emily announced, not bothering to conceal her eagerness.

She pushed down on the crystal until it was fully inside the panel. I could almost see the mana travelling from the device through the thick wires and into the rods on the wall. Everyone watched as strands of multicolored mana began shooting from one rod to another, spreading exponentially until the

strands connected the metal rods to one another with a honeycombed pattern. “What in the world...” Buhnd breathed, stretching his neck as he gazed at the walls and ceiling of the room.

“The same sensors are buried in the floor,” Emily said proudly. “Now, before I go over what all this is, General Arthur, I believe Miss Emeria has something she needs to do.”

I turned to my training attendant. “Alanis?”

She put down the clipboard she had been holding and approached me. “It won’t take long, General Arthur. Please give me your hand.”

Curious, I took off the glove, letting it dangle by its attached wire. Alanis gently wrapped both her hands around my mine and began chanting with her eyes shut.

Once she finished, her eyes snapped open. Her eyes had surely been pink and blue, yet when she gazed at me now, they had turned a shimmering silver. A faint emerald aura pulsed around her and began spreading to cover me as well.

“Please stand still for a moment, General Arthur,” she said, her voice seeming to echo. Alanis’s silver eyes darted left and right, up and down. She studied me intently until her green aura faded and her silver eyes reverted to their normal colors.

“Scans are complete,” Alanis announced, then retrieved her clipboard and began scribbling furiously.

“What was that?” I asked. The hand the elf had held tingled.

Alanis looked up from her clipboard and opened her mouth to speak, but Emily quickly forestalled her with a small laugh. “We’ll tell you everything later. For now, why don’t we start with the training?”

“The lady has spoken!” Buhnd agreed, swinging his arms. “My limbs were beginning to calcify from standing still for so long.”

Hester rolled her eyes. “I hardly think that’s possible, but I agree with the dwarf. Princess Kathyln has told me much about you, General Arthur, and

I'm quite curious to see if you live up to her exceedingly high praise."

"It's not like that," Kathyln quickly said, pushing her guardian away.

Smiling, I followed her and the three elders to the center of the room. They distanced themselves roughly thirty feet from each other, surrounding me. The princess positioned herself close to the pond in the rear corner, with Buhnd to her left and the silent Camus to her right. My mind raced as I tried to decide which one I should turn my back to. Adrenaline coursed through my body, coalescing with the mana streaming through my limbs. The familiar feeling of my dry mouth and cold sweat rolling down my cheek told me all I needed to know about the situation I was in.

The pressure the four of them gave off sent chills down my spine, but my smile only grew wider. I licked my lips and lowered myself into a defensive stance. "Let's begin."

ELDERS' ASSESSMENT

THE ELDERS WASTED no time in their attack. As soon as the words left my mouth, Hester moved forward, forming a globe of fire in her palm. She snapped her wrist and the burning sphere shot toward me, growing larger as it approached.

I turned to counter but the ground beneath me shifted abruptly, throwing me off balance. With hardly any time to react now, I spun, withdrawing Dawn's Ballad from my ring. As I tumbled to the ground, I launched a shockwave of frost from my blade, exploding the flaming globe before it could reach me.

"Tripping over your own feet, young General?" Buhnd snickered, his hands glowing yellow with his aura.

"For someone with so many muscles, I expected more than some cheap parlor tricks," I jeered, pushing myself up from the ground.

The dwarf shrugged. "I'm not the one who just fell on my arse."

I didn't respond to his jab, keeping an eye on the other two to see when they made their move. I didn't have to wait long.

Camus casually hurled a blade of wind in my direction. The crescent approached viciously, carving a path in the ground where it had travelled.

I swung Dawn's Ballad into Camus's attack, but the crescent suddenly distorted before exploding.

"Lesson one of fighting as a conjurer. Be unpredictable," Camus muttered.

A blast of wind nearly threw me back onto the ground. This time, however, I

was able to react fast enough. I stabbed my sword into the ground, embedding the broken tip of my sword into the dirt floor to brace myself against the blast.

I looked back up to see dozens of jagged icicles, each as long as my arm, flying toward me.

Siphoning mana from my core, I swung my free arm, releasing a wave of fire. The large shards of ice evaporated with a hiss when my flames reached them, but before I could continue my attack, three triangular panels of stone shot up from the ground around me and collapsed on each other.

Trapped within the pyramid of earth, I lost sight of my opponents.

This is getting annoying, I thought.

Fighting against conjurers was fundamentally different than going up against augmenters. For one, they kept their distance and attacked from afar.

With a snap of my fingers, I ignited a flame to study my surroundings. The three walls came together at a point about twenty feet above me.

“I might as well try and fight like a conjurer as well,” I muttered to myself, putting Dawn’s Ballad back into my ring.

I sent a current of earth mana into the ground, and within a moment I was able to make out the approximate position of all four of them, as well as two figures farther away, who I assumed were Emily and Alanis.

Buhnd must’ve sensed what I was doing, because spikes of stone almost immediately began jutting out of the walls.

Crafty dwarf, I smiled.

The spikes elongated, closing in. It was now or never.

After enlarging the flame I had used for light, I conjured a wave of frost with my other hand. I clasped the two opposing elements together, creating a blast of steam which spread until it filled the entire enclosure.

“Steam’s leaking out. Careful for a surprise attack,” Hester warned. “Princess, take advantage of the moisture from the steam.”

Oh crap.

I beckoned lightning to surge around my body, charging and containing it when I felt the temperature of the cloudy air around me plummet. I could see floating shards of ice forming, but my spell was finished.

“Burst!” I hissed, discharging the currents of lightning coiling around my body. Tendrils of electricity surged out, shattering the ground and walls effortlessly. The stone pyramid Buhnd had conjured collapsed.

A large cloud of dust and debris obscured much of the view, but Camus had somehow found me. The old elf was just a few feet away, swirling gales coiling around his arms.

Wordlessly, the wind conjurer *pushed*, the full blast of his wind sending me hurtling backward.

Straight into Hester.

She was waiting for me on the other side, a fully formed globe of blue flames ready to fire.

With barely enough time to twist in the air to defend against the attack, I faced the full brunt of the sapphire flames.

KATHYLN GLAYDER

Hester Flamesworth had been serving the Glayder family for over two decades. I’d always respected her magical prowess, but, because of her talents, she had a tendency to be a bit prideful. So when I saw Arthur’s form being consumed by the blue flames that set her apart from all the other fire-attribute conjurers of Sapin, I knew she saw Arthur as a person she had to beat at all costs.

My hand unconsciously reached toward Arthur. He was engulfed for no more than a few seconds, however, before the blue flames began to swirl around him. At first I thought it was Hester’s doing but when the cone of fire split, revealing Arthur to be intact aside from the lightly burnt ends of his long hair, I knew he had somehow dispersed the flames on his own.

Arthur coughed out a weak laugh. “That was a close one.”

My guardian’s eyes widened just a little, but she feigned composure.

“Impressive, General Arthur, but it seems you’re taking us a little too lightly.”

Elder Buhndemog raised a bulbous arm. “I second that. If this is all you can do, I’m afraid we’re going to need a lot more than two months to train you.”

“It’s hard to get motivated when you so obviously hold back like that,” Elder Camus added, then sat down with a loud yawn.

I frowned. I had been told that Elder Camus was once a distinguished member of the elven army, but he was such an ill-mannered individual. If I were in Arthur’s place, I might have been offended by his conduct, but to my surprise, Arthur started laughing.

“Sorry. I often find myself trying to match my opponents’ level to gauge their strength. Bad habit of mine,” he said, calmly dusting himself off.

Then a wave of mana flooded out of Arthur as if a dam had just collapsed. I instinctively reeled back from the force and when I looked back up, I saw that Camus was back on his feet, all signs of his lethargy gone. Both Hester and Elder Buhndemog had already thickened their aura for protection.

In the center of us all was Arthur—but his form had changed. His long hair now shimmered like liquid pearl and golden symbols ran down the length of his arms. Arthur’s presence had been strong before, but it was outright oppressive now.

“I won’t use this form for the remainder of our training, but since today’s sparring serves to get everyone acquainted with one another, I’ll be glad to let loose,” he said.

The crude leather armor that Emily had clad Arthur in now seemed almost majestic underneath the vivid nimbus of mana enveloping him. He turned around to face me, and I was able to fully take in his amethyst eyes. I was having a hard time trying to find the right word to describe them.

Ethereal? Radiant? Enthralling? Even those words didn’t seem to accurately describe how those eyes seemed to shake me to my very core.

I had seen this form once before at Xyrus Academy, when he’d battled

against Lucas, but this was the first time I had seen it this closely.

“Now that’s more like it!” Elder Buhndemog exclaimed, although the slight tremor in his voice betrayed his unease.

“Spread out!” Hester’s voice rang with authority as she leaped backward and prepared her spell. She knew—everyone knew—that the tables had turned. The second round had yet to start, but already I felt the advantage we had in numbers was now gone.

As Arthur’s presence thickened like a shroud, the usual voice inside my head began whispering, saying that all was futile.

No! You always do this, Kathyln. Stop doubting yourself.

I bit down on my lip, berating myself for my pessimism. Ever since my awakening, I’d been constantly told how talented I was as a mage, yet I always found some way to tell myself I was lacking. Perhaps that’s why my impression of Arthur, back when we had first met during the auction, had remained so clear... even after all these years. As a child—and even now—he was smart, talented, sociable, knew what he wanted, and had a smile that could light up the world.

Regaining my composure, I found myself eye-to-eye with Arthur once again. By his gaze, I knew he had been waiting for me, somehow sensing that my mind was elsewhere.

Doing all I could to keep my embarrassment from showing on my face, I quickly nodded and took my stance.

His lips formed a faint smile and he gave me a nod in return. In that same instant, Arthur vanished, leaving behind only a footprint in the hardened ground and a few tendrils of electricity. By the time my eyes caught up to where he had appeared, Elder Camus had been knocked a few dozen feet in the air. The earth below him molded to cushion his impact when he landed.

Black lightning coiled around Arthur as his eyes searched the room, looking for his next target. But before he could move again, the ground rose around his feet, anchoring him in place.

Stop gawking and help, I told myself.

Using the water from the nearby pond as a catalyst, I shaped it into a giant frozen spear. As soon as I launched it, I felt Elder Camus use his wind magic to accelerate the ten-foot spear of ice to a speed that I couldn't have achieved on my own.

Our cooperative attack tore through the air, spiraling viciously toward Arthur. He stood in place, staring straight at the giant spear of ice, only a hand up in defense.

Is he not going to try and dodge?

I thought about dispersing the spell, but Commander Virion had stressed that we needed to be serious about this to help Arthur.

To my surprise, when the spear was inches away from him, my spell dispersed on its own. The gale surrounding my attack still pushed Arthur back, but the ice spear I had conjured had shattered.

Camus shot me a look, as if asking whether I had done it. I quickly shook my head, my brows knitted in confusion.

I'm sure it wasn't me.

Arthur got back to his feet, unaffected except for the hint of satisfaction on his face.

The elders and I all exchanged glances. No one was completely sure what had just transpired.

“Bah!” Elder Buhndemog stamped his foot, raising a giant boulder from the ground beside him. “Show me more! Unless changing the color of your hair and eyes is the only thing you can do.”

Arthur smiled wickedly. “Gladly.”

My friend—now my opponent—became a blur. This time, I was able to follow his faint form, but just barely.

He sent a shockwave of mana at Elder Buhndemog, but the dwarf had expected that. He sculpted the boulder by his side into a giant shield of stone. A crater formed where the shockwave hit the shield, but it had been no more

than a diversion. By the time the shield had blocked his spell, Arthur had already targeted Hester with a lance of black lightning in his hand.

He's not attacking you because he's afraid to hurt you, Kathyln, the voice whispered tauntingly.

Expelling a sharp breath, I focused on a spell General Varay had taught me. I never liked using it, since it meant I had to get close to my opponent, but this situation was worse. I didn't like to be pitied.

"Seraph of Snow."

Layers of frost spread over my body, covering me in its icy grip. My clothing hardened into armor and a layer of white completely covered me, from my toes to the bottom half of my face.

With my body further empowered, I ran straight at Arthur, who was being attacked by everyone else.

Elder Camus was darting around, sending blades of wind at Arthur and cushioning Elder Buhndemog and Hester whenever Arthur knocked them away.

Arthur launched a spear of lightning at Camus, but it exploded in midair thanks to Hester's intervention.

Everyone felt the presence of my spell, but Arthur seemed too preoccupied to notice.

The frost covering my arm changed form at my thought, extending and sharpening into a blade of ice.

I swung just as General Varay had drilled into me for over a year.

My blade cut across his back, drawing blood that froze instantly. Arthur's head snapped back to look at me, his gaze more of surprise than of pain. He spun around and launched a blade of wind at me, but the layer of frost covering me mitigated the spell.

Without the need to physically block, I continued my attack. Drawing back my other hand, I pushed out, launching a shockwave of frost at my opponent. Arthur quickly blocked my attack, but it still pushed him back—straight into

Elder Buhndemog.

Arthur's instincts were inhuman though. He was already twisting his body, preparing to defend himself, when a gale of wind spun him uncontrollably.

The elderly dwarf saw him coming, and an excited smile stretched across his face, splitting his white beard. He brought his fist into position to punch while the earth around him trembled.

Pieces of the ground flew, combining around his fist to form a giant gauntlet of stone. Hester further empowered his attack by imbuing a blue flame around the earthen fist.

A painful crash resounded as Elder Buhndemog's flaming rock fist slammed straight into Arthur.

"Oh! That felt *so* good!" the dwarven elder beamed, shaking out the fire around his fist.

I dispersed my spell too, relishing the warmth that soon followed.

Arthur sat up from the crater that his body—now back to normal—had formed in the ground. Stretching his neck, he groaned "You got me good there."

Elder Buhndemog burst out in a hearty laugh. "The princess sure saved the day! The three of us were basically in a stalemate—and I suspect the young general wasn't even going all-out."

"I'm not able to keep up that form indefinitely, and I was already running out of steam." Arthur shook his head. "But yeah, I wasn't expecting you to come at me like some sort of ice ninja, Kathyln."

I tilted my head, confused. "Ice... ninja?"

"Uh, nothing." Arthur said, scratching the back of his head. "I shouldn't have taken you lightly, that's all."

I blushed.

Thankfully, Elder Camus seized his attention, extending a hand and pulling Arthur up to his feet.

"Interesting boy," the quiet elder said with the faintest trace of a smile.

“It seems we’ll have much to discuss,” Hester added. “I think this will be a learning experience for us all.”

We all agreed on that.

The five of us regrouped near the entrance of the training room with Emily Watsken and Miss Emeria.

“Before I go over the analysis of today’s assessment, I just wanted to hear some feedback,” Emily addressed. “Of course, our beautiful Miss Alanis Emeria has planned a rigorous training schedule for General Arthur, but overall, if there are any concerns, please let me know.”

Miss Emeria nodded, her expression deadpan. “Feedback is crucial.”

“I think it’s safe to say that the biggest issue for everyone, especially General Arthur, is concern for safety,” Hester noted.

“Ah, yes! I’m actually in the process of working on something to help solve that problem, but it still needs some tinkering,” Emily responded.

“Can I ask what it is, exactly? I’m pretty curious,” Arthur asked.

“It’s a device that basically reads how much mana the wearer is being hit with, triggering a last-minute defense mechanism to prevent a lethal blow,” the artificer answered almost mechanically.

“If an artifact like that can be built, couldn’t it be given to all the soldiers in battle?” Elder Buhndemog mused.

Emily hesitated. “It could, but—”

“It would be astronomically expensive,” Miss Emeria finished. “Also, the defensive mechanism will only work for that single triggering attack. In a training environment, the opponent would stop, but out on the battlefield, another attack would be all the enemy needed to finish the job.”

Elder Buhndemog stroked his beard. “True. Good point.”

“Yes, the artifacts are extremely expensive to make, not just in terms of the cost but the rarity of the material. The artifact uses phoenix wyrm scales. The Glayder family has graciously bestowed a few on us for the sake of my new

training devices,” Emily informed us, looking at me with an appreciative gaze.

I wasn’t aware that Father and Mother still had any left.

“Speaking of training devices, what exactly is this getup for anyway?” Arthur asked, poking the gem on his leather chestplate. “I’m assuming this and those plates all over the wall aren’t just for decoration.”

At that, Emily smiled brightly. Even Miss Emeria had a trace of excitement shining in her eyes. “Everything, my friend, from the unappealing armor to the weird plates all across this room, is for recording and measuring everything that has to do with how you magic the hell out of people.”

MEASURING MAGIC

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Measuring and recording how someone ‘magicked the hell out of people’ was a rather un-intuitive way of describing an unfamiliar process to a group of elderly mages—and two teens.

However, once Emily quelled her enthusiasm and began slowly explaining the functions of the disks all over the room and the metal panel filled with gauges, as well as the leather armor I was wearing, I could see the excitement bubbling up on everyone’s faces.

“So the things all over the room serve as detectors of some kind to record how powerful a spell is?” Camus asked, tilting his head.

Emily nodded. “The word ‘powerful’ is a vague term, but yes. The disks were rather tricky to make because each one of them needs to be sturdy enough to receive the impact but sensitive enough to accurately transmit the feedback to my recording panel. That’s just one aspect though; I’ll explain the other in a bit.”

“What were those glowing lines connecting the disks earlier?” Hester asked.

“Good question!” Emily nodded. “Well, you see, a spell is rarely going to be the size of just one sensor, so I needed the disks placed relatively close to one another with sensors in between. That way, even when a spell is several yards in diameter, the disks can accurately gauge the impact or force of the spell. I call this measurement the force per unit, or fpu. The glowing trails of mana

that light up once sufficiently powered—in this case, by Princess Kathyln and the three elders—serve as sensors that connect the disks to one another so I can more accurately gauge the fpu of a spell as soon as it's released into the field of disks.”

I could see more than a few eyes glaze over with confusion at Emily's excited explanation. I was tempted to remain quiet and let her run out of words to say, but I was curious about something. “So the disks act as sensors after basically being struck with a spell. But say I fired a blast of wind at Elder Buhnd and he blocked it. The spell would never reach any of the disks, so would that spell not be measured?”

Emily's eyes lit up. “As expected, you've quickly caught on to one of the shortcomings. I realized the same thing in the early stages. If these disks were just targets to be hit, then the impact they would receive is enough to get an accurate reading on the force of the spell. But when live sparring is taking place, more than half of the spells would be either unreadable—or inaccurate at best—due to being partially or fully mitigated by a counterattack from the opponent. I said earlier that recording through direct contact was one of the main aspects of the disks. The other is why I needed to cover the whole room. Each disk not only sends visible trails of mana to the other disks around it, but also creates a sort of pressure that can read the force of a spell as soon as it's formed.”

“Is that why I had to help you put all those disks so deep in the ground?” Buhnd asked, scratching his head.

“Exactly, and so the disks aren't in the way even when you use earth magic,” she replied. “Thanks to Elder Buhnd, installing the disks underground was easy. Through the sensors in the ground, all over the walls, and on the ceiling, manipulated mana can be measured even without any of the disks actually being physically hit with a spell.”

“Okay, so basically having this room completely surrounded with these disks creates an area where mana can be measured,” I simplified.

Emily pursed her lips. “Well... yeah, if you want to just summarize six entire months’ work into a sentence, I guess so.”

“Believe me,” I said with a laugh, “I know very well that what you’ve created here is a technological marvel that’ll help mages develop much faster in the future, but I don’t think anyone here has plans to be an artificer.”

“True,” Emily admitted, still pouting.

“So you explained what the disks and the panel do, but what about the armor you had me wear?” I asked.

“Ah, the armor itself was an early part of this process, one of my original designs in fact. It monitors the flow of mana through an individual by—well—I’ll spare you the details. The disc sensors more or less made the armor obsolete. However, in your case, we wanted as much information as possible, and the armor just so happens to compliment Miss Emeria’s abilities nicely,” the artificer replied, turning her gaze to Alanis.

My training attendant nodded before speaking. “Miss Wykes noted the possibility that this environment might have a negative effect on my personal ability, and she thought the suit could assist me in making accurate readings throughout your training.”

“That’s a rather vague explanation. If I didn’t know any better, I might think you’re trying to keep your ability a surprise, just like Emily did with her invention,” I teased my robotic assistant.

She was, however, less than amused. Her expression remained deadpan.

“General Arthur, you asked for specifics of Miss Wykes’s suit, not my ability. If you are curious about my ability, please tell me so.”

“Will do,” I replied, taken aback. Unlike Emily, my training assistant didn’t seem very keen on explaining anything and everything. “So, Alanis, what is your ability?”

The stoic-faced elf nodded, satisfied with my straightforward question. “After making a physical connection with an individual, I am able to utilize nature-affinity magic to accurately observe the mana flow of said individual.”

I heard a snicker from Buhnd. Taking a peek, I saw the dwarf nudging Camus with his elbow and whispering, “Heh, ‘physical connection’ indeed.”

I held back a groan, and Camus simply ignored the lecherous dwarf.

“So does that make you a deviant of nature magic?” I asked, curious.

While it was common knowledge that the higher forms of wind, water, earth, and fire magic were sound, ice, gravity, and lightning, respectively—with metal and magma magic specifically a dwarven specialty—little was known about exactly what nature magic was. It was acknowledged that only elves were able to utilize nature magic, which led magic researchers to believe it was a sort of deviant specialty of wind and water, just as magma was a specialized combination of fire and earth. One example of nature magic was plant manipulation, like what Tess was able to do, but I’d never heard of reading mana flow using nature magic.

“I am uncertain whether my ability is an evolved form of nature magic or a specialized peripheral use of it,” she answered. “However, Commander Virion tasked me with providing accurate feedback on your mana flow throughout the course of your training, as I have done for other Lances.”

“You helped out the other Lances, too?” I asked. I wasn’t so much surprised by the fact that Alanis had worked with the others as I was that Virion hadn’t told me about her.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“How intriguing,” Hester chimed in. “And what does this sensory magic show about General Arthur?”

Alanis took out her clipboard. She flipped through several pages before reading aloud, “General Arthur’s rate of mana flow upon manipulation from mana core to extremities measures at roughly point-four-six seconds for body augmentation. For spell casting, there is roughly a forty percent increase in time for wind-attribute spells and fifty-five percent increase for earth-attribute spells as compared to ice- and lightning-attribute spells. Fire and water magic were not used enough during the session, so no readings could

be made.”

“Point-four-six seconds is awfully specific. How did you measure the time so accurately?” Camus asked, his interest piqued as well.

Alanis produced a small cube-shaped device from the inside of her suit-like jacket. “Miss Wykes generously provided me this time-counting device.”

She pressed a small button on the side and the cube began whirring, then she quickly pressed it again. She showed us the top of the cube, and it showed the time that had elapsed, down to a hundredth of a second.

“Never thought I’d see such a useless tool,” Buhnd grumbled, obviously uninterested in the analysis of these numbers.

“Nonsense. That device can measure how fast you can run from one end of the room to the other on those short stubs you call legs,” Hester jeered, a smug grin on her face.

Buhnd gave a loud snort. “Why do such a plebian thing as running when I can have the earth move my feet underneath me, you old witch?”

The two began bickering once again, making me wonder what their relationship was. It wasn’t just their bickering, though; back when we were sparring, all three of the elders had shown an uncanny degree of coordination, as if they had fought together before. I made a mental note to ask Kathyln or Virion later.

I turned my attention back to the two elves. It seemed Alanis had just finished answering a question from Camus that I’d missed.

“I see,” the old elf replied thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t want to hassle Miss Wykes too much about this so I’ll procure some materials myself.”

“It’s really no problem at all, Elder Camus,” Emily said. “I was planning on improving Arth—General Arthur’s suit anyway. Making a few more wouldn’t be much of a strain, as I already have several half-finished prototypes. Assuming I have enough materials on hand, I just need to update them to the correct spec and fit them properly.”

“What’s going on?” I whispered, leaning toward Kathyln.

“Elder Camus asked if it was possible for Miss Emeria to do readings for multiple people,” Kathyln answered, taking a step back.

Whoops. A little too close for her.

I distanced myself as well, remembering the princess had always been wary of her personal ‘bubble.’ “Does that go for you as well?”

She nodded. “I’m curious to know how the speed of my mana flow compares to others.”

The aspect of comparison brought to mind a whole load of questions that I wanted to ask Emily, but now wasn’t the time for that. Instead, I turned to my training assistant. “Alanis, what were my numbers after I used Realmhea—I mean, after my hair and eyes changed colors?”

Everyone looked at the strait-laced elf expectantly. Even Hester and Buhnd, whose squabbling—or maybe flirting—I had tuned out, stopped to hear her response.

Alanis only had to flip a single page in her notebook before answering. “General Arthur’s spell-casting efficiency, from the mental invocation stage to the physical shaping of elemental mana, increased nearly five-fold throughout all spectrums of elements, and...”

“And?” Buhnd pressed while everyone held their breath.

Alanis shook her head. “My apologies, General Arthur. I did not record your body augmentation after the change in your form.”

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “Was it because there wasn’t enough of a difference in times?”

“Oh, no. It’s not because of that,” Alanis said, her eyes wide. “I did not record you simply because I *could* not. General Arthur, your body augmentation speed normally is on par with most of the Lances. After the transformation, however, it was much too fast for me to even attempt to measure.”

“How’s your brother doing these days?” I asked, hoping to fill the

uncomfortable silence in the corridor.

Kathryn and I were walking in one of the residential floors of the castle. The clear view of the moon and stars outside told us that our training had gone far longer than we'd intended. With everyone either already asleep or working down in the lower levels, the castle felt almost abandoned.

"Curtis is doing much better, now that Father has finally allowed him to leave the castle—under supervision, of course," Kathryn replied with a hint of envy. "In his last transmission scroll he described how rewarding it is to be one of the assistant training instructors at Lanceler Academy."

"You're not so lucky, I'm guessing?"

"I had hoped that becoming stronger as a mage would allow me a little more freedom, but the image my father has of me remains that of a timid little princess," she breathed.

"Well, to be fair, you are pretty timid," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"I have been told that I've become more outgoing," Kathryn replied, flustered. "Even my participation as your sparring partner was at my own insistent..." Her voice trailed off.

"What was that?"

She quickened her pace, walking on ahead. "Nothing."

We continued in silence, and I found myself paying eerily close attention to Kathryn's walk. Her footsteps had an almost lulling cadence, each footfall deliberately made on the balls of her feet to minimize sound. She was small-framed, but her stride exuded a confidence that seemed well-rehearsed. If I didn't know her, by her walk I would've thought she was just another arrogant and pretentious noble.

She stopped, and by the time I raised my eyes, I found her looking back at me with just the slightest lift to her left brow. "Is everything all right?"

Realizing I had spent the past few moments staring at her legs, I blushed. "No—I mean yes, everything is fine."

"Your footsteps are very quiet; I didn't know if you were still walking behind

me,” Kathyln said, waiting for me so we could walk abreast.

“I could say the same for you,” I laughed. “Despite the confidence with which you walk, your feet seem to hardly touch the floor.”

“Mother was very strict on anything that could be seen by those around us. Curtis and I were required to take lessons covering every aspect of royal etiquette,” Kathyln answered.

“Oh! My mom had Ellie go to those kinds of classes when she was little. Except the only thing she seemed to learn was how to get out of chores by saying they were ‘unladylike,’” I said.

Kathyln smiled faintly. “Ellie is your sister, correct? Short for Eleanor?”

“Yeah. Have you met her? She’s usually on the outdoor balcony practicing her archery.”

“I have seen her on occasion, but never spoken to her,” she answered.

“She can be a bit intimidating, with that bear always following her around,” I admitted. “I’ll have to properly introduce you to her sometime. I’m sure she’d be excited to get to know you.”

Kathyln’s smile widened to the point that it actually looked like a smile. “I’d... like that.”

We continued talking as we made our way to her room. Hester was originally supposed to escort the princess back, but I’d wanted to get out of the training room—I actually planned on getting something to eat after—so I volunteered. The old mage was reluctant, but she and the other two elders had wanted to stay behind with Emily and Alanis to measure the force of their spells. She knew Kathyln would be with a Lance, and her excitement at measuring her fpu outweighed everything else, so she’d relented.

If someone were to stand absolutely still and stay quiet, it was possible to feel the castle tremble slightly as Hester, Buhnd, and Camus let loose their magic far below.

Kathyln’s room was just a few feet ahead when I remembered what I wanted to ask her. “Does your guardian personally know Buhnd?”

She nodded. “All three elders know each other.”

My brows lifted in surprise. “Really? How?”

“Those three played crucial roles in the last war between human and elves. Darv sent soldiers to help Sapin during the war, which is how Hester and Elder Buhnd know each other. After the war was over, leaders from all three kingdoms were obligated to attend a summit held every couple of months in an attempt to mend broken bridges. Hester has mentioned Elder Camus’s and Elder Buhndemog’s names several times. They often trained together before.”

“That explains their impressive coordination when we sparred,” I noted.

I wanted to ask more about Hester, and about the Flamesworth House in general, but we had stood before Kathyln’s door for several moments now, and it felt more proper to ask Hester directly.

“Will you be okay by yourself, Princess?” I teased as Kathyln carefully unlocked her door with the touch of a palm. My room didn’t have a mana signature reader, but then again, it probably wouldn’t have done me much good to have one.

“Father took extra precautions with the reinforcements for my room,” she said, lifting a familiar-looking pendant from around her neck. “I also have this.”

“That’s made from a phoenix wyrm, right?” I asked, knowing where I had seen it.

“I’m impressed you know what it is at such a brief glance,” she replied. “The artificer, Gideon, made these from the core and scale of a phoenix wyrm.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said, omitting the fact that I had bartered two of the same artifacts from Gideon almost ten years ago for the blueprints of the steam engine ship. Ellie and my mother were still wearing them now—one of the reasons I could sleep a little easier at night.

“Thank you.” She tucked the phoenix wyrm pendant back inside her shirt.

“And thank you for walking me back. I was glad to see Hester so eager to

join in, but, knowing her, she would have insisted on leaving with me had I not had an escort.”

“No problem,” I responded. “It’s the least I could do in return for your taking the time to help me with my training.”

She shook her head. “It’s training for me as well. No need to thank me for that.”

“Well then, let’s train hard and get even stronger.” I stuck out a hand.

Kathlyn stared at my open hand for a moment before gingerly accepting the gesture.

Her palm and her fingers were warm to the touch—hot, even—and her hand remained absolutely still in my grip. Making sure my friendly gesture didn’t last too long, I gently squeezed her hand before letting go. “Goodnight.”

Without even a pause, she whipped her head away and shut the door. From the other side of her door, I heard a muffled, “Goodnight, Arthur.”

ASPECT OF UNPREDICTABILITY

NICO SLAPPED the back of my dueling vest. “Are you ready, Grey?”

I continued the last set of my stretches, more out of anxiousness than to loosen my body. We were in the underground waiting area where dozens of other students were either practicing their techniques on the padded mats or restlessly pacing until their name was called by one of the officiators.

“Ready as I can be, I suppose,” I finally replied, swinging my arms.

“Come on. You’re going to have to be more confident than that—hungrier,” Nico pressed. “I know how hard you’ve had it, being bullied by everyone from the second and first division—”

“How could you possibly know how hard I’ve had it?” I cut in, annoyed.

“Moving from Division Four into Division Three last year made their ‘pranks’—most of which gave me welts if not broken bones—worse, because I apparently didn’t ‘know my place.’”

“My bad,” Nico stammered, taken aback by my sharpness.

“You’re in the first class of Division One, respected by teachers and peers. I’m proud of you for that, but don’t think that means you know what I’ve been through these past years.”

He nodded. “I was just trying to help.”

“It’s fine,” I said, suddenly feeling guilty. “I’m sorry for snapping at you. I’m just really sick of those nobles flaunting their house names like a badge that lets them do whatever they want to me.”

“Yeah. It doesn’t help that most of their parents are generous donors to the academy. It only serves to make the teachers turn a blind eye to students like us, with no family to back them.”

“At least they treat *you* well,” I said, sitting with my back against the cold wall. “Being better than them intellectually doesn’t seem to hurt their ego nearly as much as being better than them in combat.”

“Thank God for that,” Nico chuckled. “At least you can defend yourself.”

I agreed. “I’m just hoping the judges will be more fair than they have been and finally let me into the second division.”

“Seriously. Even if your ki level isn’t as high, your overall combat ability should have at least put you in Division Two last year. I still can’t believe they held you back even after you pummeled that mouthy kid.”

“Remember him taunting me before the start of the match, saying he could beat me with one hand?”

Nico suppressed a laugh, perhaps fearful that the boy in question was somewhere in the large room. “That match was over so quick, he didn’t even have time to take his hand out of his pocket.”

“Yet, here I am, taking part in these rigged assessment duels.” I thumped my head against the wall, letting the dull pain wash away my despair.

Nico lowered his voice. “I have heard from the other engineering students that there’s a new judge this year, very cold and impartial.”

I raised a brow. “How would the engineering students know about that?”

Nico coughed and looked away. “Supposedly, she’s also a very attractive lady. You know how it is with the engineering guys; they’re a lewd bunch.”

“Seems like that includes you as well,” I said, shaking my head in mock disappointment. “I wonder what Cecilia’s going to think when I tell her this.”

“You wouldn’t.” Nico’s face blanched. “After all I’ve done to try and help you—”

Just then, a gruff voice called my name over the intercom. “Cadet Grey to Arena Six. Failure to appear will result in an automatic loss. Once again,

Cadet Grey to Arena Six.”

I picked up the blunted dueling sword that I had borrowed for the assessment and winked at Nico. “I’ll keep you and your engineering dogs’ little interest to myself.”

Nico hung his head in defeat and motioned for me to go.

Waving back at my friend, I made my way up the wide ramp that led to the surface. I had to raise a hand to shield my eyes from the midday sun until they could adjust, and when they did, I found myself in the center of a wide outdoor stadium.

Raised circular platforms dotted the large field of grass. Students and faculty members surrounded the platforms, some judging or scouting while others were just there to watch their friends or an upcoming opponent.

The bleachers surrounding the stadium were dotted with people—too far away to recognize, not that I would know any of them. Prior events had made it easy to assume most of the adults seated here were family members of the students participating in today’s assessment duels.

I made my way toward the sign that read ‘Arena Six,’ slipping through the crowds congested around the arenas in between.

“Great, an audience,” I mumbled to myself. There was a large group, of varying ages, excitedly chattering amongst themselves. One portly middle-aged man had his arms up on the arena, giving last-minute advice to a boy my age, until the slender referee informed the man not to lean on the stage.

I barely had room to go up the stairs that led to the elevated dueling arena, and eyes bored into me the entire way. Some cast assessing gazes, trying to size me up to make their own prediction on whether their son—or cousin, nephew, or whatever the boy up on the stage was—could beat me.

I reached the arena platform. There was only me, the boy I’d be facing, and the referee. The vests, the only source of protection we were provided, spoke volumes about what our academy thought in terms of our safety.

Broken bones were common, and even life threatening injuries couldn’t be

considered shocking. As if sensing my discomfort, the referee stepped toward me and peered into my eyes, scrutinizing me.

The later rounds of assessments would have a panel of ‘unbiased’ judges as well, but this first round would be determined by this one referee, so I’d have to do my best to impress him.

“Make us proud, Simeon!” the portly man roared.

“You can do it, Simmy!” a curly-haired woman hooted excitedly.

“Sir, the barrier will be up soon, so please refrain from leaning forward into the arena. I will not remind you again,” the slender referee said sternly.

“Dad, please!” the boy named Simeon groaned, shooing his father away.

Without further delay, the referee took out a key and slid it alongside the far edge of the arena. Immediately, a light flickered around us, casting a translucent wall about thirty feet high.

“Weapons in position,” the referee announced. “Traditional dueling rules apply. Match will end when one of you yields or when the protective barrier around your dueling vest shatters. Points will be earned for solid contact, not glancing blows. Cadet Grey, Cadet Simeon Cledhome, are you ready?”

I kept the blade of my sword low, gripping with only one hand; Simeon took a more traditional pose, with both hands firmly on the handle and the blade positioned vertically out in front of him.

We dipped our heads in acknowledgement, our gazes locked on each other.

“Begin!”

Immediately, Simeon lunged, clearing the distance between us—over ten feet—in a single bound. He had concentrated his ki to his back leg, pushing off and redistributing back to the rest of his body after gaining the momentum he needed—not an easy feat.

However, his burst seemed like wading through viscous waters to my eyes. By the time his sword was lined up in position to stab at my vest, I had identified three different courses of action and was contemplating my choices.

I went with the simplest option, pivoting so his blunted weapon would barely glide across my chest.

Executing the same technique as Simeon, I concentrated ki into my back leg and torso for support. In one swift stroke, I stepped into range and spun, using my leg and hips for momentum. Even though I didn't enhance my arm with ki, the strength of my attack was enough to knock Simeon off his feet.

Just before my sword struck him, he managed to twist so that his left shoulder took the force of the blow, not his vest.

"Gah!" Simeon yelled in pain, dropping his sword and cradling his injured shoulder with his right hand.

I thought for sure he'd yield, so I held my position, my eyes shifting between the referee and Simeon.

A muted thump drew my attention, and I could see the father banging wildly at the barrier. "Get up, Simeon! Get up!"

After a series of groans and curses, my opponent was back on his feet, his left arm dangling limply by his side while he struggled to hold his long sword in his right hand.

I cast a doubtful look at the referee, but he shook his head. The match wasn't over.

In an act of desperation, Simeon tried to catch me off guard while my attention was on the referee. He lunged once more, sacrificing his speed by allocating most of his ki into his arm. With his right arm strengthened, he was able to easily swing the heavy dueling sword.

His stubbornness was respectable, but the match was already over.

I struck Simeon's right hand, making him immediately drop his weapon. Without stopping, I spun and kicked his right thigh, which was unprotected by ki.

Simeon grunted as his knee buckled under him. The tip of my sword was already waiting for him underneath his chin.

"I-I yield," he breathed.

“No!” his father protested, banging wildly against the barrier. “The boy cheated! No way my Simeon would lose to some no-named rat!”

“Enough!” the referee shouted. “Cadet Simeon Cledhome’s remaining assessment duels will take place amongst the other defeated cadets while Cadet Grey will move on. That is all!”

With that, the referee withdrew the barrier and allowed us to leave. Simeon walked down those stairs like his soul had just withered. I almost felt bad for him. His ki control was considered pretty good—most kids in my division were now getting a firm grasp on basic body strengthening, not ki allocation.

His mother immediately gave him a hug and gingerly caressed his wounded shoulder while his father stared daggers, as if his son’s loss was because of me. I guessed it was, so I stared back and did the respectable thing.

I smiled politely at the portly man of House Cledhome. Now... if he saw that as being rude or arrogant, that was on him.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

“What were you dreaming about?” a familiar coarse voice asked, startling me awake.

My eyes shot open to see Virion, his face just a foot away from my own, wrinkled with a wide grin.

“Gah!” I yelped, bolting up and nearly colliding heads with the old man.

From the side, I could hear Emily and my sister giggling; even Boo and Sylvie huffed in amusement.

“Damn it, Virion. Your face is terrifying,” I said, gathering my wits.

“You were smiling so widely that I just had to wake you up and find out what it was you were dreaming about,” the old elf snickered. “Was it perhaps one of *those* dreams?” he continued, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Are you sure you’re fit to lead this continent’s army?” I groaned, fighting the urge to roll my eyes.

The commander—sitting casually on the ground next to me, his back against the cold metal wall of the training room—simply shrugged. “I’m pretty sure

smiling lewdly while sleeping in a public setting isn't very fitting for a Lance either."

"It wasn't a lewd smile!" I protested.

"It was kind of creepy," Ellie chimed in.

"It was just a dream about when I was younger. You know, when times were simpler," I shot back.

It wasn't a lie. Just not the entire truth.

Ellie exchanged glances with my bond and shrugged.

'Was it another dream of your former life?' Sylvie probed, concern in her voice.

I wouldn't worry too much about it, Sylv, I comforted her.

Turning my gaze away from my vulpine bond, I watched as Kathyln and the three elders finished warming up. Only a day had passed since the first training session, but the fact that I couldn't get any sleep due to my futile attempts to extract mana out of Uto's horns—without the acclorite in my right hand absorbing it first—made it feel like a week had gone by.

The last thing I remembered was coming into the training room and seeing my sister and Boo with Virion. While Emily and Alanis prepared the training equipment she had made for Kathyln and the elders, I'd sat down and talked with the commander. I'd asked him about my personal training assistant—how he ever found someone like her, and why he'd never bothered to mention her to me.

Virion had explained that he had first met Alanis while visiting a unit stationed near the southern border of Elenoir, where the Elshire Forest ended. He had stumbled upon Alanis in one of the medic's tents where she was helping a soldier who had been ambushed by the corrupted beasts. Though she was only a nurse there, Virion had seen the true value of her deviant magic and brought her to the castle. While I was training in Epheotus, Virion had made all the Lances undergo evaluation with Alanis so they could improve their mana flow where it was the weakest or slowest.

Virion had been explaining to me that ‘corrupted beasts’ were what the soldiers dubbed the mana beasts infected by the Vritra—and the next thing I knew I was waking up to the sight of the old man’s face hovering over mine.

Trying to shake off the lingering weariness, I got up and stretched.

“Looks like the boy is ready,” Virion exclaimed, motioning Emily over.

The artificer hurried to me, carrying the upgraded training equipment. I was impressed she had managed to accomplish so much in such a short amount of time.

Instead of wearing the full leather armor to bounce back the mana waves Emily needed to record the power of my spells without interrupting Alanis’s internal readings, I now only had to attach a few bands to my arms and legs and wear a thin chestplate with the gem embedded on it.

As I finished putting on the new equipment, my training assistant approached me, her eyes glued to her notebook.

“General Arthur. I have finished compiling the training schedule for the next seven weeks, focusing on improving your mana flow times during body augmentation and spell casting of your lesser elements,” she said, raising her gaze to me while handing me her notebook.

“The first two weeks will be one-on-one training,” I said after giving it a cursory glance. “That probably isn’t the best use of time considering I only have two months, right?”

“I agree.” She nodded, taking back her notebook. “However, your goal in all this, General Arthur, by immersing yourself in combat scenarios involving all of the elements, was to acquire the knowledge of which elements can be best utilized, depending on the situation, in order to apply that in later battles, correct?”

Her thought process was a lot more technical, but she had the gist of it.

“Correct.”

“While it’s commendable that you’re willing to become a training dummy in order to achieve this goal, it’s impractical for one main reason.”

Her statement piqued my curiosity. “Go on.”

“After your assessment with all four trainers, I believe that the main reason for your—forgive my bluntness—problem stems from how solidified your fighting style is already,” she answered. “It is my understanding that you have previously tried to train your lesser elements by forcibly inhibiting your strongest elements, correct?”

“Yet, even after doing so, once you allowed yourself to go back to your more comfortable elements, your fighting style reverted to what I perceive as close-combat with elemental integration in your attacks.”

“That sounds about right,” I said, thinking about what my core fighting style was. Many of my abilities had improved since my time as Grey, but my core style, which was the use of the sword and body, was still the same—albeit improved after my training with the asura Kordri.

“In order to accustom your body to modes of fighting outside of your usual methods, a slow transition is required, along with another important component: unpredictability.” I could tell by the twinkle in Alanis’s eyes that she was almost as enthusiastic about training regimens as Emily was about artificing.

“General Arthur, you will start off with one-on-one sparring against the four training partners here today. They will trade places at random intervals so you will not have the chance to acclimate,” she explained in a serious tone.

“In addition, in each session, you will be forbidden to use one element.”

“And which element is that?” I asked, looking over her notes.

The usually impassive elf showed the slightest glimmer of a smile. “That will be chosen—and switched—at random, General Arthur. Unpredictability, remember?”

“It seems my original idea of brainlessly sparring four against one has become much more convoluted,” I murmured under my breath.

“The training regimens she made for the other Lances were just as complicated,” Virion remarked, standing up.

After dusting off his robe, Virion headed to the door. “I’ll be by later to see how things progress. Alanis, don’t break Arthur. I still need him.”

Alanis nodded sternly, as if she had seriously considered the possibility.

With that, the old elf bid us farewell. Kathyln and the elders, who had just finished warming up, showed their respects as the commander left.

“The equipment is all ready to go,” Emily exclaimed as soon as the door closed behind Virion.

I looked around at the training room, spotting Kathyln blotting her forehead with a handkerchief and Hester straightening out the creases in her tight-fitting robe. “So who am I going up against fir—”

The ground underneath my feet abruptly shot up like a spring, ejecting me into the air.

I was startled for a split second before realizing it had to be Buhnd. It had been less than a day since I’d met the bearded ball of muscle and he was already becoming predictable.

I was launched some twenty feet in the air, and when I managed to twist myself to face him, the old dwarf was waiting for me with an eager smile, his bulging arms stretched out wide as if expecting me to hug him.

A smile crept across my face as I siphoned mana into my hand.

At least I won’t be bored.

GUEST TEACHER

“SWITCH!” Alanis called out just as my wind-infused fist was about to connect with Camus’s chest.

I muttered a string of curses, stopping my strike. *How is it that over these past few days, the matches always seem to stop at such inconvenient times? She has to be doing this on purpose.*

As if to answer my accusation, my trainer said, “Exactly twenty minutes have passed. Elder Camus will be switched for Elder Hester. General Arthur, please restrict your water magic.”

I wiped away the sweat pouring down my face, trying to take a breather before my next opponent arrived. Having my water magic banned meant I couldn’t use ice either. How frustratingly convenient for Hester, who would’ve been at a disadvantage against those two elements.

Glancing at the audience, I could tell everyone had been paying close attention to my fight against Camus. My sister was particularly engrossed.

Hester approached me until we were about a dozen feet apart. Tying her long grey hair back into a bun, she readied herself and assumed a dueling stance. Being a silver core mage meant that, although her strength was in conjuring, she could easily augment her body. The fact that she wore tight-fitting clothes and chose to use a conjuring ring rather than the traditional staff or wand meant that she wanted the flexibility of both long-range and close-range combat.

“Begin,” Alanis stated, her voice amplified by the artifact she was speaking into.

Hester immediately snapped her finger, a spark igniting between her middle finger and her thumb.

The blue ember was just a distraction, though.

Since I wasn’t using Realmheart, I couldn’t see the fluctuations in mana, but I could feel it. My body, enhanced through assimilation with Sylvia’s dragon will, seemed to instinctively sense that I was in danger.

I quickly propelled myself back, just in time to see a burst of fire detonate where I had been standing.

The explosion caused a cloud of smoke, obstructing my view of Hester.

She didn’t expect to hit me with that. She wants me to lose sight of her.

I swung my arms, manipulating the cloud of dust between us to shoot forward. The rock and sand in the air froze for a second before erupting forward into a shockwave of debris.

As I had predicted, Hester’s form came into view. She managed to shield herself with a panel of fire. It was my turn to strike back.

Augmenting mana into my legs, I flashed forward, gathering blue fire into my fists.

I struck at the panel of fire, expecting my flame to overpower hers. Her spell disintegrated, but to my surprise, Hester was no longer behind the panel of fire she had conjured.

That’s when I felt it again, the primal instinct that told me I was in danger. This time, it came from below my feet.

Blue fire swirled beneath me before erupting into a pillar of flames. For a moment, even my vision turned blue as an intense heat washed over me.

My aura blocked the attack long enough for me to manipulate the fire and keep it from harming me. If I took too much damage, the defensive artifact in my armor would activate, making it my loss.

Just when the heat was becoming unbearable, I was able to dispel Hester’s

attack and break the pillar of fire—only to find myself surrounded by a dozen or so fiery spheres, each at least six feet high.

Given that I couldn't see or sense Hester, and that each globe of fire would easily fit a grown woman inside, I knew she was in one of the globes.

If she was trying to annoy me with all these distractions, it was working.

I stomped the ground, conjuring earthen spikes. Only half the spikes hit their mark.

Note to self: Practice aiming with earth magic.

The spikes that did hit bored straight through the spheres of fire, causing them to disperse. But it didn't take long for new spheres to manifest and take their place.

Before I could strike them down again, the flaming globes brightened, then launched their attacks.

Each globe seemed to have a mind of its own, as the attacks they fired were different from each other. One globe shot a barrage of small fire bullets, while another began spinning and releasing burning crescents.

I was forced onto the defensive by the barrage of attacks coming from all directions. I erected a stone wall from the ground to block the flame bullets and launched a blade of wind at the burning crescent, detonating the fiery spell prematurely.

My mind raced, trying to think of my next move. I couldn't stay on the defensive, but I had no idea which flaming sphere she was hiding inside.

The temptation to just release Realmheart grew, but I knew that was just a shortcut, solving my inadequacy by blowing off most of my mana.

Think, Arthur. How would I try to fight me if I was Hester?

The only strategy I could think of was to get on my nerves until I let my guard down. That was the answer.

I let out a roar of frustration, wildly launching shockwaves of wind and blasts of fire at the globes. Of course, the ones I hit were replaced by new ones, but I continued my seemingly agitated assault.

Coalescing tendrils of lightning around my arms and legs, I flashed forward, getting close to the spheres of fire and striking them down.

For each globe I struck down, two more took its place until there were more than thirty spheres hovering around me.

Her mana pool is impressive.

Now the spheres began undulating and glowing brighter. I thought they were all going to explode, but instead each of the flaming globes shot a condensed stream of fire at me.

Is this the final attack? I thought, noticing that the spheres were growing smaller as they released their flaming beams.

I put on my best expression of surprise and horror and waited until all the beams were just about to hit me before I acted.

Siphoning a large amount of mana from my core, I engulfed my entire body in a suit of fire. It required absolute control to keep the fire from harming me, but timing it with Hester's last attack would make it seem like I was hit.

Even with several extra layers of pure mana and fire mana protecting me from Hester's barrage, I felt the fire singeing the hair on my extremities. I feared for a moment that I might actually come out of this bald, but my aura kept me—and the majority of my hair—safe.

Over the roar of the flames I heard Ellie call out in horror, but I kept my focus on my opponent. I knew Hester wouldn't let her guard down even from this.

The next step was the hard part.

One thing any multi-elemental mage always had to consider was not just knowing *when* to utilize each of his elements, but *how* to utilize multiple elements in conjunction with one another.

Keeping the flaming barrier around my body, I split off a part of my focus so I could manipulate the ground underneath me.

I felt my flames tremble—a sign that my concentration was wavering.

Almost. Enduring the growing heat around me as I manipulated a hole into

the ground for me to fit inside, I waited until I finally saw Hester's silhouette through the layer of fire between us.

Now!

I collapsed my protective spell just as I fell into the ground, immediately restoring the ground above me so I was completely submerged.

The earth shook with what I assumed was Hester's next strike.

Without wasting any time, I pushed at the earth around me, utilizing the seismic perception spell to sense where everyone was. I felt a ripple in the earth from a different location—the same perception spell that I had used, but far stronger.

Focusing on the task at hand, I shaped the earth around me, allowing myself to slowly move underground. Experts like Buhnd were able to travel underground as easily as if they were underwater, but unfortunately I wasn't at that level.

It didn't matter, though. It was Hester's turn to be caught off guard.

I only needed two seconds to gather mana around my right fist for my final attack. As soon as I was ready, I cleared the earth above me and bolted up to the surface and into the air by infusing wind mana beneath my feet.

Black lightning coiled around my right arm like a vicious serpent ready to strike. Just beneath me, standing on the ground, was Hester, her arms enveloped in fire fashioned into long blades with thin tendrils of electricity wrapped around them—no doubt her actual finishing move.

Hester whipped around to face me just as my body descended. She was too late. I was within striking range and she wasn't in the safety of her fire orb.

We were playing to my strength now.

My opponent's lips moved—whether she was cursing or chanting a spell, I couldn't tell—as she brought up her flaming arm blades.

The black lightning tore free from my arm as I unleashed the voltaic charge at Hester. The black tendrils ripped through the air and our two spells collided.

A sphere of congealed fire and lightning formed from the impact, growing

larger and brighter until it finally exploded with us at the epicenter.

KATHYLN GLAYDER

The explosion obscured our view of Arthur and Hester. My eyes flitted to Arthur's little sister; I was prepared to conjure a barrier in case the shockwave reached us, but her bond had already responded, pulling her close with its body positioned to block any remnant of the blast caused by the colliding spells.

In my concern for Arthur's little sister, I forgot to protect myself from the shockwave that resulted from the detonation.

I braced for impact, trying to raise a wall of ice in time, but to my surprise, the ground beneath me sank. I found myself a few feet below the surface as the shockwave passed harmlessly above me.

After the explosion subsided, I was raised back up and came face to face with Elder Buhnd.

"Careful, Princess," he grinned before turning his attention back to the origin of the blast.

The cloud of debris caused by the explosion dissipated and I could see the two figures.

Though disheveled, Arthur was standing. My guardian, on the other hand, had fallen back. A soft pink glow surrounded her, signaling that her defensive artifact had been triggered.

Elder Buhnd clasped his hands together, obviously excited. "Haha! Brilliant!"

"The artifact worked seamlessly!" Miss Watsken exclaimed from the side, excited for a different reason.

"It's worrying that you're this surprised about the functionality of the device meant to keep my brother from dying," Arthur's little sister muttered, patting the dust from her clothing.

"I wasn't surprised!" the artificer protested. "Just happy that there were no unexpected complications."

"Mhmm." Arthur's sister cast one last look of doubt at Miss Watsken before

turning her focus to her bond.

“What were General Arthur’s mana flow readings during that battle?” Elder Camus asked Miss Alanis. I listened in, curious about Arthur’s improvement over the last few days.

Miss Alanis’s eyes glowed in a myriad of colors as she assessed Arthur’s internal data. Eventually her irises returned to their original colors. “General Arthur’s mana flow for spellcasting earth and wind have increased by four percent and two percent, respectively.”

“And that’s a... good thing?” Elder Buhnd asked, his thick brows knitted in confusion.

“The rate of General Arthur’s growth is... impressive, to say the least. It has been less than a week, yet the improvement he has made with his peripheral elements is remarkable,” she replied before recording her newest findings into her journal.

“I think you’d be more helpful in the war if you led a larger group of soldiers, rather than trying to push that old body of yours,” a familiar voice sounded from behind us.

My eyes widened as I realized it was Commander Virion, and he was accompanied by General Bairon and Master Varay.

I immediately lowered my head in respect.

“No need for such formalities. I’m just here to check up on my youngest general,” Commander Virion said. “Actually, let me apologize in advance.”

I raised my head tentatively, locking eyes with Master Varay. My ice magic teacher regarded me with her strong gaze before turning her attention to the aftermath of Hester and Arthur’s mock battle.

“That sort of passive-aggressiveness is beneath you, Virion—I mean, Commander,” Elder Camus responded with a slight smile.

“Part of my job is making sure my strongest assets are as effective as they can be,” Commander Virion responded, smiling amiably as he squeezed Elder Camus’s shoulder.

“What are you apologizing for?” Elder Buhnd asked. “Don’t tell me you’re going to cut our play—training time short! I was just about to go next!”

“Actually, Princess Kathyln was scheduled to go next,” Miss Emeria corrected.

Master Varay approached me casually, tenderly picking out a piece of debris that had become lodged in my hair. “It’s been a while, Kathyln. You’ve gotten stronger.”

Blushing, I quickly combed my fingers through my hair, trying to tidy my unkempt appearance. “Thank you, Master. I’ve been growing in strength while training alongside the elders and General Arthur.”

She nodded before shifting her gaze behind me. I looked back to see Arthur pulling Hester back up on her feet. I could make out Arthur’s lips moving but it was impossible to hear what he was saying.

“I just arrived from a mission and have some rare free time,” she began, unclipping the fur-lined cloak from her shoulders.

The rich midnight-blue cloth fell to the ground, revealing her signature battle attire, a minimal navy armor with gold accents that looked like a gift from the asuras when she wore it.

I stepped out of the way and let her pass, already knowing what she was going to ask.

“At least the show’s going to be entertaining,” Elder Buhnd grumbled as conjured a stone chair and sat down.

“Umm, General Varay, I’m not sure the artifact has enough fuel to withstand a duel of this caliber,” Emily said, raising a shaky hand.

Without breaking stride, Master Varay locked eyes with Arthur. Even in his disheveled and worn-out state, his eyes gleamed as his mouth curved into a smile.

“Bairon. Help Miss Watsken fuel up her artifact for my little skirmish against our newest Lance.”

BEAUTY IN MAGIC

I WATCHED as Arthur and my master faced each other, just a dozen feet apart. Their presences collided terrifyingly, submerging the room in a heavy shroud as they waited.

Finally, Miss Watsken's strained voice croaked from behind us as if she was already regretting what she was about to say. "Th-The barrier is ready... I think."

Her voice was soft, but Master and Arthur must've heard because their auras thickened around them. A shimmering veil of bluish silver surrounded my master—unlike Arthur's aura, which was a myriad of different hues, no doubt because of his multiple affinities.

Commander Virion, along with the elders and even General Bairon, watched in silence, each of them afraid to blink in case they missed anything. I could sympathize with them—I was standing as close as I could without endangering myself.

Just the mere sight of them was awe-inspiring. I felt a sense of pride watching my master and the presence she had even in a room filled with masters of magic. I had no doubt that, regardless of the many sparring sessions I could provide for Arthur, training just once with Master Varay was more valuable for him.

Suddenly, my master's body flickered and disappeared. Arthur reacted instantly, his form flashing away just in time to dodge her first strike.

Where her frozen lance pierced the ground, ice formed and spread.

Arthur seemed to want to test his own ice magic against her, because he responded by hurling a shockwave of frost.

With a flick of her wrist, Master Varay dispersed the shockwave, using Arthur's frost to fuel her own magic. The white mist swirled, forming a dozen spears of ice around her. She clutched her fist and the ice spears responded to her call, shooting towards her opponent.

As impressive as Master Varay's control over ice was, Arthur's speed in dodging her barrage was even more splendid. His body seemed to have split and multiplied from the afterimages. I had heard that he was able to go even faster, but his body wasn't able to handle the stress.

Someone beside me clicked their tongue. I turned to see Buhnd wearing an expression of frustration. "I see the young General was holding back on us."

"Arthur has a tendency to hold back with anyone he even suspects is weaker than him. Against Varay, he can go at full strength," Commander Virion said, his arms crossed.

"Why isn't he using that form of his? Realmheart, I think he called it," Hester asked, her face still strained after her duel against Arthur.

"I think it's so he can enjoy the fight longer," a light voice answered. "It's not everyday you see my brother look so happy."

Arthur's little sister was watching from atop her bond as if in a trance. She had the same gaze I often saw on Arthur when he was truly focused on something. They really did resemble one another.

A loud crash drew my attention back to the battle. Where there had once been only a dirt field was now a snowy expanse. Master Varay, who had just blocked an attack from Arthur, waved her arm and manipulated the snow around her. A vortex of frost swirled to life, forming a spiraling serpent.

Elder Buhnd whistled in appreciation as all eyes followed Master's creation. A snowy frost formed the long body of the dragon, and its jagged claws and fangs were made of ice.

The ice dragon opened its maw at Arthur, who readied himself. Brilliant blue flames coiled around his arms, melting the snow in a circle around him as his gaze remained locked on the mighty dragon.

“Smart move, giving up on playing to her strengths,” Hester praised.

Arthur lowered his stance, digging his back legs into the ground for support before he unleashed his fiery attack.

The coiling vines of blue fire around his arms conjoined before erupting into a devastating blast at the frost dragon.

Their two opposing spells crashed, enveloping them in an expanding sphere of steam and debris.

“Careful!” Elder Camus grunted, conjuring a barrier of wind around the spectators.

We all braced ourselves for the shockwave that ripped through the room following the collision. The ground trembled and cracked, and pieces of rock and ice bombarded the protective spell around us.

As the cloud of steam and dust faded, I could see two figures in the air. Master Varay was flying, with two dozen frost spheres the size of her fists circling around her. Arthur was slowly descending, using wind magic to stay somewhat afloat.

With a wave of his arms, Arthur unleashed a torrent of wind blades at Master Varay. However, before the crescents reached her, they seemed to slow and fall off course.

“Air pressure drops when the air cools,” Arthur noted. “Don’t I feel stupid for that last attack.”

“Admitting your shortcomings is a step forward,” Master Varay acknowledged with the slightest hint of a smile on her face.

With a flick of her wrist, the spheres of frost launched toward Arthur—but not directly at him.

Arthur seemed to sense the danger they posed because he immediately covered himself in a whirlwind of blue fire.

“He’s utilizing both fire and wind to amplify the power of his spell,” Hester remarked.

Just as the spheres of frost were about to explode, Arthur unleashed his fiery tempest. The blue fire roared to life, engulfing Master Varay’s spell.

The swirling gale of fire remained, hiding Arthur within. I expected the blue flames to soon dissipate, but instead the embers swirled as if being sucked in. That’s when I saw it.

The flames had converged, coating Arthur’s giant spear of lightning in a layer of blue fire.

“Not bad,” General Bairon admitted, his gaze locked on the fearsome spear of fire and lightning.

“It would’ve been good if he could manipulate metal for the base of his attack,” Elder Buhnd muttered.

As Arthur slowly descended in the air, he hurled his spell. Just as he released the fire and lightning spear, a gust of wind swirled around him and his attack. The spear ripped through the sky, accelerating rapidly from the wind he had added at the last minute.

Elder Camus nodded in approval. “Using wind as a supportive spell.”

Master Varay was obviously wary of the strength of Arthur’s spell, because she conjured protective barriers made of multiple layers of ice.

Unfortunately for her, Arthur seemed to have predicted this because the layer of fire surrounding the spear of lightning melted through every layer of protection she had conjured.

Most of the people present seemed to be anxious about whether she would be able to block Arthur’s attack, but I knew better. While I wanted to root for Arthur, I knew he wasn’t the only one holding back.

The elemental spear exploded upon contact with Master Varay’s body, throwing her back in the air with her form engulfed in fire and lightning. Arthur landed on the ground, his body slumped forward, his breathing heavy.

“So she used *that* form,” General Bairon said, eyes wide and tone

appreciative.

Arthur's sister and the others, who didn't know what he was talking about, looked at him in confusion, but I was already expecting it. I had learned *that* form from her, after all.

"I suggest you take it up a step as well, General Arthur," Master Varay said, her form now visible.

It was the form Arthur had referred to as an "ice ninja," but a few stages higher. Master was now completely clad in frost, as if her very body was carved out of ice. Every strand of hair looked like a crystalline thread, and her eyes glowed a bright blue.

Though Arthur's expression was appreciative as he looked over Master Varay's form, his tone was lighthearted as he spoke. "I suppose it is time to bring this to a close."

He closed his eyes and took a breath. That casual action seemed to change the entire atmosphere in the room. My master's form exuded a presence of awe, but Arthur was distorting the very space around him.

I had seen this form before, yet it still made shivers run down my spine.

Arthur opened his eyes, his irises now a magnificent lavender hue and his long auburn hair a brilliant white. That wasn't all, though. Arthur was muttering something under his breath. Soon after, a surge of black lightning enveloped his body.

"Oh... Oh my," Miss Watsken muttered. "G-General Bairon. Would you mind charging more of your mana into the artifact?"

"Good idea," Hester agreed. "We'll help out as well. Buhnd, you should make a bunker around us."

The earth around beneath sank a few feet so that we all had to stand to see the fight. In the distance were two distinct figures. One looked like a translucent statue carved by a master sculptor, while the other seemed like a mighty deity in human form.

"So. Do you think you can beat Arthur in a fight?" Commander Virion

casually asked General Bairon.

The Lance remained silent while he imbued the crystal on Emily's panel with mana, his stern gaze focused on Master Varay and Arthur.

I turned my attention back to them as well, just in time to hear a series of pops in the space between them.

"What's happening?" Arthur's sister asked, squinting her eyes.

I'm not sure either, I thought.

"General Arthur is spellcasting, but for some reason, it's not visible," Miss Emeria explained, sounding confused as well.

"The boy is countering Varay's spells before they even manifest," General Bairon answered, gnashing his teeth.

"How is that possible?" Hester asked.

"It has something to do with that form," Commander Virion replied, his sharp eyes wide in amazement.

The 'pop' sounds were the mana colliding and cancelling each other out, I realized.

Arthur's form blurred and disappeared, only to reappear behind Master Varay, his leg high in the air. He struck, and a shockwave of mana and electricity ripped out, but was immediately met with a blast of icy frost.

Master Varay responded by swinging her arm. Arthur parried with a hand, but the ground beneath them shattered from the force.

They were now engaging in melee combat. Every time Master Varay tried to form a spell, it dissipated immediately.

Still, she seemed to be holding her own against Arthur. She had formed a crystalline sword in each hand; Arthur had one as well, though his was a little thinner.

Their ice swords chipped with each block, strike and parry, the broken remnants sparkling in the reflection of the room's lights. Both of them had formed their weapons from ice, yet only Arthur's conjured sword seemed to break—Master Varay's swords remained strong.

Despite this disadvantage, however, I could tell that, in such close combat, Arthur had the upper hand. His movements—the ones I could see—were fluid yet unpredictable. Each slash and stab connected, flowing into one neverending combination of attacks—and he did this all while forming a new sword of ice every time his previous weapon broke. Even with my untrained eyes, I could tell that each of his attacks had meaning, like he was slowly guiding my master in an elegant dance.

What enraptured me most, however, wasn't his stunning swordplay, but his expression. He was smiling—practically beaming.

Ah, he is having fun, I thought, my mind wandering as I tried to remember the last time I had considered magic fun.

Unable to recall a particular instance, I concentrated on the fight. *It's rare for Master to exhibit so much of her ability. I need to take notes.*

Arthur was fighting straightforwardly, while Master attempted to incorporate long-ranged attacks while simultaneously striking at Arthur. However, because of his ability to seemingly counter every spell, she was left with only close-range combat.

“Oy, Camus. Want to bet? I think the young general is going to win this one,” Elder Buhnd muttered, his eyes locked on the battle.

“It's hard to gauge who has the upper hand,” Elder Camus responded, not answering his companion's actual question. “General Arthur's speed and reflexes are several steps above General Varay's, but General Varay's defense seems to allow for more error.”

“I agree,” Hester added. “Most of General Arthur's strikes can't penetrate that ice-clad form of hers, and she seems to have the flexibility of manipulating that armor into whatever shape or weapon she wants.”

“Incredible. General Arthur's mana flow speed is constantly accelerating,” Miss Emeria breathed, shifting her gaze between her notepad and Arthur.

“So do you want to bet or not?” Elder Buhnd grumbled.

“I will wager on General Varay,” Hester said.

“General Arthur for me,” Elder Camus replied.

“Varay for me,” General Bairon said.

Commander Virion only chuckled. “Let’s see who wins.”

OFFENSIVE MINDSET

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Looking up, I locked eyes with Varay as she returned to her normal form, the ice that enveloped her slowly thawing.

“Good duel, General Arthur,” Varay said, extending a hand.

I grabbed her arm and allowed her to pull me up to my feet. “As expected, there’s still a gap between us.”

“If you were able to hold that form for an extended period of time, there’s a chance you could’ve overpowered me,” Varay admitted.

“I consider that form a borrowed power, not my own,” I said, patting the dust from my clothes. “I thought I had mastered ice to a large extent, but seeing you today makes me doubt myself.”

Varay revealed just the faintest glimmer of a smile before heading toward where my sister and the rest of our audience watched.

As soon as we made it back to the group, the elders, Bairon and Virion—who had been exchanging gold coins for some reason—eagerly began bombarding me with suggestions and tips on what I had done wrong in my sparring session with Varay.

“Your fire spells are strong, but you expended an unnecessary amount of mana with each of them,” Hester began.

“That’s right,” Buhnd chimed in. “And there were many instances where utilizing your earth magic would’ve been more beneficial, yet you chose to

revert back to your comfortable affinities.”

My head spun as I tried to make eye contact with everyone who was talking to me. Then Alanis spoke up. “Elders. I believe it’d be most beneficial for General Arthur if we spoke one at a time and in a more controlled setting.”

“I agree,” Virion added. “Let’s gather around and examine what our young general did wrong.”

With that, I found myself on a stone chair, graciously erected by Buhnd, sitting in a circle like a child and his classmates for a group activity. But my ‘classmates’ were perhaps some of the most powerful and influential figures on this entire continent.

Ellie and Boo joined us in the circle, but remained silent. Everyone else began pointing out specific instances of things I could have done better in my last fight.

“Using wind to bolster your spells was a good idea, but your application of it was surface level,” Camus explained. “For example, instead of using the wind to push the lightning spear, why not integrate it around the entire spell itself? That way, you’d create a spinning force to strengthen its piercing power without using that much more mana.”

I was mulling over the elven elder’s analysis when another voice spoke up. It was Bairon.

“Because of the element’s very nature, shaping lightning is much harder than shaping fire. A more efficient attack would’ve been molding the fire into a piercing shape and coating it with lightning,” he said sternly.

“Thanks... for the advice,” I said, surprised by his help. I understood that we were on the same side and all, but I was still the one who had brutally killed his brother.

Lucas deserved every ounce of what I had done to him and more, of course, but that didn’t stop Bairon from taking my actions against his relative personally.

“Allow me to give just one insight,” Varay said. “Your control over ice is

good, but as your opponent, it was clear that your ice magic merely served as a distraction. I'm sure Princess Kathyln saw this as well."

The princess nodded. "Besides the spell Absolute Zero, most of his ice manipulation serves to divert his foe's attention from his more powerful lightning spells."

Have I become that predictable?

As if answering my thought, Varay added, "Your speed and spell chaining make up for this slight shortcoming, but I suspect that—in a prolonged battle—this would lead to your defeat."

"I'll keep your advice in mind. Thank you." I shifted my gaze to Kathyln and added, "Both of you."

Virion seized this opportunity, rising from his stone seat and clasping his hands. "Well, I apologize for our little interruption. Carry on with the training, Arthur. My expectations for your growth are high, especially since you're taking time off from the battlefield."

The commander shot me a wink before heading for the entrance with his hands behind his back. The two Lances followed close on either side of him and I watched their figures until the large doors closed behind them.

"That was exhausting," Emily said, letting out a deep breath.

"Being in a room with two Lances and Commander Virion really leaves no room to breathe," my sister added, falling forward on top of Boo's furry back.

"Three Lances," I corrected. "Your brother's a Lance too, you know."

"Well, you're my brother first." She dismissed me with a wave of her hand.

I got up from my seat and stretched my sore limbs. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Is training done for today?" Kathyln asked, keeping her eyes downcast.

Emily walked over to the panel, carefully reading one of the gauges. "Well, there's still a lot of mana stored in here from earlier if you want to continue training."

“Sounds like a plan!” Buhnd exclaimed, shooting up from his seat. “I’m itching to stretch my body after watching that fight. You down for a little match, Princess?”

Kathyl n eagerly nodded and followed the dwarven elder to the other end of the training ground.

“I think I’ll head on up,” my sister said, mid-yawn.

“Do you want me to walk you to your room?” I asked.

Ellie shook her head, patting Boo’s thick body. “That’s what I have Boo for.”

I nodded, shooting her a smile. “Good night.”

With her eyes half-closed, she gave me a weak salute. “Good night, elders. Good night, Emily. Good night, Miss Emeria. And good night, Lance Arthur.”

I scoffed. “Cheeky girl.”

My sister batted her eyes innocently before trotting out of the room, leaving only Emily, Alanis, and the two remaining elders.

“Your sister is very different from you, General Arthur,” Alanis commented.

I couldn’t help but smile. “She definitely takes more after our father.”

“And you more closely resemble your mother?” the elven assistant asked, her eyes fixed on Kathyl n’s and Buhnd’s figures.

I watched the two of them as well as they adjusted their dueling equipment before beginning their spar. “I’m not sure. I’d like to think I’m a mixture of both.”

“Who else would you resemble if not either of them?” Hester asked.

I simply shrugged, unable to form a better response. Then I heard a yawn from behind us.

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see Emily’s head bobbing as she struggled to stay awake.

“Emily,” I called, startling the artificer.

Emily fumbled with the dials on her panel as if she had been working. “I’m not sleeping!”

“No one said you were,” I said. “But maybe you should get some rest.”

“General Arthur is right,” Alanis said. “I have the basic knowledge of how to operate the device from watching you.”

The artificer yawned widely, adjusting her glasses. “Thank you, but it’s okay. I need to collect more data and compare the fpu from General Varay and Arthur’s last battle.”

“Speaking of that, you haven’t really given us any of the data from my training sessions with the elders over the past few days,” I said.

“I’ve been wondering about that as well,” Camus added, turning his gaze from Kathyln and Buhnd’s duel. “I’m curious to see how my spells measure.”

“Yes, of course. However, the numbers won’t really have any meaning to them out of context,” Emily explained. “I currently have a few assistants in several academies testing out lower end versions of this artifact. They’re getting recordings from their students so we can gather a wide enough spectrum to have a reference.”

“Ah, so the fpu was intended more to be used to compare amongst other mages?” I asked.

The artificer nodded excitedly. “Exactly! I can, however, compare the fpu readings between the mages present here. But I’d be more confident in the overall measurements if we had more data.”

Camus’s lips curved into a smile, his eyes hidden behind silvery-blond bangs.

“I wonder which of us oldies is the strongest.”

The two elders soon fell into arguing about who they thought was strongest, while I returned my gaze to Kathyln and Buhnd.

The duel was drawing to a close. Kathyln was almost completely out of breath while Buhnd had barely broken a sweat. Spikes of ice and earth surrounded them and small craters littered the ground, but neither had taken any visible wounds besides fatigue. When the princess finally dipped her head in a bow, the duel was over.

“Are you up for a little stretch with this old elf?” Camus suddenly asked,

turning to me. “I want to show you something.”

My mana pool was almost completely depleted and my limbs ached, but the elder had piqued my interest. “Sure. Only if Hester doesn’t mind.”

“Don’t mind me,” Kathyln’s guardian said dismissively. “I’ll stay here and judge you both from afar.”

The two of us passed Buhnd and Kathyln on our way to the other end of the training room. I stuck my hand out to the princess, expecting a high-five. Instead, all I got was a confused gaze before she shyly clasped my hand between her hands.

I suppressed a laugh, scolding myself for expecting a princess to know such a casual greeting.

“Are you two done?” Camus asked, eyeing me curiously.

Kathyln, who I now realized was still holding onto my hand, quickly let go and scurried off.

Camus and I positioned ourselves a few feet apart. I tightened the bands around my limbs and readied myself to begin.

Camus lowered his stance, holding an open palm out toward me. “Before we start, I want you to throw a punch at me, right here.”

“What?”

“A punch, right here in this palm that I have so helpfully held out.”

“Just a punch?” I asked, confused.

“An augmented punch, one that you would throw at your enemies.” He spread his legs a bit wider. “Come on, I’m ready.”

“Okay.” I shrugged, then covered the few feet of ground between us. Planting my foot just below his extended arm, I turned my hips, waist, shoulder and arm in one fluid motion. Mana coursed up, flowing in conjunction with the punch to produce a concise, explosive effect without wasting a drop of mana. Just before my fist hit Camus’s palm, however, it suddenly felt like I was trying to force my fist through a thick layer of tar. I could see my own fist slowing until it fell gently into Camus’s open hand, barely making a noise.

The old elf grabbed my fist and bobbed it as if we were shaking hands. “Hello.”

I snatched my hand out of his grasp. “What the hell was that?”

“You’re a smart lad; figure it out,” the elder answered.

Gazing down at my unharmed fist, I went through what had just happened. After my initial surprise died down, it was fairly easy to deduce that he had somehow used wind to cushion my punch—but I had barely felt any mana fluctuations surrounding his hand.

“Figured it out yet?” Camus asked.

My brows furrowed in thought. “You somehow you used wind to slow my punch.”

“A tad broad for an answer, don’t you think?” The elder said, clearly enjoying my confusion. “I had an inkling during these past few days but your duel with General Varay was what made me sure.”

“Can we try that again?” I asked, taking a step back.

He held up his palm again. “Sure.”

I punched him again, with the same effect. I punched him once more, not able to grasp exactly how he was using wind to achieve this effect.

“One more time,” I said, frustration seeping into my voice.

Basic mana theory stated that when like elements collided, they weakened each other or canceled each other completely based on mana output. Utilizing the theory that I had learned from one of the many books I had read as a child, I augmented my fist with wind attribute mana.

I restrained my mana output since dispersing Camus’s technique wasn’t my goal. As I punched again, this time I felt it. The air pressure.

My fist struck firmly, sounding a solid *smack* that made the elf take a step back.

He rubbed his injured hand. “You caught on quick.”

“You used air pressure!” I beamed excitedly. “You created a vacuum around me and raised the air pressure in your palm to slow down my fist.”

The elder tilted his head. “You use strange terms, but it sounds like you got the gist of it.”

“That’s brilliant! How did you think of doing that?” I asked, unable to contain my excitement.

The scientific progress in this world was miles behind where I had come from. However, Camus had figured out how to utilize an advanced principle of air pressure—not just on himself, but on his opponent as well—to create a powerful effect.

Why didn’t I think of that? I asked myself. I had the knowledge within me, yet I had failed to apply it to such an important aspect of this world.

Camus’s voice snapped me back to reality. “You’re probably wondering ‘Why didn’t I think of that,’ right?”

I looked up. “Yes, in fact.”

“It’s what I suspected early on,” Camus answered. “Hester, Buhnd, the princess, and I are all here because you wished to immerse yourself in all elements in hopes of picking up little bits of how we utilize our magic so you can incorporate it into your own style, right?”

“Basically,” I agreed.

The elder’s voice grew sharp. “Well, the problem lies in the fact that your ‘style’ is so skewed toward offense, you never even think to use the myriad of elements that you have at your disposal in defensive measures, aside from the blatantly obvious way of raising a wall.

“You’ve only thought of wind in the form of either a blade or a tornado. You think of earth as a spike or a wall, yet truly mastering these elemental affinities means knowing the subtleties of their nature, which might not always be visible or geared toward killing your enemy,” Camus chided me, his usual sardonic demeanor gone. “I saw you studying those marks on the ground during Buhnd’s duel with the princess. Do you know what they’re from?”

The obvious answer would’ve been craters from an attack, but I knew that

wasn't it so I shook my head. "No, I don't."

"Masters in earth magic can redirect the force of an opponent's attack into the ground below them. Doing so accurately can negate nearly all of an attacker's physical assault."

I stood there, unable to form a response.

Camus patted me on the shoulder. "You're technically in a higher position than me so I suppose it's rude for me to lecture, but let me just say this. Your utilization of the elements is good—great, in fact. However, you constantly choose to shape your spells and attacks around either hurting your opponent or enhancing yourself to dodge your opponent, and while that may be good for one-on-one duels, the battles you'll face won't always be like that. The time you have here is short, so let's make it count."

I realized it had been a while since I had been lectured like that. It left a sour taste in my mouth and it was humbling, but I knew he was right.

Camus held out a hand and smiled.

"You're right. Thank you, Camus." I returned the gesture, clasping his hand.

DRAGON STEPS

“YOU GOTTA DO BETTER than that, *young general*,” Buhnd grinned, wagging his finger.

Infusing fire into the mini gales of wind in my palms, I prepared to try and hit the dwarven elder once more. Then a barrage of wind orbs hailed down from above.

With a click of my tongue, I ignored Buhnd’s provocation and focused my attention on Camus’s assault. I easily dodged the orbs of wind—until the ground beneath my feet rose and stiffened around my leg, immobilizing me.

One of the wind orbs nicked me in the shoulder, but it felt like I had been hit by a cannonball.

I fought the need to curse and just gritted my teeth against the pain.

That’s how you want to play?

My initial reaction was to raise up a wall of earth or ice in hopes of blocking Camus’s barrage, but over the past few days, I’d been constantly trying to come up with better ways to handle certain situations.

This often meant running through various scenarios and trying to think of multiple ways around them, taking into account the cost of mana and my physical stamina.

The orbs of wind felt almost solid, but they were actually whirlwinds packed into a sphere. I abandoned my usual response—erecting a solid wall in hopes of deterring the wind spell—instead enveloping my arms in condensed gales

of wind.

Rather than trying to block the attack, I used my wind gauntlets to redirect the orbs. As I expected, the clash of winds propelled Camus's spheres in different directions.

"You *both* are going to have to do better than that," I taunted. Then, with another thought, I aimed the gauntlets down at the stone cast trapping my legs to the ground.

"Interesting concept," Camus said approvingly from where he floated above me in a swirl of wind.

"That cockiness will be the death of you," Buhnd added with an eager smile.

The old dwarf began running toward me. Chunks of earth began congregating around him, forming an armor of stone mid-charge. Meanwhile, Camus kept his distance, preparing another spell.

I expected another barrage of wind from the elf, but instead a gale formed right behind the dwarf, abruptly accelerating his charge so that his stone fist was in range before I could blink.

Buhnd was fast, but I still had time to react—or so I thought.

When I raised my arm to block his augmented fist, I was met with resistance. The familiar sensation of my body being submerged in a viscous liquid washed over me once more.

While accelerating Buhnd's movement, Camus was also increasing the air pressure around me to slow me down.

Before I could break free of his spell, my face was met with the loving touch of Buhnd's giant stone fist.

My vision flashed black for a split second and I found myself on the ground, Buhnd's stone-clad form just a few feet away.

Ignoring the high-pitched ringing in my ear, I forced myself to focus. The gears in my mind whirled into overdrive and I found myself thinking about the crevices that formed in the ground whenever Buhnd sparred. Every time he was met with a physical attack, a crater formed beneath his feet as if a

meteor had struck the earth.

At first, I thought it was the force of the spells that caused the ground to cave below Buhnd, but now I knew it wasn't as simple as that.

"Try to block this!" Buhnd exclaimed, raising a rock arm in the air. The stone that made up the thick armored fist shifted and convulsed as if coming to life. Buhnd's stone-clad arm changed shape as I watched, forming a giant hammer twice his size.

A rush of wind coated the hammer as it was about to drive down into me.

If that hits me, I'm done for sure.

The memories of the craters Buhnd had formed continued to flash in my mind—then suddenly it clicked.

Still lying on the ground, I raised a hand directly in the path of the giant hammer. I augmented my body but not in the protective way I normally did. Instead, I envisioned a tunnel-like path of earthen mana both inside and outside of my body.

I spotted a trace of hesitation on Buhnd's face, but there was no way for him to stop his attack now that it was just inches away from me.

If this doesn't work, I'm going to be in a lot of pain, I thought.

The hammer struck my palm and I could feel my whole body protest. Normally, if I attempted to block an attack that strong with just a hand, my arm would've shattered, but instead, the ground below me took the force.

I found myself in the epicenter of a crater the size of my room with my hand still stretched out. My arm, shoulder, ribs, and back felt sore, but I had succeeded.

Still wearing his armor of stone, Buhnd looked down at me in disbelief—then a smile crept across his bearded face. "You're a bit scary, General."

I stifled a laugh and attempted to get up. A surge of pain rushed through me.

I lied. It wasn't just a few parts of me that felt sore—it was every fiber of my body.

"Oww," I croaked, finally succeeding in sitting up.

Buhnd dispersed his earthen armor and stuck out a burly hand. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Very much,” I admitted. “You made it look like nothing.”

“Well, I have better control over that technique than you do, and I wouldn’t be stupid enough to try and divert the force of an attack that strong in the first place,” the dwarf replied. He tried to drape my arm over his shoulder, but my legs dragged awkwardly on the ground due to our difference in height.

“Here, let me help,” Camus said as he floated down to the ground. An updraft lifted me to my feet as Camus dipped his head below my other arm.

“I was going to carry the boy like the princess he is.” Buhnd gave me a wink. Rolling my eyes, I leaned on Camus. “Leave me with some dignity.”

“You took a risk, but I’m guessing it was worth it?” Camus scoffed, his eyes still hidden behind his bangs.

“For now, yes—but we’ll see how I feel about it tomorrow morning,” I groaned, limping alongside the elf.

My sister came running up to me, her gaze laced with concern. “Are you okay? I mean, I know you’re strong and all but that was a *big* crater you just made.”

Close behind my sister, Emily adjusted her glasses as she peered out at the sparring zone. “Luckily the crater didn’t reach the disks underground.”

“Thanks for your concern, Ellie.” I smiled wearily before turning my gaze to my assistant close behind her. “I should be fine... right, Alanis?”

Her eyes shifted into their multicolored hue for a second, then back to their original colors. “The shock disrupted your mana flow, which is the cause of your internal pains. I suggest you get some rest, General Arthur.”

“Good idea,” Buhnd agreed. “I remember my first attempts at trying the force diversion spell. You’re lucky to have gotten away with just some soreness.”

“Lucky or skilled,” my sister pointed out smugly.

Buhnd laughed. “Yes. Or skilled.”

“Hester and Princess Kathyln are away visiting Prince Curtis at Lanceler

Academy anyway, so no harm in cutting practice short today,” Camus mentioned, carefully setting me down.

“Ooh, I can just imagine all those would-be knights, glistening with sweat, eyes trailing our princess wherever she goes...” Emily trailed off. “I should’ve gone with her.”

My sister nodded wistfully. “Me too. My friend says the guys there are good looking... and toned.”

“Eleanor! You’re only twelve!” I sputtered.

“Don’t ‘Eleanor’ me! I’m a curious lady isolated from the world because of my distinguished upbringing resulting from being the cherished sister of this continent’s youngest Lance!” she said, wiping away a nonexistent tear.

Emily fell into a fit of laughter, and even Alanis looked amused as I stared at my sister.

“Don’t be so overprotective of her. I had my first wife when I was your sister’s age,” Buhnd said with a snort.

“Well, humans and dwarves have different societal standards for these kinds of things,” I protested.

“Ooh, you’re being racist, Brother.” My sister shook her head disapprovingly and Buhnd clutched at his heart in mock despair. Meanwhile, Camus and Alanis looked amused, but neither seemed to have any intention of backing me up.

I clicked my tongue. “Well, *Lady* Eleanor, I’m sure the boys will be flocking to you knowing that your brother can wipe them off the face of the continent with a flick of his finger if he chooses.”

Ellie’s face paled as she gasped. “You wouldn’t.”

Satisfied with her reaction, I simply shrugged, letting her imagination take over. Then I made my way to the edge of the training room.

I took a seat against the cold wall, watching Emily and my sister pack some of the training equipment while Buhnd talked to Alanis.

Camus sat beside me. “Your sister is quite the character.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “She’s always had a strong personality.”

“You must be worried about her with the war going on.”

“She and my parents are a big part of why I’m a part of this war,” I answered, watching my sister and Emily laughing as they talked.

“Understandable,” Camus said. “Protecting your loved ones is the biggest motivator for soldiers out in battle, but it’s also the loss of the ones you want to protect that often causes soldiers to lose sight of their cause.”

“It sounds like you speak from experience,” I said seriously, turning my gaze to him.

“An old story for another time, but yes. It’s the reason I remained in seclusion for so long.”

I blinked. “But Virion mentioned you’re the head of a unit now.”

“An empty title. After I lost my wife and my vision during the last war, I had no intention of ever fighting again,” he muttered. “Before this, I just gave my input to the acting head.”

“Wait. Your vision?” I asked, my brows furrowed in confusion.

Camus lifted his silver-blond bangs to reveal two closed eyes, a jagged scar running through both lids.

“Hold on. You’re telling me you haven’t been able to see this entire time?” I blurted, unable to take my gaze off of him.

“Surprised?” the elf smirked, letting his bangs fall back over his face.

“Of course I’m surprised. We’ve been training together for weeks and not once did I suspect anything. I mean, even aside from your combat prowess, none of your mannerisms ever gave away the fact that you can’t see.”

“I can still see,” he corrected. “Seeing with your eyes is such a plebian practice when your control over wind allows you to sense even the smallest change around you.”

I stared in amazement, entirely taken aback. After a moment of silence, I asked, “Is that what you’ve been working on since retiring?”

“It definitely took a large part of my time,” he said.

“I bet.” I nodded, then wondered if he could tell what I was doing.

“At my level, sensing the movement of the air from your nodding is easy,” he said, as if reading my mind. “But I can’t see the details of facial expressions, which is probably why I can come off as rude or crass—or so I’ve been told.”

“I see—no pun intended,” I quickly corrected myself.

“Don’t worry about it. I came to terms with it fairly quickly,” he said, dismissing my concerns.

I hesitated. “Do you... ever miss it?” *Of course he’d miss it, you dolt. Who wouldn’t miss having one of their senses?*

“At times,” he said mildly. “But at the same time, the last thing I ever saw with my eyes was my wife. That fact allows me to keep her intact inside me.”

Do not cry, Arthur. Do not cry.

“That’s sad but... sweet,” I managed, struggling to keep my voice from trembling. “I’d love to hear your story sometime.”

“You’re young, General Arthur. Nothing good comes out of hearing tragic stories when there’s a whole war ahead of you,” Camus replied, clearing his throat. “Now off you go. Get some rest and come back tomorrow with a clear head.”

I carefully got to my feet. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Camus waved directly at me, giving no sign that his vision was impaired.

“And if I catch so much as a whiff of you thinking about going easy on me now that you know, I will knock you down so hard—”

“Don’t worry,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m actually a little more scared of you now.”

The elf’s lips curved into a contented smile. “Good.”

My sister and her bond followed Alanis and Emily to the artificer’s work station at the castle, saying her bow needed some repairs and fine tuning. Alanis had been taking extensive notes on a daily basis during the training, but had refused to share them with me. She said that the training was going the way she had intended, and any information she shared with me might

derail my training at this point. She promised to reveal her findings on my mana flow growth next week, after more data from Emily's artifacts has been gathered.

Walking down the empty halls in the dead of night these last days had been a time for my own thoughts to wander. I thought a lot about the memories from my past life that had been resurfacing, which made me think more deeply about the even bigger question: What was I doing in this world?

My skeptical self refused to believe that it was all a coincidence, but I had nowhere near enough information to find out how I had come to this world or dimension.

I knew that the asuras—mainly Lord Indrath—knew more about me than he had shared, but I'd never get any sort of answers from him without offering something in return. I had some hope that if Dicathen came out of this war victorious, Lord Indrath would be more inclined to share some insights about me, but that was only a hope. A surer way to get some answers—and also the reason I had refused to accept the artifact given to Lances—was by surpassing the white core stage and unlocking more of the message Sylvia had left for me after we'd parted ways.

Hopefully, extracting the mana from Uto's horn will lead to a breakthrough into the white core stage, I thought, though I had my doubts. Sylvie had been in a near-comatose state while she hungrily extracted the mana from her horn. I had been worried about her at first, but I could feel the relaxed state of her mind through our mental transmissions.

When I unlocked and opened the door to my room, however, I found myself questioning that line of thought.

Sylvie—or rather, her silhouette—was glowing with an obsidian light. What shocked me, though, was that her form was shifting erratically. Her wings grew and shrank suddenly, and her tail convulsed before contracting. Sylvie's small limbs elongated and her paws stretched out into something that vaguely resembled a... hand.

“S-Sylvie?” I muttered, unsure whether I should try and hold her or keep some distance.

After what seemed like an hour, the erratic changes in my bond’s body slowed down and she gradually shifted back to her vulpine form.

I held my breath, waiting for Sylvie to do something—anything.

Just then, her eyes shot open, revealing two clear orbs of topaz. Breathing deeply, Sylvie tilted her head. “Arthur? What’s wrong?”

“With me?” I asked. “Nothing... Are *you* okay?”

“What do you mean?” she replied, obviously confused.

“You—your body was changing.” I motioned with my hands, unable to form an accurate description of what I witnessed.

“I’m fine,” she said dismissively. “I actually feel really good. The mana in this horn is really potent.”

I scratched my head. “Well at least you’re making some progress. I’ve been having a hard time absorbing the mana.”

“Really? The mana has been flowing inside me naturally—almost like it was my own.”

I was perplexed by the difference between Sylvie’s progress and mine, but my fatigue overpowered any notion of investigating more deeply. “All right. Well, try and get some rest.”

My bond shook her little head. “No need. I can get by with fewer hours of sleep than lessers—even more so while absorbing this mana, actually.”

I fell flat on my bed. “Well, this *lesser* needs his sleep. I suspect I won’t even be able to come back up to my room over the next few weeks of training, so I need to relish the feeling of this bed while I can.”

“I can tell your training is going well,” my bond said. “I can feel the level of your strength rising steadily.”

“Mhmm. With my training progressing how it is, I should be able to hit white core soon, if I can extract the mana from Uto’s horn,” I mumbled drowsily.

“That’s great,” Sylvie replied, her clear voice lulling me into sleep. “Get

some rest.”

“You... too,” I managed to say before drifting off to sleep.

INSIDE THE VAULT

MY THOUGHTS VEERED BACK to the sight of Sylvie's form changing as she absorbed the mana from Uto's horn. It had been a few days since that night, but her unexplainable shift in form still worried me. My days had been hectic; if I wasn't training, I was either in a meeting, advising Gideon with the train project, or personally advising Virion on various aspects of the war. Even then, my thoughts always drifted back to what I had seen that night. Sylvie didn't seem to feel like anything was wrong—just the opposite, in fact. My bond had become deeply infatuated with the horn and the mana it provided for her. After that night, she had asked me for a private space so that she could continue absorbing the retainer's mana without interruptions. I hadn't seen her since then—my only comfort came from the calm traces of her mental state I detected through our bond connection.

“—neral Arthur!”

I jolted upright in my seat at the booming voice, only to see that the eyes of everyone in the room were on me. Around the large round table that had replaced its smaller predecessor, seated in large cushioned chairs, were myself, the other three remaining Lances, and the five members of the Council. Also joining us today for the exciting and fun-filled meeting was Gideon, who seemed to be wholly concentrated on picking something out of his left ear.

Oh right, I'm in a meeting.

“Are you feeling well, General Arthur?” King Glayder asked, his expression laced more with irritation than concern.

I shifted in my seat. “Of course.”

The king lowered his gaze to my hand. I followed his eyes, only to realize that the quill I held in my hand had snapped in half from my grip.

Clearing my throat, I faced everyone. “My apologies. I was lost in thought for a moment. Please continue.”

“We were moving on to the topic of this so-called ‘train’ that you and Artificer Gideon are planning. We were hoping the two of you would be able to give us an update on how that’s coming along,” Queen Eralith stated, her gaze switching between me and Gideon, who was sitting a few seats to my left.

Just the day before, Gideon and I had discussed the final details of the project. We were ready to move on to actually building the vehicle in order to secure a safe and fast supply route from Blackbend City to the Wall.

“Ah, yes.” The artificer smoothed out a crease on his dirty lab coat. “The landsh—I mean the *train* will be able to hold at least twenty times more supplies than the squads of carriages we have utilized until now.”

“What about the potential dangers while traveling between Blackbend and the Wall?” Varay asked with an inquisitive look. “From what I read, this ‘train’ seems to be limited to a set path. Won’t this make it easy for bandits, or even Alacryans, to attack and lay siege to our supply line?”

“I agree. I imagine it would be easy to destroy a portion of the track that the train relies on,” Aya added casually.

“Both good points, generals!” Gideon exclaimed. “Arth—General Arthur and I saw that as one of the pitfalls as well, and came up with a solution.”

“Oh? And what would that be?” Virion asked with a raised brow.

The artificer replied with a snarky grin. “To put it underground, Commander!”

There was a moment of silence where the royals and Lances present pondered

the solution before King Glayder spoke up with a gruff tone. “The cost of doing all this would be excessive, don’t you think?”

Gideon coughed and looked to me, his eyes practically begging me to take over. Being the renowned artificer that he was, Gideon usually had the wealth and influence to build whatever inventions he wanted, but actually calculating the cost and benefit of creating something as large-scale as this was foreign to him.

Luckily, having read numerous books on economics and being personally taught by the shrewd and resourceful leader of the Council in my previous world, Marlorn, I had the answer. “You’re thinking about it the wrong way, King Glayder. The initial costs might seem high, but this project serves to potentially solve three problems at once.”

“I’m listening,” he replied with a raised brow. Everyone else leaned just a bit closer.

I took a breath and gathered my thoughts. “Aside from the main problem we’re trying to resolve, which is finding a more efficient way to transport supplies for soldiers stationed at the Wall, building the train helps to address two peripheral issues. One is the rising cost of purchasing domesticated mana beasts, which as you know is necessary because of the current state of the Beast Glades; the other is the increasing poverty.”

“Increasing poverty? What nonsense,” Bairon blurted. “Because of the war, business is booming!”

“Let General Arthur finish!” Queen Glayder said sharply, surprising me.

“Thank you,” I said, addressing Kathyln’s mother, before continuing. “Not to sound cold but ‘booming business’ mostly benefits business owners and highly skilled patrons, not the lower class citizens. Queen Glayder, I’d imagine that your reports from various cities mention an increasing number of riots due to the increase in taxes and prices of basic goods because of the demand from the war, correct?”

She flipped through several pages of the neat stack of papers in front of her.

“How did you know that?”

Explaining everything would become cumbersome so I merely shrugged.

“Simple cause and effect. This war is taking precedence over everything else, which means that priority will be given to those who are taking part. For everyone else, this means an increase in the cost of living, while their wage might not necessarily increase. More than that, because of the various attacks near the coasts and borders, fishermen aren’t able to fish and farmlands have been destroyed.”

“So you’re saying that this project will be a means to create jobs for those people?” King Eralith finished for me.

I nodded. “This underground path for the train will be a big project that can’t be finished with just a few competent earth mages. And while mages will be necessary for security of the tracks in predetermined locations, there will be many duties available for normal workers during the building process, and for maintenance.”

“Those are good points, General Arthur, but what about just using slaves?” King Glayder argued. “Wouldn’t it be more efficient and cost-effective to have slaves doing the labor instead of paying workers?”

Rather than answering, I glanced at Virion. Slavery was one of the many topics we had discussed, and Blaine’s question fell into one of the explanations I had given the commander.

“Slave labor has its limits as work becomes more skilled, King Glayder. I don’t think we should think of this train project as a one-off venture, but rather as the beginning of a new era. The introduction of the steam engine provides a new line of work for laborers, one that does not require magic. This too—whether it’s the workers actually building the tracks, or the designers planning the routes from one city to another—will require skills that will never stem from what a slave is forced to do,” he stated with confidence.

The meeting room was quiet for the first time in what seemed like hours,

until a white-sleeved hand shot up.

Everyone turned to Gideon, who was leaning his head on one hand while he raised the other. “I didn’t know if it was appropriate to speak in this rather uncomfortable silence. Anyway, I just wanted to say that this project will indeed be the beginning of many, and it’ll be a breeding ground for fostering new skill sets. If possible, I’d prefer not to work with slaves. If they’re forced to be there, they’ll no doubt be doing the bare minimum—which will cut into productivity of this urgent project.”

With that, the discussion came to a close, and everyone cast their vote anonymously on a piece of paper. After going over the results, I was glad that the hours of discussion on the issue hadn’t been for naught. The project to build the underground route and train was approved, along with several policies pertaining to it—one of which was the ban on slave labor. I trusted Gideon, who would be the head on this project, to be able to properly manage and teach the people working with him in the upcoming months so that they would be able to work—if not lead—the next train route project.

It was interesting to see a new era—one that had existed only in textbooks in my old world—begin to unfold here. This ‘industrial revolution,’ that had perhaps started with my introduction of the steam engine, was undoubtedly being hastened by the war with Alacrya. And while I would never be one to support war, I had to admit it did bring some favorable aspects to the table.

“Our little talks seem to be bearing fruit,” Virion noted as we walked down a narrow hallway, barely wide enough to fit three people abreast. Two armored guards followed closely behind us, while one led the way just a few steps ahead.

“You mean my insightful lectures on war and economics?” I corrected him.

“Oh, shush. I consider it payment for housing you for over three years while you were a wee child,” the old elf retorted.

I shrugged. “I don’t mind. I’m sure you would’ve come to a similar

conclusion about using slave labor anyway.”

“Probably not as eloquently as I put it in the meeting, though,” Virion admitted. “Elves have prohibited slavery for over a hundred years now, but it was for moral reasons. I hadn’t thought about the economic benefits until you pointed it out last week.”

“Well, in a world where people are mainly divided according to who can use magic and who can’t, it’s hard to see past a lot of things,” I said.

“You sound as if you’ve been in a world that *isn’t* divided into magic users and normal people,” Virion teased.

I replied with a forced smile, opting for silence instead. That lasted until we reached a thick metal door with only one guard present.

The young guard—an elf, as evidenced by the long ears sticking out from his cropped hair—was small-framed but toned, his lean muscles minimally protected by armor. I could tell by his rich yellow aura that, like me, any form of thick armor would be more of a hindrance than protection. Two unadorned short swords, curved at the tip, hung by his waist, as opposed to the gaudy spears of the soldiers accompanying us, but even at a glance I could tell that he would easily wipe out all three soldiers ‘protecting’ us.

His eyes were glazed with boredom, but he perked up when he spotted Virion and me. “Good evening, Commander Virion and... General Arthur. Or is it morning already? My apologies; there are no windows here for me to tell.”

“It hasn’t been that long, Albold,” Virion replied with a smile before turning to me. “Arthur, this is Albold Chaffer of Chaffer House. He is from a strong military family, which has served the Eralith family for generations. Albold, I’m sure you’ve heard of Arthur Leywin.”

“I’ve been told that he might become the new Eralith family heir,” Albold said, his sharp eyes sparkling with interest.

I coughed in surprise, shooting a sharp glare at Virion. “New heir?”

“Well you see, General Arthur, when the royal family doesn’t have a son, the man marrying into the—”

I put out a hand. “I get it.”

“I’ve always wanted to meet you in person, General, but I’ve been stuck—entrusted with the paramount duty of guarding this door,” he said, motioning at the thick metal door. “I guessed it might be you coming here. It’s hard to believe, but you’re even more imposing than I’d imagined.”

I tilted my head. “I’m pretty sure I’ve been holding back my presence.”

“The Chaffer family are known for their eerily keen senses,” Virion explained.

“What’s he doing here then?” I inquired, regarding the elf, who was not much older than myself. “Your skills would be better suited for the field, no?”

“Albold was out in the Beast Glades until he defied a direct order from his head,” Virion answered for him. “Usually, he would have been given a demotion and strict punishment, but I know the boy and I happened to be at the scene, so I picked him up and placed him here.”

“And my appreciation for that gesture is as boundless as the northern sea!” Albold beamed, bowing deeply.

The guards behind us muttered a few words of disapproval but stopped when Albold’s gaze bored into them.

“Anyway, enough about this troublemaker,” Virion said dryly. “Albold, let us inside and lock the door after us.”

“Aye aye, Commander!” The elf saluted before unlocking the door and pulling it open.

A foul, musty smell infused with the stench of decay bombarded my nose as soon as the entrance to the dungeon was opened.

“Have a pleasant stay, everyone,” Albold said, gesturing us inside like a tour guide.

Virion rolled his eyes and muttered something about telling Albold’s father as he followed behind the leading soldier. It was amusing to see Albold stiffen and pale after overhearing the remark.

Surprisingly, the first level of the dungeon wasn’t as bad as I remembered it

from when I had first come here, after the incident at Xyrus. The area was relatively well lit with spacious cells that seemed to have been empty for a while. If not for the mysterious stone walls that inhibited mana manipulation and the fact that the cells had reinforced metal bars rather than doors, it might have seemed like the designers of this castle had simply gotten lazy and decided to dub this area a dungeon.

Still, the lack of ventilation was stifling and, though the cells were mostly empty, they didn't seem to have been cleaned in a long time.

"Does it bring up some unpleasant memories?" Virion asked, catching me studying the exact cell that I had been locked up in.

"Sort of. I was thinking how funny it is that I've just came back from a meeting with the man who plotted alongside the Greysunders and the Vritra to kill me," I explained, ignoring the wary glances of the guards around us.

Virion's voice became serious. "If it had been solely up to my discretion, I would've locked them up myself, but Lord Aldir was right—we need the Glayders. The Greysunders always had a weak hold on their kingdom, but the Glayders are respected—almost revered—by nearly all humans. Sapin would be in chaos if they learned about what had happened. Not something we need for this war."

I nodded. "Speaking of which, where is that three-eyed asura anyway? He hasn't shown himself, even after what happened with Rahdeas and Olfred."

"Three-eyed asura... is it because of your journey to Epheotus that you can be so casual with the asuras?" Virion asked uncertainly. "And I haven't been able to communicate with Lord Aldir through the transmission artifact he gave me."

"That's not good," I said, and resumed walking toward the far end of the dungeon. "We'll talk more about it later."

"Agreed," Virion replied solemnly, following closely.

We made our way to the end of the floor where two cells had been joined to become one large, spacious room. The cell was furnished with a couch and a

large bed topped with stuffed animals. In front of the couch, a decorative tea set was laid out on small table. On the couch was a little girl, nodding off to sleep while she read a book.

I motioned for the lead guard to unlock the cell and stepped inside. “Hey, Mica. Sorry for taking so long to visit you.”

The dwarven Lance put down her book and stretched her thin legs and arms. “Hi, Arthur.”

We chatted a little while Virion and the guards waited on the other side of the barred gate. The old elf wore a somber expression, undoubtedly feeling guilty about having her holed up here while investigations were still ongoing. But because of her position and the fact that both Olfred and Rahdeas had betrayed Dicathen, the matter had to be examined with utmost scrutiny before she could be allowed her freedom.

We talked about unimportant things, and I filled her in on how my training was progressing. She tried to give me some tips on gravity magic, but I had trouble following along with her nonsensical explanations.

“It shouldn’t be long until the team Virion sent out has gathered enough evidence,” I consoled her.

Mica shot me a smile. “Mica knows. Don’t worry about me—do what you gotta do. Mica doesn’t blame anyone but that old bastard, Rahdeas.”

“Well, I’ll tell you now that his cell isn’t nearly as nice as yours.”

She nodded. “Get Mica out soon, okay? Being alone here without being able to use magic is so boring.”

“Of course,” I promised, giving her a hug before walking out of the cell.

I waved once more, then followed Virion and the guards to the forbidding door at the end of the hall.

“Ready?” Virion asked, his expression grim.

“Let’s get this over with.”

I’d thought the stench of the first level of the dungeon was bad, but the lower level was vomit-inducing.

I could feel my stomach revolt at the acrid and metallic odors of chemicals and blood. Suppressing the increasing urge to gag, I followed Virion down the dark flight of stairs until we reached a small area that housed the most heinous criminals. I was surprised to find I could use magic inside, but after surveying the walls and the enclosed vaults in the room, I was pretty certain that the use of magic was limited only to the tiny walkway between the cells. A burly man in a bloody apron, his face covered by a black mask, greeted us. Standing next to him was a thin elderly man with a hunched back and hooked nose.

“Commander. General. We are honored to have you here,” the old man spoke with a grating voice.

“Gentry,” Virion said, returning the greeting. “Take us to Rahdeas first.”

The elder looked at me with uncertainty but responded with a bow. “At your command,” he rasped.

We followed behind the elder as he practically slithered his way to a small cell and gestured with another bow. “Here is the criminal.”

Despite Rahdeas being Elijah’s caretaker, basically his father figure, I had little affection for the traitor—but even I had trouble confidently saying that he deserved to be in the state he was in now.

The cell was dark and shadows censored most of his injuries, but I could tell by the cuts and blood stains on his stark-naked body that he’d been heavily tortured. His hands, tied to the chair he was sitting on, were dripping blood.

His fingernails were pulled, I noted with a wince.

More than the physical injuries, though, it was Rahdeas’s blank expression that made me shiver. His eyes were foggy and a trail of saliva ran down from the corner of his mouth.

“Ah, his current state is from the side effects of my questioning,” the elderly man said, noticing my gaze.

“Gentry specializes in wind and sound magic to create hallucinations to aid in questioning,” Virion explained.

It was at times like these that I thought about the true function of magic. Much like technology, magic could just as easily be used to destroy as to create something wonderful.

“The traitor is strong. It’ll take a little more time to break him, I’m afraid,” Gentry said bitterly.

“It’s imperative that we find out what he knows,” Virion replied curtly, casting a disdainful gaze at Rahdeas before turning back to the old man.

“Now, what of the retainer?”

“Ah, yes. He’s a most fascinating specimen. Very thick skin and a strong mental fortitude, even with his ability to use magic taken from him. I feel we’re close to breaking him though. Keeping him in the small vault so his movement is limited has been driving him crazy,” the old man said with glee. Virion shot Gentry a look of disapproval but didn’t say anything.

With a cough, Gentry motioned for his burly associate to open the thick vault. Runes were inscribed on every inch of the box, which seemed more like a coffin than a prison cell. “Please be careful, Commander, General. While the vault will keep the Vritra from using magic, he’s still fairly strong, and he’s in a rather crazed state of mind right now.”

The vault creaked open and I found myself locking eyes with a disheveled Uto, who was garbed in restraining clothes. Just one look was enough to tell me that he was far from broken.

The retainer broke into a grin as he shot me a wink. “Hello, *pup*.”

SOLITARY MINDFRAME

UTO's sinister voice sent shivers down my spine, and although he was restrained and locked up inside an anti-magic vault, a familiar sense of dread pulsed through me.

Everyone in this room thought I was the one who had defeated Uto—but the truth was that both Sylvie and I together had barely managed to put a few scratches on him.

“You look a tad uncomfortable, Uto,” I quipped, hoping to mask any sign of weakness.

The retainer's smile disappeared, replaced by a snarl. “What did you do with my horns, lesser?”

Taking the black horn out of my dimension ring, I casually tossed it in the air in front of him. “Oh, you mean this?”

“Insolent little—”

“Stop,” I cut him off. “I'm not here to exchange insults with you. I have better things to do.”

Uto's gray face darkened, his eyes wild. “I swear to Vritra, if I get out, you'll wish you had died that day.”

I shook my head slowly.

“I'm sure there's something you want more than getting out or inflicting pain on me.” Leaning in closer to Uto with an arrogant sneer plastered on my face, I continued, “I know that the fact that you have no idea how you even lost to

me is slowly eating you up right now.”

I didn’t think the retainer’s face could get any angrier but Uto ground his teeth, jerking desperately to free himself.

“Close it,” I said, keeping my eyes locked on his until the thick rune-inscribed door shut firmly.

“What was tha—”

I put up a finger to my lips to silence the confused commander. It was only after the four of us got back to the entrance of this level of the dungeon that I spoke softly. “Leave him be for now.”

“Ento and I have been torturing him—physically and mentally—but I’ve never seen him this worked up,” Gentry murmured. His burly associate nodded beside him.

“I doubt hallucinations or physical pain will work on that arrogant sadomasochist,” I replied.

Virion tilted his head. “Sadomaso—what?”

“It’s nothing,” I smiled faintly, then turned to Gentry. “Don’t open his vault.” The hunched elder furrowed his brows. “No offense, General, but from my experience, it’s best to prod while his mental fortitude is in disarray, as it is now. Besides, what if he does remember how he lost to you during that time?”

“He won’t,” I assured him. “And that’s going to slowly drive him insane. Let him stew until I decide to come back.”

“I don’t like that look you have,” Virion muttered. “What are you planning?”

“I’ll be the one to interrogate him when the time comes,” I answered.

“Are you ready?” Emily asked from behind her increasing number of panels. She looked like she was inside the cockpit of an airplane from my previous life.

“Almost,” I replied as I finished strapping in, securing the last of the bands on my arms. I winced when I tightened the strap around my arm too tightly.

Damn it.

“We will move on to the three-versus-one scenario starting today so please be focused, General Arthur,” Alanis informed us, apparently noticing the blank expression on my face. I was still thinking about the visit to the dungeon earlier in the day.

I stood up and swung my arms, ready to let loose. “Got it. What element will I be restricting for the first part?”

My training assistant’s eyes glowed in their familiar array of colors as she ‘scanned’ me before looking down at her notes. “Water—and its deviant form, of course.”

I walked to the other end of the training room, stopping about a dozen yards away from Camus, Hester, and Kathlyn. Meeting Uto had made me antsy. I’d been confident back in the dungeon that Uto wouldn’t find out how I had beat him—because I wasn’t the one that beat him.

What sort of Lance am I if I can’t even beat a retainer? Let alone a Scythe.

As soon as Alanis gave the signal to begin, I flashed toward Hester, leaving only a single imprint on the ground.

In a single, fluid motion, I condensed a layer of wind around my hand, shaping it and sharpening it into a transparent blade before I swung horizontally at the fire mage’s torso.

Hester’s eyes widened a little in surprise, but unlike other mages, she was competent enough to respond even to my blitz attack.

Knowing that fire was weak to such a compressed form of wind, she opted to block my strike by grabbing my arm while strengthening her body with mana.

You may have an advantage over me in knowledge of fire magic, but if you think you can try and beat me in hand-to-hand combat...

I let her grip my arm, but grabbed the arm she was using to hold on to me. Hester was in a stance that helped her withstand a pushing force so when I pulled her back instead, she stumbled forward. Utilizing that momentum, I

pivoted and positioned my hip underneath her center of gravity to flip her to the ground.

Hester's breath was knocked from her as her back hit the ground. Just as I prepared for another strike to activate her lifeline artifact, a blast of water completely drenched me.

Before I even had the chance to turn to my attacker, the water covering my body froze, restricting any sort of movement.

I augmented my body in a layer of fire, thawing myself free, but Hester had already used my brief moment of incapacitation to put some distance between us.

Ignoring Hester for a brief moment while she recovered, I dashed toward the princess while trapping her legs with the ground beneath her. Taken off guard, Kathyln immediately clad her body in ice as she had before, no doubt a technique she had learned from Varay.

With her body strengthened, she attempted to pry herself free from the earthen shackles. But I didn't give her the chance. As I approached her, I continuously manipulated the ground around her, reinforcing it and pushing it further up her legs.

It was an idea I'd gotten from watching Olfred—the coffin of magma that he had trapped and executed Sebastian in. Of course, I had no intention of doing the same thing, but just as many earth mages clad themselves in an armor of rock, one could easily encase another in the same armor without giving them the freedom of mobility.

Kathyln struggled to free herself as I continued my spell. Every time she broke off a piece of stone, a large slab would take its place, slowly working its way up her small body.

In moments, the princess was covered to her neck. A layer of frost slowly attempted to weaken the integrity of the earthen restraint, but it was too late.

I charged mana into my fist, forming a gauntlet of crackling lightning. A twinge of guilt passed through me as I raised my fist to strike the finishing

blow.

She has the lifeline artifact, Arthur. Besides, you can't afford to go easy on anyone if you hope to win this war.

Kathryn regarded me seriously, no trace of fear. Just as my fist was about to make contact with her, however, a gust of wind pushed me back, catching me in the center of a whirling formation of wind just above the ground.

“Erupt!” Camus barked, taking advantage of my brief loss of equilibrium by unleashing the powerful cyclone.

My vision was obstructed by walls of wind around me, and for a moment, everything was deathly still. Any sounds were washed over by the constant roar of the tornado. I soon found myself panting—gasping for breath in this funnel of low air pressure.

“Annoying,” I muttered in between a strained breath.

The walls of the twister closed in, threatening to whirl and throw me wherever it pleased, but thankfully, I still had enough oxygen to retaliate.

My initial reaction was to burrow myself underground—that would’ve been the smartest choice. However—maybe because of the diminishing oxygen supply—I found myself picturing Uto in front of me. His savage grin seemed to say ‘All you can do is run or hide in the face of something greater than you,’ and it ignited a rage in me that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

To hell with strategy. If I can't even face this, how am I going to go up against the Scythes?

After anchoring my feet to the ground using earth magic, I began conjuring an opposing current to negate the powerful wind spell slowly closing in.

As my spell clashed against Camus’s spell, tears began forming. It seemed I was close to neutralizing it when a dull pain radiated across my back, knocking me forward. With my feet fixed to the ground, I bowed awkwardly, pushing off with my palms to put myself back upright.

I cursed in my mind, afraid to waste any unnecessary air, as I gazed at the object that had bludgeoned me from the back. It was large boulder of ice.

Worse yet, it wasn't the only one. Swirling around me, riding the tornado, were several dozens more chunks of ice—each at least twice the size of my head.

Still, I continued attempting to negate Camus's tornado spell. Perhaps it was my stubbornness. I was adamant, desperate to win against this 'foe' that towered over me. As the tornado closed in on me, my body became a mere punching bag for the ice boulders.

I had to hand it to Kathyln for the creativity in her chunks of ice; some of them were just heavy bludgeons, but some had sharp edges that cut through my clothes and drew blood.

Despite the repeated blows, however, my body felt numb. I was lightheaded and a strong feeling of fatigue washed over me.

The only thing that kept me going was the notion that overcoming this spell head-on was somehow winning against Uto.

I continued to think these irrational thoughts until I noticed—too late—that the boulders of ice had disappeared. In their stead was a growing fire that coalesced with the tornado, fusing into a flaming cyclone.

My vision began to spot, and my imagination of Uto became a full-blown hallucination. It only lasted for a few seconds until I blacked out, and my last thoughts were to blame the lack of oxygen for my senseless actions.

It felt like I had only blinked, yet when I opened my eyes again, I was looking up at Kathyln, the ceiling of the training room visible behind her. I was lying down.

A cool sensation radiated from my forehead. I fumbled with it and realized it was an ice-cold handkerchief.

"You're still a bit hot. Keep it on," Kathyln urged, putting the cloth back on me with just a tinge of worry in her brusque tone.

"Thank you," I muttered. "And sorry for back there."

She shook her head. "We were training. Although the elders might be of a different opinion."

“Damn straight we have a different opinion!” Buhnd’s familiar voice boomed.

Just a moment after, his bearded face popped into my view. “You fought like a child throwing a tantrum. I *know* you knew about twelve different ways to get out of that situation without trying to face it head on.”

“Yeah, I knew,” I said through gritted teeth. “But I wanted to see if I could overpower their combination spell. If I can’t even do that, how am I supposed to defeat all the retainers and Scythes left?”

Buhnd opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, but remained silent. It was Camus who spoke.

“You’re feeling the pressure, aren’t you?” he said softly.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

To them, I might simply be a young prodigy, but I had the memories and intellect of when I was a king. For me to admit to Camus’s remark meant that even despite my advantage, I was weak.

“A war isn’t fought alone,” Camus continued. “Although holding the title and responsibility of a Lance might make it seem otherwise.”

Hester spoke, her chastising voice coming from a bit farther away. “You’re not an important enough figure for this entire continent to rely solely on you.”

“You’re right,” I said, trying to believe her.

Kathlyn placed a finger on the cloth resting on my forehead, cooling it with magic. “Just as the people of Dicathen rely on the Lances, you also need to trust in your soldiers that they’ll make up for what you can’t do.”

I lowered the cloth, allowing its coldness to seep into my eyes. For a minute I said and did nothing, gathering myself.

“I feel like I’m in therapy,” I laughed, bolting up to my feet. Surrounding me were not only Kathlyn and the elders, but also Emily and Alanis. The two of them had remained silent, but traces of worry showed on their faces. “Thank you everyone, for helping me with my training, and for keeping me in

check.”

Hester’s stern face softened as she nodded. “I think that we can skip out on today’s debrief since I’m sure the young general knows exactly what he did wrong.”

“Get some rest. I’m going to be itching to go crazy tomorrow!” Buhnd agreed as he punched his open palm.

“I’ll make sure to have the lifeline artifact back to its normal state by tomorrow. Even if I have to stay up all night!” Emily assured us.

I nodded. “I’ll see everyone tomorrow then.”

Lost in my own thoughts, I didn’t even realize I had been walking until I found myself in front of my doorstep.

Too tired to wash up, I sank into bed, my eyes searching for Sylvie until I remembered she was isolating herself in another room.

I reached out. *Everything okay, Sylv?*

My bond didn’t respond, but the faint trace of her calm state of mind was enough of an answer.

Lying on my back, I stretched out my hand toward the ceiling. This hand—this body that I had grown so used to in the nearly-twenty years that I had lived as Arthur, felt so small when I thought back to my time as Grey.

My thoughts flashed back to my former life and the several times I had fought in the Paragon Duel, a one-on-one battle between kings, each duelist representing their respective country. While the Paragon Duels lacked the atrocity and gore of normal wars, the weight of such battles was much heavier.

“This war isn’t fought alone, Arthur,” I reminded myself.

MAGICAL PERCENTILE

OPENING MY EYES, I slowly released my grip of Uto's horn. I took another moment for introspection, examining the state of both my mana core and my body.

I was close. The road to white core stage, which had once seemed so long, was nearly at an end.

I'm glad I didn't accept Virion's artifact after becoming a Lance, I thought.

Getting out of bed, I touched Sylvie's mind, making sure nothing was wrong. Satisfied with her calm silence, I began stretching, my body brimming with energy.

Breathing deeply, I performed a series of strikes I had learned from Kordri while training under him in Epheotus. It wasn't some stringent combination of moves, but more of a utilization of the body's every movement while maintaining speed and precision—connecting each punch, kick, elbow, knee, all while remaining flexible for whatever the outcome might be. A true master of this fighting style, like the four-eyed asura, could take down a whole unit—and the soldiers would see nothing more than a simple monk strolling amongst them.

My mana flow had improved substantially during my training with Kathryn and the elders, and synchronizing its timing with my strikes created shockwaves in the air. I wanted to move faster and with more agility, but I wasn't an asura, much less a Pantheon like Kordri. Incorporating mana into

muscle fibers and ligaments to maximize power and speed while using the least amount of physical movement—similar to what the Thyestes clan did—would just lead to the same results as that of Burst Step to my legs.

Maybe reaching the realm above white core will strengthen my body, I thought hopefully, as I executed a combination of kicks.

I pivoted my body to end the sequence with a palm strike, just as Boo poked his gigantic head into my room from the doorway, right in the path of my attack.

Boo was hit with a shockwave of wind from my palm strike, causing all the saggy skin around his muzzle and ears to flap wildly.

My sister's bond and I stared silently at each other for a moment, but he only grunted and shook his furry head.

I buckled forward and broke into a fit of laughter.

Ellie's head poked into my room. "What's so funny? Boo was supposed to scare you."

Unable to speak as I tried unsuccessfully to stifle my laughter, I motioned for my sister to come to me.

Confused, she squeezed past her bond's burly form and came into my room.

"Watch," I chuckled, this time conjuring a gust of wind directed at Boo. The bear's ferocious face rippled like liquid, the folds of skin covering his upper jaw flapping up to reveal a set of teeth beneath a pink layer of gum.

My sister giggled, then broke into helpless laughter as well; her bond wasn't nearly so amused. It took us nearly the entire walk down to the training room to compose ourselves.

It was probably childish to laugh so hard at something so trivial, especially considering my mental age, but who cares? I hadn't laughed that hard in ages, and it helped loosen some tension and stress.

"You two seem chirpy for such an early morning," Emily said, yawning, her hands robotically setting up the panels as if they had a mind of their own. "Or is it still nighttime?"

“Did you pull another all-nighter, Emily?” my sister asked, concerned.

“It’s been a back-to-back all-nighter actually. It’s your brother’s last training session so Miss Emeria and I wanted to have all the data from the last two months compiled by today,” she said, her eyes half-closed.

“Remind me to properly thank you both for your efforts,” I said, my eyes scanning for any sight of the curt elf. “Where is Alanis now?”

“Ah shucks—I learned a lot from this as well, so no thanks necessary. As for Miss Emeria, I practically had to force her to go get some sleep,” Emily answered, with another yawn. “She should be here soo—ah, here comes everyone now!”

First through the thick metal doors were Buhnd and Camus. Buhnd was stretching his arms, smiling as he said something to the old elf. Behind them were Hester and Kathyln. The Flamesworth family elder was straightening out a crease in Kathyln’s tight-fitting training robe. The princess spotted me and turned a shade brighter as she tried to pry herself away from her guardian.

Alanis, who usually maintained the mask of a professional businesswoman, looked soulless today. Her normally deliberate steps were sluggish as she trailed behind the rest.

It took several minutes for everyone to get their protective gear on, but I was soon positioned in the training grounds with Kathyln, Camus, Hester, and Buhnd surrounding me. Their expressions were serious, as was mine. I’d come a long way in these past two months—enough to have beaten them a few times. They knew that if they weren’t completely focused, they could lose again—and they couldn’t let themselves be defeated on the last day of training.

“What was the bet again?” Buhnd shouted from behind me.

“Virion is going to throw us a feast to celebrate the end of my ‘vacation’,” I smirked, looking back over my shoulder. “But having him pay for everything is no fun, so I suggested that the loser of this last battle will pay for the entire

party.”

Hester rolled her eyes. “Consider it paid for by the gracious Flamesworth house. How much can a dinner possibly cost?”

Alanis, overhearing our conversation, spoke using a sound enhancing artifact. “Accounting for the cost of the seventy-year-old casks of alcohol fermented from rare grains found only in the outlands of the Beast Glades, as well as the approximate costs of the abundance of fine meats—the prices of all of which have escalated since the start of the war—I have already calculated for Commander Virion the cost of the celebratory feast as amounting to somewhere around twenty thousand gold.”

Hester’s eyes widened at hearing the exorbitant cost. She cleared her throat as she attempted to feign composure. “Well, I suppose it might ruin the gratifying experience of winning if I were to simply pay for the meal outright. Perhaps it is best to determine who pays for the feast with this match; that way, it’ll be much more memorable to everyone.”

I couldn’t help but smile, seeing the usually composed elder so flustered.

“I won’t go easy on you just because you’re young, General,” Camus said, smiling. “This old man’s pride won’t allow it.”

“I agree with Elder Camus,” Kathyln added. “Perhaps besting you now will convince my father and mother to let me help in the war.”

“How cold, Princess. Using me as a stepping stone,” I responded, lowering my stance.

“Since this is the final mock battle, General Arthur will not have any elements restricted,” Alanis’s voice sounded again. “Please begin!”

“For the alcohol!” Buhnd’s gruff voice roared as he charged at me from behind.

I was surrounded, and I had a limited amount of options. With my senses heightened from mana and the rush of adrenaline, I focused on the biggest threat.

Buhnd was charging in while forming a giant stone mace and Camus was

backing away while gusts of wind gathered around his arms, but it was actually Kathyln's mana levels that posed the biggest threat right now.

An old but effective trick, I loosened the stone ground around me and lifted the debris to form a cloud of dust, which I pushed toward Kathyln.

Manipulate the earth under my feet to spring me forward just as I push off, and expel the wind resistance as I run, I recited to myself.

It wasn't as instantaneous or subtle as Burst Step, but, by chaining the earth and wind abilities, I could enhance my initial acceleration without burdening my body.

I catapulted forward, the air slipping by me harmlessly until Kathyln was just a few feet away.

The princess inhaled sharply in surprise and attempted to cast her spell but I didn't allow it. Utilizing wind once more, I created a vacuum in my palm, *pulling* her straight into my grip.

Grabbing Kathyln's wrist, I twisted and threw her over my shoulder directly at Buhnd.

I felt a sting on the hand that had touched her, and glanced down to see a layer of frost around my fingers.

She reacted quickly. I cast a wave of heat to thaw myself, while taking note of Kathyln's position by the pond.

Just then, the room lit up—dozens of crackling orbs dotted the air above us.

Lucas's Ember Wisps spell—from back when I was qualifying to be an adventurer—came to mind. But these 'wisps' weren't of fire; rather, they were concentrated globes of electricity. Again I took note.

Camus took the opportunity to launch his spell as well, hurling two giant spears of wind that swirled fiercely like a drill.

I quickly moved, dodging one of the wind spears, which drilled a hole into the ground before dispersing. The other one, however, was able to change direction, following me as it carved a trail into the ground where it passed.

I'm really beginning to wonder if that old elf is actually blind.

I continued sprinting, but it wasn't aimless. I charged toward Buhnd with the wind spear close behind me. I did my best to seem as though I wanted a head-on confrontation, and it seemed to have worked. The bearded dwarf clad himself in armor and anchored himself to the ground, holding his mace high like a professional baseball player of my old world.

I charged at him, condensing the blue fire in my palms. I fainted long enough for Buhnd to begin his swing. Then I released my fire spell at the ground below me as I jumped up. The force of my flame launched me into the sky like a rocket, causing Buhnd's giant mace to collide with Camus's wind drill. But my moment of contentment lasted only a brief second because immediately, a barrage of ice shot up from the pond below, in the same moment that Hester decided to fire off the globes of lightning.

Why can't they just fire their spells one by one, I grumbled to myself, my brain whirring for the best way to handle this.

A glimmer of an idea flickered through my mind. I had to act fast though.

Without any restraint for mana expenditure, I released a shockwave of fire toward the rapidly approaching splinters of ice.

The ice bombarded the wall of fire, producing steam and a high-pitched whistle.

In my peripheral vision, I caught sight of the increase in brightness signaling that the lightning orbs were about to fire, but I couldn't worry about that right now.

Wasting no time, I manipulated the moisture caused by the collision of Kathyln's and my opposing elemental attacks, while slowing down my descent with an updraft.

I shaped the water that I had gathered, forming it into a large barrier around me, just as Hester's spell cast a barrage of lightning my way.

The water manipulated from Kathyln's spell—which had utilized the mineral-filled water from the pond—was a perfect conductor.

The sphere of water surrounding me began bubbling as the blast of electricity

hit. A deep buzz filled the training room while the lightning tendrils flickered on the surface of the water.

I need to get rid of this thing before I hit the ground.

Manipulating the electrically charged water, I shaped it and fired it off in streams—directly at Buhnd, the one who would be the weakest against this combination of elements.

Buhnd didn't have a chance. His life-line artifact activated, forming a pink protective barrier, just moments after the compressed stream of water struck, electrocuting him.

Needless to say, once Buhnd was out for the count, the tide of the battle changed. It still took a while, but after negating Kathyln's ice lance through a combination of Camus's air cushioning technique and Buhnd's kinetic redirection, I was able to knock Kathyln out of the battle.

"Someone really doesn't want to pay for their own celebratory feast," Camus joked.

"I don't even know if I can afford the feast," I retorted with a wry smile.

With only Hester and Camus remaining—and thanks to the fact that I had full access to all of my elements—within another twenty minutes, I was able to subdue them.

I plopped back on the ground, my chest heaving and my mana core aching. "I... I win."

Camus groaned, leaning against a wall as he caught his breath. "Congratulations, but there are more pressing matters."

"I agree," Hester nodded beside him as she blotted the sweat on her forehead with a handkerchief. "Who's going to pay the exorbitant cost of the feast?"

"I thought we decided that the losers were going to pay?" Buhnd asked, confused.

I sat up. I'd thought so too.

"True, but why hurt many when you can just break one?" Camus added, a smile forming on his face. "I vote that Buhnd pays for the meal. He's the one

who lost first, causing the rest of us to lose.”

“What!” Buhnd bellowed. “From whose sore ass did you pull that quote?”

“I second Camus’s vote,” Hester replied immediately, raising her hand.

“Hester!” The dwarf’s eyes widened before turning to Kathyln. “Princess. You don’t agree with those old bats, do you?”

Kathyln, who had been with my sister and Emily, averted her gaze from Buhnd, and raised her hand as well.

I could see the bearded dwarf’s jaw drop as he began calculating the cost of the extravagant meal with his fingers. After a minute, Buhnd straightened his back and cleared his throat. “Gentlemen. Ladies. We are in times of war. We should be sparing resources for our beloved soldiers out there on the field. Isn’t that right, Miss Emer—*argh!* You damn old bat! Release my earlobe!”

“What good will it do to give soldiers seventy-year-old alcohol, you old fool? Don’t try to get out of this!” Hester snapped, dragging her companion by his ear as the rest of us laughed.

After everyone had calmed down, we settled around in a circle for our last debrief. It was a bittersweet feeling. Two months had flown by, but I’d formed bonds with the elders and had gotten to know the aloof princess a bit better during this period. Toward the end, Kathyln had started conversing more with Emily and Ellie, and they’d even hung out together in the castle from time to time.

A small part of me wanted to forget about the fact that there was a war raging below us, but with Tess and my parents out there, I knew I wouldn’t truly be able to relax until the war was over.

“Now, the moment I’m sure everyone has been waiting for!” Emily’s chirpy voice sounded, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Alanis has recorded the progress of Arthur’s mana flow utilization while I compiled the data of General Arthur, Princess Kathyln, and Elders Camus, Hester, and Buhnd. I’ve cross-referenced it against the data I’ve received from my assistants—students at a few academies and some soldiers.”

Emily must've noticed the traces of skepticism written on my face as she explained the sample size and diversity.

"It's been pretty hard to get a wider range of participants, this continent being at war and all," she said glumly. "This measurement is something I'm planning on standardizing and actively promoting with Master Gideon's help, so getting data will be an ongoing process. For now, you'll have to make do with the two hundred entries I've received from the various mages."

Buhnd fidgeted in his stone chair. "Well? On with it, girl. Only about a fifth of my ass is on my seat right now from all this anticipation."

I suppressed a laugh. The bearded elder's reaction reminded me of a student anxiously waiting for his grades to be handed back by his teacher.

Emily didn't find Buhnd's impatience as amusing as I did. She began quickly sifting through her stack of paper until her eyes brightened, and I assumed she finally found what she was looking for.

"Okay! I'll start with Elder Buhnd, since he seems to be the most curious," Emily began. "Please be advised that this data does not take mastery over mana into account—simply the raw output of force that your average spell contains during battle."

The young artificer flinched as Buhnd's intense gaze drilled holes into her while he waited for her results. Clearing her throat, Emily spoke. "Based on how much higher Elder Buhnd's fpu is compared to the average of the limited data we acquired, he is in roughly the ninety-first percentile."

"Ninety-first percenti—what? No way ninety-one percent of the population is better than me!" Buhnd blurted, stamping his feet on the ground.

I snorted, unable to suppress my laughter as Emily looked at the old dwarf incredulously.

Hester merely sighed and shook her head.

"It means that only nine percent of the population has a higher fpu than you," Camus answered, unfazed by his companion's naiveté.

"Oh." Buhnd's posture straightened and a smile creeped up, making his beard

spread like some sort of frilled lizard. “Heh! Oh.”

Hester rolled her eyes and I spotted my sister trying to cover her smile with her hand.

“Again, this data can’t be considered completely accurate since the data pool is so small and very biased toward certain demographics,” Emily explained. “Most likely, everyone’s percentile will increase as more data is gathered.”

The words seemed to have gone in one ear and out the other. The word ‘pride’ was practically written on Buhnd’s face.

Emily continued, turning to Camus. “Elder Camus’s fpu is in the ninety-third percentile.”

Buhnd seemed to snap back to reality and his brows scrunched when he heard Camus’s score. Camus simply nodded in acknowledgement.

“Elder Hester’s fpu is actually the highest of everyone—ninety-fourth percentile.”

Ellie gave a faint whistle, while Buhnd’s eyes widened. Hester chose this exact moment to cast a haughty glance down at the dwarven elder.

“Bah! The data isn’t considered completely accurate. Remember?” Buhnd recited, fuming.

“I didn’t say anything,” Hester shrugged. She smoothed her face into a neutral expression, but the twinkle in her sharp eyes still showed her contentment.

I guess a high affinity for magic runs in the Flamesworth family, I thought, remembering Jasmine’s competence in magic—albeit not fire magic.

Emily turned to Kathyln, smiling. “Princess Kathyln, your fpu is in— “

The princess raised a hand, shaking her head. “I’d rather not get caught up. Knowing me, comparing myself to others will hinder more than help.”

Alanis regarded the princess approvingly but remained quiet as Emily finally turned to me. “Lastly, Arth—General Arthur’s fpu is in the ninetieth percentile.”

Buhnd’s eyes lit up once again as he trotted to me and put a hand across my

shoulder. “You’ll grow in time, young general, but for now it seems my fpu is just a tad higher than yours.”

“So it seems.” I smiled. I had expected as much. From the beginning, the elder’s raw mana output was stronger than mine. I had the advantage of being able to utilize all four basic elements and the higher forms of two, and fusing multiple elements into a single attack would often have more devastating results than a single elemental spell. But overall, I had known the elders would come out on top.

“Big talk for someone who got knocked out first in a four-against-one match with the ‘young general,’” Hester scoffed.

Buhnd scowled, turning red. “Do you want to take this to the field, you old bat?”

Hester’s brow twitched in anger. “Again with the ‘old bat’!”

“Enough with the bickering!” Camus cut in, sitting straight in the stone seat Buhnd had conjured for all of us. “Miss Emeria. Did our time spent with the young general bear fruit?”

The stoic elf dipped her head respectfully. “General Arthur’s mana flow rate has increased a noticeable amount. I believe these two months have been utilized to their full potential.”

“That’s good,” Camus said, turning to me—a gesture I found odd now that I knew he could see just as well without facing me. I figured the gesture was more for me than himself.

Alanis walked to me, handing me a small leather-bound journal. “This is for you, General Arthur. The detailed recordings of my analysis over this period are written in here. I have taken the liberty of pointing out areas for potential growth so that you can have some guidance in your training while I am not with you.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely, gingerly holding the small booklet. “You’ve really outdone yourself.”

“It was my pleasure working with you,” she responded with a courteous nod.

Buhnd clasped his hands together, drawing everyone's attention. "All right! I don't know about all of you, but I'm starving and my mind keeps going back to those seventy-year-old caskets of alcohol!"

"Yes," Hester agreed. "And the thought of you having to pay for all of it is sure to make everything tastier."

I could hear Buhnd grumble as the three elders headed toward the door. I gestured for the others to follow them as well. They all deserved the time to unwind and have fun.

"Are you sure I can go? It seems like a party for the really important people," my sister asked, hesitating.

I patted my sister's head. "Of course you're invited. I better see you and Boo eating enough to make Elder Buhnd homeless!"

Ellie's gigantic bond gave a grunt of confirmation before scooping her up with his snout and trotting off.

Smiling at the sight, I looked back to see the young artificer scrambling with some artifacts inside her little cockpit of panels. "We're the last ones, Emily."

"I'm almost done cleaning up. You go on ahead."

Not wanting to make her rush more than she already was, I took her advice.

"You better be there—you don't want Ellie to be lonely at the party."

EMILY WATSKEN

I quickly gathered the array of papers that were scattered all over the ground behind my fpu measuring artifact—working name.

After carefully placing the panel components into the wooden box, I placed the papers equally carefully on top, noticing Arthur's name on the top sheet. It was the fpu readings I had managed to gather while he was in that angelic form of his where his hair turned white. I'd thought I had lost it.

I shook my head, crumpling up the sheet of paper. "Ninety-ninth percentile. That can't be right."

EAT, DRINK, BE MERRY

AFTER ANOTHER FAILED attempt at trying to coerce Sylvie to take a break and come join me for the dinner, I conceded defeat. As soon as I stepped through the towering double doors of stained wood, opened for me by two guards clad in silver, my worries were replaced by wonder. It felt like I had left the castle entirely.

Maybe I had.

I looked back over my shoulder to make sure that I hadn't stepped through a teleportation gate disguised as a doorway. Confirming that I was still indeed inside the castle, I took my time to relish the sights, sounds, and aromas around me.

While the size of the dining room wasn't anything extraordinary, the details in the decoration took my breath away. The vaulted ceiling alone made this room feel like a separate structure from the castle, and the ambient light cast from the floating orbs above brought to life a scene straight out of a princess's picture book.

Unlike the flamboyant party where the witch-like retainer's frozen body had been showcased as a morale booster for the many noble houses in attendance, this event emitted a cozy, intimate atmosphere—with a little sprinkle of a surreal fairytale mixed in.

I approached a meticulously-dressed butler, standing almost as still as a statue, and picked up two glasses of whatever lavish drink the purple liquid

on his tray might be. I handed one to Emily, who was beside me.

When my sister tried to take one as well, I pulled her back. "It's alcohol."

Ellie clicked her tongue and continued walking, but it didn't take long for her discontent to be diffused. "Everything looks so...magical!" she marveled, unable to find a better word to express herself. "It smells amazing in here, but where's all the food?"

"This is still a dinner, not a party," I explained, pointing to the long rectangular table covered with a seamless white tablecloth and topped with perfectly arranged empty plates and glasses. "The food's going to be brought out once everyone's here and seated."

The alcohol, I noted with amusement, lay spread out against the back wall in large wooden kegs.

"I'm getting hungry just breathing the air here," Emily moaned, near to drooling.

I nodded in agreement. The air was thick with a concoction of spices, sauces, and herbs that seemed to harmonize alongside each other rather than clash. Helping to blend and mesh the variety of kitchen ingredients together was the subtle oaky scent of the fire crackling and popping in the hearth at the far corner of the cozy dining hall.

Ellie pulled on my sleeve. "Are you sure we didn't need to dress up for this?"

"The place is a lot fancier than Virion let on, but yes, I'm sure," I assured her.

"This is supposed to be a comfortable dinner to celebrate before I go back out to the field, my dearest sister."

"I'm your only sister," she retorted, her eyes still gazing around the room curiously.

"Then you know I'm telling the truth," I said blandly.

Ellie groaned at my witty response. "Whatever."

"I can imagine how 'comfortable' it'll be already... with the Council, the Lances, and the elders all gathered in one place," Emily chimed in, her sarcasm practically palpable.

I simply smiled, breaking off from the two of them to enjoy my purple drink in peace. Despite being the last to leave the training room, Emily, my sister, and I were the first to arrive.

As I sat in the back to enjoy the warmth of the fire, I saw Kathyln entering, escorted by Hester. Both wore evening gowns that, while minimally adorned, still looked undoubtedly elegant... and expensive.

Ellie and Emily didn't hesitate to shoot me glares as they saw this, mentally blaming me for their comparatively informal attire.

I winked and lifted my glass, now half-empty. Kathyln thought I was gesturing to her and raised her glass slightly in return, smiling shyly before turning her attention to Emily and my sister.

Elder Hester strode toward me with a glass in hand as well. "Seems you've already made yourself comfortable—in both attire and demeanor."

"I thought this was supposed to be a casual dinner," I sniffed, raising my glass toward her.

"Is this not casual?" she said with a bemused smile, clinking my glass with hers in a casual toast before we each took a sip.

"Casual is wearing slightly too-large pants so we can comfortably indulge in whatever exquisite cuisine we're presented with tonight," I said confidently.

Hester looked at me curiously. "I often forget that you're not from a noble house, no offense."

I chuckled. "None taken. It's always amusing seeing some of the nobles trying to hide their contempt when a Lance like myself does something blatantly 'improper.'"

"Proper etiquette is ingrained in everyone here since infancy," Hester admitted. "My mother would faint if she saw you dressed like that at an occasion like this."

"Truth be told, my mother would probably faint as well if she knew I was attending such a fancy dinner wearing this," I replied, feeling a pang of guilt and sorrow at the mention of my parents.

We sipped our drinks in silence for a bit, watching the chaotic movement of the fire as if it were a show.

Finishing off the last of my purple liquor, I asked Hester a question that had been on my mind since I'd first met her. "Hester. If you don't mind me asking, what is your relationship to Jasmine Flamesworth?"

Hester, who had been watching the fire intently, shifted her gaze to me. "You two are acquainted?"

I nodded.

She took a few moments to gather her thoughts. "Then I guess it's safe to assume that the Flamesworth family has made a rather negative impression on you."

"It's gotten a little better since I met you, but yes," I confessed.

"Jasmine is the daughter of my younger brother—my niece," she began, idly twirling the remaining liquid in her glass.

Hester proceeded to tell me a little about the Flamesworth family. Jasmine's story wasn't anything I hadn't already been told or guessed myself. Basically, the younger brother—the one with the most pride in their family's line of fire mages—thought of Jasmine as an embarrassment to the Flamesworth house. At first, he did all he could to try and draw out any latent potential Jasmin had in fire-affinity, hopeful that she might have been a dual-elementalist. Once her father had realized that wind was the only affinity his daughter possessed, he had isolated her until she came of age, then kicked her out soon after.

Hester's remorseful tone as she told the story helped quell some of the anger I had toward their family, but there was still a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Your brother, where is he now?" I asked.

"Trodius is a captain, his division being one of the main forces at the Wall," she answered. "You don't plan on—"

"No, I have no intentions of harming your brother," I scoffed, turning back to see some familiar faces. "I was just curious. Oh, and regarding your comment

about every noble having proper etiquette engrained upon them...”

Buhnd and Camus had just walked in through the doors. While Camus wore a traditional elven robe, Buhnd had apparently decided to attend the event disguised as what seemed like a farm worker.

Hester, following my gaze, rolled her eyes as she watched the dwarven elder finish a glass in one gulp and proceed to grab two more before walking over to us. “There are always outliers.”

I nodded. “An outlier indeed.”

It didn’t take much longer for the rest of the guests to file in. Virion congratulated me on my training with a hug and a pithy comment about Tess not being able to make it. I cordially greeted Merial and Alduin Eralith, Tess’s parents, exchanging a few pleasantries. Alduin digressed a bit, talking about the war and some of the dilemmas he’d been having in allocating the elven armies around Elenoir, but Merial scolded him for talking about that here and dragged him away. My exchange with King Blaine and Queen Priscilla was even more succinct. While Kathyln’s mother was brusque by default, I knew that the former King of Sapin still found it uncomfortable to be around me—a human who had become a Lance for the elves. I was most likely someone he considered disloyal to his home kingdom.

Needless to say, by the time I’d finished talking and toasting—and thereby drinking—with the elders and the Council, my inhibitions had been lowered by a significant degree. It was only noticeable to me when I clasped an unwilling Bairon in a hug and said repeatedly that there were ‘no hard feelings.’ The Lance tried to pry himself away without drawing attention to us, but I utilized one of the techniques I had learned from Camus to create a vacuum between him and me.

Finding real life applications for spells is the next step in mastery, after all.

After saying my piece, I released the fuming Lance and proceeded to greet Varay and Aya. The two Lances had just come back from a mission near the border between Sapin and Darv, after sightings of another retainer.

Unfortunately, the final retainer had been gone by the time they had arrived. We talked amongst ourselves until an unexpected surprise guest showed up. Garbed in a bright yellow dress, which looked like it might've belonged to a child, was Mica.

"Mica!" I exclaimed, drawing everyone's attention to the entrance. The dwarf, obviously unaccustomed to such a fluttery dress, flushed at the attention. Rather than shrink, however, the dwarven Lance stuck out her chest and held her chin up and made her way to me.

I pulled the dwarf into a hug, which was a little awkward considering she was about half my height. Virion came by and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Our scouts in Darv found enough evidence to assure the rest of the Council that Mica—or should I say *General* Mica—was not involved in Rahdeas and Olfred's plot with the Vritra," Virion explained with a smile.

"Mica's allegiance will always be to the country," the Lance confirmed. "But Mica is a bit confused since there are no dwarves on the Council and Lord Aldir is missing."

"We have much to discuss and several positions to fill, but that can be saved for tomorrow," Virion said comfortingly. "Tonight, we enjoy the food, the drinks, and the company we find ourselves in."

Virion left us to continue his rounds, talking to everyone else in the room while Mica and I chatted a bit more. We kept our conversation lighthearted. I teased her about her frilly dress, and she retorted that I looked like I had come straight from a training session. She laughed when I told her she was right.

The pleasant chime of a bell signaled for everyone to gather around the table. Butlers and maids escorted all the attendees to their predetermined seats. Since I was one of the main reasons for having this dinner, I had been put at the far end of the table, directly across from Virion, with Kathyln to my right and my sister to my left. The Council was spread across the table toward the other end, near Virion, while the Lances and Elders sat toward the center.

After everyone had taken a seat, Virion tapped his spoon on the glass flute to get everyone's attention before speaking.

"I'll make this short since I know I'm not the only one who's hungry. I believe it's important for even our strongest soldiers to have the opportunity to rest and be merry. Yes, we're at war, but war or not, there will always be a battle tomorrow, so make some time to enjoy today. Drink, eat, laugh, so that you can tackle tomorrow with fire anew!"

We all clapped, while Buhnd's gruff voice shouting, "Hell yeah!" sounded in the midst of it. Our applause brought forth an organized stampede of servants carrying dishes. It was a traditional ten course elven meal, starting with a creamy soup garnished with edible flowers and leaves.

My stomach—which had been uncomfortable, most likely due to the copious amounts of alcohol I'd drunk—welcomed the warm, rich flavors. The subtle kick of an unfamiliar spice complemented the thickness of the soup, while the leaves and flower garnishes added a surprising hint of freshness.

"This is so good!" Ellie exclaimed in between spoonfuls of the soup.

The ceramic bowl of soup had been taken away, replaced by a silver platter with two strips of what looked like raw fish. The morsels of translucent flesh, with dashings of two different sauces, practically melted in my mouth. Both the green and the brown sauces were unfamiliar, but it was a mixture of a nutty and a slightly acidic taste that served to mask the unwanted brininess of the ocean dweller and bring out its desired flavors.

As I swallowed the second piece of the fish, a pang in my abdomen caused me to buckle.

Did I drink too much? I wondered, casting a side glance at the large cask of priceless liquor that had been conveniently placed just behind Buhnd's seat.

"Are you okay?" Kathyln asked, her plate completely clean.

"I'm fine," I smiled, putting down my fork.

Ultimately, my stubbornness wouldn't allow me to pass up the opportunity to drink such expensive alcohol. I held up my glass, taking another sip and

rolling the deep brown liquid in my mouth to savor the taste.

I let the aromatic flavors coat my mouth before finally swallowing, feeling the pleasant burn pass down my throat.

“Can I try?” my sister begged once again after seeing me relishing the drink.

I was about to turn her down again, but paused. “Fine. Just a sip.”

“Uh, Ellie?” Emily chimed in, her eyes widening as my sister grabbed the rounded glass. “You sure about this?”

Ignoring her, my sister immediately brought the glass to her lips. As I had expected, she most certainly did not take ‘just a sip’ and instead gulped a big portion of the liquor.

Already prepared for what was about to come, I cast a small circular vacuum of wind that sucked in the spray of liquid that shot out of my sister’s mouth as she coughed.

The servants nearby took immediate action, handing my sister a new napkin while they opened up a container for me to ‘dump’ Ellie’s sprayed mouthful into.

“You jerk,” Ellie hissed, trying not to draw any more attention to herself than she already had. “You knew that would happen!”

Barely suppressing a laugh, I looked at her, deadpan. “Of course. That’s why I said no so many times.”

“You could’ve warned me!” she protested, drinking the cup of water the servant behind her had so sensibly placed next to her plate.

“I could’ve,” I agreed, leaving my sister aghast.

Emily distracted her, telling her about some of the modifications she’d made to Ellie’s new bow, to steer her away from her bitterness.

After the plates were cleared, other—smaller—dishes took their place. Even before I looked down to see what it was, the smell had already caused me to reach for it. A handful of shellfish, their black shells laid open, their meat basking in a savory broth that I could practically taste through my nose. Supplementing the shellfish was a side of sautéed mushrooms that looked

like they had actually been lit on fire.

The servant covered the mushrooms with a crystal cup to extinguish the soft flame. As soon as he lifted the cover, the rich scent of whatever liquor the chef had used to ignite the mushrooms permeated the vicinity.

“Raw fish, and now flaming fungus? Interesting *and* tasty!” I overheard Emily whisper to my sister, who nodded furiously in agreement.

Conversations drifted in the air while soft music, played by a trio of musicians, provided a comfortable tune to accompany the dinner.

I leaned forward, taking in another whiff of the complementary aromas of shellfish and mushrooms when another sharp pain stabbed at my sternum.

Am I allergic to something? I thought, bringing a mushroom close to my nose in suspicion.

With the pain gone as quickly as it had come, I decided to lay off the purple alcohol while shoveling in a mouthful of the mushrooms.

The supple firmness of the mushroom as I bit down into it dispelled any remaining suspicions I had about the food.

If I'm allergic to this mushroom, so be it. I'll suffer knowing that it was for a good cause.

Throughout the next few dishes, I ate in silence. Kathyln wasn't much of a conversationalist; the few times she did speak were to respond to whatever my sister and Emily were talking about.

My thoughts began veering toward the war, and the upcoming battles, my only solace being the exquisite dishes that never seemed to stop and my glass of liquor that never emptied. There were tender meats that I was able to cut with my fork, and even a whole boar—carved so precisely that I doubted I could replicate the task even with my mastery of the sword.

There were other, more bizarre dishes that showcased the more... ‘unwanted’ parts of various mana beasts as supposed delicacies. As the dinner was becoming more lively—most likely due to the alcohol in everyone's system—I experienced another episode of pain in my stomach.

This time, it was a more gripping pain, as if someone were slowly squeezing, twisting, and wrenching my insides. That was when I realized it wasn't my stomach or even my liver, as I had thought.

It was my mana core.

"Is something wrong, Arthur? You seem pale," Virion said, noticing my state from the other side of the table.

I rose from my seat, feeling more than a tinge of regret as I stared at the untouched, steaming crab on my plate. "My apologies to everyone, but I think I'll have to call it a night."

Virion stood up as well, his expression laced with concern.

Holding up a hand to stop him, I made my way to the door, careful not to stumble. "Please, enjoy yourselves. I've been a little tired today and I think I just had too much alcohol."

Without looking back, I headed to my room, one hand using the wall as support while the other pressed down on my solar plexus.

Is something wrong with my mana core?

Cold sweat beaded down my face as the gripping pain became more intense.

When I reached my room, I curled into a ball on the floor, unable to make it to my bed. My fear and worry grew alongside the pain, until a thought crossed my mind.

Sending a pulse of mana into my ring, I withdrew Uto's horn and instinctively began absorbing its contents, like an infant reaching for its mother's milk.

I slipped in and out of consciousness, time elapsing as if it were caught in a jar of sap. Everything seemed slow and the cold, gripping pain escalated until it became unbearable.

Then two things happened in what seemed like the span of a second.

First, I felt a surge of unmatched energy and power throughout my body. I could feel it in my pores and the tips of my hair.

Then, I passed out.

BROKEN SEAL

I LOOKED up at the row of judges peering down from their platform, which overlooked the main stadium my opponent and I were currently in. Sitting in the middle of the row was a tall, shapely woman, her blazing red hair curling down her back. Two sharp eyes that would make even a wild lion flinch regarded me with interest as the rest of the judges murmured amongst themselves over the results of the match.

I thought to myself, *What exactly is there to go over?* My opponent, a Division Two candidate testing for a first division spot, was passed out behind me while the medics approached with a stretcher.

With a sinking feeling, as the judges continued their discussion, I realized that they might very well be determining whether to send me up or keep me at Division Three.

I could see Nico and Cecilia from the corner of my eye. They were waiting for the verdict just as intently as I had during my first competition while attending this academy—back when I still believed hard work would offer fair results.

After what seemed like ages, a thin, elderly man, his white moustache groomed a bit too meticulously—probably to compensate for his bald head—cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention. “Cadet Grey, no surname. While your match was impressive, especially your demonstration of martial arts, the poor level of utilization of your ki throughout the tournament made it

clear that you are lacking in some fundamentals, and these need to be thoroughly reviewed. Therefore, Cadet Grey, you will move up to Class One of the third division.”

I could feel my blood boil underneath my skin as I did all I could to suppress my rage. I clenched my fists, ground my teeth, curled my toes—anything to stop myself from lashing out at the judge and this entire academy system.

Just then, a roar of laughter echoed throughout the entire arena. My burning rage was instantly quelled as I looked up, dumbfounded, at the red-haired judge, who continued laughing heartily. It wasn’t only me who was shocked by her actions, though. The rest of the judges whipped their heads toward their colleague with expressions ranging from shock to anger to embarrassment.

The audience, which had been quietly waiting for the results from this final round, muttered amongst each other, hoping to get some answers about this turn of events.

Finally the red-haired judge calmed down, wiping away a tear. “My apologies. I thought Judge Drem was pulling that kid’s leg by telling him he needed to ‘review his fundamentals.’”

At her words, the mustachioed judge—who I assumed was Judge Drem—flushed red all the way the top of his shiny head. “Lady Vera.” The judge spoke to her with an eerie respect, despite the gap between them in age. “In the sanctity of these annual assessment duels, your behavior is unacceptable—”

“No,” the red-haired woman cut in flatly. “What’s unacceptable behavior, and embarrassingly pathetic, is this blatant attempt at holding that kid back because he’s not from a distinguished house.”

Clearly unprepared to be verbally assaulted by the woman, Judge Drem stammered what he had probably hoped would be words. “Wha—How dare... I did no such—”

“Then how can you possibly justify placing Cadet Grey in anything less than Division One?” Lady Vera interrupted again. At this point, I really hoped this

lady had either the physical strength or the political backing to justify her blatant lack of respect for the older judge.

Judge Drem tried his best to gather his wits, giving another cough. “As I stated earlier, Cadet Grey’s ki utilization is lack—”

“Wrong.” She instantly cut him off again, making the older judge practically fume in frustration and embarrassment. “The boy’s ki utilization is at least a step above even the Class Two students in Division One. What you call ‘lacking’ in ki utilization is actually him making up for his lower ki level to an impressive degree.”

The other judges sitting behind the panel were obviously lower in rank than Judge Drem, because the only thing they’d been doing up to this point was wordlessly shifting glances between Lady Vera, Judge Drem, and me.

“Lady Vera,” the old judge said through gritted teeth. “While I am grateful for your insight into the matter, I have been a judge for nearly twenty years now. Please reciprocate the respect I’ve shown you by showing me the respect that I’ve earned in this field.”

Lady Vera thrummed her fingers on the panel she was sitting behind, contemplating for a moment before she nodded. “Fine. I’ll respect your verdict, Judge Drem.”

Before I even had the opportunity to be disappointed by this, though, Vera’s form flickered out of sight.

What in the—

She appeared above me and landed with a soft thud. Despite the fact that I had witnessed everything, I was still incredulous that she’d just cleared the span of two stories as casually as I would step off a sidewalk.

“Kid. Like Judge Handlebars said, you’ll still be in Division Three, but what do you say about me becoming your personal mentor?”

I thought for a moment—I even turned to Nico and Cecilia to make sure what I was witnessing was real. I didn’t know who this woman was, but the way she held herself—and the impressive movement skill she had used to clear

the distance, something most elite soldiers wouldn't even dare try to replicate—made me take the risk.

Ignoring the aghast row of judges as well as the stunned crowd, I took her hand. "I accept your offer."

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I woke up on the floor with my hand stretched out in front of me, much the way my dream had ended. However, rather than Lady Vera's seemingly fragile hand in my own, I was gripping tightly onto Uto's horn.

The horn, which had previously glimmered like a sinister, obsidian jewel, now had cracks and splinters strewn across its dull gray exterior.

It took a moment of idly wondering how I had come to be in this position before I suddenly remembered. As if struck by a bolt of lightning, I shot up to my feet. I took in my surroundings for the first time since waking up, relieved that I was still in my room and that my room was relatively intact. Looking at the window, it was still nighttime, which meant I had been unconscious only for a few hours.

Pulling my senses inward, I focused my attention on my mana core—which no longer had a glimmering silver sheen, but instead radiated brightly like a white sun.

"I did it," I muttered incredulously. I maintained concentration on my core for a few minutes, mostly just taking in the new, alien feelings that came with my breakthrough. The paranoid part of me just wanted to make sure I wasn't imagining things.

I wasn't. I was now a white core mage.

Ecstatic, I sent a pulse of mana throughout my body. The flow of mana was seamless and near-instant. I hadn't gotten the chance to read through the notebook Alanis had written for me, but I had a feeling she might have to update some of the readings.

Without stopping, I held out my hand, palm up, and began shaping the mana. I started out with something relatively easy, making a small orb of pure

mana. This was the equivalent of stretching before a run.

After that, I proceeded to more complicated exercises. I enlarged the orb of mana and shrank it as quickly as possible. Then I split the mana orb into two smaller ones. After I had about a dozen small mana orbs floating above my hand, I ignited some of them by coalescing fire affinity mana particles in the atmosphere while I froze another set of orbs and so on. A few minutes into the exercise, I had dozens of different elemental spheres, all orbiting around my palm.

Throughout it all, I wore a wide smile on my face that I only noticed after my cheeks began cramping.

There were hundreds of variations of these manipulation exercises, all meant to help mages get better at organic magic—a term that had many names which all meant one thing: magic that did not require gestures or chants to cast.

Much of the magic that the beginning classes in Xyrus Academy had taught was centered around stagnant magic, which were essentially spells limited in variations and uses in order to be reproduced consistently and easily. The gestures and chants that so many mages used—and still use today—help in guiding their subconscious as they mold their mana into the spell they want. The downside was that most of these gestures and chants basically told opponents, ‘Hey, I’m going to throw a fireball at you.’ It was fairly easy for any decent mage to counter such stagnant magic.

The organic magic, which I had so naturally grasped from an early age thanks to my understanding of mana from having lived a previous life, was much harder to cast and control. Every time I launched a blade of wind at my opponent with a simple swing of my arm, my brain was basically giving detailed instructions about the mana I imbued into the spell in order to get the shape, size, speed, trajectory, angle, and all the rest correct.

Breaking into white core stage wasn’t as awe-inspiring as I had hoped it would be, but it was definitely a huge step forward—more so than any of the

previous breakthroughs into the next core stages.

My control and ‘finesse’ over mana had definitely been taken up a notch, almost as if the advancement into white core had also affected my cognition.

I thought back to several instances in the past when the Lances had demonstrated some of their prowess in magic. Olfred’s ability to cast eerily lifelike golems of magma, and Mica’s superb control over an abstract element like gravity, were two examples that supported my suspicion. Putting Alea aside, I’d never had the chance to see Aya fight. Bairon was able to mold lightning into a giant spear that looked about as detailed as a masterfully crafted weapon, and just recently, I’d come face to face with Varay’s dragon, which was made completely of ice.

Is this why all the Lances are so skilled in manipulating mana?

Another thought occurred to me as well: flying. Usually, skilled flying meant constant attention to your body and mana output, all while having your attention on something else, like fighting.

That was why most mages didn’t fly even if they were able to—what use was flying when it took complete focus to sustain it? And the mana expenditure wasn’t cheap.

If manipulating mana became this easy, then I could see how the Lances were able to fly while casually talking to me or even casting spells. Eager to know what my limits were, I was tempted to immediately head down to the training room and test a few theories out—I was especially excited to activate Realmheart just to see what I could do. However, just then a sharp pain flared in my head, wrenching me out of my thoughts.

‘Arthur! Something’s happening...’

Sylvie’s voice rang in my head, but sounded muffled and distorted.

Sylvie? What’s wrong?

I called out to her several more times but didn’t get a response. Feelings of excitement and elation were immediately replaced by worry and fear as I

headed down the flight of stairs to the small training room she had isolated herself in.

I turned the cold metal handle of the door, but it was locked. “Sylvie, I’m here! Can you hear me?”

No response.

I shook harder, hoping it was just jammed. When I realized it wasn’t, I punched a hole near the knob, rendering the lock mechanism useless. Pushing open the door, I stepped inside only to stop dead in my tracks at the sight in front of me.

Standing in the back of the dimly-lit room was a wide-eyed little girl in a simple black robe—with two unmistakable black horns jutting out from the side of her head.

I thought I was seeing things at first.

I blamed the poor lighting and the shadows it cast, thought they were playing tricks on my eyes. But when I stepped closer and the girl looked up and we locked eyes, I knew.

“Sylvie? Is that you?”

The girl cracked open an uneasy smile, a trace of fear and excitement evident in her bright topaz eyes. “Hi, Arthur.”

We both stood there. Neither one of us knew what to do, what to say, how to react. I couldn’t believe it. My eyes told me that I was seeing a girl who looked no older than eight or nine, with long choppy hair that was the same pale wheat color as her draconic form’s underbelly; looking more closely, her messy hair looked like soft feathers rather than actual strands of hair.

Little of the girl’s small face was covered by her hair, since her bangs barely covered half of her forehead. Her round yellow eyes shifted uneasily under my scrutinizing gaze.

Finally she sent a mental transmission. *‘How long are you going to keep staring like that?’*

Caught off guard, I flinched, not at the words themselves but at the emotions

that were intertwined in them.

Unlike before, I could feel the emotions she was feeling while she communicated through my mind. I could tell she was uncomfortable and embarrassed, but at the same time excited and anxious. It was odd, experiencing foreign emotions in my mind; it had never felt like this before. At most, Sylvie had been able to send one, extremely strong, emotion to me, like she was telling me how she felt, but it had never been this... intimate, for lack of a better word.

“Sorry,” I said aloud. “I’m still digesting everything right now. What exactly happened?”

“After absorbing the retainer’s mana from the horn you gave me, I was finally able to break the seal that you and grandpa said my mother placed on me to keep me hidden.” The disparity between her childish voice and her words threw me off, but I nodded in understanding.

“So by breaking the seal, you were able to unlock the human form that asuras are able to transform into?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking down at her small hands. “To tell you the truth, I haven’t had the chance to really study the changes in my body, so I can’t tell you exactly what’s happening at this moment but—”

Sylvie abruptly lurched and staggered, nearly falling forward before she regained balance.

“Sylvie? You okay?” I asked, concerned.

Sylvie stood in place for a moment, frozen. I cautiously made my way to her, unable to even fathom what was wrong. Slowly, she looked up at me.

When our eyes locked again this time, however, a chill ran down my spine. Her appearance was the same—nothing had changed—but her presence, her demeanor, her gaze were completely different. So much so that I had involuntarily stepped back from her.

‘Sylvie’ straightened herself, swaying her neck side to side as if she was stretching it.

“Ah, ah,” she said, clearing her throat. “You can hear me, yes?”

I raised a brow, not knowing how to answer.

“I’ll take that gesture as a yes,” she said dismissively.

“Who are you?” I asked, my eyes narrowing.

‘Sylvie’ smirked, an expression that looked unnatural on her face. “I’m grateful you happened to be in the same room when the connection was finally established. It makes things so much easier.”

“Who. Are. You?” I repeated.

Her smirk widened to a grin. “Agrona.”

MAN BEHIND THE VEIL

I COULD FEEL the blood drain from my face, but I held my ground. Despite the casual disclosure, I could tell that Syl—Agrona was carefully observing my reaction. The same two gleaming yellow eyes that had looked so innocent and confused just moments ago were now bright ruby and carried an unwavering confidence and authority—he could’ve just as easily said he was some sort of sentient shapeshifter from a different planet and I would’ve been compelled to believe him.

Giving no indication that his words had any effect on me, I made a simple gesture with my hand, casting multiple spells simultaneously. The door slammed shut and a thick stone slab sprouted up to barricade the entrance; a swirling layer of wind surrounded the two of us, muting any sound that might leak from the room.

“Is Sylvie safe while you’re in control of her body?” I asked.

“Sylvie... a good name.” Agrona breathed as if savoring the sound. “Yes, what I’m using to speak with you like this is a harmless spell that I embedded into her while she was still an egg. Sylvie’s simply sleeping.”

Two stone chairs popped up from the ground and I took a seat, gesturing at Agrona to do the same.

Agrona sat down, leaning back in the seat contentedly. “Thanks for the hospitality, and for keeping your wits together. Communicating is so much easier when you’re not trying to kill me.”

“You’re possessing my bond, so hurting you in this form wouldn’t be very effective,” I replied calmly.

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t have been able to put up much of a fight regardless, since I can’t use any mana arts like this, but I digress. Shall we talk about something a bit more important than the various flaws of this method of communication?”

Seconds ticked by in silence, with only the faint whistle of the field of wind surrounding us while the two of us stared at each other.

My brain whirled with activity, trying to make sense of the sudden change of events while devising a clever way to take full advantage of it. After all, it wasn’t every day you could calmly have a one-on-one meeting with the enemy’s leader in the middle of a war. But whether it was because I was still having a hard time believing all of it or because my worry over Sylvie was constantly nagging at me even with my calm façade, my mind couldn’t keep a coherent train of thought. So I asked the one question that had bugged me ever since he had first taken control of Sylvie.

“You said you were grateful that I happened to be in the same room when you made the connection. Why did you only seek *me* out?”

“Fair question. First reason, and the more obvious one, is that I’m sure most of the members of your leadership wouldn’t take too kindly to me intruding on their home turf in the form of a little girl. Assuming that they even believed me, it would scare the living shit out of them that I could intrude on the most ‘secure’ location on the continent,” he answered. “Although... it would be amusing to see their reaction.”

“And the second reason?”

“Because”—he leaned forward and grinned—“you’re the only one on this continent that I’m interested in.”

I hadn’t expected that answer. What did the leader of a rogue asura clan that was hundreds, if not thousands, of years old find interesting about *me*? Whatever it was, it couldn’t be a good thing.

My expression must've betrayed me because the asura abruptly let out a laugh. "Don't worry, I'm not going to just suddenly pin you to the ground and have my way with you. Even assuming my tastes suddenly skewed that way, it'd still be a little inappropriate in this form, no?"

I rolled my eyes at this supposed mastermind behind the intercontinental war, unable to make heads or tails of his character.

"You're a lot more eccentric than I imagined... almost sociable," I commented.

Agrona raised a brow, amused. "Did you perhaps see me as some poised dictator in a silken cape, hell-bent on making the world all mine?"

"Something like that."

He put on a grave expression as he leaned forward. "Well..."

Agrona flashed a smile. "You're partly right!"

He leaned back again, as if unable to find a comfortable position to sit still in.

"Don't let this pleasant demeanor fool you. I have my goals and ambitions and a face I show my people in public. But as for my personality, after spending generations upon generations amongst you lessers, who seem to change your ethics and social mores on a whim, it's a pain to keep up with appearing dignified and cultured. For instance, even in my continent just a couple hundred years ago, it used to be normal to have public torture and executions—hell, they even brought snacks and watched it as free entertainment. Now? It's somehow become shockingly horrifying to them."

He waved a hand dismissively. "I have my people to handle and run the lessers based on their ever-changing sense of right and wrong."

Wow, he talks a lot. Still, there was a lot of knowledge contained in his little rant. From what I'd seen facing the Alacryan soldiers—and, truthfully, my own prejudice based on the crazy Vritra like Uto and the witch—I had imagined that the enemy continent would be some horrid wasteland full of lessers enslaved to do the Vritra's bidding.

But from what Agrona had just said, Alacrya seemed to be like any normal

developing land, with leaders that actually cared for their citizens.

“That look you have right now.” He pointed a finger at me. “That annoying look of pleasant surprise... you were thinking it’s weird that I actually give a shit about the lessers in Alacrya, huh?”

“Well, from what the asuras told me, you’ve been conducting experiments on the lessers and breeding with them even before you were kicked out of Epheotus,” I remarked.

I expected him to get mad—at least annoyed—but instead his expression turned somber. “The best lie is only telling half the truth, I suppose. Kezess and that lackey of his, Windsom, never told you the reason why I did all this, did they?”

So Lord Indrath’s first name is Kezess, I noted internally before replying. “It was to build an army capable of bringing down the other asuras, no?”

“That’s all they told you?” Agrona rolled his eyes, tapping his fingers impatiently on the chair’s armrest. “Arthur, do you think I one day just woke up wanting to commit genocide against my brethren?”

“Any reason you have isn’t justification for what you’re trying to do,” I stated firmly.

He scoffed. “I should have more or less expected you to have the same mindset as Kezess and the rest of his underlings.”

Annoyed, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Let’s suppose you lived in this continent without being able to use magic; how differently would everyone you know have treated you today? The royal families you know? They wouldn’t bat an eye in your direction. Your peers from Xyrus? You would never have met them—probably would’ve just befriended thugs and farmers from your own social class. Your family? Well, they might be the only ones that love you, but that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t be inwardly disappointed by your lack of talent.”

I raised a brow. “And... this hypothetical person is supposed to relate to you?”

“Basilisks in general were notorious amongst other races, but imagine if your very clansmen and family looked down on you for the miniscule talent that you had no control over. The same *Lord Indrath* who approved of you in that brusque and lofty way of his didn’t even find it worthwhile to breathe in my direction,” Agrona spat, his fingers clawing away at the armrest.

“So you found it justifiable to inhumanely toy with the lives of countless ‘lessers’ in order for you to get stronger?” I shot back.

He tilted his head. “Do you shed tears for the ants you step on?”

Rage smoldered in my stomach, but by his tone and expression, it didn’t seem like he was looking down on me. He truly felt that lessers were like bugs.

“It was naive to think we could have a rational conversation,” I said.

Agrona spread his arms, looking at me with a proud smile. “What I achieved through those experiments has benefited not only myself, but the lessers in Alacrya—to such a degree that they worship me. Not out of fear, but out of reverence. To them, I am their savior.”

“Savior?” I scoffed again. “Did you somehow wipe their memories of killing and torturing your people’s ancestors or something?”

“Killing and torturing... I could taste the bitterness in your words from here, Arthur,” he said, feigning a hurt expression. “Why, I’ve merely *utilized* the many lessers who were available to me in order to strengthen my own kind’s inherent abilities. I’m sure those test subjects are grateful that I made use of them. After all, I’ve accomplished something unimaginable. It is their heirs, the future generations of their families, that now live to reap the reward for their sacrifice.

I wanted to slap the snide look off his face, but this egotistical maniac truly believed that what he was doing was right.

“What have you managed to accomplish for their future generations that is so great it supersedes decades of you conducting experiments on the inhabitants of Alacrya?” I asked, playing along.

“I’ll answer that question with another question,” he gestured. “I know the rough statistic of mages to nonmages in Dicathen is one to one hundred. What do you suppose the statistic is in Alacrya?”

I remained silent.

Agrona smirked. “It’s one in five.”

“One... one in five?” I sputtered.

“Unimaginable by your standards as well, right?” He gave me a wink.

“I’ll admit that what you manage to do is impressive, but aren’t you afraid that with so many of the population being mages, those who still hold a grudge against you will band together and revolt?”

Agrona looked at me for a second in silence before he burst out laughing.

“Oh... you weren’t joking,” he said in between laughs after seeing my expression. “Like I said earlier, my people, whether they have some of my genes or they’re still full blooded lessers, revere me. Because of the structured process of awakening I have devised for them, many of them can utilize magic to improve their mundane lives.”

“You’re telling me that you spent the time and effort to devise this method for what... the actual benefit of Alacryans?” I asked, skeptical. “I’ve heard from the asuras, but since they’re apparently so skewed in their views, I want to hear it from your mouth. What is your goal in all of this?”

“Ooh, is this the part where the villain falls into a monologue and reveals his nefarious plans to the righteous hero?” he replied excitedly, steepling his fingers.

I shook my head. “You’re insane.”

“Insanity is relative,” he said, unwavering. “And as for your question, I have no intention of telling you anything.”

“You said you were interested in me earlier. I assumed it was because you wanted my help, but withholding your goal in all this hardly makes me want to jump over to your side,” I pushed, hoping to get an answer out of him.

Agrona leaned back. “I never expected you to come to my side as a result of

this little conversation. I told you all this because it is my hope that you will remove yourself from the war.”

“What? Why would I—”

Agrona held up a hand. “Before you say no, consider this. Thus far, I’ve been progressing very conservatively in this war—refraining from unnecessary civilian deaths, since I have use for them—but that does not mean it will continue this way.

“You’ve barely managed to cling to your life up until now, but this is just the start. Statistically speaking, how likely is it that your side can win this war—and that your family and other loved ones will be alive after everything?” He paused before speaking again. “You can hide, seek refuge in Alacrya—anything really, just as long you don’t become an opponent to my army. Guarantee that, and I will guarantee that you and your loved ones will be left untouched.”

It would be a lie to say a small part of me wasn’t tempted. “What do you gain from me doing this? Telling me to keep hidden or go to Alacrya obviously means you want me alive. Why? If I’m not on your side, aren’t I a threat?”

“Despite how I may be perceived and what I’ve done to get to where I am today, I don’t believe that allies can be made through force. If I want you on my side, I won’t attempt that by threats.”

We both stayed silent for a bit. He was waiting for me to respond, and I didn’t know how to respond. I wanted to refuse—I should definitely refuse—but for some reason, his words carried a weight that made me truly think.

“It actually seems like you’re thinking about it,” he said. “As a small thank you for that, I’ll divulge a few things that you may or may not have been curious about.” Agrona smoothed out the wrinkles of the black dress Sylvie’s body was wearing. “First. Your parents were attacked not too long ago while transporting supplies to your forces at the Wall, correct?”

I bolted up from my seat, mana coalescing around my entire body.

Still seated, Agrona raised his hands in a placating gesture. His eyes, however, were fierce. “You may not believe me when I say this, but your parents were left untouched because I willed it.”

“Lastly. The asuras have been out of touch with your leaders, right?” He didn’t wait for me to respond. The asura possessing my bond rose to his feet, maintaining his poise. “That’s because a few asuras, including Aldir and Windsom, tried infiltrating my castle in Alacrya, hoping that they’d succeed in killing me while my forces are divided.”

“Tried? That means that they failed,” I replied, my heart beating faster. “Doesn’t that mean the treaty is broken?”

Agrona shook his head. “No. Neither my side nor the asuras in Epheotus wish for it, but they had to pay for violating the treaty. So we made another deal.”

I was afraid to ask, but I did anyway. “What is the deal that you made?”

“The asuras in Epheotus can no longer aid you in any way throughout this war,” he answered, stepping a bit closer. “Windsom, Aldir, and the rest of the asuras that you’ve met have abandoned you and Dicathen.”

It would be tempting to say that I remained unfazed and took the news in stride, but that would be a lie. In my head, I was using every curse I knew to express the frustration and panic that was bubbling up inside me.

Finally, after I regained enough composure to form words again, I spoke. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“To appeal to you, of course. I’m trying to ultimately get you on my side willingly, remember?” Agrona winked. “Frankly, I don’t see where your loyalty to those asuras comes from. Kezess and the other asuras that helped train you did so only for their own gains; you simply went along with it because you needed to get stronger to keep your loved ones safe. Seems more like a business arrangement to me.”

I shook my head. “Even so. You’ve said that you’ve been conservative during this war, but while you come off as well-mannered so far, your retainers have massacred soldiers with glee.”

“Exactly as you said. Soldiers,” Agrona pointed out, snapping his fingers. “And really... I think it’s hardly fair to bring that up when your side has treated my men with just about the same amount of hospitality. I’d say freezing my poor Jagrette and displaying her corpse like some sort of trophy in front of your nobles is hardly any better than what she or any of my other soldiers have done.”

I was at a loss for words. I shouldn’t have been surprised that Agrona had such detailed information, but hearing him speak of events that had happened in the castle, like he had been there to witness it, was difficult to digest. Clearly he was much better informed about our actions than we were about his.

Silence enveloped the room, bringing my attention to the sound of the wind whistling around us.

“What we’ve discussed today isn’t something you can organize in a span of a few minutes. I’ll give you some time to think about everything,” he finally said, breaking the silence. “Besides, Sylvie seems to be stirring from her sleep. After you’ve thought about it, recite this spell to Sylvie so you can give me your answer.”

He sent a string of foreign words through mental transmission, allowing me time to remember it. Then he continued, “I advise you to make a choice soon, though. As I said earlier, we’re progressing to the next stage of this war, and I assure you it won’t be to your side’s benefit. Offering you this deal does not grant you immunity from harm should you refuse or withhold your answer.”

“Wait,” I called out. “What you told me earlier... that I was the only one on this continent you’re interested in. You never told me why that is.”

“I suppose it does no harm in telling you.” Agrona tapped his chin with a finger, thinking for a moment. “Let’s say I’ve enjoyed talking with an old friend of yours, King Grey.”