



THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

BOOK 7: DIVERGENCE

TURTLEME

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195

NEXT STAGE

STEFFAN VALE

"Oh Great Vritra," I muttered under my breath as one of the Shields lost his footing and was nearly trampled by the herd of mana beasts.

"Shields, keep up those defensive panels! Don't let any of the beasts stray from the pack," I barked. With the Shields properly chastised, I looked back down at the mysterious black ore in my hand. I had been ordered to crush it once the beasts had been successfully relocated to the Elshire Forest.

I watched as hundreds of corrupted mana beasts were herded between tall translucent panels, which had been conjured by the Shields. It was a peculiar sight. Monsters that would normally avoid each other—or attack one another—shuffled along in a stupor. Spiders large as hounds, immense wolves with ridges of dark bone jutting from their hides, and even serpents with heads on both ends—all manner of creatures "marched" together, unaware of anything but the unfightable urge to move, one sluggish step after another. Several unads—non-mages—served to protect each of the Shields just in case any of the beasts broke free.

Even unads have their uses. Better one of them dies than a mage.

My gaze swept over the unads, encased in iron and wielding weapons of steel —which they couldn't even strengthen. *Pitiful*.

I turned to the Sentry assigned to my force, Ashton, a lanky man with bangs that covered his eyes. "Can you get a read inside the forest?"

He put his palms to the ground, concentrating. "My range is cut to about a fourth inside there."

"Looks like you'll have to go in with us."

He stepped away from me, his eyes wide. "What? That's not what—"

Before he could say more, I grabbed the Sentry by the throat and pulled him toward me until we were eye to eye. "Look. I don't care that you Sentries think you're special because of your voyeuristic tricks. You'll be with my personal Shield and Caster, as safe as I can make you—safer than you'll be if you keep talking."

The boy gripped my forearm with trembling hands and let out a choked grunt that I assumed mean "Yes sir."

Merciful Vritra, he's not going to make it far as a soldier if he's scared to go anywhere near a battle.

"You'll be *fine*," I said, releasing him. "Now form the mental link with me, and only me. Something tells me you're not very good at multitasking."

The Sentry nodded, placing two fingers on my temple and closing his eyes in concentration.

'C-can you hear me?' a familiar voice rang directly in my head.

How is it that you stutter even inside your own head, I thought.

'I can only do one-way transmission of mental communication. I won't be able to hear back from you.'

"Okay," I said aloud, rolling my eyes. Though I wasn't impressed with the boy's skill, his presence meant that my Shield and Caster wouldn't have to stay so close to me and could rely on feedback from the Sentry.

Turning my attention back to the task at hand, I watched as more and more of the corrupted beasts disappeared into the thick, hazy forest—home to the elves in Dicathen. As soon as the last of the monsters, which we'd herded out of the northern Beast Glades, were deep inside the dense array of trees, I held up the black ore.

"Unads—nonmages—front line positions with weapons ready. Strikers—

behind them with your Shields and Casters close. Prepare to charge on my signal!" Several teams of mages had been on standby, watching the Shields shepherd the mana beasts into the misty trees, but they burst into action at my order, taking up their places along the edge of the forest.

Once confident that each team was in place, I crushed the black ore in my fist, releasing control of the horde of creatures. Vicious growls, snarls, and roars could be heard from within the forest as the mana beasts woke from their sedation.

Several unads carrying supplies began handing out vials of rancid liquid for the soldiers to spray on their clothes. Expensive and temporary, but it would prevent the corrupted beasts from attacking us.

Once this task was complete, a tense silence fell over the company as everyone waited for my signal. I flexed my hands, eager to finally see some action and to utilize my newly unlocked crest. Not even a season had passed since I had trained my initial mark to form my crest—truly praiseworthy for an Alacryan who had just turned eighteen—yet I found myself thirsting for more. Just like my father, I wanted to be granted the privilege of entering the Obsidian Vault and, if I proved strong enough, acquire an emblem.

I looked forward to returning to Alacrya. I knew my father would survive the trials of the Obsidian Vault, and I wanted nothing more than to see what sort of emblem he would claim from within.

Perhaps he'll be blessed with a legendary regalia! If so, the House of Vale will soar within all of Vechor, perhaps even within all of Alacrya.

Yet I knew that my father wasn't capable of claiming a regalia; he was only a mid-tier mage, even considering the relatively young age at which he attempted the Vault. Already I knew myself to be his match in power, though he was twice my age. While I respected his strength and talent, he was just a Shield, whereas I—

A loud crash resounded in the distance. With my basic senses enhanced by my crest, I was able to hear faint yells. An elven patrol must have found our beasts.

Glancing behind me to make sure that the signaling artifact, which would guide us back out of the forest, was in its proper place, I steeled myself.

"Charge!" I roared, tapping into the power of my crest to sheath my entire body in protective mana.

The non-mages surged ahead in a cacophony of war-cries and clanging iron, no doubt or reluctance in the face of death. Behind them, the mages strode forth with a steady confidence, some chanting, others stone-faced and watchful.

I was certain that it was my own bolstering presence that filled these troops with confidence—confidence that stemmed from both my strength and mentality. It didn't matter if the Dicathians had strange, versatile magic; for me, this mission was simply an opportunity to succeed and to receive more accolades—achievements to further my blood waiting for me in Alacrya.

I weaved through the maze of trees, unable to even see my own feet because of the dense fog. However, it was easy to spot the battle between the elves and the corrupted mana beasts we had let loose on their land.

Though outnumbered, the elves were holding their own against the rabid beasts. Glowing arrows—shot with astonishing accuracy—fell beast after beast, small and large. The forest itself seemed to come alive to trap and choke several of the larger monsters.

Nearby, an older elf caught my eye. She had no weapons, but she conjured deadly blades of wind that sliced through several beasts at once.

She was my target.

"Seren, focus shields on me and stay at a distance with Mari. Ashton, stick close to them and relay my position in case I'm in danger," I ordered, picking up my pace. Polygonal panels of mana hovered around me to defend against any projectiles, while a faint hum sounded from behind me as Mari began charging her magic.

I channeled mana through my crest and unsheathed my sword, which had

been strengthened by a powerful instiller. The blade ignited with a jagged fire that tore and seared rather than burned.

Mana continued to circulate through my crest and out to the rest of my body, strengthening my limbs. Power rushed through me as I dashed forward into the thick of the battle like a true Striker, my sword blazing like a beacon to my troops.

The first elf in my path, a lean young mage with short hair and stern brows, turned to me, eyes widening. His mouth moved and wind began gathering around his dual daggers, but it was too late. My sword smashed through his parry and I felt it strike a layer of mana before carving into his flesh. Surprise and pain flashed across his face, then he collapsed at my feet.

So even a weak mage like this is able to protect himself with mana. How odd. These Dicathian mages, while versatile, are just as slow as I'd heard though. Primitive fools.

Around me, many other mages had already engaged with the enemy elves. The tide was rapidly turning in our favor. My soldiers drew the elves' attention, allowing the mana beasts to run amuck. The corrupted beasts were deadly in that they didn't care for their own safety and viciously attacked anything in their way.

As I neared the elf using wind-blade magic, Ashton's voice rang once more in my head.

'Her mana readings are a bit different, b-but she should be around the lower end of a mid-tier mage. Your Caster is readying her spell to single-target. Proceed with caution, and I'll let you know when to get out of the way.'

So this is what it's like to have a Sentry—even a half-baked one—accessible. No wonder they're considered valuable despite not having a single form of offensive or defensive magic.

When I had unlocked my mark after the awakening ceremony, the fire magic it granted me allowed my flames to take on a jagged nature that tore at anything in its path—a rare, upper mid-tier mark. However, after I had

mastered that magic to the point that I could evolve it to a crest, I was able to utilize it in a whole new way.

Slowing to a cautious walk, I sheathed my sword and circulated more mana through my crest. My body erupted, shrouding me in an armor of fire and releasing four floating sickles of jagged flame. They orbited around me, ready to strike with only a thought. It was a powerful ability, but it required that I concentrate entirely on controlling the fiery sickles.

My target let loose another blade of wind, killing two more beasts before turning her full attention on me.

'S-Shield prepared to guard the attack."

Unlike the dagger-wielding elf I had just killed, her mouth didn't move when she cast her spell, letting loose a blade of wind meant to cut me in two.

I sprinted forward, my movement empowered by the flames enveloping my body. Two polygonal shields were layered in front of me, prepared to take on the wind blade. The first panel broke upon impact and the second cracked, but the spell was dispersed.

Just as I was able to get in range to send my sickles out, I heard the Sentry's voice in my mind.

'Duck!'

Without hesitation, I dropped to the ground. Although the sudden movement broke my concentration on controlling the flying sickles of flame, I avoided the mana-clad arrow that sizzled through the air. The arrow crackled like a bolt of lightning overhead—I knew that relying on the shield was a risk better not taken.

I need to end this fast. I can't waste too much mana on just a single enemy; there are many yet to come.

The drawback of using the full form of my crest was the amount of mana required to keep it up. Each of the four sickles also cost mana to maintain; something I would need to improve upon if I ever wanted to be able to control more orbiting flame-sickles.

Pushing off with both my hands and feet, I dashed toward the elf, who was just about to release another blade.

One sickle arced down toward her clasped hands, but despite the speed of my blitz, she was able to dodge, withdrawing her hands and allowing the blade to flash harmlessly past. The momentary distraction allowed me time to slam a burning fist into her breastplate, shattering it and sending her flying backwards into a tree.

Releasing my flame-clad form to save mana, I drew my blade to end the elf. I nearly dropped the sword, though, as a terrifying presence gripped at my very soul.

'S-S-Steffen. G-get out of there. Now!'

I wanted to—I wanted nothing more than to escape, to flee like a rabbit that smells a fox, but I found myself on my knees, clawing at my chest, unable to breathe.

What in Great Vritra's name is this suffocating presence?

I tried to crawl away; it was all I could manage. I cared not to save face in front of my soldiers. If I didn't get out of there, I knew I wouldn't live to feel ashamed.

That was when he landed in front of me. His striking blue eyes, which radiated power, gazed down at me in annoyance.

I was the son of Karnal Vale, heir to the House of Vale! Yet in front of this boy, who appeared no older than me, I was nothing—not a warrior, not a leader, not a mage. Nothing.

My body trembled and convulsed as a palpable *power* radiated from him, crushing me to the ground with the weight of a mountain.

Distantly, I heard a slight hum, then a beam of pure frost bombarded the boy. I flinched and rolled away, avoiding the icy nova that exploded around him. A fleeting sense of hope allowed me to get back on my feet as I tried to run away, but I didn't even get two steps before a searing pain radiated from my right arm and the ground slid out from under me.

I toppled forward, unable to brace my fall. My right side had gone suddenly numb; it was with vague detachment that I saw my arm was gone, severed by a spell. Blood pooled crimson below me, soaking my uniform and the ground alike. Fighting through the haze of shock and disbelief, I used my left arm to try and crawl again, unable to get up. Feeling the wild tinge of desperation seeping through the shock, I looked around hopefully for my teammates, only to find Seren, Mari, and Ashton fleeing.

My vision dimmed as I found myself eye-level with grasping roots sprouting from the ground. *It wasn't supposed to be like this*.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I surveyed my surroundings. The once lush, green forest was stained with blood and littered with corpses. Even the thick fog did little to cover up the aftermath of the battle.

"Thank you, General Arthur, for your aid." The female elf's voice was hoarse with pain, and she winced as she attempted to bow.

My eyes lingered on the corpses; too many were elven soldiers who had died trying to protect their home. "I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner. This could've all been avoided had I arrived before the beasts were herded into the forest."

The elf shook her head. "Please don't apologize. The outcome of this battle would've been very different had you not come at all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to gather my men."

With a weary smile and a nod, the elf limped away, occasionally bending down over a prone form to check for signs of life. Other elves, those still capable of movement, gathered to her, each one wearing the same sad, stoic expression.

Is this what Agrona meant when he said the war is progressing to the next stage?

This marked the first assault on Elven territory, and even if this particular strike had been beaten back, it had done its job.

Until now, Sapin had taken the brunt of the attacks, which had made it easy to allocate resources to a central place. Now, though, our enemies were striking Elenoir as well. How would the Council choose to handle this?

I'll have to check up on General Aya to see if she needs help, I thought. A weak moan drew my attention to the Alacryan at my feet, who I had managed to keep alive. I had severed his dominant arm but otherwise kept him able; the healthier he was to start, the longer he'd last during the information extraction.

"You—soldier carrying the weapons," I called out to a nearby elf who had been assigned to collect his fallen comrades' belongings.

The young elf looked down at the weapons in his arms before realizing that he was the one being called to. "Y-yes, General Arthur?"

I pointed down to the Alacryan on the ground. "Bring this one to the camp and wrap up his wounds so he doesn't bleed out."

A look of disdain passed across the elf's face, but he quickly hid it and dipped his head in understanding.

"Oh, and make sure he doesn't kill himself before I interrogate him," I added as the elf dragged the wounded enemy roughly over his shoulder.

"Yes sir!" he said with renewed vigor, knowing that his enemy's fate would perhaps be even worse than death.

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QUESTIONING

I SANK down on a bed of thick moss and leaned back against a tree. I pulled out my waterskin and took a long draft, letting the cold water rest in my mouth before I gulped it down.

There was a faint glow now as the sun rose. Looking upward to the dense canopy, I could see specks of orange peeking through the lush green to provide a little warmth in the damp and cold forest.

I let my mind wander; I was not ready to think on the task ahead. As it had regularly for the last few days, my conversation with Agrona played in my head. I had decided simply to ignore Agrona's promise of safety for my family if I recused myself from the battle, telling no one but Sylvie. I didn't, however, explain to my bond that she could be used as a mouthpiece for the enemy at a moment's notice.

I also hadn't mentioned Agrona's appearance to the Council—not even Virion. Though Agrona had claimed that he couldn't utilize Sylvie's mana, I didn't want the others to panic and lock her in a cell. I still wasn't sure if hiding it was right, but I could only hope that a solution would present itself eventually. I had told Sylvie only that Agrona had contacted me, not how. I thought of the conversation too often to hide it from her entirely, and sharing my thoughts with her had eased my mind.

Still, despite the weight of that conversation, things seemed to be getting better.

My core had advanced to white, and every moment my body continued to acclimate to the change, I felt stronger. The scars around on my neck and wrist hadn't disappeared but had faded significantly. My legs, which had endured several substantial injuries, felt more stable than before.

I knew that my body hadn't physically changed, but using organic magic, magic that didn't have a set purpose predisposed by gestures or chants, had become infinitely more natural—and with it, provided a method for me to grow even stronger. This also allowed me to increase control over Static Void and the phases of my dragon's will. Though Lady Myre had made it clear I would never be able to control aether like the asuras could, even I still didn't know how far I could progress.

I still couldn't use any sequence of Mirage Walk, including Burst Step, without causing irreparable damage to my lower body, though.

Sylvie's body, unlike mine, had changed significantly. While she looked just a little younger than my sister in her new human form, she had the coordination of a toddler.

Her frustration was visible; she frequently tripped over her own feet or lost balance for no apparent reason while standing still. She had a particularly difficult time learning to use her newly-acquired thumbs. Many plates and bowls had to be replaced due to her clumsy efforts to use these new human appendages.

I let out a chuckle, still clearly able to picture everyone's faces when they saw Sylvie in her human form for the first time. Everyone had taken it a different way.

Kathyln's eyes had widened as she bolted away from my door, repeatedly apologizing for the intrusion, then leaving before I could explain. Hester, unable to suppress an amused grin, simply waved to me before following her ward back down the hall.

My sister had pointed at me with a trembled finger and asked when Tessia and I had a child together. When I thought about it, Sylvie did have glossy,

wheat-colored hair that might have resulted from a shade of brown mixing with gunmetal silver, but I responded like any older brother would: I smacked the back of Ellie's head and asked her how Sylvie could be my child if she looked only a few years younger than Ellie. At the mention of Sylvie's name, my sister turned ecstatic, immediately taking the stumbling Sylvie under her wing as a sort of protégée.

Virion's reaction had been relatively muted; he seemed to have sensed this little girl was Sylvie the moment he walked into the room. We had spent several minutes exchanging questions and answers, he had teased me about being a father at such a young age, however would I handle the responsibility and so on, then had left with a bow to Sylvie.

Emily had been fascinated and had immediately started brainstorming ideas on how to measure Sylvie's strength, to test her abilities, and to create a grading system that would allow comparison of human versus asuran magical potency. Sylvie and I only escaped the encounter by promising to let Emily come by our room and observe Sylvie's learning behavior on occasion.

I decided then that I really needed to introduce Emily to some of the castle's young noblemen...

Squeezing my eyes shut, I let out a deep breath. I had left Sylvie behind; she was still getting used to the changes to her body now that the seal her mother had placed on her was broken. Although I felt isolated here, despite the constant activity around me as the elven forces dealt with the aftermath of the recent battle, I knew I had made the right decision.

I didn't want her—I didn't want anyone I knew—to see what I was about to do to the Alacryan boy I had kept alive.

I just hope that things are better on General Aya's side, I thought.

Aya and I had been ordered to confirm news of the Alacryan assault on Elenoir and aid in the defense against the attacks if necessary. News of the battle would already have been communicated back to Virion, and I knew that, at that very moment, the Council chambers must be in chaos as they fought over proper redistribution of soldiers and mages to protect not only Sapin, but now Elenoir as well.

"General Arthur!" a familiar voice called out from a distance, coaxing my eyes open.

It was the elf I had ordered to carry the Alacryan back to camp. He ran toward me deftly, never missing a footing despite the unevenness of the ground. "The Alacryan has awoken!"

I rose to my feet, patting the dirt off of my clothes. In preparation for what was to come, I reached out for the emptiness that would help me interrogate the enemy without remorse or sympathy, all the while trying to bury the memory of my past when the situation was reversed.

"Strip the prisoner and remove everyone else from the room."

The encampment of elven troops was in the middle of a small clearing that seemed unnatural, just a few hundred yards north of the battle—or so I thought. My senses, even at the white core stage, weren't fully accustomed to the direction-disturbing effects of the Elshire Forest.

By the holes in the ground, which had been packed with fresh dirt, and the unusually dense trees just outside the camp, I assumed the elves had a mage with strong wood affinity to manipulate the trees. Elven soldiers rushed about between tents made of thick fabric, which filled the clearing.

A few bowed as they passed, while others glanced warily in my direction.

The elf pointed ahead. "This way, General. The Alacryan is in the tent at the rear. Our head is waiting just outside."

The "tent" was actually a large canopy made up of twisted roots and branches with a thick cloth draped over it. A swirling dome of wind covered the wooden tent, causing the cloth to sway and ripple. Waiting outside, her attention on the entrance of the tent, arms out and mana continually circulating inside her, was the same armored woman who I had saved from the prisoner himself.

As she noticed us approach, she visibly relaxed and held out a hand. "I forgot to introduce myself earlier. My name is Lenna Aemaris, head of the southeastern unit in Elenoir."

"Arthur Leywin." I shook her hand before turning to the tent. "He's able to talk?"

Lenna's face contorted in disgust. "He's been screaming and yelling since waking up, which is why I had to put up a wind barrier. It'll also give you some privacy," she added knowingly.

"Thank you." I took a calm breath, dissociating myself from the events about to unfold as I walked through the sound protecting barrier without disrupting the spell—a feat that was much harder than it appeared. I couldn't think of myself as Arthur; I was an interrogator, and I had a job to do.

Once inside the barrier, my ears were filled with the sound of an angry boy shouting idle threats.

"My arm! Where's my arm? If you primitive beasts know what's good for you, you'll untie me. I am of blood Vale, a distinguished family of the—"

My hand cracked across his face, snapping it back with the force of the blow.

The boy looked at me, stunned. "Y-you—you slapped me! What's your name? I'll have you—"

His head rocked as I slapped him once more. When he'd recovered, I bent forward to lock eyes with the boy. "I don't think you truly understand the gravity of the situation you are in, so allow me to enlighten you."

My fingers crackled with wire-thin tendrils of electricity as I grabbed him by the forehead and squeezed down on his temples. The boy's body immediately spasmed as I continued to take advantage of my organic mana.

"Un...h-hand me! Wh-what are you d-d-doing?" the boy cried out.

I continued imbuing carefully strewn lightning mana into his brain and down his nerves for the next few minutes until it finally worked.

A mind-numbing scream tore out from the boy's throat as he flailed madly in his seat. "Burns! I-it burns!"

"Of course it does," I replied flatly. "Your nerve-endings are a little confused right now, making it feel as if you're in a fire."

I could see the whites of his eyes as he screamed. Foaming at the mouth, the boy continued to thrash, desperately trying to put out a fire that wasn't there.

After a few minutes had passed, I gripped his head once more and relieved him from the pain.

"Pl-please. Why are you doing this? What do you want? I'll give you anything," he muttered in between sobs as his entire body trembled in shock.

"Your name," I demanded without emotion.

"Why do you need to know—" the boy let out a shrill cry at the mere sight of me lifting my hand. "Steffan! Steffan Vale. Please... no more."

"Steffan. Just looking at you, I know your family—or blood, as you call it—is distinguished, meaning you are as well. Unlike the other soldiers we've captured so far, you've made no attempts to kill yourself—and wish dearly to live. Am I correct so far?"

"Yes!" he blurted out, clearly eager to avoid any more pain.

I chose my next words carefully before speaking. "I won't kill you if you cooperate. In what condition you make it back home, however, will depend on how helpful you are and how honestly you answer my questions. Do you understand?"

He nodded fiercely.

"A few of your troops have survived and managed to escape, but I strongly advise you rid yourself of the hope that any force they can muster up and bring back here will be strong enough to aid you."

In my time as a silver and then white core mage, I had grown used to restraining my full power, as the aura of a white core mage could be crippling to those around them. Now, though, I needed this Steffan to understand his situation, to really believe what I was telling him, so I let go my restraint.

The thick roots and branches making up the tent cracked and snapped under the full weight of a white core mage letting loose. The ground splintered as rubble shook below our feet.

As for Steffan, he was having a hard time breathing, even with the meager amounts of mana cycling throughout his body. His bloodshot eyes bulged and his mouth gaped like a fish out of water, and an acrid stench drifted up from the wet spot between his legs. I withdrew my mana.

"I-I... under—understand," he stammered.

"Good," I said, taking a step back. I thought of going straight to the more pressing questions, but I wanted to see if he was actually telling the truth.

"List all of the members of the Vale house and your relationship to them."

The boy looked fearful for a second, perhaps thinking that I would use the information to kill off his entire house, but he didn't have the strength to refuse. Steffan rattled off a list of names that had no meaning to me until one name came up that I could verify. "... Izora Vale, my mother. Karnal Vale, my father. Lucia Vale, my sister."

I put up a hand to stop him.

"What is the awakening process?"

"The awakening is the ceremony that unlocks for children their first mark so that they can become a mage," Steffan answered, his voice hoarse.

"What is the difference between a crest and a mark?" I asked, remembering the terms from my glimpse into Uto's memories through his horn.

The boy recited his reply like he'd memorized it out of a textbook. "A crest is stronger. It symbolizes a greater understanding of the specified route of magic that the mark enables the mage to utilize..."

My curiosity was beginning to win me over; I wanted to learn more about Alacryan magic, but I could tell he was starting to withdraw. I knew it would be a lot harder to get him motivated to answer my questions the longer it went, and without an emitter to keep him alive, losing him was a risk I couldn't take now.

Again, I chose the words very carefully for my next question. I wanted Steffan to think he was confirming what I already knew. That was the best

way to get truthful answers out of him.

- "What stage is above marks and crests?" I asked, gripping his leg in warning as his eyes began to shut.
- "A-after crests are emblems, and then regalias," he said hurriedly.
- "How strong are mages with regalias compared to retainers?"
- "I don't know! My family's highest power is my grandfather, and he's only an emblem mage—I swear on the name of Vritra!"
- "Swear on the name of Vritra," I echoed distastefully. I'd heard a saying similar inside the cavern in Darv. It seemed the Vritra were considered almost like gods in Alacrya.
- "Do you know how many emblem- and regalia-holders are on Dicathen currently?"

He shook his head. "My commander is an emblem mage, but I know that he answers to a regalia-holder. I don't know the exact numbers."

I let out a sigh. This boy was too low in the rankings to be of any real use. From the sound of it, the House of Vale that he so proudly proclaimed to be a member of wasn't even very high up in Alacrya.

Finally, I asked a few questions pertaining specifically to the orders he had received. As I had feared, this had not been the only attack targeting the Elshire Forest. Several other troops were headed north, intending to strike while the elven forces were still recovering and before further reinforcements could be sent from Sapin.

"Please... let me go now. You promised. I answered every one of your questions truthfully!" The boy's shoulders sagged; the stump that used to be his right arm was bleeding through the bandages.

"Like I said, I won't kill you." With those last words, I left the tent.

Outside, waves of elven soldiers were arriving at the camp, some carrying bloodied allies, while others moved what was left of their comrades' corpses.

I stepped up next to Lenna Aemaris. She flinched when our eyes met, but she remained silent, waiting for my orders.

My gaze remained cold; I didn't want even a shred of emotion to get in my way as I spoke.

"I'm done. Feel free to dispose of the Alacryan however you see fit."

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TORN

MY EYES SNAPPED open from a sharp sting on my cheek, only to see a blinding light aimed straight at my face.

Immediately, my heart started to pound as my mind scrambled to make sense of what was going on. I tried to stand, but both my hands and feet were bound to the chair I was sitting on.

"Grey. Can you hear me?" a dark silhouette asked from behind the fluorescent light.

"Where am I? Who are you?" I groaned, my throat dry and burning.

"What is the last thing you remember?" said another voice, ignoring my questions. I saw a second, larger, figure standing next to the first, but I couldn't make out any other details aside from that.

My head throbbed as I tried to recall the memories, but eventually I was able to sort them out. "I... I had just won the tournament."

I was slowly adjusting to the light, able to make out more details of the room I was in and the figures standing in front of me.

"What else?" the thinner man said calmly.

"I accepted an offer to be mentored by a powerful person," I let out, hoping my ambiguity would go unnoticed.

"What is the name of this powerful woman and what is the nature of your relationship?" the man asked. The fact that he already knew she was a woman made me think that this was some kind of test, and that he likely already

knew the answer.

I pulled at what felt like a thick metal wire tied around my wrists. Seeing as even my strength reinforced with ki did nothing, I had no choice but to answer. "I only know her as Lady Vera, and I just met her."

"Lies," the larger man, who I now could see had long slicked-back hair, hissed. He raised a hand as if to strike me, but the thinner man stopped him.

"What happened after you won the tournament, Grey?" he then asked, his voice emotionless.

I grimaced, trying to remember with some difficulty. "I think I headed back to my dorm room, right after."

Lady Vera had said that she'd contact me once things settled down, but I wasn't going to give these men more information than they asked for.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when a massive hand wrapped around my neck and lifted me—and the chair—off the ground.

"Again, *lies!*" he said, his face now close enough to mine to make me gag on his fetid breath. He had scars all across his face, making his already-intimidating features even more frightening. "It'd be wise to just tell us which organization sent you to protect the legacy."

Organization? Legacy?

I couldn't make sense of their accusations, but with my throat crushed in the man's grasp, all I could do was flail and choke until his thinner companion smacked away the hand that was holding me.

Weighed down by the chair I had been tied to, I fell helplessly to the ground, my head snapping back into the hard floor with such force that I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I had been put back upright, face-to-face with the thinner man, who somehow scared me more than the large, scarred abomination.

He had short-cropped hair and the hollow eyes of a dead fish, which remained locked on mine as he forced his stiff lips into an awkward, mannequin-like smile.

"Strip him while I get the white phosphorus," he said, turning abruptly and walking away.

The larger man sneered as he tore off the old shirt I had worn to bed and the goose-print pajama pants that Headmaster Wilbeck had gotten me as a joke for my birthday.

"I believe you have some information that we need. Fortunately for you, this means that we need you alive—for now." The thinner man came back, wearing gloves. In his hands was a small metal tube. "If you're truly who we suspect you are, then you might have prepared for this. If, by some wild chance, we've made an error and everything that we considered as evidence was simply coincidence, then... well... this will be an incredibly uncomfortable experience for you."

"What? What are you talking about?" I said, still bleary from the recent head trauma.

"This will be easy." The thin man smiled as he dipped a gloved finger into the metal tube. "I won't even ask you any questions yet."

He smeared a line of shiny silver paste just below my ribs, then brought out a lighter.

"W-wait. What are you doing? Please," I begged, still unable to fully process what was happening to me.

The man didn't talk. He just lowered the small flame onto the silver paste. As soon as the fire touched the substance, a pain that I didn't even know existed erupted in my flesh.

A scream tore free from my throat as my body convulsed from the searing torment. I had been burned before, but those injuries seemed like a warm breeze compared to the sensation eating away at my skin right now

It went on for what seemed like hours, and the pain somehow continued to grow worse. My screams turned hoarse and the tears that flooded down my face had run dry.

Finally, the pain began to subside, only for the thin man—the demon—to

apply another line of the silver paste on a different part of my body.

"P-please," I wept. "Don't do this."

The man silently lit another hellish fire on my body.

I screamed, and when my voice gave out, my mind screamed on.

Every part of my body spasmed and twitched, my muscles and nerves unable to process the input they were receiving.

My thoughts turned from the question of whether I was about to die to the hope that I would die soon, if only to relieve the pain.

I couldn't tell how many times the demon stood before me holding that wretched silver paste of his, but this time he didn't immediately smear my body with the paste again. My wide, wild eyes met his dispassionate gaze.

I jumped at this chance. If it meant that I would be free of the pain, I would do anything.

"I-I'll tell you whatever you want. Anything. *Everything!*" I pleaded, my voice barely a whisper.

"That's better," he said, his face again twisting into an awful imitation of a smile.

"Now, I'm going to tell you a little story and you're going to help fill in the gaps for me. Any attempts at lying or withholding any truths will unfortunately lead me to put this in places more... sensitive. Am I clear?" The thin demon held up the container of white phosphorus and waved it in front of me.

Without even the necessary saliva to swallow, I simply nodded.

"Your name is Grey, with background checks confirming you to be an orphan. One Headmaster Olivia Wilbeck had overseen your care since infancy, and the orphanage was what you considered home. Am I on track so far, Grey?"

I nodded again.

"Bring the boy a glass of water," the thin man replied, seemingly pleased by my obedience.

The larger companion held a dirty cup against my mouth. The water tasted as if they'd wrung it from a wet dog, but it still felt blissfully cool against my parched mouth and throat.

The bulky man pulled the cup away after only a moment, allowing me no more than a couple of mouthfuls. I craned my neck toward the cup, but my efforts only made his scarred face crease into a sadistic grin.

"Moving on—and this was where I was hoping you'd start filling in the gaps..." he said as if I had a choice. "What military institution trained you to be the legacy's protector, because there wasn't anything in the official records."

I furrowed my brows, confused. "I've only barely finished my second year at Wittholm Military Academy. I've had no previous training."

"So you're telling me that you managed to defeat two skilled ki combatants without prior training?" the thin man asked, his voice getting dangerously low.

"I had help from my friends, but yes," I said, mustering up as much confidence as I could.

"And so you're telling me Olivia Wilbeck, that calculating shrew, allowed the legacy to simply walk out in public with two ordinary children?"

"What is this legacy you keep mentioning? I've never heard of this thing in my life!" I pleaded.

The thin man regarded me silently for a moment. "There are just two things I really want to know, Grey: What organization sent you to protect the legacy, and to what extent is the country of Trayden providing assistance to you and the legacy by publicly announcing Lady Vera as your *mentor*?"

My mind spun, empty of answers. I had no idea what organization he was talking about or what the country of Trayden had to do with whatever "the legacy" was.

Before I could croak out some kind of answer, the man let out a heavy sigh. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as he walked toward me. "I really hoped you'd stay true to your word and cooperate. When you hesitate like this, I can only assume you're trying to make up an answer."

He dipped his gloved fingers in the tube and smeared a line of the silver paste on the inside of my left thigh.

"P-please. I don't know," I pleaded, fresh tears rolling down my cheeks once more. "I don't know!"

Hellfire ignited on the soft flesh of my thighs, the heat reaching up to my crotch, making my stomach roil and my head swim.

I couldn't tell if I was screaming after a while. My ears seemed to have stopped working. I thought the pain was unbearable, but no matter how badly I wanted to lose consciousness, I stayed awake, feeling every torturous moment tick past.

But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst moments were those when the thin demon would wordlessly ignite another part of my body.

Every time he walked toward me, I was both afraid and hopeful—afraid that he'd induce more pain, but hopeful that this would be the time that he'd finally talk again, allowing me a reprieve from this hell.

Time seemed so foreign. I couldn't tell whether it was going by fast or slow inside that dark, windowless room. The bright light aimed constantly at my face prevented me from making out details of the room. No distraction to help me ease the pain.

What snapped me out of my stupor was the sound of footsteps approaching me. I readied myself to plead, to beg, but I slowly realized a third person had come into the room.

"What the—"

The large man slumped after taking a quick strike from the newcomer.

The thin demon lashed out with an unseen weapon but was suddenly sent flying.

The third figure walked toward me, turning off the light.

White splotches obscured my vision, and I blinked until my eyes were able to

adjust.

"You're safe now, kid," the figure said, kneeling down.

It was Lady Vera.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

The wind tore past me in gales as I flew above the clouds. Reaching white core had come with an abundance of perks and manipulating ambient mana effectively enough to take flight was one of them. Had I tried to do something like that while still in silver, I would've drained my own core minutes into a journey.

Now, I was filled with the surreal feeling of the mana around me lifting me up into the sky. Still, while the sensation was exhilarating, my head swam with thoughts from last night's dream.

I assumed that interrogating the Alacryan was what brought out that unwanted memory, but with how frequently I'd been having these detailed memories of my former life, I couldn't help but grow worried and frustrated. Regardless, I had made a vow when I was born into this world that I wouldn't live a life like my previous one. Until I could get a better explanation of why these memories were coming back, I decided to just consider them reminders of my past failures.

Besides, it wasn't like I could see a therapist here.

I mustered a smile at the thought of myself lying on a couch, talking about my problems to a professional with a clipboard. Then I looked back toward Elshire Forest, and my smile faded. A twinge of guilt bubbled up from my stomach for leaving them so hastily.

Lenna and her soldiers are better off with General Aya, since she can actually navigate within the forest, I reassured myself. After meeting up with the elven Lance, we exchanged our findings in-depth. We had decided that I was to report back to the castle while she remained as support until further orders from the Council.

We hadn't decided that I couldn't make a slight detour before reporting back

to the castle, which is exactly what I was doing. I did send a brief report via a transmission scroll that Lenna had on hand to inform Virion of my plans, however.

The transmission scroll will give them enough to work off of and the information I learned from the Alacryan will be more useful here, I thought as I stared at the snow-capped peaks of the Grand Mountains jutting out of the clouds.

Even that high up, I could hear the distant echoes of battle raging beneath. Muffled explosions, the hum of magic, and the faint cries of various indistinguishable beasts resounded off the mountains, muddled by the screams and yells of the people fighting and dying.

I was nervous, although I couldn't pinpoint why. The Lances rarely came to the Wall because there had yet to be any sightings of the retainers or Scythes. The day-to-day battles at the Wall were fought by mages and soldiers against corrupted beasts that mindlessly tried to charge through and break the defensive line.

I'd read many reports coming from the Wall and even made some changes to their fighting structure. Yet, this would be the first time I'd been there in person, even though the battles here happened almost daily. Below me, the war had made seasoned soldiers out of many new recruits who were still wet behind the ears—if they survived.

More importantly, this was where Tess and her unit were stationed. They were part of the assault division responsible for infiltrating dungeons, exterminating the corrupted beasts, and disabling any teleportation gates they could find. For each gate they located, thousands of Alacryan troops could be prevented from teleporting to Dicathen.

Reaching the Grand Mountains, I slowly descended through the sea of clouds until I got a full aerial view of the battle below. Streams and bolts of magic in various colors rained down from the Wall while soldiers below fought off hordes of beasts that had managed to live through the bombardment.

Some stronger beasts unleashed magical attacks of their own, but few such creatures had been brought to the front, and their might paled when compared to the collective efforts of all the mages at the Wall.

I continued my descent toward the Wall, studying the numerous types of beasts on the battlefield, when I sensed a spell approaching me from behind.

Looking back over my shoulder, I saw a blast of fire as large as my entire body shooting toward me.

I felt a twinge of annoyance as I swatted at the spell, dispersing it effortlessly, then completed my descent to the upper levels of the Wall.

Softening my landing with a cushion of wind, I found myself looking upon a crowd of kneeling soldiers.

Closest to me was a barrel-chested man clad in full armor that was dented and dirty from battle. He knelt a few feet ahead of me, his hand holding down the head of a man who looked only a few years older than me.

"General! My sincerest apologies for my subordinate's grave blunder. As we had not received word that a Lance would be visiting the Wall, he assumed you to be an enemy. I will reprimand the fool and see to his punishment immediately," he said. His voice wasn't loud but carried a presence that showed he was a veteran just as clearly as his battered armor.

I pried my gaze off the man, who I assumed was the leader, and looked at the boy, whose head was still forcibly pushed down into a bow. He was trembling and had a white-knuckled grip on his staff.

It's been a while since I've been treated like this, I mused, momentarily enjoying the sight of all those heads bowed in respect—and probably fear. This thought soured the moment, and I was suddenly weary of all the bowing and scraping.

I cleared my throat and walked toward the man who had spoken. "No need. I come unannounced and from the Beast Glades, so I can see how your subordinate thought I was an enemy."

I paused, then bent down so my gaze was level with the conjurer that had

fired the spell at me. "But, the next time you see an unidentified potential threat, you should immediately notify your superiors so that they can make the judgment call. Understood?"

"Un-understood, General!" He bolted upright into a salute, nearly clipping my chin in the process.

I turned back to the man I assumed to be the leader here and winked. "Name and position," I stated, walking past him toward the stairs.

"Captain Albanth Kelris of the Bulwark Division." He trotted close behind.

"Well then, Captain Albanth Kelris, let's talk strategy."

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A CITY WITHIN

VIRION ERALITH

I took my customary seat at the table, a cushioned chair of gnarled wood, and cast a weary look at the two royal pairs, already poised like duelists, ready to lash out at each other; the only thing keeping the four of them silent was their respect for me.

In front of me was a transmission scroll with a message sent to me by Arthur, whose words were the subject of today's meeting. A creeping suspicion that the boy had decided not to come straight back in order to avoid this very meeting bubbled inside my head, but I let it go with a sigh.

I forgive you, Arthur. I don't want to be here either, I thought, gazing around the luxuriously decorated room just to avoid looking at the kings and queens before me.

A cozy fire was burning in the hearth and several light artifacts were set in gold sconces along the walls, giving the room a warm, friendly atmosphere—which was, admittedly, undercut by the subtle hostility emanating from those present inside.

The last rays of natural light from the window to my left dimmed as the sun dipped below the clouds. Resigned, I took that as my cue to start the meeting. "Take a seat. Let's begin."

There was a moment of silence while the rest of the Council looked at one another before the head of the Glayder family cleared his throat.

"Well, we've all been briefed on General Arthur's and General Aya's report, so I say we get right to it. I believe we should keep our forces as they are and send reinforcements to the Elshire Forest on an as-needed basis," Blaine said. Despite the human king's sunken cheeks, dark-ringed eyes, and unshaved jaw, all of which spoke to his own fatigue, he spoke resolutely.

I remained silent and neutral, as was my job until all sides had voiced their arguments.

"Councilman Blaine, your suggestion to send reinforcements on an as-needed basis to the border between the Beast Glades and the Elshire Forest suggests you don't see the elven territory worthy of defending," Merial intoned coldly.

Years of being part of the Council had shaped my once lively daughter-inlaw into a sharp and cold diplomat.

"Oh, don't twist my words, *Councilwoman* Merial," Blaine rebutted. "The report stated two separate but coordinated attacks. This has been the enemy's only foray into the elven territory. Compare that to the near-daily battles at the Wall. Shouldn't it be obvious that protecting Sapin's borders takes precedence?"

"No one is saying that the defense of the Elshire Forest should take precedence over Sapin," Alduin said, composed. "However, much like how there are elven soldiers stationed at the Wall to help protect Sapin, there should be at least some form of consistent defense on the forest borders, don't you think?"

"The Elshire Forest *is* a form of defense," Priscilla Glayder added, pointing at the map laid out in front of them. "The mana-laden fog itself has been a form of deterrence to everyone but elves for as long as it has existed. Even the attacks attempted yesterday would have failed eventually if you chose to ignore the intruders. The Alacryans and beasts would've gotten lost and starved to death long before they reached any of Elenoir's cities, even those closest to the border."

"The forest itself is a part of the kingdom of Elenoir, and there are still tribes of elves housed outside of the cities," Alduin stated, his voice growing louder. "By the same reasoning, Sapin would be better off abandoning the Wall and letting the small outpost cities near the border fall so that there is less land to protect."

"That's hardly an adequate comparison!" Blaine said incredulously, slamming his palms down on the round table. "The easiest path to Elenoir's major population centers is through the northern range of the Grand Mountains, *from Sapin*. If Sapin were to fall, even just the outermost cities, the Alacryans could march their armies straight into the heart of *your* lands as well!"

"Watch your tone, Councilman," Merial snapped, her bright blue eyes growing dark. "You act as though the elves are in your debt, yet we have sent plenty of mages to help your forces fend off the Alacryans. If even a fourth of those soldiers were assigned to guard the forest borders, this meeting would be entirely unnecessary."

"The truth remains, Merial," said Priscilla, her voice carefully cool, as if she could sooth the heated argument with just her tone. "While you can say that the Elshire Forest is part of your kingdom, no elven city, or even town, has seen battle. Until such a need grows, sending troops will only serve to weaken the Wall, where Dicathen faces *continuous* battle."

Alduin rubbed the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. When he opened them, his emerald eyes locked onto mine. "All we're requesting is to recall some of our men back to Elenoir so that they can defend their home."

"These soldiers are no longer *your* men. Did you forget? The Council was formed to unite the three races *because* we predicted an outside threat. Our job is to stay impartial and lead the entire continent to victory over the Alacryans, not just Elenoir," Blaine rebutted before turning to face me. "I implore Commander Virion to remain impartial for the sake Dicathen, and all its people."

"You talk of impartiality yet you've been single-mindedly focused on what's best for your own kingdom!" Alduin argued, the tip of his ears turning red. "The purpose of this Council is to unite Elenoir, Sapin, and Darv so we are better able to protect one another, not so elven mages can shield Sapin while the enemy rampages through their home—and what of the dwarves? One third of this Council is missing, executed for treason for putting their own selfish desires above the well-being of the people, as I'm sure you remember "

"Enough!"

Those present felt the palpable pressure that I pushed out through the room. Even Priscilla, with her core on the verge of turning silver, paled as she struggled against the weight of my intent.

"I've heard both sides, and before you further degrade yourselves by arguing like spoiled children, I would like to speak."

Both Blaine and Alduin flushed with anger and embarrassment but remained silent.

I looked to each of them in turn, my expression sharp, before speaking again. "Based on the consistency of the attacks, Sapin remains the priority for the Alacryans. As Councilman Blaine mentioned, the easiest way to the major cities of both Sapin and Elenoir is through the northern range of the Grand Mountains, through the Wall. We will proceed under the assumption that the Alacryans know this as well, and will continue to prioritize the defense on that front."

"That still doesn't—"

Alduin's jaw snapped shut as I released another pulse of mana.

"As for the defense of the southern borders of Elenoir, we'll relocate several units of the Trailblazer Division to the dungeons nearest the border. If there is another incursion through the forest, they can resurface and act as additional support."

The room remained tense, but everyone seemed satisfied—just barely.

"Good," I nodded. "Now, as for the biggest issue: Our relationship with the dwarves has remained neutral at the best of times, and fallen into hostility due to the treasonous actions of their leaders. Even since the formation of the Council, the dwarven representatives have always had their own agenda and priorities, but I'm hoping that will soon change."

I turned my head toward the door and everyone followed my gaze. After a moment of silence, I cleared my throat. "You can come in now."

"Damn, I missed my cue!" a gruff voice said from the other side of the door. I could feel a smile forming on my lips.

The ornamented knob shook harshly before the door flew open and a brawny dwarf with a thick white beard and a decorated robe—which seemed a few sizes too tight—walked into the Council chambers.

With a childish grin, he took a seat in the empty chair closest to him before introducing himself. "Buhndemog Lonuid. Pleasure to meet y'all."

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Walking down the never-ending flights of stone stairs, I was entranced by the bustle of activity all around us. I couldn't help but think how misleading the name "the Wall" was—it was so much more.

Each flight of stairs led to a different floor within the Wall. The highest stories remained relatively minimal with reinforced metal and stone blocks continually being maintained by human and dwarven mages. Even now, I was able to see cracked stone blocks being temporarily filled by an ice mage while a team of dwarves were shaping a large metal beam. There were also teams of conjurers and archers stationed on these upper floors, responsible for keeping up the bombardment through the numerous embrasures.

Adjacent to the multiple staircases spanning the entire height of the Wall were dozens of pulleys that hauled arrows, provisions, and other supplies to the upper levels.

The sound of tools clashing against stone and steel fused with the constant shouting of instructions, rushed footsteps of soldiers and workers alike, and constant sounds of battle below.

"Please excuse the noise, General. I've been told it's quite overwhelming for those that aren't used to it," Albanth shouted, his voice barely audible from the clamor.

"Overwhelming indeed," I drew in a breath. "I regret taking this long to actually visit the Wall. It's amazing!"

"Aye, it's quite the marvel," he said, waving at a few workers that saluted to him.

We continued our walk down the stairs until we reached a gate flanked by two soldiers standing guard.

"The floors from here on out are accessible to civilians as well," Albanth explained, flashing a badge at the guards.

"Captain!" The guards saluted, but they eyed me uncertainly.

"Fools!" Albanth barked. "Were you taught to stare in the presence of a Lance?"

The armored guards' eyes widened, their faces paling.

"General!" They immediately bowed in unison.

The captain scratched the back of his neck. "My apologies, General. Most of the soldiers here have never even seen one of the Lances."

"It's fine," I said with a smile at the soldiers. "And a salute is enough."

"Yes sir!" the soldier on the right replied, standing back upright in a salute.

His companion followed suit, staring at me with an awe-struck grin. "It's an honor to meet one of the famed Lances!"

"Just open the gates," Albanth sighed, shaking his head.

The guards scrambled to unclasp the metal bolts, and we continued our descent. By the next floor, my eyes were stinging and my nose burning. A bead of sweat ran down my cheek. "Is there a fire somewhere?"

"In a way, yes," the captain said, tugging at the neckline of his gorget to allow some airflow under his armor. "We're near our main forge."

After another flight of stairs, the massive smithing operation opened up

around us. Although the smoke was ventilated through narrow slits near the ceiling, the entire level was still filled with a dense, dark cloud. Oppressive heat radiated from several forges, each one manned by a team of blacksmiths and their assistants.

The forge was a complex machinery of smiths, workers, and mages interfacing with several different pieces of equipment. Some I recognized, but others were foreign to me. The manufacturing processes of my old world had left traditional blacksmithing behind long before I became king, but I was surprised by the intricacy of some of the equipment.

I watched as two smiths took turns rotating and manipulating a piece of glowing-hot metal, which was being repeatedly struck by a large wedge of iron that moved up and down within a solid framework nearly as large as Boo. The mechanism reminded me of an old steam-driven hammer, but I couldn't see any piping that would deliver the required steam. Curious, I glanced around the back of the device and saw a thin, bare-chested mage using gravity magic to manipulate a counterweight, causing the hammer to rise and fall.

"Please bear with the heat for just a bit longer," Albanth chimed in, drawing my attention away from the mana-powered hammer. "We're almost there, General!"

I also spotted a handful of dwarven metal mages who molded ingots like putty. It was fascinating and somewhat unreal to watch the metal stretch, twist, and bend under their careful application of mana.

The farther we traveled down the more people there actually were. Aside from the soldiers and workers, there were a fair number of merchants and freelance adventurers present as well.

"There's an entirely separate economy here," I mused.

"Absolutely," Albanth agreed, wiping the sweat from his face with his gloves. "Because there is no law mandating service for the war, we've set out rewards for adventurers who clock in time out in field. It's easy money for

them, and we get a consistent supply of able-bodied mages and fighters. There is occasional tension between the soldiers and the adventurers, but everyone here gets a belly-full of fighting without turning on each other, so it hasn't become violent."

"And the merchants are here because of the adventurers?" I guessed, surveying the lines of stalls and tents set up on the ground floor.

"Yes, sir. They're restricted from operating in the main supply route, and they're also taxed quite heavily for doing business here, but they still come in droves," Albanth chuckled. "Always eager to make a coin—but without them, we'd suddenly have to worry about food, clothing, weapons, and entertainment for a few thousand mercenaries. We pay the adventurers, the adventurers spend their hard-earned coin with the merchants, and we collect the taxes to pay the adventurers. Everyone earns a living, and we all share a stake in the defense of the Wall."

"Brilliant," I echoed, nodding to a pair of guards who bowed deeply as we passed. It was a resourceful use of the pieces at hand, which spoke volumes about the senior captain in charge of the city-like complex.

Albanth led the way, easily maneuvering through the crowd on the ground floor, which seemed to instinctively part before us. "I'm sure flying down would've been much faster, but I hope this little tour helped you become familiar with the Wall."

"I appreciate it, Captain Albanth."

The captain smiled, his crow's feet deepening.

We walked for several more minutes until we reached a quieter area. An unusually large canvas pavilion stood out against the mountainside, several mages standing guard around it. Albanth gestured toward it. "This is where the captains and heads hold their meetings. You came at a good time, since there's a meeting going on right now. I was actually about to head down just as you arrived."

"I'm glad I got here when I did, then—despite the fireball," I replied.

"It's constant excitement around here, I'll tell you that," he chuckled, flashing his badge once again at the guards. "Senior Captain Trodius is inside, along with the other captains and several heads."

Trodius? I thought, vaguely recognizing the name from somewhere.

The guards opened the flap, and I followed Albanth inside. The interior was dominated by a large round table covered by a detailed map of what looked like the Beast Glades. On the map were several wooden figures shaped differently to indicate various positions of the dungeons and troops.

There were seven people seated around the table, all in battered armor and disheveled robes, and all leaned over the table, apparently in the midst of some discussion regarding the map.

At the far end of the circular table sat a man that I could only describe as the perfect image of a traditional gentleman. Handsome, with shiny black hair meticulously cropped, his uniform so well kept that it looked like it had been made just that morning. His eyes were sharp and deep-set, his irises glowing with a slight tint of red.

The man stopped mid-sentence upon noticing our arrival and stood up. He dipped his head toward me. "General Arthur Leywin."

Upon hearing my title, the rest stood up and bowed as well. Captain Albanth saluted. "My apologies for being late."

"Given the nature of your arrival, it's of no consequence," the man said, showing no emotion. "Please, have a seat and allow me to introduce myself. I am Trodius Flamesworth, senior captain in charge of the Wall."

199

RETURN

"CURRENTLY, there are five units in this region and another three farther east, based on their last transmissions," the captain of the Trailblazer Division reported, pointing to the relevant markers with an outstretched finger.

Jesmiya Cruwer was the captain of Tessia's unit. She moved and spoke with natural grace and authority, but there was also a fierce quality to the way she held herself; one hand always rested on the pommel of her saber, as if she was always ready to strike. I had imagined that the captain leading the Trailblazer Division into the dangerous wilds of the Beast Glades would be tough, but Captain Jesmiya appeared as though she could frighten away mana beasts with just a sharp look in their direction.

Trodius shifted his gaze from the map to a sheet of paper he was holding. "Captain Jesmiya, the log sheets for clearing the dungeons—how accurate is this timeline?"

Captain Jesmiya straightened her back before speaking. "Fairly accurate. Taking into account—"

"A week is too long," the senior captain stated flatly, cutting her off. "The number of corrupted beasts attacking the Wall continues to grow. Four days for each dungeon, that's all we can allow."

"But sir!" Captain Jesmiya bolted up from her seat. "Rushing the expeditions to that degree will cause significantly more casualties. Some of these dungeons have never been cleared before, and extreme caution has to be

taken or an entire unit can get wiped out!"

"That is an order, Captain Jesmiya Cruwer. The Wall is the last line of defense on the eastern border. If a soldier from your unit dies out in the Beast Glades, that soldier's family isn't in danger. However, if the number of beasts becomes more than this fort can handle, many more lives will be lost here, and those monsters—and the Alacryan mages controlling them—will move on unimpeded to the towns nearby."

Captain Jesmiya's expression as she returned to her seat was even more severe than it had been before. Captain Albanth, who had taken the chair nearest to Jesmiya, glanced nervously at her sword-hand, which still gripped the pommel of her weapon.

I learned that most of Albanth's division comprised workers and blacksmiths responsible for the maintenance and construction of the Wall. He reported on the daily goings on, briefly listing off a series of repairs made, resources used, and supplies which required restocking.

I stayed silent as the two captains continued their reports to Trodius. The unit heads present in the meeting occasionally chimed in to give more detailed accounts when asked.

Trodius looked up from his notes. "And what is the progress on the new routes for our Trailblazer Division?"

"We've just finished securing the fourth tunnel. It's the longest one yet, and the entrance is hidden in a small crevice along a riverbank. A team of earth mages is still reinforcing the tunnel, but it should be accessible to units within the week," Albanth explained, drawing a line with his fingers to indicate the rough layout of the tunnel.

"Pull back a fourth of the workers and have them work nights instead," Trodius instructed. "We were forced to flood another route just last week because its location had been compromised. Securing more underground routes is priority."

The senior captain then turned back to Captain Jesmiya. "Are there new

updates on finding any transportation gates?"

The captain shook her head. "We've only allocated a single unit to scouting for gates. I'll need more time."

"Teleportation gates?" I asked, my interest piqued.

"Yes," Trodius answered, his red eyes shifting to me. "With the constant attacks on the Wall, the best way for our soldiers to access the Beast Glades is through our underground channels. However, with the new mode of transportation currently being built to connect the Wall to Blackbend City—a 'train,' I believe they're calling it—we would have far easier access to the city's teleportation gate. If we are able to locate and connect that gate to any gates hidden in the Beast Glades, then we can move troops without hours of marching through underground tunnels."

My eyes focused on the map. "How are you certain that there are any teleportation gates in the Beast Glades?"

"We're not," he replied matter-of-factly. "Which is why we're expending only a limited amount of resources on the search. Several ancient texts make reference to gates hidden within the Beast Glades, but whether this is true or not remains a mystery."

The teleportation gates were an interesting subject for me. Along with the floating castle and Xyrus City, the gates were a relic left behind by the mages of old. It was fascinating to me how these ancient mages used magic to do things the strongest mages of the present couldn't even fathom replicating.

The stone arches engraved with indecipherable runes looked archaic, yet entire cities were built around them and relied upon them as modes of transportation. Modern artificers had unlocked how to connect teleportation gates to each other and change their destinations, but actually building one themselves was a distant dream.

"What method is the unit using to track down the gates?" I asked. "Assuming that you do not just have them blindly wandering around."

A shadow of a smile passed over Trodius Flamesworth's lips. "I prefer not to

waste even the smallest of resources on ventures like that. The gates constantly emit a faint fluctuation of mana particles. Normally, this wouldn't be detectable to even the best trackers, but these fluctuations occur throughout the whole spectrum of elements."

"Interesting," I said, thinking back to my time trying to track mana fluctuations in Darv. It was hard, but that was because I had blindly searched for any deviations in the ambient mana through Realmheart. To find fluctuations through all the elements, finding it would just be a matter of flying over... all of the Beast Glades.

Never mind, I thought. A waste of time considering there might not even be any gates.

My thoughts were interrupted by Trodius, who began putting away his notes. He spent a good few minutes meticulously organizing and perfectly stacking his piles of papers before meeting my gaze. "My apologies for your having to sit through this meeting."

The senior captain stood up, motioning for the rest of the people present to leave, but I stopped him.

"It'll be better for them to hear this as well," I stated, still in my seat.

It didn't take too long to explain what I learned from interrogating the Alacryan. By filling in some of the gaps with information I'd gained from Uto's memories, I was able to give an in-depth analysis that had even Captain Jesmiya furiously scribbling on a piece of paper.

"Intriguing," Trodius mused. "General, you say that the Alacryan mages have a very limited, specialized form of magic manipulation, but what is stopping a 'Striker'—for example—from forming his mana into a ranged strike?"

"It's as the senior captain says. I can't exactly give this information to my troops only to have them injured or killed because a Striker launched a ranged spell or a Shield was able to conjure a mana blade," Jesmiya added.

"I won't tell you to be entirely confident in this information. Inform only the heads and have them observe. Our enemies use magic very differently from

us, but that doesn't always mean it's better. Study and exploit the flaws," I stated. "The Council will be expecting reports containing firsthand observations of these potential limits to our enemies' abilities."

The Council wasn't actually aware of this information yet, but they would be soon, and they undoubtedly were going to want reports back.

Finally, I explained the rest of what I knew about the marks, crests, emblems, and regalias.

"Hopefully this information can give us an edge in the upcoming battles, assuming we can confirm its validity." I stood up. "That'll be all."

I took my leave, not wanting to stay inside any longer than necessary. Throughout the entire meeting, I had paid careful attention to Trodius Flamesworth. I couldn't help but resent the Flamesworth family after hearing firsthand from Jasmine how she was discarded by them.

I'd gotten to know Hester, Jasmine's aunt, rather well during my training at the castle, which had somewhat eased my negativity toward her family as a whole. Hearing about the relationship between Jasmine and her father from Hester had focused my animosity on Trodius, but after meeting the man today, all I felt was a wary callousness.

In the end, I had come here as a Lance, not as Jasmine's friend. Trodius may be a piss poor father, and he may be cold-hearted to a certain degree, but his leadership was solid.

After the quiet of the meeting pavilion, the Wall felt especially loud and busy. The ground wasn't paved so a fine cloud of sand and dust constantly swirled in the air. Workers, caked in dirt and grime, mingled with merchants and adventurers, some still holding their shovels or pickaxes after being recently relieved from their shift. Vendors shouted out their products from tents and carts as the laborers, adventurers, and soldiers filtered through.

I saw mostly food and equipment useful to a life of constant conflict, but there were many vendors selling other things as well: silversmiths, gem cutters, potters, painters, sculptors, tailors, and more. Many families resided in the little makeshift city, and the stress of living here, on the very doorstep of the battle against the corrupted beasts flooding from the Beast Glades, certainly drove their desire for whatever creature comforts they could afford.

As if to emphasize this thought, a monstrous roar cut through the clamor of the market and the Wall, followed by a series of explosions. There was a lull in the market noise as every head turned toward the Wall. I blinked and the moment passed.

"Oy! Lad! Your shoes look mighty thin for someone in these parts," a burly man in a leather apron called out. "Might I interest you in a pair of fine leather boots for your poor feet?"

The man waved his arm at an array of leather footwear displayed in wooden racks. Feigning interest, I leaned forward and touched a few of the boots that looked my size.

"Those ones all have a layer of compressed wool inside," he said excitedly. "I swear, you'll feel like you're walking on a cloud."

Curious, I slipped out of my thin turnshoes and pulled on a pair of the merchant's boots.

I hopped a few times before taking them off. Placing them back on the rack, I gave the merchant a grin. "I've walked on a cloud before and this wasn't quite the same. Nice shoes, though."

It was somewhat surreal walking through the busy streets of the fortress. Dressed in a simple loose robe and carrying no weapon, very few people here recognized me, and I was able to explore without drawing attention to myself.

Life here required a certain stoicism from the residents. Even in the market, there was a subtle tension hiding under the surface. I could see it in the laborers' quick steps and downcast eyes; in the short, businesslike exchanges between the merchants and the adventurers; but most of all, I could see it in the way everyone pretended like they weren't afraid.

Chewing on a skewer of charbroiled meat that had the texture of chicken

thigh, I stopped by every stall that caught my interest. Some contained more mundane items like cloth, furs, spices, and alcohol—which was unsurprisingly popular with the overworked soldiers and workers—but there were other, more interesting wares on display as well. A rapier-thin, mustachioed man was selling enchanted armor and weapons. One merchant tried very hard to get me to buy an enchanted handle that shot out a blast of fire and smoke from a small nozzle—mainly used for self-defense by weak nobles. He finally gave up when I conjured a sphere of fire from my finger, close enough to singe his bangs, and gave the man a wink.

As the sun began to set, I was considering my next move when a deep horn sounded in the distance.

The horn had sounded from beyond a large metal gate about twenty feet high. *I wonder what's happening?* I thought just as another horn blew.

Several uniformed workers marched off to the gate, so I followed. Chains rattled behind the stones as the gate rose with a groan, opening the way.

A crowd had already formed around the gate as carriages pulled by mana beasts began filing in, mages and warriors walking beside them with weapons unsheathed. Their exhaustion was evident in their postures and expressions, but the workers took over and started slowly unloading crates from the carriages. I stepped forward to get a better look when, out the corner of my eye, I saw my father.

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RESPONSIBILITIES

I HAD KNOWN it was possible I might run into my parents at the Wall; I even anticipated it to a certain degree. But when I saw my father help my mother out of the carriage, I stopped in my tracks.

My feet remained anchored to the ground as I watched more familiar faces appear beside them: Jasmine, Helen, Durden, and Angela came into view one by one. The whole team still looked the same, though somehow incomplete without Adam.

My parents and the Twin Horns all wore the same exhausted and grim expressions, which matched their ragged appearance as they trudged through the gates alongside their carriage.

"Close the gates!" a soldier roared, and the towering gate rumbled to a close behind the last carriage.

More and more workers were arriving to offload carriages. Some unhitched the beasts pulling the carriages and led them away to be fed while others lined up and began passing out the boxed supplies to be sorted.

A soldier carrying a notebook began talking to the driver of the lead carriage. Imbuing mana into my ears, it was easy to hear their conversation even amidst the clamor.

"There are two less carriages than what was reported to have left from Blackbend," the soldier said gruffly.

"We ran into a small team of Alacryan mages just a mile north of the

southern border," the driver said, taking off his dented and scraped helmet. "Lost two of my carriages to those bastards."

The guard looked behind the wiry driver, studying the carriages, and then let out a sharp breath. "After the carriages are unloaded and your men accounted for, come to the main tent. You'll need to do a full debrief."

The driver didn't wait, already beginning to shed his layers of battered armor, which he dropped unceremoniously to the ground before walking back to his carriage.

The fact that the head of this expedition spoke of being attacked as if it was a common occurrence startled me; I had expected the Twin Horns' guard duty to be relatively safe.

Without another thought, I plowed my way through the crowd, knocking aside men twice my height and weight with ease, until I reached my parents. I experienced a moment of nerves as my eyes met theirs; we had reconciled, but my relationship with them was no longer as innocent as it once was.

My mother's mouth opened in surprise, and she looked like she was about to say something, but her weathered face melted into a soft smile.

"Arthur!" my father called out, dropping the sack he had slung over his shoulder.

I smiled back. "Hi, Mom. Hey, Dad."

My father wrapped his thick arms around me, lifting me off my feet. My mother patiently waited for my father to release his embrace before she, too, pulled me in for a hug.

"It's good to see you're doing well," she whispered, her face against my chest.

She was covered in a layer of dust from their travels, and she probably hadn't had a proper bath in a while, but she still gave off a familiar scent that smelled like... home.

The Twin Horns came in next, unable to wait any longer. Durden took off his dirty cloak before giving me a hug. Helen and Angela squeezed me tightly,

saying how much I had grown like aunts say to their nieces and nephews every time they visit.

"You got bigger," Jasmine muttered with a half-smile as she tousled my hair.

"Are you sure you didn't just get smaller?" I teased, pulling my old teacher and friend into a hug.

After letting go of Jasmine, my body turned, expecting one more embrace—but it would never come. That's when it hit me—that Adam was really gone. The rude, harsh, and often selfish spear-wielder of the Twin Horns would never shoot me that snide smile of his ever again.

Gritting my teeth, I mustered another smile, and we left the workers and carriages behind, heading for the nearest inn.

We found a large, decrepit house that had the audacity to put up a sign advertising itself as the most popular inn for miles just a few blocks away. Because the inn served as a restaurant and bar as well, it was packed with workers and soldiers looking for a drink or a hot meal while getting away from the biting cold, which only got worse as night fell.

"It's... it's a L-Lance, in the flesh! Here at my inn! Oh my." The owner of the inn, who happened to be working at the front desk, squirmed like a puppy as he tried to shake my hand, get our forms signed, and call a waiter for a table all at the same time.

"I'm just looking for a quiet dinner and a room for my family and friends," I said with a smile.

"Of course, General Arthur! Jives, clear the patio seats upstairs! Hurry!" the old man barked at a surprised waiter.

"Looks like there are some benefits in knowing you after all," Helen chimed in, nudging me with an elbow.

Durden looked back at the crowd of people currently waiting for a seat. "We probably would've had to wait for a while otherwise."

We were led up a flight of spiraling stairs to a balcony that faced away from the Wall. Even on this side, the small city-like camp was enclosed by curtain walls, obscuring the view of the outside world. Still, I enjoyed being able to see the busy flurry of people down below.

There was a fire crackling in a metal furnace just beside our table for warmth and a plate of warm bread and some broth for us to start our meal with.

"How have you been, Arthur?" my mother asked after we settled around the table.

"I've been good," I lied. It wasn't as simple as that; so many things had happened since the last time we'd seen each other, but looking at my mother and father, I didn't want to give them anything more to worry about.

My mother had aged significantly since the last time we met. After the comfortable life she had led in Xyrus, being out on the road with the possible threat of death looming around every corner was clearly taking its toll on her.

My father still cropped his hair short, but now also sported a full beard that covered most of his face. There were dark bags under his eyes, but he still had a lively expression.

"I can't even feel your core anymore, Arthur," my father added. "How strong have you gotten?"

"I hit white core not too long ago," I smiled.

Helen let out a whistle and Jasmine nodded in approval.

My father smirked openly, looking from me to his friends. "My boy."

As the food came and we continued to talk, some of the weariness and fatigue fell away. My mother smiled more, playfully reprimanding my father when he made a crude joke—just like old times.

It turned out that my parents still kept in touch with Ellie. It wasn't as often as they wanted, but every time they got back to Blackbend City, they'd go out of their way to send a transmission to the castle.

"Really?" I replied, taking a bite out of a piece of grilled fish. "Ellie never told me about that."

"Your sister is in her rebellious stage," my father grumbled, shoving a hunk

of broth-soaked bread in his mouth.

"She just replies with 'I'm okay' or 'I'm alive' most of the time," my mother added, her voice laced with worry. "She's okay, right? She's eating well? She's making friends?"

I set down my fork. "If you're so concerned, why don't you go visit the castle? I'm sure that's what Ellie wants."

"Security into the castle has tightened recently. Only heads and above have access to the teleportation gates there, and even they can only go on official business," Helen explained, wiping her mouth with a cloth.

"I can take you myself. Sylvie's not with me to fly us directly, but we can go to Blackbend together and make the jump to the castle," I replied hopefully.

My parents looked at each other for a moment before looking back at me. In a reassuring tone, my mother said, "A new mode of transportation is going to be built underground. Once that's made, we'll be able to visit you and Ellie much more often."

"That's good and all, but I've heard reports that the journey from Blackbend is getting more and more dangerous. Ellie worries about you. *I* worry about you!"

My mother nodded. "I know, and I don't blame you for your worries, or your frustration, but we have our duties here—people that need our help."

"It's not only *your* burden. There are other soldiers that can take your place." My voice came out sharper than I had intended.

There was a moment of silence, then Angela suddenly sprang up. "Oh dear. Helen, we never took our belongings out of the carriage!"

Helen's expression flowed from confusion, to realization, and finally to surprised worry. "Yeah, of course. Let's get them before they get stolen. Come on, you two."

Helen and Angela ushered a confused Durden and irritated Jasmine away with them. Angela looked back and gave me a meaningful glance before disappearing.

Whether the conjurer wanted to avoid the tension or just give our family some privacy, I didn't know, but I was glad for the opportunity to have this conversation with my parents privately.

"Arthur," my mother said, breaking the silence. "Our responsibilities here may not be on the scale of what you do as a Lance, but we are still doing our part to win this war and send everyone home that much faster."

"You're putting yourselves in danger," I argued.

"Everyone is in danger while Dicathen is at war," my mother replied. "Even you, Arthur."

"Yes, but I can handle it," I said angrily. I could feel my mana boiling just under the surface, eager to be unleashed, and I had to struggle to restrain it.

My father slapped down his utensils on the table. "Do you realize how hypocritical you're being?" he said, scolding me like a child. "So you're saying it's fine for you to put yourself in danger, as long as Ellie, Alice, and I are locked away someplace safe? Abandoning our responsibilities to our kingdom?"

"I'm fighting this war to protect you, but I can't be next to you all the time. What if something were to happen to you or Mom while I'm on a mission? Even Ellie... the whole reason she's been so engrossed in training is because she wants to join you! What if she dies, too—like Adam?"

"Enough, Arthur!" my father snapped. He got up from his seat and stared at me fiercely. "Keeping my family safe is my priority, but I also want my family to live happily. *That's* why we're doing this. Dicathen may not have been *your* only home, Arthur, but it's the only home that we know, and if that means dying so that Ellie can live in a better future, then so be it."

My father stormed off and my mother followed. She looked back at me solemnly but didn't say anything.

I sat alone in silence for a moment before getting up from my seat. Reaching into my robe, I pulled out several gold coins, which I left on the table, then flew off the balcony.

My mind muddled with emotions, I made my way to a ledge of rock high up in the mountain adjacent to the fortress from where I could look down on the Wall. I let the sharp winds bite into my skin, enduring the discomfort as punishment for my foolish anger toward my parents.

I did all I could to avoid rethinking the conversation. I wanted to shoot down a few corrupted beasts as an outlet for my feelings, but the night was quiet. Enhancing my vision with mana, I started counting the torches along the Wall and the number of archers and mages stationed atop it. I pretended not to notice a pair of soldiers behind a wooden pillbox spending their night a bit more *passionately*. Obviously they had not expected anyone to be looking down from above the Wall.

After I ran out of things to count, I peered out into the darkness on the other wide of the Wall, trying to sense any prowling mana beasts. I didn't find any mana beasts, but I did sense someone approaching me from below.

"There... you... are," a voice drifted up from below a few minutes later. A hand shot up into view, grabbing hold of the ledge I was sitting on.

I pulled Jasmine up by her arm. The adventurer leaned back against the mountain cliff and took time to catch her breath before speaking again. "You should have some respect for those who can't fly."

I knew Jasmine was trying her best to be lighthearted. I smiled. "Sorry about that. How did you find me, anyway?"

Jasmine straightened her posture and looked at me with one brow raised.

"Don't underestimate your mentor."

"I never have," I said, chuckling.

The two of us sat in silence for a while. A cloud blew in on the gusting wind, blacking out the stars above.

"How long have you been at the Wall?" she asked, shivering.

I wrapped us both in a layer of fire-imbued mana to keep the cold at bay.

"Just a few hours before you all arrived."

"Thank you," she muttered. Then, not meeting my eye, she asked, "Did you

get the chance to meet my father?"

"I walked in on their meeting," I answered. "Have you seen him?"

Jasmine shook her head. "Not once, despite the many trips back and forth." Frowning, she glanced at me. "Looks like we both have family problems now."

"Seems like it."

Another moment of silence passed before she spoke again.

"I won't pry into what happened at the inn. I just... you need to know that your parents do care about you and Ellie. Whenever your father meets anyone new, he always tells them about how his son is a Lance, how proud he is... it's kind of annoying, actually."

I smiled despite myself. "I know that they care."

"Rey—and especially Alice—they both feel a lot of guilt. No matter how much we told them otherwise, the fact that they weren't there to help us when Adam died made them feel like it was their fault."

Jasmine continued speaking when I didn't reply. "You know what happened with your mother before she had you. She was traumatized after Lensa, and for a while, she could hardly bring herself to use her magic for anything more than a scrape or bruise."

"I know," I said, flicking a stone with mana and sending it arcing out into the darkness. "Which is why I thought they would stay at the castle until the war was over, not throw themselves into the middle of the battle by traipsing back and forth through dangerous lands, fending off attacks and... and—"

Jasmine put a hand on my arm. "I'm not sure if this makes sense, but I think what they're doing now to contribute to this war is as much for themselves as it is for you and Ellie. They're trying to overcome their past mistakes and their fears so they can become better parents for the both of you."

"I know I was being selfish, too," I admitted. "I think all three of us need some time to adjust."

"Just don't let your relationship with your parents become like me and my

family," she said tersely. "I'm sure there was a time when we could've reconciled, but I chose to keep running, and my father's pride kept him from reaching out, from apologizing..."

I turned to Jasmine, who was sitting down on the cold stone and hugging her knees. She didn't look like she had aged a single day since I had first met her —except her eyes, which held a deep wisdom at odds with her youthful appearance. "Thanks, Jasmine."

"You better be thankful. My jaw is sore from all this talking."

Despite her words, we kept talking. We exchanged war stories like a couple of grizzled old veterans. I told her a little about my time with the asuras and recounted the true story of how I'd defeated the Vritra retainer, Jagrette, and she shared the exploits of the Twin Horns. The highlight of the night was Jasmine's disbelieving expression when I told her that Sylvie had a human form now, but I wasn't entirely sure that she really believed me. Either way, we enjoyed each other's company well through the night.

"I should get back now," Jasmine said as the first moments of the sunrise cast a halo around the mountains.

"Do you need a lift down?"

She shook her head. "Going down is the easy part."

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "For everything."

She just nodded and patted my head.

I watched her hop down the side of the mountain, a gale of wind surrounding her and softening each landing, until she was out of sight.

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ALLOCATION

THE CASTLE APPEARED OVERHEAD, standing out against the solid gray sky. Rain had yet to form within the thick clouds, but moisture still clung to my skin and soaked into my clothes, and I could feel the dense water mana surrounding me as I neared the flying structure's base.

Soldiers on flying mounts guarded the floating fortress, and several encircled me as I approached.

"General Arthur!" they shouted, saluting in unison before guiding me to the landing dock.

I nodded tersely at the squad before touching down. My eyes turned unconsciously back toward the Wall, though it was far too far away to see, then the gates rolled shut.

The dock workers, who were in charge of keeping the dock functioning and properly warded against potential attack, stopped what they were doing and immediately scrambled to salute me.

"Proceed with what you were doing," I stated, motioning them away.

I continued walking, thin wisps of steam rising from my wet clothes, until I spotted two familiar girls. I broke into a smile at the sight of them.

Ellie stood tall, her chestnut eyes glowing with confidence. Her ash-brown hair, which flowed down just past her shoulders, was a sore reminder of our father.

Standing next to my sister was another girl. She looked a bit younger than

Ellie, but her glimmering yellow eyes radiated a sense of maturity. A curtain of pale, wheat blonde hair draped over her slender figure, which was shrouded in a black dress that shined like fine obsidian. Matching her attire were two jagged horns that jutted out from the side of her small head.

Ellie waved before trotting happily toward me with Sylvie in tow. My bond took hesitant steps, but her movements had become much more fluid in the few days we'd been apart.

"Welcome back," my sister said. "Seeing as how your entire body is drenched, let's just pretend like we hugged."

"No way, I want the real thing," I said deviously before pulling my sister into my arms.

"Gah! I just bathed!" she protested, struggling to escape my grasp.

After soaking my sister to a satisfying degree, I let her go, turned to my bond, and tousled her hair, which felt almost sharp to the touch. "I see that my fearsome dragon is growing up to be a healthy young girl."

Despite my joking tone, Sylvie's large eyes narrowed and she regarded me with concern.

We'll talk about it later, I sent to her, certain she felt my lingering distress.

My bond forced an awkward smile and patted my arm. "Welcome back."

"It's good to be back," I said to both of them.

"So, how was your mission? I want to hear all about it," my sister asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement.

As Ellie improved her skills in magic and archery, I could tell she yearned more and more to be out on the field and to prove herself.

"I'll tell you all about it later," I promised. "But first, I need to report to the Council."

After conjuring a wave of heat to dry myself off, the three of us left the crowded room, which had become uncomfortably silent due to my presence.

"I broke into light red stage while you were gone," my sister declared proudly as we walked through the castle halls. "That—and my daily training

regimen with Boo—probably makes me a pretty competent conjurer for my age. Even Commander Virion complimented me on my skills, saying that I might be able to skip the mandatory training for the soldiers."

Every time my sister brought up her enthusiasm in joining the ranks of the army, I felt immediately inclined to stop her. This time, though, I gave her a friendly smile and nodded—the most supportive response I could give.

Meanwhile, Sylvie walked silently beside me, her concentration still on the action of walking bipedally. I could feel mana practically bursting out of her small form as she used magic like a crutch until she had full control over her body.

Still, Sylvie's acclimation to her human form had vastly improved since the last time I had seen her, which had been just a few days earlier. I could tell she was pushing herself so she could join me on missions as soon as possible.

"You know, Princess Kathyln has been really helpful too. She's been sparring with me and helping me out with some of the intricacies of mana manipulation," my sister chattered on, skipping ahead, then walking backward to face me as she talked.

"Oh, really? You know I can always help out with teaching you magic when I'm free," I replied. "I was an official professor at Xyrus Academy, after all." "For, like, a semester," my sister responded with a smirk.

I waved her snide comment away. "A professor is a professor."

"Thanks for the offer, but I feel like learning from you will just discourage me."

"What?" I blurted, surprised. "Why would you be discouraged?"

"I know we're five years apart, but we still share the same blood," she answered, turning around so her back was to me as she walked properly. "Seeing as how you're already a white core mage on top of being a quadra-elemental, I'd just start comparing myself to you if you tried to teach me magic."

My sister's words hit hard, but it was her tone of subdued acceptance that hurt the most, and I found myself staring at Sylvie in hopes that she had a way to solve the mess I had just created.

My bond raised a brow at me before walking up to match pace with my sister.

Sylvie patted Ellie on the shoulder. "It's okay. Your brother's talent is considered an anomaly even amongst asuras. Don't compare yourself to a freak like him."

"Freak is a bit much, isn't it?" I asked, scratching the back of my neck.

My sister looked back over her shoulder with a smirk. "No no, I think 'freak' describes you perfectly in this regard."

We reached the meeting room, having parted ways with my sister. I wanted some more time to talk with my bond—about the changes in her body now that the seal had been broken, but also about obligations that had to be fulfilled.

As we approached, the guards standing on either side of the entrance clicked their heels together and saluted before letting us in.

Sitting directly in view of the entrance was Virion, who turned eagerly in our direction. His face lit up as he rose from his seat. "Arthur, you've finally arrived!"

"Commander," I said. Sylvie opted for a slight dip of her head.

"Sit," he motioned, his eyes sweeping the room, a grin on his weathered face.

I turned to see what he was looking at: The rest of the Council was seated at the table, along with one familiar face I hadn't expected.

Twiddling his beard—and looking bored out of his mind—was the dwarf Buhndemog Lonuid, my former magic teacher.

"Ho, if it isn't the young Lance," he said flatly.

"I see the meetings have taken a toll on you," I replied with a grin that

mirrored Virion's.

"Never has my ass been so sore since the days I got whipped by my mother as a child," he groaned, stretching his stout body.

I let out a laugh and turned my attention to the rest of the Council.

- "Councilmen," I greeted with a respectful nod. "Councilwomen."
- "General Arthur," Priscilla Glayder replied. "You've come at a good time."
- "Yes," Blaine agreed. "We were awaiting your return to continue discussing your report."
- "Arthur!" Alduin Eralith exclaimed, his expression warm. "Take a seat, you two."
- "Welcome back," Merial Eralith chimed in with a warm smile, a sense of gratefulness in her voice.
- "Thank you," I replied. I walked past the former king and queen of Elenoir, taking a seat next to Buhnd. Sylvie sat beside me, her feet dangling from the too-large chair.

Virion returned to his own seat and rolled up the transmission scroll. "Seeing as the rest of the Lances are out on missions, we'll proceed with the meeting, but before we say anything, I'd like General Arthur to give a full debrief on what happened at the border of the Elshire Forest."

I took a sip from the glass of water in front of me as I gathered my thoughts, then launched into a thorough retelling of all that had happened, including my interrogation of the Alacryan mage and everything I learned from him. It took the better part of an hour to get the Council and my bond up-to-date.

- "It seems we've been underestimating the Alacryan mages' abilities," Virion replied thoughtfully.
- "Underestimating?" Blaine furrowed his brows in confusion. "If anything, learning that those Alacryan bastards are so limited and specialized in their magic makes me think we've been *overestimating* them."
- "I have to agree with Councilman Blaine on this one," Alduin added. "I think this is a clear weakness in their fighting tactics."

"I don't think it's as simple as that," Buhnd argued, rubbing his beard in thought.

"On the surface, their specialization might be seen as a weakness," Virion agreed. "But from what General Arthur found out, their method of awakening and training in magic seems a lot more advanced than ours."

"How so?" Merial asked curiously.

Buhnd spoke up again, a tinge of excitement in his voice. "This is me just speculating at this point, but with the system of marks and crests and whatnot, the mages of Alacrya seem to be hyper-focused on a spell and its alterations and evolutions. That means, while mages of Dicathen focus on various spells of their attributed element, or elements"—he looked at me—"these Alacryan mages spend their lives honing a single spell and building off only that."

"What Elder Buhnd says adds up, considering what I've seen on the field," I added. "One of the 'Strikers' I battled against only used one spell, but from the cast time to the durability and potency of the magic, I had thought he was around the level of a yellow core. And these specialized mages work in small teams to negate their weaknesses. I'd say that only our veteran mages of light-yellow core or higher could actually exploit these 'limitations.'"

"Duels are one thing; on the front line, versatile mages aren't as useful as specialized soldiers who are damn well good at one thing," Buhnd concluded grimly.

"We need to send this information to our captains—as well as the guilds and military academies—so they can develop better ways to fight against these 'specialized mages,'" Blaine grumbled in frustration.

"I already stopped by the Wall and told the captains there," I said, looking at Virion.

"Good. Now let's discuss plans on how to best deploy our forces," Virion said heavily. "I had originally hoped to discuss this with Lord Aldir, but since the asuras have ceased contact with us, well—"

The mention of Aldir and the asuras caused a sharp throb in my chest, and I wanted to share what Agrona had told me right then and there, but I held my tongue.

This discussion won't get far if I say it now, I thought.

'You'll need to tell everyone eventually,' Sylvie sent back. 'But maybe once this discussion is over.'

True to my expectations, the meeting had soon devolved into a full-blown debate as the members of the Council argued with one another about where the soldiers and mages were most needed. The main problem was that there was just too much ground to cover, and the Alacryans had so far kept their goals nearly unreadable. From the battles so far, we knew that that the Alacryans were investing heavily in breaching the Wall, which would allow the corrupted beasts to run wild across Sapin's easternmost cities.

The Alacryans had also been able to utilize the dwarven tunnels throughout the Kingdom of Darv to transport their forces from the southern coast all the way to the Darv–Sapin border. From what Buhnd told us, there seemed to be a faction of radical dwarves so discontent with their positions and lives in Dicathen that they actually wanted the Alacryans to take over, expecting they would then be set above the humans and elves in this new social order. Buhnd made it clear that he and his loyalists were taking charge of eradicating this faction and would do so as soon as possible.

What's more, there were still Alacryan ships being sighted all along the western shores, which forced coastal cities like Telmore, Etistin, and Maybur to build defenses on not only the eastern side—in case the Wall didn't hold—but their western borders as well.

The Council had reasonably concluded that the brunt of the Alacryan assault would target Sapin, but my last two missions proved otherwise. Towns as far north as Ashber, from which the enemy could easily reach the Grand Mountains or several of Elenoir's most populous cities, had Alacryans hidden within them.

We had thought that their goal was to march south and join their allies coming in from the western shores, but considering the recent incursions into elven territory from the Beast Glades, the Alacryan troops up north could actually have been heading east toward Elenoir.

Alduin's and Merial's main concern was, naturally, the defense of the elven kingdom, while Blaine and Priscilla continued to argue against sending troops into Elenoir, which would spread thin the already strained forces stationed around Sapin.

Buhnd and his forces, with the assistance of General Mica, were largely focused on clearing away any surviving Alacryans within Darv and managing their own civil dispute with the radicals, and so were able to provide little in the way of additional support to either kingdom.

Throughout the debate, I could tell Virion was trying to remain neutral and let the kings and queens work through the problem. He was silent throughout the entire meeting, which took us well into the night, and only provided his strategic guidance when discussing specific combat scenarios.

"This is why I wanted to wait until Lord Aldir was here!" Blaine huffed. "He would know that it's foolish to spread our forces even thinner than they already are."

"Commander Virion, you mentioned that Elder Camus had gone back to Elenoir after my training with him was over," I said, ignoring the former king of Sapin.

"Yes, his latest transmission scroll placed him in the northern city of Asyphin."

"Does he know about the attacks coming from the Beast Glades?"

"He was made aware, of course," Virion said, understanding where I was going. "Perhaps we could recruit him to assist in surveying the southern border for any suspicious movement."

"The Elshire Forest spans hundreds of miles. No matter how powerful Elder Camus is, he's just one man," Merial rebutted.

"And General Aya," Virion added, turning to Blaine and Priscilla. "If your two Lances remain in Sapin, is it acceptable that I keep a Lance in Elenoir? She can be pulled back if absolutely necessary—and we still have General Arthur."

Blaine looked like he was about to say something, but Priscilla intervened. "That's acceptable."

"It'll have to do—as a temporary solution," Alduin stressed, catching Virion's eye. "If these attacks on Elenoir escalate, we'll need to send troops capable of navigating through the forest to defend it."

"Don't sugarcoat it, Alduin. Just say you'll take the elves back, because defending Elenoir is more important to you than defending all of Dicathen," Blaine snapped.

"Enough!" Virion barked, glaring around the table. "If that's all, we'll end the meeting here—"

"Actually," I interrupted, "there is one more topic on the agenda that we should address as soon as possible."

"Oh? And what is that?" Virion asked. There was an air of nervous curiosity at the table as the others waited for me to continue.

I looked at Sylvie and she met my gaze with a resolute expression. Letting out a deep breath, I began. "It's about the absence of Aldir and the asuras..."

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TRAITOR'S REQUEST

THE MEETING ROOM had fallen eerily silent by the time I finished reporting what Agrona had told me—minus a few details. I spoke freely about his enmity toward the Indrath Clan for belittling him, and how he had managed to increase the ratio of mages among the Alacryans with his experiments. I withheld some information that I wasn't ready for the Council to know, like the fact that he not only knew I was reincarnated into this world, but also knew who I was in my past life.

Making my conversation with Agrona seem more like a unilateral declaration from the Vritra leader for us to surrender allowed me to explain that the asuras had tried using our war as a distraction and had attacked the Vritra in Alacrya... and had failed.

Virion swore loudly, slamming his hands down on the table. The commander's usually controlled expression was twisted into a scowl and the tips of his pointed ears turned red. "Those conceited sons of—as if it wasn't bad enough that they *used* us and this war for their own purposes, they didn't even succeed!"

Virion rose from his seat and began pacing, muttering curses under his breath. The others, stunned into silence by either my revelation or Virion's outburst, exchanged glances but did nothing to interrupt. Finally, he looked back at me. "Arthur. What else did Agrona say in his message?"

"Just that Epheotus's attack on Alacrya failed. Agrona leveraged the failed

assault to further dissuade the asuras from taking part in this war—by demanding the asuras in Epheotus cut off all communications with us," I answered.

Virion gnashed his teeth but remained silent.

"At least that explains why we haven't seen more Scythes and retainers yet," Buhnd chimed in. The dwarven elder seemed the least shaken by my news; he had never actually met the asuras in the first place. "Agrona must've kept his strongest soldiers—the Scythes, retainers, and whatever the hell these basilisks are—in Alacrya in case something like this happened."

"That makes sense," Merial replied, her brows furrowed in thought. "But that leads us to the next question: Are we to expect the rest of Agrona's Scythes and their retainers to come to Dicathen now that the asuras of Epheotus have attacked them and failed?"

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy, as if a weighted blanket had been thrown over top of us.

"I'm sure this battle between Epheotus and Alacrya wasn't as one-sided as Agrona led Arthur—and all of us—to believe," Alduin responded.

"That's right. I've experienced Lord Aldir's power firsthand! No way Alacrya turned back a full-blown assault by the asuras of Epheotus without experiencing some casualties themselves. Hell, their home might be in shambles right now!" Blaine added, speaking as if he was trying to convince himself rather than the rest of us.

"That's all sunshine and peaches, but from my experience, nothing good comes from expecting the best in situations like this," Buhnd added grimly.

"He's right," I agreed. "We should assume that both retainers and Scythes are headed this way."

"The gates the Alacryans hid down in the dungeons of the Beast Glades," Merial suddenly exclaimed. "What if the retainers and Scythes are already here?"

"According to Captain Trodius's reports, there hasn't been a teleportation

gate sighting in months, not since the last one was destroyed," Priscilla answered. "From what I gathered, the constructs were of poor design and failed after only a few Alacryan troops made it through. One soldier witnessed only half of an Alacryan mage coming through a portal before it broke, and that mage died within seconds. Right now, the Trailblazer Division is mainly wiping out corrupted beasts and their controllers before they're able to make it up to the surface."

"That adds up, from what I've seen," I muttered, recalling how even the Scythe, Seris Vritra, had arrived via teleportation gates within the Kingdom of Darv before traveling by land through Sapin.

"We'll just have to hope that's true," Virion said, still pacing.

"Then are we to expect them to arrive from the western coast by ship?" Blaine asked, his face pale. "If that's the case, no amount of wall-building is going to make a difference."

As the Council continued discussing the possibilities, my mind shifted to my previous life. Although it was rare that disputes between countries would escalate into wars rather than Paragon Duels, Lady Vera was very thorough in her lessons on warfare, despite the rarity of full-scale armed conflict. We went through endless rounds of strategic board games, and I was sure there were lessons to be pulled from that experience, but a loud *clap* drew my attention away from my thoughts.

"While we have a lot to think about, I suggest we take time to rest. Rested minds think more clearly than those that are tired and overtaxed," Virion said in a defeated tone. "We'll meet back here at sunrise."

I looked out the window to see that night had fallen and quickly calculated just how much time I had to finally rest.

Not enough, I thought, walking out of the room behind Buhnd.

The dwarven elder let out a groan as he stretched his back, muttering, "I wonder if it's not too late to just throw myself out into the field and fight the enemy face to face instead of from behind a meeting room table."

Sylvie and I walked to our room in silence, not needing words to feel the tension we each carried.

After shedding everything but my inner shirt and trousers, I sank down into the couch. My vision glazed over, hardly focusing on anything as my mind went blank. A subtle movement from Sylvie caught my eye, though, and I turned to watch as her simple black dress swirled around her as if alive. Sleeves formed while her dress elongated until it dangled loosely around her ankles. It had turned into a nightgown.

"How'd you do that?"

"I can mold my scales into clothes in this form," she said quietly, transforming the bottom half of her gown into pants to prove her point.

"What else can you do?" I asked, leaning forward in my seat.

Sylvie sat down on the couch across from me. "So far, I've been focusing mostly on how to function in this bipedal form. Apart from the lack of stability these silly legs provide, though, I have to admit that I've begun to understand why the asuras choose to stay in this form."

"Oh? Do tell," I said, leaning back into the couch and getting comfortable. It felt good to be chatting with my bond like the weight of our entire continent's future wasn't resting on our shoulders.

"Mana manipulation—and even using aether—is easier in this form," she acknowledged, curling and uncurling her fingers.

"Interesting," I replied. "So, what are your magic capabilities like now that the seal is broken?"

"Because the Indrath Clan are aether users, most of my mana manipulation abilities focus on strengthening my body," she answered. "But I am able to dispel a large amount of my mana at once."

Suddenly, mana began gathering into her open palm, casting a bright light all around the room. The light artifacts hanging from the walls and ceiling flickered and dimmed.

My eyes widened as the orb of concentrated mana grew in size. "Sylvie?

Please don't destroy this room—or this castle."

My bond's stoic face broke into a smile as she looked at me. "Is the mighty Lance scared of a little girl now?"

"Those jagged horns kind of negate the 'little girl' thing," I said uneasily, scooting farther into my seat as the charged sphere of mana pulsed with power. "But seriously—you still stumble over your own feet, Sylv. Let's not endanger everyone in the castle."

The glowing orb slowly faded, dissolving into tiny particles. Sylvie let out a deep breath. "I'm glad that I was able to break the seal since I'll be more useful out in the field, but there's a part of me that feels foreign now."

"Well, you are still getting used to your human form," I said, trying to comfort her.

Sylvie shook her head. "It's not like that. It's more... internal, like there's much more to my abilities than I thought before."

"Well. You'll have a lot of opportunity for self-discovery. You heard what they said in the meeting; things are only going to get more hectic."

"At least we'll have one another to count on," she said resolutely. "Once I have better control of this form, I feel that the two of us defeating a Scythe isn't impossible."

"Isn't impossible," I echoed with a laugh. "Not the best of odds, but much better than before."

"Maybe we'll have some time to spar before going on a mission," Sylvie said hopefully. "I'd like to test out the extent of my control over aether in this form."

"We'll be lucky if we can actually get a good night's sleep without being disturbed," I said with a yawn. Dragging myself up off the couch, I crossed the room and flopped into bed.

I would have liked to stay up and talked with my bond more. Sylvie attaining a human form made it seem as if I'd just gotten another younger sister—albeit one with large, intimidating horns. But I could already feel sleep

overtaking me—

'Speaking of sisters,' Sylvie chimed in, reading my thoughts, 'wasn't Ellie waiting for us?'

"She's probably asleep by now," I mumbled, slurring my words as my drowsiness began taking hold of me.

'I'm not so sure about that, Arthur. Ellie's been looking forward to having you back... however briefly that might be.'

"I'll—try to spend time with her—tomorrow," I replied, about to fall asleep. My eyes snapped open a moment later when a firm knock on my door startled me awake.

"What?" I snapped, annoyance practically oozing out of my voice.

"I apologize for the disturbance, General Arthur, but I have a message from Commander Virion to meet him in the dungeon," a deep voice recited from behind the door.

I shut my eyes, refusing to part ways with the fluffy, feather-stuffed pillow molding to the shape of my head. *This is just a dream, Arthur. No need to get back up.*

"General Arthur?"

With a growl, I rolled out of bed and put on a robe. "Come on, Sylv. Let's go."

'Must I?' she sent back, not even bothering to speak. 'I just made myself comfortable, and the guard only asked for you.'

"Traitor," I grumbled, heading toward the door.

I followed the guard along the dim hallway, going down several flights of stairs until we reached the lower levels of the castle.

"Did Commander Virion provide any details about why he wanted to see me?" I asked.

"My apologies, but no sir. I'm afraid not."

We continued in silence until we reached the reinforced doors leading down into the dungeon. The members of the Council, still in their sleepwear, were

standing before the door looking as if they, too, had been pulled from their beds with no notice and no explanation.

Another figure, which stood right in front of the door, was a hulking man a head taller than Blaine and twice as wide. It took me a moment to recognize him as the assistant to the old man who was in charge of interrogating the prisoners.

"Arthur, do you know what this is about?" Buhnd asked as the guard and I approached, not trying to hide his annoyance.

I jerked a thumb toward the guard. "I came here because this guy told me Virion called for me."

"We just arrived as well. What is going on?" Alduin asked nervously.

"I called for you all because this man"—Virion turned back to face Gentry's assistant—"What was your name again?"

"Duve," the burly man grunted.

"Because Duve said that Gentry finally got one of the prisoners to talk," Virion finished.

"Who? The retainer?" Priscilla asked, her arms crossed.

"I'm not sure," Virion replied, glaring at the burly man.

"And where's Gentry now?" I asked, looking behind the interrogator's assistant as if the old man might be hiding in his shadow. "Shouldn't we go inside instead of waiting out here?"

"Master Gentry will be here soon," Duve replied, standing his ground.

Hardly a minute passed, but my patience was growing dangerously thin when the dungeon door slid open and the hooked-nose elder trudged out.

"Gentry!" Blaine barked. "What exactly is going on?"

"My apologies to the Council and General Arthur. I was just finishing up the maintenance on the retainer's restraining system when he called for me. Still, I didn't want to take even the smallest of chances of my beloved prisoner breaking free while we were all down there," Gentry said, cleaning his wrinkled hands on a cloth.

Virion's eyes widened, and he eagerly pressed the interrogator for details.

"Then why did you feel the need to drag us down here at this godforsaken hour?" Merial demanded, her eyes narrowed.

Gentry let out an uncomfortable cough before speaking again. "I have yet to break the retainer, but the traitor, Rahdeas—I think that was his name—has finally spoken."

"What did he say?" I asked, stepping forward through the Council members.

"On with it, you tittering old corpse!" Buhnd snapped. "Stop speaking in circles and spit it out."

Gentry winced but took a step forward, puffing his chest out. "Thanks to yours truly, the traitor has finally spoken and he has requested to speak"—his crooked finger pointed toward me—"but only to General Arthur."

[&]quot;What did the retainer say? Did you finally break him? Tell us!"

[&]quot;Unfortunately, no," Gentry rasped.

[&]quot;Did he give you any information?"

[&]quot;Well, no, not exactly."

[&]quot;Tittering old cor—"

[&]quot;Gentry," Virion growled in warning.

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A POEM

THE HALLWAY WAS quiet as everyone's gaze followed the long crooked finger to me.

I furrowed my brows. "Me?"

My mind spun. Why would Rahdeas want to speak to me, and what he could possibly say to me in this situation?

"That traitor has cleft the dwarven kingdom in two and shit on our reputation, then left me to clean up his unwiped ass—who is he to make demands?" Buhnd growled.

"Do you think he's aiming to make some sort of deal with General Arthur?" Blaine asked.

"If he wanted to strike a deal, he'd have a much better chance of doing so with Commander Virion or anyone else in the Council," Merial answered.

"Perhaps it's because of your ties to Elijah?" Virion wondered.

"That's... what I'm afraid of," I sighed.

Gentry coughed dramatically, drawing our attention. "Councilmembers and Lance. It would be an understatement to say it has been difficult for me to get the traitor to talk. Perhaps it's best we capitalize on my—this achievement, and talk to him while he's still able?"

All eyes fell on the commander, and he answered with a terse nod.

"Lead the way, Gentry," I said, walking through the reinforced doors.

The familiar musty smell of the castle dungeon brought back a series of

unpleasant memories regarding my own time down here. I walked silently after Gentry, leaving the Council to watch begrudgingly as we disappeared behind the reinforced door. After passing through another guarded entry, this one leading down to the lower levels where only Uto and Rahdeas were held, Gentry led me to a barren cell barely the size of a shoe closet.

Taking a deep breath, I waited for Gentry to carefully unlock the cell.

"I will be here, just outside the door, General Arthur. I'm sure you already know, but please refrain from touching anything," Gentry warned before opening the cell door and stepping aside.

I waited until the old man left before shifting my gaze to the cuffed dwarf kneeling before me. "Rahdeas."

The man twitched at the sound of his name, but then a smile slowly carved itself across his pale face.

"My gratitude for your time and presence," he dipped his head, though I couldn't tell if it was a show of respect or mockery. "Allow me to begin."

"Begin?" I asked, but the man kept his head lowered, his eyes hidden.

I kept my guard up, uneasy. This wasn't the attitude I had expected from him.

"A lad of humble origins, born wrapped in rags in a sad little town," he began, finally lifting his head. "Within, however, he was more, born from and for a life of renown."

"And as with all heroes-to-be, the lad had the looks and the lad had the might." Rahdeas stretched out one arm while his other hand lay over his heart. "His mother taught him the world, his father taught him to fight."

I watched, dumbstruck, as the mad dwarf continued his epic.

Rahdeas's voice got deeper, darker. "That is, until the day came, when the lad saw there was a larger stage to play. His blood knew well they could no longer contain the lad's fire, which raged inside him hot as a king's funeral pyre. So they took up their bags and wished their small town good luck," Rahdeas let out a breath. "But woe, as all stories go, tragedy struck."

"Rahdeas," I said, growing annoyed with his recitation, but was silenced by a raised finger.

"But never fret, never doubt, because, as all stories go, a hero never drops out. So he grows and he grows, through heartache and death throes, never ceasing, overcoming."

Rahdeas looked up at the dim flickering light above us. "Alas, every light needs a shadow,

every hero a foe. The brighter the light, the darker its night."

Finally, Rahdeas met my gaze, grinning like a fool. "But I ask you this, hero-to-be.

What happens when your foe, who has crossed both time and space, is actually brighter than thee? Perhaps a fair maiden's shining knight, is another one's deadly blight, and the side of dark and of light, is determined only by who wins the last fight?"

An uncomfortable silence lingered as he finished his strange poem, and just when I thought things couldn't get weirder, Rahdeas, his arms chained to the ground, reached out and grabbed my hand with his blood-crusted fingers.

His glossy, soulless eyes squinted into thin, watery crescents as he smiled up at me and nodded. "Ah, good, you're real. I was afraid you were another illusion and that my performance had gone to waste."

I stared down at him, unsure how to react.

He groaned in pleasure. "I'd forgotten how warm a person could be." He gazed into the distance as he stroked my hand absently, like I was his pet housecat.

I jerked my hand from his grasp. "It seems that your time spent here has made you... unbalanced."

"Of all of the interesting and exciting words in our language, you choose 'unbalanced'? Not 'crazy' or 'insane' or 'mad,' maybe even 'cracked' or 'nutty,' but you choose 'unbalanced'?" Rahdeas snickered.

"I don't have time to waste on lectures about my word choice, especially

from someone so *unbalanced*," I stressed, narrowing my eyes.

Rahdeas shrugged. "Regardless, it is of your own free will whether you choose to ignore my words or not, poetry or prose alike."

"So that poem you just recited—"

"I thought a heart-to-heart conversation would be a bit boring. And though I'm not very well versed in the art of poetry, I had to do something to pass the time down here," Rahdeas replied seriously, but the moment of clarity lasted only a second. He leered at me, his eyes twinkling. "Or... you know, this might just be the rambling of a man 'unbalanced."

A sigh escaped me and I shook my head.

"Be honest, though. My rhyming may have been a bit elementary but it was catchy, was it not?" he grinned, wrinkles lining his ghastly skin.

My annoyance and frustration boiled over. "I don't think you understand the gravity of your situation, Rahdeas. You're going to be here for a long time, and it's going to be unpleasant. How much you cooperate, such as revealing anything that might be of help to the Council—to Dicathen—will ultimately decide *how* unpleasant. Now is not the time to worry whether your rhymes are catchy or not."

"I know precisely what sort of position I'm in and I've told you exactly what I wanted to," Rahdeas said, no longer looking at me. The dwarf was attempting to lay back and rest his head in his hands but was struggling with the chains. After several tedious moments, he settled into an uncomfortable contortion. "Again, what you gain from it is none of my concern."

I gnashed my teeth in frustration and waited in silence, hoping that he might change his mind. In the end, the traitor *shooed* me away with a wave of his hand as he began humming the rhythm of his poem.

Scoffing, I called for Gentry and had him lock Rahdeas's cell.

As I turned to leave, fuming over the traitor's attitude, my gaze landed on the other cell—this one even smaller than Rahdeas's. Despite the manainhibiting qualities of the material the cell was made of, an ominous aura

constantly seeped out of it, like rot from a corpse.

For a moment, I was tempted to open the cell.

In a short amount of time, I had grown and broken through to a stage that rivaled any mage in Dicathen. The fear that I had felt when facing Uto, even with the help of Sylvie, left a deep impression on me that I wanted to get rid of. I thought that confronting the retainer again might cleanse me of the doubt our battle had left on my spirit.

There's nothing to gain, Arthur, I scolded myself, shaking my head. He's bound, broken—a weak shadow of the creature that nearly killed you.

I left the dungeon, glad to be rid of the smell and the sound of Rahdeas's humming, though bits and pieces of his poem still echoed in my head.

The members of the Council were still waiting for me by the dungeon entrance. Six sets of eyes bored into me, waiting for me to say something—anything.

I gestured to the withered, hook-nosed interrogator behind me. "Gentry's *interrogation* tactics seem to have made Rahdeas lose a bit of his mind. He brought me all the way down here in the dead of night just to recite a poem to me."

"Poem?" Blaine said incredulously.

Everyone knew Rahdeas as a mild-mannered, intelligent dwarf who always strived for a collaborative effort. The news of his madness was met with surprised, concerned looks from the Council.

"What... was the poem about?" Virion asked hesitantly.

"To be honest, I can't quite say. As I said, he was a bit... off. Something about his poem did bother me, though" I replied. "With the Council's blessing, I will try to find out more about the poem before providing any definite answers."

"Though our tactics for extracting the truth from men such as Rahdeas have proven quite effective, it does sometimes have a lingering effect on their sanity," Gentry said with a cough. "My apologies for the false alarm. I sincerely thought he would be confessing something important."

"Seeing as nothing substantial has been revealed yet, how about we discuss this more in our next meeting?" Alduin suggested.

"I second this," Buhnd grunted. "We can choose whether to decipher his ramblings once we've had some sleep."

"If Rahdeas's state-of-mind is as you suggested, his words are likely empty of meaning," Priscilla said, already turning to leave.

After our impromptu gathering had ended, I made my way back to my room where, despite my body begging for rest, I sat wide awake, the strange poem echoing in my mind. Despite my irritability with the traitor, I wanted to believe his words still held some merit.

Dimming the light artifact on the desk to its lowest setting, I began jotting down the parts of the poem that I remembered, going verse by verse, using the rhymes and structure to guide me when my memory failed. Once complete, I read through what I'd written. Whether it was because of my exhausted state or because I had been so confused by Rahdeas's behavior, I wasn't confident with my recollection.

The main message I got from this poem was about a hero, but there was something more to it than that.

If I examined his words under the assumption that Rahdeas wasn't out of his mind—not exactly a safe assumption—he explicitly said that the poem was what he wanted to tell me. It seemed likely that this "hero" had something to do with me, so I assumed I was the "lad" described in his words.

How did Rahdeas know details of my childhood, though? It wasn't just the fact that I had a rather modest upbringing in Ashber, but the poem also said that the lad wished the town luck before a tragedy struck.

It probably wasn't too hard for Rahdeas to have done a background check on me using his resources while he was still part of the Council, but even then, this whole thing just didn't sit well. One verse was particularly unnerving, though I wasn't entirely sure I was remembering it correctly. Had he said "from a life of renown" or "for a life of renown?" I swear he said both, but how would that make sense unless... I shook my head, losing my train of thought.

Frustrated at Rahdeas for the needlessly cryptic message and at myself for dismissing his poem for the jabbering of a madman, I moved on.

The latter half of the poem was a bit more ambiguous as it began to sound more and more like the sort of overused prophecy foretold in nearly every hero story I'd read throughout both my lives.

Lines like, "the brighter the light, the darker its night" most likely had something to do with my foe being more powerful the stronger I became. As if I choose my enemies by their strength relative to my own.

Then there was the line about one person's "knight" being another's "blight." Again, I had to assume the mad dwarf was referencing me, but to whom had I been a "blight," unless he meant the Vritra and the Alacryans? Yet that was no secret and hardly bore mentioning, much less being so cryptic about it.

I thought over the poem for another half hour before I gave up, deciding to visit the dwarf in the morning and ask him to repeat his words.

Hopefully he is up for an encore.

I was still skeptical about whether the poem even meant anything, but I was powerfully curious.

Sliding into bed, I tried to empty my mind of the mad poem and my many questions related to it. As I drifted off to sleep, half-formed lines continued drifting through my head, followed by nonsensical rhyming words that fought to fit themselves into their proper places.

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ENEMY TERRITORY

CIRCE MILVIEW

"How much longer?" Fane demanded, his voice a hissing whisper. From the corner of my eye, I could see his head constantly swiveling left and right. I knew his eyes were darting from tree to tree, looking for any signs of an approaching enemy. It had been the same each time, and the long days within the cursed elven forest had only made him more agitated.

I held up two fingers, turning my focus back to the tree in front of me. The crest on my back flared and I pushed Fane's anxious needling to the back of my mind as I fought to keep my powers under control. Mana coursed through my arms and into the tree itself, slowly forming into a beacon that would light the Alacryan army's way through the mists.

"My veiling barrier isn't going to last much longer, Circe, not when I'm covering such a wide range," Cole said through gritted teeth, louder than he should have. Concerned, I glanced back at the Shield; his long brown hair was stuck to his face with sweat.

I felt more than saw it when the three-point array stabilized within the tree. I waited a moment to make sure it was entirely concealed, then let out a sigh of relief. "Done."

Without a word, Maeve grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet. I felt Cole's barrier disperse as he and Fane followed us away from the freshly imprinted array. It wasn't a good idea to hang around the source of so much

magic, despite our precautions against detection by the Dicathian forces. We'd already stumbled across the remains of another group that hadn't been cautious enough...

Despite the urgency of our task, our pace was frustratingly slow. By using my crest, I could extend my senses out to about thirty yards. Without the crest, we would have been entirely unable to navigate within the forest; I was the only one who could see more than a few feet into the thick fog that oozed between the trees, unmoved by any magic we had yet discovered. It made for slow going, though.

"Do you see anyone, Circe?" Fane asked for the fifth time, his sharp features contorted into an angry glare.

"I said I'll tell you if I see anything out of the ordinary," I snapped, shooting him a warning glare.

He narrowed his eyes, discontent, but didn't say anything else.

After about an hour of practically crawling through the fog-laden forest, I signaled for everyone to stop. "We need to place another array."

Everyone got into position: Maeve hopped up into a nearby tree, ready to defend us if necessary; Cole stayed beside me and enveloped the area in a veil to help mask the mana fluctuations while I worked; Fane circled the perimeter, watchful for approaching enemies.

After everyone was in place, I began setting up the first part of the three-point array. As a mid-tier Sentry, it wasn't difficult setting it up. The tricky part was making sure it was undetectable until I finally activated it. If there was any mana leakage at all, the elves lurking around the forest would sense it, and if even one of the arrays I had made were discovered, the whole plan would be ruined.

As if in answer to my thoughts, a bush rustled to my left. I twitched, and the mana flowing from my fingertips and seeping through the bark was disrupted. Fane was there in the space of a breath. He turned to me, a dead rodent in his hand. He smirked as he tossed the crushed corpse back into the

undergrowth.

As expected of a veteran emblem holder, I thought. The Striker's attitude was foul, but he was good at his job. Since that involved keeping me alive to finish plotting the course through the forest, I knew I shouldn't hold his lesser traits against him. Still, if an elven arrow found his throat, I wouldn't shed any tears.

Turning my focus back on the old tree, I pushed out instilled mana until it buried itself deep into the core of the tree. After it was in place, I had to cover the tracks and mana fluctuations at the site of the wound. The mana imprint left by my spell had to be manually obscured with surgical precision so that no one could sense that magic was used in the area. This step required my attention be entirely concentrated. I couldn't afford to spread my senses around us, even if it increased the risk that an elf could sneak up on us.

My dry, strained eyes grew heavy, my legs and back ached, and the fog seemed to be seeping through my ears and into my mind—but I finished it.

"Done," I mouthed at my teammates before moving onto the next point.

Kneeling down on the ground a few feet away from the tree, I repeated the process. Covering the magic's imprint was slightly easier in the soil, and when it was done, I moved on to the last part—a second tree creating a triangular shape with the first two points.

Once the three-point array was complete, we got moving again.

Maeve stuck to me like a shadow, practically touching me as we walked. Cole followed a few feet behind, ready to conjure a magical barrier at the first sign of danger. Fane brought up the rear. *A team specialized for this mission*, I thought dourly. It was exceedingly difficult to be both the newest addition to the team and the linchpin of the Alacryan army's efforts.

A combat team would normally train together for years before they went into the field, but this group's Sentry had been killed in training only a few weeks ago. Having been recently granted my emblem, I was sent in as a replacement. Fane's outright hostility was only slightly more irritating than

Maeve treating me like a child, or the puerile crush Cole seemed to be harboring toward me.

It was a source of comfort to know that we weren't the only team.

Maybe one of the other teams have already succeeded in securing a route, I hoped, knowing how unlikely that was. Out of all the teams, I knew that we were the most likely to succeed; my newly acquired emblem gave us a distinct advantage.

Maeve's arm shot out, pressing against my chest and forcing me to stop. Her amber eyes locked onto me as she pointed down. Nearly invisible beneath the fog was a shallow ditch full of wooden spikes.

"The spikes weren't sharpened, they were twisted into this shape," Maeve said in a whisper.

"Plant magic." After the initial assault on the elven forest, many survivors had reported strangling vines, choking spoors, and even trees that pulled up their roots and walked. It was amazing and horrifying to think that our enemies controlled such power.

"I thought you said this way was safe," Fane grumbled as he glared down into the pit.

"We'll have to stop somewhere safe for me to scout another route." I avoided looking at my companions. I didn't want to see the anger, the pity, or the boundless acceptance I would find in Fane's, Maeve's, or Cole's eyes. We couldn't march an army through land harboring such traps. We'd have to find a safer path.

Navigating the forest was difficult enough without the gnawing doubt starting to form like a crust at the back of my mind. Eventually, though, the physical torment of our days of endless marching was strong enough to distract me from the worry that some elf would drop out of the trees and cut us down. My legs throbbed in pain and my sore back made me feel older than my blood matriarch, but I continued on without complaint until the weak, diffused light started to dim. Somewhere out there beyond the awful fog, the sun must have

been setting.

"Merciful Vritra," I mumbled as we finally settled down for the night, nested in the thick branches of a tree.

Cole passed around strips of salted, dried meat and a candied root for each of us, giving me a gentle smile when he handed me mine; my pieces were bigger than the rest.

We ate silently, relishing the first small break in several days. As I sucked the sugar from the candied root, I thought about Cole's attitude toward me. I'd been the target of similar affections from other men during training, but my focus had always stayed on attaining my emblem. It had been easier to avoid the unwanted attention back home. Here, it was just the four of us, and I worried that if I rebuffed him too sharply it would interrupt the team dynamic, perhaps putting us all at risk. I knew there was no choice but to suffer through it, using the Shield's feelings toward me to further the mission. After the light meal, I turned my mind away from trivialities and set about finding a valid path through the fog.

Igniting my emblem, I activated True Sense. The unsettling sensation of my consciousness leaving my body felt as if I were undressing in a snowstorm. Like a ghost, I drifted through the sky, narrowing my True Sense to lock in on a single element. My head—figuratively speaking, since my actual body was sitting comatose below on a tree branch—throbbed terribly.

Particles of ambient mana glowed green as I focused on seeing wind mana. Mastery of True Sense would one day allow me to see all four elemental mana particles in the atmosphere, but for now seeing wind-attribute mana would be enough. The goal was to find any large clusters of mana, thereby leading us to the hidden kingdom of the elves.

As I extended my True Sense, the throbbing grew unbearable, and it was a struggle to maintain the incorporeal form.

Just a little longer... There!

Immediately, I was drawn back into my body, anchored by the powerful

emblem. The last twinkle of green flickered out of my vision as my physical eyes opened and a pained gasp forced free of my lungs.

"Were you successful, Circe?" Fane immediately asked, true to his impatience.

My body felt cold, like I'd fallen asleep outside only to wake in the dark, but my lips curled into a smile. "The kingdom itself is still too far away, but I found a large area of mana fluctuations about a day's travel from here."

"How large?" Maeve asked cautiously. "Large enough to be a settlement, or even a town?"

Cole ran a hand through his long hair and let out a sigh. "At least we're going the right way. Nice to know all of this hasn't been for nothing. Great job, Circe, really great work."

"As expected from a member of the Milview blood," Fane grunted, tearing off a piece of his dried meat. "Up 'til now, I was wondering if you truly were of that lineage," he added, his eyes probing me for a reaction.

Ignoring him, I looked up into the branches above us and, speaking to no one in particular, said, "I won't be able to use my emblem for another day, but after I've fully recovered, I want to do another scan to hone in on water-attribute mana."

"Sensible," Maeve said, shooting a warning look at Fane. "From our reports, these elves are particularly adept with water or wind magic." The Striker turned away from us both, spitting a hunk of gristle off the edge of his perch and falling into a sullen silence.

After finishing our modest meal, we got as comfortable as we could within the branches of the ancient tree, deep within enemy territory. Either Cole or I had to be on watch in case something approached, but since I had just expended most of my mana activating my emblem, Cole and Maeve took first watch. The weathered Shield, who was at least twenty years my senior, winked at me before erecting a small veiling barrier around us while Fane and I slept.

Despite the cold, hard branch pressed against my back and the fear of falling—even though we tied ourselves to the tree—I soon felt myself drifting off. Then Maeve was shaking me awake.

"It's been two hours," she whispered, signaling me to take over, then turning to shake Fane awake.

No need to worry about elven soldiers or Dicathian mages. These two hour shifts will be the death of me, I groaned internally.

Channeling mana into my crest, my awareness spread to a thirty-yard radius around us. Normally, I'd be able to stretch my sphere of awareness to over a hundred yards no matter the terrain, but the mysterious magic encompassing this endless forest restricted everyone's senses, even mine. I passed the time by pushing my senses as far as they would go, exploring the trees around us, feeling the shapes of bird nests and rabbit burrows.

Was it possible the animals were immune to the effects of the fog? If they could navigate within the forest, perhaps we could use that somehow? I'd trained with a young woman who could inhabit the consciousness of a small animal, see through its eyes, and give it simple directions. How far could I see if I could join my mind to one of these birds and ask it to fly over the treetops?

Farther than thirty yards, I imagine, I thought bitterly. I was saved from delving further into my own shortcomings as multiple figures entered into the range of my senses.

Elves!

Moving slowly so as not to scuff the tree or lose my balance, I turned toward Fane and gave him a meaningful look.

"How many?" Fane mouthed.

I held up three fingers and pointed in the direction they were coming from.

He nodded, and we quietly shook Maeve and Cole awake, covering their mouths while doing so in case they made a sound.

Cole quickly erected a two-layered barrier that dampened sounds and veiled

our presence. Though he was breathing heavily and starting to sweat with the labor of casting spells after erecting barriers all day and barely getting any sleep, Cole had a resolute expression that told me he'd endure. He had to.

"About a dozen yards away," I whispered solemnly.

"Hopefully they'll pass us by," Fane said. "If they seem suspicious, I'll drop down on them, breaking free of the barrier. If I can take them down quickly, I will. Otherwise, I'll run for it and draw them off. You three stay hidden." To Maeve, he added, "Keep the Sentry alive. Without her, we're doomed."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "We can all fight, Fane. Four on three is better odds than three on one."

Cole rubbed his stubbled chin. "Even if we kill them quickly, the magic will leave traces. It's too risky."

"Cole is right," Maeve added, tying her dark hair up into a tight knot. "But so is Fane. We're expendable in this mission, Circe. *You* are not. Let's avoid a fight if we can, but if we can't, you and Cole will bolt while Fane and I hold off the elves." Seeing my doubt, she smiled confidently and said, "I'll take two to four with these watered-down Dicathian mages any day."

It grated my nerves, but I understood why she was being so protective, and I knew it would be selfish to insist on throwing myself into the middle of an unnecessary battle. Out of all the teams trying to create a route to the elven kingdom, I was the only Sentry with an emblem powerful enough to navigate effectively in the Elshire Forest. Completion of the mission was priority. However, despite her insistence that the rest of them were expendable, our chances of success plummeted dramatically if any one of us were lost.

We stopped our whispering, afraid the elves might hear us even through the two-layered barrier. By the time we could hear the footsteps below us, I was holding my breath. *Oh Vritra*, please let them keep walking.

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LOST WORDS

I STEPPED BACK as Lady Vera positioned the thin metal stick she called a "foil" for a horizontal swing. Still, somehow, the foil managed to slap my left arm.

"How?" I hissed, rubbing the fresh wound. "I thought I dodged that."

"You're too focused on my weapon," Lady Vera answered, keeping her body still. "Your vision should encompass your enemy—or enemies—as a whole. What do you see differently right now?"

I looked down at the foil, still pointed at me. "Aside from the obvious?"

That earned me another smack with her weapon. "Don't get smart with me, kid."

"Okay, okay!" I yelped. "And I have a name, you know."

"I'm aware that you were named for a rather boring color," Lady Vera said bluntly. "Now, answer my question."

Afraid of getting hit again, I scanned the tall woman. She wore a dark shirt and tight-fitting black pants. Her long, curly red hair swirled like fire when she moved.

Several months had passed since my capture, torture, and subsequent rescue. After my injuries completely healed, I began my lessons with Lady Vera. While her methods were brutal and her personality was about as warm as a block of ice, she was a very effective tutor.

"Well?" she pressed, jolting me out of my thoughts.

I let out a breath and pointed at her foot. "You pivoted using your lead leg, bringing your back foot forward for longer reach."

"Good," she nodded in approval. "Although, if you weren't able to see that from the track mark on the ground—"

"Yes, yes. 'Then I don't deserve to be your student," I finished. "Now, how do I get better?"

My mentor muttered something under her breath, turned away from me, and walked over to a manmade pond she had in her yard. Our training ground, which stretched out for fifty yards in both length and width, was her backyard.

The simple fact that she even *had* a backyard in a city where high rise buildings took up nearly every available plot of land spoke a lot about her wealth and power. The entire backyard—which looked like something out of an old nature magazine—was also blocked off from the outside world by a twenty-foot wall, which made me wonder what sort of position she actually held in Wittholm Academy, the military school I was enrolled in.

As we reached the clear pond—which had actual, live fish in it—Lady Vera sat down at the edge and motioned me to join her.

"Try catching a fish with your hands," she said. "Without using ki."

"What? Won't they die if they come out of the water? I—I don't think I can afford to replace a living fish like this."

She gave me a rare smile. "Don't worry about that and just try."

Gazing warily at the rare aquatic animals, which I'd only ever seen in a frozen and processed form, I reached in and tried to scoop one up. Just as my fingers grazed the surface of the water, the gold and black fish darted off to the other end of the pond.

"So fast!" I exclaimed, marveling at its speed.

She snapped her finger to get my attention. "Again."

I plunged my hands into the water again and again but, after a dozen or more tries, hadn't so much as brushed the fish's scaly sides. Frustrated and wet, I

swiped my hand angrily through the water, only to slip on the wet stone and fall into the pool.

"Gah!" I flailed to the surface, letting out a gasp. Lady Vera just laughed.

After scrambling out of the deep pond, I laid back on the grass. "What's the point of this, anyway? It's impossible to catch one with just your bare hands."

"Is that so?" my mentor said in a haughty voice.

"Yes, it is. There is no way you can"—I lifted my head to look at her, and in Lady Vera's hand was a writhing, glistening fish—"What? No way! Do it again!"

Lady Vera shrugged and threw the fish back into the pond. "Sure."

I scrambled back to my feet and watched closely in case my mentor tried to pull a fast one and use ki or cheat in some other way.

Leaning forward, Lady Vera waited with her hand close to the surface. Just as another fish was about to swim by, she dipped her hand slowly into the water. The fish darted forward, startled by the disturbance of the water, right into Lady Vera's waiting hand. With a twitch of her fingers, she closed her fist around the fish, holding it in a firm but gentle grip.

With a smug grin, she released the fish, which shot away into the depths of the pond. "Now do you believe me?"

"I don't get it. You did it so slowly..." I mumbled. "Wait! Did you train these fish to just swim into your hand?"

"Do I look like someone who would spend my time doing something as useless as that?" My mentor gave me a deadpan look that suggested she was not, indeed, the type of person who whiled away her days training fish to do tricks in order to impress orphan boys she picked up off the street.

I scratched my head. "I guess not... but I still don't understand the point of this—unless it was for you to just show off."

Lady Vera splashed water in my face. "I did it to show you that you and these fish—these little creatures that were able to make a fool of you—are

similar."

"What?" I asked, clueless as to her meaning.

Lady Vera's hand suddenly shot out toward my face, and I whipped my head to the side to avoid being smacked.

"Your reaction speed is fast, frighteningly so," my mentor explained, patting my shoulder. "But it's instinctual, untamed—just like these fish."

"I don't understand. What do you mean 'untamed'?" I asked.

"Though you are not consciously aware of it, by the time your opponent's arms flex in order to throw a punch, your brain has already sent a signal to your body in order to react. Now, if your opponents are on the level of the students here, which is to say, they are not yet trained and experienced fighters, you hold a large advantage over them due to this ability. However, if left untrained, stronger opponents can easily predict how you're going to dodge, just like how I predicted the fish would surge forward when I grabbed it."

I thought for a moment and realized that what Lady Vera said made complete sense. "So how do I *tame* this ability?"

"By responding, not reacting," she answered, getting up and taking an offensive stance.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

She shook her head. "One is intentional, the other is instinctual. We've focused on basic conditioning for the most part, but I think you're ready to start learning how to *respond* to an enemy's attack, instead of merely *reacting*."

Grinning, I fell into a defensive stance, bouncing slightly on the balls of my feet. "The fun part!"

"Fun for me," she replied with a dark smile, swinging her foil in a figure eight. "Lucky for you, your next class starts soon, so we'll continue with this exercise tomorrow."

I let out a groan and rubbed the welt on my arm from where she hit me

earlier.

"There's a car waiting for you to get back to school," Lady Vera said, shooing me away. "Now scram—" She cut off suddenly, looking at something over my shoulder.

I turned to follow her line of sight; a young woman, one of the household staff, was walking quickly toward us.

The woman curtsied then glanced at me before speaking. "Ma'am, we've just received a call. There was some kind of explosion at Wittholm. The enforcers have locked down the school and asked all students and staff to stay away until further notice."

"The enforcers? But why—" I felt my stomach drop suddenly. "Oh my god, Nico—"

"A panicked man may drown in a puddle, while a calm man may swim across the ocean, Grey," Lady Vera said sagely.

I frowned. "What?"

"It means calm down."

I opened my mouth to respond, but she cut me off, pointing across the yard. Another servant was walking quickly toward us. He bowed before he reached us and, addressing me, said, "Mr. Grey, you have an urgent call from a Mr. Nico. I apologize for interrupting, but he seems quite upset."

Forgetting myself, I took two steps toward Lady Vera's house before I remembered to ask permission. She waved me off.

"Go, Grey. See to your friend. Then return. Since you apparently don't have class today, we can keep working on your reactions."

"Nico!" I gasped into the receiver, having sprinted into the house from the yard. "What is it? Are you okay?"

"Grey! Grey, I don't know what happened—the ki restrainer must've malfunctioned—but I checked it just a few days ago and it was fine. I don't know what happened! It's all my fault!" he said. It sounded like he was

choking back tears.

"What happened, Nico? What's your fault? You're not making any sense."

"It's Cecilia. She had one of her accidents. Can you—can you come down to the school, Grey? The enforcers are here, they've been taking interviews and asking all kinds of questions—I'm scared, Grey. What if they take her away? Please?"

"But Cecilia... she's not hurt? She's alive?"

"Yes, but what if they lock her up? It was bad Grey, really bad. She demolished part of the administration building."

"They..." I hesitated, unsure. Would Lady Vera let me go to the academy if I asked? Or would she just scold me and tell me to stay out of it, to keep my eyes forward and let the enforcers sort it out. I knew the answer. "They've asked everyone to stay away. I can't come, Nico. I mean, I want to, but they wouldn't let me in."

"Can you meet me somewhere else, then? We need to figure out what to do if they try to lock her up—"

"Nico," I cut in, "Listen, we don't know that's going to happen, right? Just don't panic. A panicked—a panicked man can drown in a puddle, but a calm man can swim across oceans or something like that. We just need to stay calm."

"So, where can we meet?" There was desperation in his voice, but all I could picture was Lady Vera's stern face, pinched with disappointment when I asked to skip extra lessons today.

"I'm sorry, Nico, but I can't. Lessons, you know? But I'm sure everything is going to be okay. Just keep your head down and don't make trouble. Who knows, maybe this could even be a good thing, maybe someone will take notice and get help for Cecilia so she doesn't have to rely on just—" I stopped, realizing I was about to put my foot in my mouth. So she doesn't have to rely on just your inventions...

"Oh, okay. I'm sorry, Grey. I'm sure you've got a lot on your plate, trying to

be king and all. I'll... well, I'll let you go." I could practically hear his shoulders slump and his head droop through the receiver. Lady Vera was right though, I had to keep my eyes forward, toward the future. If I became king, not only could I avenge Headmaster Wilbeck, I could keep Nico and Cecilia safe, too.

"Give me a call once you find out what the enforcers' intend to do, alright?" "Yeah, sure. Bye, Grey." The line went dead.

I sat by myself for a moment, thinking about Cecilia and Nico. *It's going to be fine*, I told myself. *Tell yourself that enough, Grey, and you might start to believe it.*

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I opened my eyes, letting out a deep breath. It'd only been a few days since my last dream, or memory, or whatever these visions were, and this one was particularly bad. It was a memory that I would never forget, dream or no dream.

I looked outside the window to see that the sun had yet to fully rise, which meant that I had at most only two or three hours of sleep.

With a groan, I got out of bed and washed up, hoping cold water would help wash out the fatigue that seemed to have made a permanent home in my body.

'You're awake?' my bond asked, not bothering to speak.

"Yeah. I don't think I can fall back asleep. Want to join me for a morning stretch outside?"

'As enticing as that sounds, it would require me to get out of bed,' she replied, pulling the covers over her head.

"Growing children do need their sleep," I agreed with a chuckle, drying my hair with a towel.

'That immature retort speaks volumes about which one of us is the child,' she replied casually.

I let out a laugh. You got me there.

After dressing in a plain, loose shirt and dark trousers, I headed for the door. As I passed my desk, I glanced down at the messy paper filled with bits and pieces of the poem that I tried to remember.

On second thought, I'll give Rahdeas a short visit. Hopefully he's functional enough to repeat the poem or, even better, give me a straight explanation.

I greeted the few maids and workers who were already awake and preparing for the day as I made my way down to the dungeon.

Walking through the long, dimly lit hallway leading to the entrance of the first level, I spotted a familiar face guarding the door—using the term "guarding" very loosely.

Albold Chaffer, the young elf who Virion had introduced me to on an earlier visit, was currently nodding off at his post beside the large metal door.

With a smirk, I erased my presence and softened my breathing. I coated my footsteps in mana in the same precise manner I did back when I was training alone in the forests of Epheotus.

Cautiously, I crept toward the sleeping guard, but as soon as I was within a few yards of the door, Albold's eyes shot open and a thick layer of mana covered his body. His swords carved through the air between us as he unleashed a quick crossing attack. I stopped short, surprised that he had noticed my approach and reacted so swiftly.

"General Arthur?" he said incredulously, quickly sheathing his twin blades.

"Ah... you caught me." Albold looked at his feet. "Please don't tell Commander Virion. I only have a few days left doing guard duty. I can't stay here any longer!"

"Relax, I was just impressed," I chuckled. "Virion was right, your senses are good."

"It's saved my ass more than a couple times in my life," Albold said, smiling sheepishly. "So, what can I do for you, General?"

[&]quot;Sorry about that, I swore I felt someone sneaking up on me."

[&]quot;I was sneaking up on you. Weren't you asleep?" I asked suspiciously.

"I need to speak to a prisoner," I replied. "Is Gentry inside?"

Albold nodded and opened the door. "I can't think of a time where he hasn't been inside."

Albold led me inside, and we soon found Gentry asleep on a cot in one of the nearby cells.

"Who... Wh-what's going on?" Gentry mumbled when we shook him awake.

"G-General? To what do I owe the pleasure of your disturbing my rest?"

"Just returning the favor," I said with a smirk. "Can you open Rahdeas's cell for just a moment? There's something I want to ask him," I explained.

The interrogator rubbed his eyes as he stood and stretched, his joints cracking and his bones creaking like an animated skeleton. "Of course—and my apologies again for calling the entire Council. I was certain that the traitor was going to reveal something important."

Gentry set about unlocking the door that led down to the lower level of the dungeon. After a few clicks, he motioned for Albold to help, and the two of them heaved the doors open.

We all froze. Gentry's assistant was splayed out on the floor with several black spikes through his body. Seeing the spikes, my gaze immediately veered toward the cell that Uto was in; the vault door was open, and the retainer stood just outside it, leaning against the wall.

Heart hammering in my chest, I immediately imbued mana around me and threw myself in front of Gentry and Albold, fearing that Uto would attack at any moment, but the retainer was completely still and silent.

"Duve!" Gentry cried, oblivious to the retainer.

"He—he's dead," I muttered, focused solely on Uto. As my mana-enhanced eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could make out the spikes piercing through his chest and stomach, pinning him to the wall like an insect pinned in a box. He was smiling.

"Rahdeas!" I stepped inside the dungeon and immediately felt the magicrestricting wards draining away my protections. Jumping over the assistant's corpse, I swung open the door to Rahdeas's cell, only to see that the old dwarf had met the same fate as Uto and Duve. He was dead.

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BROTHER'S CONSENT

I KNEW that the unexpected deaths of Rahdeas and Uto would be enough to send a ripple of panic through every echelon of the noble families, both within the castle and without. Holding two major Alacryan prisoners created a certain semblance of power and control for the people of Dicathen.

To prevent chaos, the Council did what countless leaders have done when faced with similar setbacks: They covered it up.

Gentry, Albold, and I were all questioned thoroughly by the Council since we were the ones present at the scene.

Considering the black spikes used to skewer the three corpses, it was obvious none of us were responsible for the attack. Still, a majority of my day was taken up by this. Eventually Gentry was left to grieve over his assistant, who he apparently cared very much for, and Albold was released from his guard duty and sent back to Elshire Forest to assist the forces there.

As for me, I was standing in front of Virion in his private office. He sat behind his desk with a grim expression.

"Cynthia Goodsky died this way as well, right?" I confirmed.

Virion nodded, his eyes unfocused.

"You must be worried about everyone's safety. Three people have been killed, apparently by enemy forces, in the most secure location in Dicathen—a flying castle that has existed since ancient times."

"Do you think I'd allow people to stay here if I was worried for their safety?"

Virion retorted. "I'm not in the mood for tests, Arthur. I know you noticed as well. It was the same with Cynthia."

"It's good that you realized," I said, smiling sadly.

No one had infiltrated the castle. No matter how much I thought it over, it just wasn't possible. The layers of defense that one would have pierce in order to get inside of this castle, not to mention breaching the prison level, just to kill two prisoners—it didn't add up. If an intruder could get into the castle, why not attempt to assassinate the Council? Or one of the Lances? It didn't make any sense, which led me to the answer that the attack had to have come from within.

Not from someone on our side, but from within Rahdeas and Uto's bodies.

Just like Cynthia, who had a powerful curse embedded inside her, it made sense for Rahdeas and even a retainer to have that as well in case they were captured. From the way the black spikes seemed to bloom out of Rahdeas and Uto's bodies, I felt sure that their curse had been activated.

As for Duve—Gentry's unfortunate assistant—it seemed he had just been caught in the explosion of spikes that shot out from within the two prisoners. *That had to be the case; it doesn't make any sense otherwise.*

Agrona had made it clear that the whole point of this war was to take over this continent with as few casualties as possible so that he could conquer and utilize the resources—living and non-living—available here to strengthen his power and attack Epheotus head on. It wouldn't make sense for him to kill only the prisoners if he had the power to send someone inside the castle.

Does that mean Rahdeas revealed something important? It was too much of a coincidence that he died right after telling me that poem. Had Rahdeas purposely communicated in the form of a poem to try to bypass the curse? Cynthia's curse had restricted her from revealing, or even thinking about revealing, anything relevant.

"Any plans for what to do next?" I asked, forcing myself out of the neverending web of speculation in my head. "For now, consolidating the priorities of the Council members comes first. They were already restless after the attack on the southern borders of the Elshire Forest. Now this..." The old elf let out a ragged sigh that seemed to contain a bit of his weathered soul. "To be honest, Arthur, I'm at quite a loss at the moment. This war... the scale is so unlike any war this land has faced, yet—"

"Things have been too quiet," I finished. "I agree. I feel like something big is about to happen. I'm just not sure what."

The room grew quiet as we both mulled over our thoughts. Eventually, Virion let out a cough. "Well, no use worrying right now. There are things that must be done. Arthur, you're on standby as of now, correct?" "Yes."

General Aya was currently stationed in Elenoir, while General Mica assisted in the investigation of the radical group in Darv. General Varay was helping to fortify the major cities across the western coast. Finally, General Bairon was supposed to be scouting the northern range of the Grand Mountains, searching for any signs of retainers or Scythes. I had wanted to help out, but because the Alacryans had been so quiet, despite the seemingly random attack on the outskirts of Elshire Forest, there was nothing that needed my attention.

"Okay. For now, stay in the castle and get used to your new core. You'll be sent out immediately if any of the cities report anything unusual, so I need you to be in top condition," Virion declared. I turned to leave when Virion's voice called out from behind, bringing me to a stop. "Oh, and Arthur?"

Looking back at the commander over my shoulder, I responded, "Yes?"

He smiled. "I know you don't care for this kind of thing, but as a Lance, don't you think you should be dressed a bit more appropriately?"

Looking down at the loose shirt and dark trousers I had on, I chuckled. "Perhaps I should."

Several minutes later I had arrived outside of my room, and I could hear a

faint voice speaking from inside; it sounded like my sister.

"...have to help me, okay? Promise?"

Sylvie must've told her I was here because my sister stopped talking.

Opening the door, I was greeted by Ellie and Sylvie, who were sitting on the couch. Boo, who was lying on the ground with his giant head propped up on top of my bed like a pillow, acknowledged my presence with a snort before closing his eyes.

"H-hi, Brother," my sister said, smiling weakly.

Sylvie gave a simple wave of her hand.

That's not suspicious, I thought.

'You're over-thinking,' my bond immediately replied back, making it even more suspicious.

"Anyway, what happened for you to be gone so long?" my sister asked, clearly a bit upset that I hadn't had the chance to spend time with her since I came back.

"Just more meetings I had to attend," I said vaguely. "Anyway, I'm free now."

"Does that mean you'll finally spend some time with your precious sister?"

"Yup, if you're okay with the training grounds, that is. Sylv and I both have things to test before an actual fight."

"That's exactly what I was about to suggest!" my sister exclaimed, grabbing her bow, which was propped up against the wall beside her.

Before we left, I changed into more *socially appropriate* attire, which was just a high-collared military tunic that covered the red scars on my neck and a more fitted pair of trousers. Compared to the rest of the Lances, I was still dressed rather casually but at least I didn't look like some farmer's kid.

"Your hair is almost as long as mine. When are you going to cut it?" Ellie asked teasingly as I tied my hair back.

I shrugged. "When I feel the need to."

We made our way to the training room. A pair of soldiers guarded the area,

and they were arguing over something when we approached.

"I'm telling you that it's not the—General Arthur!" The armored man on the left clicked his heels and saluted and his companion did the same.

"There are currently several mages practicing inside. Would you like us to clear them out?" the guard on the right asked as they let us inside.

Because of the sheer power that could be generated from a white core mage, the training room was usually emptied and the walls were additionally fortified when a Lance trained.

"No need. I'm not the one training today," I said, following my excited sister through the doors. Sylvie and Boo trailed behind us as we stepped onto the loose earth that made up the floor.

The large room was lively; various nobles around my sister's age, all well-adorned in stylish robes and tunics, tested spells while guardians and tutors looked on and provided instruction. Those training here all had privileges that extended from family members of high rankings within the army. Being able to live and train in the castle meant that they were safe, a luxury that only the top houses and the families of captains had.

Seeing the large entrance open, a few heads turned my way, and the private instructors and adults all immediately recognized me and bowed respectfully.

A woman who looked a few years older than my mother walked up to me with an amiable smile. "It's an honor to see a Lance like this. If you are here to train, I will take my son and his friends elsewhere to learn."

"It's okay," I smiled back. "Just here to stretch a little. Don't mind us."

"Hurry up!" Ellie exclaimed, already several yards ahead.

"If you'll excuse me..." I followed after my sister with Sylvie and Boo in tow.

"Your sister really wants to impress you," Sylvie said with a smile. "Don't be too hard on her."

"Aww, that's no fun." I glanced at my bond. "Get ready to 'stretch' as well. I

want to see what you can do before we get into an actual battle."

"Is that okay with all of these people here?" she asked.

"We'll tone it down a bit. If we really wanted to go all out, we'd have to find a very large valley somewhere very uninhabited."

My bond snorted. "True. Very well, I'm also curious to see how well I've adjusted to this new form."

Making our way to the far end of the training grounds near the pond, I launched a slab of earth at my sister.

"Incom—" I was cut off as three arrows of mana pierced through the slab, shattering it.

Ellie turned her head back at me with a smirk. "You're going to have to do better than that, Brother."

Sylvie and I exchanged glances.

"Looks like I might not get the chance to be hard on her," I said, shaking my head.

Time passed quickly in the training grounds despite the fact that all I did was create targets for my sister. It gave me the chance to really test the limits of what I could create with organic magic. Freeforming spells into odd and sometimes intricate shapes seemed to fascinate the children who had gathered around us to watch the show.

The noble kids would *ooh* and *ahh* as I conjured birds made of ice to flit around in the air while my sister attempted to shoot them down. Some of these spells weren't very applicable in battle, but it helped me metaphorically stretch my abilities and see what I could and couldn't do in a set amount of time.

I tried raising earthen soldiers like Olfred, the traitorous dwarven Lance, had been able to, but after raising three simple humanoid golems, my control over them faltered to the extent that they simply mimicking each other's movements. My asuran trainer, Wren, was able to control hundreds of golems at a time, each so precisely that they seemed like sentient beings.

A shame one is forbidden to help and the other is dead. Not that either would have offered to teach me if they were here. The thought left a bad taste in my mouth.

Rather than dwelling on the past, I focused my attention on the task at hand. I owed it to Ellie to be present for her.

Let's try kicking things up a notch.

With a wave of my arm, I conjured a current of fire that began twisting and shaping itself into the form of a huge, flaming bear. The ground where its legs touched sizzled from the heat as I willed my creation to walk toward Ellie.

Boo, who had been watching from beside me, tilted his head in curiosity at the flaming beast. Some of the noble kids let out gasps and their instructors shushed them and tried to explain what I was doing.

"Your offense is good, Ellie, but what happens when a spell that you can't just shoot down with arrows comes at you?" I called out.

Ellie just grinned confidently as she drew her bow. A shimmering, white arrow manifested nocked to the bowstring. Just before she loosed the mana arrow, a slight undulation rippled across the shaft.

The arrow shrieked as it flew toward my fiery copy of Boo. I had expected Ellie's spell to simply pierce through harmlessly, but as it impacted my spell, the entire arrow exploded in a ray of light, dispersing the flaming beast.

I blinked. "That was—"

"Impressive? Superb? Jaw-dropping?" my sister finished, her eyes twinkling.

"Not bad. It was not bad," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Mhmm." Ellie put on a dignified air, trying unsuccessfully to hide her selfsatisfied smile.

As the day went by, I moved on from conjuring elemental targets to testing her body's defenses. Ellie's ability to conjure a protective layer of mana over her body was flawless, and fast enough to rival some of the upperclassmen I had seen at Xyrus. Due to her unnaturally intricate control of her mana, she was able to layer mana over specific portions of her body almost instantly and create a fairly durable protective panel.

I put the scabbard of Dawn's Ballad, which I had been using to spar with Ellie in close range, back inside my dimension ring. "Did you learn close-quarters combat with your bow from Helen too?"

My sister plopped down on the ground, sweating and panting. "Yup... I read a couple books that helped too."

"Most archers carry around a dagger or even a light sword for close combat," I mused. "But since your archery doesn't depend on you drawing an arrow from your quiver and nocking it before firing, learning how to fend off a few attacks in order to give yourself some space for a quick shot was the right decision."

"Your compliments seem... somewhat dull," my sister said in between breaths.

"Because that wasn't a compliment. Don't get ahead of yourself," I said, smirking. "We've only been drilling for a few hours. Your stamina needs improvement."

"That's... not even fair," Ellie huffed.

"What your brother means to say is that he's very proud of your growth," Sylvie comforted Ellie with a smile.

"Woah, no verbally expressing my thoughts!" I protested in mock outrage.

"This was rigged from the start, anyway." Ellie stuck out her tongue. "I mean, how can you dodge an arrow fired at point blank range—repeatedly."

"White core—Lance—I better be able to dodge a few arrows at least, right?" My sister narrowed her eyes. "You didn't even break a sweat."

"You'll get there with enough training and experience," I replied.

Ellie glanced to Sylvie before looking back at me. "Speaking of getting enough experience, I was wondering if I can maybe... you know..."

I raised a brow. "I know... what?"

"N-never mind," my sister muttered.

"Ellie," Sylvie chimed in, shaking her head. "Just say it."

"Does this have anything to do with what you two were talking about before I came back from my... meeting?" I asked.

"I want to start helping out in the war!" my sister said, unable to look me in the eyes.

Even though I saw this coming, my heart still sank.

'Arthur...' Sylvie sent, feeling my emotions.

"You said it yourself—thought it yourself—that I was a lot better," my sister continued when I didn't answer. "I'm confident that I'm better than a lot of the soldiers that have been assigned to squads. I'm okay with being in the reserves and since I'm an archer, I'd be in the rear anyway so—"

"Ellie," I interrupted, kneeling down so I was eye-level with my sister.

With a wave of my hand, a barrier of wind surrounded the four of us. I didn't feel comfortable having others listening to family conversations.

"I'm not saying no, but I'm also not sure if I'm allowed to make this decision for you. Mom and Dad aren't here, and to be honest, we haven't exactly been on the same track these days," I said.

"You guys still haven't made up since you left to go train?" my sister asked, concern laced in her voice.

"You knew?"

"I'm young, not dumb," my sister said, frowning.

"Right. Sorry."

I looked at Sylvie, who simply gave me an encouraging smile. Letting out a sigh, I gave in. "How about we go on a mission together? If you do well, I'll give you my blessing. I can't speak for Mom or Dad, but I won't hold you back on it."

"Okay!" Ellie beamed. "Thank you."

'That was very fair of you,' my bond approved.

I shot Sylvie a smile before standing back up. "Anyway, since that's out of the way—Sylvie, it's your turn."

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COORDINATION

Although My Bond had the appearance of a little girl even younger than my sister—if you disregarded the horns sprouting out from her head—she was still an asura.

After having the guards clear out our small audience, none of whom appeared interested in continuing their training regardless, I began pouring mana into the large mana crystal responsible for powering up the defensive mechanisms within the training grounds. A low hum reverberated throughout the cavernous room and the walls and ceiling glowed dimly.

I allowed my sister to stay with us in the training room, but I had her stay near the entrance, behind Boo, in case one of our spells accidentally flew in her direction.

"Do I really have to stay this far away when you two are just practicing? I can hardly see you, even with mana-enhanced sight!" Ellie complained as she peeked her head out from behind the huge bear.

Ignoring her, I continued to stretch, taking extra time to stretch out the muscles of my legs.

"Are you not going to stretch? Do you even need to stretch?" I questioned my bond, who was standing perfectly still, watching me.

"Considering I can barely use this body for basic daily functions, I'm a bit hesitant to try anything more," Sylvie replied, frowning.

"Better to practice now than in the middle of battle, right?" I countered,

balancing on one leg as I stretched my aching thigh.

Sylvie huffed but did as I suggested. She attempted to mirror my pose, only to stumble. After a few more minutes of her wild gesticulations, frustrated sighs, and the occasional tumble as we went through a series of stretches, we began our training.

"So, how do you want to go about this?" I asked. Having only seen her use her dragon form to fight alongside me, I had no idea how she planned on fighting in her humanoid form.

"Stay still for a bit," she replied, raising her arm and pointing an open palm in my direction.

My eyes widened in surprise as a missile of light flew from her palm, but I quickly coated my hand in mana and swatted the missile away.

"A mana arrow?" I looked at the shallow cut on the side of my palm. Despite the spell's similarity to Ellie's mana arrows, Sylvie's attack was much more dense—almost solid.

"Ellie's use of elementless mana gave me a few ideas on how to best take advantage of my traits," she answered, sending another arrow of mana my way.

This time the arrow—or more accurately, the harpoon, considering the size of the shining projectile—moved in a slight arc rather than in a straight line.

I made no attempt to block or dodge the incoming spell this time. Instead, coating my hand in a thick layer of mana, I snatched Sylvie's mana harpoon out of the air.

The speed of her spell jerked my arm backwards, but I held on firmly. I had expected the projectile to disperse immediately, but it remained in my hand even while I gripped down on it with a force sufficient enough to shatter stone.

Although Sylvie may have gotten the idea for her attack from watching Ellie, the composition of the two spells couldn't be more different.

The raw power of the spell isn't that high, but in order to pack so much mana

this densely into this form so quickly...

My mind wandered off as I contemplated the possible applications of my bond's magic. By the time I looked back at my hand, the mana arrow had disappeared.

"Mana manipulation for dragons is limited to pure mana only, right?"

"If you don't take into account my race's ability to manipulate aether, yes," Sylvie said. "Although there's something else..."

"What is it?" I asked, curious.

"I'm not quite sure myself. Having spent some time in this form, I've been able to get a better grasp of my core, yet there's a part of it that I still can't seem to access," she answered.

"Maybe you'll be able to access it once you grow stronger," I said. "For now, let's see how versatile your control over pure mana is."

I launched a dozen fire arrows with a swing of my arm. The streaks of fire fanned out, converging on her from all sides.

A shimmering barrier of light enveloped Sylvie, and for a moment I lost sight of her as she was engulfed in fire and dust. Once the flames died out and the dust settled, I could see her standing at the center of a scorched patch of dirt, arms crossed. She yawned.

"Try to create individual panels to block each projectile," I barked out, sending another wave of fire arrows.

Sylvie's brows knit in concentration as she managed to conjure a large sphere of pure mana from her palm that separated into multiple panes to block my spells.

By then, though, I had already closed the distance between us and had the broken blade of Dawn's Ballad pressed against her arm. Rather than flesh, my blade met a patch of black scales that appeared from beneath her skin.

Despite my attack's failure, Sylvie seemed genuinely surprised by my followup.

I sheathed my broken sword and waved her over to provide my evaluation.

"Your control over pure mana is excellent, and, considering how dense your spells are, it seems your mana reserves are quite large. Your body innately provides good physical defense even if you are a bit slow."

Although Sylvie held in her smile, I could tell through our mental link how proud she was feeling.

"Still, I don't think your attacks are strong enough to threaten retainers and Scythes," I continued. "What else have you noticed about this form compared to your draconic form?"

Sylvie thought for a moment. "My innate defenses are a bit weaker in this form. You held that strike back, but if you had attacked me seriously with Dawn's Ballad, I would've lost a limb."

"Good to know." I nodded. "Anything else?"

"My control over mana is better in this form, but my dragon form allows me to utilize more of my mana in a single breath—albeit a more unrefined form," my bond explained, twirling several orbs of mana around her hand as if to emphasize her point.

"I see," I muttered, taking a few steps back. "There are a couple more things I want to test out, Sylv. Can you conjure a square pane in front of me?"

I could feel her curiosity flare up, but I hid my intentions as best I could.

With a twitch of her wrist, the spheres of mana that had been orbiting her hand shot out and converged into a bigger orb before flattening out into a square.

"Keep it stable," I ordered, cocking my fist back. I punched Sylvie's panel of mana, and, while it trembled from the impact, it stayed where it was.

"What about distance? How far out can you conjure a spell and keep control over it?"

In answer, Sylvie stretched out a hand and willed away the panel of mana I had just punched. The spell rounded out into a bubble as it hurled toward the back wall of the room. Sylvie then closed her outstretched hand into a fist, suspending the orb in midair.

"Move it left," I said, concentrating on the shining orb.

Upon Sylvie's direction, the orb easily darted left, stopping just before it hit the wall.

"Bring it back, change it into an arrow."

I led Sylvie through a series of exercises, gradually adding more orbs for her to manage. We kept going until there were ten orbs, five of which I had instructed Sylvie to change into flat panels. By the end of the drill, Sylvie was sweating profusely, but I had a pretty good idea for how we were going to coordinate in battle.

Four days passed in the blink of an eye. I spent a majority of the time in the training grounds, drilling with Ellie and Sylvie until they were both mentally and physically drained. It was a great change of pace for me as well, and I felt my control over the mana being refined by my white core steadily improve. While Sylvie had yet to unlock more of the abilities hidden away in her core, and we hadn't had the chance to practice any sort of coordinated fighting together, she and my sister still improved greatly under my scrutinizing tutelage. After our morning drills—target practice for my sister and multitasking with mana spheres for my bond—we took a break.

Sylvie, Ellie, Boo, and I rested near the grassy patch beside the pond, eating sandwiches provided by the castle cooks.

"Hey, Art," my sister said as she absentmindedly picked the vegetables off her sandwich. "What would you say are the biggest drawbacks of fighting using pure mana? From what I've seen while watching you and Sylvie practice, her spells seem really versatile, even against all your elemental attacks."

"Stop picking them out and just eat it," I chided, gently slapping her hand. "And to answer your question, I can think of three big reasons why most mages prefer to use magic of their elemental affinity rather than just pure mana spells. First, it uses up a lot of your mana reserves."

"More so than elemental spells?" Ellie interrupted.

"Pure mana can only come from your mana core, which—as you know from experience—is time-consuming to gather and purify. Elemental magic does use mana from your core, but it's also powered by the ambient mana that surrounds us," I explained.

Ellie's brows furrowed as she tried to wrap her head around the concept. "I'm not sure I follow."

I thought for a moment, trying to come up with an appropriate analogy. "Ah, so it's kind of like this. Imagine I'm on top of a snowy hill and I'm trying to hit you, at the bottom, with a snowball."

"Why am I the one getting hit?" she frowned.

I looked at her with a deadpan expression. Sylvie chuckled beside me as she tossed a sandwich to Ellie's drooling bond.

"Okay, okay. Please continue."

"A mage using elemental magic would first make a snowball with his hands, but instead of just throwing it, he would roll it down the hill so that the snowball picks up more snow from the ground. By the time it hits you, the snowball is the size of Boo," I continued.

Upon hearing his name, Boo let out grunt, looking at me expectantly. When no treats were forthcoming, he turned his attention back to Sylvie, who was the only one feeding him.

"Now, a mage using a pure mana spell of the same power will have to make the snowball and pack it with more and more snow until it's the size of Boo, then throw it at you. See the difference?"

"That sounds like a lot of work," Ellie admitted. "Okay, what are the other reasons?"

"It's harder to effectively control pure mana once it's been expelled from your body, and"—I willed a field of stone spikes to shoot out from the ground a few dozen yards from where we sat—"unlike what I did just now, pure mana spells must originate from the caster."

I could tell from the look on my sister's face that the proverbial light seemed to have lit up in her head.

"Anyway, since we've had a break, why not continue a little longer?" I suggested, getting up.

"Yes!" Ellie agreed, bolting up as well. "Hey Sylvie, can you do what you did earlier and make those moving panels? I want to try to hit them!"

"Sure. If you shoot some mana arrows off course, I can practice reacting as well!"

Feeling more content than I had in awhile, I watched the two run off together. Past them, the doors to the training room opened and a single guard came running in. Judging from his expression, I knew whatever he had to tell me wasn't good.

Sylvie's and Ellie's eyes followed the guard, who stopped in front of me and saluted before speaking.

"General Arthur! News of a massive corrupted beast horde has come from the Wall. Commander Virion is currently waiting for you at the dock with a team of mages."

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ENEMY TERRITORY II

CIRCE MILVIEW

Stooping, I dipped my swollen, dirty hand into the cold stream, relishing the soothing sensation of the icy water on my skin. I scrubbed the grime from my hands and forearms, then my face. Sitting on the bank, I jerked my boots off, then peeled my stinking socks free of my aching feet and plunged them into the stream. It felt heavenly.

I had told the others a rinse in the stream would revitalize us, but Fane just rolled his eyes and Maeve said it wasn't worth the risk. Dicathian patrols had passed within a stone's throw on three separate occasions over the last two days, and the she-demon elf had twice flown over our heads. Maeve was right, of course, so I had felt a little bit guilty when I dropped lightly from the tree we'd made our camp in. I had waited until everyone but Cole was asleep, and he didn't argue when I ducked away.

Cupping my hands, I scooped up the clear water and poured it over my cracked lips and into my mouth, which had felt like it was full of cotton for days. It was the first moment of relaxation I'd had since entering the elves' awful forest. It was impossible to feel entirely at peace, however. My senses pushed out as far as my crest would allow, straining through the enchanted mist.

I jumped when I sensed a figure approaching from behind me, but it was only Cole.

"Want a turn, eh?" I whispered, smiling wryly. "Fine, I'll head back to the tree and keep watch. Can you keep the barrier up from here?"

Cole stopped, giving me an embarrassed sort of shrug. "No, but I—well, I wanted to come make sure you were okay..."

I wiggled the naked toes of my left foot in his direction. "Are you sure you weren't sneaking over here to steal a peak at my exposed bits, Cole?"

I felt his pulse rise and sensed rather than saw the flush that spread across his face. Much too loud, he said, "No, Circe—I'm sorry, I never meant to—"

I shushed him, glancing around us with wide eyes, feeling suddenly foolish for coming to the stream by myself. We were completely exposed there, and who knew how well those pointy elven ears could hear. Like a child afraid of the dark, my pulse raced and I yearned suddenly for the warmth and comfort of home and family. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have teased you," I said, keeping my voice low, "and we shouldn't be here. Let's get back to the others before they realize we've left them asleep and unguarded. Fane will skin me alive if he finds out I tempted you away from your post."

Cole just nodded and turned back toward the camp, clearly too embarrassed to speak. I quickly pulled my sweat-stiff socks back over my clean feet and slipped into my boots. Cole moved slowly, letting me catch up. I watched his feet as we walked. *If only my crest let me sense what is happening in his head*, I thought. I had no interest in the older soldier romantically, but neither did I bare him any ill will. We needed him, and we all needed to focus on the mission.

Distracted, I didn't immediately notice as another figure, approaching from behind, entered into the range of my senses. My breath caught in my throat and I grabbed Cole by the shoulder. He turned, mouth open to speak, but the look on my face stopped him dead. Fear roiled through me like a wildfire in my veins and I froze like some stupid prey animal that's caught the smell of a predator. *Move, dolt!* I snarled in my mind, but the most I could manage was a glance behind us into the fog.

I felt the dampening pressure of a shield being conjured around me, followed by the snapping of wood as an arrow shattered six inches in front of my face. By the time I had flinched back from the shower of splinters, two more arrows had impacted the barrier.

The fear burned away the paralysis and I burst into motion. "Run!"

Side by side, Cole and I darted through the trees. Every few seconds I would hear the sound of an arrow impacting the shield, but Cole held it firm. There were three elves, and they were gaining on us quickly.

I led them back to our camp tree. It was risky, but Cole and I couldn't outpace them, not in this forest. Our only hope was that Fane and Maeve had heard the yell and would be prepared when we reached them.

Cole began to slow as we approached the tree, perhaps intending to attempt a frantic climb up to our companions, but I pulled him along. We ran past, directly under the branches where, thirty feet above, Fane and Maeve slept. I could sense their movement; they were awake, at least.

Seconds later, Fane leapt from the branches, crashing down atop the lead elf, his long spear piercing the elf from her shoulder all the way to her hip. The second elf had been following too close to stop and had run full speed into Fane's back, sending them both tumbling, but the third jumped aside, turning his nocked arrow toward Fane as the Striker rolled to his feet, a dagger gleaming in his hand.

Cole and I threw ourselves to the ground behind a large tree, and I watched breathlessly with my expanded senses as Fane launched himself at the elf. Our Striker was fast, but so was the elf. The arrow struck Fane near the shoulder, glancing off his breastplate and lodging in the meat of his neck. The elf had given up his chance to dodge in order to take the shot, though, and slumped to the ground with Fane's dagger between his ribs.

The last Dicathian soldier bolted, certainly trying to escape and find reinforcements, but a jet of green light lanced through the mist and caught him in the back. He dropped dead not ten feet from where Cole and I lay

panting in the dirt.

"Fane's hurt," I whispered to Cole, standing up and offering him my hand. "Come on."

Maeve was still making her way down the tree as we approached. Fane glared at me as he snapped the tail off the arrow protruding from his neck and pulled the shaft free, staining his hands crimson. Blood poured down his neck.

"What the fuck happened?" He snarled, one hand pressed over his wound. "I__"

"Explanations later," Maeve said, having just dropped out of the tree. She threw me a leather bundle. "Patch that up as best you can. Cole, get a barrier up, as wide as you can. I'll see what we can do about these bodies."

"There's a ditch over there," I said, pointing. "Deep enough for—for three bodies."

Cole sat at the base of the tree and conjured his two-layered shield while Maeve dragged the corpses away one by one. Clumsily, I bandaged Fane's wounds. This was made more difficult by his constant need to turn and glare at me, but I was able to stop the bleeding. Maeve had just returned from depositing the third corpse into the ditch when I sensed them.

"Oh no," I groaned.

"What now?" Fane asked, following my line of sight out into the darkness.

"Two more figures. Approaching cautiously."

"The barrier won't be enough to hide us if they've already detected the traces of magic," Cole mumbled, his brow knit in concentration.

"Go," Fane ordered, looking at Maeve. The Caster held his eye for a moment, then nodded.

"Wait, what?" Perhaps it was the stress and the exhaustion, but I was having trouble following along. "What are you going to do?"

"He's going to lead them off," Maeve said somberly. "Give us a chance to escape. Fane's the only one fast enough to keep ahead of them."

I wanted to say something, to apologize, but he was already jogging off through the trees. Wordlessly, Maeve started in the opposite direction. Cole and I shared a brief look full of guilt and remorse, then followed.

"Maeve! I need a break," I gasped in between ragged breaths.

Maeve, who had been pulling me by the arm, stopped suddenly, and I stumbled sideways to avoid colliding with her when she let me go. Cole, who had been running desperately to keep up with us, went to one knee, panting. Maeve pointed up at a large tree. "Let's take cover here."

Fatigue weighing down my body, I needed Maeve to hoist me up the tree, and Cole barely managed to push himself up onto the lowest branch. The strenuous task of climbing up high enough in the tree to stay hidden took us several arduous minutes.

When she was satisfied, Maeve leaned back against the trunk of the tree, her legs dangling in the air. We remained silent. After a short break to catch our breath and eat a few strips of dried meat, Cole set a barrier around us while Maeve cycled mana.

As for me, I knew what I had to do, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead I turned to where Cole and Maeve sat and asked hesitantly, "Do you think Fane made it?"

Maeve opened one eye—just one eye—but the anger burning in that eye like a hot coal made me wince. Cole shuffled over and sat between Maeve and me so we weren't in direct eye contact.

"Circe, can you use True Sense yet?" Cole's voice was soft and gentle, but he wouldn't meet my gaze. *Damn it*. Everything we'd worked for—the entire war effort in Elenoir—was at risk because I wanted to dip my toes in the water. If Cole hadn't followed, if he'd stayed and kept up the barrier like he was supposed to, I wouldn't have been distracted. I'd have seen the elves sooner. I could have sneaked back to camp; once I was inside of the barrier, they would have lost me. We would have—but no, I was the one to leave

first. I couldn't blame him to save myself. That wasn't the Alacryan way. *Focus, Circe*.

I closed my eyes and ignited my emblem. For a moment, as I felt my consciousness leaving my body, I was tempted to use my limited time in this form to search for Fane. If I could just see that he was still alive—

Snap out of it, Circe. Focus on the mission!

I navigated through the debilitating fog using True Sense and locked in on multiple elements this time. In the distance, I could see a cloud of the rich ambient mana particles.

We're almost there!

Though I'd had True Sense active for only moments, I couldn't hold it. I released the spell and let out a deep breath. Slowly opening my eyes, I found both Cole and Maeve staring at me intently.

Despite the guilt and fatigue pressing down on me, I gave my companions a small grin. "We're almost there—just a couple more days."

We took turns to sleep an hour each, then crept out of our tree had hurried along. I found myself hoping that another Sentry would succeed in charting a path. I wasn't a war hero. I wasn't battle-hardened like the others, who had trained for years to fight as a team, to support and protect one another and kill their enemies. I had barely graduated before I was recruited for this mission. A few weeks ago, before stepping through the highly unstable portal that brought me to Dicathen, I was packing up my belongings, ready to go home to my blood.

Lost in my thoughts, I stumbled on a tree root and pitched forward. Thankfully, Maeve was able to grab my arm and stop me from falling flat on my face.

Unable to speak, I nodded my thanks, but Maeve's demeanor was cold. She'd mothered me since the moment I joined the team, but now she was treating me like a failed pupil. I was sure that she'd turn to me at any moment, shake her head, and tell me how disappointed she was and how she expected me to

make better decisions in the future. Despite the mollycoddling, I now found myself eager to please her, and the sting of her disappointment was difficult to shrug off.

She's not your blood, Circe, I told myself. Who gives a damn if she's disappointed, as long as the mission is successful. You have to survive. You have to survive for your brother.

I repeated those words in my mind like a mantra. The great Vritra would save my brother and bless him with magic if I succeeded. I'd kill ten thousand elves if I had to just to give my brother that chance. I'd fight the elven shedemon by myself to prove to the Vritra that the Milview blood was worth it.

I was roused from my reverie by the sensation of two figures entering into the range of my perception. I held out an arm with two fingers extended to stop Maeve and Cole as well.

They understood the signal and we immediately started up the closest tree. Unable to strengthen my body like Cole and Maeve, I struggled to reach even the lowest branch. In my rush, my foot slipped on a moss-covered root and I pitched headfirst into the trunk. The resulting dull thud sounded like an explosion within the quiet forest. My heart stopped and the bottom dropped out of my stomach; I hardly even noticed the throbbing pain in my forehead as I waited, breath held, for any response. It took a moment before I noticed the dull pressure in my ears and the slight blurring of the details around us; Cole had already conjured a barrier.

Great Vritra, that was close! I thought, making a mental note to thank Cole. "Here!" Maeve said, reaching down for me.

I quickly grabbed the Caster's outstretched hand and, with her help, pulled myself up onto the branch. My heart, which had a moment before seemed stopped forever, now felt as if it were about to break out of my ribcage, and I was having difficulty controlling my breathing, but I didn't have the time or luxury to gather myself.

Maeve had already climbed up a few feet higher. I followed, using the same

handholds and footholds she used to climb up the tree while Cole took the rear.

The three of us had to be extremely careful as we traversed the giant tree. Although we were protected by the barrier, falling leaves or sticks would still give away our position.

My arms ached and my legs trembled, half from fatigue and half out of fear. I desperately wished my mark allowed some form of body enhancement, but I knew hoping for that now was pointless.

Finally, we stopped climbing. The branches this high up were too thin to support our combined weight, so we each sat on our own tree limb and hugged the trunk in order to lessen the burden on our seats.

Cole prepared to strengthen his barrier but stopped on my signal.

"I'll tell you when they're close enough," I whispered. We needed his barrier at its full power if they got near, and I knew he was too tired to hold it for long.

As the two presences approached us I narrowed the focus of my crest until I was able to faintly hear the two elves talking.

"We should head back, Albold. We've already strayed far enough from our survey route," one voice said.

"Just a second," the second voice, apparently "Albold," replied dismissively.

"We're miles away from the last sighting," the first voice insisted. "No way that Alacryan could have made it all the way out here. You probably just heard a hare or something."

What does he mean by the last sighting? I wondered.

"It wasn't really a sound," the elf named Albold said as he continued approaching the tree in which we were hiding. "It was more like an inkling."

"I swear, if you weren't a Chaffer, I would've just left," the first grumbled.

"Three soldiers dead in a ditch, and you want to wander around just the two of us. Maybe we should signal for General Aya..."

"No need to bother the General," Albold said dryly. "It's just one damned

Alacryan. How the hell did they manage to make it this far north?"

Fane is alive! I thought, pleased despite myself. He was a pain in the ass, but I sure felt better when he was around.

Prying myself away from the perceptions of my crest, I turned to Cole and nodded. He nodded back and tightened his veiling barrier to encompass just the three of us. Decreasing the area of effect strengthened his magic and allowed him to add two more layers of barriers.

I ignited my crest once more and focused all my magic on the two elves. They were less than twenty feet away now.

Cole and Maeve were as still as the tree we were perched on.

Holding up both my hands, I mouthed "ten feet" to my teammates.

The snap of a twig nearby made me stiffen. Cole and Maeve were both focused intently on the ground below us.

Then we saw them—two elves. One had long hair tied tightly behind his neck while the other had cropped hair and ears slightly longer than his comrade. Unlike the long-haired elf, who was looking around aimlessly, the short-haired one kept his head down as he walked.

The latter slowed his pace, his focus still on the ground.

Please, just keep walking. Please.

Suddenly the elf's head jerked left. He looked at the base of the tree, at the moss on the root—the moss I had slipped on.

The fear that I had been pushing down bubbled up into my chest, threatening to swallow me.

Please.

The short-haired elf stopped walking and his head turned up until I could make out his face, until I could see the color of his eyes—two gray orbs that seemed to be looking directly at me.

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DEPLOYED

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"I'm going with you!" Ellie yelled from behind me.

I stopped in my tracks and the guard beside me halted as well. Turning, I met my sister's determined gaze. I wanted to tell her that it was too dangerous, that she was too young, that she could be hurt, *that she could die...* but I bit my tongue.

"You promised, remember?" Ellie's tone was resolute, eager, and a little afraid.

'Afraid you'll leave her behind, not of the mana beasts,' Sylvie prodded.

"A massive horde of corrupted beasts," I muttered softly.

"You'll be with me," Ellie said, as if that was any guarantee. "And I'll have the protection of the Wall."

'I understand your dilemma, but this is a good opportunity,' Sylvie added.

'I'll be with her as well, and casting arrows from the top of the Wall is little more than target practice for her.'

But what if the beasts break through? I thought, looking down at Ellie's upturned face.

'I know you won't let that happen,' she answered with a soothing wave of confidence.

The guard beside me shifted impatiently, his armor clattering. "General Arthur..."

"We're going," I stated, heading quickly for the exit, the nervous guard on my heels.

Looking back over my shoulder, I called, "What are you waiting for, El? Let's go."

Ellie visibly brightened as a contagious smile blossomed on her face, and she followed after me at a full run. "Come on, Boo!"

Immediately outside the training grounds waited an unfamiliar mage with a large, sparrow-like bird perched on his shoulder. After making eye contact, he respectfully inclined his head. "Greetings, General Arthur. I am Officer Julor Strejin. A member of my squad surveying the Beast Glades was the one to spot the horde. I will be briefing you of the situation at the Wall."

"Officer Julor," I acknowledged with a nod.

Without wasting any time, the officer began informing me of everything I was expected to know. Two other mages—both highly-accomplished adventurers before joining the army—would be accompanying us to the Wall as additional support. Our best estimate of the size of the horde was somewhere close to twenty thousand beasts. Although a majority seemed to be from D-class to B-class, several A-class and even some S-class mana beasts had been spotted.

"Unfortunately, we weren't able to get too close because of the Alacryan mages, but we're certain there are at least a dozen S-class mana beasts," Julor stated solemnly.

I looked back at Ellie. "A dozen S-class mana beasts... and the fact that they're corrupted means they'll be even stronger and fiercer than normal."

Ellie's face paled but her expression remained firm. "I'll be okay."

My determined, talented, yet sheltered sister had never seen a mana beast except for the tamed bonds in Xyrus. I doubted she could even fathom how overwhelming an S-class beast was, yet I was leading her straight toward not one, but a dozen such creatures... along with many thousands of lesser beasts.

'They're only mana beasts, Arthur,' Sylvie thought, attempting to comfort me with soothing emotions.

I know, I know, I thought, some of my worry soothed by her calm assurance.

I turned to Julor. "Any signs of retainers or Scythes, Officer?"

"None," he replied confidently. "Which was why Commander Virion deemed that sending a single Lance was sufficient."

"How long until the horde reaches the Wall?" I asked.

"At their current pace, we expect them to arrive in no more than two days' time," he answered, glancing apprehensively at Sylvie and my sister. I could tell he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue.

We marched on in silence until we reached the dock, which we found to be quiet and subdued compared to the normal noise and bustle of the workers. Virion waited with a small entourage while several assistants strapped saddles onto giant hawk-like mana beasts.

"Arthur!" Virion called out. His once-cheerful disposition had faded, instead replaced by war-weary eyes. Beside him stood two mages, and a few attendants behind them.

"Commander." I saluted while walking up to the old elf.

"I'm sure Officer Julor informed you of the situation, so let me quickly introduce you to the two mages I've chosen to support you at the Wall. This is Callum Hembril. He's young, barely past thirty, but already an accomplished fire conjurer in the solid-yellow core stage."

The chestnut-haired mage stepped forward, his long, coiled bangs covering his forehead. He wore an inquisitive look that he quickly covered with an amiable smile. "Callum, as introduced by the commander. Pleasure."

Virion gestured with a thumb toward the figure a few feet behind Callum. "This big lug here is a dark-yellow core augmenter, but he's been fighting in the Beast Glades for over forty years."

The barrel-chested man, who was almost a foot taller than me and twice my girth, was covered from the neck down in heavy plate armor that glowed

faintly. He had short hair and his lower face was dark with stubble. His piercing gaze seemed to be assessing every inch of me as he stretched out a hand. "Gavik Lund."

I shook his hand, which looked almost as wide as Boo's paws, before turning back to Virion. "So, what's the plan? Judging by those mounts, I assume we're traveling by air?"

"Mhmm. Those are Callum's and Gavik's mounts," Virion confirmed. "The closest teleportation gate is in Blackbend City, and the train hasn't yet been fully finished. It's fortunate that the castle's location is relatively close to the Wall."

I turned to Sylvie. "Do you think you'll be able to carry Ellie while holding Boo?"

Boo let out a moan of protest, obviously understanding what I meant.

"If the trip isn't too long, I'll be able to manage," Sylvie answered, ignoring my sister's giant bond.

"Wait, the little kid and her pet cub are coming along?" Gavik asked with a scowl. "Commander, is that wise? There will be a massive army of mana beasts."

"She's an adept conjurer that'll be valuable to have stationed on the Wall," I cut in. "And since when was it okay to refer to a general's sister as a 'little kid'?"

Gavik blanched, despite being about three times my age and twice my size.

"My... my apologies," he muttered. "Didn't know she was your sister, General Arthur."

Virion's brows were knit in worry, but he didn't comment on Ellie going with me. Instead, he waved over the attendants who were standing behind him. They approached, carrying a large wooden chest with runes etched into its entire surface. "Anyways, before you leave, I've prepared a little something for you. It's not much, but I think wearing something a bit more eye-catching might help with morale at the Wall."

Virion placed a hand on the lid and the runes lit up before opening with a *click*. Several compartments popped out of the chest to reveal an entirely new outfit for me.

"Jand, Brune, help the General get dressed," Virion ordered. Before I could protest, his attendants grabbed me and led me to the side of the room where a dressing stall had been conveniently set up beforehand.

The man, Brune, immediately began undressing me while the lady attendant, Jand, started working on my hair. After brushing it, she tied the back neatly and trimmed my bangs.

I should cut my hair soon, I noted. My hair had grown long enough to reach past my shoulders. If it wasn't for my height and relatively broad shoulders, I could easily have been mistaken for a girl from the back.

'And from the front,' my bond added, her thoughts invading into mine. 'You're prettier than some of the noble females I've seen in the castle.'

I groaned internally. Yeah... I should definitely cut my hair soon.

As soon as my hair had been tamed, they got to work on the outfit. I wore a black, high-collared shirt that conveniently covered the burn marks on my neck, which I had gotten from the first retainer I had fought against. I brushed Brune away and pulled on the trousers myself. They felt surprisingly thick despite their lightness, and were fit so that the thin, dark-gray greaves could comfortably slip over my shins.

The attendants then strapped matching bracers over my arms and handed me tight, fingerless gloves.

"What, not going to help me find the finger-holes of my gloves?" I quipped. "I'm not sure I'm up to it, honestly. I might get my thumb in the pinky hole and then all would be lost!"

"The last touch, General Arthur," Brune announced, ignoring my jibes. He carefully draped a waist-long mantle lined in white fur across my shoulders.

While the appearance of the outfit was a tad over the top, what with its intricate trimmings and the engraved armor on my shins and forearms, Virion

knew precisely what sort of armor would best suit me. While protection was minimal, the bracers and greaves would allow me some form of defense while leaving my movement unimpeded.

I walked out of the dressing stall, enjoying the sense of freedom and lightness the new clothing provided. Callum and Gavik had already hopped onto their mounts, ready to depart.

"Ah! Much better," Virion said with an approving nod.

"Where'd my brother go?" my sister teased as she looked around the room.

I rolled my eyes, making my way back to the commander, who was wearing a gray, fur-lined coat that fell just below his ankles over his usual loose robe. "You really like your furs."

"That mantle is an old piece of mine that I wore back when I was younger," Virion said, his eyes growing softer as he regarded the clothing. "Although it doesn't look as good on you as it did on me, I'll let you have it."

"Thank you for the outfit," I said, moved by the gesture.

He gave me a serious look. "Thank me by keeping the Wall from falling." "Yes sir."

One set of large bifold doors opened, letting in a constant rush of wind, and the floor below us slowly extended outward into the open air. I motioned for Sylvie and my sister to follow and we made our way toward the edge of the castle.

"I forget sometimes how high up the castle is in the sky!" I yelled over the rushing wind. It was a beautiful sight; a sea of clouds rolled along below us, with occasional gaps revealing the untamed landscape of the Beast Glades far below.

"Tell me about it! At least we can't see how far up we are because of the clouds below," my sister shouted back.

I burst out with a laugh and winked at Ellie. "Just be sure to hold onto Sylvie tightly!"

"I won't drop you," my bond reassured her.

Boo groaned pitifully, more a whimper than his usual throaty growl.

Sylvie shook her head. "I won't drop either of you."

Callum and Gavik whizzed by on their mounts. The tamed mana beasts dove off the edge of the dock before reappearing into view with wings spread out, wobbling slightly in the wind.

"Let's go!" I shouted as I conjured a shroud of wind around my body.

Sylvie began glowing as she transformed into her draconic form. "Jump up, Ellie!" she shouted, her voice an octave lower than it was before.

I watched the obsidian dragon sail above the clouds with Ellie on her back and Boo—looking distinctly grumpy—in her clawed hands.

Using the sound of Ellie's screams as the cue, I jumped off the edge as well, following the rest.

How are you holding up? I asked my bond, who was slowly losing speed.

'It seems that, despite all of my magical and physical capabilities, I wasn't designed to be an efficient mode of transport,' she replied, looking down at the large bear dangling in her arms.

Several hours had passed since our departure, and, besides the gorgeous views of the sky and clouds, it was a boring journey. We had settled into a comfortable pace, heading southeast with Callum and Gavik leading just a few dozen yards ahead. After my sister's initial excitement—and Boo's terror—had died down, the two had fallen asleep.

Ahead, Callum and Gavik dipped suddenly, leading their avian steeds below the sea of clouds, which had become dark and stormy gray below us.

We're almost there. You'll be able to get some rest once we land, I conveyed to my bond before following after Callum and Gavik.

The shroud of wind I had cast over my body kept all the moisture from the clouds off of me and my clothing, but Ellie wasn't as fortunate. As I watched Sylvie descend through the thick layer of heavy clouds, which looked even darker from this side, I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of my sister now

wide awake, dripping wet, and grumpy. Boo's thick fur was drenched and matted down to his skin, making him look scrawnier than I had imagined.

I tried to catch my sister's eye to tease her, but her gaze was glued far below, mouth agape.

'Arthur, look down,' Sylvie sent, and her sudden concern washed over me like a wave.

Far below was a writhing sea of black and gray, made up of what could only be the corrupted mana beasts. We were over a mile above ground, well out of range of any attacks the beasts could make against us, but already I could feel the suspense building for the inevitable battle.

Callum and Gavik had both stopped their descent to behold the sight below, exchanging concerned glances with one another every few seconds.

Seeing the enemy before us, my heart beat like a smith's hammer, my blood boiled in my veins, and my hands trembled at my sides.

'Arthur. You're smiling.'

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AWAITING THE HORDE

WE ARRIVED at the ground level of the Wall, where a small welcoming team was waiting for us around the designated landing podium.

Sylvie dropped a grateful Boo to the ground, and Ellie slid down off her back.

"Ahh—oof!" my sister let out as she fell into my arms. "Couldn't you have used wind magic to like—I don't know—gently float me down to the ground?"

I looked down at her with a smirk. "I thought all girls wanted to be carried this way at some point in their lives."

"Gross," Ellie groaned as she rolled out of my arms, landing deftly on her feet. She looked around as she rung the water from her clothes, only to blush fiercely at what she saw.

'Arthur,' Sylvie, now returned to her human form, nudged mentally from beside me.

There was a crowd forming, silent and expectant. Callum and Gavik had already handed their mounts off to the beastkeepers and were awaiting orders.

Ellie straightened her posture, trying to appear dignified, her cheeks still red from embarrassment. Boo drew himself up beside her, attempting to look fearsome. The damp still clinging to them both somewhat undercut their efforts, though.

"General Arthur," a familiar voice called out; Captain Trodius Flamesworth, with both Albanth and Jesmiya beside him. Upon making eye contact, the three of them inclined their heads respectfully.

Rather than addressing the captains first, I swept my gaze through the crowd. Most of the people appeared to be the merchants or laborers who worked within the Wall, rather than soldiers.

You should've stayed in your draconic form, Sylvie.

'They're staring at you, not me,' my bond responded with a faint smile.

To keep the morale up, these people had likely not been told how large the enemy force was, but even then, many wore worried expressions. It seemed my presence hadn't done much to fill them with confidence; my age worked against me at times like these. There was even some mumbling about whether or not I was really a Lance.

I let out a heavy breath and ignited Realmheart. Power surged through my limbs and the world drained of color, aside from the mana particles that lit up around me. While the glowing runes across my body were covered by my clothes, the change in my hair and eyes was enough to stun the crowd.

Gasps resounded through the crowd and many people's knees quaked and buckled, unable to bear the pressure of my aura—even though I was holding back.

"While my presence in this fortress may prove unnecessary, I hope to expedite our victory with as little loss to our forces as possible," I stated, my head held high.

The people in the crowd erupted into cheers and shouts as I walked toward Trodius and the two captains beside him.

Color returned to the world when I suppressed my dragon will, and I knew that my hair faded back to its normal auburn color.

"Senior Captain Trodius Flamesworth." I held out a gloved hand. "I didn't think I'd have the pleasure of meeting you again so soon."

The senior captain shook my hand with a tired smile and waited as I repeated

the same gesture to the other two captains.

"General," Jesmiya said curtly.

Albanth removed his armored gauntlet and shook my hand vigorously. "General Arthur. Pleasure to have you here."

"Let's head to the meeting room," I suggested, matching my pace to Albanth's. Since he was in charge of the Bulwark Division, whose main duty was to defend the wall, I decided to address my sister's place in the coming battle immediately. "My younger sister would like to contribute in this battle. Her skills as a magic archer should be of use to your troops. If you'd like to test her out—"

"No need for that, General. A Lance's word is plenty enough for me and my men," Captain Albanth responded resolutely. "I'll also have my most capable soldier guiding her." Without stopping, Albanth beckoned for a messenger and had him fetch the guard.

"I don't need a babysitter, you know," my sister complained, walking just behind me. "I still have the pendant you gave me, remember?"

Ellie pulled out the Phoenix Wyrm pendant I had gotten her for her twelfth birthday, courtesy of the artificer Gideon.

"I've let you come on this mission as promised, but you're not allowed to complain about me taking extra precautions," I chided. "That pendant only works once and it's not something I can easily acquire again."

By the time our small group had arrived at the familiar meeting tent, the soldier who had been summoned by Albanth was already there.

"Stella," Albanth called out. "This is General Arthur's younger sister—"

"Eleanor Leywin," my sister finished with a salute.

"Eleanor Leywin. She's a capable magic archer, and I'm leaving her under your direct care. Make sure she's properly equipped before taking her to the top level."

If Stella was discontent with being stuck protecting my sister, she did a great job of hiding it. Her scarred face was expressionless, her posture ramrod straight as she held her helmet in one hand and a mace in the other.

"Yes, Captain," the soldier barked, clicking her armored heels. "Please follow me, Lady Eleanor."

"Please, just Eleanor, or even soldier is fine," my sister mumbled as she followed after Stella.

"My apologies for asking you to give up one of your soldiers to guard my sister like this. She was rather adamant about serving and I thought the Wall would be a safe place to start."

"Normally, I'd agree with you," Albanth responded, "but with the size and strength of this beast army approaching, I can't say that for sure."

After everyone had settled into their seats around the table, we started the strategy meeting. Those present were Senior Captain Trodius, Captain Jesmiya, Captain Albanth, Callum, Gavik, Sylvie, and I.

"Let us begin by discussing our own troop numbers, locations, and make-up," Trodius began. "Once everyone at the table"—he glanced at Sylvie and me—"understands our current troop distribution, then we may move on to battle strategy and tactics."

With a silver croupier's rake, the senior captain began sliding markers around the large map spread out on the table.

"Each large marker represents one thousand troops, and small, one hundred. Does this look about right?" Trodius confirmed with Jesmiya and Albanth.

"Not including the freelance adventurers currently under my wing, we have just a bit shy of two thousand," Albanth confirmed.

Jesmiya used her sheathed sword to move a few smaller pieces around in the territory of the Beast Glades. "One of my scouting units returned a few minutes before General Arthur arrived. The head will be joining us shortly to report."

"Thank you," Trodius said with a nod. "I expect we'll see an influx of adventurers as word of this horde spreads, but the numbers won't

significantly change anything we may plan here. General Arthur, Commander Virion has often praised your strategic acumen. Would you like to offer a plan of action?"

I shook my head. "I'm unfamiliar with the inner workings of the Wall and its residents. I think it'd be best if you take charge, though I may offer some suggestions here and there."

"Noted," Trodius replied promptly before moving on to his plan.

While I bore little fondness for this man who had tossed his own daughter aside like a broken toy, I had to admit that Trodius's efficient and callous nature was well-matched to his position of power.

The basic premise of his plan was to slay as many of the corrupted beasts as possible before they reached the Wall. This meant that there would be several units sent out as cannon fodder, out of range from the mages stationed on the Wall.

Trodius moved pieces around the map to indicate four units that would take a more roundabout path in their approach to the beast horde.

"Our main advantage against the approaching enemy is that they do not appear to have a strategy beyond fielding overwhelming numbers, with only a few Alacryan mages to herd them in place," the senior captain stated, moving two large pieces on either side of the Wall. "Thus, while we send in a steady stream of soldiers and augmenters from the Bulwark Division to impede enemy movement, two units of the Trailblazer Division will move out early and get in position to flank from either side."

The senior captain paused for a moment before speaking again. "With concentrated attacks coming from three directions, by the time the beast horde is in range of the mages at the Wall, the conjurers—with the help of General Arthur—should be enough to finish it off."

Captain Albanth looked blatantly dissatisfied with the plan to send his soldiers to certain death, and Captain Jesmiya thoroughly studied the map for a better alternative.

Something feels off, I thought, puzzling over the map.

'While the lives of the soldiers sent outside the Wall aren't cheap, this plan seems fairly reasonable,' Sylvie rebutted, staring at the map as well.

No, not that.

"General Arthur? Is something the matter?" Trodius asked.

"Huh?" I looked up to see all three of the captains, as well as Callum and Gavik, staring at me.

The senior captain pointed at my right hand. I had been tapping my finger unconsciously on the table.

"My apologies. I was just thinking."

Trodius's brow twitched. "If you are dissatisfied with the plan that I have suggested—"

"No, it's not that," I interrupted, raising my hand. "Whether this is a good or bad strategy, I'm not quite sure yet. However, I feel like this attack will most likely be their last on this front."

"What do you mean?" Captain Albanth asked.

"The Alacryans have been sending a steady stream of corrupted beasts to the Wall, herded along by their mages, and, while effective—thinking from a strategic standpoint—that isn't a feasible long-term strategy," I answered. "Captain Jesmiya, you've stated that your troops have cleared out most of the dungeons that the Alacryans used to hide their teleportation gates, correct?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes. The few gates that my troops have found recently have already broken."

It was common knowledge that the Alacryan teleportation gates in the Beast Glades were rather limited in the number of times they could be used. Even some of the more stable ones that the Trailblazer Division had found were deemed too unstable to safely cross. The fact that the Alacryans had to take a gamble each time they wanted to send their troops to Dicathen spoke volumes about their leaders' ruthlessness.

"Having very few gates available for the Alacryans to slip into Dicathen, it'll be nearly impossible for those that have already made it through into the Beast Glades to receive supplies," I continued.

"With how untamed the lands are there, they'd be busy just trying to survive once they run out of supplies," Gavik added.

"Which is why I feel they might be devoting everything they have into this last attack," I finished, studying the map with furrowed brows.

"Not that I don't agree with you, General Arthur, but how does that change our current predicament?" Trodius asked impatiently.

I circled our current location on the map with my finger. "It means that we might have to rethink our plan of sacrificing soldiers to keep the Wall fully intact."

Albanth spoke up. "If it means not having to send my soldiers in a single-file line to their deaths, I'm all ears, General Arthur."

"As am I," Jesmiya agreed.

"A moment, *please*," Trodius cut in. "While I am all for preserving as many of our men as possible, I'd like a plan that isn't based on a *feeling*."

"Fair." I eyed the senior captain for a moment before continuing. "This is speculation on my part as well, but my stance is that keeping our men alive is imperative. In this phase of the war, we need to be flexible, and having living soldiers we can divide and reallocate in future battles will be of greater use than an immovable wall."

Trodius's eyes narrowed. "We would be risking a vital structure in the defense of both Sapin and Elenoir, one which took over a year to fully complete, General. If the Wall is in shambles, what happens when an Alacryan army attacks shortly after the beast horde?"

"Would a fortified wall hold off mages better than mages themselves?" I retorted. "Captain, I'm not saying we should just forfeit the Wall. I'm suggesting we sacrifice parts of our fortress as opposed to our men."

After a moment of silence, Trodius slid the silver rake he had been using to

maneuver the pieces on the map over to me. "Please continue." Accepting the gesture, I stood up and began moving the pieces around while everyone else looked on curiously. "So here is what I had in mind..."

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AWAITING THE HORDE II

I DROVE the pommel of my practice sword into my opponent's wrist, and his longsword clattered to the ground at my feet. "Your movements are too stiff. You need to loosen your shoulders and wrists until the last moments of your swing. If you can't do that, the sword you're using is too heavy for you." The young soldier shook his armored hand, grimacing. "Thank you for the

"Next!" I called out, looking over the few dozen soldiers standing in line, waiting for a chance to spar with me.

A burly woman clad fully in plate armor, holding a buckler in one hand and a shortsword in the other, walked up and dipped her head to me before stepping back into an open stance, her buckler held out and shortsword behind her right foot.

A dense layer of mana enveloped her body while tendrils of wind swirled around her blade.

"Same rules apply," I said, raising my thin, saber-like sword. "Attack me with the intent to kill; I need to see what you can do."

With a determined nod, she dashed forward, displaying tremendous speed for someone weighed down by a full set of armor. She attacked with a simple horizontal swing, the reach of her blade extended by the wind-attribute mana imbued within the weapon.

I deflected her sword upwards and thrust my palm at her sternum, but the

advice."

woman was quick enough to raise her buckler in time to block my strike. The force of the shove threw her off balance and she stumbled back a few steps.

"If you're already hesitating, this match is over," I said with a sigh.

"I'm not sure what you mean, General. I was able to block your counter successfully!" the woman responded, her brows knit in confusion.

"It doesn't matter. Even if you had landed that initial slash, it would barely have made a scratch on an augmenter or a mana beast." Anticipating her question, I went on. "Why? Because your weight was already on your back leg before you even swung." Her eyes turned toward the ground, but I beckoned her forward.

"Again," I ordered.

She approached me once more, positioning herself carefully. Just when I thought she had perhaps gotten cold feet, she lunged forward with a windenhanced thrust of her shortsword.

I turned my head slightly to the left, letting her blade pass within an inch of my cheek. It was a feint, I realized, intended to put me off balance so she could bash me with the buckler.

I let the full force of her buckler hit my arm and spin me to the right, opening up my left side for another attack. Rather than continue her assault, however, the soldier stepped back and raised her guard.

"Why did you stop?" I asked, dusting off my mantle. "You knocked me off balance, had me in a vulnerable position. You have your armor and buckler to make up for small mistakes, you need to attack aggressively."

The soldier was quiet for a moment, but when she answered, her voice was confident. "I was wary that you were preparing for a counterattack."

"If I wanted to counterattack, I would've done so before you hit me with your shield, not after," I retorted. "Your equipment and your fighting style are total opposites of each other. Your footwork, attacks, movements, and feints all point to a speed-type augmenter, but your armor, shield, and even sword are made for a heavy-hitter, an augmenter who will throw themselves into the

middle of the fray and shrug off the damage. I'm not sure if you're doing this to confuse your enemies or confuse yourself, but pick a style, because you're going to get tired real fast out in battle if you try to fight like a skirmisher in all that armor. Next!"

Quite a few soldiers—those who had been relieved of their posts to take a break, mostly—had lined up to spar against me. A few of the merchants and tradesmen not currently preparing for evacuation had gathered as well and were chatting animatedly about the show I was putting on.

So far, I had exchanged only two or three moves with each opponent before landing what would be a fatal blow, then provided a few pieces of advice to each soldier about their performance.

As a new soldier stepped forward into the stone ring I had conjured, Sylvie's voice rang in my head. 'I thought you said you were going to try and get some rest before setting out?'

I looked around to see her descending the nearby stairs, Gavik and Callum on either side of her. I couldn't fall asleep, so I figured I'd warm up my body and train a few soldiers while I'm at it. How was your trip up to the top of the Wall? Is Ellie doing okay?

My bond grinned as she walked up to me. "Ellie is adjusting pretty well. When I went to see how she was doing, she was busy practicing how to shoot from the edge of the Wall with a few other soldiers. One looked around her age too."

I looked up at the towering wall, surveying the bustling activity. "That's good."

Gavik approached the stone ring. "Captain Albanth and his troops are busy tearing down most of the support beams holding up the underground passages. Captain Jesmiya is relocating her troops around the ends of the Wall, but"—the burly adventurer paused, shifting from foot to foot—"is it really necessary for you and Lady Sylvie to go by yourselves?"

"No offense to you or Callum," I said consolingly, "but are you confident in

fighting alongside us, keeping up with a Lance and a..." I paused, having almost said the word *dragon* out loud, "and Sylvie? I don't want to have to worry about accidentally killing you."

Gavik looked back at the curly-haired conjurer behind him. Both mages wore stoic expressions when they turned back to me. "Yes."

"Listen, I know Commander Virion sent you out here to assist me in the Wall's defense, but I doubt he meant for you to go into battle next to me. Just stay here." I dismissed them with a wave of my hand.

I could hear Gavik grind his teeth even from where I was standing, but he turned on his heel and led Callum away, weaving in between a throng of workers filing past, undoubtedly headed to the underground passages.

"We could've used their help," Sylvie said, watching the two adventurers disappear into the crowd. "And they seemed really determined to go with us."

I motioned for the soldier waiting on the other edge of the ring to approach and fell into a ready stance.

Gavik has a daughter that looked to be about my age—or even younger, if the picture on that pendant is recent. I saw him sneak in a kiss after the meeting, I explained to Sylvie while redirecting a wild thrust from my opponent.

Sylvie burst out with a surprised, half-stifled laugh from behind me. 'And here I was, thinking how cold my bond has been to these poor soldiers. It seems like you're getting better at keeping your thoughts from leaking into mine.'

A man's got to be able to keep a few secrets, I joked, my saber pressed against my opponent's nape.

"If I'm not wrong, you've had a significant injury on your right side in the past, which is why you favor that side of your body. You fall for every feint to the right, leaving your left side open. Next."

"Mind if I have a go?" a familiar voice called out from my left.

Sylvie and I both turned towards the source of the voice; a flood of elation

poured through our mental link as she dashed off.

"Tessia!" Sylvie cried, throwing her arms around the elven princess.

I smiled at the sight of the two of them. Tess hadn't changed much since the last time we met. Her gunmetal-gray hair was dark and heavy with lingering moisture, and her turquoise eyes seemed to shine with their own inner light. I could tell at a glance that she had matured as a soldier though. Time down in the dungeons was sure to harden any adventurer.

The surprised princess looked from me to the child currently wrapped around her waist. It wasn't until her eyes focused on the horns protruding out of the girl's head that she made the connection. "Sylvie?"

"No more sparring for today!" I called out. The disappointed crowd of soldiers and adventurers sheathed their weapons and dispersed, though I did notice a few jealous glances thrown at Tessia.

For a while, I stayed silent and listened as Tess and Sylvie talked. My bond had always had a deep fondness for Tess, even calling her "Mama" at one point in her life. I could tell Tess was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that the little fox she used to cuddle with like a pet was now standing in front of her as a human.

Tess and her team had reached the Wall an hour ago, having been pulled out of the Beast Glades ahead of the approaching horde. They had been sent straight to the inn to wash up and rest for the next leg of their journey, but, much like myself, my childhood friend couldn't sleep, instead deciding to walk around the market area, which, of course, led her to me.

I was walking a few paces behind them when Tess looked back over her shoulder, eyeing me suspiciously. "What's so funny?"

"Huh?" I replied stupidly, pressing my fingers to my lips. "Oh, I didn't even realize I was smiling. "I guess Sylvie's emotions are influencing mine."

"You know, if I chose to take that the wrong way, it almost sounds as if you're saying that you're not happy to see me," Tess teased.

"Unlike Arthur, I will wholeheartedly admit that I'm happy to see you," my

bond replied. "I just wish it was under better conditions," she added, a twinge of unease growing in her mind.

"I agree, but I'm glad I was able to see the two of you before I head back out. I can't get over how cute and pretty you look in this form!" Tess said, trying to comfort my bond.

The compliment had the desired effect, as Sylvie practically glowed as she replied. "Back when we were in Epheotus, my grandmother did tell me that I would grow up to be a very pretty dragon."

"I'm not sure most people would describe a pitch black, twenty-foot dragon with gleaming yellow daggers for eyes as 'pretty," I interjected.

"Is this how you two always talk inside your heads?" Tessia asked, her turquoise eyes glinting.

"We'd been getting along fairly maturely until you showed up, Tessia," my bond replied. "Your presence must be affecting Arthur."

I rolled my eyes. "And there's that snide little attitude I've missed so much." Sylvie simply shrugged, and the three of us continued to walk aimlessly around the lower levels of the Wall. Workers, blacksmiths, artificers, and soldiers alike went out of their way to greet Tess as we passed by them.

"You're looking prettier than ever, Princess! A sight for sore eyes in these parts!" a bald blacksmith shouted as he waved a pair of tongs he had been holding in our direction.

"I'm going to tell your wife you said that," Tess replied with a mischievous grin. Sylvie and I chuckled as the old blacksmith snorted with laughter and turned back to his work.

A young girl covered in soot sprinted toward us, shouting, "Head Tessia! Head Tessia!" She had to pause for a moment to catch her breath, then said, "My master has a new set of armor for you that she's been working on in—" The girl seemed to catch herself, moved closer to Tessia, and said very quietly, "in secret..."

Tess's face lit up at the girl's words. "Oh! Tell Senyir that I'll be by to visit

her later tonight! Thank you for the message, Nat."

"Anytime!" The little girl beamed, her white teeth radiant against her sootstained face. Seeming to notice me and Sylvie for the first time, she tilted her head in a slight nod, then scurried off.

"As expected of Tessia," Sylvie said with adoration.

"Since I'm part of the Trailblazer Division, I don't get to spend as much time here as I'd like, but I've still got to know a few people here and there," Tess explained as we continued on.

"Still, they treat you so kindly," Sylvie said thoughtfully. "Most of the people we meet regard Arthur with either awe or fear."

"Well, seeing the head of a unit is one thing. Seeing a Lance as young as Arthur would elicit a different sort of feeling," Tess said, glancing back at me. "I have to say, he does look more like a real Lance with his sleek new outfit."

"Still," Sylvie sighed. "He could make do with some improvements to his interpersonal skills."

"You know I'm walking right behind you, right?" I cut in.

Tess giggled, and by the warm fuzziness growing inside me, I could tell that Sylvie was really enjoying herself.

When we reached the steep set of stairs leading all the way to the top of the Wall, Tess stopped. Stealing a glance at me before turning to my bond, she asked, "Hey, Sylvie. Do you mind if I steal Arthur away from you for a bit?"

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A PROMISE

HUGGING TESS ONE MORE TIME, my bond headed up the Wall as we waved her off. The guards let her through the gate to the upper levels, and she walked out of sight.

'Try to have some fun while you're with her, Arthur,' Sylvie thought in my mind. 'Don't think about all these other things for a bit.'

"It's surprisingly easy to get used to Sylvie in that form," Tess said, turning to me.

"Well, if it weren't for those huge horns on the sides of her head, she'd just look like an unassuming little girl."

"Those horns are pretty adorable though. But anyway"—Tess pointed in the direction of the merchant area and gave me a warm smile—"shall we be off?"

"After you... Princess," I said, bowing and gesturing for her to take the lead. It was an odd feeling, walking through the market, talking and laughing with Tess as if we weren't about to go into battle against thousands of monstrous, corrupted beasts that wanted nothing more than to kill everyone stationed here.

The atmosphere was entirely changed from my last visit to the Wall. That underlying tension I had seen had boiled over as outright fear. Many of the stalls we passed were closed down, some emptied, their owners likely having taken their wares and evacuated, others simply buttoned up as the merchants

sought shelter before the approaching horde. Some few brave—or foolish—vendors sat next to their stalls, quietly offering their services to the few folk moving in the streets around us.

I watched Tess from the corner of my eye as she turned left and right, the wide smile never leaving her face as she kept up a continuous stream of conversation. It was a rare feeling, the comfort I felt while standing next to this girl that I had spent so many years of this life with; thoughts of my responsibilities as a Lance and general weren't a priority.

That was when it struck me: This role that I had accepted for the sake of Dicathen had been slowly turning me back into the man I was in my old world. There were some differences, of course. I had people I truly cared for in this world, but, in a sense, that made it worse. I felt like I had to be better—to make no mistakes—if I wanted to keep them alive.

"Has being apart from me for so long finally made you realize how pretty your childhood best friend really is?" Tess teased, drawing me out of my thoughts.

"Actually, yes," I replied earnestly.

Not expecting that sort of reply, Tess blushed all the way to the tips of her ears.

"I—I see. Well it's good that you know now," she said, clearing her throat. "Hey, there's this place just over there that I've always wanted to try, and it looks like they're still open. Come on!" Tess pulled me by my arm, leading me toward an isolated cart where a handful of adventurers had gathered. The smoky scent of herbs and spices mingling alongside the savory aroma of grilled meat bombarded my senses, causing my stomach to grumble and my mouth to water.

"If it tastes as good as it smells, maybe I should make your grandfather hire him as a chef inside the castle," I answered, only half-joking.

"Tempting, but I'd feel bad for all the people who look forward to eating here," she replied.

As we stepped up to the cart, a short, stout man appeared behind it. He pushed two bowls filled with a steaming stew of meat and vegetables across the counter with a smile.

"It's not much, but stew's on the house tonight," he grunted. "No one should have to fight on an empty stomach."

"Thank you," I said, reaching down for the piping hot stew as Tess did the same. "But we'd like to offer you something. Are you sure we can't pay you for the meal?"

The stand owner nodded seriously.

Holding the bowl up to my nose and breathing in the mouthwatering smell, I couldn't help but wonder how many meals I might miss after this one once the fighting started. "Regardless, thank you for the treat," I said, nodding my head to the cook.

The portly old man clicked his heels and saluted, which pulled up his shirt to reveal a bulging stomach. "No, thank you, General."

After returning our respects, Tess and I wandered away, enjoying the soup as we meandered, no destination in mind.

"Looks like bringing you along does have its perks," Tess said as she used a wooden pick to skewer a piece charred meat dripping with sauce. After taking a bite, her eyes closed and a look of serenity settled across her face. "Mmm, so good!"

"You're probably the only person I know who'd regard a Lance as a *perk*, Tess," I said, taking a bite as well. The stew was so delicious it made the extravagant dishes served in the castle seem bland by comparison. Despite my mental barriers, the flood of flavors on my senses was strong enough that even Sylvie felt my satisfaction.

'You better save some for me,' she sent, a tingle of curiosity laced in her thought.

Sorry, I don't think I can promise you that, I replied, taking another bite.

Despite the foreboding of the coming battle, I felt more at peace in that

moment than I had since... since I fell down into the depths of Widow's Crypt and found Alea Triscan, the Lance who I replaced after she died in my arms, I thought, suddenly melancholy.

I was grateful to Tess, who kept me engrossed with stories of our time together in Elenoir and Xyrus Academy. We shared small, kind words with the few folk we saw in the market streets and stopped at every open stall we passed. She laughed at the smallest things, and I found myself constantly looking forward to her reactions.

In a way, her bright and sometimes childish attitude seemed so admirable. She was responsible for an entire unit. She spent days, sometimes weeks, out in the Beast Glades, fighting against the dangerous corrupted beasts there. But still she was able to find joy in even the simple things around her, and her positivity radiated from her, spreading to all those around her.

Tess's hand slowly approaching the bowl of stew that I was holding brought me back to reality. "If you're not going to eat that..."

I snapped the dish out of her reach just as the skewer in her hand attempted to spear one of the few remaining chunks of meat I had been saving. "You wish."

"As expected of a Lance," Tess said, pouting.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, because it's imperative for a Lance to learn how to defend his or her food from treacherous allies."

I held out a piece of meat on my own skewer. "Fine, here."

Her eyes visibly brightened as she got on her tippy toes to bite the meat off of my skewer. "Sho good!" she moaned around the mouth full of food.

We walked on in silence for a while, each lost in our own thoughts. I could hear the hammering and grinding from the forge in the silence. No doubt the smiths were still toiling in the heat to make as many blades, axes, and spears as possible before the horde's arrival. Elsewhere, I knew builders and miners labored to prepare my plan. The final preparations were likely being made within the medical tents: supplies being inventoried and organized, space

being reallocated. If my mother were here, surely she would be there, wearing a stoic expression as she prepared for... but no, my parents would be a long way away, safe at Blackbend City. At least I didn't need to worry about them right now, too.

When I noticed a confectionery where several colorful dough-like desserts were displayed, I pointed it out. "Do you want something from there? I haven't seen anyone else selling sweets."

"I'm okay, but Caria loves these," she said, eyeing the bright desserts. "I'll go by myself; just wait here, okay?"

"Yes ma'am."

The old woman minding the stall looked at Tess hopefully, gesturing to her wares and saying something I didn't catch. As Tess stood and gazed at the different flavors, I made my way over to a small booth nearby.

"Please sir, let me know if you see anything you like," the young attendant exclaimed. He leaned forward and, in a lower tone, added, "My mum won't let me close up shop until we make back what we spent on the spot, see?"

"I'm just looking around," I answered, not taking my eyes off the display of trinkets and accessories laid out on top of the white cloth. "Actually, can I purchase this?" I asked, indicating a simple charm that had caught my eye.

"Of course! That'll be one silver—ouch!" the kid yelped, looking back. "What gives, Mum?"

"What do you think you're doing?" An older woman had appeared next to the boy, breathing heavily—I was suspicious that she had run back to the booth when she saw me browsing—and looking at me apologetically. "I'm so sorry, General. My boy here is a bit ignorant of the world."

"But didn't you say I had to earn another three silvers before we pack up?" the boy said, indignant. "If he's some General, surely he can pay!"

That earned him another smack from his mother before she handed me the item I wanted to purchase. "Please take this as an apology for my son's rude behavior. Again, I'm so sorry."

"No problem at all, and please, I'd like to pay for it," I insisted.

She waved her hand in dismissal. "Oh no! How could I possibly take money from a Lance!"

"Well, it's a present, you see, and I'd feel better about giving it to the person if I'd paid for it," I admitted.

"Is it that pretty lady over there with the silver—ouch! Mom!" The boy rubbed the spot on his shoulder where he'd gotten hit.

Chuckling, I tossed the kid a coin and thanked the two of them before walking back toward Tess.

"Wait! This is a gold coin!" the mother hollered.

Looking back over my shoulder, I held up the charm. "I just paid what I thought this was worth. It's very well-made, ma'am."

The lady stared at me for a second, stunned, then she bowed stiffly. "Th-thank you."

I walked back to the confectionery just in time to witness Tess devour some sort of stretchy dough in a single bite. She looked at me guiltily, holding a piece out for me as well. "Do oo wunt shom too?"

"What happened to just buying it for Caria?" I teased.

As sunset neared and the bitter chill set in, the few people still in the streets began to head indoors. Tess and I made a quick stop by the inn, where Tess dropped off the desserts she had bought for Caria. The rest of Tess's group was asleep, though, so I didn't get to greet them.

"When do you leave for your next mission?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Later tonight," she replied, eyes downcast.

"There's a place I want to show you before you go then. Is that alright?" I asked with a hopeful smile.

Tess let out a breath as she took in the view. We had climbed to the spot on the cliff were I had come after fighting with my parents. The sun hovered over the horizon, casting a warm light over the Beast Glades.

"The view here is even better than from the castle," she sighed.

"I agree." I leaned forward, looking at the top of the wall and the many people moving around it. Though the streets may have emptied out, the Wall itself was still abuzz with activity. "I found it by chance, only been here once before."

We sat side by side, our shoulders just barely touching. Tess shifted her gaze away from the scenery below us and looked at me. "I wanted to say this earlier, but it's been a while, Art."

I'm not sure if it was the way the red sun gleamed off her silky gray hair or how she tilted her head slightly so that the nape of her neck was exposed, but my heart felt like it was about to break out of my ribcage.

Unable to maintain eye contact, I turned away. "Where will you be heading off to for your next mission?"

"My unit, along with a few other elves from the Trailblazer Division, is being sent back to Elenoir tonight," she answered.

"Because of the attacks by the Alacryans?"

"Yeah. There have been several recent sightings of Alacryan stragglers by our scouts stationed throughout the forest. It doesn't sound too serious, but they've been requesting backup for a while now and Captain Jesmiya finally relented," she explained, resting her chin on her knees.

"The captain had a difficult choice to make, especially with the beast horde approaching," I said. "Although I'm sort of glad you won't be here for this battle."

Tess swatted my leg playfully. "While I may not be a match for a Lance, I recently broke through to the mid-silver stage."

I hadn't thought to check her mana levels, so this news caught me by surprise. "Congratulations. Truly."

Tess's shimmering turquoise eyes studied me for a moment, then she heaved a dramatic sigh. "I wonder when the mighty General Arthur, who is in fact younger than me, will actually begin to treat me as someone who can take care of herself."

"I know you can take care of yourself," I assured her. "I'm sorry if my words came off the wrong way. Spending time with you today made me realize how much older you've gotten."

Tess inched away from me and turned to look directly at me. "Am I supposed to take that as a compliment?"

I scratched my chin, the wheels of my mind spinning uselessly as I struggled to put my feelings into words. "What I meant was, you give off a different aura now. I'm not talking about mana, although your core has improved, but more like—"

"I've gotten more mature?" Tess finished.

I let out a soft groan. "Yeah, that..."

Shaking her head at me, Tess turned back to watch the sun set, scooting back toward me just a little as she did so.

Memories of my last conversation with Tess came to my mind. It hadn't been that long ago, but she seemed so different now—more mature, like she said.

That's when I realized: The feeling of elation and joy I felt when I saw Tess wasn't from Sylvie's emotions flooding into mine, because I still felt it even now.

I reached into the inside pocket of my mantle where I'd stashed the charm I had bought earlier.

I liked Tess.

I had always liked Tess.

If it wasn't for the fact that I was born with memories of my previous life as an adult, I might've confessed my feelings to her long before.

But how would she feel about me if she knew my secret? Would she react the same way my parents had? Would she feel disgusted—like I had when I first realized I liked her?

Doubt weighed down on me, and suddenly the tiny little charm in my hand

felt like a lead weight.

"Thank you for showing me this place. I always thought of the Beast Glades as such a dangerous and bloody place. I didn't realize how beautiful it could look."

"That's exactly how I felt. I love the view up here, but honestly this place is tied to a bad memory, so I"—I gripped the charm more tightly—"I thought coming up here with you might make it better."

"Has it?" she asked, shifting slightly. "Made it better, I mean?"

"It has," I said seriously. Summoning my courage, I held out my hand, gesturing for her to do the same, then setting her gift gingerly into her palm. It was a simple silver charm: two leaves laid over one another to form the shape of a heart. "I got this for you."

"It's so pretty!" she cooed, holding the charm up to inspect it. "Is this, perhaps, a reward for the great tour I gave you today?"

"No..." My tongue felt very heavy and my mouth very dry. "It's—it's because I like you."

"Wait, what?" Tess's eyes widened, her expression more disbelief than surprise. "I'm sorry, I was so wrapped up in your present, I must have misheard. I swear I thought you said—"

"I like you, Tess," I finished with more conviction, pushing down the doubt still growing inside me.

Tess stood up, eyeing me like I was a merchant who was trying to swindle her. "What do you mean by 'like'? I swear, Arthur, if you say you like me as a friend, or as a sister or something, I'm going to—"

"I like you as a..." I paused and let out a sigh. "I love you."

Tess's lips trembled and her eyes shined like stars as she tried to contain her emotions.

"I love you as a girl," I assured her, standing and reaching for her hand. "I hope that you feel the same way about me and, well, maybe we can, you know, start a relationship—together."

"You're lying," she said breathlessly.

"I'm not."

She sniffled. "Yes, you are."

"Do you want me to be?" I asked with a slight smile, my hand hovering like a nervous bird above hers but unwilling to alight upon it.

"No, I—I don't know," she said, her head down. "It's just—I imagined things going differently for us."

"Differently, how?" I could feel how awkwardly the frozen smile sat upon my face, but I seemed to have momentarily lost movement throughout large parts of my body.

"I thought that I'd have to get stronger and prettier and older to wow you and sweep you off your feet," she said, hitting me in the arm, and I had a sudden flashback to our time together as children in the city of Zestier. The tension shattered like glass, and suddenly we were six years old again, giggling and teasing each other because we didn't know how else to express our feelings.

"Can I still look forward to you sweeping me off my feet?"

"Oh be quiet before I sweep you off your feet and down the mountainside!" she snapped, her eyes full of tears but her mouth twitching into an uncertain smile. She held up the leaf. "Put this on for me."

I took the pendant back, but rather than undoing the chain clasp, I pressed the two ends of the leaves together. With a *click*, the silver leaves separated into two individual pieces.

Holding one of the leaves, I draped the silver chain around Tess's neck. "Here. Half for you, half for me."

After gazing at her own silver leaf for a moment, Tess untied a long leather cord that had been wrapped around her arm and took my silver leaf. She weaved the cord through the silver loop that made up the stem of the leaf pendant.

"Turn around," she ordered, "and bend down just a bit, you're too tall."

I did as she asked and felt her move close behind me; my breath caught when

I felt her reaching around me. She passed the leather cord from one hand to the other, pulling it carefully around my neck, and tied it so that the leaf dangled loosely against my chest. Then her arms were around my waist as she embraced me from behind.

"I love you too, idiot. But we're at war. We both have responsibilities, and people that need us," she said in a solemn whisper.

I wrapped my hands around hers. "I know. And I have things I want to tell you, so how about we make a promise?"

"What sort of promise?"

"A promise to stay alive—so that we can have a future together, a relationship... a family."

Her arms trembled, but when she answered, her voice was steady. "I promise."

Tess pulled her arms away, but I didn't turn around. I stared off at the Beast Glades, my mind pulled violently away from our mountainside ledge, our conversation, even from Tess... In the gloom, I had almost missed the cloud of dust drifting up from behind a large hill only a few dozen miles away.

"It's too soon," I muttered. Beside me, Tess raised her hand to her mouth, stifling a gasp.

The reports were wrong; they couldn't be more than a few hours away. The beast horde was coming.

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ENEMY TERRITORY III

CIRCE MILVIEW

I ran. It seemed as though my purpose, my entire function, had boiled down to running near-blind through this cursed forest. I sprinted in whatever direction my magic guided me. Without it, I was blind. Even if there was a moon tonight, I doubted its pale rays would be able to penetrate the dense canopy or the fog above.

Low-hanging branches scraped my cheeks and arms while thorny shrubs tore through my clothes. Next to the fire in my lungs and the knives piercing my every muscle, the pain was insignificant, but if I fell, all would be lost.

Every so often, I would see flashes of green light from Maeve's magic, illuminating the trees and casting eerie shadows on the forest ground.

Maeve, Cole. Please make it out safely.

Running until the flashes of magical battle were barely visible, I skidded to a stop and took cover behind a thick shrub. I covered my mouth to muffle my gasping breaths, afraid that I'd be heard. Paranoia, doubt, and hopelessness threatened to overwhelm my will to go on.

You're okay, Circe. You're doing great, I told myself, wiping at the stream of tears that wouldn't stop flowing. You have to survive. For your brother—for Seth.

After finally catching my breath and calming my nerves, I ignited my crest. Immediately, I could sense the location of the closest three-point array. It was farther away than I had hoped.

Unable to even curse aloud, I ground my teeth in frustration. Considering the distance between the arrays, just using mana wouldn't be enough. It had to be strong.

Using my bare hands, I dug a small hole in the soft ground, then bit down on my thumb until I drew blood. Carefully, I let my blood drip into the hole, infusing it with the mana from my crest.

Purely by accident, I had discovered that using my blood as a medium for mana would amplify the effects of the array. Perhaps finding out why might one day begin my crest's evolution into an emblem. If I survived long enough to return to Alacrya...

After my mana-infused blood had seeped into the small hole, I covered it up and moved on to a nearby tree.

Taking out my knife, I began carving a small hole underneath a low branch. I was about to put my bleeding thumb up against the hole when a sharp snap caused me to whirl around. I held the knife with both hands, pointing it toward the source of the sound and activating my first crest.

My senses expanded, covering a twenty-yard radius; it was just a small forest creature. I lowered my knife, frustrated at my own jumpiness. I was trembling, my back up against the tree, tears in my eyes again, but I clenched my fists, ground my teeth, and pushed the fear into a dark place at the back of my mind. *Time enough to die when the job's done, soldier*.

Despite my best efforts, despite knowing the noise had been caused by an animal, I couldn't focus. I was wasting time, but my instincts kept screaming, *Check behind you! Check behind you!*

"If someone was here, they would've killed me already," I growled. It wasn't a very comforting thought, but it was true. I was a Sentry—widely respected and valuable, but nearly defenseless compared to Strikers like Fane, Casters like Maeve, and even Shields like Cole.

Though the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, I forced myself around

and, hands shaking, began the process again. After the second point was complete, I moved to the final tree to finish the three-point array. I knew that using blood as a medium for the array would take its toll, but I hadn't been prepared for how weak I felt once the final point was in place. Despite the brisk winter air, which seemed even colder within the fog, I was sweating and my knees were close to giving out.

Got to move—almost there. Unable to mask my mana trail, I moved on. Fortunately, I wouldn't have to use my blood again. I just needed to make sure I didn't set the next imprint too far away.

A half-jog was all I could manage. In training, we'd often been made to run a sort of marathon where we alternated running and utilizing our power in a circuit, over and over until half the group had collapsed from exhaustion. I had hated those days the most, but now I understood. Without that conditioning, I would already be dead.

Have the others preceded me into the afterlife? I wondered. Annoying, motherly Maeve; foolish perpetual child, Cole; intolerant, wrathful Fane...

Cole would have fallen first, I knew. It was common with Shields; protection of the combat group was paramount, even to the very end. After Cole fell, Maeve wouldn't be far behind. Casters were aggressive, entirely focused on offensive magic. Without her Shield to protect her, Maeve would be little more than target practice for the elven archers. Fane, though—he was a Striker and held an emblem. If any could survive blind and alone in the elves' forest of death, it would be him. For awhile, at least.

My boot caught a knobby tree root and I pitched face forward into the dirt. Well, this is as good a place as any. Pushing myself up to my knees and igniting my crest, I got to work once more. Mana oozed painfully from my fingertips into the first point of the array. I was nearly drained of power. I could tell I wouldn't have the energy to create many more arrays, but I couldn't be sure how much farther the elven village was. I hadn't been able to rest and use True Sight since the elf, Albold, had discovered us.

"Blood honor me," I mumbled, performing the mental equivalent of squeezing a lemon to extract the last drops of power from within me as I formed the second point of the array. "Light guide me." Dragging myself to a thin, white-barked tree, I began the third point. "Vritra protect me."

It was as I completed the third point of the array that I heard it: footsteps hammering bullishly through the undergrowth. They were coming nearer. Using a low branch as a hand hold, I pulled myself to my feet and stumbled into a half-jog away from the three-point array.

Ahead of me, a large fallen log loomed suddenly from the fog. Using a nearby boulder as a step, I tried to jump over, but my legs didn't have the strength. I caught the side of the log with my shin and pitched forward over the top, crashing into the brush on the other side. I couldn't find the strength to stand again, so I lay in the dirt, the remains of the bush I'd crushed stabbing into my back, and waited for the footsteps to find me.

Moments later, a form flew over me, vaguely person shaped, but I couldn't tell if it was an elf or not. Whoever it was, they hit the ground running. *They must not have seen me*. As the thought flitted through my mind, the heavy steps faltered. Slowly, torturously, I turned my head to look in the direction of the figure. The fog obscured the person's features, so I activated my crest —pain burned through me as I did—and pushed my senses outward. *Fane*.

"You look like shit," I said as the blood-covered Striker slowly made his way back to me.

Falling to his knees at my side, Fane leaned into me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me up into an awkward embrace.

"Quiet, Circe. There's no time. Can you run?" he asked, pulling me suddenly to my feet. He seemed reluctant to take his eyes off me, but eventually his wariness won out and he turned away, looking back over the fallen tree I'd failed to jump.

[&]quot;What are you—"

[&]quot;I think so."

Fane ignited his emblem. His entire body glowed and visible gusts of wind surrounded him like a whirlwind, lifting him off his feet. In his hand was a long spear with a sharp point that spun like a drill, whipping the still air around us into a gale.

"Then run. I'll hold him off."

Without another word, I turned and ran. I didn't know who Fane was referring to, but from the way he had immediately ignited his emblem to its full power, I knew whoever it was must have been powerful.

It wasn't long before I heard the sounds of battle behind me. The ground shook and the trees seemed to shudder in sympathy for their brethren being destroyed in the fight. More than once I was almost blown off my feet by a gale from behind me, but even then, I resisted the temptation to look back. Fane was doing his job; I had to do mine.

I kept going until my legs felt like lead. Every step seemed harder and harder to make, as if I was wading in a pool of tar. No matter how desperately I wanted to keep moving, my body had had enough. My feet were rooted to the ground, I couldn't move at all. How far had I gone from the last array? It was hard to tell. Every yard felt like a mile, and my mind felt like someone had hammered out my brains, boiled them to broth, and poured the results back into my head.

"Idiot! Didn't I tell you to keep running?" I hadn't heard him approach, but I could tell Fane's rough voice when I heard it. I never thought I'd be so happy to hear words coming out of his big, stupid mouth...

Without stopping, Fane dipped under my arm, allowing me to wrap it around his neck, and half carried, half dragged me along beside him.

"Fane. Y-your arm!" I moaned, wide-eyed.

"Not important," he snapped. "I need you to focus on guiding me."

I wanted to know what had happened, but now wasn't the time. Pointing in the direction that True Sense had last shown me, I directed the veteran Striker toward our goal. It was with mild surprise that I realized the sun was coming back up. We had been running non-stop throughout the night, and it was obvious that Fane was close to collapsing. He had to continually concentrate much of his mana on the stub where his left arm used to be in order to keep from bleeding out. The rest of his mana, what little he had left, was spent on reinforcing his body just to keep himself upright and moving.

"We're almost there!" I said, pointing at an opening in the woods a few dozen yards away.

"Just a bit more... You need to focus everything you have on the three-point array. Do that and our mission is a success," Fane huffed. "Can you do that?"

"I can."

We stumbled to a stop and Fane dropped me on the ground. I assumed that the Striker wanted me to start on the array, but I was only half right.

Fane's emblem glowed brightly underneath his shirt as he stepped in front of me. The spear once again formed in Fane's hand, and he aimed it at an approaching figure—an elf. The same elf who had spotted us hidden up in that tree. It seemed like days ago now. Maeve and Cole had stayed behind to fight this elf...

If he was alive, that meant they'd met their end.

"Our lives are the light that will guide Alacrya to victory," I muttered, forgetting for a moment about the array as the elf named Albold continued closing the distance between us. He looked injured and tired, but he was alive.

I heard an airy *thwip*, but before my brain could process what the noise meant, Fane's wind spear had already moved, deflecting the arrow that was meant to take my life.

"Damn it, Circe, this will have to do. Make the array," Fane hissed. "Now!"

Trusting Fane to keep me alive for the next few minutes, I ignited my crest

one final time and imprints of the three-point arrays lit up like a map in my head. We had run too far from the last array; it would take blood to make this one strong enough to be seen. Drawing out my blade, I shakily drew the sharp edge across my forearm, letting my blood flow down into the soil.

The sudden clash of weapons just behind me startled me, but I refused to look back.

There was another *thwip* from behind, followed by a meaty thud. Fane let out a groan.

My hands trembled as I started the array.

Damn it! It's not strong enough.

I tried to imbue more mana into the first point of the array, but so much was happening. From the corner of my eye, I could see the trees around us swaying. Another pained grunt behind me, but it wasn't Fane's voice. A sharp ache radiated from my crest, quickly growing more and more unbearable as I poured mana into the pool of blood on the ground in front of me.

I heard the bow loose another arrow, then found myself lying on my side, a blinding whiteness exploding in my head. Dully, I was aware of pain crawling up my arm like fire. I pushed drunkenly back up to my knees. My right hand wouldn't move. The arm it was attached to was mangled beyond repair.

"The... array," Fane croaked from behind me.

"I—I can't," I moaned. I couldn't think; it felt like every inch of my right arm had been stabbed over and over again.

Blood pooled beneath me.

I knew it wouldn't be long until I died. I almost wanted to die, but I had to think of Seth. He was waiting in a hospital bed back in Alacrya; he was almost dead as well. Even if I couldn't live, shouldn't he be able to?

Though I don't know where I found the strength, I got back to my feet. Blood continued to flow freely from my mangled arm, but it was okay. I knew what

I had to do.

"I hope you can forgive your sister... for not being able to make it back home," I mumbled. "I'll sleep with you in my heart—forever."

I took a step to the side, creating a trail with my blood. The pain faded as my entire body seemed to go numb.

Fane came into view; he was barely standing and was dripping almost as much blood as I was.

Though neither of us could speak, Fane continued to protect me, using gusts of wind to deflect the glowing missiles that hissed through the air toward me while I made the array, strengthening it with my life's blood.

I took another step, but I must've lost consciousness because I found the world turned on its side. Fane was still on his feet, holding off Albold and another elf with his spear, which had turned into a whirling wall of destruction.

Almost there.

I crawled, dragging my maimed arm on the ground to continue the bloody trail, but it was getting harder to see. I couldn't have been unconscious for more than a second, but somehow an entire row of trees had moved, shifting out of the way to reveal a towering wall. And on the top of the wall were hundreds of elves, each armed with staves or bows. The staves were glowing in all sorts of colors, some green, some yellow, others blue. Hovering above them, a lone figure—the she-elf devil. She raised one hand and pointed at me. Blue energy gathered at her fingertip.

"Circe!" Fane yelled, snapping me out of my daze.

A desperate scream tore from my throat as I summoned every ounce of mana I had left through my crest. Drained of mana, energy, and blood, my body sagged like an empty wineskin, but that didn't matter.

It had worked.

Every imprint I had left in the forest was now connected, and every Sentry waiting outside the forest would be able to sense the arrays. I had created a

trail for our army to follow right to our enemy's heart.

I couldn't feel my face, but I hoped I was smiling as I stared up at the wall of Dicathian soldiers. I wanted them to see my expression so they'd know...

Even this damned forest won't keep you safe anymore.

The Alacryan army is coming for you.

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WELCOMING GIFT

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"We need to go warn the others!" Tess urged, mana already enveloping her body as she prepared to jump off the cliff.

I grabbed her wrist. "I'll warn everyone. You need to go get your teammates. You have a mission to accomplish."

"That beast horde is more than a day early, Art! The people here aren't prepared for this. I should stay and—"

"That's what I'm here for, Tess," I cut in firmly. "You have your orders, soldier."

There was a tense moment of silence. Tess's brows furrowed and her jaw tightened in frustration, but she finally relented. "Fine. I'll gather my team and report to Captain Jesmiya before leaving."

"Good. And Tess... be careful," I replied with a gentle smile.

"That's what I wanted to say, dummy," she said before grabbing me by the scruff of my mantle and pulling me into a kiss.

As she let go and stepped up to the edge of the cliff, I found myself subconsciously touching my own lips, dazed.

Tess smiled at me, her flushed cheeks betraying her embarrassment at the bold move. Tugging on the chain of her leaf charm, she met my eyes. "Remember the promise."

"I promise," I replied, holding up my half of the charm dangling around my

neck.

Just like that, Tess jumped off the cliff, sailing down the mountainside like an emerald comet. I watched her go, hoping that what I had said to her was for the best. I didn't want her to stay here. In the Elshire Forest, she'd be hunting stragglers who were lost in an environment that she could freely navigate.

"It's for the best, Arthur," I said aloud to myself. After a moment, I reached out to Sylvie and informed her of the situation, then leapt off the cliff.

The people of the Wall handled the news surprisingly well. Though there was a brief surge of panic, between the adept leadership and the fact that most of the people present were either trained soldiers or veteran adventurers, they were quick to ready themselves for battle.

In the span of an hour, archers and conjurers were positioned on every floor of the Wall, staring warily out from the Wall's many arrow slits. Melee troops—largely members of the Bulwark Division—were hurrying into formation just behind the gate to the Beast Glades. Work was not yet complete in the tunnels below, and many workers still toiled within them, rushing to finish the preparations; Trodius had tasked many of the adventurers to assist them. The Trailblazers had vanished, moving into position so quickly it was as if Jesmiya had teleported them all away.

As for myself, I waited inside the meeting tent with Sylvie. Trodius was pacing back and forth behind his desk, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes darting back and forth as if he were reading an invisible text. Gavik and Callum stood nearby, quiet and tense. Taking advantage of the moment's peace, I checked the contents of my dimension ring. The only useful item inside was Dawn's Ballad. Even cracked and broken, the sword was still better than any other weapon I'd ever used.

I took it out, inspecting the translucent teal blade, the point of which had been melted away. A spiderweb of cracks spread down the blade from the ruined tip.

I really wish this damn weapon inside my hand would manifest already, I grumbled in my head.

'Now would be as good a time as any,' Sylvie agreed.

"General," Gavik said suddenly, drawing my attention away from Dawn's Ballad. "Please reconsider. Allow us to accompany you."

I looked at the two mages and shook my head. "As I said before, your job will be to support the troops here."

Callum answered, frustration bleeding into his voice. "Commander Virion has personally picked Gavik and me to assist you in battle. If something were to happen after sending you by yourself—"

"I'm not looking down on you two, but the chance of something happening to me or Sylvie only increases if you two come with us. I—"

The tent flap was pulled aside and a tall, muscular woman with bright red eyes and dark skin entered. Those starling red eyes moved quickly from face to face, stopping on mine.

"Please excuse the intrusion," she said, bowing slightly before turning to Trodius. "Father, I brought the weapons you asked for."

"Ah! Come in, Senyir." Trodius waved the woman over, gracing her with a rare smile. "Arthur, this is Senyir Flamesworth, my daughter and the master blacksmith here at the Wall."

Tess had referred to that little girl's master as Senyir back when we were touring the Wall together. Tess had seemed to have a good relationship with her, but even so...

The very mention of the word "daughter" coming from Trodius's lips annoyed me. Jasmine's stories about her life, about how her family had practically thrown her away, were fresh in my mind. This wasn't the time for such thoughts, however, so I pushed down my negative feelings toward the senior captain and introduced myself to his daughter.

"Arthur Leywin. Pleasure to meet you," I said, sheathing Dawn's Ballad. Senyir opened her mouth to reply but was cut off by her father. "Senyir here is one of the finest blacksmiths in Sapin, on par with even the master smiths of Darv due to her *excellent* ability to manipulate fire-attribute mana during the forging process," Trodius boasted.

"I heard from Tessia that you prefer thinner blades," Senyir said, ignoring Trodius's interruption and handing me the longer of the two swords. "I'm sure it's nowhere near as well crafted as your weapon, but my father informed me that you'll be in battle for an extended period of time. Having multiple backup weapons won't do you any harm."

"Thank you," I replied, drawing the sword from its plain steel scabbard. The blade was a pale gold color, about three fingers in width, and slightly longer than Dawn's Ballad. After testing its balance with a few swings, I began channeling mana into it.

The thin sword hummed as fire, wind, water, and earth magic all began to swirl around the blade in harmony. I continued injecting mana into the sword until I could see the blade beginning to deteriorate from the burden of being imbued with multiple elements.

Cutting off the flow of mana into the sword, I sheathed it and said, "Not bad. I think it'll suffice." The weak compliment was all I could muster; I was struggling to suppress my personal feelings toward the Flamesworth family despite myself.

Senyir couldn't keep the disappointment from her face, but she accepted my words with a bow. "I'm honored."

Putting the longer sword into my ring and fastening the shorter one onto my hip beside Dawn's Ballad, I turned to Trodius. "Have the ground troops ready to advance as soon as I leave."

"I'm aware of the plan, General. Don't worry about us, just come back in one piece," Trodius replied. "We'll be waiting for the signal."

Without another word, I walked past Senyir Flamesworth and stepped out of the tent. I was met with a thunderous cheer; all around me were soldiers, merchants, and adventurers, all clapping and shouting my name. "Your presence is what is holding this Wall together, General," Trodius said from just behind me.

It was overwhelming, to say the least. Rather than feeling joy or pride, however, I was overcome with horror; within the crowd, I had just seen my father. He wasn't supposed to be here, and if he was here, the rest of the Twin Horns must be as well.

No. They were supposed to be in Blackbend City, far away from this battle! Sylvie squeezed my hand. 'Arthur. Everyone is watching.'

I didn't care. I wanted to run to my father right then and demand that he leave, that he take Mother and the Twin Horns and get away from the Wall.

But I couldn't. One look from my father stopped me in my tracks. He had such a determined expression that, even as a general, I didn't dare stop him. He would never forgive me.

If everything goes to plan, most of these soldiers will make it out alive—and Dad is one of the stronger soldiers, I thought, trying to calm myself down.

Swallowing the anxiety and the dread building up inside me, I saluted the crowd, locking eyes with my father. He saluted back, and, despite the fight that we had not long ago, he smiled at me.

Another wave of cheers rolled through the crowd as Sylvie shifted into her draconic form.

My bond reeled her head back and let out a deafening roar, shaking the ground. We ascended with a single beat from Sylvie's broad wings, clearing the height of the Wall in just a few seconds and giving me a clear view of the approaching horde as well as the people below who we were responsible for protecting.

My hands trembled as I finally felt the true gravity of the situation. I had brought my sister here. My parents were here, as well as the Twin Horns. Their lives, the lives of every man and woman at the Wall, depended on me.

'You're not alone, Arthur,' Sylvie said as she spread her obsidian wings. 'Nothing has changed from when you made the decision to bring Ellie along.'

She was right. Despite the beast horde arriving a day early, the preparations had already been made. Both my mother and sister had the Phoenix Wyrm pendants to keep them safe, and I had even given Ellie a transmission scroll in case she needed to reach out to me. Still, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Was it because of the promise I had made with Tess? The pendant hanging around my neck seemed to weigh down on me, but it wasn't just that. The timing of everything happening seemed off. I still couldn't shake the feeling that this attack was more than what it seemed. What were the Alacryans trying to accomplish?

Focus, Arthur. You're going into battle.

'Are you ready?' Sylvie asked, her excitement flooding into me.

Not as ready as you are, I teased, bolstered by her confidence.

Sylvie's laughter rang in my head as the world around us turned into a blur. With her seal released, every inch of her body was brimming with power. Each stroke of her wings made gales behind us, and we were soon approaching the army of beasts.

Scanning the churning sea of fangs and claws with mana enhanced vision, I found each of the Alacryan mages spread throughout the horde, shepherding along the massive herd.

"How about we send them a little welcoming gift?" I suggested.

'My thoughts exactly,' Sylvie responded, her wings beating slowly to keep us aloft high above the mana beasts. Space began to distort around us as mana gathered into Sylvie's open maw, forming into a golden-white sphere, which grew larger with every passing breath until it was even larger than me.

The sphere erupted into a beam of pure mana, which cut silently through the space between us and the enemy. A blinding flash forced me to turn away, but the sounds of shattering stone and shrieking mana beasts was carried on a draft of hot air that I could feel even from this distance.

So began the battle.

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TWO VERSUS AN ARMY

I WATCHED as the hole that had formed from Sylvie's attack slowly disappeared—covered by the steady stream of mana beasts marching toward the Wall. Despite the devastation the blast had caused, the corrupted creatures hardly seemed to notice.

Sylvie released another blast of mana, but this time several shields appeared, compounded upon one another and absorbing the brunt of the attack.

Looks like we won't be able to just rain spells down on them from the comfort of the air, I mused.

'After you,' Sylvie thought, turning her long neck to give me a toothy grin. Try to keep up.

Normally, falling head-first from several thousand feet in the air into an army of magical beasts should've caused some sort of fear or anxiety, but that wasn't the case for me. My heart hammered against my ribcage not out of fear, but excitement.

Mana flooded through my body as wind gathered around me, swirling and condensing as I landed like a meteor in the center of the beast horde. The layers of wind surrounding me burst outward, shredding and flinging away hundreds of beasts caught in the blast.

Slowly, I rose to my feet, Dawn's Ballad in my hand. The impact had made a crater at least ten feet deep, and dozens of sets of monstrous eyes glared down at me from above. The creatures snarled and snapped at the air, but, at

least for a moment, the entire horde had come to a standstill.

A wild, manic war-cry suddenly burst out from a bipedal canine at least three times my height. That frenzied howl rippled through the other beasts surrounding me, as if waking them up from a stupor. The corrupted mana beasts, which moments ago had marched along in a drug induced state of apathy, all suddenly wakened in a concert of cries, roars, and jarring screeches.

But piercing through the cries of the corrupted mana beasts was the thunderous roar of my bond as she landed in their midst. Sylvie immediately ripped out the bipedal canine's throat with her fangs and crushed four other mana beasts with a swipe of her tail.

'Try to keep up,' she thought to me, her challenge burning in my mind.

Eager to "keep up" with my bond, I leapt from the crater and slammed into a reptilian creature with three swirling tails. The force of the impact was enough to knock it flat, and Dawn's Ballad finished it with a quick slash across its neck, cleanly separating head from body. Dozens of mana beasts swarmed around me, snarling and spitting, lashing out with claws, talons, and paws. I conjured a surge of churning air that threw the closest beasts backwards into the swarming beasts behind them.

So thick was the press that the creatures were crawling over each other to get closer to me. A wolf-like beast with sharp ridges of bone protruding from much of its body leapt from the back of another large three-tailed reptile but was immediately turned end-over-end by the force of my cyclone barrier. Dawn's Ballad flashed, and the creature's corpse landed beside me.

I held that position for several minutes, limiting my mana usage and relying instead on my battle prowess—accumulated through my two lifetimes—as I cut down one enemy after the next. For each beast I killed, two or three replaced it, but we had prepared for this. After all, Sylvie and I weren't going to win this battle by ourselves. Our job was to do as much damage as possible.

'Something is coming your way. Be careful,' Sylvie said, her message of caution somewhat undercut by the jolt of excitement I felt as she faced off against an S-class mana beast somewhere nearby.

A pack of wolves, each the size of Boo and crackling with an aura of blue and white lightning, pushed their way through the ring of enemies, snapping and snarling until the other mana beasts fell back. The thunder-wolves—I counted thirteen in the pack—carefully circled around me, staying just outside of the rotating wall of wind.

These ones seem to have some brains, I thought. It was obvious by their murky black pelts that the wolves had been corrupted, but unlike the other beasts, which had marched mindlessly toward the Wall, these ones remained alert.

The pack leader—a larger wolf with a wild, spiky mane that reminded me of a lion—let out a short, sharp bark, and the others pounced, crackling lightning arcing out from their bodies, jumping from one wolf to the next and forming a snare intended to trap me within their circle.

Stomping my foot, I conjured a ring of stone spikes from the ground, skewering the thunder-wolves mid-leap. Only the leader escaped, dodging around the earthen spears and launching himself at me. I stepped to the side, easily avoiding the alpha's snapping jaws, and brought Dawn's Ballad up to lay open its stomach, but a bolt of lightning jumped from its spiky mane and struck me in the shoulder, throwing me off balance and forcing my blow off course.

I lunged after the thunder-wolf, which was turning to circle around me again. Mana flared bright white at the melted tip of my teal blade as I focused it into a sharp point. I stomped down, exaggerating the motion, and conjured another spike of earth, just to the wolf's left. The alpha took the bait, dodging right and preparing to leap again, but it was too late. Dawn's Ballad impaled it through the chest, and the lightning coursing through its fur flickered and faded, and the beast slumped to the ground dead.

A piercing screech drew my attention to the sky; a flock of bat-winged birds was swooping down with their sharp metal beaks homed in on me.

I cast a net of lightning directly into the path of the birds. The metal beaks dropped like flies, their wings spasming from the shock. With the thunderwolves dead, the surrounding horde's restraint broke, and the monsters flooded back in to attack.

Sylvie's voice rang in my mind. 'Arthur, these beasts seem off. Most of them aren't even retaliating; they just keep marching toward the Wall. Only some of the stronger ones and their packs are actually putting up a fight.'

I feel it too. I'm not sure what the Alacryans did. They must be controlling the beasts, directing them to get to the Wall no matter what, I replied. I think it's time to turn up the heat, Sylv.

Looking to stem the constant flow of mana beasts, I began to rain down destructive spells on the horde. Spheres of fire, water, and lightning orbited around me, burning, slashing, and electrocuting any beasts that came near me while I focused on casting spell after spell.

The terrain became a strange, otherworldly patchwork of elemental domains; some parts of the ground were scorched and littered with burning corpses, while others transformed into gruesome gardens of stone spikes from which beasts' corpses dangled like limp flowers. A storm of ice knives raged like a tornado through the battlefield, leaving behind a carpet of shredded flesh.

An odor of burning fur, fresh meat, and metallic blood settled over the battlefield like a fog. Even navigating became a challenge, as I had to maneuver around the lingering effects of my own spells, the corpses of fallen mana beasts, and the endless march of those still living.

'It's working, Arthur,' Sylvie thought to me. 'Some of the more powerful mana beasts are starting to break away from the horde. Where are the Alacryan mages, though? I haven't seen one since they conjured those shields earlier.'

Me neither. Let's see if we can't thin out a few of these big ones before the

horde reaches the wall.

Sylvie was right. Almost immediately after her warning, an S-class mana beast appeared, charging through the lesser creatures with reckless abandon. It was a humanoid feline, twice my height and all muscle, covered in dense crimson fur that acted as armor and wielding deadly claws.

It took me a second to remember its name: a razor grimalkin.

Its speed and agility were on par with Kordri, my martial arts master from Epheotus, and it would have torn most adventurers to shreds. However, it relied entirely on its thick fur for defense and focused on attacking aggressively at breakneck speed.

Its fur, however, wasn't a problem for me.

"Come on!" I roared, dodging the razor grimalkin's clawed kick and nicking its neck with the edge of my wind-imbued blade. Blood rushed to my head, drowning out everything other than the opponent in front of me. The beast, which had the ability to kill its victims long before they could even fear it, hissed and dashed toward me, its body blurring into a red streak.

I used Thunderclap Impulse to heighten my senses, and the charging beast came suddenly into focus again.

To the outside world, we must have seemed little more than two intangible blurs flashing around each other on the battlefield. Each swipe of the razor grimalkin's mana-infused claws extended through the air and left deep gashes in the earth—and oftentimes the nearby mana beasts—while opening it up to another cut from Dawn's Ballad.

My objective, the reason Sylvie and I threw ourselves into the path of twenty thousand murderous monsters, faded to the back of my mind as I dominated the S-class mana beast. Though my legs ached from old wounds, and the scratches left by those vicious claws stung, I was in much better shape than the panting, oversized cat.

Heaving for breath, its fur matted with blood, the razor grimalkin backed away, suddenly wary. Sensing that the fight had gone out of it, I charged. Just

as the creature was about to bolt, I conjured a slab of condensed air behind it and pulled with all my strength. The wall of air struck it mid-stride, knocking it off balance and into the path of my blade.

Dragging the dead S-class beast up by the bloodied scruff of its neck, I roared in triumph. The mana beasts around me, no matter how deranged and feral they had become due to the Alacryans' corruption, began to quiver.

I felt a rush of euphoria seeing the beasts around me shake in fear, my eyes scanning for the next victim to take its chances against me.

'Arthur, the beasts may be corrupted, but they're still intelligent beings. We have no choice but to kill for a greater cause; don't take joy in it.'

Sylvie's words were like cold water splashed in my face. I had indeed lost myself to the bloodlust for a moment, high on the freedom to wreak havoc. I had acted like a wild beast let loose from its cage.

It would be easy to say that this is what war did to everyone. In part, this was true—fighting countless beasts slowly turned men into monsters themselves. However, it was also true that I enjoyed it. Being surrounded by death, yet never being able to kill freely myself, might have had something to do with it. The countless duels I had fought in my previous life had all been supervised and restricted by rules and laws. Here, it was different.

As I sobered from the battle frenzy, I could feel many aches and wounds I hadn't even realized existed. There was no time to recuperate or rest, however; I could already feel the approach of another S-class mana beast. Its footsteps shook the earth, and its killing intent pressed down on me like a weighted net.

It didn't take long for me to see the towering monstrosity, which trampled the smaller corrupted beasts like they were insects. The iron hyrax—appropriately named—was as tall as a three-story building, and every inch of its body was covered in metallic plates. Spikes sprouted along its spine, and at the end of its trunk-like snout was a dented metal orb the size of Sylvie's head.

'Do you need help?' Sylvie asked, sensing my hesitation as I watched the colossal beast advance.

Not yet, I conveyed, sheathing Dawn's Ballad.

Wanting to test the iron hyrax's resilience, I threw an arc of lightning at the beast, but it didn't even flinch. As it stomped through the press, it swung its snout like a flail, bludgeoning mana beasts left and right. The mana beasts fortunate enough to evade the iron hyrax's snout were soon trampled by its thick hooves. That's when I saw him—a human.

An Alacryan mage was holding on for his life from a perch between two of the spikes on the S-class beast's back. At this distance, it was easy to tell that this was *not* part of his plan.

That's when it clicked: the weaker mana beasts appearing almost sedated and mostly ignoring Sylvie and me even as we killed them; the higher-tiered mana beasts seemingly possessing their own will even under the effects of whatever the Alacryans were using to control them.

The pieces of a plan came together in my head as I watched the Alacryan mage struggle with something in his hand: a small black stone.

I launched a fireball into the iron hyrax's face. The flaming sphere splashed across its metallic hide without so much as a scorch mark, but it did its job.

The beast bellowed and reared up in anger; the Alacryan mage was barely able to hold on. Intent on flattening me with its flail-like snout, the beast charged recklessly. I continued throwing spells I knew were just barely strong enough to annoy it, which kept it charging through the other beasts, doing nearly as much damage to the horde as Sylvie or I had done.

Wherever the mammoth beast went, it left a trail of crushed corpses in its wake. To keep its attention on me, I continued to pelt it with spells. I drove earthen spikes into its hooves, layered the ground in ice so that it'd slip, and threw blades of wind at its eyes to blur its vision, but my half-assed spells weren't doing any real damage.

Fire seemed to work best, but when I threw another fireball at it, a translucent

shield flickered in front of it, blocking my spell before it could land.

I could use your help now, Sylvie, I sent, projecting a calm, leisurely air, then turned the beast toward where I could sense Sylvie was fighting.

'Wow, how did you make it so angry?' she replied, leaping into the air with a beat of her wings.

Pin the beast down for as long as you can, I instructed.

With a mental confirmation, Sylvie flew up high into the sky before dropping back down in a nose-dive.

Clearing the beasts around me with a gust of wind, I stood my ground as the iron hyrax lumbered toward me. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I waited for the moment when the beast's front legs were just about to touch the ground as it charged. This sort of spell required precision and timing, and the distance compounded the difficulty, but as a white core mage, it felt as natural as if I was shaping clay.

The ground just below the beast's front feet splintered, sending it crashing onto its knees. However, its momentum continued to carry the beast, and the mage riding on its back, toward me.

Preparing my mind and body for the toll about to come, I waited until the beast was just a few feet away, then I activated Static Void. The elephantine beast and the Alacryan mage both froze in place, paused in time. Even as a white core mage, the size and complexity of the mana art caused my mana core to groan in protest, but I managed to hold the time-pause until the moment before Sylvie reached our enemies.

'Now!' she screamed mentally.

I immediately released Static Void and leaped out of the way, almost crashing into the slavering jaws of a reptilian mana beast. It twisted and snapped as I flew past, rolled, and came back to my feet, already casting a spell to summon a thick stone wall between us to protect myself. The force of Sylvie's headlong dive created a shockwave of wind and debris that sent the mana beasts in the vicinity tumbling. I heard the reptilian beast I had just

passed crack against the other side of the wall, which I then kicked over, crushing the mindless creature under a ton of stone.

With no time to rest, I dashed toward the iron hyrax, which was dazed but still alive and struggling to get out of Sylvie's grasp.

Don't kill it yet, I said to my bond.

'I'm not confident I even can. These metal plates are even thicker than my scales, and the hide beneath them is made of tiny, interlocking scales, like chainmail.'

Leaping up on top of the beast's back, I pried the oblong black stone from the unconscious mage's viselike grip, then threw him down to the ground. He jolted awake from the impact, his unfocused eyes drifting aimlessly as he struggled to make sense of his surroundings. He nearly jumped out of his skin when I landed on the ground in front of him.

Before he had the chance to speak, I held the black stone to his face. "Does this control the mana beasts?"

His eyes widened and he made a desperate swipe at the stone, but I pushed him back to the ground with my foot. Conjuring a stone nail, I impaled his hand to the ground. His scream carried over the battlefield, cutting through the earthquake rumble of Sylvie's struggle with the mammoth beast behind us.

'Hurry! I can't keep him still for much longer,' Sylvie conveyed.

I glanced back at Sylvie, who was perched on her prey, biting and clawing and shoving it to the ground, keeping it pinned. With every surge of its massive bulk, though, it pushed her a little farther and came a little closer to righting itself. A gurgled cough drew my attention back to the Alacryan, and I saw with horror that he had bitten off his own tongue and was currently choking on blood.

Reaching into his mouth, I cauterized the wound with fire mana, but the damage was done.

"Damn it. What is it with you Alacryans and killing yourselves," I sighed.

"Well, if you won't tell me, I might as well find out myself."

I quickly cycled mana through the stone. When I found that it wouldn't react to any type of mana, or even aether, I did the only other thing I could think of. I crushed it in my hand.

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BATTLEFIELD

THE MAGE'S eyes widened in panic as the crumbled fragments of the black stone fell from my grasp. Suddenly, as if a switch had been flipped, every mana beast in the vicinity seemed to wake up, their glazed and lifeless eyes burning with fury. It was as if they all went mad simultaneously; the mana beasts began growling and hissing at each other, baring fangs, claws, and horns at any living thing near to them.

It didn't take long for all hell to break loose. Beasts pounced on one another without even a semblance of sanity. They leaped at me with reckless abandon, though they were so wild, few made it to me. Any time two beasts collided, they would fall into a manic battle and tear each other to shreds.

Quickly drawing the two swords I had received from Senyir Flamesworth, I transformed into a flurry of blades, cutting through the mana beasts that attacked me until a mound of bloody carcasses accumulated beneath my feet. Despite the massacre that befell those who came close, the mana beasts continued to attack, throwing their lives away as if possessed.

'Arthur! I can't hold on anymore!' Sylvie's struggling voice sounded in my mind.

I turned back to see the iron hyrax break free, its eyes locked on me as it pawed the ground in preparation to charge.

However, I noticed a subtle difference in the mammoth beast's behavior. The way it glared down at me still indicated rage, but the fact that it didn't throw

itself directly at me showed some level of calculation, or at least of control, that the lesser beasts didn't possess. It seemed to be considering me or waiting for me to react to its aggression. I was, however, slightly preoccupied by the never-ending flow of mana beasts that seemed hell-bent on ripping my limbs off.

"Enough!" I roared, releasing every ounce of murderous intent I had built up throughout the battle.

To the naked eye, nothing had changed, but for anyone that had an ounce of sense, they felt it. Even the beasts, as deranged as they were, froze in their tracks, trembling

This may not have worked while they were in their stupor, but now the beasts around me shrank back out of instinctual self-preservation, some of the weaker ones collapsing entirely.

With a little space to breathe, I took a step toward the mammoth beast. A path opened up as I walked; the mana beasts were unable to bear being too close.

I locked eyes with the colossal S-class monster, directing the entirety of my killing intent toward it. It was a primitive thing to do, much like flexing your muscles in front of your opponent to discourage them, but it worked; the colossal monster broke eye contact with me, its body slackening. Finally, with a mournful bellow, the S-class beast turned and fled, trampling smaller mana beasts with each step.

'It's been a while since I've felt you unleash your intent. A good reminder not to tease you too much,' Sylvie joked as she joined me at my side.

It seems to only work on the more intelligent and powerful beasts, though, I replied, keeping my expression deadpan.

The mana beasts that had been temporarily paralyzed by my intent had quickly broken free and resumed mauling each other.

Having dealt with the largest threat, I turned back to the Alacryan mage. Despite being bloody and incapacitated, he was still alive. None of the beasts seemed to want to go near him. Seeing how the crazed beasts acted, it

couldn't have been out of pity or loyalty to their master.

"Now..." I peered down at the frightened mage. "I wonder how you're still alive."

Sylvie craned her neck and began sniffing at the Alacryan. 'I'm not sure if this has anything to do with it, but there's a rather repulsive stench coming from this human.'

The Alacryan mage let out a muffled whimper as my bond bared her fangs at him, but there was little else he could do. Perhaps overwhelmed by the dragon's presence, he fell unconscious once again. I decided to leave him there. He'd most likely die within a few minutes, painlessly in his sleep. That was more than he'd offer the people of Dicathen, given the chance.

I bent down, sniffing at the unconscious mage's clothes. Smelling nothing but the sweat and grime of travel and battle, I used mana to enhance my olfactory sense while dulling the rest of my senses. There it was... a repulsive stench, just as Sylvie had described, but very subtle to a human's poor sense of smell. The beasts, though... If Sylvie could smell it, they certainly could too. The Alacryans must have discovered some sort of elixir or serum that was repellant to the corrupted mana beasts. That would explain their avoidance of him, even in their madness.

There was little time to spend wondering about it now, though. There was a lot more work to be done.

I spent the following hours on the ground, hacking, stabbing, and shooting mana beasts with swords and spells. My time training under Kordri had honed my body to last for days with the help of mana arts and martial technique, and the mock battles against Kathyln, Hester, Buhnd, and Camus had provided ample experience battling against multiple opponents, which proved invaluable against the unceasing waves of mana beasts without overexerting my mana.

Though our purpose of doing as much damage to the horde as possible hadn't

changes, Sylvie and I had also spent the time hunting for other Alacryan mages. The substance that the enemy used to basically conceal themselves from corrupted beasts was an enticing bounty, and I already knew what to use it for.

However, even after hours of searching, our efforts were fruitless. Just the sheer number of mana beasts alone made it almost impossible to distinguish even larger mana beats, let alone a human.

How's everything on your end, Sylvie? I asked as I struck down yet another mad monstrosity.

'A bit tired, I'll admit, but I'm fine,' she responded, and I could sense the fatigue through our shared emotions.

Tired already? It's only been like four hours of nonstop fighting, I teased, plunging Dawn's Ballad into the ribcage of a four-armed gorilla creature. Of my three swords, only Dawn's Ballad had held up. The broken blade of the shortsword was sticking out of a boarish beast's skull somewhere, and the longsword had grown dull enough to be used as a training blade.

'The Wall is getting closer, Arthur. The conjurers and archers will be in range to attack soon. It'll be even harder to find the enemy mages then.'

You're right. Once the beast horde reaches the Wall and the trap activates, it'll be impossible to find them, I responded back as I slashed through another pack of frenzied canine beasts.

'What do you suggest?' my bond asked as she fought her way toward me.

There's no choice but to rely on Realmheart to search for the mages.

There was a moment of silence in our minds as I felt Sylvie think over her next words.

'I want to keep your family safe as well, Arthur, but is it wise to deviate from your obligations as a general and Lance? Using Realmheart will take a toll on you, and even then, we run the risk of it being for nothing.'

Gritting my teeth, I jumped up on Sylvie's back, letting the memories of my recent fight with my parents flood out of my mind and into my bond's. It was

easier to share the experience that way than trying to explain.

It's not wise, Sylv. I know that. But please, just for a little bit... I need to be able to tell myself that I'm doing everything I can to keep my family safe, and finding this substance might just do that.

Assuming everything went according to plan, we'd be sacrificing parts of the Wall and the underground tunnels, but it'd be much safer for our melee troops to fight. Even so, with so many people I cared about participating in the battle, it was impossible not to be anxious and afraid for them.

'I understand,' Sylvie assured me, her powerful wings beating down. 'Besides, who knows what uses Gideon could find for this substance.' With a blast of wind, we soared up into the sky, shooting past several flying mana beasts before they could even react.

Taking a deep breath, I ignited Sylvia's beast will from deep within my mana core and let its power flow freely out into my body.

I felt the physical changes to my body as the warm surge of power filled me from the inside. Long, white bangs obstructed my view, and the runes covering my body and limbs glowed brightly even through the thick clothes I wore.

Then my vision turned to shades of gray and flecks of colorful light began emerging out of thin air.

No matter how many times I used this skill, it was breathtaking every single time. Being able to physically see the very substance that made up all magic in the atmosphere truly made it feel like I had fallen into a magical world.

'Focus, Arthur. Can you distinguish any of the Alacryan mages?' Sylvie said with a hint of envy. My bond had yet to grasp this ability, despite breaking out of the seal that her mother had placed on her before birth.

Not really, I replied, narrowing my gaze to try and pinpoint any mana fluctuations that seemed different from the magic that the beasts were able to cast.

Sylvie continued flying over the army, avoiding or killing any flying mana

beasts that got in her way, while I scoured the horde for any sign of the Alacryan mages hiding amongst it. When Sylvie swerved suddenly to avoid a giant, corrupted vulture, I pulled my gaze from the forces below us for just a moment, and I noticed something odd up toward the Elshire Forest.

Sylvie, can you take us higher for minute? I asked my bond, trying to make out what was happening up north. She let loose a gout of fire, which burned through the vulture's wing and sent it tumbling to the ground.

We ascended until it was impossible to make out the individual mana beasts below us. But as expansive and threatening as the beast horde appeared, my focus was on a much bigger threat.

In the distance, I could see mana fluctuations that seemed to be made up of tens of thousands of mages—the Alacryan army. The bright trail of mana snaked through the Elshire forest right to the heart of Elenoir Kingdom.

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DECISIONS MADE

TESSIA ERALITH

Darvus stepped up beside me, his knuckles white from gripping his dual axes for dear life. The smug grin that he always wore was nowhere in sight. "This doesn't look good, Tessia."

Behind me were gathered the two hundred soldiers that made up my unit, along with the ragtag squads of elven soldiers that had been placed under my command. Amongst them were many more civilian elves garbed only in cloth or leather for protection. These were the brave men and women who stayed behind to protect their home and their fleeing loved ones from the approaching army.

Every one of them wore a grim expression. The soldiers gripped their weapons while the civilians anxiously clenched their kitchen knives and gardening tools, and the steady drone of marching grew louder and louder.

The once lively elven town just behind us had long since been evacuated, but we knew the evacuees would be slow moving; there were many children and elders amongst them. If we fled here—if we couldn't hold out long enough—they would all die. This wasn't just a matter of protecting an abandoned town on the outskirts; this was our chance to halt the Alacryan forces' momentum and show them we wouldn't give up Elenoir without a fight.

My heart pounded against my chest and my knees felt weak. No matter how strong my mana core was, no matter how much I had trained, I felt nothing

but fear in that moment.

Yet I couldn't show it—I wouldn't.

The morale of every one of these people behind me was relying on my strength, not just as a mage and warrior but as a leader. If I let fear take my heart, the foundation of their strength would collapse.

Holding my feelings in, wearing a mask of confidence and strength—such was my burden.

Turning to face the small army, I unsheathed my sword and conjured a wind to carry my voice. Projecting a wave of mana to reassure myself and show power before my forces, I began to speak.

"Behind me, the Alacryan army approaches. Behind you, the children and elderly of this village flee for their lives, forced to abandon their only home. We are the only thing standing between the enemy marching toward us and the slaughter of these innocents." Murmurs of consensus rang throughout the crowd. "Though our numbers are few, I am honored to be the first line of defense in the protection of our people, of Elenoir—of Dicathen!" I waited for the soldiers' shouts to die down, then continued. "Lance Aya is currently leading an army of able-bodied elves to beat back the invaders, but the question before us is"—I held up my sword—"will you stand with me, will you be the shield that protects the defenseless from the blades of our enemies, no matter the odds?"

There was a breath of silence, and I was afraid my pounding heart would be heard through all of Elenoir, then a roar of cheers and battle cries resounded through the forest. Caria gave me a reassuring smile and Darvus nodded grimly, but Stannard only fidgeted over his strange weapon, checking it again to make sure it was ready for combat.

At my signal, a defensive line formed around me and the rest of the ranged spell casters. "Conjurers, archers, ready your weapons!"

The foreboding thrump, thrump, thrump, thrump, of the Alacryan soldiers marching grew louder and louder within the dense veil of the fog and trees

between us.

I pointed my sword forward. "Prepare your attacks!"

With my heightened senses and familiarity with the Elshire Forest, I was able to sense the moment the enemy vanguards came in range.

I thrust my weapon, releasing condensed bolts of wind. "Fire!"

An array of colors dotted my line of sight. Dozens of arrows flew past, followed by sharp shards of earth, arcing bolts of lightning, blades of wind, and blasts of fire that lit up the mist like fireworks.

I held up my sword for everyone to see, then dropped it to signal another flight of spells and arrows. "Fire!"

Another volley rained down on the enemy, but this time I could see the results. Shimmers of light shaped like shields and walls deflected or absorbed our attacks; very few appeared to have made it through.

"Another flight?" Stannard proposed hopefully, gripping his artifact in preparation for another spell.

"No. We're just burning up resources." I turned to Vedict, the soldier in charge of the front line. "Get in there and break the line, open it up so the conjurers and archers can hit something."

With a nod, the steel-clad elf raised his shield and ran forward, relaying my order. The gallant warriors brandished their weapons, the augmenters ignited their cores, and our soldiers charged forward into mists. They faded like ghosts into the thick fog, but I could hear the thunder of their impact against the shields.

Steeling not only my weapon and body but my will, I looked at Stannard, Darvus, and Caria—my closest friends and most trusted aides. None of us said a word, but we had spent enough time together that words weren't necessary. We were all thinking the same thing: *Let's get out of this alive*.

I reached for the necklace Arthur had given me, which still hung around my neck. Kissing the pendant, I tucked it into my cloak, vowing to keep it—and our promise—safe.

Reaching deep into the pit of my stomach, I let out a guttural cry. "Charge!"

ALBANTH KELRIS

"Captain," a concerned voice sounded from my side.

Prying my eyes off of the beast horde slowly lumbering toward us, obscured by a blanket of dust, I looked down at my assistant. "What is it?"

Sinder, who I had trained and groomed since he was just a kid, pointed down toward my hands.

I realized that the reinforced railings, built to keep soldiers from accidentally falling off the top of the Wall, had been bent out of shape.

"Ah." Readjusting my grip, I twisted it back into its proper form before letting go.

With a gentle smile, my assistant placed an armored hand on my pauldron. "I know it's in your blood to worry and overthink, but look at the mayhem General Arthur is causing to our enemy."

All the Wall's defenders had gathered to watch the spectacle. With how large the enemy army was, it was not always obvious where the young Lance was within that sea of mana beasts, but we could see the changes occurring within their ranks, like nuts and bolts becoming undone, causing the larger pieces to become more unstable.

I let out a sharp breath. "I know, Sinder. But it just pains me to be standing here twiddling my thumbs while the Lance has been tirelessly fighting for hours."

"Our time will come. No matter how strong the general is, he is only one man. He will need our support soon," my assistant reassured me. "Now please, Captain, straighten your shoulders and don't let the soldiers see you faltering."

"Since when did you start lecturing me, boy?" I teased, smacking Sinder's back and almost throwing him over the edge of the Wall.

The soldiers nearby laughed. Sinder wasn't as amused, but his expression softened after noticing the smiling men and women around us.

I continued making my rounds, walking the length of the Wall to make sure everything was in place. Not only did it bolster the men's courage to see the captain walking among them, but seeing my men, giving them encouragement, helped me as well. These soldiers, most of whom I had trained, lectured, and fought beside, relied on me, and in this moment, facing an army of beasts much larger than any force seen at the Wall before, they needed my presence.

"Wess! I'm not seeing you shake, am I?" I called out to a middle-aged conjurer who gripped his staff as if it was the only thing keeping him on his feet. Patting his shoulder, I gave him a kindly smile. "After this fight, let's have your wife make us one of her crumbled pies, right?"

The conjurer laughed nervously, but his body visibly relaxed. "It's just like you to be thinking of food at a time like this, Captain. Very well, Maryl will be delighted to know that you like her pie that much."

I winked and continued my stroll. It wasn't much—a wave here, a joke there, making a plan for the future—anything to get the soldiers' heads out of the dark cloud caused by the looming battle.

That's when I saw General Arthur's little sister, Eleanor. The little girl was hard to miss with the large mana beast beside her. Stella, the soldier I had assigned to her, was nowhere in sight, replaced by a dark-haired archer with bright eyes. She seemed to be teaching her the basics of firing from higher ground.

"Miss Leywin," I greeted. "What happened to the soldier I had assigned to you?"

The little girl stiffened into a rather clumsy salute. "Ah, yes! Hello, Captain..."

"Albanth." I smiled before turning to the woman that was teaching her. "And you are?"

The sharp-eyed woman saluted gracefully. "Helen Shard, Captain. My apologies for the confusion. I'm this one's longtime instructor, so I relieved

Stella of her duty to watch after my pupil."

"I see," I said. I was relieved that the general's younger sister wasn't the one to shrug off her protector. "In that case, I will leave her in your care."

"Yes sir!" she said, brimming with confidence.

"Miss Leywin." I turned to face the approaching beast horde, which appeared to grow larger each passing moment. "Do you still feel up to helping us out even after seeing that?"

"Yes." The little girl's expression hardened as she gripped her intricate bow.

"My brother is fighting out there with only Sylvie to help him. The least I can do with all the training I've been given is fight and be brave, like him. I can help protect my parents, too, who are here as well."

She couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen, yet here she was, her innocence and youth left behind in the face of death. I wanted to ask whether her parents knew she was here and if they would approve, but it wasn't my place to do so. With a salute to Eleanor and Helen, I turned and spotted a messenger running toward me.

The messenger dipped his head before speaking to me, breathing hard. He must have sprinted up every flight of stairs in the Wall to reach me. "Senior Captain Trodius has called for a meeting and has requested your presence immediately."

"Got it. Thank you," I replied, leaving the man there to catch his breath as I made my way to the main tent.

By the time I arrived, Captain Jesmiya was leaving the tent wearing a sour expression. She bumped my shoulder as she passed, muttering a string of curses under her breath.

"Captain Jesmiya," I called out, grabbing the captain's arm.

The she whirled around, her free hand already holding her saber before realizing who I was.

"Captain Albanth," she nearly spat out, sheathing her sword again.

Surprised by her venom, I asked her what was going on, only for her to shrug

me off and turn her back to me. "Ask *Trodius*," she hissed before striding away.

I opened the entrance to the tent to see Senior Captain Trodius leafing through some paperwork, his posture eerily impeccable as always, no trace on his serious face that there had been any tension in his conversation with the captain.

The senior captain knew I was there, but he continued on with his work. This went on for a few minutes before I grew impatient with whatever game he was playing. I couldn't wait any longer and cleared my throat to get his attention. "Senior Captain—"

A raised finger cut me off. The man didn't even look in my direction until he had finally finished whatever it was he was doing, despite the fact that he had sent a messenger to find me for this *urgent* meeting.

Finally, after meticulously filing his papers into three even piles, he looked up and met my eyes. "Captain Albanth."

"Sir!" I saluted, my armor clanging.

"Have your melee troops prepare to march," he stated. "They will be confronting the beast horde on our terms, in the open field."

"Excuse me?" I asked, confused. "My apologies, Senior Captain, but it was to my understanding that the melee troops would enter the field only after we've lured a majority of the beast horde into the trap we have—"

"Captain Albanth," the senior captain snapped, cutting me off. "Do you understand how many resources we've expended excavating those underground passages for our Trailblazer Divisions to safely explore the Beast Glades? I won't go as far as to weigh the value of lives against the efforts spent building this fortress, but I have determined that it doesn't make sense logistically to detonate the underground routes."

"But, sir..." I took a step forward but was met with a blazing glare from Trodius. Taking a step back, I continued. "With General Arthur's plan, we'll be able to immobilize the majority of the beast horde. This will give our

melee forces a much better chance to—"

"As I have stated before, *Captain Albanth*, I won't go as far as to weigh the value of lives..." The senior captain let his sentence trail off, letting me know that was *exactly* what he was doing.

"Besides, the Lance said it himself—it was only a suggestion. I said nothing at the meeting out of respect for his position, but he's merely a boy, and clearly ignorant of war. It would be in your best interest to realize that as well."

Clenching my fists behind my back, I stood silent.

Trodius seemed to take the silence as my answer and smiled. "Good! Then we'll have your melee troops advance immediately. You and your troops will do *whatever it takes* to hold your ground until Jesmiya's forces come around the flank to assist you. By then, the archers and conjurers will be in range to fire freely at their back line."

Gritting my teeth in anger, I was barely able to respond with a nod before turning around to leave. I now understood Jesmiya's mood when I'd met her outside the tent.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

'Arthur.'

My gaze shifted from the Wall, barely visible through the dust that hung in the air, back to the sight of the Alacryan army well within the forest.

'Arthur!' Sylvie's voice rang louder.

"I don't know!" I snapped. "I don't know what to do, Sylvie."

My role was to stay here, to help the forces of the Wall defeat this beast horde. Even if all of this was nothing but a diversion, my family and the Twin Horns were still here. What if I left and something happened to them? But then, what if Tess was in danger? With so many elves stationed around Sapin, it would be almost impossible for Elenoir to properly defend itself against an army of that size.

'I know it's a hard decision,' she responded, her soothing voice calming me

slightly. 'Rest assured that I will support whatever choice you make.'

The gears in my brain turned as I debated myself. The Alacryan forces would be at a disadvantage fighting in the Elshire Forest because of the fog, but then that hadn't stopped them from navigating nearly all the way to the heart of Elenoir, and they outnumbered the elven defenders there by tens of thousands, so far as I could tell. The traps already set at the Wall would even the odds between the Wall's defenders and the approaching horde, although, if I left, was there anyone here capable of taking down the larger S-class mana beasts? I couldn't be sure.

Pressed for time as both the beast horde and Alacryan army advanced relentlessly toward their destination, I made my decision.

[&]quot;Sylvie, we're going to Elshire Forest."

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FROM LEADER TO SOLDIER

TESSIA ERALITH

Digging my feet into the ground as I leaped forward, I used a mana vine to pull myself to the nearest enemy mage.

The surprised Alacryan didn't even have time to turn toward me before my swordstaff sunk deep into his hip. The blood rolled right off as I pulled out my weapon, leaving its pale blade spotless.

"Tessia, duck!" Caria shouted in warning. I dove under a swinging axe and rolled out of its reach. By the time I was on my feet again, Caria had dropped from her perch in the tree above, landing on the Alacryan and driving a gauntleted fist into his skull.

To my left, Stannard was falling back before an Alacryan Striker, but a wind blade targeted at the Striker's unprotected legs dropped him with ease.

"Thank you!" Stannard shouted. With his artifact charged, he unleashed a blast of mana directly at an approaching group of enemy soldiers.

Darvus came into view, his dual axes drawing trails of fire in the mist as they cleaved both flesh and steel.

"We can't let them get past this point!" I reminded them as Caria flew into action beside Darvus, her gauntlets enveloped in thick mana.

We can do this, I reassured myself, watching my teammates battle alongside our second unit of mages. Hachi, one of our new recruits, stood out even from this distance, as he was a head taller than everyone else and his fists

were clad in brilliant flames.

Suddenly a bright beam of ice lanced down from a tree nearby. Caria and Hachi each dodged, but an elf from his team wasn't as lucky.

Damn it, I cursed, watching as the elf—I couldn't even tell who—slumped to the ground, clearly dead.

Infusing my legs with mana, I jumped up into the tree from which the ice beam had originated. Before the Caster could finish another spell, my swordstaff had pierced her heart. The body slumped and fell from the tree.

From the tree, I was able to survey the battlefield below and make sure there weren't any other enemy conjurers hiding nearby. It was chaos. I couldn't get an accurate count of my men, nor make out where the enemy forces were moving. Despite my difficulty in navigating the battlefield, at least I knew it to be much worse for the enemy. If not for the fog, our small force would likely have been crushed within minutes.

A piercing scream reached my ears. It came from nearby. Not knowing whether it was friend or foe that made the pained cry, I whirled toward the source.

It was an elf. From the leather apron with a metal sheet clumsily attached to the chest—most likely a baking pan—I could tell he was a civilian who had chosen to stay and defend his town.

The elf crumpled lifelessly to the ground, a puddle of blood forming around him. The killer was an Alacryan mage whose open hands were surrounded with a spinning ring of wind. He sneered proudly as he trampled over the elf's body.

My blood burned at the sight. Landing deftly on the ground, I sprinted toward the enemy, fully intent on removing him from this battle.

"Tessia! Where are you going?" Darvus hollered from behind me.

"I'll be right back!" I responded, not bothering to turn back.

My vision narrowed in on the enemy mage as I easily cleared the distance between us, but just as I was about to drive my blade into his back, a golden pane of light flickered in to being between us. The barrier shattered when my blade struck it, but it gave the mage enough time to scurry out of my path.

"Sneaky little elven witch," the enemy mage spat. The whirling blades of wind surrounding his hands grew larger as he prepared to strike.

"You'll pay for the elven blood you've spilt with your life," I replied coldly, unleashing the first phase of my beast will onto the enemy.

"Sh-Shield!" he screamed, sprinting toward his guard.

A golden light flickered into existence, but before it could even fully manifest, the sharp tendrils of mana surrounding me had already pierced several holes into both mages' bodies.

Having defeated these enemies, my gaze was drawn toward the dead elf beside me. His empty eyes seemed to be looking back at me, blaming me.

I can do this, I repeated through gritted teeth.

"Tessia! We need you back!" Caria called. It took me a moment to find her in the fog; she was facing a group of three Alacryans. Her expression was grim, but she wasn't losing ground even against three enemy mages.

"I'll be right there!" I shouted. Augmenting my sight, I peered through the layer of fog to try and find any of the so-called Shields hiding nearby. Taking any Shields out would seriously weaken the attackers, since they didn't seem to be able to defend themselves with magic.

I spotted a Shield conjuring a panel of light around two other Alacryans, but before I could engage him, an enemy mage charged at me. I easily dodged his flame-clad spear and carved a bloody line through his neck, but as I turned back to the Shield, I spotted another ally in need of help.

A human soldier had been backed up against a tree by two enemy mages, who were closing in on her. I knew my main job was to reinforce my teammates and to stop the Alacryan troops from advancing, but that task became more difficult every time an allied soldier fell.

With a flick of my wrist, roots shot up from below the two Alacryans, anchoring their feet to the ground. Compressing the air around my

swordstaff, I cast Wind Cutter, launching a translucent crescent of wind at the immobile mages.

An earthen wall burst out of the ground, intercepting my spell. By the time I darted around the barrier, the human girl was already on the ground, a frozen spike protruding from her chest.

I cursed inwardly, angry at myself for being too late. Meanwhile, the enemy mages managed to free themselves from the grasping roots and prepared their next attack—this time, at me.

With a manic cry, the mage dashed toward me, his entire right arm enveloped by a lance made of ice.

The emerald vines of mana that surrounded me like an aura knocked aside his feeble attack and plunged into his stomach and chest, killing him instantly.

The second Alacryan conjured a stone barrier that formed around him like a little cave, clearly hoping to be rescued before I could break through his shield. With a snarl, I summoned roots and vines from the earth underneath the dome, and I could hear his screams resounding dully within. More and more plants filled the hollow space, and I knew they would crush him if he didn't release his spell. Moments later, the screams cut off, and the barrier began to crumble, revealing the Alacryan's broken body.

My eyes shifted toward my dead ally, still leaning against the tree nearby.

I cursed again. I needed to take down more of the enemy's mages. The more I brought down, the better chances my allies had. *That* was my duty.

The emerald aura surrounding me shot out more translucent vines that whipped, wrapped, and pierced any enemy that approached, and I realized that, while in the first phase of my beast will, my most effective method of attack was to simply get within range of the enemy mages. Even the Shield's magical barriers proved ineffective against the emerald vines, which could move over, under, and around the barriers faster than they could be altered.

I sprinting from one group of enemies to the next, darting into their midst—often before they even knew I was there—and letting the vines do their work.

While the forest was a handicap to many, the endless rows of trees worked to my advantage. Not only did the emerald vines of mana constantly protect me and strike out at my enemies, every tree around me also beckoned to call and hid my presence.

From somewhere out in the fog, I heard a man shout, "Focus on the gray-haired girl!" Seconds later, a condensed beam of fire shot down from the top of a tree.

Rather than dodge it and hope none of my allies would get hit by the blast, I waved my swordstaff and channeled a spell through the mana-amplifying gem on its hilt.

Thick roots rose from the ground beneath my feet, sacrificing themselves by blocking the beam of fire.

Thankfully the fog makes it hard for fires to spread here, I thought as the burned roots withered away. I shuddered to think about the entire Elshire Forest burned down by the spells being thrown about.

"Head Tessia!" a desperate cry rang out nearby. Whipping around, I saw Hachi lying on the ground just a dozen yards away, his hand desperately reaching out for me. A bullish Alacryan was standing over him, already swinging a stone hammer—

I felt a sick jolt in my stomach as the hammer crushed Hachi's skull. His arm dropped to the ground, crimson spreading out in a red halo around what used to be my ally's head.

"No!" I yelled, seething in anger. However, before I could reach the man to vent my rage in his flesh as my vines tore him apart, a glowing axe separated the Alacryan's head from his neck.

Darvus appeared behind the Alacryan's corpse, his eyes fierce. "Are you out of your mind? Why the *hell* did you break formation and go off on your own like that?"

"It's not like that!" I retorted. "I was saving our troops!"

"Yeah?" he scoffed, "You were supposed to be in position to back Hachi and

his team up! You were supposed to be keeping him alive!"

I shook my head, my face burning with anger and regret. "You don't understand, there were—"

"We all had our positions assigned—positions *you* assigned," he snapped, cutting me off. "Because you ran off, two others are critically injured and their right flank is completely exposed! In what world is that 'saving our troops'?"

Shaking his head, Darvus dashed off, unleashing his anger on the unfortunate enemies nearby. I wanted to explain, wanted him to understand, so I started after him, but then a searing pain spread across my back.

The protective aura from my beast will seemed to have shielded me from the worst of it, and the damage felt minimal, but it still hurt like hell, whatever it was.

If the attack had been stronger, I could've died, I thought, the realization hitting me like a bucket of cold water. The promise I made to my teammates—the promise I had made with Arthur— would've been broken because I was caught up in trying to play the hero, to do everything myself.

Snap out of it, Tessia! Darvus is right, we need to stay in formation.

I headed back toward my initial position, exerting more mana into the emerald aura protecting me. The enemy appeared to be having trouble keeping their own troops in formation, and the forest was full of small groups of Alacryan soldiers who charged recklessly through the trees.

Turning into a whirlwind of blade and magic, I fought through several such small groups, but we were vastly outnumbered and more and more of the enemy were bypassing our small blockade every moment. I could only hope that General Aya's army would take care of them, and that the elven refugees had made it far from here.

Damn it, where are the others? I cursed, trying to find my way back to Stannard, Caria, and Darvus.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed since the battle first began, but one

thing seemed painfully clear: I wasn't fit to be a leader.

The guilt that I felt manifested itself into a voice in my head, constantly reminding me that I was the one that led every one of my allies here to their death. It didn't matter that I was a silver core mage with an S-class beast will—getting emotional over every ally death showed that I wasn't capable of making rational decisions for the good of the whole. A leader had to be calculating, to understand when sacrifice was necessary...

Shaking the voice out of my head, I continued making my way toward my initial position. Finally, I caught sight of Stannard just a few dozen yards away.

"Stannard!" I yelled, hoping the conjurer could hear me over the chaos.

However, my voice attracted someone else's attention: It was a human, adorned in black armor, his long blond hair billowing around him. He rode a corrupted wolf-like beast and was surrounded by guards of a different caliber than the rest of the Alacryan soldiers I'd faced.

He looks like someone important, I thought, channeling more mana into my beast will as I prepared to defend myself.

"Leave the girl to me," he commanded, and his guards immediately complied, stepping back and lowering their weapons.

I kept my face impassive as the man dismounted from his wolf and strode toward me. His black armor was a finely crafted suit of both plate and chainmail. Hanging at his waist were two ornate-looking swords embedded with fine jewels on the hilt.

He unsheathed his swords. "As expected of Tessia Eralith, to barely have any wounds. It's an honor to meet you like this."

Keeping my swordstaff pointed at the man, I took a cautious step forward. "How do you know my name?"

He smiled politely. "You can call me Vernett."

The translucent green vines thrashed wildly around me, manifesting my frustration and anger. I hated when they talked. We both knew what had to

happen here; words wouldn't change the fact that this man wanted to undo my entire way of life, reduce my home to ash, and build a war machine atop the charred remains.

"You didn't answer my question," I growled, making the statement a threat.

Vernett shrugged as he got into a fighting stance. "Perhaps beating me in combat might make me talk. After all, you Dicathians seem to love interrogation."

If that's how you want to play it...

I launched myself at the Alacryan, getting in range before he could properly react. Mana tendrils snaked out from me, striking at his exposed face. As they approached, however, they slowed drastically, coming to a complete stop before even reaching him.

Looking smug, Vernett swung his blade almost lazily, and I easily dodged back.

I followed up with my swordstaff this time, but it felt as if I was swinging through a thick viscous liquid. By the time my blade reached Vernett's unprotected neck, it was moving so slow that it couldn't even draw blood.

The battle continued, but we were at a stalemate. I was clearly stronger, faster, and more adept in combat, but because of his unique variant of defensive magic, I couldn't land a solid hit and was forced to move constantly, which took us into the middle of other skirmishes.

A soldier in a silver breastplate—one of my soldiers—lunged at the Alacryan just as I launched a crescent of wind. Heedless of the soldier's blade, Vernett jerked him into the path of my spell, using him like a shield.

The man's chest spurted blood as his silver armor was cleaved open by the wind-blade. His eyes, wide with shock, looked to me in terror and disbelief, then his head drooped lifelessly to his chest.

"Bastard!" I roared, dashing toward Vernett, my blade out like a spear.

Laughing, he threw the body he had used as a shield at me, forcing me to dodge as he backed away, directly into an ongoing struggle between an elven

augmenter and an Alacryan Striker.

"You're nothing but an infant wearing a shiny badge," he gloated as he sliced off the leg of the elven soldier, purposely leaving him alive and in agony.

"Shut up!" The emerald vines surged with power as I imbued them with more mana, extending up toward the trees and killing two Alacryan Casters before falling upon the Striker, who had turned to flee our conflict.

With no more obvious targets in our vicinity, Vernett halted his slow retreat and waited for me to attack. My vines bore down on him, surrounding us both in a writhing mass of emerald green, but they could not touch him. Playfully, he batted each one away with his sword.

"You should've kept the tiara on your head, little princess. Leading with a sword doesn't suit you."

"Shut up, shut up!" I screamed. Succumbing to my rage, I activated the second stage of my beast will, and the world around me turned green. My body seemed to move on its own through the verdant mists, the battle around me suddenly quiet.

The cocksure Alacryan flinched back, finally showing signs of concern, but it was too late. I *reached out* and a translucent green hand grabbed Vernett while the trees around him moved to form a cage.

"Call off your troops," I demanded, my voice thick with power.

Vernett coughed out blood; I could feel his ribs cracking through my magic, but still he smiled. "What troops?"

Looking around, panic seething just under the surface, suppressed for the moment by my beast will, I saw that we were alone. The battle had moved forward—or I had been pushed back, led away from the heart of the conflict.

I could sense my troops falling without me to lead them, more and more of their corpses lying on the forest floor with each passing moment. Through my beast will, I could feel their lives, and their deaths... there were so few defenders left... because of me—because I had let this man manipulate me, isolate me, and remove me from the battle.

"I'm happy you think so highly of me, but, like yourself, I'm merely a distinguished soldier," he gurgled, blood leaking from the corners of his mouth. "The difference between us is that, unlike you, I *know* I'm only pretending to be a leader."

My vision swam as my emotions raged within me: anger, frustration, disappointment, regret, guilt... it was almost a relief when the piercing pain shot through my chest, giving me something to focus on, pushing my thoughts away.

I found myself looking up at the forest sky, my body unresponsive and very, very cold. Vernett's pained but arrogant expression bobbed into my view as he looked down on me.

What had happened? Another enemy mage?

Vernett clicked his tongue in disapproval. "You were so short-sighted that you couldn't see what was right in front of you, could you?"

I closed my eyes, waiting to die, wishing that so many others hadn't had to die because of my poor decisions. *It wouldn't be so bad*, I thought, *if it was iust me*.

A horn blared from the distance. When I opened my eyes, Vernett was gone. I heard the crunching of leaves as someone approached. A face appeared above me, looking at down at me with an expression so cold that I half

wished that I had died... General Aya.

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ARMY APPROACHING

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Compared to the speed with which my thoughts and worries flew through my mind, our flight to the forest of Elshire had gone by at a crawl.

When I wasn't looking back towards the beast army, nearly overwhelmed with guilt that I was leaving the troops—and my family—at the Wall behind, I was focusing on the bright path of mana that made a road straight to what I suspected was the heart of Elenoir Kingdom.

'What sort of spell is capable of such a thing?' my bond asked as we followed the markers, which shined even through the thick layer of fog above the forest.

I'm not entirely sure, but seeing as how the trail sort of zigzags around various points leading up north, I don't think it's a single powerful spell but an accumulation of the same spell creating a path.

It was just my speculation—rather, it was my hope. The thought of an enemy mage being able to basically nullify the ambient magic of the forest with a single conjuration terrified me, and I urged Sylvie to fly just a bit faster. It was already worrying enough to think that something might happen to my family or one of the Twin Horns, but the thought of not making it to Tess in time left me sick and sweaty.

After another hour scouring the forest, following the crooked path of mana that marked the way through Elshire, I finally spotted signs of a battle in the distance. Mana fluctuations were apparent even above the thick canopy of trees below us, but they were old. The battle had ended, and it was impossible to tell from this distance which side had won.

Sensing my shift in emotions, Sylvie dived down closer to the forest, fast approaching the location that I had imprinted into our minds.

As we approached the battleground, however, a figure hovering above the blanket of trees and fog caught our attention. I could feel Sylvie's fear and anxiousness leaking into me, and she stopped over fifty feet away before transforming into her human form.

I had suspected who—or what—it was when I had first noticed that the floating form had no mana signature, but seeing the familiar figure up close, clad all in black armor, his purple cloak billowing behind him, confirmed it. Compared to the oppressive tidal wave that was Uto, this man was the eye of a terrible storm—just like his master.

"Cylrit," I said simply.

"Lance."

Despite my impatience, I exchanged a glance with Sylvie, who already had mana coalescing around her in preparation for a fight.

I was at a loss.

My instincts urged me to fight him; he was an enemy. But at the same time, the Scythe he served had saved my life and was the reason Sylvie and I had been able to advance past our respective bottlenecks.

"Are we to fight?" I asked, somewhat hesitant.

"I have been instructed to keep you from advancing further," he replied simply, his expression unchanged.

"And if I were to say that I *have* to advance?" I demanded, getting ready to release Realmheart once again.

Cylrit's sharp eyes narrowed, but his voice was still calm as he answered. "It is for your benefit, Lance Leywin. My master wishes to keep you in optimal health for the final battle, but partaking in the defense of the elven kingdom

could make that difficult."

"Seris said this was for my benefit?" I said in surprise.

"My master's name isn't something you should speak so casually, human." Cylrit's voice didn't change, but a sharp bloodlust surged from him at the mention of the Scythe's name.

Matching the pressure he emanated with my own, I glowered down at him as I said, "Watch your tone, Cylrit. I chose to exchange words with you out of courtesy toward your *master*."

"Courtesy?" The Vritra's expression darkened. "Master Seris saved your life. I suggest you heed her words and clean up the mess you've abandoned back at your fortress, as intended."

"We're going to Elenoir," I stated firmly, my eyes not leaving his.

"Knowing how to sacrifice is a part of war," Cylrit said, his tone calm once again. "Wasting your efforts here won't help you, even if you manage to succeed in defending Elenoir."

"You think I don't know that?" I growled, unable to hold back. The wind stilled and the air grew so thick it was almost tangible.

Beside me, I could feel the worry from my bond, but in that moment, I didn't care. I had already sacrificed lives at the Wall by making this journey, and I couldn't let that sacrifice be in vain. A lecture on the necessities of war from a creature that, as far as I knew, could still turn out to be my enemy, would not dissuade me.

The Vritra's brows furrowed in frustration. "Go back, Lance. If you want even a chance of saving Dicathen, you should worry about bigger things."

I flew forward until I was face to face with the Vritra. "Move aside, Cylrit. You're mistaken if you think you can keep us both here. A lot has changed since our fight against Uto."

Seris's retainer held out his arm, and a thick, black fog swirled around his outstretched hand, manifesting into a pitch black greatsword nearly as long as he was tall. "Very well. If you insist on fighting, allow me to prove you

wrong."

CURTIS GLAYDER

"Keep your formations!" I barked from my position just behind the group of students. "Vanguards, keep your shields up! Trust in your mounts to protect your legs. That's it!"

The twelve students followed a predetermined path while archers, positioned a few dozen yards away, were standing ready to loose their arrows.

"Release!" I shouted at the archers.

A volley of blunted arrows struck the line of students, all of whom were riding clawed equines. These seven-foot-tall mounts, owned by Lanceler Academy, were unique in that they were never bred, but caught and tamed in order to keep their keen instincts and tough, muscular build. As we had practiced, the students leaned forward on their mounts and raised their shields, using their knees to buttress themselves against long-range attacks.

Some of the students were slow in raising their shields while others weren't able to augment their bodies in time to withstand the volley. Those unfortunate students were knocked off their mana beasts and went tumbling into the dirt.

Grawder, my bond, grunted in disappointment as he trotted towards the students that lay groaning on the ground.

"Tanner, Gard, Lehr," I called.

The three students bolted up from the ground and saluted. "Sir!"

Stroking my world lion's red mane, I passed by them. "Each of you owes me twenty sets of shield press—without using mana." The three new recruits' faces blanched at my words.

The practice went on for another two hours as we reviewed a handful more formations. Eventually, the clawed equines had to recover, bringing the session to a brief rest.

"All right, walk your mounts to the lake and take an hour break!" I called, hopping off of Grawder.

We followed the students down to the late but broke off to sit beneath a wizened old tree not far from the banks. I leaned my back against Grawder, enjoying the cool breeze in the shade. One of my favorite things about Lanceler Academy was the fact that it was so close to Mirror Lake.

Opening my dimension ring, I pulled out some dried beef and a fresh loaf of bread and watched as the students separated into their respective circles of friends. Tanner, Gard, and Lehr squatted by the edge of the lake, raising their steel shields above their heads.

Some of the other students had already finished their light meals and began sparring with their training swords: heavy, blunted weapons that hurt like hell when they hit you but weren't likely to do any permanent damage, so long as everyone was following the rules.

"As expected of Lanceler students," a familiar voice said from behind me. "Even as trainees, they can never stay still."

I looked up, smirking at the retired knight. "What does that make me, then?" "A lazy fool," he retorted, taking a seat beside me in the grass.

I ripped off a chunk of my bread, pulled a sealed bowl of broth from my ring—the old man's favorite—and handed both over. "A student is only as good as his teacher, Instructor Crowe."

"Ex-instructor," he scoffed, but he accepted the food with a smile. "It's unfortunate that growing up as royalty only taught you how to talk well."

We sat in silence, enjoying the glittering view of the lake and the spectacle of the students making fools of themselves, either while sparring or playing in the water. The boys flocked to the few female students, showing off in whatever way they knew how. For their part, the young women teased the male students mercilessly and did their best to outperform them in increasingly difficult feats of youthful stupidity.

"Looking at these youths frolicking without a care in the world, it's hard to imagine that we're in the middle of a war," Crowe said softly.

"I've heard the stories coming in from the eastern border of Sapin. I'm

frustrated that I'm not there helping out. If I'm being honest, though, I'm also relieved, because I don't think my students are anywhere near ready to face Alacryan soldiers."

"You know, I had been pretty discontent when I heard the news that you were coming to Lanceler. I remember thinking you were another spoiled noble that acquired a position here due to your connections." My former instructor turned his gaze to me. "I was wrong about you, Curtis. You were hardworking from day one, and you were happy to hear your mistakes, because that gave you room to improve."

Not used to hearing compliments from the strict ex-knight, I felt my cheeks starting to flush. "Well, being an adequate mage and fighter is one thing, but I didn't know anything about teaching."

"Exactly! Why is it so hard for some of you nobles to admit that you don't know something, or you're not good at it? It still baffles me, honestly."

"Think of it as an inferiority complex," I said, chuckling. "Nobles are taught to hide their weaknesses—act as if they don't have any."

"That's one good thing about being in battle. At that moment, when you're just one of the countless soldiers on the front line, all that strategic thinking—the mask you wear—it all falls away," the old knight huffed.

"Is that your excuse for never trying to go into leadership or strategic positions?" I smirked.

"Why you little—" Crowe hooked me with his arm and began grinding his knuckles on my head, eliciting a groan of protest from Grawder at being woken up.

"Okay, okay! I surrender!"

We continued our friendly bickering, laughing like youths ourselves. Crowe had an abundance of stories to share, each one as ridiculous as the last, and we passed the rest of the short break time trying to outdo each other with stories of our students. Too quickly, it was time to return to lessons.

"Back to the training grounds—full armor—fifteen minutes!" I yelled. The

students stiffened at my voice, then, without hesitation or protest, scurried back up the hill to the pitch.

"They listen to you well," Crowe commented, his expression thoughtful as he watched the students sprint away.

"Their graduations depend on it." I shrugged and patted the old knight on the back. "Come on, Instructor Crowe, it's time for spear lessons and you're still the best. I'm sure they'd love to learn from you."

"I may be retired, but I'm still expensive."

"Think of the bread and broth as payment."

Crowe opened his mouth to reply, but something caught his eye and he stopped. He raised his head, peering up at a figure in the sky.

"Isn't that a messenger?" I asked, squinting my eyes to try and see what sort of beast the flying mount was.

The beast and rider descended, landing on the highest balcony of the headmaster's tower. The tall, pointed structure had been constructed in the shape of a colossal lance as a symbol of our academy, as well as serving as the headmaster's residence.

"That's a blade wing," Crowe muttered, his tone serious. "There are only a few mages bonded to those beasts. If they were hired as messengers, the news must be serious."

I hopped on Grawder and gestured to my former instructor. "Let's see what it's about."

I waved as we passed by my confused students, indicating I would be right back, and rode through the paved school grounds toward the tall, lance-shaped tower.

Grawder couldn't fit in the staircase so we left him with the guards stationed outside before making our way up the tower. By the time we had reached the upper level of the spiraling stairs, we could hear muffled voices on the other side of the headmaster's door.

Crowe and I exchanged glances, then I turned the golden handle and opened

the door.

The headmaster sat behind his desk, his large frame slumped forward and his head buried in his hands. The messenger stood beside him, his expression fearful.

"Headmaster Landon?" I said. "We saw the messenger and—"

The headmaster raised a hand, not bothering to look up. "Gather your students, Instructor Curtis. Better yet, maybe it's best you just make your journey to Kalberk now. That's the closest teleportation gate to get you back to the castle."

"I'm not following, sir. What's going on?" I shifted my gaze from the headmaster to the messenger.

"An envoy arrived at Kalberk from Etistin this morning," the messenger explained, his voice trembling. "A watcher flying a few miles off the coast of Etistin spotted roughly three hundred Alacryan ships approaching."

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THE WEIGHT OF A CHOICE

TESSIA ERALITH

My eyes flickered open, though I found it difficult to keep them that way. My body ached and pain rolled in waves from behind my eyes and up into my temples. Backlash... from overusing my beast will, I was sure.

I appeared to be sitting atop a small wyvern; several soldiers stood around me, their weapons drawn, but I could see that the battle had already ended.

The battle had ended; we had won, thanks to General Aya. No post-victory glow suffused my tired body, though, because I was focused on the injured soldiers being carried off, and on the dead, who were being buried where they fell. Those bodies should have been taken to their families for a proper ceremony, but there was no time to spare for the dead. There was an army of Alacryans still marching toward Zestier city, into the very heart of the elven kingdom.

How many of those being buried now would have survived the battle if not for my foolishness?

I tried to shake off the dark mood that seemed to have fallen over me, but Vernett's taunts still echoed in my head. It was with a melancholy gaze that I looked out over the battlefield watching the clean-up effort from my perch atop the wyvern. Then I noticed something out of the corner of my eye that drew my attention.

I scrambled off the winged reptile, alarming the soldiers on guard. My tired

legs buckled and I stumbled, landing hard in the dirt. One of the guards gently pulled me up to my feet and gestured toward the wyvern. "Head Tessia. Please remain on the mount in case anything happens."

Wordlessly, I started running.

It can't be.

I pushed my way through the crowd of medics and nurses tending to the injured, my eyes glued to an emitter kneeling next to a familiar figure. It was Caria... and she was unconscious. I nearly threw myself atop her, but a hand blocked my path.

I looked up to see Darvus, stony-eyed and wearing an expression that I'd never seen before. "She was just barely able to fall asleep with a sedative. Don't wake her up."

Stannard was also nearby, disheveled and covered in dirt. After seeing me, though, he looked away.

Neither appeared to have any injuries besides a few scratches and scrapes, but the same couldn't be said for Caria.

I watched, horrified, as the emitter continued closing the wounds on her left leg... or rather, what was left of it. The man had his hands clasped over the mangled stump, blood gushing between his fingers. Then the skin began to stretch and grow, knitting itself together to form a lumpy knot of flesh.

I had known that emitters couldn't regenerate new limbs, but seeing the healed stump of Caria's leg, which now ended just above the knee, it hit me that this was real, irreversible.

The bright and energetic Caria, whose talent as an augmenter was only outshined by her love for martial arts, would never be able to walk on her own two feet again.

"H-how..." I stammered, my vision blurry with tears.

"How?" Darvus snarled. "You leave us to go on your own solo crusade and

"Stop, Darvus. People are watching." Stannard pulled Darvus away. "I

apologize for his outburst, Head Tessia," he said, and though he met my gaze, it was as though he were looking straight through me.

I shook my head. "Stannard..."

He turned away, moving to stand by Caria and speaking to the emitter in a low voice.

Caria's injury was the blow that really drove it home. Darvus was right. It was my fault. I should have been there to protect her. I let her down.

"It's time to go," a familiar voice said from behind me.

I didn't look back—my eyes remained focused on Caria in her peaceful slumber. How would that change when she woke up? Would she blame me like Darvus and Stannard obviously did? Would she hate me?

I wiped my tears with the back of my hand, imagining her future. Her time as a soldier and adventurer was over. She would have to return home, perhaps go back into service with the Clarell household. Would they even have her, with a missing leg? Perhaps I could have my parents bring her on within the Zestier estate, if it survived the coming battle—

"Tessia Eralith."

The voice snapped me out of my thoughts. Turning around, I found General Aya behind me with several guards.

"The rider is ready to depart. You'll be going back to the castle immediately, Head Tessia," the general stated as she turned around.

"The castle?" I replied. "I don't understand. The Alacryan army is marching towards Zestier right now. There's no time to visit—"

General Aya gave me a sharp look over her shoulder, cutting off my words. "Perhaps I haven't made myself clear. You are to be withdrawn from battle until further notice."

My stomach dropped. "Wait, no—General! I—I can still fight! Please."

Though she kept her voice polite, I could sense the Lance's impatience. "I have already informed the Council that you are unfit for battle. Please be wary of your position as an Eralith, and do not make a scene."

No, no, no! I needed to fight—I needed to make up for my mistakes. I needed to show Caria and everyone else that I could do better!

As Aya began to walk away, her dark hair billowing behind her, I grabbed onto her arm. "General, I'm one of the few silver core mages ready to fight. I can't just hide in the castle while the elven kingdom is under—"

"Your job was to hold a line and prevent the enemy from pursuing a slow-moving civilian caravan until backup arrived. From what I've been told, you abandoned your position as leader of this unit in favor of playing the hero." The Lance pried my fingers off her arm and regarded me coldly. "The remainder of your unit that is still fit for battle will join my division effective immediately."

The Lance's words crashed down on me like an avalanche, freezing me to the core. She turned away, dismissing me as if I were a child, and handed the wyvern-rider a scroll. "Take her straight to the castle and get this to Commander Virion."

Before mounting the wyvern that would take me away from Elshire, away from Elenoir and my chance to defend my home, I allowed myself one last furtive glance back at Darvus and Stannard.

Neither would look me in the eye.

The hollowness I felt at that moment hurt more than any injury I had suffered fighting by their side.

VIRION ERALITH

It was chaos. Live updates—a majority from Zestier City—were being branded onto the transmission scrolls faster than we could sort and read them. Piles of the communication artifacts were littered all over the meeting room, and the Councilmembers hurriedly flipped through more.

The frantic pace of the news rolling in only fueled the fiery tension that had already built up in the room.

A sudden *thud* drew my attention to Alduin, who had thrown a stack of transmission scrolls on the ground. My son grabbed Blaine Glayder by his

collar and slammed him against the wall.

"Look at these reports from Elenoir, damned you," he hissed. "I warned you, Glayder. *I warned you!*"

The guards had stepped forward to break up the confrontation, but I gestured for them to stay back.

The former King Glayder, usually so proud, looked... ashamed. "It was impossible to predict something like this could happen, Alduin."

"Impossible?" Alduin spat, his face within an inch of the human's. "An army of Alacryan mages is currently approaching Zestier, the very *heart* of Elenoir. The death toll will be catastrophic—there are barely enough soldiers in Elenoir to implement our plan for evacuation, because *you* refused to allow us to relocate *our own* soldiers to protect their homes, yet you look me in the eyes and tell me it was impossible to predict?"

Merial rested a hand on her husband's elbow and said, "Alduin, I understand your anger but please, this isn't the time or place to do this."

Jerking his arm free from his wife's hold, he swung his fist—still clutching the transmission scroll sent by General Aya—squarely into Blaine's jaw. "My *daughter* nearly *died* because of your greed!"

Priscilla Glayder rushed to Blaine's side as he slid down the wall, rubbing his jaw and glaring quietly up at my son. Buhnd sat idly, his usual look of amusement replaced by a grim frown.

"How many times did I ask for more elven troops to be placed back in Elenoir? How many times did I *plead* because I was afraid something exactly like this would happen? This could lead to the fall of the entire elven kingdom!"

Tears flowed freely down Alduin's face as he exercised his frustration, fear, and anger. Merial gently wrapped her arms around him, comforting my son in a way that I couldn't.

I had no right. After all, the weight of his words didn't just fall on the Glayders, but to me as well. I had ultimately sided with the Glayders and

agreed to keep the elven troops in Sapin. Commanding this war effort was my responsibility, and the events unfolding in Elenoir rested on my shoulders.

I had been overconfident in the magical defenses of the Elshire Forest. I was wrong. That simple acknowledgment seemed stuck deep in the back of my throat; I didn't have the strength to say it aloud.

Instead, I stared at the transmission scroll sent from Etistin.

Now isn't the time to doubt my decisions.

I quickly flipped the scroll and tucked it into another pile nearby before speaking.

"Enough! Now is not the time to be pointing fingers. Get out and cool off, *all of you*," I ordered. "Councilmembers Alduin and Merial, Tessia should be arriving soon. Take some time to be there for her."

Shifting my gaze towards the Glayders, I said, "Take a break, and just know that, whatever happens, no one person is at fault."

I waited for the guards to escort the members of the Council out. Alduin and Merial left first, and, from the way my son's sharp eyes flashed with indignation and anger, I knew he blamed me as well.

Blaine stopped in the doorway and looked back. "I know you swore an oath to be impartial, to show no favoritism toward Elenoir, Darv, or Sapin, but I won't blame you for protecting your home."

He didn't wait for me to reply as he walked out, one arm around his wife.

Buhnd was the last to leave; he had been unusually quiet, and his expression was unreadable.

Alone for the first time in many hours, I found the sudden quiet unsettling. The messages written on the transmission scrolls seemed to radiate a sort of mental pressure, and the cumulative effect was almost suffocating.

Sighing heavily, I retrieved the transmission scroll that had come from Etistin and read it again. The contents of this scroll, and the many more soon to come, would stun the rest of the Council. I felt nearly paralyzed by the report,

but I couldn't let that happen. At least one of us needed to be in their right mind, which was why I hadn't revealed it to them—even if it gave me only a few hours reprieve. I needed that time to put my thoughts in order.

There were now over three hundred ships—each one filled with Alacryan soldiers—approaching our western shores, and there would undoubtedly be Scythes and retainers amongst them. The corrupted beasts at the Wall, the sudden appearance of an army within the Elshire Forest, and now these ships... The timing was too perfect. They had carefully planned this moment, and I couldn't help but fear that this war was reaching a turning point.

Fortunately, Bairon and Varay were already close by, but the presence of two Lances wouldn't be enough—even having all five of our Lances at Etistin might not be enough. I knew Buhnd wouldn't argue if I withdrew General Mica from Darv, and Arthur should've been nearly finished with his role at the Wall.

That only left the elven Lance.

Could I withdraw General Aya from Elenoir and deny them reinforcements? Would I essentially abandon Elenoir by taking the Lance away or risk allowing another even larger army to step foot on our land?

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BACKTRACK

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Cylrit, Sylvie, and I stood in the air above the canopy of trees. I gripped Dawn's Ballad in my hand as I considered my options, none of which seemed good.

Despite Sylvie's recent growth, she wouldn't be able to handle the retainer by herself, but neither could she find Tess within the magical fog spread over Elshire Forest. The best option was to end this battle as fast as possible. However, expending too much energy and mana in a fight now could be detrimental for the real battles soon to come.

Sylvie, I'm pretty confident I can beat Cylrit on my own, but if his aim is to just stall for time, an extended battle works in his favor. Let's wrap this up quickly—together.

While the speed of my flight was by no means slow, it was difficult to utilize my fighting style, which consisted of sharp movements and bursts of speed, in the air.

'I agree,' she confirmed, mana already gathering around her at an extraordinary rate. A solid panel of condensed mana formed beneath my feet, giving me a platform to fight on.

Expressionless, Cylrit merely lifted his greatsword into a defensive position as I closed in.

I focused on a space about three paces in front of Cylrit, and my bond

conjured another translucent panel beneath my right foot. This allowed for another quick change in direction as I pushed off Sylvie's conjuration. The retainer's eyes calmly followed my movements and his greatsword remained steady.

Dawn's Ballad whistled as its sharp edge cut through the air toward Cylrit's chest, but my teal blade jerked off course and rang against the retainer's pitch-black blade. It had felt as though Dawn's Ballad were being pulled by an invisible hand directly into the behemoth sword.

The sensation disappeared as soon as our blades clashed, but when I swung again, Dawn's Ballad was again attracted to his mysterious sword.

Frustrated and eager to end this fight quickly, I activated the first phase of my beast will.

Static Void.

The colors around me inverted, freezing everything but myself in place. I pressed the broken tip of Dawn's Ballad into a gap in the motionless retainer's armor, then released Static Void. Even at point-blank range, though, my sword veered away from Cylrit's torso, barely nicking him while leaving me drained.

Damn it! I thought, grinding my teeth.

Sylvie reacted immediately to my failed attempt by conjuring another platform beneath my feet, which let me quickly gain distance from Cylrit.

I was breathing heavily; Static Void was a spell passed down to me from Sylvia, but it required manipulating aevum, which wasn't compatible with my mastery of aether. Even as a white core mage, using it for extended periods was tiring.

"I was taught of the various mana arts that the asura clans had forged, including the 'aether arts' of the Indrath Clan. Experiencing it in person, though, I can see why it's to be feared," Cylrit said, looking down at his wound.

Having no intention of exchanging frivolities with him, I mentally nudged

my bond.

Sylvie, fire a few shots behind him.

'Got it.'

Just as arrows of mana manifested in the air behind the retainer, I launched a blast of frost and a bolt of lightning. The ice blast spread into a cone while the lightning branched off to completely cover our opponent, but to no avail.

With a single sweep of his sword, our spells were sucked up and completely eaten away by the black blade.

Sylvie snorted in irritation. 'What a troublesome ability.'

Impatience welled up inside me as I watched Cylrit maintain his stance, not even bothering to attack. Instead, he made a show of pulling out a small scroll and reading it. When he looked up, his gaze shifted from Sylvie to me before saying, "One of my scouts has confirmed that the elven princess has been withdrawn from battle."

"Do you honestly expect me to believe you and just walk away?" I spat.

Worried that the retainer's ability to absorb mana might somehow damage Dawn's Ballad, I sheathed the sword and conjured two frozen blades—condensing layer upon layer of ice to reinforce their durability—before rushing towards him again.

Cylrit's cold eyes narrowed as I quickly approached.

The blades of ice clashed with his sword, generating a blast of pressure from the impact. Even with mana coating my weapons, several cracks had appeared from the impact.

Mending the scarred surface of the weapons, I launched into a series of cuts, feints, and counters. Again and again, my swords were forced to change direction mid-swing, always ending pressed against his blade.

Hoping there would be a bit of delay in between the gravitational pull from his sword, I purposely abandoned the ice swords, quickly conjuring new ones to strike again. The result was the same, but I tried again—and again.

"If your master is really on our side, this is a meaningless battle, Cylrit," I

growled, releasing yet another conjured sword from my hand and shooting a blast of fire at his legs.

That's when I sensed it: Something within his weapon *changed*. Not visibly, but it happened just after the sword I had let loose was pulled into his sword and I had shot the fire.

I activated Realmheart, surprising both Sylvie and Cylrit, and did it again, throwing my other ice sword at Cylrit while simultaneously conjuring an arc of lightning.

The mana fluctuation within his greatsword—now visible to me with Realmheart—changed in the middle of his swing as he blocked both the solid composition of my ice sword and the mana-fueled lightning.

His sword can only attract one or the other at once!

Cylrit gazed at me with annoyance, and I was certain that he had realized what I was doing, but it didn't matter. I knew his weakness.

Sylvie, capitalizing on our discovery, quickly cast the spell she had been preparing. Like a brilliant firework display, hundreds of sparks with blazing trails flew outward from her. Rather than fade, though, the sparks of light remained suspended in the air all around us.

A wave of fatigue leaked into me from my bond, but it was buttressed by her determination.

'I need to concentrate fully on maintaining this mana art. Don't let Cylrit near me.'

With a mental nod, I burst forward, using a condensed blast of wind to aid my acceleration. I didn't know if we could pull off the sort of coordination we would need to follow through with Sylvie's plan, but I committed.

Cylrit was obviously wary of the gleaming sparks of light surrounding him, but his attention remained focused on me as the more immediate threat.

A single blade of ice appeared in my hand as I approached the retainer. The spark of light beneath my right foot turned into a panel for me to push off of, allowing me to sharply change my direction. Another spark turned into a

platform, and another, until I was dancing around Cylrit fast enough for him to lose track of me briefly.

'Now!' Sylvie expressed.

I pushed off a platform of mana directly behind the retainer, my blade poised. Even without his powerful vacuum ability, however, Cylrit's reflexes were at least as good as mine—maybe better. He whirled around, his large sword moving so quickly that it might have been a child's toy.

The mana composition changed within his weapon and I felt my blade of ice being drawn off course.

Sylvie triggered one of the sparks of mana hovering nearby; a blinding beam of pure mana shot out towards Cylrit just as my blade clashed with his. The retainer, unable to alter his weapon's ability fast enough, took the impact across his shoulder. The spell glanced off his armor, leaving an ash-gray scorch mark on the black metal.

I let the ice sword melt away, instead concentrating mana into my fist before swinging hard at my opponent's face while simultaneously releasing a blast of lightning with my other hand.

Cylrit opted to absorb the lightning while using his own arm to block my fist. As he was reeling from the blow, I conjured a huge ice-blade and struck.

Off-balance and unable to redirect my attack, Cylrit took the full force of my blade right below his ribs. The mana around his body negated the brunt of the attack, but, by the blood leaking from the corner of Cylrit's lips, I knew we had landed our first successful attack.

We continued to stay on the offensive, mixing spells with swordplay or even attacking with my own hands and feet.

It's working, I thought to Sylvie.

My bond triggered another spark, releasing a blast of mana, while I hailed dozens of ice-spikes down on the retainer. Before either of our attacks could reach Cylrit, however, the retainer spun towards me. I barely managed to dodge the kick aimed at my face, but his foot still scuffed me on the

shoulder.

Tumbling back in the air, I was still trying to regain my balance when I saw a black object advancing directly at me. It was Cylrit's sword, along with the barrage of icicles, which were being pulled towards it.

I grabbed on to one of Sylvie's suspended sparks to stop myself from tumbling, and four other sparks lit up and connected to form a large barrier between me and the sword. The dark blade pierced through Sylvie's mana barrier, but the ice shards all shattered on impact.

I dodged Cylrit's weapon easily enough, but the retainer followed up with an explosive mid-air dash to launch another kick.

Barely managing to duck out of the way, I imbued my fist with lightning, but as I tried to strike at him, a force pulled the spell surrounding my fist back behind me.

This gave Cylrit enough time to land a solid punch to my jaw. The mana protecting me soaked up some of the force, but my vision still swam from the impact. I dodged the next blow and tried to gain some distance from him but he stuck closely to me.

Around us, the sparks glowed threateningly; Sylvie was waiting for a chance to release another blast of mana. Cylrit's sword was still pulling at my lightning-cloaked fist, leaving the retainer open—

"Do it!" I roared.

A note of panic and confusion bloomed in my bond's mind, but I expressed my confidence and determination.

Sylvie fired everything she had.

The sky lit up as every single spark fired a bright beam of mana directly at us.

Though my instincts shrieked for me to dodge out of the way, I grabbed hold of Cylrit and held him in place instead.

'Arthur!' Sylvie's horrified voice screamed in my head.

The retainer struggled to break free from my grasp, his attention focused not

on the spell but on his sword behind me. It was obvious that he was trying to get his weapon back, but I smashed my forehead into his nose to distract him, keeping his focus on me. I repeated the headbutt again, then a third time, until the heat from Sylvie's mana beams radiated across my back.

Static Void.

The world grew still again; the cluster of beams was inches away from us.

I tried prying myself away from Cylrit, but the retainer had been holding onto the fur-lined mantle that Virion had passed down to me. Scrambling, already feeling the fatigue, I pulled free of the cloak and dropped down out of harm's way, then released Static Void.

Color shifted back to normal and I watched from a distance as Cylrit's figure disappeared within the beams of mana.

Damn. So much for not wasting my energy, I cursed myself.

Cylrit's abilities made it a bad match-up and there was still much to be desired from the coordination between Sylvie and me; our timing had been off at times, and because of the complexity, we were limited in the number of platforms we could utilize. However, we managed to win without any serious injuries—a large improvement considering we got our asses handed to us by Uto, the last retainer we fought.

Cylrit's figure plummeted down into the canopy of trees and fog below, but with Realmheart, I knew he was still alive.

I shared a tired look with Sylvie as we prepared to finish our journey to the elven kingdom, when a mild shock-pulse from within my pocket brought me to a stop.

It was the transmission scroll linked with my sister. I quickly unrolled it and read the short message now inscribed on the vellum.

Brother, please help. They're dying. Come quick.

My hands trembled as I read and reread the message on the scroll. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't decide. I fumbled with the scroll, trying to shove it back in my pocket, but once that was done, I still floated there, irresolute.

The silence lingered for several long moments before Sylvie's voice echoed in my head. 'Arthur. Let's go.'

Sylvie understood my struggle, but appeared to have made up her mind. She quickly shifted into her draconic form, swooped underneath me and scooped me up.

'We'll assume that the retainer was telling the truth for now. Right now, your sister needs us back at the Wall.'

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DIM TUNNELS

MICA EARTHBORN

The bouncer, a thickly muscled dwarf wearing a two-sizes-too-small tunic that strained against his chest and biceps, glowered as I approached. The bar was in a deep and distant tunnel well away from the bustling central caverns, and I had seen none but the worst sorts in and out over two days and nights of observation. Many Alacryan soldiers, survivors of the Battle of Slore or agents left within Vildorial, the capital city of Darv, still skulked within the tunnels, aided and abetted by a group of dwarven radicals. I was sure that several had stayed here recently, though I hadn't seen them come or go.

Stepping forward and holding out a hand, the bouncer said, "Sorry missy, I think you're in the wrong place. Better turn around and—" Blood spurted from his mouth as his jaws were forced shut, biting down on his wagging tongue. His knees buckled, and he collapsed.

He lay awkwardly on the ground, his limbs twisted at odd angles as if he were a bug and a giant foot was crushing him into the earth. His wide eyes stared up at me in panic.

"In eight seconds, ten if you're tougher than you look, you'll pass out. Mica will release her Gravity Hammer spell and you will not die. When you wake —" I stopped speaking. The bouncer was unconscious. Releasing the spell, I stepped through the now unguarded doorway into a dim, smoke-filled barroom.

Embarrassing. The room was roughly circular in shape with a rounded ceiling. Even in the dim light and through the haze of brackish smoke, it was obvious how roughly hewn this room was. The bar and chairs looked as if they'd been grown by magic, as was normal for nearly all dwarven dwellings, but it was poorly done.

This place is a testament to the old adage: Even a dwarf can dig too deep and live too long in the dark.

Three dwarven men sat at a dark table near the far wall, their heads bent low over their beers, but their hushed conversation ended the moment they noticed me standing in the doorway.

The barman, an aged dwarf with a graying beard tucked into his belt and his hair pulled up into a topknot, glared. "Get gone, child," he grumbled. "This is no place for the likes of you."

Wordlessly, I moved up to the bar, sat on a stone stool that wobbled on three uneven legs, and waggled a finger toward the graybeard. When he didn't immediately approach, I rolled my eyes and signaled more enthusiastically. Begrudgingly, the barman stepped forward, leaning slightly across the bar.

"If one more man tells Mica where she should be, she'll crush this sad hovel and search for the remains of her prey within the rubble." I shot the barman a cheery smile as his forehead suddenly plummeted, bouncing off the bar with enough force to crack the rough stone. "Now, unless you think your skull is harder than this stone—which, to be fair, it may be—then you will avoid insulting Mica again and instead do your very best to assist in the location of a handful of Alacryan mages who Mica believes are hiding somewhere around here."

"Sh-shove off!" the barman growled as he wiped at the blood running down his face and into his beard. Before I could reply, my attention was drawn by the scraping of stone stools across the hard-earth floor.

I watched with amusement as the three sturdy men walked slowly toward me. They wore hard looks and made a show of rolling up their sleeves as they approached. I waited for them to make the first move.

The lead dwarf, a taller-than-average man with blue-black hair that hung in tangled sheets down to his belt, looked me in the eye and spit into the dirt at my feet. "You seem to have made a mistake. You must've thought this was the kind of establishment where a human-feet-licking pseudo-dwarf could stumble into with her fine clothes and superior attitude and do whatever the hell she wants. In the process, you seem to have hurt my friend. Now, I'll ask you kindly to offer Ludo here an apology for your rudeness, and then you can be on your way."

I looked at the dwarf in surprise. Even in Darv, where a third of the population hated me and everything I represented as a Lance, no one had dared speak to me like this. *Pseudo-dwarf indeed!*

When the late King and Queen Greysunders had betrayed the Council and attempted to side with the Alacryans, many dwarves supported them. There were Alacryan sympathizers all throughout Darv, and they viewed my allegiance to the Council as the betrayal.

"Mole got your tongue, girl?" the lead dwarf sneered, drawing me out of my thoughts. "That's what I thought. You lot are all the same. Know a little bit of magic and you think it makes you special. What's it let you do other than bully an old barkeep, though, eh? Ludo's still waiting for that apology."

I slid off my rickety stool, turned to the barman, and nodded. "Mica apologizes for the knock, graybeard. Clearly, Mica was smacking around the wrong man."

Turning back to the black-haired dwarf, who glared angrily at me and was fingering the knife at his belt, I said, "Mica is certain a band of Alacryan survivors has been through here, and you seem more than stupid enough to be a supporter. Where are they hiding?"

Grunting in an "I tried to warn you" sort of way, the dwarf ripped a jagged knife from his belt and lunged forward, mana clinging tightly around him. The knife flashed across my throat, and then my attacker stepped back into a

guard position, smirking confidently. Eager to see the realization dawn over his squashed face, I simply waited.

The victorious grin slid into confusion, and then finally slumped into a look of dismay. The dwarven man stared down at the knife in his hand, the edge of which had been ground flat against my protective layer of mana.

Before the dwarves could do anything else but stare, I conjured two massive hands of stone. They reached up through the floor, filling the small space with the sound of grinding and rending, and grasped the second and third dwarves, who had thus far been satisfied to snarl and grimace menacingly in the background while their leader did all the talking. The unfortunate men yelped in terror, blindly trying to wrench themselves free of the massive fists, but they were held fast.

Their leader, perhaps realizing he'd made a grave error, bolted for a door on the far side of the bar. With every step, though, he went slower and slower, until it appeared he could not even lift his feet from the floor.

He fell to his knees, then to his stomach as I increased the pressure of gravity weighing down upon him.

The barman, Ludo, grabbed something from under the stone bar and lifted it up: a crossbow, already loaded. The contraption *clanked* and a steel-tipped bolt flew through the air, but I redirected it with a thought. Instead of firing straight at me, the bolt curved downward dramatically, burrowing into the earth floor. A moment later, Ludo fell into the air, tumbling head over heels and crashing into the ceiling.

Smiling, I kneeled down and pulled the bolt from where it had stuck in the dirt. "Where are the Alacryans hiding?" I asked again. "Come on, Mica knows you can still speak. Tell her, and she'll take the fight to them. Or you may keep your silence—forever."

From where he was pressed into the ceiling, Ludo grunted, "Freedom—for the—dwarves. You're nothing but—a dog—for the humans and elves."

With a flick of my wrist, I tossed the bolt behind the bar. It was caught in the

gravity manipulation and fell upwards, lodging itself point first in Ludo's chest. Looking down, he met my eyes and attempted to spit, though the spittle only splashed across his own face and beard. A moment later, he was dead.

Blood pooled on the ceiling, running through the ridges and swells of the roughly-hewn stonework. When it ran to the edge of the reversed gravity, it began to drip from the roof down into the dirt. I let the spell fade, and his corpse fell with a *thud* back behind the bar.

"Please!" shouted one of the restrained dwarves. He was young, his mudcolored beard barely extending past his chest. His wide, wet eyes were dripping with fear. "Please, I can tell you. They're not here, but—"

"Shut your hole, Oberle," the leader hissed from his place on the floor. I pressed down with Gravity Hammer, crushing the air from his lungs and silencing him.

"Oberle, is it? Well, at least one of you has some sense. So, if the invaders aren't here, Oberle, where are they?"

With a glance at his companion, who was clawing at the ground in desperation, Oberle began speaking in a rush. "Ludo's bar's one in a network of safe houses for the remaining Alacryans, where they can rest or hide—sometimes they meet with dwarven folk, those who are tired of the Triunion's favoritism toward the elves and humans, those who haven't forgotten the Greysunders or their assassination.

"I haven't seen any soldiers in or out in a few days, but I know where some of them have kipped up. Torple"—his eyes darted to the flattened dwarf on the floor—"took me along for a delivery once. There's an underground grotto a few days' walk out from here—real isolated—maybe thirty soldiers there when I saw it."

"Oh, most excellent, Oberle!" I clapped my hands happily, and the stone fist gripping Oberle released, then crumbled to dust at his feet. "Mica is so glad to have you as her guide. Please follow. This information must reach the rest

of the team, and you'll be staying with Mica until the Alacryan infestation has been exterminated."

"What—what about Torple and Eroc?" Oberle moved stiffly, casting a look back at his companions. "You have to understand, they're not bad people—just angry, and tired, and frightened."

"The city watchmen will collect them. Perhaps when this war is over, there will be a place for them in Vildorial. That won't be up to Mica to decide."

It was a long walk back through the outer tunnels of Vildorial to the central caverns. I would have liked to have flown back but was doing my best to keep a low profile. Many of those who dwelled in the high caverns or deep tunnels didn't recognize me by appearance alone, but why would they? The Lances had spent precious little time in Darv since being knighted, and I was no city watchman to be seen patrolling the dim tunnels.

Fire salt. The stink of it is everywhere down here. Mica hates the smell of fire salt.

Still, the war, the betrayal of the Greysunders, the removal of Rahdeas from the Council... I could see the toll it had taken on the dwarves. Though the nobility weathered these events with the stoicism of those who had already carved out a stable life for themselves, down in the deep tunnels—where the laborers, miners, and magicless lived and worked—I saw questions in every face.

These dwarves, through no fault of their own, were trapped in a civil war, torn between allegiance to Dicathen and the Triunion and their leaders' alliance with the Alacryan forces.

Many of these folk would happily sit by and let the two sides rip one another apart if it meant they could go back to the daily business of survival in Darv, hard enough without the threat of becoming embroiled in a war they didn't understand and didn't want.

"Mica would like to hear more about you, Oberle. There is another hour's

walk to reach our destination, so it might as well pass in conversation."

"Um..." Oberle ran his fingers through his beard nervously. "What—what do you want to know?"

"Dwarves are always so afraid to be introspective. Mica had forgotten what it's like to have to talk to other dwarves. Except for Olfred and..." I trailed off at the thought of my friend, mentor, and rival. Olfred Warend, the other dwarven Lance, had been a part of Rahdeas's coup and had attempted to murder both Generals Aya and Arthur, a battle that ended in his death.

"I—I suppose I can... I'm of clan Lastfire, but I doubt you've ever heard of us. Miners, mostly. Used to mine ore, working for whichever outfit was paying, but before my time my great uncle came into a vein of fire salt, so the whole clan has been working it for the last hundred years or so."

I sniffed, realizing he stunk of fire salt. *Gross*. "Are all your clansmen traitors to Dicathen, or just you?" Oberle stopped walking and gave me a hard stare. "What is it? Do you, perhaps, disagree with Mica's assessment of your life choices? Please explain then—and keep walking."

Oberle did as I said, but a dark cloud seemed to have rolled over him. "I'm not a traitor, and neither are my clansmen. Maybe things look different from the lofty perch you live on, but outside of the great caverns things aren't *great*. First, we hear whispers of war and then our king and queen uproot their entire court and move off to some castle in the sky while joining this *Triunion* and aligning the dwarves with elves and humans.

"Next thing we know, the Greysunders are dead and Counselor Rahdeas has become the sole voice for the dwarves on Dicathen, and he, it turns out, is also allied with the invaders. Our king, queen, and voice on the Council all turned out to be in league with Alacrya. What does that mean for dwarves in the tunnels? Are we allies of the Alacryans? Are we still represented on the Council? Can we expect Sapin and Elenoir to send their armies marching into our homes? Many were the questions, few the answers."

I said nothing. This had been a common excuse for the current situation

within Dary.

"My father told the clan to keep their noses out of it," Oberle continued. "Not our business,' he told us. 'Not when there's fire salt to be dug.' So far's I know, I'm the only one that didn't listen, and even that wasn't on purpose." "Oh? So you accidentally became complicit in the criminal act of harboring fugitives of war?" I ran a hand theatrically through my hair. "That sounds like quite a tale. Mica is dying to hear it!"

Oberle shook his head angrily, wringing his beard with his hands as he answered. "Eroc is an old family friend. We've been drinking at Ludo's since well before the Council was formed and the war announced. I never meant to get involved, but Ludo, Torple, Eroc—all they talked about was building a better world for dwarves, reclaiming the honor of our ancestors, lifting our people out of the dirt... It was just talk, or so I thought. Then the Alacryans came, and I got scared. I'm no activist. I was just—just sort of there."

"Did you ever meet the Greysunders? Or Councilor Rahdeas?" I asked seriously.

"No."

"Mica was bound to them, stood guard over their beds while they slept, heard their most intimate moments, was trusted with their every secret—almost every secret. And do you know what Mica learned?"

Genuine curiosity writ on his face, Oberle replied, "No. What?"

"The king and queen were selfish dogs. Constantly they plotted, not for the betterment of Darv or reclamation of our rights as an equal nation, but for their own well being and the downfall of those that had personally crossed them. More than that, they were weak. Rahdeas, on the other hand, loved Darv too much, and sought to elevate the dwarves by climbing a mountain of the dead. Both failed to live up to expectations."

Oberle looked away. His eyes fell upon a small girl dancing past us behind two dirty, tired-looking dwarves. The girl, noticing Oberle's gaze, pulled something from a pocket in her discolored dress and threw it into the air. A plume of shimmering dust rose around her, sparkling blue, red, and silver. The girl giggled and Oberle smiled.

My declaration regarding the dwarven leaders was met with silence. *Perhaps that has given the young dwarf something to think about. That is good. We dwarves need to spend more time thinking.*

The Earthborn Institute, where my team and I were staying, was not far away at that point. With traffic growing thicker so close to the central caverns of Vildorial, I knew silence would be best around this many ears. Which of these dwarves are Alacryan sympathizers? Which would put an axe in this boy's skull to keep him from giving up the Alacryan hideout?

"What do the Alacryans want?" Oberle asked suddenly.

"Only the enslavement of every human, elf, and dwarf on Dicathen—and all the resources under, on, and above Dicathen too—to further the continuation of a war older than our entire nation."

Oberle only nodded.

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FUTURE'S FIRST STEP

A LOT CHANGED after Cecilia's accident at school. Although the enforcers couldn't just take Cecilia and lock her away, they were able to force Cecilia to attend sessions at a nearby government facility for "tests" under the guise of helping her "control her abilities."

It didn't help that Cecilia was an orphan like Nico and I were. Since she didn't have a legal guardian—Headmaster Wilbeck having passed away—supposedly wealthy or powerful individuals kept extending their desire to adopt her. Still, we had some basic rights, and Cecilia was able to avoid being auctioned off to the highest bidder like some prized pet.

I'd like to say that I was there to help my friend as she endured the stresses and hardships that came with being under the spotlight, but that would be a lie.

Training with Lady Vera became even more intensive as I continued to exceed her expectations. She had the authority to allow me to skip most of my classes, her own training regimen being several times more intensive than the academy. If I wasn't training or sparring, I was learning etiquette and basic courtly knowledge required to pass the exam to even qualify for the city level King's Crown tournament. As it turned out, you had to be more than a good fighter—you needed the intellect and charisma to appeal to your country's citizens.

It was while under the tutelage of Lady Vera—and her team of tutors

dedicated to making sure I had a fighting chance to become a king—that I learned the role was more akin to a glorified mascot than it was a leader.

Still, I needed the power and voice that came with the position. I hadn't forgotten about the assassins who were responsible for Headmaster Wilbeck's cruel death.

I also used that reason to justify my absence with Nico and Cecilia. Days, sometimes weeks, would go by without even being able to see their faces, and while I felt bad, I fooled myself into believing that becoming a king would solve everything.

I wasn't as sensible or empathetic as Nico, nor were my feelings for Cecilia strong enough to overcome my desire to study and train. If anything, there was still a small part of me that blamed Cecilia for Headmaster Wilbeck's death. After my capture and torture, I had learned that the headmaster, who had been like a mother to me, was killed for protecting Cecilia.

It wasn't fair for me to blame her—I knew that. I had swallowed those unjustified resentments long ago, but it still left a small fissure in our relationship. Perhaps that's why I could never reciprocate the feelings Cecilia once had for me. Whatever the reason was, it didn't matter. That was all in the past.

We were almost eighteen, soon to be legally adults, when Nico brought up his plan with Cecilia during one of our irregular phone calls. I had long suspected that the relationship between Nico and Cecilia had grown beyond friendship, but I was still surprised by what Nico had to say.

"You're going to run away?" I asked incredulously, my lips pressed against the receiver.

"No... well, I guess, in a way." Nico sighed. "You make my well-thought-out plan sound like some sort of prepubescent rebellion."

"Because it sort of is," I scoffed. "Do you think the government will let you get away with Cecilia? As far as they're concerned, she's a national asset."

"Trust me, I know. But after Cecilia and I no longer need a guardian, we can

drop out of school and go to a different country. The new prototype of the ki limiter I made is already several times more stable than the previous one, and that accounts for the growth in her ki levels."

"How much has her ki level grown?" I asked despite myself. A part of me didn't want to know the answer.

"According to her latest report—more than double."

"No way. That's—"

"Impossible? Nope. Apparently, it's not just her inherent ki level that's monstrous, but its growth as well. At this point, I just hope the team of researchers watching over her knows what they're doing—no form of explosive growth can be perfectly stable."

"Still, that's ridiculous," I said, lowering my voice. I couldn't even imagine myself having a ki level so high. A majority of my training with Lady Vera consisted of compensating for my levels of ki despite the endless resources she had spent on medicines and supplements. If I had those ki levels, becoming a king would have been just a matter of time. No wonder the government wanted to control her so much.

"Training still rough?" Nico asked. He asked this question every time we talked.

"It's getting a bit more bearable now, but yeah. Lady Vera's tough, you know, but whatever it takes."

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" Nico's voice had grown cold and serious. He normally didn't pry for details, but I guess he couldn't contain himself. When I didn't answer, he kept talking. "I barely see you nowadays. Hell, Cecilia isn't as busy even with the government training sessions and politicians hounding her. When I *do* see you, you're either bloody to the point that it's seeping through your uniform or you're so sore you can hardly stand. Is being the king that important that it's worth throwing away everything else?"

"You know it's not as simple as that," I said wearily.

"Yeah, I know. It's apparently the dying wish of Headmaster Wilbeck for you to avenge her by wasting your life. Except that I really doubt she'd have wanted you to kill yourself for her, Grey, and especially not for some stupid revenge fantasy. Be honest with yourself. You're not doing this for her at all; you're doing this for yourself. You feel helpless, and you think becoming king will make you feel powerful."

"Are you done?"

The line was silent for several long moments before Nico spoke again.

"Look, I didn't mean to come off like such a jerk. I just wanted to say that Headmaster Wilbeck wouldn't have wanted this for you—either of you. She would've wanted you and Cecilia to live as normal students and be happy with normal lives and families."

"You know I can't just let it go, Nico. Not after her murder was covered up as an accident and the whole thing just swept under the rug. Those assassins are part of a bigger organization, I just know it."

"So you become a king and then snuff out the organization that killed Headmaster Wilbeck. Then what?" Nico pressed.

"Then I retire. Find a quiet place and 'be happy with a normal life and family."

"Let's hope it's that easy."

"What about you and Cecilia?" I asked, trying to change the subject of our conversation. "Do you have a particular country in mind, or are you content with going wherever the wind blows you?"

"Engineers never 'go wherever the wind blows," he said with a scoff. "It's all planned out—and it's all legal, just... low-key."

"Well, have you explained this master plan to Cecilia?"

"Not entirely, but—oh, speak of the devil." Away from the microphone, Nico called out, "Cecil! I'm up here talking with Grey!"

There was a pause, then: "It's been a while, Grey. How is training going for you?"

"It's been going well," I replied awkwardly. "How are you, Cecilia?" "Fine. Thanks."

Nico must have had his head right next to the receiver, next to Cecilia, because I heard his voice immediately after. He said, "We were just talking about our plans, Cecil."

"N-Nico. I don't think we should be talking about that over the phone," Cecilia said, her voice distant as if she'd pulled away from the microphone.

"Come on, Cecil," Nico said soothingly. "It's not like we're actually running away. We're legally allowed to go to other countries, you know."

"Still..." Cecilia's voice trailed off.

I looked down at the watch strapped to my wrist. "My time's up. I better get back down to the yard or Lady Vera will double my regimen for the rest of the day."

"I'll see you both again soon... hopefully," I said as I disconnected the line. I really did want to see them, but I could never be confident when that would happen.

The day progressed normally, though I couldn't shake Nico's words, which followed me like a cloud throughout the day. Would Headmaster Wilbeck have wanted me to pursue this life? I couldn't honestly say. It wasn't as if we'd sat down and discussed the potential that she would be murdered and I would become king.

I was so distracted that Lady Vera eventually gave up in disgust and sent me to clean up and rest, though only after leaving me with several welts from her foil for my inattentiveness.

As I sank exhausted into bed, the phone rang. It was a number I didn't recognize. *Probably another reporter trying to dig up dirt on Lady Vera*, I thought sourly. Since I had joined the ranks of the would-be kings and began training under Warbridge House, it was a regular occurrence for journalists and socialites to reach out to me, trying to get a story or an in with Lady Vera.

Ignoring the call, I set the phone to silent and rolled over, falling asleep the moment my eyes closed. Too soon, the sun was peeking through the curtains. The first thing I noticed was the small blinking light on my phone indicating a message. Picking up the phone, I pressed the button for my messages and a pleasant female voice played from the speaker.

"Hello. I'm calling from Etharia National Hospital for a Mr. Grey. I'm sorry to call so late, but you are listed as Nico Sever's emergency contact. He was taken into urgent care a few minutes ago and is being prepped for surgery. If you get this message, please contact us immediately."

Before I could fully make sense of the message, a second recording began to play.

"Hello. This is Etharia National Hospital calling again for Mr. Grey. We wanted to update you that Mr. Sever's surgery is complete and he is resting comfortably. We still need to speak to you as his emergency contact. Please contact us when you receive this message."

Nico had been hurt somehow, but he was okay now. What the hell happened, Nico?

"Hello Mr. Grey. I am calling from—No, Mr. Sever, it's his voicemail again. You shouldn't even be awake, sir, so I really don't think—" For a moment, all I could hear was a scuffling noise and muffled speaking, then a different voice came on the line.

"Grey! They took her! I had just dropped her off and was on my way back when I remembered I forgot to give her the new prototype. I saw them shove her into a car. She was unconscious." There was a pause and I heard the hospital employee say something in the background, though I couldn't make out the words. "I said this was going to happen, Grey. I told you! It was the enforcers." Then the message ended.

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IN HER ELEMENT

ARTHUR LEYWIN

'Arthur. Take a look.'

Sylvie's voice drew me out of the memories of my previous life, which only seemed to get more vivid with time.

The sun had set, enveloping the wild lands of the Beast Glades in a blanket of darkness. We were still miles from the Wall, but we could clearly see the battlefield as spell after spell lit up the night in shades of blue, red, and green. They didn't collapse the underground tunnel—or even let the beast horde get close to the Wall. I gnashed my teeth in frustration, sure that this had been the senior captain's doing. I tried to swallow the rage building up inside, reminding myself that my plan had been a suggestion, but it had been up to the captains to defend the Wall as they best saw fit.

But my decision to leave the beast horde and help Tessia was based on the assumption that my suggestion would be implemented. It *should've* been implemented. Even before I left, the plan was already *being* implemented.

Ellie's note was vague, but it felt urgent—desperate, almost. *If anything happens to my family*—

'Arthur, we're almost there,' Sylvie said, interrupting my thoughts.

I sent her a mental confirmation and activated Realmheart. Using it so shortly after my fight with Cylrit sent sharp waves of pain through my veins but I ignored it. The dark evening's muted tones were washed away, replaced by

motes of colors. Some of these wisps and specks were floating freely while others were being absorbed and clustered in preparation for a spell to manifest.

Homing in on the Wall, I scanned the top line where rows of archers and conjurers were stationed, searching for Ellie's distinct form of magic. I could only hope that my sister hadn't run off somewhere.

We hovered high enough above the Wall so as to not be accidentally shot at by alarmed soldiers, but it didn't take long for me to find my sister. Not many mages were able to shoot such well-structured arrows of pure mana, making the mana fluctuations around her fairly distinguishable.

There, I indicated to my bond, directing her to the battlement where Ellie was stationed and releasing Realmheart.

Bolts of fire and ice drew arcs in the dark as they rained down on the battlefield a few hundred feet from the Wall, far from the underground tunnels that had been rigged to collapse. Alongside the various spells and mana enhanced arrows were streaks of pale light: my sister's mana arrows.

Sylvie quickly shifted into her human form as we neared our destination, and we flew down side by side. We landed softly but still sent a tremor of alarm through the soldiers stationed on the battlement. Weapons were raised against us, but the weight of my presence kept them from letting loose. These were all capable soldiers, but they could sense they were outmatched.

It was only when I stepped closer to a nearby illuminating artifact that Ellie ran into my arms.

"You scared the hell out of us!" my sister said in a strangled mixture of annoyance and relief. "The plan that was supposed to happen with the ground and the explosives—it didn't happen! At first I thought that they were delaying the plan in order to draw more beasts toward the area where we set up the trap, but the soldiers that went out aren't coming back."

I pried my sister away, partly to talk to her face to face, partly to not let her hear my heart beating against my chest. "Ellie. Where are the others? Are—

are the Twin Horns out there?"

Before my sister could answer, though, an officer in charge of this section came running toward me. After a hasty salute, he said, "G-good evening, General Arthur. My apologies that we weren't able to give you a proper welcoming. I am Officer Mandir, if there's anything I can—"

"I'm fine, Officer Mandir," I snapped, cutting him off. The man flinched and shuffled back a step.

I turned my attention back to my sister. Sylvie had a consoling hand on my sister's shoulder, calming her down enough to give us some solid answers.

"We're required to stay in our positions, but Helen, who was watching over me, was able to leave. She never came back, but before the beast horde arrived, I saw Mom in the medic camp set up on the ground level. Dad or the other Horns... I haven't seen any of them," my sister sputtered.

"It's okay, Ellie. Don't worry, your brother will handle the rest," I said, forcing a reassuring smile.

"W-what should I do? How can I help?" Ellie replied.

I shook my head. "Stay here. You're a soldier now and this is your post. You wanted experience in a real battle, right?"

"Okay." My sister's gaze hardened. After giving Sylvie a quick hug, she bolted off back to her station.

"Is it safe for her to stay here?" my bond asked, unable to pry her gaze from my sister.

"If they've decided to forgo my plan, it means that they're trying to keep the Wall as intact as possible. It'll be safer for the soldiers on this side of the battle. But those in the field..."

I leaped off the edge, ignoring the surprised shouts of the soldiers. The two of us landed deftly on the ground level behind the fortress and made our way to the medical tents.

I pushed aside a tent flap for the fourth time and was finally rewarded with

the sight of my mother. Her hands hovered over a patient, brows knit in concentration. She barked out orders to some of the other medics to have the patient moved and properly taken care of, then another gurney was rolled in front of her, carrying another injured soldier.

Her expression, her presence, her demeanor—it made me freeze in my tracks. The mother I knew and grew up with was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a strong and level-headed medic carrying the weight of the countless injured and dying.

I thought back to her words the last time we met, when we fought. She spoke of her duties here and the people that needed her help. Then I looked at the countless patients slowly recovering in their cots, all thanks to her abilities, and imagined how many would be dead already if it wasn't for her.

"Are you okay, Arthur?" Sylvie asked, her concern leaking into my mind.

My mother's white uniform was stained with blotches of red and brown, and her face was grimy with dirt, blood, and sweat, but she looked so... admirable.

The patient she was treating gained consciousness, and, though his face was knotted in pain, he reached up to my mother and gently placed a trembling hand on her arm. Despite the frenzy of activity going on around us, I heard his words clearly; with tears rolling down his cheeks, he smiled up at my mother and thanked her for saving his life.

Something bumped into me from behind, and I turned to see a started nurse looking over her shoulder at me. "Sir, you're blocking the passage. Unless you're critically injured, please—" The nurse stopped mid-sentence and scanned my body in concern. "Sir. Are your injuries bad? You're crying."

"No. I'm fine." I looked away, letting my bangs cover my face. "My apologies. I'll get out of the way."

I walked back out of the tent to gather myself.

Sylvie stood by me, tears welling up in her eyes as well.

"She was right—they were both right," I breathed, looking up at the starry

night. I could still hear my father's angry shouts as he called me hypocritical. My parents had tried to explain that I wasn't the only one that could contribute to this war, but I was too stubborn and scared to listen.

"It's good that you've realized," Sylvie answered.

I turned to my bond, examining her face as she looked up at the sky. "So you thought so too? Why didn't you tell me?"

Sylvie looked me in the eye. "I've been connected to you since I was born, Arthur. I know better than anyone how stubborn and sometimes irrational you get when it concerns the wellbeing of your loved ones. Would you have listened to my words if I had told you back then? Or would you have played the 'I've lived two lives' card and said you know best?"

I opened my mouth to speak—to argue—but no words came out.

Sylvie gave me a somber smile as she squeezed my arm. "Age isn't always wisdom, Arthur. You're learning that slowly."

I shook my head, scoffing. "I'm such an idiot. An arrogant, hypocritical idiot."

My bond leaned her head against me, letting me feel the warmth radiating from her horns. A wave of tender, comforting emotions radiated into me as she spoke. "Yes, but you're our idiot."

We stayed this way for another minute, letting our shared emotions sooth us, taking a small break from the world and what it was throwing at us, before going back into the tent.

"Arthur?" My mother's voice was a mixture of confusion and worry.

I held up a hand, "Hi, Mom."

Sylvie mimicked my gesture.

My mother flashed a smile at the two of us before focusing back on the task at hand. "Arthur, hand me a pair of pliers."

Finding the bloody pliers in a metal tray, I handed it to her. Without looking up, she snatched the tool and used it to carefully set a snapped rib bone jutting out of the patient's side back in place. The patient—different from the

man we saw earlier—let out a gut-wrenching scream.

Unfazed by the howls of pain, my mother continued her spell, and I could see the exposed bone slowly mend together. I realized that she had narrowed her spell to only release from the tips of her middle and index fingers, allowing her to precisely control where the healing magic was disbursed and likely saving herself a large amount of energy in the process.

Several long moments passed as both Sylvie and I watched, entranced by my mother's work. Despite the trauma that had haunted her all these years, I couldn't see any traces of hesitation now.

It was only after she had finished that she shifted her attention to us. "Sorry, Arthur. There are just so many soldiers that need my attention. Hopefully, once the traps go off, it'll be easier for Rey and the rest of the soldiers out there."

"Wait, Dad's out there right now, fighting?" I asked, panic rising in my voice.

"Not so much fighting as luring them towards the Wall," she said, confused.

"Wasn't that the plan? Bury the beast horde by sacrificing the underground passages?"

No one had told her. It made sense—medics didn't need up-to-date strategic information to continue doing their job. If anything, too much knowledge might hinder their focus.

"What about Helen? Didn't she visit you?"

"She stopped by earlier but didn't stay for long. Why?"

Helen hadn't told her either, for the same reason that nobody else had told her. It was better if she didn't know—there was nothing she could do about it anyway.

"What's going on, Arthur?" Her liquid brown eyes peered into me, searching for an answer. It was the same look she always gave our family when she knew we were hiding something from her.

"Mom..." I began.

There was nothing she could do about it, but she still had the right to know.

"The troops are a lot farther away than planned, and there is no sign of our soldiers backing down."

"What? That can't be right. What about all of those explosives placed throughout the underground passages?" She seemed on the edge of panic; her eyes darted around the room, jumping from one wounded soldier to another, than back to me.

I shook my head. "It seems like one of the captains decided against the plan. They've gone with Trodius's original strategy."

My mother's knees buckled. I caught her and eased her to the ground, but she suddenly looked ten years older.

"Don't worry, Mom." I smiled, trying to look as bright and reassuring as I could, but she only gazed fearfully up at me, her face pale. "I'm here now—we're here. Sylvie and I are going to go out there. I'm sure Dad and the Horns are still kicking ass right now. I'll make sure they get back safely," I assured her, trying to get her back up on her feet. "I promise."

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DIM TUNNELS II

MICA EARTHBORN

If any one aspect of Vildorial seemed unchanged, it was the mages scurrying about the Earthborn Institute as if the world was on fire and only they could put it out. *Not far from the mark now, maybe*. Though, perhaps the guards didn't used to look on with quite such attentive suspicion, nor did they finger their axes and shortswords so nervously.

"Don't worry, brave soldiers, this little sprite is with Mica and won't cause any grief." One of the guardsmen made to break off and provide an escort, but I shooed him away. "These halls are well known to Mica, and she doesn't need a guide to find her team!"

Cheeks blooming red under his ruddy beard, the guard stopped and stammered out an apology before returning to his post.

If you asked most any dwarf, the Earthborn Institute was the finest magic school in all of Dicathen. It had been founded by the Earthborn clan hundreds of years ago and had been managed by the Earthborns since.

I had spent my formative years within those marble halls annoying my family and terrifying my professors. Even amongst the Earthborns, who were considered unusually talented at magic among the dwarves, I had always been considered a genius. Few dwarves could manipulate gravity, and none could do so with my level of proficiency. *It's a wonder you've stayed so humble, Mica dearest.*

The halls were quiet, it being rather late and most of the students and staff having already retired for the evening, but I knew that the team would be waiting to hear about the night's hunt. Oberle, following closely behind, seemed to grow more quiet and nervous the deeper into the school grounds I led him. The tunnel bumpkin is more scared here than he was back at the bar. How odd.

I heard the team even before opening the iron-bound door that led to our shared quarters. It sounded as if they were arguing, though I couldn't make out the words. Eyes rolling, I pulled open the door, grabbed Oberle by his collar, and dragged him through.

- "—forgotten why we've been sent here, Mr. Gideon—"
- "—I do with my own time while not directly assisting in the war effort is none of your damned business—"
- "—operation is essential to preventing the Alacryan army from making this a three-front war—"
- "—done everything that has been asked of me, and will continue to do so, but I am an inventor, damn it, not a diplomat, and I—"
- "Shut it!" A red-faced dwarf, his blond beard quivering with irritation, stomped between a middle-aged elven woman and a gray-haired human. "That's enough! By the stones, if you two don't quit your bickering, I'll bury you both, consequences be damned!"

The room's occupants fell into a shocked silence. The old man looked apoplectic, too outraged to even respond. The elf's multi-colored eyes fell to the floor, but I could sense her mana seething within. From a seat nearby, a young, curly-haired human was peeking out from between her fingers. Leaning against the far wall, a second blond dwarf, identical to the first, seemed to be having a hard time keeping from bursting into a fit of laughter.

"Glad to see everyone getting along so well," I chirped, dragging Oberle into the room and pushing him down into an empty chair. There was a brief pause as everyone realized that I had joined them, then each burst into a rapid fire explanation, speaking over each other and making it impossible to hear any one of them.

"General, I must protest to the extracurricular activities of Mr. Gideon—"

"Your attendant seems to think that it is *she* who is in charge of this investigation—"

"Cousin, you'd better have brought us actionable news, because my axe won't stay sheathed much longer—"

One by one, they cut off their explanations. I gifted them my sweetest, most innocent expression, which told them if they didn't stop speaking immediately something uncomfortable was likely to happen.

"Thank you all for waiting up. Dear Cousin, Mica does indeed bring 'actionable news.' Everyone, this is Oberle." I waved toward the miner, who seemed to have lost the ability to move and sat, frozen, staring out at them all. "Oberle is a fire salt miner who has become embroiled in the Alacryan insurgency entirely by accident, and he has agreed to take us to an Alacryan camp he recently delivered goods to in order to make amends for his past mistakes."

That got their attention.

"Oberle, this wizened human here is Artificer Gideon, master inventor and chief science officer to the Council itself."

The old man stepped forward excitedly. "Fire salts, you say? Why, it just so happens that one avenue of my research here in Darv—"

"And this," I said, speaking over the human, "is my attendant, Alanis Emeria." The elven woman bowed respectfully.

"These roguishly handsome dwarves are my cousins, Hornfels and Skarn Earthborn." The laughing dwarf by the wall waved cheerily, but his twin only glared at Oberle.

"And let Mica not forget the infant child that for some reason Gideon has insisted upon endangering by bringing her along, Emily Watsken, previously of Xyrus Academy."

"I'm not an infant!" Emily declared sulkily.

Moving from his post by the wall, Hornfels hopped over the back of the couch and settled in next to Emily. "So what have you learned, Cousin? As Skarn said, our axes are eager to see some action. We've been skulking through the streets for weeks."

The promise of progress focused the group. Skarn stalked around the couch to stand behind his brother while Gideon took a seat next to the smoldering fire and Alanis moved to the side, standing uncomfortably still and straight.

I proceeded to explain my discoveries, prompting Oberle to fill in the details where necessary. The group then discussed the plan for moving on the Alacryan camp.

"It is clear than Emily and I were brought along for our brainpower, not our combat prowess. We would be nothing but a liability down in the tunnels, an object which you must protect. Anyway, I have already communicated the Council's desires to the Earthmovers' Guild, and Emily has shared her design for the monitoring of mana flow with the Earthborn Institute.

"Now," Gideon paused and shot Alanis a dark look, "I will spend the time you are away researching the fire salts mined from under Vildorial. I believe there may be a number of combat applications for this mineral beyond its use in dwarven forges and to warm the deep tunnels."

"General Mica," Alanis said immediately, "I believe it is imperative that Artificer Gideon and his apprentice oversee the work at the Earthmovers' Guild. The planning there is essential for the defense of Sapin, which the Council made very clear. Gideon—"

"Will be as much a liability at the guild as he would an asset," I interrupted. "Famed Gideon may be, but the Earthmovers are prideful and will only be insulted if a human stood over their collective shoulder and attempted to micromanage them. So long as they are fully aware of their task—and understand its urgency—then Mica is fine with Gideon pursuing his pet project while we are away." To Gideon, I added, "Clan Lastfire may be of

assistance, and you can explain to them why their youngest son has vanished while you're at it."

"Then what shall I do while you are away, General?" Alanis asked stiffly.

"Mica would like Councilor Buhnd's taskforce to assist us in the assault. Though unlikely, it is possible that we will face a retainer, perhaps even a Scythe. It is known from General Arthur's original report regarding the Alacryan forces' movements through Darv that a Scythe made its way through the portal, though this Scythe never appeared on the battlefield. Thus, the creature must be considered still at large. Should we find this Scythe, Mica will deal with it, but more soldiers to handle the Alacryan forces would be better. Then, please send a scroll to the Council, explaining what Mica has found."

"I will see to it immediately, General." Alanis bowed deeply, her blonde pony-tail spilling over her face, then left the room at a brisk walk.

"We'll be coming with you." Skarn's tone made this a statement of fact.

"Yes, Cousin. Oberle will lead Mica, Hornfels, Skarn, and whoever Buhnd's taskforce can spare into the deep tunnels to this hidden grotto."

Oberle's voice was choked and raspy when he broke his silence, saying, "You—you want me to go with you? I—um—I had assumed that I'd be just... just giving you directions. Or something."

"Oh no, friend Oberle, you are Mica's guide now, and you will not leave Mica's side." I smiled sweetly at the young dwarf and batted my eyes while letting free just enough of my power to make him squirm in his seat.

"Well then, I need to get my beauty sleep if we're off to kill Alacryans tomorrow," Hornfels said, heaving his stocky frame up from the couch.

"It'll take more than sleep to make you a beauty, Brother," growled Skarn.

"Look who's talking," Hornfels quipped back.

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CARRIED BACK

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Sylvie and I left the protection of the Wall and looked out at the battle. Many more archers and mages were positioned on the ground, closer toward the bloodshed. The noises of battle seemed much louder on this side of the Wall. I looked back at the thick metal gates closing behind us, filled with regret, seething with rage.

'We'll find out who was responsible for this later,' my bond said comfortingly. 'Right now, it's our duty to help win this battle and keep everyone safe.'

Giving her a nod, the two of us walked forward. I tuned out the shouts and cheers of the soldiers around us. I wasn't a hero, nor did I wish to be. It was impossible to be everyone's hero. It's inevitable that I'd let some people down—hell, I'd already let a lot of people down.

Not every human, elf, or dwarf could be equally important to me, and that's a fact that I had accepted long ago. I was here to serve my role, to help end this war, but it wasn't for world peace or to save mankind—it was so, one day, I could lead a comfortable and happy life with the people I loved and cared for. Walking through the lines of bowmen and conjurers, most of whom were launching arrows or spells at the rear line of the beast horde, I could hear mutters around us. Soldiers nudged their colleagues nearby to get their attention; hundreds of gazes turned towards us.

"You should at least acknowledge them," my bond said, noticing the stares.

"Focus, Sylvie," I admonished. "Let's do what we came here to do first. We can worry about troop morale after."

The ground felt like wet tar, gripping and pulling at my feet as I trudged forward with my bond by my side. I couldn't shake off an unsettling feeling that made my chest tighten and my breathing to become quick and shallow. The veil of night and the crowd of combatants hid the answer to a question that I grew more and more afraid to ask.

Brandishing Dawn's Ballad, I dove into the thick of the battle underneath the shower of spells and arrows, Sylvie right behind me. My bright teal sword became a beacon for our soldiers, giving them hope and the strength needed to keep fighting.

Sylvie focused on defending the soldiers, shooting precise bullets of mana wherever she saw one of our men let his guard down, slaying many beasts just as they would have claimed another victim.

Corrupted mana beasts melted away before us, while behind us a wedge of soldiers formed, and always my eyes darted from face to face, looking for the familiar figures of the Twin Horns or my father.

The largest of the mana beasts started to appear. I saw the silhouette of a massive worm towering high over the battlefield, its gaping maw full of soldiers. Occasionally, blasts of fire erupted from its tip, eliciting faint screams from the soldiers, then it would dive down to scoop up more.

Gritting my teeth, I tore my gaze away, trying once again to spot my father through the dirt, smoke, and debris that had settled over the chaotic battlefield. It was then that I caught sight of another group of soldiers trying to bring down a giant monster.

It was a midnight grizzly, a mana beast that ranged from B-class to AA-class—when it wasn't corrupted—depending on their maturity and the density of their metallic pelt, which they obtained from consuming precious ores.

By its twelve-foot height and the glimmering sheen across its spiked fur, I

guessed that this particular midnight grizzly was in the AA-class. What drew my attention wasn't the beast itself, though; it was the broad back of a soldier who fought with thick armored gloves and was taking the brunt of the grizzly's attack while his companions made futile attempts at bringing the corrupted beast down.

I couldn't tell whether that person was my father or not, but my feet were already moving towards that battle. With two mana-infused steps, I was within range to strike down the grizzly, but my focus was on the brawler. The soldier was in a full set of armor, including a helmet that covered his face, so I couldn't make out his identity.

When the soldier stepped back to take a momentary breather while the beast was occupied by the other soldiers, I pulled off his helmet.

"Hey! What the hell—"

It wasn't my father. Suppressing the urge to crush the flimsy helmet in my hands, I shoved it back on the brawler's head.

"Move," I ordered. It wasn't just directed towards the man I mistook for my father, but at the other soldiers circling and striking at the midnight grizzly as well.

Being mages made them sensitive to mana, and the mana surging out of me gave weight to my command, and the soldiers quickly complied.

I knew Dawn's Ballad wouldn't be able to pierce the midnight grizzly's hide, especially in its current condition, so I put the sword in my dimension ring before stepping toward the giant, metallic, six-limbed bear.

That single step carried me just below one of its razor-sharp claws as the beast struck. Grabbing hold of one of its claws, which were as thick as my forearm, I shifted my weight and siphoned mana throughout my body at the very last minute.

The result: the 6,000-pound beast was tossed in the air like a stuffed animal, twirling cartoonishly before slamming into the ground hard enough to crack it. The midnight grizzly let out a deep, piteous moan.

"Holy crap," someone exclaimed. I turned to the soldier; his giant warhammer was dented and its shaft slightly bent from multiple collisions against the midnight grizzly's armored pelt. He was staring at me with awe, then his eyes suddenly widened at the sight of something behind me.

The grizzly had rolled back up to its feet and immediately lashed out with its four clawed arms. I swayed, sidestepped, and pivoted, cleanly dodging the barrage of claws that created divots in the dirt around me.

'Arthur, do you need help?' Sylvie's voice sounded in my head.

No. Keep looking out for my dad or the others. This won't take much longer. Frustrated, the midnight grizzly attempted to hammer down with its two top

arms. Rather than dodging it, however, I held up a palm.

Utilizing the technique that Elder Camus had shown me, I created a vacuum just above my open palm and received the full force of the attack. My feet sank into the ground and my whole body shook, but it threw off the beast's center of gravity and left it wide open. In the time it took to take another step, I had tethered the midnight grizzly's back legs to the ground—so it wouldn't go flying and cause casualties on our side—and condensed several layers of swirling wind around my right fist. The torrent in my hand was strong enough to make the trained soldiers nearby recoil, and when my fist landed squarely in the metal beast's abdomen a shockwave resonated from the blow, sending some of the weaker soldiers and nearby beasts sprawling on the ground. The grizzly crumpled over, choked out a puddle of stinking black blood, and died.

'Wasn't that a bit excessive?' my bond chimed in, obviously feeling the impact from where she was.

The grizzly's coat seemed to have been affected by the Alacryans' corruption. I had to hit it pretty hard.

Unable to even spare the time to catch my breath, I moved on to the next fight, still searching every face for some sign of familiarity. As the largest—and most visible—of the Twin Horns, I had decided to focus on finding

Durden in the hope that he'd be near my father.

Despite the lack of conjurers in the front line, it proved very difficult to find my giant friend. Earth mages were more useful closer to the ground, so it wasn't just one or two earthen spells that I spotted in the distance. Knowing Durden and his unruly strength, despite being a conjurer, I was certain he wasn't back near the Wall with the other casters and archers.

Damn it, I cursed. My patience grew thinner with each passing second. Every scream and cry for help made me flinch, afraid that the next one might be someone I loved.

Sylvie and I continued on separately. Not once did I find an Alacryan mage amongst the chaos, but that was a good thing. There were no mages to cast shields to protect the beast horde from our conjurers. It seemed strange, but I didn't have time to think about it.

Before I realized it, the sun had come up, highlighting the turmoil that stretched out as far as the eye could see.

'What about using Realmheart again to try and find your father like you did with Ellie?' Sylvie suggested, her voice weary even in my head.

Don't you think I've thought of that? I snapped. Ellie's magic is unique enough for me to spot with the ambient mana fluctuations. How am I going to differentiate my father amongst the other hundred or so soldiers that have a fire-affinity?

There was no reply to my churlish response, though I could feel the surprise and hurt Sylvie felt.

Letting out a deep breath, I apologized to my bond. The frustration and desperation building up inside me made it hard to tamp down my emotions.

'It's okay,' Sylvie assured me. Her voice was gentle, but I could still feel a tinge of sadness leaking through. I promised myself I'd make it up to my ever-faithful bond after this was all over.

Smoke, fire, debris, abandoned weapons, and the corpses of both men and

beast carpeted the once barren field. As limited as my vision was, I kept my eyes wide and ears open. I knew it was hopeless trying to discern my father's voice amidst the roars of beasts, the cries of soldiers, the hum and crackle of magic, and the sharp ringing of metal, but there was little more that I could do.

The number of beasts had dwindled tremendously, but not without loss. Humans, elves, and dwarves alike lay sprawled out on the ground alongside the beasts that they had either killed or were killed by. Once, in another life, I had seen a painting of a similar scene: soldiers wearing the colors of two opposing countries draped across one another in a jumble of limbs and death. Beneath it, a small brass plaque read: "In death, there are no sides."

So many soldiers had died to defeat this army of beasts. Behind me, the Wall stood high and unscathed, the ground before it intact despite the explosives we had placed underneath. Even if we won the day, many of Dicathen's finest soldiers had perished, yet how many Alacryans had died for their country?

My gut told me it was Trodius who had rescinded my plan, since the other two captains were transparent in valuing their troops over the Wall.

It was only the thought of finding my father and the Horns—making sure they were okay—that kept me grounded. I had to remind myself over and over that what I had suggested was only that: a suggestion.

The sun crawled across the sky. Soldiers too wounded or too tired to continue fighting were carried off by their comrades as the next batch of soldiers marched forward to replace them.

The beast horde slowly collapsed into chaos as their numbers dwindled down to the hundreds, and they were no longer able to sustain their steady push toward the Wall. I knew it wouldn't be long until the battle was over. Still, to the soldiers out here still fighting, every moment that passed was a moment that could end with their deaths. To them, this victory would be tarnished by the deaths of their friends that had fought alongside them.

After a night and half a day of fighting and searching, my body had settled into an autonomous routine. I killed beasts wherever I saw them and helped soldiers in distress if they were on my way. I couldn't save them all, but I wouldn't ignore the ones right in front of me.

I was helping a soldier whose right leg had been mauled when I was hit with a wave of panic and worry.

"You! Carry this man back to the Wall," I ordered after encasing his bleeding stub in ice.

Sylvie! What happened? Cold sweat was dripping down my neck as my bond's emotions washed over me.

I was already flying towards Sylvie's location. She wasn't far, less than a mile to the southwest, toward the southern end of the Wall. Why wasn't she answering me?

Despite the scenery blurring past me, time seemed to slow, flowing like old honey from a cold bottle. The sounds of the battle were muffled, lost beneath the noise of my heartbeat thumping against my eardrums.

As I got closer and closer though, my vision came in flashes. It felt like I was watching the world through a thick glass jar—I barely made out Sylvie as she held me back, embracing me. I could hear her worried cries, but I couldn't make out the words she was saying.

I registered her teary eyes, her shaking head, the pressure of her hands on my chest as she stopped me from going closer, but I couldn't make out her expression because my focus was on the man dragging his feet towards the team of medics running his way.

He was missing an arm and half of his face had been burned past the point of recognition, but I still knew it was Durden—and slung over his wide back... was what was left of my father.

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SHARED AFFLICTION

SYLVIE

I should've stopped him from coming the moment he reached back out to me. The panic that leaked out to him couldn't be taken back, but I should've kept him from seeing it.

The moment I saw Arthur approaching, his eyes begging me to be wrong before his gaze drifted past me to the horrible vision beyond, my gut clenched and I felt tears threaten to take over. Seeing my bond's horrified expression, hearing his exhaled breath as if he'd had his wind knocked out... I wanted to disappear—to take him in my arms and just disappear.

I wanted to be anywhere but there. I would've rather faced another horde of deranged mana beasts by myself than endure the sight of my lifelong bond staring hopelessly at his own father's bloody corpse.

Arthur staggered forward. He pushed everyone aside and knelt over his father's unmoving body, and for a moment, it seemed like all was silent.

Beasts and soldiers alike seemed to have sensed the heavy veil that descended over the battlefield, but none could feel my bond's state of turmoil as clearly as I could.

It hurt.

It was excruciating... it was unbearable.

I didn't know my heart could hurt this much. I clutched my chest and sank to the ground, unable to endure the pain of his emotions. Tears streamed down my cheeks and blurred my vision. I couldn't breathe as the torrent of emotions continued to surge out of my bond and into me: grief that threatened to drown everything in its path, a gnawing guilt that ate away at the foundations of our strength, regret like a hurricane, blowing away years of growth and progress... and *rage*. Rage like a forest fire, burning out of control.

I could feel these emotions like disasters wreaking havoc inside my heart, tearing away at Arthur's mind and soul.

Yet, on the surface, Arthur was as silent and still as a statue.

I crawled towards him, gasping for air in between my sobs as my heart wrenched in my chest. It was only then, when I embraced his back—his broad, lonely back—that the thin wall that he had built around himself crumbled.

With a guttural, primeval howl that tore through me like shards of glass, my bond broke down into tears.

The very earth seemed to lament for my bond as his sobs and wails filled the air. The ambient mana all around us shook and surged to match his anger, then changed, undulating rhythmically, sympathizing with his despair.

I could only cling to my bond's back as the fiery claws continued to grip and twist my insides. I tried to do more, anything more to help, but I couldn't. The lump in my throat blocked any words of consolation I could possibly say, so I did what no one else could do; I empathized through the connection we shared.

Arthur—the Lance, the general, the white core mage—was, at that moment, only a boy who had lost his father.

The world continued to turn, even as Arthur and I remained frozen in this moment of grieving and loss. The battle, which had gone on for two nights, had come to an end. We had won, but not unscathed. The Wall loomed over us like a gravestone, and on it written the names of all the men and women, humans, elves, and dwarves who died here. I could see the name Reynolds

Leywin burning bright across the stone surface, and it wasn't Arthur's anger that made my insides boil... it was my own.

Time trickled by until the sun had set. It was only then that Arthur rose to his feet.

Whether his emotions had been expended or locked away, I couldn't tell, but his state of mind mirrored the thick layer of ice that he was encasing his father's body in.

Nearby, Durden still waited, his expression a mixture of sorrow and guilt. Angela and Jasmine had barely managed to hold him still long enough for the nurses to heal his wounds. The three adventurers then attended over Arthur's mourning, never showing any signs of pain or discomfort despite the many wounds they'd all received.

"Durden. Please take my father's body to my mother and sister." My bond's voice was icy, hollow. He rose to his feet and walked towards the Wall, his presence seeping out like an aura of death and dread.

CAPTAIN ALBANTH KELRIS

"Following through with my original plan has led us to victory with minimal damage to this essential strategic structure," Senior Captain Trodius boasted, a rare smile on his usually-stoic face. "Your obedience will not go unnoticed, Captain Albanth, Captain Jesmiya. Well done."

Jesmiya bowed to the applause of the other unit leaders present in the large meeting tent.

I glanced down at the picture in my hand—worn, ripped, and crinkled around the edges. It was a picture I had found in the chestplate of one of my soldiers as I prepared his remains for cremation.

"Captain Albanth?"

Looking up, I saw the senior captain looking at me, his brow raised. Around him stood three men he had introduced only as his "benefactors," all sharing the same puzzled expression.

"My apologies," I respond quickly, shoving the picture in my pocket before

inclining my head and silently accepting the commendation, hopeful that no one could see the muscles of my jaw clenching and unclenching as I ground my teeth.

It felt wrong to stand here, accepting praise for our victory after cremating several dozens of my men, many of whom I had shared drinks, meals, and laughs with.

"While a proper celebration is in order, we are at war and there is much to clean up," Trodius said. "Continue your good work. I will have someone send a small gift to the fallen soldiers' immediate families."

"As expected of the head of the Flamesworth House. Your leadership is impeccable," a portly man standing to the senior captain's left beamed. "It was the right decision to invest in this fortress."

Meanwhile, Jesmiya and I exchanged a quick glance, both of us obviously hung up on Senior Captain Trodius's use of the phrase, "clean up". Surely he wasn't referring to cremating and burying our allies in such a callous, thoughtless way.

After the other soldiers had trickled out, Jesmiya and I turned to leave, but the senior captain called my name.

"Captain Albanth, I'll need a moment of your time," he said, waiting for Jesmiya to leave.

After all but the senior captain and his benefactors—nobles, based on their gaudy and spotless attire—were left, Trodius gestured toward an empty seat.

I sat as requested, and one of the nobles raised an embellished metal wand and soundproofed the room using wind magic.

"Captain Albanth. You home is in Etistin, correct?" the senior captain asked, crossing his legs.

I nodded. "Yes sir."

"And that means, with the entire city being fortified, your family has been evacuated," he continued matter-of-factly.

"Yes sir. Fortunately, my position and contributions allowed my family to

secure a place in a fortified shelter near Etistin's castle."

"I see," Trodius mused, eyeing me for a moment before turning to the lanky, bespectacled nobleman to his right.

Receiving a nod from the senior captain, the nobleman slid an unbound scroll toward me. "This is information that Senior Captain Trodius Flamesworth received during the beast horde attack."

I read the flawless writing, cold sweat forming on my brow, my fingers trembling as I mumbled what I read. "Elenoir Kingdom... Alacryan ships approaching from western coast. Three hundred ships..."

"The Council has surmised that this will be the biggest battle. And it'll take place on the western shores just above Etistin.

"Due to the manpower needed to withstand the Alacryan army, the Council has decided to abandon the elven kingdom. A majority of the elven troops will be transferred to Etistin. The citizens, of course, will be evacuated before the Alacryans reach the central cities," Trodius explained matter-of-factly.

"Th-this..." the parchment slipped out of my fingers. "Why am I the only one to be notified of this? We should tell Captain Jesmiya and spread the word. Our remaining troops need to be transferred to the west if we want to stand a chance! General Arthur was right!"

Senior Captain Trodius's expression turned sharp. "Had my objective been the same as the boy-Lance, I too would have proceeded with sacrificing the Wall. However, this fortress will soon become one of the most important military fortifications in Dicathen."

"I don't understand," I said truthfully.

The portly noble spoke this time, eagerly leaning forward. "As my family always says, war is a big ol' bag of money waiting to be open—"

"Sir Niles, please refrain from such insensitive prattling," Trodius admonished.

"Of—of course. My apologies." Niles let out a cough. "Anyway, with the war drawing to an end and so much land being either destroyed or taken by

the Alacryans, it's only a matter of time before people desperately seek for a safe haven."

"What about Xyrus City? It was to my understanding that the flying city is currently the safest location next to the castle," I responded.

A petite nobleman sporting a mustache, who had stayed quiet so far, finally spoke, grumbling in annoyance. "That floating rock is a powder keg waiting to explode."

"Xyrus City is inherently in a safe location, but the city is not built as a fortress," Trodius clarified. "Once access into the flying city is overridden by the Alacryans—which is entirely plausible from the portals we've discovered in the dungeons of the Beast Glades—the people there will be sitting ducks."

"Which is exactly why it was so important that the Wall and underground routes below it remained in one piece. The Wall will serve as the foundation of a great new city," the portly nobleman chimed in. "That general is smart, but shortsighted. He wanted to destroy this magnificent structure, which could potentially become the new capital of Dicathen, or if things go poorly, the only safe haven against the Alacryans!"

"I apologize if I come off as rude, but from what you're saying, it seems like you're expecting—or even *desiring*—for the Alacryans to win this war," I said, barely able to control my anger.

"How dare you! That is a dangerous accusation you're making, *Captain*," the fat man barked.

Trodius raised an arm, shutting him up. "It's easy to shine a negative light on this picture, but we're merely preparing for the inevitable circumstance. I am in no way rooting for those filthy intruders, but it would be foolish to ignore their military might. Even if we do manage to win this war, Dicathen will not come out unscathed. Elenoir has been abandoned, Darv is hiding like a turtle in its own shell, and attempts to fortify smaller cities in Sapin have been left to the city officials."

The senior captain paused, clearly considering his next words. "What we seek

is to build a new safe haven for the citizens of Dicathen. There will be a new society reforged by the Flamesworth House and its patrons."

I shook my head, laughing out of sheer incredulity. Getting up, I opened my mouth, prepared to risk my position so that I could tell him off.

"Think hard before you let loose your tongue," Trodius warned, his faint smile sharp as a dagger. "Did you not say that your father, mother, wife, and children are all in Etistin?"

My eyes widened and my mouth snapped shut.

This was wrong. What they were doing was wrong, but fear held my mouth closed like a muzzle.

"Your reputation among the soldiers and workers here is highly positive. Stay here, work for our cause, and I will ensure you that your family is brought to the Wall immediately. We already have a plan in place to fortify and expand the structure utilizing the underground routes. Your family will be safe here, and you will be raised above the position of mere captain."

"I—I don't... what about the soldiers here? I thought that you had received a letter ordering you to transfer all able soldiers to Etistin?" I managed to stammer out. I clasped my hands behind my back, unable to keep them from shaking.

"The battle against the vicious beast horde was hard fought. We lost many—too many, in fact, to be able to send reinforcements to the west... that is our reply to the Council," Trodius answered simply. "I doubt that they will come to check with all that's on their plate."

My chest tightened and my breathing came out short. "Then y-you... purposely sent out these soldiers to their deaths... so that you can—"

"The soldiers here fought to defend the Wall, a task they were honored to perform," Trodius interjected. "Do not cheapen their deaths by overthinking our strategy, captain."

"You're right. There's no need for me to overthink," an icy voice interjected from behind me.

It wasn't the words that made me shrink in upon myself. It was the presence that spread out from the voice, hanging like a thick shroud in the air, forcing me to my knees, sucking the very breath from my lungs...

I tried to turn around, but I couldn't move. I watched as the three nobleman shrank back, mouths hanging open stupidly. I saw an expression on Trodius's face that I had never seen from him before... an expression of fear—of abject, overwhelming terror.

Though he attempted to appear calm and collected, he failed. Sweat rolled down his face and the barrier of fire that he had instinctively conjured fizzled away.

In a high, breathless voice, as if a large fist were currently wrapped around his throat, Trodius spoke.

"General... Arthur."

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PUNISHABLE ACTIONS

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Applause and cheers erupted as soon as I entered through the fortress gate. Soldiers, smiths, and laborers all stopped what they were doing. Some bowed, others clapped, but they all looked at me with wonder and appreciation.

I couldn't take it. Not the people, not the appreciation, not the expressions of relief. I couldn't be here.

Sylvie, get my sister and take her to my mother. She's going to need someone to be there for her, I conveyed as I strode past the cluster of tents that made up the field hospital.

My bond tugged the sleeve of my shirt. "I'll go get your sister, but Arthur... your mother will need you as much as she needs your sister."

I'm the last person she'd want to see. She no longer sees me as a son, and any semblance of affection she might've had for me after I told her the truth... that will be gone now that I failed to keep my promise to keep everyone alive—everyone safe.

Sylvie shook her head, and I could feel her doubt and disagreement. I couldn't bring myself to argue with her, not now, so I simply walked away.

"General... Arthur," Trodius wheezed, his body involuntarily shrinking back in his seat.

I took another step toward the senior captain, eliciting panicked responses from the nobles beside him.

"M-my spell! How...?" the lanky one sputtered, pointing his wand at me, though he seemed to be having trouble keeping it steady.

The portly man to Trodius's left was a bit more courageous. "Stay back! You are in the presence of nobility! How dare you intrude upon our confidential meeting," he threatened.

The third noble, a small-framed man sporting a thick mustache, was overwhelmed by the pressure I was exerting and slid to the ground, lying in an unconscious heap behind Trodius.

I took another step into the tent. The lanky one squealed and the fat one flinched. Trodius glistened in the lamplight as sweat poured down his face, but otherwise he appeared unfazed.

The sea of rage and grief that churned inside me had been drained, leaving a hollow void that allowed me to think clearly. No longer were the screams of panic and worry in my head clouding my judgment. Now, there was only silence within me—a ghostly lull.

It was comforting, in a sense.

If I had reached the tent just ten minutes earlier, I would've done to Trodius what I had done to Lucas—or worse.

Except I realized, in this numb and emotionless state of mind, that Trodius wasn't as simple as Lucas. I would gain nothing by killing Trodius, and he would be able to take any pain I dealt him with that same constipated expression he always had.

I couldn't just hurt him; I knew that now. I couldn't treat Trodius the same way I did Lucas.

I took another step forward, and Trodius finally spoke. Straightening his posture and clearing his throat, he looked me in the eyes and asked, "To what do I owe the pleasure of a Lance gracing me with his presence?"

His scrutinizing gaze and the ever-so-slight sneer that tugged on the edge of

his lips told me what I already knew. He wasn't afraid of the pain that I could cause him or even the death that he might face. With his resourcefulness, he was confident in being able to escape, and he would relish the chance to be "the one that withstood the fury of a mad Lance."

"D-don't come any closer!" the portly man said, drawing his own toy-like wand.

"Settle down," I said dismissively, causing both the conscious nobles to flinch.

"Even a general should show respect to those of noble blood," Trodius admonished, shaking his head.

Another bait. He wanted me to do something so that he could retaliate.

I walked leisurely around the table, keeping my expression and posture passive. Arriving in front of the fat noble, I gestured with a finger. "Move."

"M-move?" he echoed, flabbergasted, the wand trembling in his hands.

Anger must've triumphed over his fear, or maybe the cornered mouse tried to bite out of pure instinct, but it was over before it even began.

I sensed the mana manifesting along the length of the wand, but before the portly noble could finish the spell, a current of wind hammered down on top of him, slamming his face down into the hard dirt floor.

I used his wide girth as a footstool as I took a seat on the meeting table just inches away from Trodius. The senior captain's mask of indifference faltered, traces of anger flaring up then disappearing just as quickly.

"General Arthur," he said, his voice surprisingly calm. "The noble beneath your feet is Sir Lionel Beynir of the esteemed Beynir House. You will show him and Sir Kyle—"

Trodius was interrupted as Sir Kyle bolted toward the exit, slamming his hip into the table and disrupting the piles of paperwork stacked neatly in front of the senior captain. Howling in pain, the nobleman threw himself to the ground, both hands pressed to his side as if he'd been stabbed.

Trodius glared at the papers strewn about the desk, a look of mild disdain on

his pinched face.

"Oh, be quiet," I grumbled, waving my hand in Sir Kyle's direction. A thin bolt of lightning mana leapt from my fingers and struck him at the base of his skull, knocking him out instantly and quieting his howls.

Turning back to Trodius, I leaned forward, grinding my heels into the unconscious Sir Lionel Beynir. "You see, Trodius, I care little for people who fail to meet the minimum threshold of decency, regardless of wealth, fame, or prestige."

Trodius's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me? I don't know exactly how much you heard from outside, but your actions will not be tolerated, no matter what sort of position you hold in the military. To blatantly sully a noble—"

"You keep referring to yourself and these fools as nobles, but all I see are four weasels trying to capitalize on their own country's loss, stepping on the corpses of their soldiers to lift themselves up." I looked down at the noble beneath my feet to emphasize my point.

Trodius's eyes flared with indignation. "Revoking the plan that you *suggested* is no sin, General Arthur. The loss of life is regrettable, but for the sake of preserving this fortress, their deaths are not in vain."

"Except that your goal for keeping the Wall intact was purely to try and build yourself your own little society where you and your minions will have free reign."

"Nonsense! My goal was to create a safe haven, so the citizens of Dicathen have a place to sleep without fear. For you to twist my words—"

My hand snapped out and I grabbed his tongue, holding it firmly between my forefinger and thumb. "Twisting words is what this thing seems to do best."

A flicker of blue flames danced on the tip of the senior captain's tongue as I pressed firmly down. Trodius's eyes widened in pain and he tried to shield himself with his own fire-affinity mana, but he wasn't powerful enough.

The smell of burning flesh filled the tent as I branded his tongue with my ignited fingers. Trodius endured, unable to let go of his pride long enough to

even let out a sound.

I pulled the senior captain close, my fingers still sizzling on top of his burning tongue. I let the malice drip from my voice as I hissed into his ear, "You see, Trodius, one of the soldiers that died out there because of your selfish plans was my father."

He stiffened and the color drained from his face. His eyes searched my own, perhaps trying to decide if I was about to kill him. Perhaps he was hoping I would.

"Your decision was informed not by military strategy but by self-gratification. You bartered with your own men's blood—you traded my father's future to enrich your own, and don't you think for a fucking second that I'm going to let that go." I released my grip on his blackened tongue. The tip had completely burnt away, leaving only a blackened stub.

Trodius immediately snapped his jaw shut, clamping his hands over his mouth as if hoping to protect his mutilated tongue from further damage.

"Don't think that my relationship with your sister and estranged daughter have anything to do with why I'm keeping you alive," I muttered, scooping up the parchments in front of him as I stood. "Killing you here would be a mercy. Instead, I'm going to let you stew in the consequences of your actions by taking what you value most."

I turned to Albanth, who had been fearfully observing from his seat on the other side of the table. "Seeing as you've witnessed everything here today, send a message to the Council stating that, for betraying his kingdom and perjury against the Triunion, Trodius Flamesworth and the rest of Flamesworth House will be stripped of their titles of nobility."

"No! You hab no wight!" Trodius screamed thickly, his charred tongue struggling to form words.

"I believe I have every right, and the Council will surely agree once they find out you were planning on lying to them in order to keep soldiers here for yourself," I replied coldly, waving the papers in my hand. Trodius scrambled towards me, tripping over his unconscious investor before desperately launching a ball of fire at the papers in my hand. I waved the spell away before it could fully form.

"Add attempted assault on a representative of the Council," I said to Albanth.

"Y-you ca't do dis!" he yelled, rushing to me and clinging to my feet. "The Fwameswoth house—"

"Will be nothing, Trodius. Just another commoner's surname," I finished.

"The legacy on which you prided yourself, that you tried so hard to raise, going as far as to abandon your own daughter, will crumble to dust, and you will have been the cause of the Flamesworth family's downfall."

I turned my attention back to Albanth. "I believe you have a message to send? Unless you're still considering Trodius's proposal?"

"Of c-course not!" Albanth jumped up and took the parchments out of my hand. "I'll get these to the Council, along with your message, with my fastest and most trustworthy messenger."

"Also, get Captain Jesmiya and a few of her men in here to round these gentlemen up," I added, waving the captain off.

Behind me, Trodius lay on the ground, glaring daggers up at me. The patriarch of the Flamesworth house, who had been the pinnacle of nobility and pride, had been reduced to a trembling sack of bones.

"Like I said, killing you here would be a mercy." I stepped out of the tent, taking one last glance back. "I hope you live a long life, and are reminded of me every time your deformed tongue slurs out a broken word."

Sylvie and I stood atop the familiar cliff overlooking the Wall. From this high up, the remnants of the battle could barely be seen under the blanket of night, and the fortress seemed to be peaceful.

I knew all too well that the Wall was in a flurry of activity: mending the broken, feeding the weak, burning the dead—but I pushed down the emotions

that threatened to overflow again.

It was so much easier to embrace the comforting emptiness that numbed my emotions—both good and bad.

"Ellie is with your mother right now. They're going to cremate him," my bond said, her quiet voice almost lost amidst the howling winds.

Her words reopened a thousand small wounds through which leaked thoughts and emotions I had desperately tried to avoid. I saw my weeping sister, my mother kneeling, bloody fingers clawing at the ground... I felt the pain my bond had felt as my mother's narrowed eyes burned with accusation and resentment. Would she have looked at me like that as well, had I been there? "It's best that I give them some privacy," I said, placing a gentle hand on Sylvie's head.

Sylvie turned to me, her large yellow eyes wrinkled in concern. "Arthur..."

"I'm fine, really," I said in a level, emotionless voice. "It's better this way."

My bond's expression dimmed and I could tell she could feel the void within me, siphoning away her own frustrations and concerns.

This was what I did in the past, as Grey. I knew that suppressing my emotions and locking them away wasn't healthy, but I had no choice.

I had no confidence in being able to handle what I was trying so hard not to feel. I knew that doing this was burying a wasting disease deep inside me, but I just needed it to hold myself together until I finished this war. After this was all over, I would be able to face my mother, but for now, I couldn't bear looking at her or my sister's faces.

Rinia's words came suddenly to mind: 'Do not fall back to your old ways. You know best that the deeper you go into that pit, the harder it will be to climb back out.' I shook away the thoughts. The old woman had left me with many omens, but what good had they done?

Looking at my worried bond, I shielded my thoughts. I didn't want her to know—I didn't want anyone to know—that I was beginning to sincerely consider Agrona's deal.

"Let's go, Sylv."

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ABOVE LIMITATIONS

"HEY. It's me, Grey. Just thought I'd try this phone again. Anyway, the King's Crown Competition is starting in our city and Lady Vera already got me a spot to compete. Finally participating in the official competition really makes it feel... well, it feels real now, I guess.

"Did you know that Jimmy Low—you know, that cocky overweight guy in our class with the lisp—that Jimmy Low is a contestant too? When Lady Vera told me that, I thought of the time when you sold him that fake contraption that was supposed to help him lose weight while he sleeps. I bet he's still mad about that.

"Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I told Lady Vera to save a spot for you in her private viewing room. It'd be great if you could come by and watch me kick everyone's asses... I—um—I miss you, Nico. I don't know what's happening with you, but just know that you're not alone in this. I'm here for you.

"You know where to reach me. Hope to hear from you soon, man." I ended the call after hearing the monotonous confirmation that my message had been sent and let out a defeated sigh.

"Damn it, Nico. What the hell are you up to?" I leaned my head back against the reading chair and massaged my temples, trying to subdue the growing ache in my head.

The last time I had seen my friend, we had fought. It had been a few weeks

after Cecilia was taken and my training was becoming more intense as the competition dates drew near.

I would train from dawn until sundown and then sneak out of Lady Vera's manor in order to help Nico put up fliers or ask around local police departments for any information. This almost always resulted in us getting scolded or kicked out of their offices.

Tired and fed up with the lack of progress, I had suggested we call it a night. That's when Nico blew up on me. He accused me of being callous and uncaring, insisting that I was prioritizing my training with Lady Vera over finding Cecilia.

I couldn't hold it in anymore either. I had tried to reason with him before, pointing out that if the enforcers were really the ones who took her, then we were way out of our league. But Nico, stubborn as ever, couldn't sit still knowing that his girlfriend was somewhere out there.

I didn't blame him, but that didn't mean I agreed with him. Needlessly insisting that two kids barely out of high school—military or not—could make a difference in an investigation that no one was investigating, was optimistic to the point of foolishness.

Nico had pushed for me to request the assistance of Lady Vera's investigators, but I knew she'd be upset to find out I'd been out searching the streets with Nico night after night. She'd cautioned me against taking risks; it wasn't unheard of for competitors in the King's Crown to be kidnapped and ransomed back to their families, or even to disappear. Lady Vera would be unlikely to help if she knew I was putting myself in danger.

That was the last straw for Nico, apparently, and he had stormed away. That was also the last time I had heard from him.

I did the right thing, I assured myself, sinking back further into the chair. Right now, winning the competition is most important. The city tournament shouldn't pose much trouble and I'm fairly confident even for the district tournament.

Even if I wouldn't become king immediately after I won the entire King's Crown competition, I'd still have influence. My two biggest goals were to get to the bottom of Headmaster Wilbeck's murder and to find and protect Cecilia so she and Nico could go live a happy, simple life together. Despite Nico's urgency, I knew that, if the enforcers had taken her, Cecilia wouldn't be harmed—she was too valuable an asset to kill.

That's why I have to win. Just a few months... Once I become king, I can make everything right.

"Cadet Grey..." a soft voice said nearby. My eyes flickered open, my vision still blurry with sleep. It was only when I felt someone touch my shoulder that I snapped awake. My instincts and training kicked in, and by the time I was fully aware of my surroundings, the maid was sitting in the seat that I had fallen asleep in and I was leaning over her, my right hand pressed against her throat.

"I'm sorry!" I quickly let the maid go, helping her back to her feet.

"No... my apologies, Cadet Grey," the maid said, her face flushed as she dipped into a low bow. "Lady Vera had informed me not to touch you when you were sleeping. I... I forgot."

She then gestured to the training uniform that she had laid out neatly on my unused bed. "Lady Vera has instructed me to inform you that today's lessons are cancelled due to the upcoming tournament. Instead, you will be sparring with the other candidates sponsored by Lady Vera's family."

"Will Lady Vera be there?" I asked, already changing into my training clothes.

The maid, her back turned to me, shook her head. "Unfortunately, she will be busy with meetings. She has assured me, however, that she will still make it to your rounds for the city competition tomorrow."

I was disappointed but I didn't let it show. After the maid excused herself, I found my hand fiddling with a small trinket that Lady Vera had given me,

sometime after she saved me from those interrogators that tortured me. It was the insignia of the Warbridge family, Lady Vera's house: two crossed swords supporting a golden arch.

Whether it was the reassurance it gave me—proof that I had a house to belong to—or the fact that it was given to me after one of the most horrific experiences of my life, I couldn't go anywhere without it. I stuck it back into my pocket before heading down to the dueling area.

As I walked through the unique-looking buildings that melded modern designs with Victorian architecture standing between the flawlessly groomed garden and lawn of the Warbridge estate, I was reminded of how different this place was from anywhere else I'd been to.

Most buildings were purely functional, with no thought or resources given to how they looked, but here, the buildings themselves were beautiful. It was a strange thought, to consider a house to be beautiful, but it was true. It was also true that Warbridge House originally came from a different country, which clearly inspired their architectural aesthetic.

Trayden, their home country, was a close ally of Etharia, and apparently it was not unusual for the named houses to have a strong presence throughout multiple countries, assuring them the opportunity to sponsor kings for any of the allied nations. I wasn't too interested in the politics involved in all of this, but since the king sat in on Council meetings, I was required to take extensive lessons about the different countries and their diplomatic alliances toward one another.

By the time I arrived in the Warbridge dueling arena, there was already a flurry of activity and noise coming from within.

The dueling area consisted of five government-approved dueling platforms and a variety of training equipment. Some of the older—but still efficient—machines used lead weights for resistance, while the more up-to-date tools utilized the user's own ki to power and train.

Normally the training grounds would be full of cadets, but today was

different. A crowd had gathered to watch the proceedings, largely consisting of the sponsored cadets' families. The faces in the crowd looked tense and excited, ready to cheer on their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, who would be challenging each other in the arena. There were more than a few missing faces today, though; the cadets who hadn't qualified to participate in the city competition had been expelled, their contracts ended.

I was just in time to see the facilitator mark the start of a mock duel. Keeping to the back, I watched carefully, curious as to how the other candidates under Lady Vera were doing.

Having the privilege of being taught by her personally, I had only rarely seen the others and had been told nothing of their skills.

Two cadets faced off, eyeing each other warily. One was a thick-necked boy fighting in the traditional sword and shield style. His opponent carried no weapon but held himself with a confident readiness that made me think he was likely the stronger combatant.

When the facilitator signaled for both cadets to ready themselves, the weaponless boy held out his empty hand and shouted, "Form!"

A glowing yellow spear coalesced into his hand.

Immediately, the crowd roared with surprise and pride.

"It's an actual ki weapon!" an older gentleman exclaimed.

"And he formed it so fast," another man beside him added.

If it had been a year ago, I would've reacted just like them, perhaps even more in awe because of my disability. It didn't just take a lot of time and effort to form a ki weapon but a sufficient amount of ki as well.

However, I knew from my many lessons with Lady Vera that this cadet's spear was no better than a glowing plastic stick at this point. True masters of ki weapons spent years physically crafting the type of weapon that they wanted to materialize. This was necessary in order to truly visualize how their ki weapon would manifest. From there, they would start by slowly enveloping their own ki around the type of weapon they wished to form. It

was only after they had mastered this step that they transitioned into forming a weapon with just their ki.

This cadet, who couldn't be more than a year older than me, had obviously skipped over a lot of the steps; it was obvious from how his weapon materialized and how simple the design was. The ki spear had sort of *bubbled* into existence, unlike how Lady Vera had manifested her own ki weapon, which had been solid and real, like light forged into steel.

Still, I couldn't help but feel a touch of envy at the fact that he could do something that I would never be able to do. Unlike regular weapons, which had to be inspected and constantly kept within regulations by the World Committee to prohibit cheating, there were no such restrictions on ki weapons. This included even the Paragon Duels—duels among kings held to settle political disputes.

It was an advantage that many kings utilized, but a skill that I could never even dream of learning due to my shallow ki pool.

Putting aside my self-pity, I focused on the combatants. While most of these cadets were chosen through various talent agencies, they were all here because they met the Warbridge family's standards.

"Begin!" the facilitator barked, taking a step back.

Steeling himself against the initial shock of seeing a real ki weapon appear, the boy with the sword and shield charged forward with a ki-infused step. He feigned a shield bash but pivoted to the right. Keeping his shield up, he swiped down at his opponent's open thigh with his shortsword.

Caught off guard, the spear-wielding cadet stumbled back but managed to dodge the attack to his leg. He quickly regained his balance and wits and used his spear to create some space between him and his opponent. The rest of the duel unfolded as expected: The superior range and flexibility gave the spear-wielding cadet a critical advantage, and he eventually won. It wasn't a one-sided battle though; the two cadets were well-matched in skill-level, and I could tell by how pale the winner's face was by the end that if his opponent

had managed to break his ki weapon, he wouldn't have been able to materialize another.

Still, that didn't keep the winner from gloating. With a nasty sneer on his sweaty face, he kicked the shield away from his opponent.

Rolling my eyes, I made my way towards the arena to check in with the facilitator.

"Oh look, it's Lady Vera's favorite pet," one of the other cadets said as I approached, his voice carrying over the constant chatter of the crowd. The rest of the gathered cadets turned towards me, each one wearing a different expression... none of them particularly friendly.

Ignoring them, I walked up and waved at the stout facilitator. "I was told to do a few rounds before my ki meditation this afternoon."

"Mmm, I was told you would be coming, but I don't have a cadet assigned to be your sparring partner yet," he grunted, lowering the protective barrier around the sparring platform and looking around.

I stepped up onto the elevated platform without a word and immediately began stretching out the knots in my muscles that came from falling asleep on the chair.

"I'm not sure I'd be able to pair you up accurately with someone since I'm not familiar with your level or combat proficiency. Anyone in particular you want to spar with, Cadet Grey?" the facilitator asked.

"Anyone's fine," I said, continuing my stretching routine.

"Let me go, Mr. Kali. I'd like to see firsthand how good Lady Vera's crippled little pet project is," a familiar voice jeered. It was the cadet who just sparred using his ki spear.

"Mason! Keep your tongue in check while you're in my dueling arena," the facilitator admonished the sneering boy before turning to me. "Is that acceptable, Cadet?"

I stood up, looking him over while stretching my arm. "I'd prefer an opponent that's in better condition."

Mason slapped his palms on the arena floor. "I can beat you silly with both feet anchored to the floor! Mr. Kali, let me teach this cocky brat a lesson!"

There was a beat of hesitation, but the facilitator waved Mason up onto the arena. "Put on your protective gear. Cadet Grey, pick out a weapon."

After putting on the ki-infused chest and head piece, I picked out a single-edged short sword from the rack. I checked its balance like Lady Vera had taught me, performed a couple of short, precise cuts with it, then walked backed to the center of the arena.

"Just the single sword for you today, Cadet Grey?" Mr. Kali asked, eyeing my choice of weapon curiously.

"Yes sir," I replied simply.

Mason waited for me to be watching before he materialized his ki weapon. Raising his hand dramatically, his eyes locked onto mine, the glowing spear materialized under his palm. The process was noticeably slower this time.

Mr. Kali looked first at Mason, who nodded, then to me, and I mirrored the gesture. His expression suddenly serious, the facilitator chopped down with his hand "Begin!"

While I had no intention of letting this duel drag on, I knew that I couldn't rush in like the previous cadet had. Lady Vera had drilled into me the need to pace myself, to minimize my movements, to expend my ki precisely because of my shallow ki pool. I stood my ground, waiting for Mason to make the first move, not even falling into a proper stance. In fact, I purposefully left my neck wide open.

"Is this a joke?" Mason scoffed, pointing the tip of his glowing spear at me.

"The duel has already begun," I replied simply, giving him an innocent smile.

"Don't blame me if you end up physically crippled as well, no-name," he snapped before bursting forward in an explosion of ki.

I had to admit that his charge was impressive, especially considering how much ki he had already spent. Still, to my eyes, his intention was clear, his movements telegraphed. My natural reflexes and perception had been honed to a sharp point by Lady Vera and her team of coaches.

At the last moment, I sidestepped his thrust and slashed at his right hand. His thin protective aura of ki shuddered, absorbing the impact, but Mason still winced in pain. Taking another precise step, I feinted toward his right hand again, bringing my blade down from a different angle. Mason shifted, trying to raise his spear up to block, but the twitch in his shoulder told me exactly where his next move was going to be.

By the time he positioned himself to block my strike, I had corrected the trajectory of my swing, and my blade slammed into his gloved fingers for the second time.

Mason grunted in pain, but he held on to his weapon. I had to give him some credit for that, at least. It was over at that point, though; his confidence was broken, his ki was spent, and he couldn't even grip his spear correctly. He circled around me several times before building up the courage to lunge again, but if his previous attack had been telegraphed, this thrust happened in slow motion. Not wanting to break his hand, despite his insults, I sidestepped again and slammed my shortsword into the ki-spear just above his handhold. The spear shivered in his hands, then shattered, falling to the arena floor in a shower of sparks.

Mason was on the ground, my sword pressed against his chest guard, before he even had time to register a look of surprise.

The next volunteer to fight me was not nearly so cocky. By the end of my warm up, the looks of pity, indifference, and disrespect the other boys had given me had been wiped clean.

I let out a long, satisfied sigh after taking a deep drink from a soda bottle I had kept hidden from Lady Vera. It was lukewarm, but the sugary carbonation helped me in ways no amount of training and healthy foods could.

The duels were over, and I had showered and changed into more comfortable clothes for my meditation. I was walking through the halls of the Warbridge estate when I heard a familiar voice from the floor below.

I ran down the stairs. Lady Vera had been spending much less time at the estate, and much of my training had been handed over to her team of coaches, so I was excited to greet her. I stopped in my tracks, though, when I saw an unfamiliar man with her. I couldn't see his face, but he wore a military-style uniform.

"Yes. Yes, I understand. I'll let him know that he has qualified," Lady Vera said to the man, speaking softly. "He might get curious, but he's not too greedy about actually competing so I don't think he'll press me too much," she continued.

I couldn't make out the man's response as Lady Vera escorted him across the hall and into her sound-proofed study.

"Of course. Yes, she won't be mentioned. I understand. Thank you. You're right. He'll have to fight at least once in order to appease the masses. We'll prepare Grey for the district—" The study door shut with a click, sealing their conversation away from my burning ears.

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ANCHOR

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I let out a sleepy groan, barely able to hear my own voice over the wind rushing past us. Propping myself up on Sylvie's spiked back, I scanned my surroundings.

I could see the flying castle in the distance, and for the briefest moment, I felt excited; Tessia was here, which was the real reason I hadn't gone straight to Etistin to prepare for the upcoming battle. That brief sensation of happiness created a wriggling guilt in my stomach, though, and I pushed it back down, embracing the emotionless void.

The castle guards, noticing Sylvie, separated into two lines, forming a path to the landing dock, which slid open soundlessly as we approached.

I had to hand it to the artificers of the olden days—those wise and powerful mages were responsible for not only lifting an entire castle up in the sky, but an entire city as well, and connecting each major city with a teleportation portal. The knowledge and power required to complete these feats of magical mastery was awe-inspiring.

It begged the question: what really happened to them? Finding out the answer to that question wasn't exactly at the top of my priority list, though, and I let the thought drift away.

Let's get this over with quickly. I'm ready to vent some emotional baggage on a Scythe or maybe a few retainers, I conveyed, hopping off my bond.

Surprisingly, the landing dock, which was usually filled with activity and noise, was completely empty aside from a lone figure by the door. It took me a moment to realize who it was because of how different he looked.

The powerful confidence that Virion usually radiated was gone, his lighthearted smirk replaced by a grim, tired expression. His silver hair was unbound and the robes he wore looked a tad too big on him, as if he'd lost weight. Still, seeing me and Sylvie, his face softened into a relieved smile.

The old elf immediately wrapped his arms around me.

I was stunned. My body froze, and, for a moment, my mind went blank.

"Welcome back. You did everything you could, Arthur... you did great," he said softly, his voice so familiar, yet seemingly unfamiliar at the same time.

The frigid shell of apathy that I had enclosed myself in—away from the anger, grief, and loss that were trying to claw their way inside me—cracked.

It could've been the warmth of his embrace, or the kindness of his words, but I broke wide open, and it all came pouring out. I pressed my face into Virion's shoulder and let the tears run free, shaking and sobbing like a child, his words echoing in my mind.

You did everything you could. You did great.

Sylvie remained silent, but I felt her small hand rest softly on my back, conveying just as much emotion as Virion's embrace.

Commander, Lance, and asura... We stood there, alone in the large empty room, huddled together, forgetting just for a moment who we were.

I held my fist up to the door but paused, reluctant to knock.

I don't think I can do this by myself right now. Are you sure you don't want to see Tess with me? I asked my bond, who was still in our own room.

'She needs you right now. Just you,' Sylvie replied coolly, and I felt her block our mental connection, leaving me stranded.

Virion had said the same thing. Tessia had locked herself in her room, refusing to see anyone, especially those that wanted to help most.

If her own parents or grandfather couldn't get to her, how could I?

That was my excuse, anyway. Really, I just didn't feel up to being anyone's support right now, not when I could barely hold myself together.

But still, Tessia needed my help, just like I had needed Sylvie's and Virion's.

I pushed down the darkness, all of the bad thoughts, and put them away for now. I'd deal with my own losses in my own time.

Holding my breath, I knocked on the door.

No answer.

I knocked again. "Tess, it's Arthur."

She didn't answer, but I could hear her light steps approaching the door. After a moment, the door slid open and our eyes met.

I had seen so many emotions come alive through those vivid turquoise eyes of hers—laughter, joy, anger, determination—but this was the first time I'd seen such utter despair. It hurt me to see her like this; I wanted to turn away. Instead, I stepped into the room, my mind racing. She looked tired, disheveled, like she hadn't had a bath in days.

Clearing my throat, I said, "You don't need help washing up, right?" My tone was light, teasing. I expected her to smack me, to roll her eyes, to laugh at my boyish stupidity.

Without a word, she shrugged out of her robe, completely throwing me off guard. I managed to turn away before I could see anything, but I nearly tripped over my own feet in the process, stumbling into the couch. I let myself collapse gracelessly onto the thick cushions and pressed my face into a pillow until I heard the washroom door close behind me.

I waited anxiously for what seemed like an hour, resisting the temptation to go and ask if she was okay, until Tessia stepped out of the bathroom with a towel barely slung over her chest and her dark gray hair dripping pools of water behind her.

Getting up, I grabbed another towel and sat her down in front of the small vanity in the corner of her room. Tess kept her eyes down, unable to look at

her own reflection.

Virion had told me everything. I knew the choices she had made and the consequences that had resulted from them. She blamed herself, much like I did, and I knew that no words of consolation would change how she felt right then, because she was right. She had made decisions and people had died because of it. In time, she would come to understand that this was the nature of war and that she would never be able to save everyone. Sometimes even our best intentions lead us astray...

So, I stayed silent. I gently patted down her long hair with the spare towel, then conjured a warm, soft breeze that blew through her hair, drying it.

After that, I grabbed a brush from the wooden vanity. While combing her hair, I found myself staring at her bare shoulders, thinking about how small they looked. Those shoulders carried a heavy burden and the weight of many expectations. It was easy to forget that, before this war, she had just been a student. Though our bodies were nearly the same age, my mind was much older. Tessia didn't have a past life to rely on for experience and mental fortitude.

"You're really bad at this." Tess's voice was soft and hoarse, but it still made my heart skip a beat.

"It's not like I have experience doing this sort of thing," I mumbled, embarrassed. I stopped and made to put the brush away, but Tess looked up, catching my eye in the mirror.

"I didn't tell you to stop."

"Yes, Princess," I replied, the hint of a smile playing at my lips. Normally, she'd pout at being called "Princess," but she just looked at me, her expression unreadable. We held eye contact for several long moments as I began brushing her hair again. When I broke the contact to look down at what I was doing, she looked back down at her fidgeting hands.

For a while, I just absentmindedly talked while slowly brushing her hair. I repeated the silly stories of our misadventures back together in Elenoir when

we were kids. Although we had been constantly training, and I had spent much of my time assimilating with Sylvia's beast will, that didn't mean we didn't relax and have fun.

I was reliving a particularly disgusting memory when she interrupted me.

"I was the one who had told *you* we shouldn't go down that ravine, not the other way around," she said, chortling.

"Really? I'm pretty sure I was the smart and cautious one when we were little."

She rolled her eyes. "Smart, I'll admit, but I wouldn't exactly say you were cautious. Ugh, I still remember finding the moss leeches all over my body even hours after we made it back home."

I stifled a laugh, remembering clearly how grossed out she had been at the harmless wriggling leeches that stuck to our skin. She had immediately flown into a spastic flailing of limbs that made her look like she had been shocked by lightning.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

I didn't answer, instead doing my best impression of her get-these-leechesoff-me dance.

"I was eight!" she protested, hitting me in the arm.

"You were a delicate little princess," I retorted warmly, rubbing my arm.

She glared at me, but when I raised my arms in submission, she turned fully towards me and wrapped her arms around my waist. Slowly, I lowered my arms, one hand lightly caressing her bare back, the other gently entwining itself into her silky gray hair.

Tess remained still, her face buried in my chest. The towel drooped, exposing more of her smooth skin, and I felt suddenly very conscious of her exposed body and her intoxicating smell.

When she looked up, her turquoise eyes met mine, and despite the shade of pink rising up in her cheeks and ears, I could see my own longing reflected back in them.

She closed her eyes then and pursed her lips, and I felt Arthur drifting away. For a moment, I was King Grey, in those early days: the days of loneliness, where I constantly questioned my self-worth, my reason for being; the days where I indulged in physical intimacy just to get a semblance of what being loved felt like—not as a political figure, but as a person.

I lowered my head, and, for a second, I was tempted to meet her lips with mine. We had done so before, after all.

But, given the circumstances, this wasn't the same.

I placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and felt her flinch at my touch.

She pulled away, looking up at me as if I had hit her. "Why? Am I not attractive enough? Is it because you still see me as a kid? I'm already eighteen. I thought this was behind us! Or... or is it that you blame me for what happened, too?"

"Do you blame yourself?" I asked, keeping my expression impassive and my voice emotionless.

Tess lowered her eyes and nodded. "I—I was selfish... I thought that—"

"Then you're growing," I cut her off, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

"We all make mistakes, but the hardest part is admitting them and moving forward so they don't happen again."

Her shoulders trembled as she sniffled. "So, it's not because I'm unattractive?"

Immediately, my face burned as I took in her exposed figure. "No, it's not because you're unattractive. I just want to do it properly, when we can really be with each other, not when we're trying to escape from something else."

Prying my unwilling eyes away from Tessia, I turned my back to her. "You should get dressed. There's one more thing I want to do for you."

The kitchen was empty when we arrived, but there was an abundance of food stored in the chilled containers.

"You wanted to... eat with me?" Tess asked, looking around the kitchen.

Taking a wrapped slab of meat from the storage, I held it up. "I want to cook for you."

"Cook? Why?"

I shrugged, gathering the rest of the ingredients and laying them out to prepare. "You've grown up with meals made for you by the chefs in the castle."

Rather than use magic, I pulled out a kitchen knife and began dicing and mincing the ingredients. "Back in Ashber, when I was a kid, my mom used to cook all of our meals. She poured her time and energy into each meal just to see a smile on our faces while we ate."

My hand trembled, but I continued cutting. "Sitting at the dinner table... laughing and joking over good food. It was one of those things that I never truly appreciated—not until it was... too late."

I hurriedly wiped away a tear. "Ah, s-some of the spices must've gotten into my eyes. Sorry about that. Almost forgot about the water." I turned away from Tess and lowered the fire beneath the boiling pot of broth.

Through gritted teeth, I held down the sobs forming in my chest, but the tears wouldn't stop. My hands shook and my breath came out in choked bursts.

Flashes of memory from my time as a child growing up in Ashber pierced my mind like hot iron stakes. *Don't be stupid, Arthur*, I thought. *It's just food, you big idiot.*

"It's okay. I'm okay, Art." Her voice was gentle, and her soft caress was enough to drive me to my knees.

I fell to the cold, hard floor, clutching my chest as heaving sobs tore out from my throat. As I lay there, my head in Tess's lap, the warm touch of her hands kept me anchored, and the smooth cooing of her voice moved through me like magic from an emitter's fingertips, easing the ache within me.

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FIELD OF WHITE

ALDUIN SLAMMED the door as he stormed off. The room shuddered slightly from the impact.

"That didn't go too bad. I didn't think he'd give in so easily," Virion breathed, sinking back in his seat.

"Neither did I," I mused, my eyes still on the door that Alduin had exited through.

The Council meeting had ended more than an hour ago, but Alduin had stayed to protest Virion's decision. Even General Aya, who never voiced her opinion regarding orders, had pleaded with Commander Virion to reconsider.

I didn't blame them. Virion had ultimately decided to evacuate forces from Elenoir and focus troops on the western border to defend against the Alacryan ships coming from the ocean. For the elves, it meant abandoning their home to the Alacryans.

Although Alduin was still angry, he relented.

"I'm glad he wants to lead the evacuation our people. Perhaps he is finally grasping the fact that we're fighting to protect all of Dicathen, not just Elenoir." Virion sighed, rubbing his temples. "And it will give me more time to focus on the fallback scenarios."

I nodded. Forming strategies for battles was only half the task during times of war. Thinking of various contingencies and training all of your troops to know what to do when things didn't work out as planned was just as—if not more—important.

We sat together wordlessly for a moment before Virion cleared his throat. I knew what he was going to ask. It was the same question he had struggled to ask me since I had arrived back at the castle.

"So, Arthur. Have you thought about my request?" Virion said, cold determination in his eyes.

I met his strong gaze. "I have, and I'm afraid that I'm going to have to respectfully refuse."

"And if I ordered it?" he challenged.

"Then I'd have no choice but to do it."

After a beat of silence, Virion let out a defeated sigh, shaking his head. "If your father hadn't died, would you have said yes?"

My jaw tightened and I struggled to keep calm but I didn't blame Virion for asking. "Most likely."

Waving his hand in dismissal, he said, "Fine. I won't push it any further."

"Thank you," I said, genuinely relieved. I hated to refuse him anything, but this was something I couldn't do. "Besides, I've heard that General Bairon is fairly knowledgeable in war, anyway."

"It is the Wykes' family tradition to teach their younger generation the art of war and battle," Virion replied. "But his knowledge stems from books—manuals of strategy and theory, tales of old wars long sense fought and forgotten."

"Compared to my knowledge... as a teenager?" I rebutted, smiling in amusement.

Virion chortled. "If I thought you were a normal teenager, I would treat you the same as my granddaughter and put you both, along with the rest of your family, into protective custody."

"Maybe I'll take you up on that offer," I teased.

"There is no offer, brat. Speaking as the commander, I can't afford to lose

you, so toughen up," he growled. "If you're not going to lead, then at least get your hands bloody."

"Aye aye, commander," I saluted. "Just have that early retirement package waiting for me."

"Will do," he said with a tired chuckle.

We chatted a bit more as Virion told me what to expect once Sylvie and I arrived at Etistin, but we also relived some old stories from our past. After all, it was possible we might never see each other again.

"My mother and sister should be arriving at the castle in the next day or so. Please take care of them in case I don't make it back," I said, holding out my hand.

There was a part of me that wanted to personally say goodbye to my family, to see their faces one last time in case I really didn't make it out of this battle alive, but a bigger part of me was scared to see them.

I didn't want to admit it, but I was somewhat comforted by the fact that, even if I died, my remaining family might mourn for me rather than look at me with hatred, disdain, or apathy.

If that made me a coward, then I would embrace the title. The fighting would offer me an escape, and if I was able to save our people from the Alacryans in the process, then some good might still come of my cowardice.

Virion clasped my hand and pulled me into a hug. "You know I'll treat Alice and Eleanor as if they were my own blood. They'll be given the same priority for retreat as Tessia and the Council."

"Thank you." I pulled away from his embrace and walked towards the door. I turned back one last time to look at Virion, jaw clenched and body rigid as he forced himself to stay composed. "You're one of the few people in this world that made this life worth living and this continent worth fighting for."

"Are you sure you don't need any armor?" I asked my bond, concerned to see her wearing only a long black cloak over a pair of pants and a long-sleeved tunic. Her long, wheat-colored hair was pulled back and tied into a braid, accentuating her large horns.

"My scales are strong enough. Besides, conventional armor would be useless when I shift between forms," she answered. We continued our journey to the teleportation room in silence.

The doors were already open and only one guard stationed out front; many of the soldiers in the castle had been sent off to Etistin, leaving few for guard duty.

I could see a few a familiar faces waiting to send us off. Aside from Tess and Elder Buhnd, Kathyln and Elder Hester were here as well.

"Looking quite dashing there, young hero," Elder Hester smiled. "Clothes really do make the man."

"It's good to see you again, Elder Hester," I greeted, holding out a hand. "I hope you don't take what I did personally. I'm sorry if it's affected you in any way."

Hester Flamesworth accepted my gesture with a wry smile. "I heard about your father and what Trodius was planning. The Flamesworth name's prestige isn't nearly as important to me, and I hope this will serve to humble my brother. I would just like to thank you for allowing him to live."

I nodded, letting go of her hand before turning to Elder Buhnd. I gave the old dwarf a pat on the shoulder. "I know that you're just itching to get out into the field, Buhnd. What do you say, want to come with me?"

"Bah, and get my arse dragged back by Virion? I'll pass. Besides, the old man needs a hand here, what with everything going on these days," he replied, looking up at me. "Be careful over there. I know it may not feel like it right now, but there are people that care about you and are waiting for you to come back."

Again, I just nodded. The promise I had made to my mother—that I would make sure my father was okay, turned out to be empty. I didn't want to make another promise I couldn't keep.

My gaze eventually fell on Kathyln, who had been silent.

"Thank you for seeing me off," I told her, holding out my hand.

Kathyln hesitated before grabbing my hand. She looked up and her usually impassive face was alive with worry and regret. "I wish I could fight alongside you and Curtis."

"Your mission is just as important, if not more, for the future of Dicathen. Don't worry," I said, trying to comfort my friend and training partner with a smile. I understood her anxiousness and frustration at being unable to fight in the main battle; it's how I felt about leaving so many I cared about behind.

Councilman Blaine and Councilwoman Priscilla had ordered Kathyln to the Wall to help the remaining soldiers scout the area and make sure there weren't any stray beasts heading towards the fortress. After Trodius had been taken away, many of the soldiers were sent to Blackbend City in order to be transported to Etistin, leaving the Wall severely lacking in capable fighters.

Kathyln's parents probably thought being at the Wall was much safer than Etistin and would give their restless daughter something to do.

Finally, I turned to Tess, who was already hugging and exchanging goodbyes with Sylvie. The two had always been close; Tessia had been in Sylvie's life just as long as I had, after all. To Sylvie, Tess was mother, sister, and friend all at once, and I could feel my bond's heart break just a little as she said goodbye.

When it was my turn, I gave Tess a long hug as well. "I heard you're going to be with my sister and mother. Take good care of them."

"Don't worry, I won't let anything happen to them," she muttered as she pulled the leaf pendant out from under her shirt. "Just remember to keep your promise."

"I'll do my best," I answered, pulling out my own pendant. We stared at each other silently for a moment before I pulled my gaze away. I couldn't keep the image of my father's corpse out of my head.

I was the one going into battle, but somehow I was still afraid for Tess. I

knew it was childish and irresponsible to think it, but the thought of her being carried over to me in the same state as my father and being unable to do anything despite all my power made me want to run, to flee—not just with her but with Ellie and my mother.

A firm squeeze on my arms pulled me out of my thoughts. Tess wore the same smile she had last night, after I had broken down in the kitchen. It was a smile that conveyed both loss and hope, and it was just enough to give me the strength to step through the teleportation gate.

"I'll see you soon. All of you," I declared. Then, with nothing left to be said, I stepped through with Sylvie by my side.

After the unsettling sensation of teleportation wore off, the two of us stepped down from the raised podium that held the gate. Heavily armored soldiers stood on either side of us, heads bowed.

"General Arthur, Lady Sylvie. General Bairon is waiting for you in the castle," the soldier to my left announced.

"Will you be guiding us?" I asked.

"Actually, that'll be me," a familiar voice rumbled from below.

It was Curtis Glayder. Despite everything that had transpired, the years had treated him well. His clean shaven face and sharp military crew cut made Curtis look like the dashing white knight he always aspired to be, complete with polished armor and swords strapped on both sides of his hips.

Behind him stood Grawder, his world lion bond.

"Curtis," I said by way of greeting.

"I thought you'd prefer a familiar face since you've never really been around these parts," he said seriously. "And even if you have been here, so much has changed that I doubt you'd even recognize it."

"I've never actually been here, but you're right in that this place doesn't really seem like a city," I noted, taking in the strange sights.

Everywhere I looked, the city had been redesigned for a single purpose: war. The shops had been converted into workspaces for the armorers, bowyers,

weaponsmiths, fletchers, leatherworkers, herbalists, and all manner of other tradesmen working day and night to prepare Dicathen's soldiers for the oncoming battle. The city plaza before us was filled with tents where unskilled laborers could help by washing and folding cloth, tying arrowheads to wooden shafts, and packaging rations. No one was idle, with everyone either making something or transporting it somewhere.

Soldiers practiced marching in their platoons while their officers barked commands. Alleys were converted into archery ranges were archers stood, positioned almost shoulder to shoulder, launching volleys of arrows at walls fashioned out of haystacks.

"A lot to take in, right?" Curtis said as he guided us towards a large brick tower that stood in the distance. "The entire city has been rearranged to act as the stronghold and production center for the battle. We're hoping to keep most of the fighting away from the city, stopping their approach at the coast."

Despite Curtis's assurances that the battle would be fought elsewhere, it was clear that every inch of Etistin had been fortified to defend against an incursion. But I kept my thoughts to myself as we followed the prince through the winding, constricted streets.

I appreciated the brief tour, though, and Curtis's lively commentary helped both Sylvie and I relax. Aside from the soldiers doing physical training and combat drills, the mood was light. Everyone seemed very confident despite the three hundred ships making their way toward the city at that very moment.

"I was expecting a very serious and intense atmosphere," my bond remarked, her head turning from side to side, taking in the sights.

"Well, we're still a few miles away from the coast where the actual battle will be happening," Curtis answered, pointing to the thick walls that seemed newly made. "The city has been heavily fortified, of course, and a whole series of escape tunnels have been constructed underneath us to evacuate the civilians if it comes to that, but right now everyone seems pretty confident.

"Anyway, the castle is up this way." Curtis pointed at the formidable structure, which had been stripped down and refortified into an imposing fortress. Dozens of mages still labored to complete the fortifications, guiding giant stone slabs into place with magic. The castle was situated on a small hill that overlooked the rest of the city. A single soaring tower looked down over the large walls.

"You said General Bairon was waiting for me? Any idea where General Varay might be?" I asked, looking up at the tower.

"She's currently assisting with the construction off the coast," Curtis explained before greeting the soldiers guarding the tower entrance.

Sylvie and I looked at each other, confused. "Construction?"

Curtis shot me a grin. "You'll see when you get up there. Come on."

We rode up a mana-powered crate and pulley system that took us all the way to the top of the tower.

"Courtesy of Artificer Gideon, who has spent quite a bit of time in this city, working the other artificers and carpenters to their bones," Curtis explained.

"Gideon?" I repeated, looking carefully around the inside of the crate. "Is he around? I've been meaning to check in with him regarding his progress with the train system."

"No, I don't believe he's in Etistin at the moment. I think he was traveling with General Mica to Darv. Something related to the Earthmovers' Guild, which has been responsible for much of the work done in the cities."

Too bad, I thought. I would have liked to see the old man.

"Anyway, the main room is just up those stairs, but there's a window on this floor as well. You should take a look."

Curious, Sylvie and I walked towards the far end of the circular room, which appeared to be a lounge. Another soldier guarded the base of the stairs.

We peered out of the viewing window, and at first, we didn't know exactly what we were supposed to be looking at. My eyes scanned the mountain

range to the north of Etistin, then panned south until my gaze landed on the shoreline of the Etistin Bay.

Without a doubt, that was what Curtis wanted us to see.

Sylvie let out a small gasp and my jaw dropped.

Filling up over half of the bay, which was more than a mile wide, was an expanse of ice and snow, created to make it more difficult for the approaching ships to make a landing.

"Incredible, isn't it? This is what General Varay has been working on." Curtis rested his forearms on the window ledge. "The largest battle of this war will be held on this glacial field."

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RESOUNDING HORNS

I was amazed by the conjuration of such a vast phenomenon, even more so since it was done by only one person. It seemed likely that General Varay would be exhausted by now, but the job had been well done.

I was curious as to the sort of strategy Virion and the rest of the Council had devised to utilize this ice field. I was given minimal information on the specific formations, deployment, and maneuvering of troops before I left the castle. Hopefully General Bairon would help clarify the details.

"Ready to go up, General?" Curtis asked.

Nodding, I followed the prince to the single set of stairs leading to the floor above, Sylvie right behind me. At the top of the stairs, we entered what I assumed was the strategic hub for the battle here, and I was immediately reminded of the situation rooms from my time as Grey back on Earth.

There were rows of desks with people sitting in front of large piles of transmission scrolls instead of computers. They were all faced towards the center of the circular room with a view of General Bairon, who was standing on an elevated podium that was looking over a large earthen table with an uneven surface and a large glass orb perched on top of an intricate artifact. Surrounding this artifact were over a dozen mages on standby.

While I was curious about the purpose of the clear orb, I was more interested in the earthen table, which I quickly realized was a rough depiction of the soon-to-be battlefield. A dwarven mage stood next to the table, his hands raised over it as he manipulated the earth into the appropriate form.

General Bairon Wykes, older brother of Lucas Wykes, was currently discussing something about the march. When he finally turned to look at me, his expression was controlled, although a slight twitch in his eyebrows hinted at the deep animosity that I'm sure still roiled underneath the surface. Still, considering he had tried to kill me when we had first met, and would have succeeded had Olfred not stopped him, I felt like we were making great strides.

"General Bairon," I greeted curtly, walking up to the earthen war-table.

"General Leywin," he replied, not bothering to step down from his podium.

I studied the layout of the war-table, noticing the small earthen figures representing the troops.

"I'm assuming this information isn't real-time, right?" I asked.

"No it isn't, General Arthur," the dwarf answered respectfully. "I'm only able to roughly gauge and track the progress from the reports we receive via transmission scroll."

"And what is this giant orb?" I asked, looking to Bairon for an answer.

"It's an artifact that works as a medium for the diviners present," he answered.

"How are the diviners getting information from the battlefield?"

"These mages you see here are elite deviants capable of scrying by sharing senses with their bonded beasts. The diviners will be able to draw images from the scryers' minds and project them into the orb," Bairon replied, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Is there anything else I can explain for you, General Leywin?"

"Don't worry, I'll be joining the other Lances on the battlefield. I already declined your position," I said sarcastically, annoyed by the Lance's attitude.

"At least you had the brains to refuse it. Tens of thousands of soldiers' lives rest on the choices made in this room," Bairon retorted. "If you can't even keep your own family alive, how will you keep the soldiers out there from

dying needlessly?"

"What did you say?" I snarled, the rage I had carried within me from the moment I saw my father's remains instantly boiling over.

"You heard me, *boy*," Bairon replied, a smug smile breaking across his usually serious face.

"Both of you, stop," my bond demanded, stepping between us. "And retract your mana."

Looking around, I could see that the pressure Bairon and I were exerting was straining the people present in the room, all of whom looked at us fearfully. Calming myself, I glared at Bairon as I held up a hand. "Give me the debrief papers you received from the Council and we'll be on our way."

Bairon reluctantly handed me the folder. In it were dozens of pages highlighting relevant information and several transmission scrolls.

Eager to be gone from the general's presence, I made my way to the exit, stopping just short of the doorway leading to the stairs, Curtis and Sylvie beside me. "And General Bairon? Lest the men here get the wrong impression, I want to assure them that we are on the same side. We all make mistakes, and we all suffer losses. We've both lost family members in this fight, haven't we?"

I passed over the high city walls that marked the edge of Etistin perched on Sylvie's back. I was turned around backwards, using my body as a wind break so I could read through the notes outlining the coming battle. Below us, lines of soldiers marched through the hills that led down to the Etistin Bay. Above us, low gray clouds were blowing in, and I could feel the moisture in the air.

Something's not adding up, I thought to myself, my eyes scouring over the estimated numbers of the approaching Alacryan forces.

'What's wrong?' Sylvie replied, noticing my concern.

It's just that, if I were the Alacryan general, there is no way I would initiate a

full scale battle like this.

I could sense the confusion from my bond, so I elaborated what was on my mind.

From what we'd gathered, the Vritra had been preparing for this war for many years now, from smuggling in spies like Headmaster Goodsky to poisoning and corrupting the mana beasts. They'd manipulated the dwarves into supporting them and secretly installed teleportation gates deep within the dungeons of the Beast Glades.

This all happened right under our noses, much of it before Dicathen even knew that another continent existed!

Considering this, it seemed counterintuitive for them to suddenly abandon their machinations and face us head on.

If the numbers I'd been provided were accurate, their force were huge, and since they were arriving by ship, their resources were limited. The journey here must've already drained their food and water supply by a considerable amount. They had no way to reinforce or resupply their troops, and there was nowhere for them to retreat to if we claimed the upper hand.

Of course, their specialized mages were a more well-oiled and cohesive military force than our soldiers were, giving them an edge in combat. We vastly outnumbered them, though, even if it would take time to mobilize all of our forces.

Was I overthinking things? Perhaps the Alacryans just wanted to wrap this up. I already knew that Agrona wanted to avoid an unnecessarily high death count on either side, as his real fight was against the asuras in Epheotus, so maybe he thought that achieving victory in a formal battle like this would end the war cleanly?

'Maybe you should've taken the strategic general position,' Sylvie suggested after absorbing all of my thoughts on the information I'd been provided. 'You have a stronger strategic mind than Bairon, and our soldiers deserve leaders who will spend their lives wisely. After what happened at the Wall—'

No. Bairon is a real bastard, but he's no Trodius. He's a Lance, and he's right. I don't have a stable enough mindset to make those kinds of decisions right now, not when I know that each of their deaths would be caused by the choices I make.

I couldn't play chess using the lives of our soldiers as pawns when I already felt responsible for the death of my father.

"Focus, Arthur. We have a war to finish," I said aloud, slapping my cheeks.

With General Bairon helming the battle, I was but a soldier assigned a mission. In a way, this was easier. My hands would get bloody instead of my soul.

Fly a bit lower, Sylv, I sent to my bond, closing the folder Bairon had given me and turning around.

Sylvie folded her wings and dived down until I could make out the shapes of the individual soldiers marching below.

With a wave of my arms, I released a blast of fire, then intertwined tendrils of lightning through the flames, and finally conjured a series of wind-blades that chased each other round and round the conflagration, creating a spectacular elemental light show in the sky.

Catching onto what I was doing, Sylvie raised her head and opened her large jaws to let out a deafening roar.

Hearing the cheers and shouts from the troops below, I couldn't help but smile.

'That was a bit childish of us, no?' my bond asked, her deep chuckle vibrating up through my legs.

Not at all, Sylv. Morale is one of the most overlooked but important aspects of large-scale battles, I replied.

Shortly thereafter, we reached Etistin Bay.

The first thing we noticed was the temperature. As we approached the conjured field of snow and ice, I felt a biting chill eating through the thin barrier of mana I created to protect myself whenever I flew.

Varay was truly on another level compared to the rest of the other Lances. While I'd like to say that I could beat Varay in a one-on-one battle, I wasn't sure I could. I had Sylvia's dragon will, was a quadra-elemental conjurer, and my fighting prowess was perhaps unmatched on Dicathen, but Varay's power and control over her mana seemed absolute. Having her as an ally was incredibly reassuring.

Sylvie landed at the threshold where the coastal beaches became ice. It was as if a frozen wasteland had fallen from the sky, burying half of the bay in the process and warping the land around it; clouds of frosted breath rose up from the rows of infantry already gathered along the beachfront as they stood in tense silence. The mood was dark, and there was an ominous foreboding lingering in the frigid air.

Even with the captains shouting encouragement and trying to boost morale, I could almost see the weight of death that they carried on their shoulders. With so many eyes on me, I outwardly remained impassive, but my stomach churned at the sight of these soldiers all lined up, waiting to fight and die. I tried not to dwell on it. I tried to bring back that detached, emotionless state I had relied so heavily on during my life as King Grey.

Some of the soldiers seemed so young, many even younger than me, and it was the young men and women in particular who stared up at me as if begging me to impart upon them the strength to face the battle to come. I met their eyes, as many as I could, giving them nods and encouraging smiles, and I'd like to think that our presence did give many of the soldiers hope.

"General Arthur, welcome." The frigid-smooth voice cut through the drifting mist like the beam of a lighthouse, and the entire atmosphere seemed to change. The silhouette of an armor-clad woman stepped into view, as elegant and fierce as a leopard.

"General Varay," I greeted my fellow Lance with a genuine smile.

She stretched out her hand, shaking mine firmly. I could tell she was making it a point to display our composure to the infantry troops, and I mimicked her

air of confident readiness. Sylvie, who remained in her draconic form, lowered her head to let Varay gently touch her snout.

We walked together towards the back of the line while the white-haired general explained the basic formations and maneuvers they had planned. Most of what she told me had been contained in the briefing I read on the way here, but it was different seeing it all laid out in front of me.

We passed row after row of infantry soldiers—augmenters and non-mages alike—organized into three phases. These would be the first men to charge in, meeting our enemies as they attempted to storm the beach.

It was clear when we reached the conjurers; spears and axes were replaced by staves and wands, and instead of armor, most of these men and women wore simple robes. Within the lines of conjurers and archers, I saw a few familiar faces.

The first was Captain Auddyr, standing tall behind his troop of elite augmenters, who were a part of the barrier line that would support and protect the conjurers should the enemy break this far into our formation. I had met the captain when I was deployed on my first mission, which soon after became the Battle of Slore. He was wearing a conspicuously extravagant set of armor, of course. We exchanged a short glance, and the only greeting I was shown was a slight nod of his head before he turned back to his troops.

The second familiar face was Madam Astera, who, I noticed, was no longer disguised as a cook, but had donned simple armor and wore two longswords across her back with ease. We had met on that same mission and had occasion to spar with one another. I knew her to be a strong combatant and a respected leader. I recognized some of her soldiers as well: the overconfident Nyphia, and the thuggish Herrick, both of whom had tried to best me in a duel but failed.

Madam Astera shot me a grin and mouthed the words, "looking good," while her soldiers looked awestruck. I winked playfully at Nyphia and Herrick, eliciting a blush from one and chagrined smile from the other. We climbed a steep set of stone stairs that followed the incline of the terrain just east of Etistin Bay.

This was another strategic advantage we held. The ascending elevation gave our archers and conjurers a clear advantage, as they would have superior visibility and range. Defensive walls had been crafted by earth mages to provide the troops at this level cover should the Alacryans try to attack the back line from a distance. The truth was, we really didn't know that much about the kinds of spells their Casters could specialize in, so we had tried to prepare for anything and everything.

We reached the top of the hill just in time for me to feel the first raindrop on my cheek. It only took a few seconds for the single drop to become a heavy downpour. Sylvie was about to lift up a wing to shield us from the rain, but I stopped her.

We're all soldiers here. We'll all be fighting in the rain together anyway, I said, my eyes focusing on the field of ice. Rain and fog impeded our vision, and the sound of our soldiers still marching towards the shore could be heard under the heavy thrumming of rain.

"We will stay behind for the first wave. Scryers will have eyes on the field and General Bairon will relay information on the enemy forces for us soon after," General Varay said beside me. "Many of our forces are still mobilizing, so we're expecting continuous reinforcement, including more silver core mages."

And so, we waited. I could feel the tension building and more than once I heard a captain delivering a pep talk to their troops.

'The wait is more agonizing than I imagined,' my bond thought, her bright hazel eyes trying to catch a glimpse of anything within the fog above the ice-field. I nodded, wishing I could simply fly to the enemy flotilla and unleash hell, but we already knew that their Shields were more than capable of defending the ships, even from a Lance.

More and more troops arrived. Some were sent to either side of the bay,

while others remained back as reserve forces.

It felt like hours had passed, all of us standing in the rain with white knuckles gripping our weapons.

Were those shapes, moving in the distance? Was that the low rumble of steam engines, barely audible beneath the hammering rain?

A crack like ice breaking resounded through the bay.

Then the horn rang.

I could see our men stiffen as the deep, brassy note announced that the enemies had landed on the outer edge of the ice fields, and their soldiers were disembarking.

A minute passed, then two, and finally the second horn rang, followed by General Varay's mana-enforced roar.

"Charge!"

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DIM TUNNELS III

MICA EARTHBORN

"Through there?" Skarn echoed, his voice rising nervously.

"Aye," answered Oberle, who had just directed us into an uncomfortably tall and narrow crevasse.

It had been three days since we'd left the Earthborn Institute. Oberle had led us down and through the deep tunnels until we'd left Vildorial behind entirely. We'd seen no sign of the Alacryans, though our guide assured us we were going the right way.

"Mica will go first. Keep your eyes up. This would be a fine place for a trap." I slipped into the gap. On either side of me, towering walls of volcanic glass rose up into the darkness above. Behind me, Oberle carried an illuminating artifact, which cast a silver light across the rippling obsidian.

Hornfels and Skarn came next, their axes out. Elder Buhnd's soldiers trailed behind them.

All three of them, I grumbled to myself.

When Alanis had returned, tired and frustrated, she had brought three mages and the news that most of the dwarves under Buhnd's command were already pursuing a lead that had taken them away from Vildorial. These three were all the assistance the taskforce could afford us.

They weren't useless though: two dark yellow core augmenters and a solid yellow core conjurer. The augmenters, Kobel and Jasper—both rugged

veterans—followed behind my cousins. Tetra Satinspar, the conjurer, brought up the rear. She held a second illuminating artifact, which caused her chalky-white skin and pure-white hair to glow.

Though we moved slowly, the narrow space amplified our noise, and it sounded as though a hundred dwarves marched with us. *Great. With every step, we're basically ringing the dinner bell for any mana beasts that lair in this crevasse.*

Within minutes, Skarn began interrogating our guide in a hoarse, urgent whisper.

"How far does this go?"

"Not far," Oberle answered.

"And you're sure this is the way?"

"Aye."

"Did you see any creatures last time you were through?"

"No."

"Hush," I hissed. "Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut, Cousin."

Despite Oberle's assurances, the fissure seemed to lead on for a very long time, and it began to play tricks on my senses. The walls appeared to move, rippling like the surface of a pond, and a silky scraping sound echoed down from above, barely audible over our own scuffling feet.

Then the clicking started. It was subtle and consistent, like someone had a rock stuck in their boot. I was entirely focused on the noise, trying to determine where it was coming from, when Oberle caught a toe on the uneven floor and spilled forward with a grunt.

The luminous globe he carried tumbled out of his hands, bounced off the hard ground with a sharp crack that echoed through the ravine, and rolled between my feet, causing the walls to dance madly around us.

"I thought you were a miner, boy?" Skarn hissed. "Some tunnel legs you've got—" Skarn's voice choked off suddenly. I shot him a concerned look, but

he was silhouetted against Tetra's light. As I opened my mouth to speak, his dark form was lifted into the air.

Hornfels hollered and leapt upward, grabbing his brother by the ankles. For a single breath they appeared to float in midair, then Skarn's boots slipped free of his feet and Hornfels crashed back to the ground. Skarn's axe bounced off the stone floor a moment later.

"Skarn!" I yelled as he was dragged out of sight high above us.

Supporting myself with ambient mana, I lifted off the ground and flew up into the dark after Skarn. Even for a dwarf, it was difficult to see in the utter blackness within this crack, but once I was in the air I could hear the shapes moving in the dark clearly: *Click Click click Click Click Click Click*.

Something like a thick, wet, sticky rope sudden wrapped around my neck, jerking me off course so that I crashed into the wall. Reaching up, I grabbed the rope, wrapped it around my wrist, and pulled. At the same time, I increased the force of gravity on my body by several times.

From above, a hairy creature slightly larger than a dwarf plummeted past me, its eight legs scrabbling at the glassy walls. There was a wet crunch when it reached the bottom.

"Gallows spiders!" I yelled to my companions below. "Light!"

A moment later, a blob of bright orange light arced into the air; Tetra had thrown a ball of pure magma high up into darkness, revealing a shifting, twitching river of huge spiders scuttling upside down along the roof of the crevasse. Long strands of webs hung down all around me, their knotted, noose-like ends set like snares to catch unwary prey.

"Skarn!" I shouted again, searching for my cousin among the mass of spiders, which had begun hissing and clicking loudly in the presence of the light.

Something heavy hit me from behind and several hard, hairy legs wrapped around me. I turned to see the spider's eyeless face only inches from mine, its four fangs, each as long and sharp as a filleting knife, ready to carve me open and pump me full of venom.

Twisting away to avoid the fangs, I conjured a short blade of granite in my left hand and flicked up and outward, sheering through two of the spider's legs. With another flick, the spider's abdomen fell away, followed quickly by the rest of it.

The lava dripping down the ravine wall was already fading, taking the orange glow with it. I turned back to the task of finding Skarn when a grinding roar like an avalanche filled the air. Twenty feet away, four stone spikes burst out of the walls, skewering a crowd of spiders and revealing Skarn, clinging for his life to a strand of web.

Taking a cue from my clever cousin, I molded a boulder—three feet across—from the obsidian walls, then reversed gravity's pull on it, causing it to fly up into the air and smash into the roof. The black boulder began to roll across the ceiling, crushing the spiders and destroying their webs.

I focused on the boulder until I saw it pass above Skarn, breaking the tether to which he clung. With a curse, he began to topple downward, but I was next to him before he'd fallen ten feet, grabbing him around the chest and easing his decent.

On the floor, our companions had been forced to shield themselves from a shower of spider parts.

"By rock and root, this is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen," Hornfels grumbled, wiping a glob of green slime out of his beard.

"It smells!" Oberle moaned, sheltering under a stone slab that Jasper had created.

For good measure, I rolled the stone back across the ceiling, making sure the gallows spiders were good and dead, then let it meld back into the walls.

"Well, that was certainly exciting," I said happily, pulling a bit of spider-silk from Skarn's hair. "Mica is glad you're not spider-food, Cousin."

"Likewise," Skarn growled, rubbing at the red burn on his neck where the Gallows Spider's snare had caught him. "Now, where the hell are my boots?"

The evening found us all sitting around a mound of glowing fire salt amid our makeshift camp, which we had set up in the middle of a long, straight section of the tunnel, allowing us decent visibility in both directions. I dipped a chunk of hardtack in my ale to soften as I listened to Oberle discuss the enemy hideout.

"The grotto is at the bottom of a natural fissure. Water runs down it into a pool within a cave maybe a hundred yards wide. All their tents and things must have been hauled in, because I didn't see any structures that looked grown or conjured."

"Seems likely they don't have the means," added Tetra, who had been listening carefully and nodding along. "We haven't found any Alacryans trained in that sort of magic. Their use of mana seems very specific."

"It is," I added. "Mica doesn't think they brought their bakers and carpenters to Dicathen for war. Their soldiers focus on just one thing: killing our soldiers."

"And how far away did you say this fissure is, again?" Kobel asked. He was a grizzled old dwarf; his left ear had been chewed off by something and his beard was patchy on that side due to a network of scars that ran across his face.

"Round about four hours, maybe five," Oberle said with a noncommittal shrug. "Only been here the once and didn't think I'd be back. The tunnels are all pretty easy going for the rest of the way, though."

Tetra leaned forward and gazed at Oberle. The weak red light of the fire salt reflected in her pink eyes, making them glow like burning coals. "Were there any scouts, any guard posts outside of the grotto?"

"I never saw any, ma'am, and I was looking," Oberle assured us. "Truth is, I was petrified after near-to-four days of crawling through the tunnels, just me and Torple. I had stared into every nook and cranny to make sure some critter wasn't waiting to grab me from the shadows."

"Awful lucky those gallows spiders weren't there when you crossed the

crevasse," grumbled Skarn, eyeing the boy suspiciously.

"Maybe they were," Oberle said, shrugging again. "We went the whole way in the dark, though. Torple insisted."

"Ah, well, that wouldn't have helped us any," Hornfels said seriously. "The way Skarn huffs and puffs when he walks, they'd have found him regardless." The group burst into laughter, all except Skarn, who eyed his twin dangerously and brandished his axe.

"Hey! You're no better than—"

"Quiet!" I hissed, turning my ear toward the dark tunnel behind me. Tetra held aloft her lighting artifact and focused down the tunnel. The little hairs on the back of my neck stood up despite the fact that the tunnel appeared empty. "What is it—" Skarn started to ask, but I motioned for silence.

Focusing mana into my eyes, I searched the tunnel for any sign of movement. *There!* The beam of light revealed the individual particles of dust floating in the air, and, at a point thirty feet down the tunnel, something was pushing them aside.

"They're shielded!" I screamed, throwing up a wall of stone across the tunnel. An instant later, something hammered into it with the force of a battering ram. Behind me, a chorus of curses issued from my companions as they each jumped up and prepared to defend themselves.

A second blast caused a spider web of cracks to form in the wall. It wouldn't survive a third, but that was fine with me.

Between my hands, I condensed earth mana into a rough stone a foot and a half wide. I kept pressing into it, forcing more mana into the stone but not allowing it to grow, until it weighed as much as a bull aurochs.

When the stone wall crumbled under the force of a third blast, I released the Meteor Strike, targeting the ground forty feet ahead. The dense stone began to glow as it streaked toward where I thought the enemy was hiding. When the meteor met the invisible barrier there was a sound like shattering glass and the shield fell away, briefly revealing three very surprised men.

One of the Alacryans was standing in the meteor's path. He was nearly vaporized on contact. The speeding stone struck the ground behind the remaining two, exploding with enough force to fling them the thirty feet into our camp, where they landed in crumpled heaps, both entirely still.

Behind me, Hornfels lowered his axe. "Why are we here again?"

I was bent over the closest Alacryan, my hand pressed against his chest. "Entertainment," I told him. I then checked the second man. "Dead, both of them. Mica hit them too hard."

I straightened and gazed at my companions, mulling the situation over. "If Mica were in their boots, Mica would have sent the fastest runner back to warn of enemy soldiers nearby. The element of surprise is likely lost."

"You could fly after them, see if you can catch up before they reach the grotto," Hornfels suggested.

"Mica would have to leave you to do so, and we don't know how long these three waited before they attacked. No. High risk, perhaps no reward. But we won't give the Alacryans any more time to prepare than we have to. Break time is over. Grab your gear."

We ran all the way to the fissure that led down into the hidden grotto where our enemy was camped, which took a little less than two hours. There had been no sign of the scout I assumed had gone to warn the Alacryans of our presence.

A series of cracks in the walls and ceiling dripped constantly, feeding a stream that meandered down the fissure. All around the stream grew glowing mushrooms, which filled the fissure with a dim green-blue light.

"How pretty," I whispered, bending down to look more closely at the fungi. "Also deadly, Mica thinks."

"We were warned not to touch them," Oberle said quietly from behind me. "When I was here with Torple. The grotto's just at the bottom, maybe three hundred yards."

I took several careful steps into the fissure, trying to see what lay ahead, but the natural path was too jagged to see far. A flutter of something akin to fear passed through me, raising gooseflesh along my arms and neck. *Don't be a coward*, I thought to myself.

Turning, I gazed at the rest of my party: pale, terrified Oberle; grim-faced Skarn; Hornfels, one eyebrow cocked slightly as he waited for my word; scarred Kobel and silent Jasper; and Tetra, glowing like fire bug with her light artifact held aloft.

"Perhaps Mica should go in alone," I suggested, my voice barely audible. *If* there is a Scythe down there...

Skarn spit into the stream and Hornfels snorted. "Not bloody likely."

"We've been tasked by Councilor Buhndemog himself with tracking down every last Alacryan in Darv, General Mica," Tetra added. "It would be tantamount to desertion if we turned away now."

"Oberle," I said, making a decision. He looked at me nervously. "You, at least, will return to Vildorial. Go to the Earthborn Institute and inform Mica's attendant, Alanis, that you delivered us to the Alacryan hideout as promised. If Mica does not return within two days of your arrival in Vildorial, assume the worst. Alanis should beg assistance from the Council. If Mica dies, it will mean that a Scythe is still in Darv."

Oberle's resolve seemed to crack and his shoulders began to shake. "Thank you. They... they said if Torple or I came back to their camp we'd drop dead and I—I was so afraid, I thought for sure..." He trailed off as tears began to leak down into his beard.

"Hush now, you've done beautifully as Mica's guide." I smiled in what I hoped was a comforting way.

Oberle stepped into the fissure, carefully moving over the mushrooms, and wrapped me in a tight embrace. Unsure how to respond, I froze, staring helplessly over his shoulder at the others. Hornfels grinned and winked at me. Then the green-blue light around us shifted subtly, taking on an amethyst

hue.

"What is—" Skarn started, but he was cut off by a pained grunt from Oberle.

The fire salt miner took a step back from me, staring down at his chest. A dull, purplish glow was radiating through his heavy tunic.

Stepping forward, I ripped open the thick cloth, revealing his barrel chest. Something within his sternum was glowing through his skin and getting brighter by the second.

Oberle opened his mouth to scream, but dark purple light came out instead. He's a bomb!

With no time to even shout a warning, I used Black Diamond Vault. A glimmering crystal structure appeared around me, then grew rapidly outward until it had encapsulated both me and Oberle within an impenetrable layer of black diamond.

Once Oberle was contained, I pushed out in all directions with a nova of antigravity, hopefully causing the others to slide away from the mineral prison containing the bomb. I couldn't see or hear anything outside of the spell's effects, though. With no way of knowing how strong the explosion would be, I waited, encased within the black crystals.

It's so dark, I'm seeing spots, I thought. Then I realized the points of light were holes appearing in the black diamond as the mana bomb detonated, eating through the hardest substance known to man or dwarf like acid through parchment.

Unable to escape, I layered mana over my body, pushing everything I had into a protective barrier. Everywhere the glow touched, I could feel my power being burned away.

Then, in a brilliant flash of light, the world turned upside down.

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FOLLOWING ORDERS

THE QUIET TENSION HAD DISSIPATED, replaced by the guttural roars of our soldiers and the trembling of the earth as they charged forth.

Even with all of my knowledge and experience in the battlefield, both in this life and the previous one, my nerves were on fire with excitement.

Sylvie felt it, and she was in a similar state. Her rush of adrenaline mixed with my own barely-contained anticipation as we gazed down at the approaching enemy forces moving with care through the fields of snow and ice.

We leaned forward, watching expectantly as our forces collided with theirs. Our front line was an organized wave of soldiers with allies ready to back them up and provide cover, but their forces seemed disorganized, missing the tactical efficiency I'd seen from the Alacryans in previous battles. It was difficult to make out the specifics, though. The mist that shrouded the battlefield obscured the fine details.

Even the scryers behind us were barely able to give us any information aside from the fact that our enemy troops all wore little to no armor and their equipment in general seemed to be a hodgepodge of clothes and common household items-turned-armor.

I wanted to be down there, in the midst of the battle. It was torture, standing above it, listening to the thunder of feet, the clashing of steel, the screams of dying men. It all blended together, a cacophony so loud that I could feel the

tremors through the soles of my feet.

Can you tell what's going on? I asked Sylvie.

My bond only shook her head.

I turned to Varay. "Maybe we should get rid of the mist, General. I can't tell what's going on down there."

She refused. "We know what's on their side. We have to keep them from knowing what's on our side. Deviating from the plan at this stage is impossible. Wait for Bairon and the Council's orders."

I was irritated but held my tongue. She was right—and more than that, it wasn't my place to give orders here. I had refused the position because I couldn't handle the responsibility right now. Who was I to do as I pleased just because I felt uneasy?

Choosing to trust Varay, Bairon, and the Council, I watched and waited for my time to come.

Flashes of light followed by a wave of cries and screams soon caught my attention.

It looks like the Alacryans have already sent in their mages, I conveyed to my bond.

It was a little disconcerting that they'd deploy their mages so early on in the battle. However, I remembered what Agrona had said about how Alacrya had so many more mages due to the experiments that he had performed over several generations.

'Their mages seem to be spread out inconsistently, though,' Sylvie pointed out.

She was right. There were areas on the field where flashes of magic were close together or clustered, while in other areas, there were several dozen yards between each sign of spells being cast.

Again, a sense of unease filled me, but I remained quiet. My eyes scanned the battlefield through the shroud of mist emanating from the icy ground, trying to find any signs of a retainer or Scythe.

Suddenly, movement above us caught my attention. Looking up, I saw a fleet of mages riding on winged mounts.

"The aerial fleets are here," Varay announced as dozens of mages sailed overhead and into the battlefield.

There would be three main forces in play during this battle. First were the infantry, responsible for making first contact and keeping a constant pressure forward, preventing the Alacryans from taking any ground. Next were the aerial forces responsible for creating disarray within the Alacryans' rear line by dropping spells on them from above. Finally, there were the Lances.

The aerial forces lit up the foggy backdrop with their spells, raining down motes of fire, bolts of lightning, and shards of ice.

The cries and screams began to blend in with the other background noises of battle. Seeing Varay's gaze as she studied the battlefield intently, I could almost see the burden of their deaths pressing down on her shoulders.

The battle continued for more than an hour before my patience frayed.

"General Varay, let me go down there too," I requested.

"No. It's too soon," she replied, studying the battlefield. "The first wave will fall back in the center, drawing the Alacryans after them, then these divisions will close in like a vice. That's when you'll go down."

I was itching to get down there, to feel useful. I wanted to prove myself, and to begin the long task of avenging my father.

'It's okay. We'll have our time to contribute, Arthur,' Sylvie said. 'Besides, it looks like the tide of battle is in our favor.'

This was true. I could make out the vague outlines of formations from where we were standing, and our forces seemed to be holding the line, whereas the Alacryans were falling nearly as fast as they could reach the shore.

Varay turned her piercing gaze to me. "You'll go in and target only their powerful mages. You will only be in the field for an hour at a time."

I nodded in understanding. Varay and I were the only white core mages present. I couldn't tire myself out in case a retainer or Scythe—perhaps both

—showed up. Facing the enemy elites was our most important duty.

"Get ready," Varay instructed.

I hopped onto Sylvie's back, sheathing myself in mana.

A horn trumpeted from the left side of the bay, followed immediately by another one from the right.

"Go!" Varay ordered. "And don't die."

I thought she was joking, but her severe expression said otherwise. I gave Varay a stern nod, then Sylvie beat her powerful wings, causing the mist to whirl around us.

We stayed low, passing just over the next line of soldiers as they charged forward, until the ground changed to snow.

Fight in human form and focus on supporting our troops. I'll handle picking off the Alacryan mages, I directed as I jumped off Sylvie's back.

'Got it. I don't sense any retainers or Scythes, but be careful, Arthur. Always be careful,' she replied as she shifted into her human form and banked left, quickly disappearing into the chaos.

I landed hard on the icy ground, kicking up a cloud of frost. Behind me, I could hear the thunder of armored boots as a line of augmenters charged forward into battle. Ahead, I could see our first wave of troops trying to withdraw. Much of the white field had been stained red, and corpses covered ground. More would join them as the battle progressed.

Drawing Dawn's Ballad, I imbued it in pale blue fire and held the blazing sword aloft for those behind me to see.

"For Dicathen!" I roared, leading the battle mages in their charge.

We surged around our own forces, who were slowing falling back, then broke out amongst the Alacryan ranks. I was surprised to find them bloodied and disorganized, some soldiers clustered together while others were off by themselves. There was no front line, no division of forces to utilize their specialized magic.

Casting aside my doubts, I clad myself in a cloak of lightning and fire and let

out a battle-cry as we approached the scattered enemy force.

The charge forward may have been an awe-inspiring sight, but the clash was dreadful. I felt it just as much as I heard it: metal shrieked and rang, men screamed in pain. The faint hum of magic was always present as both sides unleashed a torrent of spells.

My first opponent fell to a single slash from my sword. Several more followed, and they all fell just as quickly, but it wasn't just me. Our line of augmenters was swiftly moving through the Alacryan soldiers, delivering a catastrophic number of casualties while we took next to none.

The first enemy mage that I found was by himself, surrounded by fallen Dicathian soldiers. His shoulders were hunched with exhaustion; his entire body was terribly thin with a sickly pale tone. Tendrils of lightning hung from his hands like whips, hissing and popping where they touched the snow.

He snarled at me like a starving animal—desperate and deranged. I thought back to the Alacryan mages I had fought at Slore, how focused they had been, how organized. This savage mage had nothing in common with those men.

Setting aside my curiosity for the moment, I rushed forward, conjuring a blade of ice and lightning in my free hand and swinging it with all my might. The crescent cut through the enemy mage's torso before he even had a chance to lift his lightning whips.

I moved on, looking for my next target. I tried to focus on my task amidst the chaos of battle, tuning out the cries of both enemies and allies. I gazed around the battlefield, still concerned at the lack of organization amongst the mages, who themselves appeared to be few in number.

Stains of pink from snow-mixed blood could be seen more often than white itself, and in some desperate places, the ground had turned a dark crimson. Severed arms still clutching onto weapons, chopped off legs, and split-open heads littered the battlefield like leaves after a fall storm.

Had it not been for the experiences of my previous life and the adrenaline coursing through my veins, I would've knelt down and retched on more than one occasion.

After an hour, Sylvie and I regrouped and headed back to the lookout where Varay waited.

I could feel the grief and horror emanating from my bond, and my state of mind wasn't much better. We were welcomed back by the applauding and cheering of the soldiers gathered at the rear camp, but that only made it worse. Most of the soldiers who'd fallen back to the rear were injured, many unconscious.

I couldn't help but wonder: How many of these soldiers' missing limbs had I run across out in the battlefield?

Medics ran around carrying supplies while the few emitters available in this particular camp were already on the verge of backlash from overusing their mana. But despite all of the activity and noise around us, I felt like I was watching everything through a thick, foggy lens.

"Good work," Varay said, patting me on the back.

I mustered a nod, then walked away, eventually taking a seat below a tree on the far edge of the camp. Sylvie sat beside me and the two of us silently gathered ourselves.

I wasn't tired. My mana reserves weren't drained despite the near fifty men I had killed in that hour. In fact, my body felt lighter than ever. It was different from fighting against the beast horde; these soldiers had consciously and intentionally killed my people.

The fact that I was killing because I was just following orders was merely an excuse for me. The order was just a shallow justification to let loose on the ones responsible for the death of my father.

The day stretched on, the end of the battle nowhere in sight. Sylvie and I had gone down to the battlefield four times and we were getting ready for our

fifth run.

"Are you okay, Arthur?" my bond asked, gripping my arm gently.

"I'm hungry, but I feel nauseous just thinking about food," I replied quietly.

"Let's get this over with."

Sylvie nodded. "We're doing a good thing though. We've saved hundreds, maybe thousands of lives by taking down those mages."

"I know, but it's just—never mind," I sighed.

Reading my thoughts, she said aloud, "You still think something is off about them?"

"I do, Sylv. We're winning, so I've tried not to over analyze it, but it's still on my mind. I haven't exactly made an in-depth study of the Alacryans, but this—them," I said, gesturing out to the field. "They're not the organized troops that Agrona created. Not like those we've fought before."

"Maybe they were the elites," Sylvie replied.

"Maybe you're right," I sighed.

Maybe I really had overestimated Agrona and the Alacryans. Despite all of the planning that they'd done over the years, the Vritra were still trying to invade an entire continent. It's only normal for us to have an advantage.

That was when I overheard one of the injured soldiers talking.

I whipped around and ran to the man. He was lying on a table with a medic wrapping new gauze around his injuries.

"What did you say?" I asked, causing him to jump.

"G-General! My apologies. I shouldn't have said something so outrageous!" he exclaimed, eyes wide with fear.

"I need to know what you said just now. Something about 'freed'?"

"I—I just said that I felt a little... bad for them," he answered, his voice dropping to a whisper. "One of the Alacryans, just before I killed him, begged me not to. He said something about being granted freedom if he lives."

"They would be granted freedom?" Sylvie echoed, turning to me with an

expression of concern. "Do they enslave their soldiers?"

It all connected, all of my questions, those little things that hadn't made sense: how untrained the soldiers seemed, how spread apart their specialized mages were, the disunity amongst their troops, and even the lack of uniforms and armor to help them tell each other apart from their enemies.

"They're not soldiers," I muttered, looking at Sylvie. "Those are just their prisoners."

Sylvie's eyes widened in realization as she asked the question that really mattered. "So then, where are their actual soldiers?"

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TAINTED BLOOD

ALDUIN ERALITH

I watched as Merial gently stroked our daughter's hair, tucking in loose strands behind her ear. Pale columns of moonlight enveloped them, lending a serene atmosphere to the quiet room.

How long has it been since we were last together like this? I wondered. Too long.

We'd spent the better half of the night talking, like a real family, until Tessia finally fell asleep.

She had grown so strong, so beautiful. She was the spitting image of her mother, yet she had my stubbornness. Hearing her talk—hearing her really talk—about how she was doing and about her plans for the future... It was what I needed.

It reaffirmed my decision.

I made my way towards the door, taking one last look at my two girls. Merial looked up at me, and though her eyes were lined with tears, I saw in her the determination of the root that cracks the stone, of the tree that grows beyond the canopy to spread its leaves in the light, of the cicada that waits out the frost, buried within the roots. There were no more words to share, but she nodded, telling me everything I needed to know.

Nodding back, my expression hard, I stepped outside the room. I'd been in the castle for several years now, but never before had it felt so large and barren. The sconces lighting up the hallway flickered wildly as I passed, almost like they knew and were rebuking me.

I only made it a few steps before I relented under the pressure weighing down on me. I leaned back against the wall for support as the tension grew in me, spreading through my face and limbs like wildfire. My breath came in stuttered gasps and my heart hammered so fiercely against my chest that I feared my ribs would crack. The empty corridors tottered and spun with every little movement I made, until, like a drunkard, I stumbled and fell to the floor. I buried my face in my knees, clutching at my hair with trembling hands as I thought back to last night's conversation.

I saw Arthur's bond in her human form. Her demeanor was casual yet refined as she approached me.

"What is it now?" I snarled, taking an involuntary step back. I knew exactly who it was. It was obvious just by the way she carried herself and the expression on her face that this wasn't actually Arthur's bond—it was Agrona.

"How very curt of you, King Alduin," she—or rather, he—replied. "I thought we were friends."

"Friends? I did what you asked, but my daughter still almost died out there on the field! If it wasn't for General Aya—"

"If my soldiers purposely avoided her like she carried some sort of plague, your daughter wouldn't be merely bruised by her own inadequacy," he interrupted, expressionless. "She'd be suspicious, and that isn't something you want."

I ground my teeth in frustration. "Why are you here? I've done what you've asked. I smuggled in your men so they could kill the prisoners."

"I've come for a different matter, King Alduin," he said. "Currently, our sides are engaged on the western shore. For you—for your people—that must have been a terrible blow. It means, of course, that you've abandoned your home."

The emotional side of me wanted to lash out at him. How dare he come in here and talk as if he had nothing to do with it, as if it weren't his troops that had driven the elves out, but years as a political figure had trained me to keep silent and mask my expression.

"I wanted to hear it from your own lips," he continued. "Where does your loyalty lie?"

"What do you mean? Letting you kill prisoners that have no use is one matter, but if you're suggesting—even remotely—that I betray my people—"
"Not 'betray your people.' You already did that," he cut in. "I'm asking if your loyalty lies with all of Dicathen, from the barren deserts of Darv all the way to the coasts of Sapin—where elves are captured and sold as slaves even today—or with your kingdom, your people."

I didn't answer, and I knew he felt my hesitation.

"I will cease the attacks on all elven territories. As long as they do not attack any Alacryan, your people will be guaranteed safety. This extends, of course, to your wife and your troubled child."

I wanted to look away from those large, strange eyes, but I found I could not. "What do you want?" I finally asked.

"Similar to last time, I need you to grant a few of my men access into the castle—as well as Xyrus City."

I laughed.

I laughed at an asura who was likely capable of wiping away my existence with a flick of his finger, but I couldn't stop myself. The idea was ludicrous, absurd. Finally, my laughter subsided, and in its wake, the silence felt cold as a grave.

Suddenly, Agrona snapped his fingers as if he'd just remembered something. "I forgot you always need that little extra push, King Alduin. How about this, then—your daughter will die if you don't. Not only will she die, she'll also most likely kill quite a few people around her in the process." "W-what?"

Agrona tapped his sternum, over where a mana core would be. "You know those corrupted beasts that have caused so many problems for you? Well, just like them, your daughter's core has been poisoned."

Anger flared up within me and I grabbed Agrona by the collar. "What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything," he said mirthfully. "Ironic as it is, you can blame your daughter's boyfriend for this."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. The elderwood guardian's beast will, which my daughter had assimilated with—it had been poisoned... and it had poisoned her.

The strength left my hands and I released Agrona, then let myself fall back onto my chair.

"I'd give you a demonstration, but that might cause problems for our little plan. Besides, I think you know by now that I don't lie."

I shook my head, trying to force the memories out, and continued down the hallway.

I stopped in front of another room on the same floor. It was currently occupied by Arthur's mother and sister. A mixture of emotions rose in me as I stared at the closed door. I pitied them. The Leywin family had all served at the Wall, fighting against the beast horde. What happened to Arthur's father was truly unfortunate, and I pushed adamantly for Trodius Flamesworth's imprisonment for his actions.

However, I couldn't help but blame the young Lance. I had cared for him like family. He was so close with my father and daughter. I'd always considered his role in our lives a blessing and been grateful that he was there to look out for Tessia. How many times had he helped her?

Yet, if it wasn't for Arthur—if he hadn't given Tessia that core...

I rubbed my temples, letting out a shaky sigh. I could not change the past, and there was no purpose to lingering on my regrets.

My steps grew heavier the closer I got to the teleportation room. It was as if my boots were made of lead. I looked back over my shoulders every few steps, guilt and fear dragging me down.

The usual soldiers that stood guard on either side of the gate were absent as planned. It hadn't been hard to arrange; no one was allowed to travel through the gate since most of the Lances were at Etistin.

Exerting mana throughout my body, I heaved open the thick iron doors. Taking one last look around in case anyone was nearby, I closed the doors behind me.

The circular room appeared a lot larger now that it had been emptied, with the only real features being a podium that held the control dock and the ancient stone arc carved with incomprehensible runes.

Without wasting any more time, I stepped onto the podium. My hands trembled as I raised them over the control panel, and for another second, I hesitated. What I did now would change the entire course of the war, but for me, there was no other choice but this.

Shutting my eyes, I pushed down on the panel. Immediately, I felt mana being sucked out of me, but I held firm until the runes began glowing.

A pristine golden radiance emanated from the mysterious carvings, then a multi-colored light enveloped the inside of the arc to form a portal. The quiet room was filled with a deep hum as the ancient relic came to life.

Minutes passed, but no one arrived.

"Where is he?" I whispered, running a trembling hand through my hair as I paced back and forth within the room.

I continued cursing under my breath, doing anything to keep myself from thinking. I couldn't think. If I did, I would only doubt myself.

No. I'm doing the right thing. For once, I was doing what was in the best interest of my people—my people. Agrona wasn't wrong; humans had been capturing both elves and dwarves for centuries. I had almost lost my own daughter to human slavers. It wouldn't matter if Agrona won the war.

I shook my head. No. No, Agrona is still a demon, I can't forget that.

But the humans had always had the upper hand. With my father taking command of the war effort, I thought that would have changed, but it hadn't. In fact, it was my father who had abandoned Elenoir in favor of the human kingdom.

Now I would be the one to save Elenoir. With my actions, I would keep my people safe.

Looking down at my hands, I noticed that they were still trembling. Was I just lying to myself? Was I just trying to justify what I was about to do?

It didn't matter. At the very least, I needed to save Tessia. What kind of father would I be if I couldn't keep my only daughter safe?

Anger and despair bubbled inside me as I realized how my emotions had been toyed with by Agrona's words. He was right; Tessia was that final push I had needed.

A deep thrum drew my attention to the teleportation gate. They're here!

Within the multi-colored glow of the gate, a silhouette came into view, slowly growing clearer until an actual figure stepped through. The creature was nearly seven feet tall, though the two serrated horns that grew from his scalp made him feel even larger. He scanned the room until his scarlet eyes found me.

"Are you the elf called Alduin?" the man asked in a deep, resonant voice.

I drew myself up to my full height, and said, with only a slight tremor in my voice, "Yes, I am."

He held up a glass vial filled with murky green liquid.

I stepped forward and reached for the vile, which could only be the antidote to the corruption growing within my daughter's mana core, but stopped short when a smoky black flame erupted from him.

I reeled back, suddenly afraid that Agrona would not uphold his promise. "That's mine! Agrona and I had—"

His hand had closed around my neck before I even realized he'd moved. His

grip became tighter and tighter, choking off my windpipe as he lifted me from the ground. "Lord Agrona has shown mercy by lowering himself to even communicate with a lesser like you."

My body fought back instinctively; mana circulated through my limbs and into my hands as I tried to pry open his grip, but I couldn't focus—my head swam and dark spots danced across my blurring vision. When he finally let go, my body buckled forward and I slid to the floor in a heap, gasping for breath through my aching throat.

"This Commander Virion of yours does not suspect anything, correct?"

I quickly nodded my head. "I told everyone that I'd be in charge of leading the evacuation of Elenoir." My voice came out in a croaky whimper.

"Then bring your blood to this room and exit through this portal," he stated.

"I will have left the vial here by the time you return."

"M-my blood?"

"What your people call 'family," he said impatiently. "Also, bring Arthur Leywin's mother and sister along with you."

I stood shakily to my feet. "What? Why?"

His sharp gaze was all that was needed to drive his point home—that this wasn't a negotiation.

"Okay," I breathed, turning to leave. I pushed open the doors slightly, but stole a quick glance back at the creature before taking my leave. I had brought a demon into the very home of Dicathen's leaders—a retainer, perhaps even a Scythe. Prying my eyes away from his looming figure, I stepped out of the teleportation room. "I'm sorry, Father."

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TREASON

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"We have our orders here, General Arthur," Varay stated, piercing me with an icy glare. "We are to continue engaging the Alacryan troops."

Trying—and mostly failing—to sound respectful and calm, I said, "General Varay, surely you've noticed by now that the enemies we're fighting can't be the Alacryans' main force. They're disorganized, desperate, and a lot of them are even malnourished and downright ill!"

Varay stood firm, masking her emotions. "Have you forgotten that we are soldiers? It's not up to us to decide what we do with this information. I've already sent an update to General Bairon and the Council. We will act according to their orders, but for now we will continue to do as we are told."

"Then let me and my bond go back to Etistin—no, the castle. I'll talk to Commander Virion and come up with a—"

"Aren't you out here because you didn't want the responsibility—didn't want to make the tough calls?" the general cut me off. "You wanted to be a soldier because you didn't want to carry the burden of making decisions."

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. She was right. I had chosen to be here, to fight mindlessly and not have the weight of other people's lives on my shoulders.

I gave General Varay a stiff bow before turning to walk away.

My thoughts wandered until I found myself back at the isolated area where I

had set up camp. There, I spotted Sylvie replenishing her mana. One eye opened slightly, sensing I was near. "How did it go?"

"Nothing's changed," I grumbled, sitting down on a large rock next to her. "We'll continue fighting them."

"Well, prisoners or not, we still can't let them advance," Sylvie said with a wave of empathy.

"But this"—I gestured to the thousands upon thousands of soldiers below, resting, and the thousands more out in the field, fighting—"is overkill. We have way more troops than necessary if all we're up against is a horde of uncoordinated and desperate prisoners."

"True," Sylvie agreed. She got up and stretched her human limbs, then glanced at me slyly from the corner of her eye. "So, what are we waiting for, then?"

"What?"

"Please, Arthur," she said, rolling her eyes. "I could read your thoughts even without our link. I know you've already decided to leave."

Again, I found my mouth hanging open but no words spilling out. Shaking my head, I gave my bond a warm smile and tousled her wheat-blonde hair. "Then don't say I didn't warn you. We're technically committing treason by disobeying orders and leaving during a battle."

Sylvie's body began glowing as her form shifted into that of a towering black dragon. "This isn't the first time we've committed treason, and it probably won't be the last."

"I raised you so well," I chuckled, hopping onto my bond's broad back and grabbing hold of a black spike, my spirits lifted. Despite what I had lost, I was still surrounded by people I cherished dearly, and it was my duty to protect them.

We shot up into the sky, quickly clearing the hills that stretched out from Etistin Bay.

'Did you want to stop in Etistin before making our way to the castle?' Sylvie

asked.

There's no point. Bairon isn't the type to listen—especially to me—and the castle severed all links to the other teleportation gates. The only way there is to fly, so we don't have any time to lose.

I had expected General Varay might come after us, but after the first thirty minutes had passed, I knew we were in the clear. In the meantime, I let myself drift off to sleep, enjoying the peaceful, quiet journey after the chaos of battle.

Scenes of my previous life began to resurface, as they so often did now, carrying with them the emotions of another life. I remembered the feelings of confusion I had towards Lady Vera when I heard her talking about the rigged matches with that man in the uniform. A part of me had been angry at her for not trusting that I'd be able to win the matches by my own strength. I never confronted Lady Vera or asked any questions, even as I continued to compete in matches where my opponents would withdraw or yield immediately. Who was I to question my mentor's decisions? She had given me a new life. Because of her training, I had the opportunity to become *king*.

While my pride had been hurt that Lady Vera hadn't trusted in my abilities enough to let me fight squarely, I had accepted the hollow victories. Then came the day of the final rounds. I, along with every other contestant that had won their state's tournament, had traveled all the way to the capital city, Etharia, for the chance to become the next king.

There was no consistent schedule for when the King's Crown competition was be held, though. It was purely at the discretion of the Council, who would come to a vote when they thought the current king wasn't performing to their expectations. Losing a Paragon Duel against another country, incurring a debilitating injury, or simply getting too old—a vote could be called for any of these reasons.

The king before me, King Ivan, had lost an arm in his last Paragon Duel, which incited the King's Crown competition I had competed in. The victor of

the King's Crown gained the opportunity to fight the current king, and if the challenger won, he or she would become the next king. If the king won, he would remain in his position until the winner of the next King's Crown came to challenge him. Once the Council had deemed the king unfit, this vicious cycle would continue until there was a new king.

I vividly remembered the palpable tension as we waited. During the final stage of the King's Crown, it was legal for contestants to deal lethal blows to their opponents; all of the contestants, including myself, had known that they could die that day.

The faces of those I had fought against were clear in my mind: young and old, small and large, every fighter at the top of their class. Most importantly to me, none of them had been bribed by Lady Vera to forfeit the match. I had tried to convince myself how great Lady Vera was, reasoning that she had purposely cleared the road of obstacles for me not because she didn't trust in my abilities, but because she wanted me to be at my best for the final rounds. If only I had known then what that day would entail. What would I have done differently if I had known the truth about Lady Vera?

'Arthur!' Sylvie's voice pierced my dreams, snapping me awake just as she swerved to avoid a giant arc of lightning. Another arc of lightning followed, piercing through the clouds from below.

By this time, both Sylvie and I knew who was responsible.

"Bairon!" I roared, amplifying my voice with mana as I jumped off of Sylvie. "What is the meaning of this?"

A figure rose from the rolling hills of clouds below us, along with several soldiers mounted on giant armored birds.

"You disobey direct orders and run away from battle, then ask the meaning of my actions?" Bairon boomed, his voice rolling like thunder through the sky. "I advise you return to your post, Arthur. I will not ask nicely again."

"Nicely?" It was Sylvie that replied, the husky voice of her draconic form dangerous with suppressed anger. "You attacked us from behind, throwing

spells that could crush entire buildings—at a Lance and an asura?"

There was a moment of hesitation before Bairon answered. "We are at war, and your human bond has chosen to take orders rather than give them. I'm merely enforcing my duty to my *subordinates*."

"Enough!" I snapped. "You've received the updates from General Varay. The enemy forces that we're engaged with at the bay are all prisoners of Alacrya —half-starved slaves. We need to reorganize our troops and scout out the enemy's main force before—"

"Those decisions are up to me and the Council to make," Bairon interrupted, drawing in closer, his soldiers surrounding him. "Your opinion has been made known and will be considered in due time, but you're not in a position to give anyone orders."

My jaw clenched so hard I could hear my teeth creak, but I was more frustrated at myself than at Bairon. It was true that I chosen to run away. Even now, I would hesitate to take a position of leadership, but I couldn't just stand by and watch as we played right into Agrona's hands.

"Please stand aside. We'll only be aiding the enemy if we spend our energy fighting here. Let us go to the castle. I'll get Commander Virion's approval as soon as I arrive if that's what you want," I said, forcing myself to calm down. "Let's go, Sylv."

The mounted soldiers fanned out, preparing their spells, and Bairon floated up to block our way, aiming a lightning-clad hand directly at us.

"I assure you that this one won't miss, General Arthur. This is your last warning to get back to your post."

"You don't know when to quit, do you Bairon? Just like your brother," I snarled.

Enraged, Bairon soared toward us, his entire body engulfed in lightning.

Bringing up Lucas might have been a low blow, but it was obvious that this show of power had less to do with me leaving my post and more to do with Bairon proving he was superior to me.

Sheathing myself in mana as well, I conjured an arsenal of ice lances, taking advantage of the moisture from the clouds below.

Sylvie unleashed a beam of pure mana from her maw, directly at Bairon, while I launched the ice-spears at the mounted soldiers.

The formation broke as Bairon's soldiers swerved to avoid my spell. Bairon himself had to stop to defend against the wide cone of pure energy, giving us a brief window to break through their line.

Sylvie. Go! I grabbed hold of her leg as she flew by me, pulling us past Bairon and his soldiers before they could react.

As we pulled away, racing through the sky, Bairon launched his cape at us. It was a magic artifact, no doubt, because the cape soon dispersed into a large net composed of metal wires that he was able to control with his lightning. *Human form, now!* I ordered.

My bond's body shrunk to that of a little girl just as the net surrounded us. Sylvie formed a barrier of mana that caught the net, but it gave the other soldiers enough time to regroup.

'Are we allowed to hurt them, yet?' Sylvie asked impatiently, still keeping the lightning net from closing in on us.

The mounted soldiers released their spells as well, and their combined power was enough to put cracks in my bond's mana barrier.

I nodded. Just don't kill them.

Sylvie responded by conjuring dozens of mana arrows outside of her barrier and launching them at the soldiers, while I manipulated the clouds below us.

With a wave of an arm, I drew Dawn's Ballad and sliced through the lightning-charged metal net. With Bairon distracted by the mana arrows, his artifact was easily disabled, and the two of us were free.

As Sylvie distracted the soldiers by launching an endless volley of mana arrows at them, I conjured a little present for Bairon himself.

Fashioning a compressed sphere of wind in my hand, I combined it with fire and lightning, creating a swirling blue fireball the size of Sylvie in her dragon

form that crackled with trails of electricity.

Bairon retracted his net and was already preparing to defend against my attack when a distant flickering caught my attention.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. Everyone stopped what they were doing as we stared at the source of the phenomenon, still miles away. I enhanced my eyes with mana and could just make out the rolling red and black waves... A jolt of shock and realization slammed onto me from my bond.

I turned to Sylvie to see her eyes wide in horror. She spoke aloud for everyone to hear. "That's... the castle."

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DIM TUNNELS IV

MICA EARTHBORN

My senses came back to me in stages. My hearing returned first as the sounds of tumbling debris and burbling water found my ears. Then the heavy scent of dust and scorched stone filled my nose and lungs, causing me to break into a fit of coughing. As I shook with racking coughs, I felt the rubble pressing down on me, holding me as tightly as Black Diamond Vault had.

That's also when I felt the pain. Pain is good, I told myself. Pain means I'm not dead yet.

My mouth was full of the metallic taste of my own blood. I wasn't sure if my eyes were open or not, so I closed them. Opening them again, I found the world around me still entirely black. Reaching for my mana, I was pleasantly surprised to find it was depleted but not completely gone.

My mana core ached as I cast Null Gravity. It took a moment for the effects to be felt, but little by little, space opened up around me and I was able to shift slightly as the stones floated apart, no longer bound by gravity's pull.

As space was created within the mound of demolished rock, I felt the cool sensation of water trickling across my arm. A sickly green light illuminated a small patch of floating debris as a glowing mushroom became visible.

I pushed off the ground below me, forcing my way up into the cloud of stones. They were still too densely packed for me to easily maneuver through them, but as they continued to spread out, drifting farther away from each other, I was able to redirect them and create a sort of path.

As I couldn't tell which direction to go, I followed the sound of water. The crater full of pulverized rock was unbelievably large, but eventually I came to its edge and met solid stone. It must have been near where the stream originally ran, because there was a tiny waterfall splashing down the sheer wall and into the crater.

I pushed off the ground, letting myself float upward under the effects of Null Gravity, finally breaking free of the nimbus of debris. Enough of the glowing mushrooms survived the blast to see by. The explosion had torn though Black Diamond Vault and the tunnel walls, leaving a roughly spherical hole nearly thirty feet across. On the other side of the crater I could just barely make out the fissure leading downward to the Alacryan camp.

I released the spell and winced at the cacophonous crash caused by the avalanche of stone falling back into the crater.

Nice one, Mica. Let's just announce to the world that we survived, shall we? Flying to a ledge of stone, which I thought must be the tunnel we'd arrived by, I landed on my feet and attempted to take my full weight. I immediately had to reinforce my legs and back with mana lest I collapse in a quivering heap. Leaning back against the cool wall of the tunnel, I slid down onto my rear and released the reinforcing mana.

"So," I said aloud in a voice as gravelly as the pit beside me, "Mica should take stock, yes." I held up one finger and stared at it. My whole hand was black with dust and blood. "Mica is alive." I held up a second finger. "Oberle is certainly dead, poor boy. Mica's party is otherwise unaccounted for. An unknown amount of time has passed, though based on the feeling of dehydration it has been quite some time. It is unlikely that the enemy hasn't noticed our approach." I had raised a third, fourth, and fifth finger as I recited each item.

What the hell happened? I wondered.

This was an interesting thread for my tired mind to pull at, and so I sat for a

long time and considered Oberle's last words, the explosion, and what had triggered it. The Lances had all been briefed on the interrogation of the Goodsky woman and the curse she had been placed under, so I knew that the Alacryans possessed such capabilities.

The corrupting light, though, was unlike anything I'd experienced before. What could be strong enough to demolish Black Diamond Vault with a single spell? I shook my head, immediately regretting it as pain erupted behind my eyes.

I pushed myself into a cross-legged sitting position, forcing my back straight, and began refining mana within my core. I felt better immediately as the familiar activity calmed my nerves and took my mind away from my current situation.

"What's that?" a cool female voice asked in a whisper, drawing me out of my meditation.

"Is that a person? A guard, maybe..." A gruff male voice responded.

"Well," I said, opening my eyes and rising to my feet, "you'd be in trouble if Mica were an Alacryan watchman, wouldn't you? Have you not yet been introduced to the tactical concept of a stealth approach?"

"You're one to talk," Hornfels responded, beaming at me. "That ruckus you made echoed for a mile up the tunnel. We were expecting to find every Alacryan left in Darv waiting for us."

Looking over the group, I realized how tired and battle-worn they appeared. All were covered in grime, their faces pale with thick, dark rings under their eyes. Two were missing. Oberle, of course, must have been disintegrated in the explosion, but the quiet Jasper was also absent.

Noticing my gaze, Tetra shook her head. "We all survived the blast, thanks to you. Knocked around a bit from tumbling ass over kettle back down the tunnel was all." She met my eye and smiled sadly. "Thank you, really."

"What happened then?" I asked, wanting to fill in the gap while I lay

unconscious under several tons of blasted stone.

Skarn spoke up, his voice deeper than usual, almost as if he'd been weeping. "Took us a minute to pull ourselves together, then we ran back to see if we could find you. We didn't even have time to start shifting the rubble, though, before the first Alacryans showed up. Must've had guards at the bottom of the fissure. We fell back into the tunnels, fighting as we went, moving to keep from getting boxed in."

"Those battle groups they fight in are tough nuts to crack," added Hornfels, "but we had the advantage of being at home in the tunnels. Some of their spells didn't seem meant for fighting down here and we were picking them off one by one."

"One of their spellcasters was launching these electric blue motes of energy at us," Tetra said, looking back down the tunnel, "which would zip through the air like hummingbirds, avoiding the obstacles we'd been conjuring to slow down the pursuit. Jasper was getting pelted with them—one must have broken through his protective mana—and he went down."

"I got the bastard, though," snarled Kobel. "Dropped half a mountain on his whole damned team."

"How long since the explosion?" I asked when the others fell silent.

"Almost two days," Skarn answered.

Two days! Plenty of time for the Alacryans to have packed up and left, or they may have spent the time fortifying their position and preparing for us. We wouldn't know without making our way down into the grotto.

"How many of their soldiers did you kill?"

"At least twelve," Tetra answered. "Maybe fifteen. Then they stopped pursuing and fell back."

"As Mica sees it, there may be another fifteen or more mages waiting for us at the bottom of that fissure"—I pointed back across the crater to the crack in the wall, clearly outlined now by the green-blue glow within—"perhaps supported by a Scythe. Assuming the enemy hasn't retreated from this

position, they will certain be waiting for us. Personally, Mica has just had a two-day nap and feels wonderfully prepared, but you lot—"

Wasting no time, we picked our way across the blast zone and crawled back up the other side and into the crack in the wall, careful to avoid the luminous fungi growing everywhere. As Oberle had said, it was around three hundred yards to the bottom.

At the end of the fissure, we found a fortified position like a guard post, but there was no one manning it. We moved carefully out of the tunnel, using the guard post and natural columns that supported the high ceiling for cover.

The cave was nearly a hundred yards long and perhaps eighty yards wide. A pond filled nearly a third of that space, however. Tents and campfires were set up on the far side of the cave, while the end nearest to us contained rows of crates and barrels. The cave roof was fifteen yards high and entirely covered by stalactites.

Thirty Alacryan soldiers stood at attention near the center of the cave, clearly organized into battle groups of three. They stood still as statues, facing our end of the cave. They gave no sign that they'd seen us enter, however.

Looking to the roof again—in particular the hundreds of stalactites that draped from it—I considered sending a tremor through the grotto to knock them free, dropping a rain of stone down upon the unwary soldiers. Something stayed my hand though.

Why did they give up their pursuit? Why did they not dig me out of the rubble and finish me off? I felt like I was missing something important.

"What's the plan here, Mica?" Skarn hissed in my ear. The others were all looking at me expectantly.

"Stay here. If anyone attacks, kill them all. If the Scythe appears, leave it to me."

[&]quot;Are ready," said Hornfels and Skarn together.

[&]quot;Aye," added Kobel. Tetra only nodded, her expression one of determination. *Ah, now that is true dwarvish grit*, I thought with a grin.

I crept forward as close as I could get while maintaining cover, then stepped out into the open. The moment I did so, the soldiers burst into motion. One mage in each group conjured a large rectangular shield, separating me from the line of soldiers. The others prepared their spells but held them, not attacking.

"I applaud your restraint," a woman's voice said from somewhere in the shadows to my right.

The speaker, a girl with long amethyst colored hair and two spiraling black horns jutting from her skull, stepped away from the cave wall and walked calmly to stand before the line of mages.

"Given your recent near-death experience, I can't say I would be as calm if I were standing in your shoes. Now," she said, her blank face becoming serious, "you are interrupting an essential operation. As you have yet to do any damage of real consequence, I am willing to let you simply leave. I will relocate my forces, and we will continue our labors."

"Near-death?" I said, feigning mild surprise. "Mica appreciates the warm up, but assures you that she's in perfect fighting shape—and unlike you, whoever the hell you are, Mica is not prepared to be so magnanimous."

The girl cocked her head slightly to the side, looking at me with interest. "The war is happening far from here, General. Shouldn't you be in Etistin, repelling the attack there alongside the other Lances?"

Flashing the demon-horned creature a jaunty grin, I said, "Mica will fight you Alacryan mages wherever you are to be found. The other Lances will handle your invasion at Etistin."

"Oh, I'm afraid that's not likely. But I see you're set on fighting." A black blade of pure mana grew from her hand, radiating dark purple light. "I will let you choose the rules of engagement. Shall we ask our troops—such as they are—to stand down, and proceed with a duel, or would you prefer a battle? The advantage of numbers is with me, I believe."

"While Mica would dearly love to fight you one on one, her companions

would never forgive her for excluding them from what is sure to be a glorious battle." As I finished speaking, I focused on the stalactites above the enemy line, increasing their weight until they began to crack and break free of the cave roof, plunging down upon the Alacryans like ballista bolts.

A sphere of translucent energy appeared around the Scythe. The stalactites that struck the barrier disintegrated on contact.

The mages repositioned their shields, in some cases layering multiple shields one over another. The stone missiles punched through a few of the shields, skewering several soldiers, but the rest held.

With a flick of my wrist, three large slabs of stone grew from the cave floor to shelter me from the hail of spells that flew my way a moment later. As the enemies' attacks impacted against the slabs, I felt spells begin to fly from behind me toward the Alacryans; my allies had released a volley of their own.

A beam of black light cut through the stone and I ducked just in time to avoid it as it carved from left to right, passing just over my head. The stone slabs slid apart and fell to the ground with a booming crash. An instant later, the three heavy blocks fell toward the Scythe as I twisted gravity around them.

The first struck her protective barrier directly and was almost entirely disintegrated, but the second and third only glanced the sphere, falling past her to crash through the line of soldiers, flattening two battle groups.

An orb of pure mana was forming at the end of the Scythe's sword, but she appeared to be aiming past me and toward my team. Knowing I didn't have much time, I began condensing gravity into small point ten feet in front of her. Sweat beaded on my forehead and there was a twinge of pain in my mana core as I struggled to contain the force building within that space. Just as she released the destructive orb, I completed casting Singularity.

A well of massive gravity appeared in the air in the form of a black hole in the fabric of reality. The orb passed through the Singularity, but the gravitational effect was strong enough to pull it significantly off target, so when it impacted against the far wall of the cavern, blooming into a ten-foot-wide disintegration field, it was far from Hornfels and the others.

Several of the tents ripped free of their moorings and were dragged into the gravity well. Water began to lift off the surface of the pond and swirl around the spell, while from behind me crates were sliding across the ground toward the black hole.

The Scythe seemed to be largely resisting the effect. Behind her, the mages scrambled to hold themselves in place. Three failed and were jerked off their feet and pulled into Singularity where they were crushed.

The translucent field of mana surrounding the Scythe slid away from her, moving to contain the black hole. The shield contracted until it was the same size and shape as my spell, then vanished, taking the Singularity with it. She had somehow nullified my magic.

Thunderous steps from behind me drew my attention to a charge from my allies. Two golems, each ten feet tall and wielding a massive stone axe, were barreling toward the enemy line. Between them, a twenty foot long snake made entirely of lava undulated back and forth to propel itself forward at surprising speed.

Tiny next to the towering golems, Kobel followed the charge. He had encased himself entirely in shining plates of volcanic glass, and all around him there was a swirling cloud of thin, razor-sharp blades.

A spear of ice shattered against one golem, while a ball of crackling lightning impacted harmlessly against the other. Several bullets of black mana punched through the magma-snake, but the lava simply flowed back into place as it moved forward.

Several of the remaining Alacryans, all with physical combat spells similar to an augmenter's, charged forward to meet our advance. I prepared to drive them to their knees with Gravity Hammer but was forced to dodge a black arrow of mana projected by the Scythe's sword.

The two forces crashed together. The magma-snake struck, engulfing an

Alacryan mage. Another Alacryan, whose skin had taken on a red glow like iron pulled from the forge, used his bare hands to punch through the leg of one golem. The stone melted where he touched it and the golem crumpled. The second golem threw itself at the Scythe, but her mana-blade carved effortlessly through it.

Three enemy mages surrounded Kobel, snarling and hissing like beasts. The augmenter didn't even slow down as he run through them, his whirling knives cutting them to ribbons. Four translucent shields appeared around him like a cage, preventing him from reaching the enemy rear line.

Seeing the Scythe turn toward him, I conjured two giant hands of stone, one from the floor beneath her feat, the other from the ceiling. She was lifted up into the air, but before the hands could crush her between them, her spherical barrier reappeared and the hands disintegrated where they touched it, leaving her floating in midair.

The glowing-skinned Alacryan had thrown himself onto the magma-snake. He seemed immune to the lava's heat, but he couldn't do any real damage to Tetra's construct as it flowed back together as fast as he could pull it apart.

Kobel was hammering at the shields holding him in place, Skarn and Hornfels were attempting to reconstruct their golems—I could see the pieces fitting themselves back together as the golems struggled to rise—and Tetra was lashing out at the Scythe with her magma-snake, which grew smaller with each strike as the destructive barrier disintegrated the construct bit by bit.

The Scythe's mana-sword grew, elongating and splitting into several individual beams and transforming into a many-tailed whip of black energy. She lashed out at the construct, which dissipated where the whip touched it. In the same motion, she swung the whip in an arc toward our end of the cave. Each tail of the whip straightened and became a spear. The spears, each a glowing beam of black light alive with purple fire, flew away from her in fan pattern, punching through any obstruction, even the walls of the cave.

I rolled out of the way of one spear and conjured a curtain of increased gravity between the Scythe and my team, hoping to force the spears off course. I watched with horror as they passed through the curtain without slowing, then lost sight of them as they pierced the crates and columns where the others had taken cover.

Before me, the magma-snake, now barely half its original size, lost its form, becoming nothing more than a puddle of cooling lava. The glowing Alacryan howled in victory.

Twisting gravity around him, I turned the room on its side. His feet slipped out from under him and he slid across the rough floor, scrabbling for a handhold, until he plunged into the pond. The water hissed and popped as his super-heated flesh was submerged.

Hornfels's and Skarn's golems lunged toward the remaining Alacryans. One smashed the lightning-thrower with a huge fist and kicked at a second. The woman crumpled and one of the shields holding Kobel dematerialized. The second golem swung its axe at the mage shooting bullets of black energy, but a shield appeared over him, deflecting the attack.

The golem slid its axe along the panel of mana, turning the overhead blow into a crossing cut that bisected the shield-conjurer. Several black bullets punched through the golem as the surviving mage scrambled backward, but it wasn't enough to stop the axe from falling on him a second time. No shield appeared to save him.

Though I didn't see her do it, the Scythe had reformed her mana-sword. She pointed it at each golem in turn and released two rays of black light. Where the beams impacted the golems, they burst into five foot spheres of dark purple energy that disintegrated everything they touched, obliterating both constructs.

Seeing her third target, I shouted, "Kobel! Down!" and flew toward the Scythe, forming a huge granite hammer in one hand. Kobel, who had just dispatched the ice-spear mage, jumped aside, but it was too late.

The black beam hit him square in the chest, but, unlike with the golems, the beam glanced off, exploding ten feet away and killing the last two Alacryan soldiers.

I barely had time to register Kobel's survival as I closed with the Scythe, driving my granite hammer, which I'd shrouded in mana, into her protective barrier. I felt the shimmering shield eating away at my mana. Still, I struck again and again and again, each time feeling the drain on my mana core.

Kobel appeared from behind her, flinging his volcanic glass blades at her back. They disintegrated on contact with the barrier. Skarn and Hornfels charged in on stone constructs similar to giant wild boars and drove into the barrier with granite lances.

The Scythe gave us just enough time to make it clear that our attacks were ineffective, then waved her hand. Her shield broke apart into dozens of motes of black and purple energy. The motes settled over Kobel, Hornfels, and Skarn like snow, then drifted inside each of them. All three collapsed, their magic turning to dust, leaving them entirely exposed.

The horned demon smiled down at me and her weapon faded away. Uncertain, I flew back several feet, hovering in the air. She waved toward the ground and then floated down until she was once again standing. I did the same, though I did not lower my weapon.

"Enough," the Scythe said matter-of-factly. "We are done here for the moment. You've run out of time."

"What did you do to the others?" I demanded, refusing to take her bait.

"The battle at Etistin is going poorly. Even now you may be too late to intervene." She regarded me sadly. "This fight is over."

"Mica can do this all day, lady. What did you do to them?"

The Scythe frowned at me, the most emotion I'd seen on her face since the battle began. "Cursed them, like I cursed the boy who led you here."

Screaming like a mana beast, I lunged forward, driving my hammer at her skull. Her mana blade flashed, slicing through the haft of my hammer. Using

Gravity Hammer, I tried to smash her to the ground, but she conjured a mist of the dark energy around her, nullifying my spell again.

Desperate, I followed up with a straight jab into her nose. Perhaps she hadn't been prepared for such a mundane attack because the punch connected, snapping her head back. Snarling, she *pushed* and the mist boiled through me, sapping me of my strength.

Chest heaving, I fell to my knees. "Cheater."

Wiping a thin trickle of blood from her nose, the Scythe regarded me, once again calm. "I've left you just enough mana to fly yourself and your friends out of here. If they are not more than twenty miles away in the next hour, the curse will activate and they will detonate. If they come within twenty miles of this place within the next week, the curse will activate and they will detonate. After one week, the curse will fade. Now go. Your friends need you."

With no other choice, I dragged the prone forms of my companions onto one of the stone slabs I'd conjured earlier, tied them down with ropes from one of the destroyed tents, and hefted the makeshift litter using a small amount of mana to lighten the bundle.

"Why?" I asked simply.

The Scythe, who had watched this happen with an air of mild curiosity, shook her head, her long amethyst hair flowing around her. "We each have our part to play in the coming conflict, even if we do not yet know what that will be." Frowning, I turned and flew to the fissure, passing Tetra's fallen form. I used a portion of my remaining mana to grow a stone sarcophagus around her. *I'm sorry, Tetra, Jasper, Oberle. I failed you.*

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REMEMBRANCE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"Caden, report back to General Varay. She'll be in charge of the battle at Etistin," Bairon ordered, gesturing the soldier away. He met my eyes for a second before he nodded. "The rest of us will head straight to the castle."

Sylvie transformed back into her dragon form and we immediately took off. I manipulated the air around us, turning the winds so they blew at our back, and we flew toward the castle with all speed.

I tried to remain level-headed, trusting that Elder Hester, Elder Buhnd, and Virion were enough to deal with whoever had intruded. But the black and red flames billowing in the distance were an ominous sign... What if it was a retainer—or even a Scythe? My mother, my sister... They were supposed to be safe at the castle.

'It'll be okay,' Sylvie assured me, but she couldn't keep her worry from leaking into me.

I continued manipulating the wind, cycling mana through my body as well, preparing for a fight. Glancing back, I could see Bairon and the other mounted soldiers slowly trailing behind, unable to keep up with Sylvie, but we didn't slow down.

Please, everyone be okay, I prayed, and then the castle was upon us.

The barrier protecting the flying fortress from the sky had been destroyed, allowing the raging winds to fan the dark flames.

Sylvie easily blasted a hole in the closed loading dock door and we landed inside. A thick cloud of oily black smoke filled the loading dock, obscuring my vision. Thankfully, the layer of mana I had enveloped myself in kept the harmful smoke from entering my lungs.

"Let's go," I said to Sylvie, who had turned back to her human form.

Taking no chances, I ignited the dragon will inside me. Under Realmheart, my vision became monochrome, except for the ambient mana around me, which stood out like thousands of multi-colored fireflies amidst the gray smoke. With my enhanced vision and unparalleled mana acuity, it would be impossible for any enemies to sneak up on us, even through the heavy smoke and fierce winds shrieking through the openings of the damaged castle.

Staying close, we began our search of the collapsed rooms and dark hallways of the lower floors. We inched through the fractured floors, sidestepping any debris that had been either dislodged from the walls or fallen from the ceiling. Crashes echoed from above and even around us while the howling winds made it almost impossible to listen for any sign of a battle that we could assist in. The only thing we could do was search each room carefully, taking it one step at a time.

'Over here,' my bond called from an adjacent room.

Inside, I found Sylvie on the ground, hunched over what seemed to be a person partly buried underneath a mountain of rubble. My chest immediately clenched and panic clawed at my stomach, but Sylvie reassured me that it wasn't anyone we knew.

After we shifted some of the rubble, it became clear that the unfortunate elf had been one of the few remaining guards at the castle.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, embarrassed and frustrated at how fragile my current mental state was. After taking a moment to compose myself, I inspected the corpse. Through Realmheart, I was able to tell that the fallen mage had died by fire, but I couldn't see any burn marks on the guard's uniform. I lifted away a section of cloth and chain-mail to examine the flesh

beneath.

'What is it?'

"There aren't any burn marks."

"He died from fire?" she said aloud, surprised.

Hearing another crash in the distance, I got up. "Come on, let's keep moving."

We continued down the hall, scouring every room in the lower floors, searching for anyone that might still be alive. All we had found were corpses, all burned to death, yet bearing no wounds to show for it.

'I don't understand. Perhaps it's a fire that burns from the inside?' Sylvie suggested.

It doesn't matter at this point. All we need to know is that our opponent uses a fire that doesn't actually burn the victims physically, I sent back, lifting a fallen wall that blocked our path.

With the stairs nearly unusable from the destruction, Sylvie and I climbed up through the levels of the castle via the many holes in the ceilings and floors. Despite my Realmheart Physique's ability to spot even the smallest fluctuations in mana, we were tense. My chest contracted in anxiety every time we found a corpse, and I felt a burst of shame at my relief each time we verified it wasn't anyone we knew well.

After searching several floors, Sylvie and I came across signs of a large battle. Intricate spears of stone jutted from the floor and walls and earthen golems lay shattered on the ground.

'This…'

Yeah, I know, I interrupted, signaling for her to keep close.

Because of the mana coalesced into the rock spears and conjured soldiers, it took a while to finally find the source of the spells.

I knelt down in front of the elderly dwarf, my hand on his neck, trying to find a pulse. He stirred at my touch and let out a harsh cough.

"Elder Buhnd!" I exclaimed. I fashioned the ground beneath him into a chair,

sitting him up so he didn't choke on his own blood.

I turned to my bond. "Sylv!"

"On it." She hunched down, laying her hands on my mentor's chest. A soft light emitted from her palms, passing through the dwarf's clothes and skin.

After ten painstaking minutes of life aether being transmitted into Elder Buhnd, we finally got another reaction.

"Elder Buhnd—hey, come on, stay with me," I said gently, patting his cheek as the dwarf furrowed his brows.

"Arth...ur?" His eyes opened but shut again after a few seconds.

"Yes! It's Arthur. What happened? Who did this to you?"

He let out a pained groan. "You gotta... get out of here, kid."

"Don't talk like that, Buhnd!" I snapped, my nerves getting the better of me.

"Tell me the situation. I need to know what we're going up against."

Buhnd tugged on my tunic, pulling me close. "Listen, you fool. The castle, the Council—it's finished. If you want to do something for Dicathen, then run! *Stay alive*."

"Okay, okay. I'll be careful, but to do that, I need to know what happened. Was it a retainer? A Scythe? What sort of magic could do this?"

Feeling Buhnd's grip loosening as his strength left him, I turned to my bond.

"Sylvie, what's happening? Why isn't he getting better?"

Sylvie's arms trembled and beads of sweat dripped down from her face. "I don't know, but I can't keep this up."

I took a step back, inspecting the injured dwarf. Like all of the other corpses we had passed, his body was riddled with motes of red mana. The wisps of purple that Sylvie had emitted into his body were currently combating whatever fire spell was eating away at his life, but the aether wasn't healing him. No, it was keeping the spell under control, but the fire spell seemed able to multiply and was spreading fast.

My frustrated boiled out of me as a guttural yell, and I smashing one of the stone spikes that Buhnd had conjured. Kneeling back down in front of the

dying dwarf, I grabbed his hand.

Once Sylvie stopped emitting her healing magic, Buhnd would start dying again, and my bond knew that as well.

Buhnd put his large hand over mine, squeezing it gently. "I-it's okay."

Though it seemed to take every ounce of strength he had left, Buhnd pried open his eyes once more and turned his gaze to Sylvie. "Little asura, can you keep this up for just another minute? I—I think that'll be enough to tell you what you need to know."

My bond nodded, her brows furrowed in concentration.

Ignoring the tears rolling down my cheeks, I pressed my forehead against Elder Buhnd's. "May you be at peace, wherever you are."

The concept of religion had always eluded me, both in this life and my previous one. But as more of my loved ones died, I found myself wishing that I was wrong, that there truly was an all-powerful god and an afterlife where everyone I knew would be at peace, waiting for the rest of us. At the very least, I hoped that they would meet a similar fate as I, reincarnated into a different world to live a new life. If that was the case, though, I hoped they would be spared the memories of their past life.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," my bond whispered, putting a hand on my back.

I shook my head. "It's not your fault."

After spending a few minutes conjuring an earthen tomb worthy of an individual such as Elder Buhndemog Lonuid, the two of us moved on.

My dwarven mentor had told me what little he knew about our opponent, which Buhnd had confirmed to be a Scythe. Apparently, he wielded a smoky black fire that corrupted whatever it came in contact with. It seemed like another deviant form of magic, like the black metal spikes that Uto was able to conjure or the black poison the witch was able to use.

Elder Hester and Kathyln had left for the Wall before the Scythe had infiltrated the castle, but Alduin and Merial Eralith, along with Tessia and my

family, were nowhere to be found when all of this had happened.

It was somewhat of a relief that they weren't here, but another part of me was even more anxious. Questions filled my head: *If they did escape, where did they go? How did they know that they would be attacked? Or was their timely disappearance just a coincidence?*

'I know it's hard, but you shouldn't think about all of that right now.' My bond was worried, and I could feel her doing her best to keep me in the moment. 'Take this one step at a time. We'll get through this together, Arthur'

I gave her a terse nod. I was grateful that she had been with me throughout everything that I had gone through. I couldn't imagine where I would be if I hadn't had her at my side, and she knew that.

The idea of someone knowing almost every thought and emotion that crossed my mind would've been disconcerting to me if I didn't realize how grateful for it I was. Maybe it was just because it was Sylvie, and not someone else, but I was thankful for the link that I had with her.

'Arthur!' my bond called out.

Yeah, I know. I saw the mana fluctuation nearby. Even without Realmheart, it'd be impossible not to sense the power being brought to bear.

Bairon's currently engaging with the Scythe, I thought, seeing the deviant magic move through the atmosphere.

'What should we do?'

I'm going in. Stay behind and cover me with mana shields.

I withdrew Dawn's Ballad from my dimension ring and coalesced mana through my limbs. I could feel the warmth as the runes running down my arms, legs, and back glowed with golden light. Strength steeled every fiber of my body as I dug my heel into the floor.

I knew that using Burst Step would strain my body, but with my experience fighting against Agrona's personal soldiers, I knew that I had to end it fast if I wanted any chance at winning.

'Okay. Go!' Sylvie signaled, layering mana around my body.

I willed the mana to flow down my legs, timed to the millisecond to maximize the burst of strength that I'd receive.

The world blurred around me as I took a single, mana-enhanced step, and my eyes and brain struggled to collect, translate, and sort the influx of images. If my reflexes weren't heightened through the usage of internal lightning magic, I would be more likely to kill myself by running into a wall than actually hurt my enemy.

Ignoring the searing pain that ate away at my lower body, I dashed forth, honing in on the towering Scythe.

No!

I slid to a halt, my body groaning in protest at the sudden cancelation of Burst Step.

The jagged tip of my teal sword hovered inches away from the Scythe's throat.

I stared at the Scythe, a flurry of emotions emerging as he looked down at me with an amused expression.

"You've grown."

I heard Bairon's voice scream at me from behind but couldn't register what he was saying over the blood pounding in my ears.

I tightened my grip around Dawn's Ballad, unable to pry my eyes away from the piercing red glare of the Scythe standing in front of me.

From the two serrated horns curled underneath his ears and the bloody cape that mirrored his bright red eyes, it was unmistakable: It was him.

It was the Scythe that had killed Sylvia.

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WAVERING PILLAR

My TIME with Sylvia flashed through my mind, and I relived the months I spent with her in an instant. The bond that had formed between us had been greater than the sum of our days together; to a grown man born into the body of an infant, Sylvia had become my solace. In front of her, I could truly act like myself, and to her—even combining my age from both lives—I was still just a child.

To this day, one of my biggest regrets was leaving Sylvia. I was young and weak then, but I still thought about it—what would've happened if I had stayed. Would she be alive today? Would she still be with me now?

At first, I wanted nothing more than to get revenge for her. The message she had imparted onto me about enjoying this life did little to dampen the rage I felt towards the demonic being responsible for her death. However, as time passed, the thirst for vengeance had slowly dissipated.

At the back of my mind, as I trained in the dungeons, went to school, especially when I went to Epheotus, I knew it was all put into motion by my hurried flight from Sylvia's cavern. Being suddenly reminded of that, however, I felt a stronger sense of guilt than anger.

I was more angry at myself, for how little I thought about Sylvia these days, than I was angry at the Scythe in front of me—the one responsible for Sylvia's death.

"It's you," I seethed, gripping the hilt of my sword to keep my hands steady.

"That night! You were the one that—"

Movement behind the Scythe caught my eye, and I realized that I had been so focused on the Scythe I hadn't noticed what was around me. Near the far wall, Virion's prone form—deathly pale and motionless— lay sprawled over a pile of rubble. Bairon sat next to him, flitting in and out of consciousness.

"They're alive, for now," the Scythe said conversationally, seemingly unfazed by Dawn's Ballad hovering just under his sharp chin. I infused the blade with an aura of wind and frost, but the Scythe continued to calmly study me, like one might study an interesting cloud or an unusual rock. "It's impressive to see you wielding mana to such a proficient degree, even if it was due to Lady Syl—"

His body blurred a few feet away, dodging the elemental blast released from my blade with inhuman speed and precision. The castle rumbled in protest as its mana-reinforced walls cracked and splintered.

"Don't you dare say her name," I growled, preparing to strike again.

Tendrils of mana coiled around me, their intensity mirroring my emotions. The ground underneath me crumbled from the pressure as I swung once more, drawing a teal arc in the air.

My opponent stood still though, letting my blade slice right through him—or so I thought.

The gash that my sword had made through his neck smoldered in flames before closing the wound as if it didn't exist.

Through Realmheart, I was able to tell that he was manipulating his black flames to such a high degree that he could become almost intangible, like smoke.

'Arthur!' Sylvie called out through our telepathic link, just arriving.

Sylv! Help Virion! I ordered, my gaze shifting back and forth between Tessia's grandfather and the Scythe standing just a few feet in front of me.

'What about you? You can't beat him alone!' she replied.

Virion's going to die if you leave him like that!

Wanting to keep the Scythe's attention on me, I sprang into a flurry of attacks, not just with my sword but every element I had in my arsenal. I launched blades of wind, bolts of lightning, blasts of blue fire, but nothing seemed to hurt him.

After a moment of hesitation, Sylvie ran towards Virion and Bairon.

All I could think of was to stall for time while my bond healed the others. I weaved mana around my hand to ignite an icy white flame, which I spun into an inferno around us, then let the flames freeze solid, encasing the Scythe into a tomb of ice. His burning eyes followed me through the three feet of ice, and his expression remained arrogant, nonchalant.

With a yell, I discharged a ray of lightning at my frozen opponent, pouring energy and power into the spell until the entire room was covered in an icy mist.

If it hadn't been for Realmheart, I wouldn't have seen the Scythe strike directly at my face.

I dodged, cursing in my head.

Each previous fight against one of the retainers had left me and Sylvie almost dead. The fight against Uto would've killed us if it hadn't been for the Scythe, Seris. But this time was different. Even against a Scythe, godlike beings able to use mana arts known only to asuras of the basilisk clans, I was holding my own.

Dodging the Scythe's fire-clad fist, however, made me realize that he seemed to be holding back. I didn't have time to consider why, only to accept that it was true and attempt to capitalize on it.

The world shifted from monochrome into its negative version as I ignited Static Void, stopping time. I ignored the painful stress caused by using the ability and repositioned myself so I was behind him.

I knew this wasn't enough though. It didn't matter if he couldn't dodge my attack—he didn't need to.

The mana particles in the atmosphere had all been colorless, unable to be

used within the void of frozen time, which made the purple motes of aether stand out all the more.

Lady Myre had told me that, while I could sense aether due to my affinity for all four elements, I might never be able to consciously control them outside of the borrowed power of Static Void.

Running out of time and ideas, I tried anyway. As crazy as it sounded, I called out to the floating specks of aether to help me somehow. I shouted, I pleaded, I prayed within the frozen realm and just when I thought nothing would work, some of the particles began congregating around Dawn's Ballad, coating its blade in a thin purple aura.

Afraid that this power would soon dissipate, I immediately released Static Void and swung my aether-clad blade.

Despite stopping time, the Scythe seemed to know exactly where I was, as if expecting that I would use Static Void.

What he didn't expect, however, was that my next attack would be infused in aether.

Dawn's Ballad flashed in a purple crescent. The very fabric of space seemed to warp around my blade as it passed through the Scythe, leaving a large, hollow gash. His look of indifference turned sour as he grunted in pain. He clasped his chest, and blood burst out between his fingers.

Just from that one attack, my mind swam and my arms felt heavy. A chilling pain radiated from my mana core, but I was able to lift my sword just in time to block a strike from a hand clad in black flames.

The Scythe gripped Dawn's Ballad in his blazing hand, glaring at me with eyes full of hate and black fire.

I tried to pull my sword free of his grasp, but I didn't have the strength. I could only watch as the black fire spread from the Scythe's hand onto Dawn's Ballad and the bright teal blade dulled and turned gray. Once the black flames had engulfed the blade, it shattered in the Scythe's hand.

"That is for the injury," he said quietly, his voice venomous.

I stepped away, putting some distance between us as I gripped the broken hilt of my beloved sword.

The Scythe didn't pursue. Instead, he turned to where Sylvie, Bairon, and Virion were. "Your aether arts aren't strong enough to heal their wounds yet, Lady Sylvie."

"Shut up!" I snapped, conjuring and condensing multiple layers of ice to craft a sword.

"While I'm confident that I'll be able to defeat you, I fear this castle will collapse in the process of doing so," he stated, glancing sideways at me. "Relinquish this fortress and I will retrieve the soulfire currently eating away at their lives."

My body tensed, unwilling to believe him. "You're just going to let us go?" I was sure Sylvie and I could hold our own against him, but a prolonged battle would mean certain death for Virion and Bairon.

"I have already completed my task here, and it has been a long time since a lesser managed to wound me."

'Arthur. He's right. I can't heal them and I used up a lot of strength earlier trying to save Elder Buhnd.'

Despite my bond's words, I didn't lower my guard. With Realmheart still ignited and my conjured sword of ice poised to strike at the Scythe, I asked him the only question that really mattered: "Are Princess Tessia Eralith, Alice Leywin, and Eleanor Leywin still alive?"

The Scythe's predatory smile sent chills down my spine. "The princess, along with your mother and sister, are safe. You'll find out more at the appropriate time—if you choose to accept my offer."

The ice sword dissipated and I released Realmheart. His words settled on my shoulders with the weight of the collapsing castle, nearly driving me to my knees. My greatest fear had been realized. My loved ones had been taken, tools to be used against me in this war, and it was entirely my fault

"W-where are they? What have you done to them?" I meant it to be a

command, but my voice came out as a whimper.

"It's not my place to tell you," he said, turning from me and walking toward Virion and Bairon.

I flew in silence next to Sylvie, who was carrying Virion and Bairon on her scaled back. The castle got smaller and smaller behind us as we abandoned its crumbling remains, defeated.

'Arthur, your family is going to be okay,' Sylvie assured me, her thoughts gentle and consoling.

I clenched my fists to keep them from trembling. I have to save them, Sylv. No matter what, I can't let what happened to my father happen to Mom, to... to Ellie.

'I know. We're going to do everything we can.'

We made camp in a remote area a few miles northeast of Etistin by the Sehz River. The sight of us—two Lances and the commander—in the state we were in would create mass panic.

I built a fire and conjured a stone tent for shelter while Sylvie began healing Virion and Bairon again. After about an hour or so, the worst of the damage had been undone, and they were able to rest peacefully. Sylvie and I sat next to each other in front of the fire, lost in the flame's dance.

On the surface, all seemed to be calm, but underneath I was a churning, wild, angry mess of emotions. Sitting and doing nothing but waiting ate away at me, but we were both at a loss.

Neither of us said anything for a long time. The sun had set; our camp was lit only by the fire's flickering orange light. I prodded at it with a stick, not because I had to, but because I would go crazy if I wasn't doing *something*.

"What do we do now?" Sylvie asked quietly, reading my thoughts.

"Find Tess, Ellie, and my mom," I answered.

My bond turned to me, her bright topaz eyes reflecting the light from the fire. I could feel her uncertainty, and, despite her best efforts to keep her thoughts

from leaking out, I could hear the question she wanted to ask: 'Is the war over?'

It was nearly impossible to lie to someone when you shared each other's feelings and could hear each other's thoughts. Between us was a cobweb of jumbled emotions, and it was difficult to tell where my thoughts ended and hers began.

Before I could think of a reply, a pained groan drew our attention, and we were both relieved to have a distraction.

It was Virion. He rubbed his head for a moment before bolting up to his feet. A sinister aura enveloped him as he ignited his beast will, his eyes darting around us, looking for danger.

"Virion. Virion! It's okay," I said, my arms held up before me.

Disoriented, the commander took a moment to inspect our surroundings before finally realizing we weren't at the castle.

"What... what happened—the Scythe!" he gasped. "My son! Tessia! Buhnd!" He reached out and grabbed my collar with one hand, his face a mask of panic. "We have to help them!"

I wrapped my arms around Virion, hugging him tight. He struggled, trying to break free from my grasp, frantically telling me that we needed to go back.

Once he'd expended the little energy he had, Virion dropped the first phase of his beast will. And once he had calmed down, Virion wept. The commander, the very pillar of Dicathen, broke down completely.

I thought about Sylvie's unasked question as I embraced Virion, tears overflowing from my eyes as well.

It sure felt like it was over. It felt like the Alacryans had won. Not only did it feel like they had won, it felt like Agrona had outplayed us at every turn. I had been so arrogant...

What was a mere two mortal lifetimes of experience when compared to an ancient asura's lifetime of intellect and wisdom?

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DARKENING GREY

"Here." Lady Vera took a seat beside me, opening a bottle of water and handing it to me. "Drink this and try to calm down."

I tipped the bottle back and chugged the clear, cool liquid. A soothing sensation spread through me, and immediately, my worries, jitters, and accumulated stresses faded away. I held the bottle up, reading the label.

"Is something wrong with the water?" she asked, worried.

"No, I feel better now, thank you," I said, taking another drink.

"Good, keep drinking. When you finish it, do some breathing exercises. At this point, we need to keep your body and mind in top shape."

I stared blankly at Lady Vera—my sponsor, teacher, and mentor—someone akin to an older sister to me. She looked back, smiling in that confident manner that made me feel so safe being at her side.

"You're almost there, Grey. Just win one more duel and you'll be the heir apparent until you're of age to take on the title of king," she said, leaning in close. "With your skill and talent, this tournament is only a stepping stone for greater things."

"You're right."

I steeled myself, thinking back to Director Wilbeck. It still enraged me how quickly her case had been closed despite the clear evidence that she'd been murdered. It made me suspect that something was going on, but in order to confirm this and get to the bottom of everything, I would need the authority

of a king. With the backing of the Etharian Council, I could launch a full investigation, find whoever was responsible, and make sure they faced justice.

"You know that my home country of Trayden and Etharia are allies, but that alliance has been somewhat strained as of late. I have faith that you'll become a great king that truly bridges the divide between our two countries, Grey."

The thought of being solely responsible for rebuilding relations between two entire countries made my stomach queasy as my nerves flared again. "You really think so? Even with my background?"

"Your background? You are a member of the Warbridge family, as am I, and do not forget it." Despite her severe tone, her expression softened into a warm smile. "I'll make sure *no one* doubts it, not even you."

My chest tightened and tears threatened to surface. Swallowing and sitting up straight, I felt a newfound determination. "Thank you, Lady Vera. I won't let you down."

"Of course you won't." She placed a firm hand on my shoulder. "You've guessed by now who your final opponent is going to be, right?"

My hands tightened into fists. "Of course."

Cecilia. I hadn't believed it when I first saw her enter the arena. She'd disappeared for weeks, then suddenly there she was, stepping into the arena as a contestant for the King's Crown. My first thought then had actually been about Nico. Had he known? I had tried to speak with Cecilia, but they weren't letting anyone near her. Then I got to see what she could do first-hand.

"I know she's an old friend and you two grew up together, but don't forget that she cast everything aside for this. Forget the rumors; no one has forced her to fight—and with her powers, no one can."

Just as she finished speaking, Lady Vera's phone chimed.

"Hello? What!" She glanced at me. "Okay, I'll be there soon," she finished, her voice stern.

"Sorry, Grey, a business partner of mine is here, and I need to run outside to meet him. Be sure to finish that water—and focus on calming yourself."

I held up the water bottle. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

With a tight nod, Lady Vera began speaking again to whoever was on the other side of the phone. As she reached for the door to exit my personal waiting room, the door swung open, surprising both of us.

"Watch it!" Lady Vera growled at the man, who turned out to be a janitor pulling a cleaning cart.

The thin, bearded man bowed hurriedly before stepping out of the way. "My apologies."

Clicking her tongue, Lady Vera stepped forward to take a closer look at the janitor but was distracted by something said through her phone.

"I'll be right there! I want footage pulled up from all angles!" she snapped as she disappeared through the door.

The janitor let the door close, then walked toward me, his head still lowered, face hidden beneath his navy cap.

"You really should be more careful, sir," I warned. "There are a lot of important people in these halls, people that you don't want to accidentally anger."

The janitor didn't speak. Instead, he looked straight at me and he ripped off his thick, grizzled beard. Then the janitor's features began to warp slightly, revealing a face that couldn't have been more familiar.

"N-Nic—"

The janitor—or rather, my old friend, Nico, disguised as a janitor—clasped his palm over my mouth. "Don't speak too loudly."

His hand remained until he was sure I had understood.

"Where have you been? You look terrible—that fake beard... is it an altering artifact? Aren't those illegal?" My voice was quiet, but my tone was manic, and I couldn't keep from rambling.

Nico ignored me as his eyes darted around the room. It was obvious that the

past few months had not been easy for him; his face was thin, his lips cracked, and his hair disheveled. He clearly hadn't been taking care of himself.

"We don't have much time before your match against Cecilia," he said, fumbling through the sanitation cart before pulling out a palm-sized device. "I need you to listen to this right now."

I pushed the device away. "What is going on, Nico? I know you're worried about Cecilia, but you've been ignoring me for the past four months and now you march in here right before my match and distract me like this? What are you trying to do?"

"Please," he asked, desperation evident in his voice. "Just listen."

I knew I shouldn't. Nico had been my friend—my best friend—but he was also madly in love with Cecilia, who I was going to duel in less than an hour. But I took one earbud from him and put it in my ear. Nico copied me with the second earbud. He pressed play on his device.

"Is this... Lady Vera?" I asked, hearing her voice through the small speaker in my ear.

He urged me to continue listening and so I did. As the audio clips continued, it became harder and harder to keep listening.

"Bullshit," I spat, pulling the earbud from my ear. "Plans to capture Cecilia during this tournament? What sort of sick joke is this? What are you playing at, Nico?"

"It's not a joke—how could I ever joke about Cecilia?" he asked, tears shining in his tired eyes. "I know Lady Vera has been good to you, but this is why. Everything was for this day."

"What have you been doing these past few months? Have you gone crazy?" Nico pulled up his sleeves and pant legs, showing deep red scars that ran around his wrists and ankles. "This is where I've been these past few months, Grey. I've been locked up by our own government, because I was trying to break her out of the facility she's been held in. I've been starved and tortured

—but I escaped. Since then I've been gathering evidence around Vera Warbridge to—to get you to help me."

My eyes widened and I shook my head. "No. No, you're lying. It makes no sense. First of all, why would Lady Vera need to take Cecilia? Trayden and Etharia are allies!"

"She's so strong now, Grey. Whoever has control over Cecilia—or what the Traydens refer to as 'the legacy'—would be able to exert incredible pressure on both governments."

I was shaken by the familiar term: the legacy. That man had called Cecilia the legacy as he was torturing me. But I never told Nico that.

"Okay, then how do I play into this? Why would Lady Vera need *me* specifically, rather than any other candidate for king? The Warbridges have sponsored a bunch of other candidates from powerful families."

"The Etharian government has been confining Cecilia for her own protection. The only time she appears in public is during the tournaments," he responded immediately. "Lady Vera needed you because you're an orphan. There are strict rules as to who is allowed into the King's Crown tournaments, especially in the final rounds. Lady Vera was only allowed in here because she's your legal guardian."

I mulled over his words for a moment, lost in thought. It was true that there weren't many spectators at these events, and Lady Vera had needed to go outside to meet with this business partner. Could any of it be real?

A sudden knock on the door made both of us jump.

"Candidate Grey? I'm one of the facilitators here. Lady Vera Warbridge has asked for me to check up on you," a gruff voice said from the other side of the door.

I looked at Nico. He looked back with wide eyes, his entire body trembling.

"I'm fine. Please let her know that I don't want to be disturbed until it's time for the duel," I replied loudly.

The facilitator acknowledged my words and dismissed himself, but Nico and

I waited a few more minutes before moving. I peeked out the door to make sure no one was outside before turning back to Nico. "Look, it's obvious you've been through a lot. I'm not going to turn you in, but I can't believe you. You need to get out of here."

"Grey," Nico said, making my name sound like a prayer, "I'm begging you. I've got a plan in motion, but I need your help if we're going to escape with Cecilia!"

"Escape with Cecilia?" I echoed. "Do you even hear yourself right now? We're competing against each other for the King's Crown! You're telling me to throw that all away because you think there's some sort of crazy conspiracy going on right now? I saw Cecilia's last fight; she's completely fine and healthy!"

"You don't know what the Warbridge family is going to do to Cecilia once they get their hands on her!" he cried desperately, starting to fumble through his pockets. "Look! I didn't want to show you this but this *has* to prove it."

I snatched the crumpled picture from his shaking hand, still skeptical of his words until I saw who was in the picture. While blurry and hastily taken, there was no doubt it was Lady Vera talking to a man with a scar running down his face.

"Do you remember him? He's the one that tried to kidnap Cecilia!" Nico said, pointing frantically at the blurry, scarred man.

"That can't be... no, it's not. Listen, Nico, this is too blurry to tell. I won't—I can't discount everything Lady Vera has done for me because of one blurry photo," I responded, handing the photo back to him. Despite my words, I knew the picture showed Lady Vera next to the man who had attempted to kidnap Cecilia. But saying it out loud would mean—what, exactly?

My hands trembled and my heart thrashed against my ribcage. I needed water.

I fumbled with the cap of the clear bottle and took a long drink. Instantly, I could feel myself calming down, feeling better—stronger, more clear-

headed.

Lady Vera was right. I needed to take care of my body, to stay hydrated. Taking a deep breath, I turned to Nico. "If any of what you've said to me today is a lie, you could be sentenced to life in prison. If it's true, and anyone finds out, then you'll likely be killed instead. As a friend, I'll pretend this never happened, but you're out of your mind if you think I'm going to participate."

Nico fell to his knees, looking up at me in desperation. "Grey! Please—" "I'll help you, Headmaster Wilbeck, and Cecilia by doing what I've been working for all this time—by becoming king." I turned away, walking towards the door. "Now if you'll excuse me, my match is about to start."

The referee—a slim, middle-aged man with a well-trimmed gray beard—was dressed in a formal black suit. He kept his hands behind his back as he spoke. "Will the two finalists step up onto the stage?"

The sound of my footsteps seemed strangely amplified as I ascended the short stairway leading onto the square dueling platform, and I could hear her footsteps from the other side of the platform, just a half-step behind mine, like an echo. The limited audience allowed to be present had been quieted and were now anxiously waiting for the duel to begin.

Using a breathing technique that Lady Vera had taught me, I calmed myself as I stepped up onto the reinforced platform. However, watching as my opponent and old friend stepped onto the platform opposite me, I couldn't help but shudder.

The very air around her seemed to be charged, and my skin tingled uncomfortably. I peered at her and realized there was a visible aura of pure ki around her. It was stunning. Could a weapon even penetrate ki condensed in such a way?

At that moment it became clear how outclassed I was. No one in this tournament ever had a chance to defeat her and become the next king. Cecilia

seemed to know that; she absolutely radiated confidence. She was paler than the last time I'd seen her—more sickly—and the dark bags under her eyes hinted at how tired she was, but her demeanor was all arrogance.

"In honor of the competition, the two finalists will pay their respects to the reigning king of Etharia, King Ivan Craft," the referee announced, gesturing towards the highest podium.

I bowed deeply in the traditional manner before turning back to my opponent. Cecilia, on the other hand, barely dipped her head before turning her gaze to me.

For a moment, time seemed to slow. Nico's words echoed in my mind, shaking my already-diminished confidence. Nico had said from the beginning that Cecilia had been captured by our own government, but I couldn't believe him. Cecilia looked as if she'd *chosen* to leave him in order to pursue the kingship—exactly like I had done.

The referee stepped between the two of us. "Finalists. Show your respects to one another."

He walked back and I bowed in respect, as was traditional, but Cecilia kept her chin high and looked down at me. The referee ignored it and signaled for us to ready our weapons.

I unsheathed my weapon with a flourish, drawing confidence from the noise it made as it cut through the air around me, then stopped with its gleaming tip pointed directly at Cecilia. I readied my mind for battle, focusing all of my attention on her—she was just another opponent I had to defeat.

Cecilia's expression remained unchanged as she raised an empty hand in a simple, elegant gesture. The ki weapon that formed was flawless in detail, and its manifestation had been near-instant.

There was a chorus of stifled gasps and murmurs from the audience. I didn't blame them; it was impressive as hell. The referee maintained his professionalism, though, displaying no change in attitude as he signaled the technicians to raise the ki barrier.

As soon as the translucent dome fully encased the arena, the referee swung down his hand. "Let the duel commence!"

Throwing aside the hesitation clouding my mind, I burst forward, brandishing my ki-clad sword, but jerked to a halt mid-dash. Every fiber in my body screamed at me not to get any closer to Cecilia, though she remained unmoving.

I switched tactics, choosing instead to carefully circle around her. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of my face.

Two things happened near-instantaneously. First, a grimace crossed Cecilia's pale face. Second, she released a flurry of piercing ki strikes with one stroke.

My eyes widened in shock. Whether by luck or instinct, I managed to weave through Cecilia's casual onslaught as scores of piercing strikes were projected from her ki weapon, inching closer with every parry and dodge, until I was in range to strike.

I feinted with a downward cut before pivoting and spinning behind her, catching Cecilia across the back of her knees with a wide slash. The attack should have caused her legs to buckle, but instead a sharp wave of pain ran down my arm.

"Weak," Cecilia muttered under her breath.

I refused to let her goad me into doing something stupid. Repositioning myself, I struck Cecilia with a quick series of sweeping attacks faster than the eye could follow.

But I couldn't pierce the thick shroud of ki enveloping her tiny body.

Cecilia responded, stabbing her translucent rapier down at my feet.

Though I dodged her rapier easily enough, I wasn't ready for the reinforced ground to shatter from the impact of Cecilia's strike, sending tremors through the floor and throwing up a cloud of dust all around us. Before I could react, her hand grabbed my wrist and anchored me in place with a strength that seemed impossible for such a small body.

"I had expected more from you, Grey," Cecilia said with an air of

disappointment. "I know how hard you've trained, what you've sacrificed. It's not enough."

"Shut it!" I spat, jerking my hand free from her grasp. Nico's statements about Cecilia being held against her will and being forced to compete seemed like total bullshit at this point. Her attitude was just like those self-important candidates from affluent families, except she had more ki in her little toe than most of the other candidates had in their whole bodies.

I moved away from the dissipating cloud of dust just in time to duck under a blast of pure ki. The barrier surrounding the dueling arena trembled from the impact, and the referee's eyes went wide in surprise.

Moments later, Cecilia shot forward, both hands gripping her ki weapon, poised to strike. I dodged the thrust, but the aura surrounding her ki weapon was sharp enough to leave a deep cut across the side of my neck, drawing blood.

Cecilia moved in a flurry, her glowing blade turning into an indistinguishable blur of light as she recklessly attacked me.

Each time I parried her ki weapon, sparks flew and chips appeared along the length of my blade, even though I was reinforcing it with ki. I knew I couldn't keep that up forever, or my weapon would disintegrate in my hand, so I relied on my own body to avoid her blows instead. I ducked, spun, weaved, and pivoted at a speed that only I could pull off with such accuracy and timing. Her attacks were monstrously strong and fast, but her swordplay wasn't on the same level as mine.

Suddenly, Cecilia's weapon blinked out of sight as she positioned her nowempty palm directly in my face.

Once again, my body screamed at me that I was in danger, and I reacted by grabbing her outstretched arm and pulling it away while leveraging it to position myself to her side.

A cone of glowing energy was released from Cecilia's open palm, right where I once stood.

"You've gotten fast, I'll admit," she said, her tone casual, as if this were merely a training bout.

Cecilia's ki-clad elbow struck directly at my sternum, launching me several feet backwards and knocking the wind out of me.

While I was still lying flat on my back, my mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water as I tried desperately to suck in air, Cecilia came sprinting towards me with a newly-formed ki weapon in her hand.

I desperately tried to reach for my sword, but it was a few inches out of reach. I clawed at the ground, trying to drag my aching body to my only chance at coming out of this alive, but it was already too late. Cecilia's shadow swept over me and I could see the glimmer of her weapon.

There was nothing more I could do except close my eyes and wait for the blow that would end the match—perhaps even end my life.

But the pain never came. Cecilia's ki-sword buried itself into the ground inches away from my face, and the impact once again destroyed the reinforced flooring beneath me, sending a shockwave of pain through my body.

Cecilia's hard eyes peered into my own. "That's once that you would've died."

"Enough!" I yelled. I threw a ki-infused punch at her knee, which she dodged, but the force of my blow had thrown her off balance and carried me far enough to grab my sword. With one hand, I shoved myself away from the ground, turning and using the momentum to deliver a back-hand strike to Cecilia's waist, channeling every ounce of ki I could muster. My blade couldn't cut through the protective shroud of ki wrapped around her, but the force did manage to knock her aside.

Cecilia twisted her body, pirouetting back into her ready stance with a confident smirk. It was a look I'd never seen on her kindly face before. Nico really was delusional if he thought everything had been forced onto her by the government.

I gripped the sword in my right hand, withdrawing the ki that had been protecting my body. If I wanted to defeat her, I wouldn't be able to do so by wasting my precious ki on defense.

Noticing this, Cecilia withdrew her weapon, letting the glowing rapier fizzle out of existence.

She settled into an offensive stance and gestured for me to come. She didn't say anything, but she didn't need to. She didn't even see me as a threat, igniting in me an anger and newfound determination to defeat her at all cost.

Letting out a roar, I imbued ki to my legs in explosive pulses, matching it to my stride. I reached her in three steps at a speed that caught even her by surprise. I swung my sword upward, hoping to at least throw her off balance, but Cecilia stood still and let her ki barrier soak up the brunt of my attack.

Her hand, coated in a thick layer of ki, clamped down on the sharp edges of my reinforced blade.

She pulled on the sword, pulling me along with it, and slapped me across the face with the back of her hand.

I had managed to protect my face at the last second, but I was still sent tumbling to the ground. Getting back up on my feet, I was immediately met with a barrage of attacks from Cecilia as she swung my own sword at me.

"We've both worked for this," Cecilia said, her voice low and distant, "but I'm just the better contender. If I have to leave you and Nico behind to achieve my goal, I will."

The mention of Nico's name brought forth another explosive wave of anger. Despite how crazy his conclusions had been, he had done everything because he cared about Cecilia—loved her even.

"Shut up!" I roared. Enveloping my hand in ki, I sidestepped her next downward slash—the end of her attack pattern—and parried the blade so it would get buried in the ground.

Even with my chipped sword, the ki she had imbued around it was a strong enough attack to split the reinforced flooring and get stuck.

I immediately followed up with a powerful punch across her jaw and another just below her ribs.

My knuckles felt like they had hit a concrete wall, but the blow made Cecilia stagger for just an instant, which was enough time for me to wrench my sword free of the ground.

At that exact moment, an explosion rocked the arena, surrounding the entire dueling platform in clouds of dust and debris. The translucent barrier surrounding the dueling arena quivered, flickered, then disappeared. A chorus of screams and shouts washed over me, followed by the cloud of dust.

The referee, momentarily distracted by the commotion, turned to us, waving at us to stop the duel.

I stood still for a moment, confused, but a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye drew my attention back to Cecilia.

"This duel isn't over!" she cried out as she dashed towards me.

She let loose with a flurry of swings and thrusts with her newly-formed ki weapon, unleashing sharp crescents of energy that bombarded the ground around me, gouging divots into the floor and causing even more dust and debris to fly into the air.

Gripping my sword with both hands, I infused the remaining ki I had left into its blade and prayed for it to endure one more attack. Within the smokescreen of dust obscuring my vision, I saw only Cecilia's faint shadow, leaping through the air.

I let out a primal roar, raising my sword and driving its sharpened tip straight into Cecilia's shadowy figure with all of my might, clenching my jaw against the impact, expecting my sword to smash into her ki shield. The recoil never came. Instead I watched as my sword slid deep into Cecilia's chest.

I felt her weight falling into me, her hot blood running down my hands and arms. She was pressed to me, the hilt of my sword between us, her thin arms wrapped around me like an embrace.

Very quiet, her breath ragged and bubbling, she said, "I'm sorry, Grey.

This... was the... only way."

I let go of my sword and felt the hilt press into my sternum as she sagged against me. "W-what—why?"

"As long as... I live... Nico will be... imprisoned—used against me."

I stumbled back, and Cecilia fell on top of me. To my horror, the blade sunk deeper into her and she let out a pained gasp.

"No... no, this can't be..." I sputtered, unable to form the rest of the sentence as I choked back the sobs forming in my throat.

I held her in my arms until she stopped breathing and fell limp.

"No! How? What have you done?" Lady Vera screamed from somewhere nearby.

I turned my head towards the sound of the voice. The dust had started to clear, and I could make out two figures, one male and one female. Both were in military armor, faces covered by cloth masks. However, the male had taken off his goggles, revealing two different colored eyes.

In any other situation, perhaps I would've reacted differently. I had just found one of the men responsible for Headmaster Wilbeck's death. I had also just heard Lady Vera's unmistakable voice and was sure that, behind the mask of the female assailant beside him, I would see her face as well.

Nico had been right, but that didn't matter to me right now. I had killed a friend. Not only that, I had killed the woman my best friend loved.

The world seemed silent as I watched the assassin with one brown eye and one green eye try to pull Lady Vera away and escape.

The referee and the judges frantically made their way towards us while the guards ran around shouting orders and threatening people, trying to control the mayhem.

And then, near the entrance to the arena, I saw Nico as his expression crumpled in horror and despair.

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EXPIRED ARRANGEMENT

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Long after the sun had set and night crept in, bringing a bitter chill along with it, I sat mindlessly by the fire. Above me, the stars, so similar to those of my previous world, glimmered like crystal dust across the horizon.

Virion had eventually fallen back asleep. His body was in a severely weakened state and his mana core had been on the cusp of shattering. Bairon still hadn't woken up. His injuries from the Scythe were much more severe than I had originally guessed.

Hours must've passed since I had last moved from my seat. After the anger had fizzled out, the plans to save my family and Tess—the plans for revenge and justice—had all faded away, drawn into a thoughtless void.

So I sat on the ground, running my fingers idly through the soft dirt beneath me, no idea where to go from here. The Alacryans now had control over the castle—and with it, the ability to access the rest of the teleportation gates throughout the entire continent. It didn't take a genius to guess that they would assault Xyrus City next, then proceed across the continent, slowly destroying the forces of Dicathen. The Lances were scattered, sure to be picked off one at a time. Considering Virion's current state, we didn't even have a leader. Once the Lances fell, the people would be defenseless.

Leaves crunched behind me. Sylvie had come out from the earthen shelter, but one glance was all it took for me to realize that it wasn't my bond, despite

her physical form.

"Let's take a walk, shall we?" she said, and her voice was the same, but the cadence and pitch were alien.

Powerless, out of ideas, and at the edge of hope, there was nothing I could do but follow. For five minutes we walked, accompanied only by the snapping of twigs and the crunch of foliage under our feet. The myriad emotions within me congealed into a single black thought: *This is the creature responsible for it all—all the misery, all the deaths.* I wished then that I could reach out and pull Agrona from Sylvie's small form, wrap my hands around his throat, and squeeze...

"Whew!" Sylvie huffed, taking a seat on a fallen log. "Controlling this body even for simple things like walking is hard work."

I fell to my knees before the ruler of Alacrya, the leader of the Vritra Clan.

Sylvie's face contorted into an expression of surprise and frustration, then quickly relaxed. "My, what an unexpected turn of events. Has the hero, the once mighty king, admitted defeat?"

"Agrona, you've made your point. Please, let Tessia and my family go." I wanted to project my confidence, my rage... I wanted to make it a threat, but it came out a plea.

"Why?"

I dug my fingers into the dirt. "Because I accept your deal. I'll remove myself from this war."

Agrona chortled, lifting Sylvie's delicate hand to cover her mouth. Her topaz eyes twinkled in delight. "You think our deal still stands, Grey? You were the only unpredictable variable, the only being on Dicathen that had even the slightest chance of hindering me, but as you said yourself, I've made my point. Even you—with all of your inherent gifts and advantages—only amounted to *this*," Agrona snarled, suddenly agitated. "The very fact that you haven't even told your bond that I'm able to possess her body tells me that you were always expecting to lose, right from the very beginning."

"Then what... what do you want?" I demanded. "Why did you go through all this trouble to talk again?"

"Again, asking questions I have no obligation to answer." Agrona's expressions on Sylvie's face were so foreign that I had trouble reading them. Was that a look of concern? Were his brows knit in worry? I couldn't tell. "I don't expect to have the pleasure of meeting like this again, so... goodbye." "W-wait, what about my—"

Sylvie slumped forward, unconscious.

Screaming, I slammed a mana-clad fist into the ground. The resulting boom crashed through the quiet forest like thunder, and dozens of birds burst into flight from the surrounding trees.

"A-Arthur?" Sylvie moaned, weary and disoriented. "What's going on?"

I let the mental barrier, which I had been honing and fortifying specifically to shield Sylvie from the knowledge of Agrona's power over her, fall, allowing my bond to read my thoughts and memories unobstructed.

"Ever since you broke the seal that Sylvia had placed on you, Agrona has been able to take over your consciousness for short periods of time."

Sylvie's expression transitioned quickly from confusion, to fear, to disgust. Her mouth opened, as if to ask me a question, then snapped closed when she had found the answer in my mind.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Standing shakily, Sylvie walked slowly over to me. Her thoughts and emotions were hidden from me. Since I was still on my knees, we stood face to face. Her right hand came up and slapped me across the cheek with inhuman force, nearly knocking me backwards. The blow would have broken a normal person's neck.

"There. We're even now." Sylvie leaned forward, wrapping her arms around my neck and burying her face into my shoulder.

I gripped my bond back tightly, so afraid to lose her as well. I was grateful when she let me back in, let me feel what she felt, so I could know she didn't

hate me for what I'd done.

Not only had I lost the battle, I had fallen to my knees before my enemy and begged. Sylvie understood the anger, guilt, sorrow, and humiliation burning me up from the inside, just like all those other poor souls who died in the castle. Yet, the very fact that I could share these feelings with Sylvie, and that she accepted them, was enough for me to move forward.

When Sylvie and I had eventually returned to our camp, we stayed together outside, guarding the shelter that Bairon and Virion were sleeping in. At some point I must've fallen asleep as well, because Sylvie had to prod me mentally, telling me to wake up. My eyes snapped open and I jumped up, only to see Virion and Bairon having a heated argument with Sylvie's small human body interposed between them.

"We have to go back! Our troops need us, Commander!" Bairon growled, wobbling slightly as he struggled to stay upright.

"And do what?" Virion snapped. "It's too late." The commander leaned against the earthen tent for support. His eyes turned towards me, noticing that I was awake. "Good. Arthur, we should get ready to leave."

"Leave? Where?" I asked, confused.

"Our *commander* says that the war is lost," Bairon cut in, his voice dripping with condescension. "It seems as though his injury from fighting the Scythe has rendered him incapable of leading."

Virion pierced the Lance with a menacing glare. "The war is lost, Bairon. With the castle in their hands, they have access to all the teleportation gates throughout the entire continent. It's only a matter of time before they're able to figure out how to fully control it."

"So what did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Camus, Buhnd, Hester, and I—along with a few other trusted friends—constructed a shelter where we could take refuge if the war went poorly...

Though, I don't think any of us ever expected an outcome like this."

The thought of Elder Buhnd sent a sharp wave of remorse through my gut, but I swallowed it. Buhnd had always wanted to retire and rest; maybe where he was now, he would be able to do that.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"You can't be serious," Bairon interrupted. "You are a Lance. We have a duty to uphold, for the sake of our people. Are we going to abandon them—leave them all to die?"

"We're not abandoning anyone!" Virion's tone took on some of his old authority. "But if we charge blindly back into the battle, and any one of us dies, we would leave no hope for the future!"

"The future..." Sylvie echoed.

"Yes! The future. We need to recuperate if we want a chance to take back Dicathen," Virion said seriously.

Bairon's shoulders slumped, and, for the first time, I saw the Lance let his mantle of authority and power fall, and he seemed so fragile and vulnerable.

"So... there's nothing we can do right now to win this war?"

"We need to stay alive and gather the Lances," Virion replied, giving Bairon a fatherly, understanding look. "It's the best chance we've got."

'What do you think we should do?' Sylvie asked, knowing that my thoughts were still filled with Tessia and my family.

Steeling myself for the arguments I knew would come, I said, "Sylvie and I will take the two of you to wherever this secret shelter is, but after that we're going to look for my mom, my sister, and Tess."

"Arthur..." Virion's voice was hollow, pained. His eyes shone with tears, though I was surprised he had any left to shed. I saw in those eyes the fear and despair that threatened to overrun me, but, as it had with Sylvie, sharing these emotions only hardened my resolve.

I held up my hand, showing Virion the plain silver ring that Vincent had given me. My mother still wore its twin. "This is an artifact connected with a ring that my mother has. I know she's still alive—I can feel it—and I won't

abandon her to the Vritra."

The truth was, my mother could have taken her ring off at any time, or it could have been removed by force. With the constant threat of death, I had started removing my own when I went to battle since my parents had been engaged in their own battles. There were also the Phoenix Wyrm pendants my mother and Ellie both wore, which would protect them from even a killing blow, though it would only work once.

"I need to do this," I said, "but I'm not going to disappear. I'll direct any Dicathians I meet back to the shelter, and I will learn everything I can about what the Alacryans are up to."

"I understand," Virion whispered, closing his eyes.

Quietly, I got to work, collapsing the earthen shelter and erasing all signs that we had ever stopped here.

"So, where is this shelter, Commander Virion?" Bairon asked.

Virion grabbed a stick and proceeded to draw a rough map of Dicathen in the dirt, indicating our position with a circle. "The refuge that we had found is near the southern coast of Darv, just along the Grand Mountains—"

"Found?" I cut in. "I thought you said you and the elders had built it."

"We found a cave system—by all appearances, man-made. We built on top of it and hid it more thoroughly."

"Well, how are we going to traverse the near-thousand miles it'll take to reach this shelter? We can't fly; it's too dangerous." Bairon was staring down at the map, his shoulders drooping again.

"You're right, but it'll be just as risky to try and take a teleportation gate to a city within Dary. We could fly only at night—"

"How about this," I cut in again. Borrowing Virion's stick, I drew a jagged line running through Sapin. "We're about an hour's hike away from the Sehz River, which flows all the way down through Darv and into the ocean. We can keep to the river until nightfall, then travel the rest by sky."

"There are cities built along the Sehz though," Sylvie countered. "Won't we

be a bit noticeable traveling on the water?"
"Who said anything about traveling *on* the water?"

"This is fascinating," Virion marveled, watching the aquatic animals and mana beasts pass by from the top of Sylvie's back as we surged through the water. I was busy concentrating on the multiple layers of spells I had to continually manage in order to make our underwater journey possible.

I had to create two pockets of air, one over Sylvie's back to allow Virion, Bairon, and I to breath and stay dry, and another around Sylvie's head. While we weren't submerged deep enough to have to worry about the water pressure, it did mean that keeping the air pockets stable was quite a bit harder.

To speed our journey, I was using water magic to push us faster, and Sylvie had fashioned a fin made of mana that connected to the end of her tail. It might not have been as fast as flying, but we were making great distance.

Though Virion seemed to be enjoying this new mode of transportation, the same couldn't be said of Bairon. The poor Lance was latched so tightly to Sylvie's back that, even through her tough scales, she complained to me about the pain.

"How did you even think of such an idea as traveling underwater?" Virion asked, twisting left and right to see everything around us. For a moment, I was able to see the old Virion, the man I had grown up with back when I had first shown up in Elenoir with Tessia.

"Did you forget that I'm pretty smart?" I teased, avoiding his question.

After the initial amazement had worn off, we settled into a brooding silence. Aside from the occasional diversion up to the surface so I could refill our air bubbles, there was little to distract us from our own thoughts, and the underwater atmosphere functioned like an isolation chamber, filtering out the noise of the world around us and amplifying our own internal voices.

The water around us grew dark as soon as the sun started its descent. Once I

was confident we could fly unseen, I signaled for Sylvie to take off. There was a peculiar moment where the air bubbles maintained their shape after we left the river, billowing around us in the wind as they shed the last droplets of water that clung to them before I withdrew my mana, letting them disperse with a faint *pop*.

Will you be okay flying with them on your back? I asked Sylvie, sliding off of her scales and soaring through the air beside her. Virion and Bairon were still barely able to use mana after their fight against the Scythe and would tire quickly if they had to fly under their own power.

'I'll manage,' she replied, beating her powerful wings to accelerate.

Below us, the shadowy landscape began turning into desert as we crossed over the border into Darv. I took one last look back, trying not to think about the battles going on throughout Sapin and Elenoir, and the chaos our troops were facing as they were suddenly left without their commander.

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HIDDEN IN SAND

"Here! We have to LAND HERE!" Virion suddenly called out as we flew over the vast deserts of Darv.

"There's nothing here though!" Bairon argued, his head turning left and right.

I looked around, shielding my eyes from the sharp gusts of wind, but below us were just a few odd boulders and lots and lots of sand.

It had been easier to navigate above the clouds, as we could map our relative location using the various peaks of the Grand Mountains as our compass, but now it was impossible to see the range of mountains, or much of anything else, because of the sand-laden winds. It would have been nearly impossible to navigate if not for the pearlescent shrouds of mana I kept around Virion, Bairon, and myself to protect from the wind and sand.

Sylvie descended, taking Virion and Bairon to the ground, and I followed behind.

"Flying through that was... tough," Sylvie muttered after switching to her human form. She wore all black as usual, but her scales had formed into a thick shawl that covered most of her face and body to combat the harsh winds.

"You did well, Lady Sylvie," Virion said, peering through the swirling sands.

"It's nearly impossible to fly this far south with the powerful winds here.

"Perhaps for mana beasts," Sylvie replied flatly.

"Ah—Of course. My apologies..." Virion muttered, still scouring the area around us.

"So where is this refuge of yours?" I asked.

Virion pointed at a tall column of stone I hadn't noticed previously. "We have to head over there."

"That thing?" Bairon pointed, squinting to see it. "It's a bit conspicuous for a hidden shelter, isn't it?"

"That *thing* isn't the shelter, it's the landmark Buhnd made to mark the shelter's location," Virion corrected, bending forward against the wind and walking toward the standing stone.

Once close enough to see the pillar properly, Virion pointed to a deep gash in its center and said, "We start from here. With your heel against the pillar, we take 35,651 steps forward."

Bairon, Sylvie, and I exchanged glances before looking back to Virion. "Really? This is the only way to find the shelter?"

"For now, yes," Virion answered. "The shelter itself branches off into various tunnels that haven't been explored, though, so I'm hoping that more entrances may be discovered."

Sylvie looked from the pillar to Virion. "If this is the only way to get to the shelter, it'll be almost impossible to bring normal civilians here discreetly."

Sylvie was right. If we could only bring a few people to the shelter, there was no point. I could tell that Virion realized this too. He turned away, gazing in the direction we were expected to walk.

"Well, we've come all this way. Let's go to this shelter first, then we can talk about logistics," I suggested, resting a hand on Virion's shoulder. "Lead the way, Gramps."

It was a rough journey. Virion walked heel to toe while I kept count, so we couldn't fly or use any shortcuts. Under normal circumstances, such a trip would have required significant preparation. However, for a group consisting of two Lances, a silver core mage, and an asura, we were able to get by. Our

mana-barriers kept us safe from the cold desert air and sharp winds, and we were able to draw fresh water from the atmosphere when we grew thirsty.

"I can take over from here, Commander," Bairon said. Virion had just taken step 10,968.

"No. Your feet are larger," I pointed out. "It'll throw us off."

Bairon glared at me, but I ignored him and signaled for Virion to continue walking. We travelled in silence. Sylvie even blocked her mental link so she wouldn't accidentally break my concentration with her thoughts—or perhaps so she wouldn't have to hear me monotonously counting numbers in my head.

Though the journey was long and tedious, I found the counting to be meditative; I cleared my mind of all else and focused on keeping track of our steps.

We did stop every few hours so that Virion and Bairon could stretch and rest. They were still recovering, and, while their bodies had healed, both men seemed somewhat diminished, and the trek through the sands was taxing. The sand pulled at our feet, and the wind always seemed against us, regardless of the direction we faced.

Sylvie had checked on the state of their damaged mana cores early on in the journey, but it seemed like the only way they'd be able to recover would be by giving them time to rest. Virion seemed to have come to terms with his injuries, but Bairon's frustration with his limitations was clear; the Lance kept pushing himself to manipulate mana, infusing his legs with mana to better withstand our long march through the sand and keeping his own mana shroud up, yet a constant litany of frustrated curses followed us as we marched. Though both Bairon and Virion tried, neither of them were able to utilize elemental magic.

After another ten thousand steps, Virion's pace was faltering, and the old elf started to shiver.

"Virion," I said firmly, gripping his arm and sending a wave of heat through

his body. His cheeks immediately reddened as the blood rushed back to his pale face. "Let me know when you're getting cold."

"T-thank you," he replied with a weary smile. "And don't worry, I'm tougher than I look, brat."

I watched as he walked on. His once broad shoulders seemed so narrow and weak as he hunched forward. For the first time in my memory, Virion appeared old.

So continued our long, slow march through the desert, illuminated only by the pale moon and stars. We couldn't even cast a light for fear that a Scythe or retainer might be nearby. Though it felt as though we would never reach our destination, finally, I reached the last number.

"We're here," I announced skeptically. Around us was only sand, as far as my mana-enhanced vision could see.

Bairon, Sylvie, and I all looked at Virion. Our commander was bent over, holding out a white, pentagonal medallion and sweeping it back and forth.

"What is that?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but we found several of these inside the castle when we first discovered it. It seems to be a relic from the mages of the past," Virion answered, not taking his eyes off the sandy ground.

"You mean the same ancient mages that had built both the floating city of Xyrus as well as the castle?" Bairon asked, glancing around us nervously.

Virion nodded and continued to walk in circles, waving the white medallion in his hand as if it were a magnifying glass.

I'd heard about these ancient mages now and again. Many of the previous artifacts that helped the Dicathen civilization grow came from the ancient mages. It's safe to say that, without the teleportation gates and the mana-rich atmosphere of the floating city of Xyrus, most of Dicathen's lands would've remained untamed.

Many artificers and researchers believed that the ancient mages had either discovered the technology to transport themselves to another world, or had

wiped themselves out while conducting a large-scale experiment of some sort. Based on the lack of evidence supporting either of these theories, most of Dicathen's scholars had more or less given up on finding out what had happened to our ancestors, according to what I'd read.

Virion had been at it for quite some time, and Bairon, Sylvie, and I were growing restless. The old elf let out a frustrated grunt and turned back to us. "It's not here."

"What do you mean it's not here?" I asked, en edge of frustration creeping into my voice. "You said that taking 35,651 steps straight while facing away from that gash on the pillar would lead us to the shelter."

"I know what I said!" he snapped.

"Then what do we do?" I knew Virion was just trying to do what he thought best by relocating to this shelter, but I couldn't help but chafe at the wasted time spent trudging through the desert when I should be searching for my family.

"I don't think we have a choice. We'll have to start over again," Virion said, his voice falling and his eyes turning away, staring back the way we had come.

"No," I said forcefully, my patience at its limit. "We just wasted the better half of a day counting our footsteps because *you* wanted to find this shelter. There has to be another way to get in."

"Well there *isn't*!" he shot back, walking towards me, his eyes suddenly blazing. "You think I *want* to be out here after my entire family was taken from me? Huh? If it was solely up to what I want, I'd be marching with my men to face the Scythe and die in battle—then, at least I would feel like I'd done what I could to avenge them. But that's not what a leader does, Arthur. When everyone else has given up, I'm the one that has to hold onto a semblance of hope, and fight for the future!"

He stabbed a gaunt finger into my chest. "So don't you *dare* say this is what I 'want."

I stood there, speechless, as Virion walked away. Bairon's expression mirrored my own, and even the howling winds seemed to fall quiet.

"Wait," Sylvie said, breaking the silence. She turned to me. "I noticed this earlier, but I couldn't quite figure out what I was feeling. I think the artifact that Virion is holding influences aether. Arthur, can you activate Realmheart?"

I did as she asked, eager to try anything if it would prevent us from having to take this arduous hike again. Igniting Sylvia's dragon will, I felt a sharp pain spread out of my core and through my body and limbs from the backlash of overusing my mana during my battle with the Scythe. However, as my vision shifted to monochrome and specks of color began lighting up the world around me, I felt a jolt of excitement. Amidst the tiny motes of yellow, green, blue, red, and purple, I found something in the distance.

We must've shifted off course during our hike here; several hundred yards to my left, there was a cluster of purple aether that shone like a beacon.

"Sylvie, you absolute genius! I found it. I found it!" I grinned around at them like a fool, my frustration and anger washed away in an instant.

Sylvie's eyes brightened at my words and thoughts. She immediately transformed into her draconic form and plucked both Virion and Bairon from the ground with her front claws.

I flew ahead, just above the ground, the speed of my passage leaving a furrow in the sand below me. It took only moments to reach the circular array of purple motes.

"It's here," I said, pointing directly to the center of the array.

Virion disentangled himself from Sylvie's claws and hurriedly scrambled to me, holding the artifact tightly as he placed it over the sand. A look of relief passed over his face, as if he had just set down a great weight.

"You're right. This is the place," he said, looking at the white medallion on top of the sand.

Bairon arrived too, his brow raised in doubt. "Nothing is happen—"

The medallion began to vibrate. Its vibrations caused pulsating waves in the sand around it, spreading several yards out in all directions. The pulses got stronger until the rolling sand formed small waves.

Sylvie and I exchanged wary glances, but before we could do any more, the ground below us sank and we fell through the sand.

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PASSAGE OF TIME

Instinctively, I shrouded myself in a sphere of wind, keeping the sand away as I gently floated down to the ground. Sylvie did something similar, enveloping herself in a black sphere that protected her and slowed her descent.

Virion and Bairon, with their cores damaged and their magic largely unusable, didn't fare as well. Virion was at the epicenter of our descent and so slid down the large mountain of sand that had accumulated below him. He ended up sitting on his rump on the floor, dirty but uninjured. Bairon, despite his lightning-enhanced reflexes, fell several yards before striking the mountain of sand, then bounced down head over heels. He yelled desperately, then must have got a mouthful of sand, because he broke out into a fit of choked coughing.

He flailed his arms like a drowning puppy for several moments before he realized he was on solid ground. Virion shook his head while Sylvie, who had emerged from her black sphere, turned away to hide her laughter.

Bairon spat out a mouthful of sand while glaring daggers at me. "You! Should a Lance be so selfish as to leave his—his commander to plunge down into unknown dangers like that?"

"I was in no danger, Bairon," Virion countered, dusting the sand off of his robe. "Now quit playing in the sand like a child."

Bairon's cheeks flushed in embarrassment, and he quickly bolted up to his

feet, wiping his sandy mouth and tongue on his sleeve as he coughed. Despite his spiteful glare, Bairon and I both knew that he couldn't do anything about it. With the state he was in right now, I could destroy him with a snap of my fingers—not that I'd want to, of course.

"Arthur," Sylvie said, her voice echoing slightly. "Look around."

Her words brought my attention back to the mysterious underground tunnel we were in. Although there were no visible sources of light, it was surprisingly easy to see.

"Are those glowing symbols runes? I've never seen anything like them," Bairon wondered aloud, his hand hovering over a rune that pulsed with faint light. "They must be runes, but I don't sense any fire or lightning affinity mana around them."

Sylvie brushed her hand over the runes, which seemed too perfect to be engraved by hand. "That's because it isn't powered by mana."

"What?" Bairon said, his brows furrowed in confusion. "That's impossible."

"No, she's right," I said, activating Realmheart Physique once more. Sylvie's thoughts had leaked into mine and I just had to verify it for myself. To my utter amazement, the entire cave lit up like a starry night, bathing the area in purple. "It's powered by aether."

My mind spun as I tried to make sense of this revelation. I ran through the conversation I'd had with Sylvie's grandmother, Lady Myre, in my head. Everything she had told me about aether being an entity that couldn't be manipulated like mana—but rather, influenced or coaxed into action—seemed directly contrary to what I could see in front of me. If aether wasn't something that could be confined and used, then what were we looking at? It seemed clear as day that someone or something had figured out how to do so.

"Let's keep going," Virion announced, taking the lead. "There's more of this down here."

Prying my eyes away from the runes, we continued to walk. Much like in the

desert above us, the air here was dry and stale. The only sounds came from our footsteps echoing through the tunnel. The floors were smooth and polished, and the ceiling above us rose as we made our way down the hallway, soon reaching so high that it became lost in darkness.

Despite Virion's familiarity with this place, I couldn't help but be cautious. My eyes darted left and right, looking for anything odd, but, except for the unusually high concentration of aether gathered here, there was nothing dangerous that I could sense.

'You're feeling uneasy here as well,' Sylvie noted, sticking close to me.

I think it's just because of all the aether here, and the runes... I thought aether only influenced time, space, and life?

'I suspect that the walls aren't just made of stone but some sort of living thing,' she responded.

I carefully touched the walls for the first time and realized that Sylvie was right. It wasn't stone as I had assumed; it felt more like a smooth tree trunk. So aether is giving this tree life?

'Your guess is as good as mine at this point. I may be able to utilize aether, but you can see the ambient mana; I have to go by my gut feeling.'

The straight passage seemed to go on forever, with no end in sight.

"How far away are we from reaching the actual shelter?" Bairon asked, sounding tired and impatient.

"I'm not sure. It hasn't been long since we arrived. Be patient," Virion replied.

Bairon's eyes widened. "Not long? Commander, it feels like I've been walking for nearly the entire day!"

"Bairon, aren't you exaggerating? I've got over a hundred years on you, and I'm also without mana right now, and I feel fine," Virion argued.

He was right; Bairon might've been exaggerating, but it did feel like I had been walking for quite some time. Yet, Virion—the weakest amongst us—seemed to be doing just fine.

Sylvie, how long have you been walking for? I asked, activating Realmheart again.

'Not more than an hour—wait, a few hours have passed for you?' she asked, reading my thoughts.

Can you try utilizing aether?

Picking up on my intentions, she replied, 'But I can't use it to control time.' I know. I don't think you have to, though.

Taking a deep breath, Sylvie began calling upon the ambient aether. Her body glowed with the faint purple light she gave off while using vivum to heal herself and her allies.

Immediately, a surreal sensation akin to falling in a dream tugged at my body—and then, as if I had really woken up, an indescribable clarity spread through my vision.

'Arthur, look behind you,' Sylvie said, shaken.

I looked back down the hallway; we had traveled barely thirty steps from the cavern we had arrived in.

Noticing that I had stopped, Bairon turned around as well. He immediately tensed, taking an involuntary step backwards. "Th-that's impossible. I've been walking for hours. How—what is going on?" Bairon demanded, turning back around and looking from me to Sylvie and back with wide, frightened eyes.

"My best guess is that these runes carry in them the power of aevum and spatium," I explained, gesturing to the intricate runes carved into the walls.

"Aevum and spatium?" Virion asked.

"Time and space aether arts," Sylvie answered absentmindedly. My bond had a faraway look, and I could feel the confusion within her.

Bairon scoffed and shook his head. "No, that makes no sense! Shouldn't these time and space 'aether arts' affect us all the same way? How is it that Commander Virion only felt like he'd walked for an hour while it feels like I've been journeying for more than a day!"

I thought for a moment, and my gaze drifted to the white medallion, still clutched tightly in Virion's hand.

"Because of that." I pointed to the artifact. "This is a trap! Anyone entering without a medallion must get caught in some kind of time-pit, giving whoever built this place enough time to react to intruders. I bet that having the artifact is enough to make passage through easier."

"That doesn't explain why you two weren't affected," Bairon retorted, obviously upset.

Though I couldn't blame him for his anger, I still wanted to reach out and slap him. I could feel Sylvie encouraging me to be patient, however, so I let out a deep, calming breath before continuing. "Most likely, it's because Sylvie is naturally inclined to aether that she experienced only minor effects. For me, I can only guess it's because I'm sensitive to aether. I was still affected but not nearly as much as you."

Bairon looked like he wanted to continue arguing, but apparently he couldn't think of anything else to say. After a long moment of silence, Virion stepped in.

"Come on. Let's continue," Virion urged. "With Lady Sylvie using aether, the effects of the time and space aether don't seem to be affecting us."

Sylvie took the lead, continually utilizing aether to suppress the time-magic effecting Bairon and me. As we walked, I tried to wrap my head around what exactly had happened. I had so many questions... How had the ancient mages succeeded in harnessing aether arts to such an extent that they could devise traps like this? Was the time and space manipulation isolated to each person individually, or were we in some sort of contained area?

Were the Indrath Clan's teachings about aether wrong? Did these ancient mages originate from the Indrath Clan—and like the Vritra Clan, flee from Epheotus due to a difference in beliefs? Or were these ancient mages actually lessers that had learned how to harness aether?

As my mind swam with questions, I continued to look behind us to make sure

we were actually making progress. Bairon did so as well, even more on edge than everybody else. After a while, something luminescent appeared in the distance. The bright glow grew larger as we approached it.

"Finally!" Bairon muttered from the back.

He wasn't the only one relieved. With the end finally in sight, our strides became longer and our steps more confident. When we reached the end of the corridor, the hallway opened into a massive cavern with an elegant coved ceiling carved from the natural stone. Pillars—each the width of three grown men—supported the huge underground structure. Bright orbs of warm light lined the walls, exposing the awe-inspiring expanse in front of us.

On the one hand, it reminded me of the cavern systems that the dwarves had made for their underground cities, but at the same time, those crude structures couldn't even begin to describe the splendor and architectural meticulousness of this sanctuary.

The cavern was large enough to hold a small town, and the various tunnels that led out of the cavern reminded me of highways. Running through the entire expanse was a wide stream that glimmered under the light-orbs. There were several multileveled structures on either side of the stream and bridges that crossed the width of the stream at various points throughout the cavern.

In the midst of all this, however, my attention was drawn to a flickering light that I spotted coming from within the second level of one of the buildings just by the stream.

Sylvie and I exchanged glances, understanding each other with just a thought. I turned back to Bairon, who was still taking in the sight in front of us, and Virion, who was catching his breath.

I waved to catch their attention and pointed to the building with the light. Their expressions both grew fierce, all signs of fatigue wiped away in the face of a potential intruder into this place, our last sanctuary in Dicathen.

I took the lead as we descended a set of stairs leading to the ground. We weaved silently through the empty stone structures. I took a mental note to

explore these buildings later on. There may be clues hidden about regarding the identity of these ancient mages. However, our first task was to find out who had lit a fire this far below the ground in a secret location.

Arriving at the building, I could hear the quiet muttering of several voices, but the windows were covered by glass, and, even with enhanced hearing, I couldn't make out how many voices there were.

Gesturing for everyone to lean in close, I whispered, "I hear at least three different voices, but we should assume there are more than that."

After receiving a nod from Sylvie, Bairon, and Virion, we circled the perimeter until we found the entrance to the building. There wasn't a door, so we inched closer, keeping our backs against the wall until we were just beside the opening.

I held up five fingers and slowly counted down. Once my last finger fell, I pivoted to face the entrance, mana coiled around my body.

I had expected to meet a guard keeping watch, and I was right...

My eyes widened and my jaw fell slack. "Boo?!"

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RECONCILIATION

THE TOWERING STATURE, the dark-brown fur, the tuft of white on the chest, along with two spots of white just above two intelligent eyes—it was unmistakable. This was Boo.

Boo must've been thinking the same thing I was, because the thousand-pound bear charged at me on all fours, letting out a happy grunt and tackling me. Looming over me, Boo revealed a toothy grin before slobbering all over my face with his long, soft tongue.

I struggled under the mana beast's weight as he pinned me down to the ground and slathered me with affection. "Boo—Ack! Stop! Okay! Enough!"

"I think he's had enough, Boo," Sylvie said, her voice calming the excited beast enough for me to escape.

"I feel violated," I groaned, wiping off the thick, slimy mask of saliva that had accumulated over my face. Then it clicked. If Boo was here...

I grabbed Boo's large, furry head and turned him to face me.

"Boo! Is Ellie here? What about my mom? How did you get here?" I asked, the questions pouring out of me before I could think them through.

Virion suddenly pushed past me and the bear, and I heard his voice call out, choking with emotion. "Tessia!"

Letting Boo go, I immediately followed after Virion. I didn't have to go far before I was able to see four figures at the base of the stairs near the far wall of the building. It was my mom, sister, Tessia and... Elder Rinia.

My long and hurried strides slowed as my vision blurred with tears. Tessia fell into Virion's arms and Ellie was running towards me—my face was buried in her short brown hair, her arms around my neck—her entire body shook as she bawled into my chest—her tiny, trembling fists hit me again and again she blubbered in between sobs about how scared she was—how I wasn't there to protect her.

It was as if an icy, spectral hand had reached into my chest and took hold of my heart; guilt burned through my veins like venom. I had done this to her—to my bright, strong little sister. I should have been there to protect her.

"I'm so sorry, Ellie. I'm so sorry. I'm here now, everything is going to be okay," I said, tightening my grip around her frail body and kissing her on the crown of her head.

"W-we almost died and you weren't there. Y-you're—you're never there! Not at the castle, not at the Wall, not even when Dad died!" she wailed, her fists still pounding my body. "You're my brother, you're supposed to be there! You were supposed to comfort me when Dad died! I—I needed you... Mom needed you!"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Ellie," I said again, repeating it like a prayer. "I'm so sorry..."

Ellie slowly calmed down, but her head remained buried in my chest. Her shoulders now only occasionally shook when she hiccupped. During this time, I didn't look up. I kept my focus entirely on my sister until she pushed herself away. Staring at me with swollen red eyes, she gestured behind her with a thumb. "G-go apologize to Mom now."

I looked up to find our mother only a few steps away from us, her expression hollow, empty of any emotion. That warm and tender smile, usually there even in the hardest of times, was nowhere to be found.

I walked up to her, unsure of what to say or where to begin.

"Mom..."

My mother's apprehensive gaze as she slowly approached me made me all

the more confused. "If it wasn't for Elder Rinia, I don't know whether or not we'd be alive."

My gaze turned to Elder Rinia, who was talking quietly with Tessia and Virion. "I...I—"

"But throughout that entire situation, when I thought that surely we would die—soon, if not now—do you know what I was thinking?"

I shook my head.

"I was thinking..." My mother paused for a moment, her stony mask wavering. Tears welled in her eyes and she bit her lower lip in an effort to keep it from trembling. She turned away from me, quickly wiping away her tears, trying to compose herself before turning back. "I was thinking the entire time how sad and guilt-ridden your father must've been to leave this world without getting the chance to make up with his only son."

The weight of her words were heavy enough to make me weak in the knees, but I held on and responded in the manner that I wished I could've back at the Wall.

I wrapped my arms around my mother and squeezed her close. "It's okay."

Her trembling hands gripped me back tightly as she whispered, low enough for only me to hear, "No. I need to say it. I need to say that it doesn't matter who you were before. I raised you when you were little, I nursed you when you were sick, and I watched as you grew into the man you are today. Your father and I talked for a long time, and we realized that you—who you are now—you are so different from who you were when you were born—and that's when we knew that you are our son."

I sagged, letting myself fall to my knees, my mother's hands still gripping my shoulders. I put a hand to my chest as my breath came out in strained gasps. I couldn't breathe, I could only gag out the never-ending sobs as my mother kept her arms around me.

"I'm so sorry that it took us so long to realize that. I'm so sorry that you couldn't come to your own father's funeral because of me. I'm so sorry,

Tess, who had waited patiently for me to reunite properly with my family, slid her arms around me and rested her head on my chest. She seemed to have something on her mind, but I was hesitant to ask directly. I satisfied myself with sharing a silent embrace, though my eyes kept flitting to her as we made our way upstairs to get settled in for a much needed rest.

I couldn't help but notice the tension between Tess and Elder Rinia. Tess's expression darkened every time Elder Rinia was mentioned, and they gave each other an unnecessarily wide berth as they moved about the second floor of the building.

Once we were all upstairs, Elder Rinia, her expression grave, pulled Virion aside and disappeared into another room. Tess's face fell as she watched them hide themselves away. I suspected something had happened to her parents. As for why she was so angry at Elder Rinia, I could only speculate. Regardless, she excused herself not long after we sat down, telling us she was tired.

Bairon was next, telling us he wanted to spend some time meditating to recover. Due to the lack of ambient mana here, it would be almost impossible to go further than trying to recoup the mana he would naturally gain from his mana core, but I suspected that he left more to give me and my family some space. While my impression of Bairon had never been good, we'd come to terms with being at odds and settled into a vague understanding of one another.

Finding myself with just my family, I felt a sense of peace. After our rush from Etistin to the castle, then our long trek here, all the while fearing that my family was lost to me forever, it felt surreal to be sitting around a fire with them, safe and together. We sat in silence for awhile, watching the flames dance, but my mind never could rest for long, and soon enough it was full of burning questions.

Catching my mother's eye, I asked, "How did you, Ellie, and Boo get here?" She held my gaze for a moment before glancing at the exit that Tessia and Bairon had left through, shaking her head. "I'll let Elder Rinia tell you. It's better that way."

Sylvie and Ellie filled the silence, talking about nothing in particular. Instinctively, they avoided speaking of the war, and it wasn't long before my sister and mother began nodding off to sleep.

"Sorry, we haven't been able to sleep well these past few days," my mother said, rubbing her eyes.

"Don't worry. Get some sleep—both of you," I said, turning to my sister.

The two of them retreated to a bed of blankets that had been laid out in a corner of the room.

"Good night," Sylvie and I said together.

They responded in kind before lying down. I caught my sister lifting her head every now and then, checking to see if we were still there, until her soft, rhythmic breathing eventually melded together with the crackling fire.

I sat and thought for awhile, watching my mother and sister sleeping peacefully. Many unexpected events had occurred in the last few days alone, but one of the moments I had dreaded the most was confronting my family after everything that had happened to them. I was so caught up in blaming myself for my father's death that I avoided Ellie and my mother out of guilt. I even had a readymade excuse—I was needed for the war effort.

When I saw them in that abandoned underground house, my mind immediately expected anger and blame from them both. Instead, I learned that my mother had blamed herself all that time. She said that her inability to properly deal with the secret of my past life had caused me to miss my own father's funeral, and she apologized for that.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how mature that was. I was in the wrong as well. I had chosen to hide behind my duties as a Lance to avoid confrontation, and I had been the one to keep it a secret from them for

so long, yet she ignored my mistakes and pointed out her own shortcomings instead, and then *she* had asked *me* for forgiveness, which was something I wasn't even sure I deserved.

Even with the experience of two separate lives, I had learned something valuable that day. I was once again humbled by the fact that, while my past life had given me many advantages, it was foolish of me to equate years lived to maturity.

'It's not like I didn't tell you this already. I guess you needed to arrive at that conclusion yourself,' Sylvie sent to me, managing to convey a mental eye-roll along with it. 'Mark today on the calendar as the day Arthur Leywin realized he wasn't the mature man he thought he was.'

Shut up, I sent back, smirking at my bond seated next to me. You're using my own inner thoughts to belittle me and say that you're more mature than I am.

'I am more mature than you are, but a true mature person wouldn't say it out loud, 'she replied, putting on a sweet, innocent smile.

You just said it out loud, I pointed out.

Sylvie looked at me with a raised brow. 'Well technically...'

I playfully nudged my bond with a shoulder, feeling good for the first time in a long while. My sister and mother were alive, and, while we had a lot to work on if we wanted to be how we were in the past, they were safe.

Sylvie was the next to fall asleep, her head resting on my lap. I caressed her hair between her horns and was reminded of when she would curl up in my lap in her fox form and fall asleep. As a growing asura, she had slept often. She was still growing, still maturing into her power. It was odd to think that, someday, she would be more powerful than I could ever hope to be. It was as her grandmother had told me in Epheotus: There was a limit to what I could do, to the power I could wield.

Staring at the fire in front of me, I became lost in thought. I had originally wanted to leave after bringing Virion and Bairon here in order to look for Tess and my family. Seeing that they were there already, I immediately

thought about the possibility of staying with them. There weren't many supplies available here, but there was a stream of fresh water and I had noticed a pile of large fish where Boo had made his den on the lower floor of the building.

We might need to make a trip to civilization occasionally—maybe the Wall—but for now, I considered just resting for a while.

I was tired, Virion was tired, and Bairon was tired—whether he admitted it or not. We all agreed that we had lost the war. Coming to this realization didn't warrant any mind-numbing revelation—maybe I was growing used to winning our battles but losing the war. Agrona utilized his limited resources to their utmost potential and didn't hesitate to sacrifice his troops to further his overall goal. Dicathen had been only reacting, and Agrona knew that all too well. Like Virion said, maybe the best thing to do was to go underground and wait for a chance to fight back.

My thoughts were interrupted by the soft footsteps approaching me. I turned around, greeting Elder Rinia with a nod. The old diviner smiled back, wrinkles tugging at the edges of her eyes. Taking a seat next to me with a weary groan, she lifted her hands to warm them in front of the fire.

"You've grown older since the last time I saw you," she said, her eyes staring blankly at the dancing embers.

I chuckled. "Well, I am a growing teenage boy."

"No *teen* would be wearing the expression you have," Elder Rinia scoffed. "But I guess that's what comes with war and having so many responsibilities."

My hands unconsciously stroked my face as I wondered what sort of expression I wore and what Rinia meant. Too tired to think deeply, I looked at her, wondering why she had come back alone. "Where's Virion?"

"He said he'll check up on Tessia to see how she's doing."

We sat, gathering our courage together: I, to ask the question, and Elder Rinia, to answer it.

Can you tell me everything that happened?"	

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HOPE AND TRUST

A LONG SILENCE followed my question, but when Elder Rinia spoke, it wasn't to provide the long, convoluted story of how she managed to get into the castle and save Tessia and my family. Instead, she started off by saying something I didn't expect.

"Arthur, I knew your identity the first time we met, back when you asked me to help you contact your parents."

My eyes widened. "What? How?"

Rinia held up a finger. "These old eyes see much more than you can imagine. However, much like how I had feigned ignorance of your past life and kept it a secret, there are also parts of this story that I can't reveal yet."

I didn't respond, letting her continue.

"I have known for some time now that an attack would occur at the castle following the betrayal of Virion's son."

"Virion's... You're telling me right now that it was Alduin who was responsible for letting the Scythe in?" I shook my head, unable to imagine the circumstance that would lead to such a thing. "That's not possible, you can't seriously be saying that he was trying to get his own father killed, right?"

"My knowledge doesn't extend to his intentions, but yes, he was the one that allowed the Scythe access to the castle teleportation gate," she answered.

My hand came up to my gaping mouth. I couldn't believe it. Despite any disagreements the two of them had, Alduin had always looked up to Virion.

Then the pieces started clicking into place. "Was Alduin guaranteed the safety of Merial and Tessia? Was that why he betrayed everyone? But then..." I dropped my voice to a whisper so my sleeping family wouldn't hear. "Why did they take my mother and sister?"

"That's what Alduin believed, yes," she said. "As for your family, it's easy to surmise that they wanted your mother and sister as hostages."

Rubbing my temples, I thought about what she said. "What do you mean that Alduin 'believed' it? What really happened?"

"We're venturing into the area where I can't give you an answer. All I can tell you is that if we want to keep any chance of taking back our country, we have to keep Tessia safe and far away from Agrona and the Alacryans."

"So..." I trailed off, my throat suddenly tight. "So you think we have a chance at taking back Dicathen?"

She nodded. "It's slim, but it does exist."

After another pause, I spoke again. "If you knew about the attack on the castle, did you also know that Buhnd was going to die?"

The fire in front of us popped, spraying a small shower of glowing red ashes over the ground.

"Yes," she finally said. "But had I tried to divert the entire attack, there was a much higher chance that Tessia would've been captured."

I opened my mouth to say something, but I couldn't quite get the right words.

"I know what you're thinking, but I couldn't risk Dicathen losing everything—losing the entire war—on the slim chance that I could save the people at the castle."

"But, if you knew everything beforehand, you could've made countermeasures. You could've told Virion, or told me!" I argued.

"Time doesn't work that way. Changing things like that alters the course of the future... and creates a future that I wouldn't be able to see," she said, her voice barely a whisper. There was nothing to be done about it now. I knew I was being selfish... If it wasn't for Elder Rinia, Tessia and my family would've been in Agrona's hands by now. She had looked at the options in front of her and made the decision she thought was best. I understood that well enough.

"How were you able to save Tessia and my family though?" I asked.

"I was able to intercept them while they were on their way back to Elenoir," she said nonchalantly.

Outwardly, I nodded at her answer, but my mind spun trying to imagine a scenario where Rinia succeeded in doing this. How did she manage to pry Tessia and my family away from Alduin and Merial? Was it just Alduin and Merial there? Rinia had hinted that, although Alduin believed that they were safe, they really weren't. Most likely, after Alduin, Merial, Tessia, and my family stepped through the portal they would've been met with a trap.

Did Elder Rinia know everything that was going to happen? Were her diviner abilities able to influence time that well?

Time!

Without any warning, I directed a surge of killing intent at Elder Rinia, and just as she reacted with surprise, I ignited Realmheart and immediately used Static Void.

The world around me turned monochrome, except for the motes of purple trembling in place. But my eyes weren't focused on the particles of aether around me; they were focused on Elder Rinia.

She regarded me watchfully, taking in my movements, my own expression as my eyes narrowed in realization. She glanced around her before her eyes fell back on me.

"Clever," she said breathily, making the word a sigh.

"So you can utilize aether," I muttered, seeing the specks of purple hovering around her, as if protecting her. "You're not an asura, I know that for sure. Are you... one of the ancient mages?"

Despite the apparent strain that Elder Rinia endured as she tried to keep her

aether arts active, she let out a chuckle. "No, I can tell you with absolute confidence that I am not an 'ancient mage."

"Then who—what are you? Even I can't control aether without relying on the dragon's will inside me." As I had this thought, I realized that controlling Static Void was somehow easier there. Under normal circumstances, I never could have held it long enough to have a lengthy discussion. Was it because I was surrounded by aether?

"While I'm not entirely sure, I believe that my diviner abilities stem partly from aether. As for how I learned—I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that."

"I don't think that's a good enough answer anymore," I challenged, staring intently at the elf. She had always been shrouded in mystery, but this... this was different.

"I can tell you—I can tell you everything, Arthur. But Tessia and your family might die because of it," she answered, her face turning ghastly. "Please, have a little patience and I can assure you that you'll find out for yourself."

She wasn't threatening me with my loved ones—no, she truly believed that revealing everything could lead to their deaths. Gnashing my teeth in frustration, I released Static Void, allowing Elder Rinia to release the aether arts she had used to keep herself from being frozen in time.

She let out a ragged breath. "Thank you... for believing in me."

"You saved Tessia and my family," I said, glancing over to where my mother and Ellie were sleeping. "The least I can do is trust you—at least until you give me a reason not to."

We continued talking, albeit a bit more calmly this time. I asked all of my questions. Some she answered and some she didn't, but I didn't press her for details.

What I did find out was that the underground town contained several teleportation gates that could only be controlled by utilizing aether. That's how Elder Rinia was able to get there so quickly and without having to physically make a cross-continental journey with Tessia, my mother, and my

sister in tow.

"You learned aether arts, and I was more or less given the ability to borrow it at times. Tell me, is it something that I can learn as well?" I asked, trying to hold onto the sensation I experienced when I had gathered aether to Dawn's Ballad in order to injure the Scythe.

"Yes, and no. Your ability to experience a taste of aether arts through your dragon will with a simple thought, as well as the fact that you can see aether, gives you a great advantage. However, my advantage, compared to yours, is much greater. I discovered a location to train in aether arts—with aether much more abundant than here, and I had eighty years to learn," she explained.

I thought about spending eighty years, perhaps more, trying to grasp aether arts. Eighty years was a long time, and while my white core extended my lifetime, I couldn't hope for the same thing for my mother or my sister. "I see."

"It's too early to lose hope. We'll continue to gather forces slowly, and with you and Lady Sylvie here, we'll have three people able to access the teleportation—" Elder Rinia stopped abruptly at the erratic sound of footsteps drawing quickly closer.

The jolt of fear and focus that I felt caused Sylvie to stir awake.

'What's going on?' she asked, lifting her head off of my lap.

Virion is coming and... something's wrong, I replied, standing up.

I sent out a pulse of wind mana, trying to sense whether anyone was chasing after Virion, but it was just him. It only took a few seconds for him to appear from the small hallway leading to the room we were in. The old commander was disheveled, tired, and had a look of panic.

"Tessia—ran away," he huffed, catching his breath.

"What?" I blurted. "How? Where did she go?"

Elder Rinia cursed under her breath and grabbed my arm. "Tessia can't leave this place, Arthur. There's something wrong with her core, and if she leaves the protection this place provides, the Alacryans can track her."

My eyes widened in horror. I turned to Virion. "What direction did she go?"

As soon as Virion lifted his finger, I shot off in that direction, immediately activating Static Void and igniting Realmheart once more. The color drained from the world as I bolted out the window. I felt the ache of activating the aether art again so soon deep within my mana core. I knew I couldn't push myself much further without rest, or backlash could become a serious danger. My mana usage was limited while in Static Void because I couldn't manipulate ambient mana, but seeing as there wasn't much ambient mana in this underground town anyway, I figured Tessia couldn't have gotten too far.

With the spell slowly draining my core, I endured until I eventually found traces of mana that had been used.

I was right. Tess had used magic to forcefully run away from Virion, who was still injured and unable to utilize most of his mana.

Following the trail into one of the tunnels leading away from the cavern, I found Tess. She was frozen in place, her eyes determined, her hair billowing... and teardrops suspended in the air behind her.

I rushed past her a few feet to give her time to stop before withdrawing Static Void and Realmheart. The motes of purple and green faded as my vision returned to normal.

Tessia resumed running until she spotted me, then skidded to a stop and froze again, eyes and mouth both open wide.

"How did you..." she started, but she didn't finish the thought. "I have to go, Art. I have to save my parents."

I hadn't thought about what to say to reason with Tess once I caught up. I didn't know what her argument for running away would be, but I hadn't expected this. "Tess... your parents betrayed us."

"Don't say that—Don't you *dare* say that!" she snapped, eyes glaring. "You don't know anything!"

"What I know is that your parents colluded with Agrona, let a Scythe into the

castle, and got almost everyone killed," I said calmly.

"It's not that simple," she argued, hurriedly wiping away a tear. "They had no choice..."

"Tess, your father and mother all but sacrificed Virion—your own grandpa—for the hope that Agrona would leave Elenoir alone. Now please, come back with us. Let's talk about our next steps and—"

"Stop. I know that you haven't always agreed with my parents, but don't make them out to be so selfish like that. They had no choice!"

"You keep saying that, Tess, but they had plenty of choices," I said softly. "They could've ignored Agrona's offer and trusted in Virion to win this war."

"Then I would be dead, Art!" she screamed. "Is that what you wanted?" Caught off guard, I looked at her in confusion. "Dead? What are you talking about?"

Tess marched forward until she was just inches away from me. "I would be dead. My parents had no choice but to accept the deal with Agrona because of the beast will that *you* gave me, Arthur."

My thoughts veered back to the elderwood guardian I had defeated. "No, that's impossible. You only had problems assimilating with it. Once you managed to control it—"

"The beast will you gave me was from a corrupted beast," Tessia interrupted, shedding tears. "A beast corrupted by Agrona. With that *thing* inside me, I was basically a living bomb that Agrona could detonate on a whim."

I didn't want to believe it. Surely it was a lie, fabricated to turn Alduin and Merial. Agrona couldn't be trusted. I tried to talk, to argue this point, but Tessia kept going.

"So don't you *dare* say that my parents betrayed us," Tessia seethed. "They did it to save me, and even if no one else here will give them a chance, I will."

'Art! What happened, are you okay? I'm coming to you now.'

No, it's okay. Stay there while I try to convince Tess, I replied.

"Tess... I had no idea that this happened because of the beast will I gave you," I said. "If I had known..."

Setting her jaw, Tessia looked past me, down the tunnel. "I know it's not your fault, but I have to do something, Art."

"I understand, Tess, but once you step out from this shelter, the Alacryans will be able to trace you. You'll die."

Tess gripped my shirt fiercely, searching my eyes, imploring me to understand. "They're my parents, Art. They did everything they could to save me."

A tumult of emotions stirred inside me as I looked down at Tess: frustration, sadness, fear... and guilt. It was easy to feel responsible for what had happened. I had known that something was wrong with the elderwood guardian, but, in my excitement, I fed it to one of the people I cared most about in an attempt to keep her safe. If only I had been more cautious...

I gently pried Tess's hands free. "Is there nothing I can do to convince you to stay?"

[&]quot;I'm sorry."

[&]quot;Then I'm coming with you."

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TWO LOVES

TESS'S EYES LIT UP. "Really? You're coming with me?"

"But... I think you should reconcile with Virion first," I said, and her face fell. "Whatever you argued about with him, remember that he didn't just lose you back at the castle; he lost his son."

"I—I know. What they did was wrong, but they only did it—"

"To save you. Yeah, I know," I finished. "Which is why, if we're going to save them and bring them back here, you're going to need to be the bridge that'll mend things between your grandfather and parents. You won't be able to do that if you just leave like this."

Tess opened her mouth as if to argue but simply let out a sigh. "You know, most girls don't like guys who are always right."

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips. "Do you want most girls to like me?"

Narrowing her eyes, Tess punched me in the arm before turning back towards our camp. "Come on. Let's go back."

[&]quot;I'm sorry—I really am—but we can't risk it," Elder Rinia said resolutely. "Your mana core has been corrupted by the beast will inside you. If you leave ____,"

[&]quot;But the potion cured me! That's why my parents did all of that—so they could give it to me!" Tess argued.

"Do not forget that it was Agrona who gave you the potion, Tessia. You may be fine now, but we don't know if that was a permanent solution or if it'll only give you a period of respite. It's too soon to tell, and if something does happen to you on that journey and you're taken by the Alacryans—"

"Then I'd be one more lost soul in a sea of the dead! What is the point of staying safe when the fate of our entire continent seems to rest on a knife's edge?" Tess demanded.

"Tessia!" Virion snapped. "Don't talk like that!"

"It's true though," she continued. "I'm not anywhere near as strong as the Lances, nor am I influential enough to rally people together like either of you. But should I not be willing to risk my life to fight the Alacryans?"

I took a step forward but Sylvie put her hand in front of me.

'Don't, Arthur. It's not our place to interfere. Not now.' There was a solemn severity to Sylvie's mood, and I thought that, perhaps, she was indeed the mature one between us.

No one else interrupted. Bairon was leaning against the far wall of the room by the door with his arms crossed. My sister had left the room some time ago with Boo while Mother quietly listened.

"So are you refusing me the chance to go find my own mother and father?" Tess asked quietly, her eyes brimming with tears.

Virion's expression softened as he gently took hold of his granddaughter's hand. "We'll bring them back. Just give me and Bairon some time to recover."

After a long silence, Tess finally nodded in acceptance. "I'm sorry, Grandpa."

Virion pulled his granddaughter into his arms. "It's okay, little one. It's okay."

My mother walked over to us, gently patting Sylvie on her shoulder. My bond and my mother exchanged a warm smile before my mother's gaze shifted to me. "Your sister is outside. You should go talk to her."

After taking a quick glance at Tess, I turned back to my mother. Her eyes were red and glistening. "Mom? Is something wrong?"

She smiled at me and shook her head. "It's nothing. I'm just glad you're staying," she said quietly, just barely loud enough for me to hear.

My mother let go of my wrist and waved me away with a sad smile. I hesitated, but Sylvie gave me a mental nudge.

'Go. I'll watch over your mother,' Sylvie assured me.

I passed by Bairon, who only nodded as I walked by, then headed down the stairs to the ground floor.

I berated myself as I walked out of the building. It made sense in my head to go with Tess since my mother and sister were safe here, but I didn't think about how *they'd* feel about me leaving.

Spotting my sister and her giant bond by the stream, I walked over. Boo was curled up into a furry ball, sleeping, while Ellie was throwing rocks into the stream.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked.

"Why? Aren't you going to leave soon, anyway?" she asked bitterly.

I picked up a flat rock. "We decided not to go until Bairon and Virion are both fully healed."

Ellie chucked another rock, making it splash into the calm water. "I'm sorry, *Arthur*. I'm sure you'd rather be out there being a hero than staying in this dusty old tomb with your stupid little sister."

"You know it's not like that," I said calmly, sidearm tossing the rock down the stream. We watched as the smooth stone skipped four, seven, ten times before it finally sank. "Bringing back Tess's parents is something that has to be done."

"Why?" my sister retorted. "Because your girlfriend wants you to?"

"Ellie," I replied.

"Don't 'Ellie' me!" my sister snapped, throwing the rock in her hand before turning to me. "I overheard Commander Virion talking to Tessia earlier. I know that the four of you almost died fighting that one Scythe! And now you're telling me that you're going to go back there to bring back the elves who sold us all out?"

"It's not that simple, you know that."

"It sounds pretty simple to me," she said sharply, looking down to search for another rock. "Our family—what's left of it—barely got back together, but you're already eager to leave us."

"I'm never eager to leave you, I wish I could be by your side every second of the day," I said, reaching out toward her but stopping when I saw her posture go stiff. Slowly, I pulled my hand away. "I'm one of the few mages powerful enough to turn the tide of this war, and one way to do that is by bringing back Tess's parents. Only then will we be able to muster up the forces necessary to eventually take back Dicathen."

My sister paused as she absentmindedly reached for another rock to throw. A lone tear fell from her chin, disappearing into the stones below.

"I love Tess, I do. But you, Mom, and Sylvie are my family."

Boo let out a deep groan from the side.

"And you too, Boo. You're family too," I added, smiling as Ellie stifled a laugh. "I'd do anything to keep you all safe, and if that means I have to be away from you all to do it, that's a price I'm willing to pay."

Ellie quickly wiped at her tears before getting back up. She turned around and threw the stone in her hand. "I know. It's just... I wish you were around more."

I picked up another flat rock and threw it. "I wish I was too—more than anything—but I don't want you and Mom living in an underground town below a desert for the rest of your lives, and to do that, I need to get off my butt."

"I don't mind it. I know Mom won't mind it, once she gets used to it," she said, watching my rock skip on the water. "I know you're doing this to keep us all safe, but it works both ways, you know."

Ellie turned around, pouting, her eyes red and cheeks flushed. "We just want you safe."

I reached out and entwined my arm with hers; there was no resistance this time. "Do you know what my dream is, after this is all over?"

"What?"

"For us to live together in a huge house by the ocean. Me, you, Mom, Sylvie, Boo, and Tess."

"Wait, why do you get to live with your girlfriend? What about my future boyfriend?" she protested.

I looked at her blankly. "You won't have a boyfriend."

"What? Why not?"

"Because if you do, I'll get rid of him," I said matter-of-factly.

"That's not fair!" she huffed.

I only shrugged. "Big brothers are never fair."

Ellie puffed her cheeks for a moment before breaking out into laughter, causing me to laugh as well.

"Fine," she relented. "But in exchange, you have to teach me how you do that."

I raised a brow. "Do what?"

"That thing where the rock bounces on top of the water! Are you using magic?"

"I'm not using magic at all," I said, skipping another rock.

Ellie tried as well, mimicking my motions and failing. "Lies. You're totally using magic."

"No, I'm not, just watch..."

Three days passed by in the blink of an eye. Tess came to terms with Virion and the two made up. Despite being stuck in a dreary underground town, in hiding and on the losing end of the war, everyone seemed to be in good spirits, smiling and laughing with each other, enjoying each other's company,

even if only for a short while—everyone except for Bairon.

When Virion and Bairon weren't resting, they were meditating and trying to cycle mana throughout their bodies to hasten their recovery. It was a slow and arduous process for any of us to meditate in this place due to the absence of ambient mana.

Despite the disadvantages of having little to no ambient mana, the underground village had a large benefit for me and Sylvie.

"Happy training," I teased, sitting cross-legged on the hard ground.

"It's amazing to me that you haven't gotten sick of this," Sylvie said, sitting down across from me in the same hallway we had arrived from. "I'm making progress, but you've yet to even take a step forward. How are you not discouraged at all?"

I shrugged. "I've had things too easy up until now. Besides, if these damn ancients were able to learn it to this extent, I'm sure I'll eventually get the hang of it."

"Honestly, I'd think you were full of it if I couldn't actually feel your optimism," Sylvie said, closing her eyes to concentrate.

Still seated, I ignited Realmheart. Color faded away from the world, leaving only the motes of purple either swaying rhythmically in the air or clustered together on the walls to produce the soft light around us.

At the same time, my bond opened up her consciousness completely to me so I could sense every little thing she was doing. This was the training system that I had devised.

Both Elder Rinia and Sylvie had agreed that it was impossible for them to teach me how to use aether. While Elder Rinia was limited by what she could tell me, Sylvie used aether so naturally she didn't have the tools to describe it. For her, it would have been like trying to teach me how to use my eyes to see, or my ears to hear. Instead, I watched and listened to my bond's thoughts as she meditated and slowly refined her control over the aether arts.

From what little I'd learned through this process, it felt like the aether was

more or less teaching Sylvie; it was nothing like mana at all.

Shaping and controlling the power within my body had been ingrained in me since my previous life, while learning to utilize aether seemed as if it would be more akin to learning how to control a new body entirely—one with a different number of appendages and senses.

It remained a mystery to us how these ancient mages had managed to trap aether into the artifacts to light them up. The very nature of controlling the aether in this way was paradoxical to what my bond was doing.

I sat with Sylvie for hours, yet had no progress to show for it. Frustrated and impatient, I once again walked back to our camp alone while my bond continued to strengthen herself.

On my way back, I stopped by one of the adjacent hallways where Elder Rinia was working. I found the old elf drawing runes on the inner mechanisms of an ancient portal, her hands glowing purple as she worked.

"How's the teleportation gate coming along?" I asked. "Maybe you should take a break."

"I'm nearly finished! I think I—should be done—in a few hours," she said in between heavy breaths.

It was obvious that utilizing aether was taking a toll on her body. "We need you to take care of your health, Elder Rinia. You look like you've aged another century since you got here."

"If I wasn't so tired, I'd walk over there and slap you..." she grumbled, not bothering to look at me. "Besides, Lady Sylvie has been helping me out by providing the raw energy to power this old thing up."

"Should I call her over?" I asked.

"No, no. Just a last bit of tinkering with the runes to set the return point," she replied, waving me away.

I stuck around for a bit, watching her draw runes in the empty center of the teleportation gate.

The rune was a complicated shape stemming from a center pentagon that

branched out into sharp angles creating a rigid, vortex-like pattern. I found myself following her hand movements as she carefully traced over the rune until the faint purple shape faded and spread out to the outer structure of the gate.

"You should get going. Tessia came by earlier. She was asking for you," said Elder Rinia.

"Oh." I scratched my head. "I wonder what she wants."

After reminding the old elf not to overdo it one more time, I returned to the main base. Near the flowing stream that cut through the cavern, I saw Ellie and Tess playing with each other. Tess was conjuring tiny orbs of water above the stream while Ellie shot them down by firing mana arrows from her bow.

I was about to call out to them when I had an idea. A mischievous grin spread across my face, and I ducked around the corner of a small building.

Just as Tess raised another sphere of water, I flicked my wrist, willing the orb to dash left. The glowing arrow of pure mana whizzed by, missing its mark entirely.

Hearing Tess exclaim in confusion made me snicker, and I continued to mess with my sister. I willed the orb of water to dip and dodge, avoiding Ellie's arrows and even squirting a stream of water at her face, until finally my sister screamed out in frustration.

"We know it's you, *Brother!*" my sister yelled, stressing the word as if it were a curse.

"Couldn't even land a single hit? Tsk tsk tsk," I teased, laughing aloud.

Ellie fired a mana arrow directly at my face, but I continued laughing as I easily caught it in my hand.

"Ellie! Don't fire arrows at your brother!" my mother's voice echoed from the second floor of the building, just behind Tess and my sister.

"He started it!" Ellie retorted, pointing her finger at me.

Tess covered her mouth, trying to stifle her laughter as my sister turned

bright red.

The three of us eventually headed inside. I continued to make fun of my sister as she, in turn, continued to throw fists and bolts of pure mana at my face.

"Oh, Tess, Elder Rinia mentioned that you were looking for me earlier?" I asked Tess while dodging and deflecting my baby sister's attacks.

"Oh, uh, it was nothing. I just wanted to check in on how everyone was doing," she said, quickening her pace to beat us up the stairs.

When we arrived upstairs, I could see a row of flame-grilled fish skewered on branches.

"Wow!" I said, my mouth already beginning to salivate.

"I managed to catch quite a few fish today," my mother grinned proudly, tapping her flexed arm. "Eat up while I go retrieve Commander Virion and General Bairon from their meditation."

I immediately grabbed a skewer and took a bite, surprised by the richly-seasoned flavor. "How is this fish salted?" I asked through a mouthful of fish.

My mother turned back as she was leaving through the door. "Elder Rinia packed it in one of her dimension rings."

"'One of'?" Tess repeated, handing a skewer to Ellie before taking one for herself.

"Mhmm. Elder Rinia has at least eight dimension rings full of things necessary to live here. She's even brought various seeds so that we can start growing our own fruits and vegetables down here," my mother answered, smiling. "We'll all have to help out so we can start accommodating a lot more people here."

Tess and I exchanged glances, both no doubt wondering the same thing: How long had Elder Rinia been preparing for all of this?

Eventually my mother returned with Bairon and Virion. Though still incapacitated, they were looking better every day. Sylvie joined us for food as well, talking and smiling with Tess and Ellie. Elder Rinia had come back

and, after a quick bite to eat, immediately fell asleep in her bed.

My mother had done a fantastic job of making the desolate building seem comfortable, almost homey. Most of us only got a blanket in order to save resources, but with curtains set up in front of the doorways of each room and small decorative touches here and there, the place didn't seem so much like a refugee shelter anymore.

I found myself comfortable and content as I drifted off to sleep after dinner. In a way, being together with the ones that I cared about the most—it was what I had hoped for. I wanted to bring the Twin Horns down here as well; I knew my mother and sister would be happy at that.

I was eager to start the new day.

If only I'd known what I would be waking up to.

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ON THE SURFACE

TESSIA ERALITH

I looked back at the softly-lit corridor stretching into the darkness behind me, back toward my grandfather and Arthur.

"Sorry, Grandpa," I muttered under my breath, looking down at the white medallion in my hand. "I swear I'll return this."

I turned and faced the ancient gate in front of me and mentally prepared myself for whatever would happen once I crossed.

Grandpa had already killed off Mother and Father in his mind, I could see it in the look he always had when I mentioned them. I knew what that look meant; to him, my parents were no longer family, but traitors.

Grandma Rinia wasn't as bad, but I knew that she had given up on trying to save my parents. Just from overhearing the plans she and Virion made together with General Bairon, I knew that my parents were nowhere on the list of people they intended to save.

But they didn't know—they weren't there. They didn't see how hard Mother's hands trembled as she held onto my hand and pulled me away. They weren't there to see Father with tears rolling down his face as we stepped through the portal.

Pulling the hood over my head, I steeled myself. They may say I was acting rashly, that I was letting my emotions overwhelm me, just as they had after the battle in Elshire Forest. Whatever anyone thought of my actions, it didn't

matter. My parents deserved a chance, and if their own daughter wouldn't give that to them, who would?

Admittedly, I had been tempted to ask Arthur to help me, but that was too selfish. I knew the dangers ahead, and if anything happened to him because of me...

I'm dispensable, he isn't.

Holding the medallion out in front of me, I walked through the glowing gate. The soft purple light undulated at the medallion's touch and I felt a slight pull. Rather than resist the foreign sensation, I accepted it and stepped further into the gate until my entire body was immersed.

Immediately, I was pulled across a whirling funnel of light. It felt different from the normal teleportation gates, more... nauseating.

I stumbled out the other side on paved ground, still a bit disoriented from the trip. From somewhere nearby I heard a voice yell out, "The gate! Someone used the gate!" There were four Alacryans standing guard around the teleportation gate through which I had crossed.

"Get on your knees and take off your hood!" one of the guards ordered, aiming a condensed sphere of wind in my direction. "Now!"

I dropped low and slammed my palm on the ground. Before the spells from the Alacryans could reach me, however, a gale of wind surged around me.

Keeping one hand on my head to keep the hood in place, I muttered another spell. I willed the protective barrier of wind to expand, pushing away the enemy mages, who were caught off guard.

Using this brief window of opportunity, I dashed forward to the nearest alleyway, a hundred feet to the north.

I heard the barking of orders and soon another pair of Alacryans were coming at me from either side. Keeping my hood down, I rushed towards the Alacryan to my left, shooting a blade of wind at him.

Almost immediately, an armor of ice enveloped his body, protecting his neck from the sharp crescent of wind that would have slit his throat. Though I was initially surprised by the deviant magic, I reminded myself that the Alacryans used magic differently than we did; a higher form of magic didn't necessarily equate to a stronger mage in their case.

The ice-clad Alacryan had managed to defend against my attack, but the force of the wind-blade knocked him off balance. It was tempting to use my plant magic or beast will to escape, but I resisted. Using deviant magic like that would draw too much attention to myself. I might as well have a herald walk before me proclaiming that the former princess of Elenoir was here.

Conjuring a condensed surge of wind below my back foot, I propelled myself to within an arm's length of the enemy. He brought up his longsword to block whatever attack he thought I would hit him with, but instead, I grabbed his arm and used a classic overhead toss that my grandpa had taught me.

With the aid of wind magic, I tossed the Alacryan up into the air, which opened up the path to the nearest alleyway.

"Don't let him get away!" a voice screamed from afar.

Comforted by the fact that they thought I was a man, I sped away from the pursuing guard, who couldn't keep up with my wind-assisted sprint.

I sped through the narrow passage. Buildings towered over me on either side, the road barely wide enough to allow two men to walk shoulder to shoulder.

Most of the human cities looked so similar to one another that it was hard to tell exactly where I was until I could get a better view of the city as a whole, but I knew that I had at least arrived in one of the major cities of Sapin.

My eyes constantly scanned the road and even nearby rooftops in case an Alacryan was keeping track of my whereabouts from above. Taking a quick look at the sky confirmed that I hadn't landed in Xyrus City. The clouds were well overhead and there was no translucent barrier that could be seen protecting the floating city.

After some time had passed, I carefully made my way towards one of the larger roads. I peeked out from the narrow passage; there were quite a lot of people still walking the streets.

I kept out of sight and studied the pedestrians passing by. While they were mostly adventurers and soldiers dressed in armor or protective leather, I spotted many children and housewives as well. Everyone seemed to be moving in the same direction...

They all have such lifeless expressions, I thought to myself, my chest knotting in guilt. It was stupid to feel personally responsible for everything that had happened, but there was an icy voice in my head that kept saying it was largely my fault that the war had turned against us.

I shook my head, pushing the voice away. I couldn't afford to be distracted.

After wrapping my cloak tightly around me and making sure that most of my conspicuous hair couldn't be seen, I jumped out of the alleyway. Blending in with a horse-drawn carriage that passed close by, I walked beside it until a large cluster of pedestrians offered me a more natural veil to hide my presence.

A few people gave me passing glances, but no one seemed to take too much notice.

"Do we really have to go?" a middle-aged woman a few feet ahead of me whispered to what looked like her husband.

The plump man answered in a hushed tone. "Those damn Alacryans are already beginning to chase people out of their homes. If we don't go now, it'll only make things worse."

The woman looked at her husband as if she was about to say something else but stopped, her eyes turning toward the ground. I could see her shoulders droop, though she still held tightly onto the hand of their daughter.

Confused, I continued following the crowd until I spotted a few stands on the side of the street. Most were almost finished wrapping up their goods and putting down the tarps that hung over their stands, but there was a clothing stand that had yet to be completely packed up.

I veered away from the knot of people and approached the stand, keeping my head down. The shopkeeper watched me warily from the corner of her eye.

Without a word, I carefully set several silver coins on her table, pulled a set of clothes—a long leather cap, matching mantle, and pants—from a rack and walked away. Glancing back, I saw the wide-eyed shopkeeper scoop up the coins and go back to breaking down her stand, pointedly looking away from me.

Sliding into another nearby side alley between an abandoned bakery and butcher shop with broken windows, I hurriedly changed into the clothes I had just bought.

I tied up my hair and tucked it into the leather cap, which ran down past my neck, making sure most of my silver hair couldn't be seen. After putting on the mantle and pants, I ran my fingers along the ground and then smeared dirt across my face.

I thought about maybe taking out the practice bow I had borrowed from Ellie to complete the adventurer's ensemble, but I realized that no one was carrying their weapon. Darting out of the alley, I once again blended in with the tides of people all walking solemnly in the same direction. Despite how much more crowded it had become, there was still an eerie silence lingering over the city.

"Excuse me. What is going on?" I asked, disguising my voice to make it sound deeper.

The man didn't answer, instead speeding up in order to put some distance between us.

I tried again, this time to an elderly woman, but was met with the same response. On my third attempt, a younger lady—just a bit older than me—finally responded.

"I-it's over," she said, choking back a sob. "Those *invaders* told us to move to Etistin center if we didn't want to be hunted down."

"Hunted down?" I said quietly. "What about the Dicathen army stationed in Etistin?"

The woman's pace quickened as she looked back nervously.

I followed after her, matching her pace, and asked again before she finally answered, in an even quieter voice. "They... they left."

"Left?" I said a bit louder than I had intended.

The woman's eyes bulged like a startled deer and she zipped off, clutching tightly onto the drawstring bag in her arms.

I tried to repress the frustration and anxiety building up inside me. My short conversation with the woman left me with more questions than answers, and it seemed like everyone else was too scared to talk.

Adjusting my leather cap, I walked on. The only way I'd get some answers was by going to the city center. The Grand Mountains were at our backs, so I knew we were walking toward the west.

I must've crossed through the eastern gate of Etistin, which makes sense as it's the least used teleportation gate and the farthest one from Etistin's castle. The longer I walked, the denser the crowd around me became. It got to the point where we all had to shuffle forward, our shoulders pressed against each other. The cries of children could be heard over the nervous shushing from their parents.

The tall, ornate buildings that made up the inner portions of the city of Etistin blocked the view of the city center, but it was as we approached that area that I spotted Alacryans.

They weren't any different from the humans of Sapin, but they all wore the same gray and black uniform streaked with blood-red. They were also the only ones with weapons, and they used them to herd the people up ahead into the pathway leading to the city center.

That's when I heard it: the first scream.

That was only the beginning—that first scream triggered more as the crowd in front reached the open area of the city's square.

I pushed ahead through the crowd, trying to squeeze toward the front. I was in the middle of the dense press of people shuffling into the open area that had once been the hub of commerce and trade in Etistin.

As I got closer, I noticed the change in the atmosphere—from fear and worry to despair. Underneath the screams that resounded from the buildings around us, I could make out the gasps and groans and quiet sobs from the people up ahead.

I noticed a broad man pointing a trembling finger at something I couldn't yet see and a woman with both hands covering her mouth, eyes wide and tears flowing freely; another man wore a hard expression as he looked the other way.

That's when I reached the front.

My gut heaved and a lump in my throat threatened to suffocate me as I saw the four figures: two men, two women, with black spikes pierced through their bodies—high up in the air for all to see.

Blaine and Priscilla Glayder and... my parents.

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DAY OF REBIRTH

I STUMBLED BACK, only kept on my feet by the press of bodies around me. My breath came in short, uneven bursts, and my head spun. Everything faded out of focus except for my parents—I couldn't bear to look, yet I couldn't look away from their corpses hanging in the air with black spikes jutting through their backs, their arms and legs dangling limply as blood trailed down the three-story tall spikes.

The worst part, though, was the fact that I could see their expressions. Their eyes were wide and bulging, their mouths hung open grotesquely. They had been positioned alongside the king and queen of Sapin for everyone arriving to clearly see the pain that they had been in before their deaths.

Blood rushed to my head, pounding in my ears, and I felt *power* leak from my mana core. The primal strength of the elderwood guardian's beast will threatened to break free and wreak havoc on the Alacryans here.

Control yourself, Tessia, I thought, pleading with myself. It took every ounce of strength left in my body to resist the beast's power. My parents did what they did believing they were keeping me safe, and, regardless of how things had turned out, I needed to make sure that I didn't throw their efforts away in vain.

A sob clawed free of my throat and I couldn't bear it any longer. Falling to my knees, I wept quietly amidst the crowd, one of many who mourned the loss of these kings and queens, though I mourned for different reasons. To

most of the people here, their deaths meant that Dicathen had lost. The people cried because for the grim future filled with hardships and uncertainties.

For me... I cried for my parents—I cried for all of the things I would never be able to do with them, for all of the things I had said to them, and all of the things I couldn't say to them.

"Citizens of Dicathen," a soft, honeyed voice said, practically oozing through the city square. Despite how loud it had been, the crowd quieted. On the top of a stone pillar stood a woman wearing the gray and red uniform of Alacrya. Her red hair billowed like a dancing flame as she looked down at us, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Your kings have passed, your armies are fleeing, and your most powerful warriors are in hiding. The castle is ours, Xyrus City and Elenoir City are ours, and now, Etistin City is ours. But do not despair, for we do not come as pillagers."

All was still and silent as everyone waited for her next words.

When she finally spoke, she made a subtle but welcoming gesture with her arms slightly raised. "We come here as agents of something greater—of *someone* greater. You know of the asuras, the mighty beings you worship as deities. You have long believed they have watched over you, yet it has been a lie. The asuras had abandoned you... Those days are no longer. Alacrya has won this war, yet not by our own power. We won because our sovereign is no lowly human or elf like these you see here." Her voice quieted, but her words carried even more clearly than before. "We won because our sovereign is an asura. Our victory was the will of a deity himself."

Murmurs could be heard throughout the large crowd, but the Alacryans didn't stop it. They let the chatter and hesitance amongst the crowd grow. The woman on the pedestal sighed sadly, and I could hear it as if she were right next to me in a quiet room.

She used earth magic to raise that stone pillar, and she's been manipulating sound to spread her voice. How many elements can she control? Was there

more to the Alacryans' powers that we'd managed to discover? In the face of someone capable of not only manipulating multiple elements, but who was also a deviant like myself, I began to wonder how many mages as powerful as this person, or even more so, existed amongst the Alacryans.

"Your disbelief is reasonable, and what I say or do here will only fan the flames of doubt growing within you. This is natural, and this is why we had to do what we did—because of stubbornness, because of pride, because of greed, and because of doubt, peace can only be achieved through war," she said solemnly. "You may feel like the prisoners of a defeated country now, but I assure you that, as time passes, you all will feel like a part of something bigger—citizens of a godly kingdom."

"My name is Lyra Dreide. Today, I have stood above you as victor, but I pray that the next time we meet, it will be as equals, and as friends."

The Alacryan's words lingered in the air like the smell of spring flowers after rain. She didn't stop there; she then raised the stone pillar even higher and gently pulled the bodies of my parents and the king and queen of Sapin from the black spikes.

After setting them down one by one on the ground, she created a pit around their bodies, then conjured a flame in her hand.

"Our sovereign has decreed today, the twenty-fifth sundown of Spring, as the day of rebirth." With a single motion, she lit the pit on fire.

I pressed my hands over my mouth, physically restraining myself from screaming as I watched the flames burn higher. The thought of not even being able to properly send off my parents clawed at my insides, making it harder to control my raging beast will.

"This is not a time for mourning or reflection of the past. Today is the start of a—"

The woman—Lyra Dreide—stopped in midsentence, scanning the crowd around me.

It was then that I felt the subtle shift in the air.

My hair stood on end, and I could feel the primal instincts of the elderwood guardian inside me tremble. Every fiber of my body told me I should get out of here.

I watched the bright flames dance in the pit as if mocking me. Rage and indignation bubbled in the pit of my stomach, but I knew it was too late.

Biting my lower lip, I took one last look at Lyra Dreide. I knew she wasn't the one responsible for those black spikes that had killed Kathyln's and my parents, but I wouldn't forget her.

There was another shift in the air, and suddenly the Alacryan was talking to a figure that hadn't been there the instant before. I thought I recognized his short black hair and thin frame, but he had his back turned toward me. Regardless, my body screamed at me to run away, and, considering how much was at stake, I followed my instincts.

Staying low, I weaved through the crowd of numb men and women, burying my own feelings. Wiping the tears from my face, I headed towards the buildings in the hopes that I'd be able to squeeze through the alleyway to escape.

There were two Alacryan soldiers guarding the path that I had come from. It would've been smarter to wait for at least one of them to leave, but, behind me, I could feel the threatening presence growing closer.

Barely able to think over the sound of my own heart trying to break out of my ribcage, I ran past the Alacryan guards, blasting both with a gale of wind. Unlike the previous guards I had met, however, these Alacryans seemed ready.

One repelled my attack with her own blast of wind while the other managed to anchor himself to the ground, his entire body covered in reptilian scales made of stone.

The earth mage swung his arms, launching a barrage of the stone scales that covered his body while the female guard conjured a funnel of wind that pushed down on me from above like a giant fist, pushing me to my

knees. Knowing that my presence had already been felt and there was no point trying to be subtle now, I ignited my beast will and shrouded myself in the protective green aura of the elderwood guardian.

The stone scales were repelled and the wind was deflected around the aura. Two translucent vines of mana shot out from me. The first plunged through the wind mage's chest, killing her instantly. The second slammed into the thick, stone scales protecting the earth mage, who was sent flying into a nearby wall. I didn't wait to see if he would get back up; I ran.

The dread in my heart grew. The threatening presence followed behind me like a shadow even as I reached the outskirts of the city. My plan had been to try and make it back through the gate, but I found it under heavy guard by Alacryan soldiers.

Cursing under my breath, I turned away, heading instead for the southwestern border of Etistin.

The closest city with a teleportation gate was Telmore, which was just off the western coast. If I could make it there and use the medallion, I could still get back to the shelter. It was possible that the Alacryans would expect this, though, and have the gate there blocked as well.

With that in mind, I didn't go directly to Telmore, but made my way toward the shore, where the last major battle had occurred. From what I'd heard, General Varay had managed to build a massive field of ice in Etistin Bay. I held out a dim hope that I might find survivors of the battle hiding in the woods and hills near the bay.

After hours of darting through the hills and dense trees—without using magic so as not to leave signs for the Alacryans to follow—the sky had turned a deep orange from the setting sun. I knew I wasn't too far from the coast, but I needed to rest. I could sleep for a few hours, then finish the journey. I didn't believe what Lyra Dreide had said. There had to be soldiers on our side still fighting out there.

My mana-enhanced senses picked up a small movement nearby, making me

stop mid-step. I instantly realized I had made a mistake. I shouldn't have made it known that I could sense someone.

"Get on your knees and show your back," said a clear, authoritative voice from somewhere to my right.

I immediately got on my knees and lifted up the bottom of my tunic to reveal my lower and mid-back.

"Clear," a deep voice grunted from behind me.

A lone figure walked into my line of sight, moving slowly, her hands held over her head in a sign of peace. She was thin and a head shorter than me, older than most soldiers I had seen on the battlefield, but her weathered face and toned body suggested a lifetime of hard work. Her expression was knitted into a suspicious scowl as she studied me.

She walked to within ten paces of where I knelt, then turned around slowly and lifted the back of her vest and shirt, revealing a tanned but otherwise unmarked back—clear of the markings that Alacryan mages had.

She turned back around but kept her distance.

"Nod for yes, shake for no. Are you alone?" she asked quietly, her gaze constantly flitting left and right.

I nodded.

"Okay," she replied, walking closer and stretching out her hand. "I am—was the head of the third vanguard unit. You can call me Madam Astera. What is your name?"

Looking around uncomfortably, I leaned in close and whispered. "Tessia Eralith."

Madam Astera clearly recognized my name, as she flinched when I said it. She otherwise retained her composure, however, simply nodding and gesturing for me to stand. With another quick gesture of her hand, the rest of her group appeared from the trees.

"We're going back to base," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The rest nodded and I found myself trailing right behind Madam Astera. We

followed the base of a steep hill, which shielded us from prying eyes from the direction of the coast.

"Are you all soldiers of Dicathen?"

She nodded in reply, but did not break her stride as she led us through the thick undergrowth of this untraveled wilderness, her head constantly moving as she watched for potential danger.

"How many of you are there?"

"You'll see soon enough, Princess," she answered coolly. "For now we need to keep moving."

I bit my lip. I needed information, not these non-answers. My patience gave way, and I stopped, forcing the entire party to halt. "I'm on my way to Telmore City. If we can rally more soldiers from the battle going on at Etistin Bay, then I can take—"

"Rally?" Madam Astera hissed, her gaze sharp as a dagger. She let out a sigh and held up a hand above her head.

The other Dicathians around us held their positions, most hidden behind trees, some crouched in shrubs and hollow logs.

"Follow me," she muttered, climbing the steep hill we'd been using as cover. I followed after her, using the jutting roots and rocks as footholds. Madam Astera got to the top first and her expression turned solemn. Finally reaching the top, I followed the line of her gaze and I felt the blood drain from my face as a sharp gasp escaped my throat.

Etistin Bay was directly below us. General Varay's ice-field, which must have once been white and beautiful, had been transformed into a horrorscape of blood and gore; the snow and ice was splashed with pinks, reds, and maroons around the corpses—more corpses than I could count. Dark, smoky flames burned within many of the bodies, and many more had been impaled by the same obsidian spikes that had killed my parents.

"You asked if we could rally more soldiers..." Madam Astera said, her voice low and choked with emotion. "I don't think there are any more soldiers to rally here, Princess."

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WALKING CATASTROPHE

"SHE REALLY IS A PRINCESS." The balding, bearish man named Herrick was studying me intently.

"You're making her uncomfortable, you big oaf." Nyphia, his female companion, punched him in the arm.

"Sorry... I've just never seen a real princess before," Herrick mumbled, looking away from me.

I held back a smile as I listened to the two bicker. Nearby, Madam Astera was talking to a thinner man—not much older than me—who was huddled over and hugging his knees as his entire body trembled. The man, Jast, hadn't said a word since we arrived, only muttering a string of incoherent words as he rocked back and forth, but Madam Astera had sat with him since we reached their camp, hidden in a remote cave, attempting to sooth him.

"He had it the worst," Nyphia commented, her steely expression softening as she watched him. "He watched his entire unit slaughter each other in front of him."

"Slaughter... each other?" I echoed, horrified.

Nyphia leaned close and whispered, "Tore each other apart like rabid animals. Horrible, just horrible."

Nyphia scooted back to where she had been sitting. I found myself staring at her and Herrick, their bodies barely visible in the dim light. They were both riddled with injuries.

Herrick was missing his left hand, and by the blood seeping through the bandages wrapped around his wrist, I could tell that the wound was fairly recent. Nyphia had a bloody gash running down the side of her face, and every time she moved her body, she would wince ever so slightly.

I pitied the state they were in, but I admired the strength they showed. It felt good to be among soldiers again. Then I thought of my own team, and I felt a sick ache in my gut. What had happened to them, I wondered? I had barely had a moment to consider their fates after Elshire... Had they been at Etistin Bay? Were their corpses still lying in the red snow? A shiver ran down my spine as I watched through my mind's eye as they turned on one another, like Jast's unit, forced by some Alacryan magic to slaughter each other... I couldn't bear the thought, and so let my mind go blank and empty, not thinking about anything at all.

After Jast had fallen asleep with his head buried in his knees, Madam Astera joined us at the back of the cave where we were sitting around a dim light artifact.

She sat across from me, and her look was so intense it was as if she was staring through my flesh and into my soul. Both Nyphia and Herrick had stopped talking, and it seemed like minutes before Madam Astera spoke again. When she did, it wasn't what I had expected her to say.

"Fuck!" she hissed, pounding the hard ground with her fist. I could tell by their expressions that Nyphia and Herrick were just as taken aback by Madam Astera's sudden outburst.

"It doesn't bode well to see you out here, Princess."

That's when I realized the reason for her outburst: I wasn't hurt, but I was in disguise and running for my life. My presence out here meant that something was very wrong.

"You're right, it doesn't. But before I explain the situation out there, can you tell me what happened? To my knowledge, we were winning the battle at Etistin Bay."

"We were and we weren't," she said cryptically. "My understanding of events is filled with gaps since my unit was positioned towards the outskirts of the battle, but I'll explain to the best of my ability."

Madam Astera's demeanor grew dark and solemn as she recounted her memory of the battle.

While General Varay and General Arthur were still present at the Battle of the Bloodfrost—as the massacre had been dubbed by the soldiers who escaped—the fighting had been one-sided. But as the battle progressed, it became more and more obvious that something was off. The enemy soldiers threw themselves into battle without formation, fled, or even begged for their lives. Madam Astera had even witnessed enemy soldiers sacrificing their comrades to save themselves.

Despite this, the higher ups continued the order to push forward. They wanted to take over the Alacryan ships docked at the far end of the ice field.

It was on the third day that the situation changed. Madam Astera couldn't tell me exactly how it had started, but they knew something was wrong when the fresh vanguard, which was supposed to relieve the current front line's position, didn't arrive.

Then, Alacryan soldiers—actual soldiers marching in formation who clearly knew what they were doing—came from behind. The majority of the Dicathian forces on the field were now suddenly trapped between the bay and the Alacryan army. The carefully constructed fortifications no longer acted as a barrier protecting our conjurers and archers, but instead put their backs against the literal wall.

In the sky, high above the battleground, General Varay was fighting an enemy capable of holding his own against Dicathen's strongest Lance. The Dicathian forces initially held strong, and the reserves were slowly regaining their footing after their initial surprise. Once Lance Mica joined the fight, it seemed likely that the Dicathians could turn the tide of the battle...

Then the man arrived.

In our dim cave, I felt as if a shadow had just passed over all who listened to Madam Astera's recounting of the battle.

With the arrival of this new figure, the already-bloody battle turned into some kind of nightmare. Scores of obsidian spikes shot from the ground, skewering allies and enemies alike. Clouds of murky gray mist slowly spread over the battlefield, transforming affected troops into deranged monsters that attacked anything that came close. But the worst were the black flames, which swept through entire units of soldiers like a forest fire, leaving behind nothing but black blood and gray ash.

It was just one man, but that one man had been a walking catastrophe. Though the battle had raged for days, within hours of his arrival, Etistin Bay had been transformed into a graveyard, and the Battle of the Bloodfrost was over.

"How did any of you survive that?" I asked, awed and shaken by Madam Astera's story.

"Luck, more than anything. The black fires, spikes, and smoke weren't targeted, just spread randomly. Dicathians and Alacryans alike were affected. The Alacryans were in a state of chaos, so some of those who hadn't died from the initial wave of magic were able to escape," Madam Astera explained, her gaze falling on Herrick and Nyphia. "There are definitely other survivors hiding out here, assuming they haven't already been caught and captured, which is why we've been going on these runs—we've been trying to find more allies.

"We found Jast just yesterday. He was attacked by an Alacryan patrol, but we were able to save him. These two are what's left of my unit, and you've already met a few more of our number. They'll be back soon. We've worked out a system where one group comes back while the other circles around just in case we're followed."

"How are your supplies looking?" I asked after a long pause.

"We can split the rations for four more days at the maximum," she said

matter-of-factly. "Besides sustenance, however, we have nothing. I only had one emergency medical kit, and that was used to patch up Herrick's injury."

The large soldier lowered his head, looking at the stump where his left hand.

The large soldier lowered his head, looking at the stump where his left hand used to be.

"Now, Princess. Tell us the situation out there. Is the war over? Have we lost?" Madam Astera asked, her large, piercing eyes focused on me.

I shifted my gaze to Herrick and Nyphia; they were staring back intently—hopeful, desperate.

I sat up and kept my expression stern and confident. "We lost this war, but it isn't over."

"Please elaborate," Madam Astera insisted, leaning closer.

I showed them the medallion and told them about the shelter. I explained that Commander Virion and General Bairon were both there, along with General Arthur, a powerful diviner, and even an emitter. I told them about how the diviner had prepared supplies in advance and that all the necessary components were there to sustain hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

My message was not received in the way I'd expected. Instead of the hope I had sought to convey, Astera, Herrick, and Nyphia all wore identical looks of indignation.

"So the outcome of this entire war had been predicted? We were doomed to lose from the start?" Nyphia muttered, horrified.

My heart sank. "No! I mean—"

"Did the commander, General Arthur, and General Bairon flee the battle to save themselves?" Madam Astera asked, her voice seething with controlled rage.

"Of course not! They were attacked by a Scythe at the castle. They barely made it out of there alive," I assured them, trying to regain control of the conversation.

Madam Astera's head drooped and she buried her face in her hands. When she finally looked back up, her eyes were full of steel.

"Last question, and please answer honestly," she said, her tone sending a chill down my spine. "Did they know?"

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. Could she honestly think that my grandfather would have sent them—any of them—into this battle if he'd known the outcome?

"Commander Virion. General Arthur. General Bairon. Did these three people know what was going to happen here?"

"No!" I snapped. "No one but Elder Rinia, the diviner, knew! And no one was angrier than those three about not being told. They blame themselves for how this war ended, but they're still there, because they know it's the only chance we have in taking back Dicathen!"

Madam Astera let out a shuddering breath. "I understand. So, what's the plan? Did you travel here because the diviner knew our location?"

I bit my lip, unable to answer. I couldn't just tell them that I had snuck out here alone on a selfish quest to bring back my parents, only to fail and be chased away. It was entirely up to luck that I'd been found by Madam Astera's group.

"I've come to find Dicathians and bring as many as I can back with me to the refugee shelter," I lied.

Though it was a lie, I was consoled by seeing Herrick and Nyphia smile at each other, excited at the fact that they'd be safe once they were there. Even Jast raised his head, his gaze momentarily sober and hopeful.

Madam Astera nodded but I couldn't read her expression. Regardless, it was enough. They agreed to go with me to Telmore City, where we'd either sneak in or fight our way to the teleportation gate. All we had to do was wait for the rest of Madam Astera's group to arrive.

An hour trickled by as we waited for more people to come, but no one did.

"They shouldn't be out there for this long," Madam Astera growled as she paced back and forth inside the cave. "I'll go take a look—alone. Stay here." "It'll take too long for you go out and search for them by yourself, then come

back," I argued. "We travelled north to get here, so if we go together and meet up with the rest of the group further south, it'll be en route to Telmore City."

"It will shave off at least half a day, depending on how fast we're able to locate them," Nyphia chimed in.

"I don't like it, but you're right. Princess, do you have any experience in tracking or scouting?" Madam Astera asked.

"I've had some training from my previous teacher on using wind magic for scouting, but my actual experience is minimal," I answered, tightening my leather boots.

"So you specialize in wind, good. That'll be useful out there," she replied, turning to Jast. "How do you feel? You had another one of your episodes again."

Jast stood up slowly, slinging a sack over his shoulder. "I'm a bit better now. Thank you, Madam Astera."

"Then let's get moving," she ordered.

We left the cave through the small entrance, which we had covered in foliage; from the outside, the little hideout was nothing more than a slope at the base of a hill.

Staying low to the ground and several yards apart from each other, we made our way south through the forest. The trees here weren't nearly as dense or lush as in the Elshire Forest—even the wildlife seemed scarce and timid.

The forest made me miss home, more than I ever had in the past. I had spent years in Sapin while I was at school, but the fact that I might not even have a home to go back to now really hit me. Even if the castle I grew up in was still there, what was the point? My parents were gone.

No. Not now, Tess. I swallowed the lump in my throat and took a deep breath. There would be a time to grieve once we were all safe. For now, I needed to focus on getting everyone back to the shelter.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed while we searched for the missing

soldiers, but suddenly Madam Astera let out a trilling whistle like a bird. This was her signal for us to stop and lie low.

It only took me a few seconds to catch on to what the leader had seen and heard—something was moving just a few yards southeast from our position. It was too large to be a rodent or hare, and it seemed too clumsy to be a deer.

I caught the reflection of her thin sword through the bushes as she carefully stalked through the undergrowth. She moved with ease, as if gliding through the trees and foliage, and her presence was barely detectable even to me.

Despite the situation we were in, I couldn't help but admire her prowess. Once she was settled, she would be a powerful ally—able to help smuggle more people away from the Alacryans.

I continued waiting, watching, my entire body tense, as Madam Astera was almost upon the thing, when she lurched to a stop and gestured for us to come.

With a sigh of relief, we all hurried over to where she was, only to find her crouched over an injured soldier—one of her missing group. Blood soaked his clothes and armor.

Beside me, Nyphia let out a gasp. "That's Abath."

She ran towards the injured man and I followed, just hearing the last part of what he was saying. "—was killed... a boy."

As I puzzled over his words, my beast will suddenly ignited and every fiber in my body warned of imminent danger. It was as if a heavy blanket of carnal bloodlust had fallen over me; I was barely able to remain on my feet. Both Herrick and Nyphia fell to their knees, trembling, and Jast crumpled, curling up into the fetal position and shaking violently.

Desperate, I turned to Madam Astera. She was staring behind me, wide-eyed, her lips struggling to form the sounds as she muttered, "Y-you... in the battle..."

I knew—my entire body knew—that, unlike in Etistin, it was too late to run away this time. Willing myself to turn around, forcing my muscles to obey, I

saw the face of a ghost. I saw a person that I hadn't seen in years, a person I thought had died, that I had almost forgotten... a person that couldn't possibly be standing here, now. Could he? "Elijah?"

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DEAR OLD FRIEND

ELIJAH HAD CHANGED TREMENDOUSLY. He was now a head taller than me, with skin as pale as alabaster, and his short, jet-black hair and sharp eyes made him look almost completely different.

Elijah chuckled, though I found no humor in the sound. "Long time no see, Tess. How's Arthur doing?"

I shuddered as a sharp chill ran through me, raising gooseflesh along my arms and neck. Elijah and I had gone to school together—he was Art's best friend. So why did his casual question sound so threatening?

"He's doing fine," I said stiffly, trying to stand taller as the pressure Elijah gave off continued to weigh down on me.

Elijah snorted. "Of course he's doing fine. That fool has been as resilient as a cockroach ever since I've known him."

My brows furrowed in confusion. What was going on? Why was Elijah speaking this way?

"Come on. Let's go."

"Go? Where?" I asked, my heartbeat quickening. "Elijah, what happened to you?"

Elijah flinched slightly at the mention of his name. "I'll explain on the way. For now, it'd be best if you come with me."

"Don't!" a voice croaked from behind me. I looked back to see Madam Astera on her feet, her sword in hand.

"Honestly, it's impressive that you can talk despite the pressure I've put on you," Elijah said. "But I advise you not to speak again.

Madam Astera raised her sword, and though her hands shook with the effort, she pointed the tip directly at Elijah's heart. "H-he's the—the one... the battlefield."

The instincts embedded into me through assimilation with my beast will caused my nerves to tingle as I sensed the danger; leaping back, I tackled Madam Astera. A familiar black spike, jutted from the ground where she had stood, blood dripping from its point.

Madam Astera groaned in pain, but my eyes remained glued to Elijah. "You?"

We were told that the only ones able to conjure those black spikes were the Scythes and their retainers. So why—how—was Elijah able to use their deviant magic?

"Are you with the Alacryans?" I asked, thunderstruck.

Elijah's expression turned serious. "The Alacryans and I both have something we want to get out of this war. That is it."

"It was you... You were at Etistin. Were you the one that—that..."

Elijah took a step toward us. "Step away from the woman, Tessia."

"I refuse," I said through gritted teeth.

"G-get out of here, Princess. It seems he can't kill you," Madam Astera whispered. "We're no match. He slaughtered hundreds of soldiers at the bay. Not even... not even the Lances could stand before him. There's no mistaking it."

"I've trained and suffered for years for this, Tessia. Come with me and I'll leave the others alone."

I tightened my grip around Madam Astera.

Elijah sighed wearily. "Okay. I really didn't want to leave you with any distasteful memories, but you give me no choice."

I could sense that he was using his power before I saw the black spike pierce

through the wounded soldier that we had just found, but there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Madam Astera jerked in my grasp, trying to reach her fallen comrade, but I kept her down.

"Come with me, Tessia," Elijah repeated.

My mind spun as I tried to think of a way out of this. I knew I couldn't go with Elijah. He was purposely keeping me alive for something. My first thought was that he was going to use me as a hostage, but then Elijah said he didn't want to leave me with any distasteful memories...

My nerves tingled as Elijah used his power again. In the distance, Jast had been pierced through the chest and hoisted into the air... just like my parents had been. The traumatized soldier's expression wasn't of pain but of surprise and confusion as he looked down at the obsidian spike that had taken his life.

"No!" Madam Astera screamed, trying to pry herself away from me.

"Now..." Elijah held out a pale hand. "Come—with—me."

My gaze shifted from Jast's corpse to Madam Astera, then to Nyphia's and Herrick's prone forms.

He would just keep killing them one by one until only I was left, but if I went with him... Desperately, I grabbed the blade of Madam Astera's sword and held it to my throat. "Don't!"

Surprise flashed across Elijah's face but was quickly replaced by a confident smirk. "You're not going to kill yourself."

I pressed the edge of the blade against my throat until I drew blood.

This was a dangerous gamble, one that could get us all killed, but I knew I couldn't go with him—I knew something far worse than death might happen if I did.

"Stop."

I held the blade in place, keeping my expression firm despite the sharp pain radiating from my self-inflicted wound. *I can't go with him, I can't go with him, I can't go with him, I* repeated to myself, a mantra to harden my determination. Still, fear

bubbled up in the pit of my stomach. I didn't want to die now. I didn't want to die.

The hand holding the blade trembled. The edge of the sword lowered, just a fraction of an inch, breaking contact with my skin. Instantly, a thin spike shot through Madam Astera's sword, knocking it out of my hand.

"I'm sorry to risk your life like that, Tess, but I've waited too long," Elijah said sincerely as he walked towards me.

I fell back and scrambled desperately away from the man that was once Arthur's friend. What had happened to him?

Elijah flicked his wrist and another black spike shot up from the ground, impaling Herrick. I closed my eyes, but couldn't escape Nyphia's horrified screams as she watched her friend die.

Why was I so weak? Because of me, everyone here was going to die, and I couldn't do anything about it. It was just like the battle in the Elshire Forest—all of those deaths had been caused by me. I opened my eyes again to see the world spinning and tipping. I felt like I was underwater, like I was drowning. The only noise I could hear was my frantic heart beat and my own short, desperate breaths.

Then a storm of golden-white light rained down on Elijah. Clouds of dust enveloped the entire area as trees fell and the ground crumbled.

Through the dust, a dragon as black as the starless night sky approached. Moments later, I could make out an all-too-familiar figure with a head of long auburn hair, holding someone. Faint golden markings glowed just beneath his eyes as he appeared. A mixture of emotions washed over me as my vision darkened: embarrassment, guilt, but most of all, relief.

"I'm sorry," I said, not even able to hear my own voice, then the darkness took me.

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Within Static Void, I dropped Nyphia—who I had practically pried away from Herrick's lifeless body—and scooped up Tess's unconscious form.

Slinging Tess over my shoulder, I snapped my fingers to get Nyphia's attention.

"Help Madam Astera onto my bond," I ordered, nodding my head at Sylvie, who was walking quickly towards us.

Nyphia, who had been staring at me blankly, snapped out of her daze and leapt to the task. She slung Madam Astera's arm over her shoulders and helped her up onto Sylvie.

"What is this?" Madam Astera marveled as she climbed onto my bond's back. Her right ankle was bleeding profusely.

Wordlessly, I handed Tessia up to her and made sure all three of them were secure before I withdrew Static Void. I ignored the fatigue around my mana core and jumped onto Sylvie's back and we took off, flying high into the cloudy skies.

How easy would it have been if I had full control over aevum like Lord Indrath? I could've kept time frozen as I took everyone to safety. Of course, if I had the powers of an asura, things would never have escalated to this point.

'Are you okay? You held that aether art for much longer than you're used to,' Sylvie asked, her concern emanating onto me.

I'll be fine. Like before, in the ancient shelter, I had felt more in control and less drained while using Static Void. Perhaps it was the training I had done with Sylvie, or perhaps the time spent in the aether rich atmosphere, but I seemed to have finally taken a step forward in my mastery over the aether art. Were you able to get a close look at that Alacryan though? From those black spikes and the pressure he gave off, he was at least a retainer, and one we haven't seen before.

'I wasn't able to make out his face either,' she answered. 'But he's already approaching us.'

I sensed it too. We had climbed above the thick blanket of clouds and had traveled several miles, but I could feel the Alacryan's presence not too far

off.

Madam Astera was the next to sense our enemy's approach. She jerked back, her face pale and expression grim.

She and I both knew that as soon as we landed, a battle would be inevitable—but that didn't matter. I just needed to hold this person off until Madam Astera and Nyphia could get Tess through the portal safely. With the artifact she and I had, the portal would take us to the shelter where the rest of our party was waiting.

'We'll make it back,' Sylvie assured me. 'We're much stronger than we were last time we fought a retainer.'

Considering that I had barely managed to wound a Scythe out of sheer luck, and I didn't even have the blade with which I had accomplished that feat, I couldn't help but feel a lingering doubt. Still, there were people waiting for me.

We continued flying in silence. Nyphia was doing her best to cope with the loss of her friend, trembling as she clutched something in her hands. I found myself staring at Madam Astera's back as she held onto Tess. I didn't think I'd meet the old soldier again after seeing her briefly at the battle of Etistin bay, but I was glad to have found her. She was exactly the type of soldier we needed now—

A sharp influx of mana behind us snapped me to attention. I whirled around, conjuring a dome-shaped barrier of ice. Several black spikes slammed into the ice barrier with enough force to shatter it. Drawing water-attribute mana from the dense clouds below us, I conjured a second frost barrier, but the barrage of black spikes continued unceasingly.

Sylv, dip lower into the clouds, I conveyed while manipulating the dense clouds to cover our movements.

'Got it. We're almost at Telmore City.'

We picked up speed during our descent, giving me enough time to prepare an attack. I readied a barrage of ice shards and released them in the general

direction of the approaching Alacryan, using wind magic to propel them even faster and cause them to spin.

My spell punched dozens of holes through the clouds, and through one of them I could just make out the black dot that was our pursuer, unfazed by my attack.

Immediately after, the black dot multiplied and I found myself facing another two-dozen black spikes the size of spears.

Faster! I snapped, unwilling to waste any more mana right now when a battle on the ground seemed inevitable. I could only pray that there wasn't another retainer or Scythe waiting for us by the teleportation gate.

Finally, after speeding down through an endless expanse of murky gray, we burst through the cloud floor. Below, the city of Telmore suddenly appeared, its buildings and the ground they were built on fast approaching

Even with the wind buffer I had cast around us, Madam Astera and Nyphia had to clutch tightly to Sylvie's back spines to keep from falling off.

'Arthur! Help me with the landing!' Sylvie mentally yelled as we approached the paved clearing in the middle of Telmore City. My gaze shifted back and forth between the approaching black spears and the ground.

"Hold on!" I roared as I ignited Realmheart and cast a powerful updraft just in time for Sylvie to spread her wings.

Simultaneously, I cast another barrier of ice over us as the black spears began raining down from above. This time, though, the spears burned right through the ice barrier.

Curling my hand into a fist, I dispelled the frozen barrier over us, shattering it and using the updraft to redirect at least some of the black spears.

I could barely make out the screams and shouts from the people below as they scattered.

Suddenly, Sylvie let out a cry and we jerked to the left and started spiraling out of control. She'd been struck in the right wing. I could feel her trying to shrug off the pain, trying to regain control of our descent. She began to coat

the wing in mana and use vivum to close the wound, but we were growing perilously close to the ground. If she couldn't slow our descent fast enough, we would crash into the pavement like a meteor.

I watched in growing horror as we plummeted toward the ground, still going much too fast. Just as it seemed all was lost, a green light emanated from around me.

Tess was awake and back up on her feet; the light had spread from her and onto Sylvie as green translucent tendrils of mana shot out from underneath us, embedding themselves into the ground and buildings around us.

Most of the translucent vines ripped apart as they tried to counter the speed of our fall, but we were definitely slowing down.

Trusting Sylvie and Tess to handle the fall, I focused my attention back to our pursuer, who was speeding towards us like an ebony comet.

Utilizing both fire and water, I conjured a blast of steam towards our enemy in order to obscure his vision, then released an arc of lightning. The blast of steam served as a powerful conductor for the electricity, creating a lightning-cloud that lit up the darkening sky in brilliant flashes of gold.

At the last moment, Sylvie cast a barrier of mana around us, and with Tess's beast will slowing our fall, we were able to land on the ground without being crushed like bugs.

"Let's go!" I snapped, picking Nyphia up by her waist as Tess and Madam Astera hopped off of Sylvie.

Madam Astera had enveloped a thick layer of mana around the wound on her right ankle to keep it from bleeding. It was only a temporary solution but a smart choice considering how little time we had.

"I can run!" Nyphia said, pulling free of my grip.

I let her go and we all began racing towards the podium only a few hundred feet east with Tess and Madam Astera leading the way. Sylvie changed into her human form and followed closely behind me, and I kept Nyphia right in front of me.

Tess glanced back over her shoulder at me as we ran. It was only for a split second, and no verbal exchange was made, but the face she made as she looked at me lingered in my mind.

There were Alacryan soldiers lined up in rows between us and the teleportation gate, but they weren't the reason that every hair on my body stood on its end. I glanced back to see black fire burning away at the lightning cloud. My eyes widened in surprise at the sight of the black fire, the same power used by the Scythe I had fought in the castle.

Below it, a man stood on the ground where we had landed. With Realmheart still active, I could see the horrifying amount of mana coagulating, not just around him, but on the ground below us as well.

Could I risk using Static Void once more? It would take a minute, maybe more, for our entire group to make it to the portal without the help of mana. I wasn't confident I could encompass all of us for that length of time. I glanced at Nyphia and Madam Astera. Could I abandon these two and lessen the burden?

"Arthur!" Sylvie shouted, urging me to do something—anything.

I cursed under my breath, but I made up my mind.

I used Static Void, but only on myself, then whirled around, digging my heels into the ground and dashing towards the Alacryan, frozen where he stood preparing his devastating attack.

Once I was right in front of him, I would drop Static Void and dispel his magic. As I sprinted toward him, I examined this enemy. He wasn't a basilisk of the Vritra Clan, that much was clear, but he seemed much too powerful to be a mere retainer. Then I realized, and my concentration wavered, and Static Void shattered.

He seemed momentarily surprised by my sudden appearance just a few yards away from him, but it passed in an instant, replaced by an arrogant smirk.

His arms lowered, but the umbral energy still swirled around his hands as Elijah greeted me. "Long time no see, my dear old friend... Grey."

251

NOT ALONE

MY BREATH CAUGHT in my lungs and I stumbled to a halt. Elijah, who had been taken by Draneeve during the invasion at Xyrus Academy, was alive and standing in front of me.

"Elijah? W-what's going on? How are you..." my voice trailed off as our eyes met. This was definitely Elijah, but everything about him seemed just a little off. His hair, his skin, even his age seemed slightly wrong. It was his eyes most of all, though. In them, I couldn't find any sign of my friend.

With a sneer, Elijah leapt back, his arms swirling with a black aura.

I responded in turn, igniting Realmheart Physique to its fullest extent. From what I'd seen so far, his spell formations were almost instant. If I was going to get out of this alive, I needed to know where and how his spells were going to form beforehand.

I could see my bangs turn white while golden runes began pulsating on my skin. In Realmheart, with the otherworldly power of an asura coursing through my veins, I felt myself calming down—becoming detached from my emotions.

With a thought, I withdrew the only sword I had left in my dimension ring—the remaining sword of the pair that Senyir, Trodius's daughter, had given me.

The golden sword slid out of its scabbard with a soft hum. Tightening my grip around its handle, I faced Elijah. A whirlwind of ash-like mana moved in

spirals around his hands, ready to be unleashed.

I need to stop him. I'll pry the answers out of him after that.

I dashed forward, closing the gap between us in three steps. I aimed for his midsection but a black spike erupted from the ground between us, parrying my swing.

"Why are you doing this, Elijah?" I leapt to the side, repositioning myself. I didn't let him rest. The physical training I had done with Kordri kicked in and my feet blurred in a series of complicated footwork maneuvers designed for sharp directional changes as I cut and thrust at every part of Elijah's body with the golden blade. I even swung with the steel sheath, wielding it like a second sword.

"After what you've taken away from me, how can you ask me that, Grey?" Elijah replied, his voice seething with anger.

His eyes couldn't keep up but the spikes, which appeared almost before I could decide to attack, seemed more like an automatic defense system than a willful conjuring. Meanwhile Elijah cautiously backed away, his face tense but controlled as he continued preparing a spell.

I could see through Realmheart the form that this massive spell would take, which only put pressure on me to move faster and hit harder. My initial plan was to confront him in close combat in order to conserve my mana and to exploit his weakness, but as our clash dragged on, I realized it wouldn't be as simple as just distracting him until the others could reach the portal.

Even while integrating elemental mana into my blade, the black flames swirling around his hands ate away at my weapon and my mana, continually growing larger after consuming my attacks. I was able to slice through the black spikes that seemed to endlessly appear and protect their master, but not without my blade sustaining damage as well.

With a blast of black fire, Elijah propelled himself back, putting distance between the two of us while I struggled to discard my outer robe, which had caught fire. A trail of the ash-like mana accumulated in a path from where Elijah now stood all the way to the portal. My friends and allies all stood in that path as they sprinted toward the lines of Alacryan soldiers.

Sylvie, I called out in my mind, sharing with her the path of Elijah's spell. I felt a jolt of panic as she understood what it meant.

"Damn it, Elijah," I whispered. Dropping the steel scabbard on the ground, I imbued more mana into the golden sword and swung at Elijah.

Crescents of mana, dozens of them, carved through the air toward Elijah, leaving thin gouges in the ground where they passed.

Elijah was forced to release his attack prematurely. The ground began to crack and crumble along the path of the spell, and massive chunks of stone and earth rose up into the air around us. Thrusting his palms forward, Elijah unleashed a score of obsidian spikes from the ground and the large chunks of stone floating in the air. Like the inside of a massive tunnelworm's mouth, rows and rows of sharp fangs shot out, tearing apart my spell.

Sylvie's mental signal let me know the group was a safe distance away, allowing me to focus entirely on Elijah.

Realmheart allowed me to see where the spikes would shoot out from and even how large they were before the spikes even manifested.

I infused my body with electricity, stimulating and forcibly enhancing my reflexes. I tuned everything out and focused solely on the path leading me to my opponent.

Now.

Blood pumped through my limbs and the muscles in my legs and core tensed. I pushed off with my back foot, feeling the paved ground beneath crumbling from the force. I shot forward, trusting my instincts to take me to the exact location that I wished.

Like a well-orchestrated performance, a black spike shot out from the ground just where my feet were, giving me another foothold to push off from. Despite the seemingly random pattern in which the black spears exploded out from the ground, I was always at the right place at the right time.

I weaved through the jungle of black fangs, and more and more spikes shot out in all directions as I neared Elijah.

Stabbing my golden blade forward, I released a bolt of lightning that glowed black under the influence of Realmheart Physique. Three black horns jutted out in front of Elijah, conducting and redirecting the blast of lightning. The black tendrils of electricity spiraled down the thick black spikes that Elijah had conjured, destroying the ground.

Elijah snarled as mana gathered around his lower face. Black fire roared from his mouth as he bellowed like a dragon. The hellfire grew stronger as it approached, consuming the black spikes as fuel.

I was about to initiate Static Void to maneuver past the black fire, close the distance, and finish it cleanly from behind. Even if I couldn't land a killing blow, I could injure him heavily enough to change the tide of battle.

But Sylvie's voice screamed in my mind. 'Arthur, the gate!'

Sharing our thoughts, I could sense Sylvie shifting back into her draconic form while Tess, Madam Astera, and Nyphia fought off the remaining Alacryan soldiers.

Trusting her, I held my ground and released Thunderclap Impulse. The tinge of electricity around my body faded and I pushed my mana into my next attack, holding my sword close to my body with its tip pointed at the approaching fire. White fire ignited along the blade, shining like liquid pearl as I imbued more and more mana into the weapon to fuel my attack.

A concentrated blast of pure mana shot out from behind me, enveloping Elijah completely and interrupting his continued expulsion of the dark fire. The hellblaze he'd already conjured no longer grew in size, but continued its fast approach.

Gathering as much power into my spell as I could, I waited until the last moment before thrusting my sword forward, releasing the white flame with a burst of cold that covered my clothes in frost and froze the ground around me.

A swirling cone of white frostfire ripped out of my sword and clashed against the raging black inferno.

The resulting shockwave of force pushed me backwards even as I used wind magic to try and keep myself steady. The golden blade of my sword shattered from the stress of conjuring the spell, but my frostfire ate away at his hellfire until both spells were gone.

Is everyone okay? I asked my bond.

'Yes. No one was hurt... on our side.'

I glanced back to see the scope of the damage from Elijah's spell. The black fire hadn't been able to move past me, but the spikes reached all the way to the teleportation gate. All around the gate, the bodies of the Alacryan guards hung from the black spikes like ghastly fruit.

Can you guys reach the portal? I asked.

'No. I can break the black spikes but even then, it'll take some time to make it to where the portal was buried.'

I needed to get Sylvie, Tess, Madam Astera, and Nyphia away from the battle, but if I used a spell powerful enough to clear the forest of black spikes, I might also destroy the teleportation gate. But I couldn't just wait for more Alacryans—perhaps even a retainer or Scythe—to show up while we tried to fish the gate out.

Suddenly, a blast of black fire exploded into view from the crater where Elijah was.

With a hand clad in frostfire, I parried the sphere of hellfire, deflecting it into a nearby building, causing the entire structure to collapse. The fire ate away at the rubble, growing larger until everything was consumed.

Elijah walked out of the crater, apparently unharmed.

"Who are you?" I asked, thinking about his first words to me.

Elijah sneered, an expression I couldn't recall seeing on his face before. "You're smarter than that. I guess the years of living comfortably in this

world have made you soft."

Elijah lifted his hands, but before his spell could manifest, I was already within arm's reach of his face.

Weaponless, I swung my wind-infused fist downward. Another black spike jutted out to protect Elijah's face from my blow, but I didn't stop. With wind propelling my swing and pure mana strengthening the force of my blow, I crushed through the damned spike and landed the punch right on Elijah's jaw.

The sound of crashing thunder resounded through the streets from the impact of my blow, and Elijah's body was buried into the ground.

"You're not Elijah, so I'm going to ask this one more time. Who the hell are you?"

Elijah stood back up from the hole his body had created in the ground. His jaw had been shattered and most of his teeth were gone, but smoky black embers were burning across his face, and the injuries that he had sustained were recovering.

Of course he has regenerative abilities, I thought, grimacing at the pain radiating from my fractures knuckles.

My frustration grew as scores of Alacryan soldiers came rushing towards us from both sides. If things progressed like this, I'd have to fight hundreds of soldiers as well as Elijah.

"Arthur!" Tessia yelled from behind me. Sylvie and Tess were running towards where I stood.

"Stay back!" I roared, my voice carrying an otherworldly power as Realmheart Physique's effects grew stronger. I released an arc of lightning at Elijah before he could fully recover, trying to keep him down in the crater.

'Elijah won't kill Tessia,' Sylvie thought. 'He could've killed her multiple times before we arrived but he didn't.'

There are more Alacryans coming. It's still too dangerous—just get her out of here!

Sylvie's anger exploded like a hot iron in my brain.

'No! Why must you always go about life-threatening situations on your own! I am your partner, not some gopher to escort your princess to safety.'

Sylvie, please, I pleaded. I couldn't let either of them get hurt, and Sylvie knew that.

'We fight together, and we get out of this together,' she said resolutely, her uneasiness leaking through our connection.

Realizing it was no good, I shifted my gaze to Madam Astera. A deep crimson aura encased her sword as she and Nyphia slowly but surely began hacking down the hundreds of black spikes that stood between us and the teleportation gate.

Damn it, Sylvie. Fine, you and Tess keep the Alacryans away. We just need to hold out until the others can make a path to the portal.

'Good plan.'

"Elijah" and I were roughly equal in terms of power. I was faster and stronger physically, but he was more than able to make up for it using the black spike magic that Uto had used, alongside an even more powerful black fire—the same magic that the Scythe who killed Elder Buhnd had used.

I dashed towards Elijah. Friend or not, I needed to stop him.

Seeing me approach, Elijah conjured another volley of obsidian spears and fired them at me.

I can do this, I thought. Elijah's control over the black spikes and the speed with which they were formed wasn't on the level of Uto, and I had gotten much stronger since my fight against him.

With mana pumping through my veins and coalesced around my body, I easily dodged the spears, keeping my movements minimal. Then a wave of black fire shot out from Elijah's palms.

Not willing to waste mana on confronting the hellfire head on, I leapt over it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the fight going at the edge of the crater. Golden lights flashed from Sylvie's attacks while tendrils of green whirled and whipped around Tessia.

Comforted by the fact that they were holding their own despite the overwhelming numbers against them, I focused on my opponent.

Rather than going for raw power like Elijah, I used my mana efficiently. Still in the air, I coalesced different attributes together to form several condensed bullets of varying colors. With a burst of blue fire, aided by wind magic, the five bullets shot through the air, visible as streaks of light like multicolored lasers.

Three were blocked by the black spikes, but one grazed his leg and another hit him squarely in his arm, burning a hole through his limb.

I landed in a forward run, frost accumulating around my arm as I closed in on my opponent.

"You're no match for me in this world, Grey," Elijah snarled as he jumped backwards and conjured a thin layer of smoke around him.

With Realmheart active, I could tell that this spell was similar to the very first retainer that I had fought, who was able to conjure and manipulate deadly toxins and poisons.

"Don't let that gas touch you!" Tess shouted from the edge of the crater.

The gas wove together and snapped out like a serpent striking at its prey.

Skidding to a stop, I used the ice-attuned mana surrounding my arms and slashed at the air. A shimmering crescent-shaped blade of white fire tore free from my swing, cutting through the air and leaving a trail of frost in its path.

The spell sliced through the snake-like formation, freezing it solid. The icy crescent nicked Elijah in the shoulder, leaving behind a patch of blue-white ice, which immediately began spreading, freezing his left arm.

Elijah thrust his right palm forward. Four black spikes erupted from the ground around me, only two of which I managed to avoid. One had pierced through my ankle and the other grazed my side.

I buckled, unable to support myself on the injured ankle. Meanwhile, Elijah's arms, one frozen and another with a charred hole through it, were both

healing.

Damn it! He can heal so fast, he's willing to sacrifice his limbs just to give me injuries.

My wounds were healing as well, but the spikes that had pierced through me were coated in poison, and it was interfering with my own regenerative abilities.

I looked for an opening to use Static Void once more—I needed to end this soon—but Elijah seemed to be conscious of my abilities. He had positioned spikes around himself in such a way that I couldn't get into direct range without him being able to react. His black fire directly countered many of my spells, while his spikes were able to conduct and redirect my lightning.

His weakness was hand-to-hand combat, but he was shrewd. Elijah was playing a game of tactics, keeping me in range while slowly whittling me down despite my superior speed and strength.

I have to assume that his mana pool is greater than mine, based on the amount of magic he has thrown around. If I want to win this fight soon, I need more power.

I struggled to think of a plan. I wasn't sure what I could throw at him that he couldn't counter, and he didn't need to defeat me, only to keep me here until reinforcements arrived. As my mind whirled, a cool and comforting sensation resonated from my core. It was from Sylvia's dragon will.

It told me to let it take control—Sylvia told me to let her take control.

252

HIS NAME

FRUSTRATION, anxiety, doubt, and fear—all of those emotions faded as a shroud of black lightning crackled around me. I let myself sink deeper into the cold embrace of Realmheart; the feeling reminded me of Lord Indrath, Sylvie's grandfather. He had that lofty, detached air around him, as if he wasn't a part of this world but above it. I started to realize why.

As aether continued to coalesce around me, weaving its ethereal tendrils into my body, I could see the runes spreading and connecting with one another along my arms. I felt calloused—numb—as the power from Sylvia's dragon will flowed freely for the first time. It was an intoxicating feeling.

I was a king in my previous life, and I stood as one of the pinnacles of strength on the continent of Dicathen in this life, but what I felt now was true—divine—power.

'Arthur! Stop! You're hurting yourself,' Sylvie begged, but I pushed her fears aside. I was tired of losing battle after battle. Uto, Cylrit, the Scythe—I had lost to them all.

Not today, especially not against this fraud who had possessed the body of my closest friend.

The tendrils of lightning shifted in color as they coiled around my body. I could see the aether being drawn to me, turning the black lightning a dark, dark purple.

'Arthur!' Sylvie roared, her voice farther away now.

Confident and ready, I took a step. The earth shattered beneath my feet, and I found myself standing behind Elijah, although he was still looking at where I had stood before.

I extended an arm and the aetheric lightning shot out like a whip. Elijah barely managed to shift his black spears in the way of my attack, but he flew back from the impact, crashing into the side of the crater where Sylvie and Tess fought the Alacryan soldiers.

Taking another step, I cleared the distance in an instant and hung in the air above him. The shroud of lightning around me lashed out in all directions, arcing and forking towards the Alacryans closest to me and piercing through their armor and bodies as if they were made of paper.

Several Alacryans retaliated with spells of their own, but the blasts of fire and shards of ice and stone shattered against the lightning protecting me.

My eyes gazed down at the hundreds of Alacryans looking up at me like a god.

'...hurting... sto—' My brows furrowed in annoyance. Couldn't she see what I was capable of now? I could stop them. I could kill them all.

Suddenly a black inferno roared outward, enveloping me in a shadowy vortex.

The shroud of lightning and aether around me grew, striking out at the whirling darkness. Embers clung to the lightning tendrils, some sticking to my body, but they didn't bother me.

With another thought, the shroud of lightning was replaced by a nimbus of purple-white fire tinged with aether. The black fire sizzled out of existence at the frostfire's touch.

I made a slashing motion with my arms and a ripple of white flames undulated outward, freezing and shattering everything in its path. With another flick of my wrist, a pulse of white aetheric fire burst forth, engulfing Elijah. He was smashed back into the frozen ground. As the mist and dust subsided, I could see him again, clothes and hair disheveled, arms crossed

over his face, and the remains of frozen black spikes scattered around him.

He looked back up at me, brows furrowed, sweat beading on his forehead... biting his lower lip in a grimace.

A twinge of remorse burrowed through the veil of apathy that hung over me at the familiar sight. Elijah looked so familiar, yet so unfamiliar at the same time. *Why*?

The question fell away as soon as it formed. It didn't matter. I needed to defeat him... to kill him, if I could. He was too dangerous to live.

As more and more of Sylvia's dragon will flowed out of my core and through my veins, the old dragon's voice became clearer. Memories of my time with her in that cave began to surface, and I began to trust in that voice more and more.

I let the otherworldly power take control over my body and my mind—whatever it took to kill Elijah and get Tess and Sylvie to safety.

Had I broken through past the white core stage? Was this Sylvia's message to me—to destroy anyone who posed a risk to those precious to me?

That had to be it. Why else would I be hearing Sylvia's voice right now? What other explanation for this sudden influx of power could there be?

'Arth—plea—stroying—ody...'

I pushed away my bond's voice. She didn't understand; she didn't know. She didn't know of Sylvia's promise to me—that she had a message for me once I had broken past the white core stage.

My vision was tinged a shade of lavender as aether gathered around me. The motes of purple danced as if celebrating my ascension to the throne.

I truly felt like a deity... like an asura.

Shifting my attention back to Elijah, I noticed his gaze kept flitting off to the side as if he expected to see something there—or someone.

I let out a breath and the motes of aether fluttered in front of me. Raising an arm completely enveloped in a golden aura, I flicked my wrist. The blade of wind whistled as it cut the air, aimed at Elijah's chest. As it flew, aether

molded around it, causing the razor-thin crescent to glow purple.

Rows of black spikes, ablaze with hellfire, erupted from the ground in front of him, but the silvery-purple crescent sheared through the rows of black spikes like they were made of butter.

Elijah, realizing that his defenses were useless, barely managed to throw himself out of the way, but not in time to avoid the spell entirely. He let out a howl of pain, clutching what was left of his severed arm. Even then, he dared to launch another attack at me.

I smirked as I took a step in the air. With control of spatium, the motes of aether converged into a bridge in front of me, and that single step cleared dozens of yards instantly and without using any physical strength. It was as if the very world had folded in front of me.

Elijah's eyes widened in shock as I held out a hand. Aether converged around the stub of his right arm, where his hellfire was currently regenerating the lost limb. Under my influence, the black fire turned purple, and rather than heal him, it began to eat away at his flesh.

"Not a match, you say?" I mocked, my voice ethereal to my own ears.

Elijah bit his lower lip harder, stifling a scream. He wasn't broken, though, I had to give him that. My old friend spit out a mouthful of blood and scoffed at me. "I knew you'd show your true face. Whatever name and appearance you take on, you'll always be the same, Grey."

My eyes narrowed but the cool blanket of apathy diffused the loathing carried by his words. Only one thought pounded like a drum within my mind: that this person—Elijah, my once-close friend—was trying to harm Tess.

"Goodbye," I said softly, raising a hand to finish the job.

'Arthur! Dodge!' Sylvie's voice suddenly screamed in my head.

Pure instinct took hold and I kicked forward, pushing myself back just as a blazing black pillar erupted from the ground where I had been standing.

I berated myself for becoming so hyper-focused on Elijah, to the point where I didn't notice the fluctuation of magic even through Realmheart.

The black flame barely grazed my left foot but the difference in power was evident. The intensity and speed of the conjuration was on a different level from Elijah's black flames. Even with aether currently surrounding my body like a protective shield, I felt a scalding pain radiating from my foot.

Following the trail of mana fluctuation, I shifted my gaze to my right and up in the sky. A slow, hungry smile spread across my face, and I could feel Sylvia shake in anger and anticipation inside me, as if even her *will* knew who was responsible for her death.

My body, bathed in an aether-tinged golden light, glowed brighter and stronger. This time would be different from the castle.

The Scythe arrived beside Elijah, his face a mask of poised indifference.

He laid a hand on the purple flame eating away at where Elijah's arm used to be and it was replaced by a smoldering black flame that began slowly, but visibly, regenerating Elijah's arm.

Rather than rush in to fight, I kept my distance, taking advantage of the time to heal my foot using vivum. I could feel Sylvie's healing touch as well, though she was largely focused on keeping the Alacryans at bay with Tess. The battle around me seemed to have ground to a standstill, neither side sure what to do in the presence of Elijah, the Scythe, and myself.

"You made it clear to me that you'd win against your friend," the Scythe said, looking down at Elijah.

"I can—I was—until he entered that form," Elijah said, grimacing.

"No matter. The fault is mine. I let him live in exchange for keeping the castle in one piece as Lord Agrona had ordered."

The Scythe's nonchalance, the way he disregarded my very presence, festered like an itchy sore until I wasn't able to hold it back any longer.

The aether around me formed into a bridge once more, connecting me to where Elijah and the Scythe were standing. I stepped forward and the world folded in front of me, carrying me to them. Aetheric lightning flashed as I pummeled the Scythe in the stomach.

A shockwave blasted outward from the impact, throwing Elijah back and sending many of the other Alacryans in the vicinity tumbling to the ground. A web of cracks formed where my fist struck the Scythe's armor, but he hadn't even flinched.

"We're no longer in the castle, so it's acceptable for me to be a bit excessive," he stated, a thin smile appearing on his passive face.

A shadowy wave of fire erupted from his hand as he waved it casually, engulfing me and everything behind me. Aether swirled around me, protecting me from the hellfire that ignited even the air and ground.

Despite the cone-shaped path of devastation behind me, which had incinerated every Alacryan in its way, I was still standing.

Now, though, I had more than one opponent to worry about, and Elijah was flying towards Tess instead of joining the fight.

The thought of Elijah reaching Tess was sobering. The cold blanket of apathy that had covered my mind frayed, and the single-minded thought of killing the Scythe and "winning" faded until I could think more clearly.

Vision and mind renewed, I became deeply aware of everything going on around me: the Alacryans burned to ashes; Tess, Sylvie, Nyphia, and Madam Astera fighting for safety rather than victory, and myself. I was aware of the change in my body and also the current state of my body. I chose not to fear the inevitable, instead using it to fuel my motivation to get the rest of them back to the shelter. I guarded my mind so Sylvie wouldn't find out.

I was clear-minded and had control over the full, unrestrained, power of Realmheart. I could do this. *I had to do this*.

I immediately went after Elijah. Spatium carried me to where he was in another single step. My fist struck him on his side and I could feel his ribs shattering under the force despite the wave of smoky fire that attempted to absorb some of the damage.

Elijah fell from the air, his body whirling out of control before crashing through the side of a building.

Mana fluctuations rippled in the air all around me, and I knew what was coming. Pushing myself away with a compressed blast of fire, I narrowly dodged a series of sudden combustions in the air as hellflames bloomed around me like deadly black flowers.

The black conflagrations suddenly stopped as Sylvie breathed a shockwave of pure mana at the Scythe.

Pushing aside my worries and trusting my bond, I flew past where Tess was still fighting the Alacryans. Even while surrounded, the translucent-green vines around her acted as if they had minds of their own. Whipping, striking, piercing her foes, it was hard to tell who was actually at a disadvantage.

Though I wanted nothing more than to fight by her side, I knew she would be fine for now, so I made my way to where the teleportation gate had been buried beneath a hill of black spikes. There, I spotted Nyphia slowly chipping away at the black spikes while Madam Astera held off several dozen Alacryan mages by herself.

I unleashed a blast of frostfire at the Alacryans, freezing half of them in a single spell. I ignored the rest, letting Madam Astera handle it while I got to work on the black spikes.

While half-tempted to release a torrent of lightning, I was afraid that the gate would be damaged, so I wreathed my fists in lightning and charged forth.

"Madam Astera! Help Tess and get her here!" I ordered.

"Got it!" Madam Astera leapt out of the way as I punched through the scores of black spikes blocking the teleportation gate.

My lightning-clad fists shredded through the layers of black spikes, but I kept my senses clear in case Elijah or the Scythe approached.

A piercing scream suddenly invaded my thoughts. *Sylvie!* I called out as her mind reeled from a tide of pain that even I could feel through our connection. *'Just keep... going!'*

I could feel the ground shake with every explosion of black flame and pure mana as my bond faced the Scythe, but I continued to push forth until I could see the faint glow of the teleportation gate.

Almost there!

Suddenly the sky darkened and a shadow fell over me. Realmheart continued to cycle through me, burning away at my own body, but I relied on it once more as I layered aether over the frostfire surrounding my hands.

I *pushed*, sending out a shockwave of aetheric ice straight at the black hellfire descending on the teleportation gate.

A shockwave rippled out from the impact, shattering some of the black spikes. The teleportation gate quivered and flickered, but the ancient portal held strong, and now there was a path directly to it. Tess, Nyphia, and Madam Astera were sprinting through the narrow channel between walls of black spikes.

"Hurry! Through the portal!" I roared as the three of them ran past me.

Tess turned back, facing me as she ran backwards towards the portal. "What about you?"

"I have my own medallion. I'll meet you back at the shelter with Sylvie. *Now* go!"

"Grey! You can't do this to me! Not again!" Elijah shouted from above, diving desperately toward the portal. "Not after what you did to me and Cecilia!"

Elijah's words struck me like thunder, and I almost let him get to the portal.

With aether under my command, I was able to close the distance just as he was about to fire a black spear at the gate. Wounded and tired, Elijah wasn't a match for me while I was in this state.

I wrapped my aether-strengthened hand around his throat, threatening to crush his windpipe.

"How do you know that name," I growled.

"Looks like you're finally... sober," he wheezed. "If you weren't—under the influence of that power that's—killing you right now—you might've already figured it out."

I squeezed harder, making him gag, then loosening my grip. "Who are you?" Elijah spat on my face, then smiled, revealing his blood-stained teeth. "I was your best—best friend, and you killed my fiancée right in front of me." My grip loosened, my head swam, and my entire body felt like it was submerged in tar. My heart seemed to have forgotten its rhythm. My throat tightened as if *I* were the one with the fist crushing my windpipe. It couldn't be... could it?

"Nico?"

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GONE

EXPLOSIONS of black and gold from Sylvie's and the Scythe's battle lit up the battleground in the distance, but I was focused on the man I had in my grasp.

"It can't—no, it's impossible. There's no way—"

"That I'm... Nico?" Elijah coughed as he pried my fingers apart just enough so he could speak. "If you've reincarnated into this world, Grey, why is it impossible for anyone else to have done so?"

The hand currently wrapped around his throat trembled uncontrollably. I squeezed harder. I didn't want him to talk. I wanted to deny everything. I couldn't bear whatever it was that he was about to say.

"Art! Watch out!"

Tess's scream jolted me out of my thoughts, but I couldn't fully dodge the back spike that Elijah had launched from the ground.

My grip around his neck loosened and Elijah took advantage of that moment perfectly, prying himself loose and punching me square in the jaw with a hellfire-clad fist.

I swayed, nearly losing consciousness, but the runes coursing down my face protected me from the black flames. I started to fall, but a hand grabbed my wrist.

As my weakened body struggled to counteract the otherworldly toxins that had entered my body from the black spike, Elijah lifted me up by my collar and pulled me close. His piercing dark eyes glared down at me while the

venom-coated black spike hovered over his shoulder, its tip pointed at my face.

"Art!" Tess shouted. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her aura flaring as she prepared to attack.

"Focus on the gate!" I roared. The world started to spin, and it was difficult to tell where up ended and down began.

Elijah had turned toward Tess, but just as he was about to go to her, I grabbed his arm.

"What did Agrona do to you, Elijah?" I groaned. "Did he make you say all of this?"

Elijah's head snapped back to me, and his voice dripped with venom when he spoke again. "Do you think even Agrona would know how you and I used to steal and sell whatever we scrounged to the pawn shop? And that we'd use the earnings to keep our orphanage funded without Wilbeck knowing?"

"That... doesn't mean—"

"Do you think Agrona knows that deep down, you had feelings for Cecilia?" I stiffened and the spinning world suddenly came back into focus.

Elijah smirked, but his eyes remained cold. "Cecilia liked you for a time as well, did you know that? But she gave up on you, because you kept your distance emotionally after you found out that I had feelings for her."

"Stop," I whispered, but the anger provided clarity, and I felt my mana core flaring up inside me. The runes spread across my body pulsed as I focused on gathering strength.

"And even when I told you everything I had uncovered about Lady Vera, you turned your back on your best friend for that bitch," he seethed, black flames dancing along his hands. "And as if that wasn't enough, you killed her! You killed Cecilia in front of me!"

My runes and his flames waged a constant battle, but for the moment, it was a stalemate.

"Stop, Nico!" I cried, unable to help the tears rolling down my cheeks.

Another explosion rocked the city, the shockwave creating a gust of wind that blew dust and debris even as far as Nico and me.

At that moment, a translucent-green blade of mana shot from the ground below. The black spike previously pointed at my face swung through the air to block the green crescent, but that gave me the opportunity to let out a blast of frost right at Nico's face.

From the shoulder up, Nico was frozen solid, though the black flame started melting the ice almost immediately. Still, I managed to kick myself free from his grasp and launch an arc of lighting at his chest while he was still disoriented.

Nico crashed to the ground, a cloud of dust rising from the area where he had landed.

Are you okay? I asked my bond, worried about her after that last explosion.

'I'm fine. It's weird, he's definitely attacking me, but it feels like he's holding back,' she responded. 'How are things going over there?'

Not so good, I admitted. But I'll be able to hold my own. I just need to get Tess and the others through the gate.

Just as I finished that thought, a large fluctuation of mana from where Nico had landed drew my attention. He was preparing a spell—a powerful one—but it wasn't aimed at me.

I immediately burst through the air, landing on the ground right between Nico and the teleportation gate.

A concentrated beam of hellfire the width of a wrist pierced through the cloud of dust and debris, targeting the gate.

Squeezing mana from my core and begging the aether around me for aid, I countered with a swirling barrier of aetheric wind. While ice would've been a better choice to effectively negate Nico's attack, the toll of sustaining Realmheart for this long was becoming more and more evident.

Embers of hellfire that had managed to make it through my wind barrier burned through my skin like acid. I could feel myself healing, but even the act of regeneration hurt, like my body was begging me to stop getting injured.

Sustaining the barrier, I looked back over my shoulder, snapping impatiently at Tess. "He's trying to destroy the gate! Hurry up and activate it and escape!"

"It's almost done! But what about you and Sylvie?" Tess shouted as she continued to hold the ancient medallion up against the center of the glowing ring, which was slowly turning to purple.

"Just go! Please!" I begged her.

"No!" Nico shouted. He withdrew his concentrated beam and burst forward to try and get past me. However, despite the poor state of my body, my reflexes were still a lot faster than his.

I pivoted and launched myself into him, tackling Nico to the ground and pinning him.

"Let go!" he roared as he flailed, trying to escape my grasp.

Small embers of hellfire ignited throughout his body, but I held strong with the help of aether.

"Hurry up!" I shouted, feeling the black flames slowly burn through the layer of aether and mana protecting me.

Nico suddenly stopped trying to break free and his whole body started to shiver. He looked me in the eyes and said, "You owe me, Grey. You *owe* me for killing Cecilia!"

"So that's what it is? Cecilia died so you have to have Tess to make it even?" I said, disbelieving. "I didn't mean to kill Cecilia, but even if I had, she wouldn't have wanted this, Nico! Taking Tess isn't going to bring Cecilia back!"

"What if it is?" Nico shot back.

Unsure as to his meaning, I didn't answer. However, I saw the mana fluctuation in his hand as he willed another black spike from the ground. I quickly spun, using him as a shield against his own spell. He was able to stop

the spike from piercing both of us. A guttural cry of frustration tore free of his throat as he tried desperately to break free from my grasp.

Just then, another, larger explosion came from where Sylvie was fighting against the Scythe.

What's going on? Are you okay? I asked, my concern bleeding into my bond.

'I'm... fine, but the Scythe is heading your way,' she replied, and even her mental voice sounded pained.

I immediately felt it—the presence of the Scythe approaching. His presence was accompanied by the rapid fluctuation of mana right where the teleportation gate was.

I initiated Static Void, but this time, along with the inverted colors of the frozen world, I felt a cold fist clutching at my innards—a warning that death was inevitable if I continued to exploit this powerful aether art.

Ignoring my body's warning, I released the frozen Nico and made my way toward Tess, Nyphia, and Madam Astera. My body grew heavy and nauseous with each step I took, but I couldn't afford to release Static Void and risk letting the Scythe's spell go off.

My body was drenched in sweat and I was gasping for air by the time I reached the gate. I grabbed Tess's waist with one arm and released the time-freezing aether art.

A cold chill ran down my spine as my body warned of the danger just behind me, where the gate was.

Tess flinched in my grasp. "What the—"

I picked her up by the waist, cutting her off, while I shouted at Madam Astera. "Grab Nyphia!"

Immediately, the former knight-professor and soldier bolted to her student and tossed Nyphia over her shoulder, just in time for me to flash past them and grab her free hand.

I tried to bend space once more with the help of aether, but the translucent

purple bridge wouldn't form. I gritted my teeth and expended what mana I had left to gain some distance before a horrible explosion of fire tore through the ground behind us.

Unable to even look back, I could only imagine how close the conflagration was by the sound of the roaring fire and its heat scalding my back.

A green aura suddenly surrounded us as Tess activated her beast will, trying to protect us while I focused on getting us out of range, but the heat kept growing stronger. Even when I saw the Scythe hovering in the distance, watching his spell do its work, I couldn't slow down. If we were able to somehow make it out of the hellfire explosion, we'd likely be face-to-face with the Scythe. Nico was still somewhere behind us as well, if he'd escaped the inferno.

Madam Astera let out a scream of pain, but I couldn't afford to slow down; I could see the tendrils of black flames in the air. I bent my every thought to survival, molding the world around me to facilitate our escape; gales of wind coalesced beneath my feet and the uneven ground smoothed out in front of us to make a clear path.

It wasn't enough. We couldn't escape the blaze. The sky darkened as we were engulfed by the black flames... but there was no searing pain, no torturous death.

Risking a glance over my shoulder, I saw Nico using his own black flames to block the hellfire that the Scythe had unleashed.

"Get them out of here!" Nico shouted as he struggled to keep the powerful explosion at bay.

"Hold onto me tight!" Tess exclaimed as she withdrew her beast will and conjured a condensed orb of wind in her palms.

I squeezed her waist as she unleashed a gale of wind behind us, propelling us forward. I stumbled and nearly fell but Madam Astera shoved her sword into the ground, allowing me the moment I needed to regain my balance.

Once I couldn't feel the heat any longer, I toppled forward from sheer

exhaustion, though I held my concentration in order to keep Realmheart Physique active. I knew that once I released it, the backlash would hit, and I would be defenseless.

Ignoring the dull, constant pain, which was growing stronger by the minute, I inhaled more ambient mana like a drug addict on the cusp of his crash. I didn't even have time to cycle and purify it through my mana core, which made the mana poison to my body. Realmheart Physique would've helped with purifying the poisonous mana, but I had taken in too much during this battle.

Considering the rate at which my body was deteriorating, though, a little more poison hardly mattered. I just needed to hold on long enough to get the rest of them out of here safely.

"Stay with me!" Tess said to someone from behind me, her voice shaky but strong.

With the ambient mana temporarily boosting the functions of my body, I wiped away a stray drop of blood that ran from my nostril and turned around. My eyes widened, and in my head I was already starting to calculate the odds of survival.

It was Madam Astera. She was missing her right leg from the mid-calf down, and Tess was doing what she could to soothe her wounds using water magic while Nyphia was preparing bandages made from ripped strips of her own inner robe.

"My foot got caught in that explosion. I knew I couldn't put out that black fire, so I cut it off," she grunted. Her strength fortified me. I admired the fact that, despite having just amputated her own leg, she was barely even grimacing, even though I knew her chances of surviving this were extremely low.

But I didn't have time to consider it. I felt the tremendous pressure of the Scythe fast approaching.

"Damn it!" I snarled, turning my gaze from Madam Astera's wound to the

Scythe, who was almost upon us. To my surprise, however, Nico marched past where we were, a smoky, nebulous aura surrounding him, a physical manifestation of his anger.

"Tessia almost died because of your attack, Cadell!" Nico roared. "I'm sure Agrona made it clear to you that she is to stay alive!"

I finally knew the name of the Scythe that had killed Sylvia when I was a child in this world. It burned into my mind like a brand: Cadell.

Cadell landed deftly on the ground as if he had just stepped off the sidewalk. His stride was leisurely, yet confident, each step demanding attention.

I made sure to position myself between Cadell and my allies, taking note of the rising tension.

'Arthur! I'm almost there.' I could already see Sylvie's large figure in the sky above some distant buildings.

Cadell noticed as well, his gaze flitting behind him for a second before he focused on Nico.

"If I had not acted in the way that I did, the vessel would have escaped." His response was apathetic, as if he didn't even register his ally's anger.

"That doesn't justify you risking her life! We had a deal," Nico snapped, a tendril of the black, smoky aura flaring out at the ground and carving a large gash in the pavement.

"You would've failed on your own. Why? Because of your past with the boy. If you weren't so fixated on getting revenge against your old friend, then the vessel would have already been in your possession."

Sylvie was almost there. It would've been smart to let them keep arguing to buy ourselves time, but I couldn't ignore their conversation. Even though I knew I would regret it, I just had to know.

Cadell and Nico fell silent and turned to me as they felt the sudden pressure I released. Straightening my back and hiding any signs of weakness, I stood tall and let my pressure weigh down on the surrounding area.

Cadell raised a brow as he studied me. "It appears you still have some fight

left in you."

"Explain what you meant when you said vessel," I demanded, my voice carrying with the help of mana, despite the tired whisper I actually projected.

"You said taking Tess isn't going to bring Cecilia back, right?" Nico said, his voice a lot calmer than it was before. "Well, what if it will?"

"Then I would say you're out of your mind," I retorted, ignoring the burning needles stabbing every inch of my body.

"This is what Agrona has been researching for the last few hundred years, Grey, and your reincarnation was what allowed the gears to start turning," Nico said. "And that was how I was able to reincarnate into this world. After all, if someone deserves a new life, it isn't you... it's Cecilia and me."

"Bullshit," I hissed, the word leaving a trail of pain throughout my lungs and throat. I let the anger fester inside me in order to mitigate some of the pain coursing through my body. Once more, I desperately tried to move the aether, but the motes of purple wouldn't budge. The pain grew stronger with each attempt, and I could feel my body deteriorating.

It wasn't fair. No matter how much stronger I became, I always just barely lacked the power to win.

Damn it. Damn it. Come on, now would be a great time for a weapon! I pleaded, clawing at the palm of my hand where that bastard asura, Wren, stuck that acclorite.

Tess grabbed my wrist. "Arthur, stop! What are you doing to your hand?" Just then—as everyone's eyes were on me—I felt hot liquid pour down my nose, spilling on my hand.

"Art? Your nose..." Tess gently touched my shoulder from beside me, worried.

I hurriedly wiped at the blood running down my nose and lips and looked back up to see Cadell's lips curved into a smirk. "You're body is breaking down, isn't it, Lance?"

"What? Is that true?" Tess asked. "How bad is it?"

"He's dying," Nico said grimly.

"I'll be okay," I lied, shrugging her away. I couldn't even look her in the eye. Instead I kept my eyes focused on the opponents ahead. Talking was pointless now and whatever that asura jabbed into my hand wouldn't help me out of this one. Whether it was Elijah or Nico, it didn't matter. He was an enemy trying to take Tess, and they wouldn't stop there.

I infused mana into my legs and prepared to make whatever desperate attempt of an attack I could manage, but a small girl suddenly stood in the way.

"Sylvie. Don't try and stop me," I muttered, wrapping my degrading body in mana in preparation for one last battle.

"Would you stop even if I tried?" my bond asked solemnly. She took a step to the side as a golden-white aura flared to life around her. "If you're so bent on killing yourself, we'll go together."

Cadell and Elijah sheathed themselves in their dark mana as well. The ground cracked and splintered around us.

"Nyphia, take Tess and Madam Astera as far away as possible," I said looking back over my shoulder. Shifting my gaze down at Madam Astera's stump, I conjured a simple prosthetic leg out of stone before turning back. "And don't stop."

"Elf Princess," Cadell said, his smirk widening. "If your dearly beloved stays in that form any longer, whether he wins or loses this battle, he'll die."

"Leave her out of this!" I shouted, but by the time I turned around, Tess had already shrugged off Nyphia.

Tess didn't speak to me, though. Instead, she gripped Sylvie's wrist and asked her, "He's lying, right? Tell me he's lying, Sylvie!"

Sylvie looked at me but didn't respond.

"I'll be fine, Tess," I lied again, but my words were met with an angry, tearfilled glare.

"You always do this. You're always ready to give up your life to save me," she shot back.

"Tess..." I reached for her arm, squeezing it gently.

"Do you think I'd be grateful if you died to save me?" she asked, her lips quivering, her eyes hard and wet, like glittering stones at the bottom of a deep pool. She wrapped her hand over mine and peeled herself from my grip. She touched my forehead with hers as she closed her eyes, chest heaving erratically as she held back sobs.

"You idiot," she whispered with her lips pressed against mine.

She tore herself away from me and walked off toward Nico and the Scythe.

"No!" I stepped forward, ready to sprint after her, but Sylvie held me back, wrapping her arms around my waist.

"Sylvie! No! You can't do this to me!"

"Arthur, please..." she begged, her small body trembling. "I don't want you to die."

I watched helplessly as Tess walked away, the sound of blood pounding in my head muting everything else. I couldn't even hear my own shouts as I begged Tess to stop, to let me fight, to let me die.

I watched as Tess turned back and smiled at me before saying something. I couldn't hear it though. Those may have been Tess's last words and I couldn't hear them.

My eyes flitted down to my bloody palm as I checked once more with the faint hope that the weapon would appear.

It didn't—and I didn't have time.

As Sylvie hugged me tighter, holding me back from Tess, I wedged my hand inside my protective chest plate and pulled out the medallion that Elder Rinia had given me in order to bring Tess back. If she was right, then this entire world and countless others would fall to Agrona if Tess was in his hands.

No. I couldn't let that happen.

It all made sense now. For whatever reason, Tess was the vessel for Cecilia. Maybe it was because of our relationship in this world, which had to create the bridge, but that didn't matter.

If both Nico and I became this strong after reincarnating into this world, how strong would Cecilia—the "legacy"—be if she reincarnated into Tess's body?

"Sylvie. You know what Rinia said," I pleaded, studying the ancient relic in my hand. "We can't let them have Tess."

Sylvie shook her head, her face still pressed into the small of my back. "We'll both get stronger. As long as we're alive, we have a chance."

I felt my insides churn, but I didn't know what to do. I glared down at the medallion, wondering what good it was now.

Something that I hadn't noticed before now stood out to me within this fully assimilated state of my Realmheart Physique. The memory of Rinia drawing the aetheric runes on the gate resurfaced, and the hours I spent in that ancient cave watching Sylvie meditate while influencing the aether around her connected together instinctively in a way that my mind couldn't fathom but my body could.

Sylvie sensed the change in the air as I got to work.

"Arthur? What are you doing?" my bond cried desperately.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

My mouth filled with the taste of metal as I dispersed the gathered aether. I reached out with my arms, one pointed at Nyphia and Madam Astera, the other at Tess.

And suddenly, we were in a separate space. This was different from Static Void, where I was in the same space as the rest of the world. No, I had created a separate pocket dimension and brought everyone along with me.

With no time to waste, I threw the medallion that had the coordinates engraved in it and held my hand in line with it. I curled the fingers of my outstretched hand as if I was molding the aether around the medallion. What manifested from it was a teleportation portal of my own.

"Into the portal, *now!*" I shouted as I struggled to keep it stable.

Wasting no time, Madam Astera picked up Nyphia and sprinted towards the

portal on the prosthetic leg I had conjured for her. After tossing Nyphia into the portal, she ran after Tess, who was still a few paces away.

I restructured the size of the pocket dimension, bringing Tess instantly closer to Madam Astera and the portal. Without even the chance to get a word out, Tess was through the portal. Madam Astera looked at me for a second before jumping through the portal herself.

"Sylvie... it's t-time to go," I said, but my bond just looked at me in horror. She reached up and wiped away the tears streaming down my face, but her hand came away red with blood... my blood.

"Arthur, you're not going to make it," Sylvie said, and I felt her consciousness go deeper into mine. I couldn't shield my thoughts from her in my current state; my mind was an open book.

"The portal isn't—it isn't going to stay stable for much longer, Sylv. P-please, I can't have you die too," I said, pushing my feelings into her: my desperation, my sadness, my despair, my hope. I made her feel it all, so she would understand.

A wave of blinding pain hit me and the pocket dimension rippled like a bubble about to pop. Disoriented, I tried to force Sylvie into the portal, but I couldn't manipulate her the way I had done to Tess.

"Sylv? What are you—" My eyes widened in horror as I realized what she was doing.

Sylvie glowed purple, growing and spreading until she stood before me in her dragon form.

"Try to keep yourself alive while I'm gone, okay?" Sylvie said, giving me a toothy grin.

"Sylv, no! Don't do this!" I screamed. Desperate, I tried to push her to the portal, but my hands went right through her.

Sylvie's body had become ethereal and she was fading as motes of lavender and gold began drifting away from her diminished form and attaching themselves to my body. I writhed in unimaginable pain at the sudden change my body was going through, but I held on, unable to pass out. My vision faded as I screamed out to Sylvie, and she pushed me through the portal with the last remaining corporeal limb she had left, her last words engraved into my mind as darkness overcame me.

"Until we meet again..."

AFTERWORD

Hello! TurtleMe here, author of this little novel that you've just finished reading. I hope you've enjoyed the story and you're looking forward to the next installment of Arthur's journey! While waiting, please take the time to write an honest review of this novel. **Ratings and reviews are tremendously important** on Amazon and since this is what I live off of, I would greatly appreciate your thoughts on this book so others can make sure that this is the book they want to read! Whether you loved it or hated it, I hope you can spare the time to write your two cents.

Kindest regards, TurtleMe