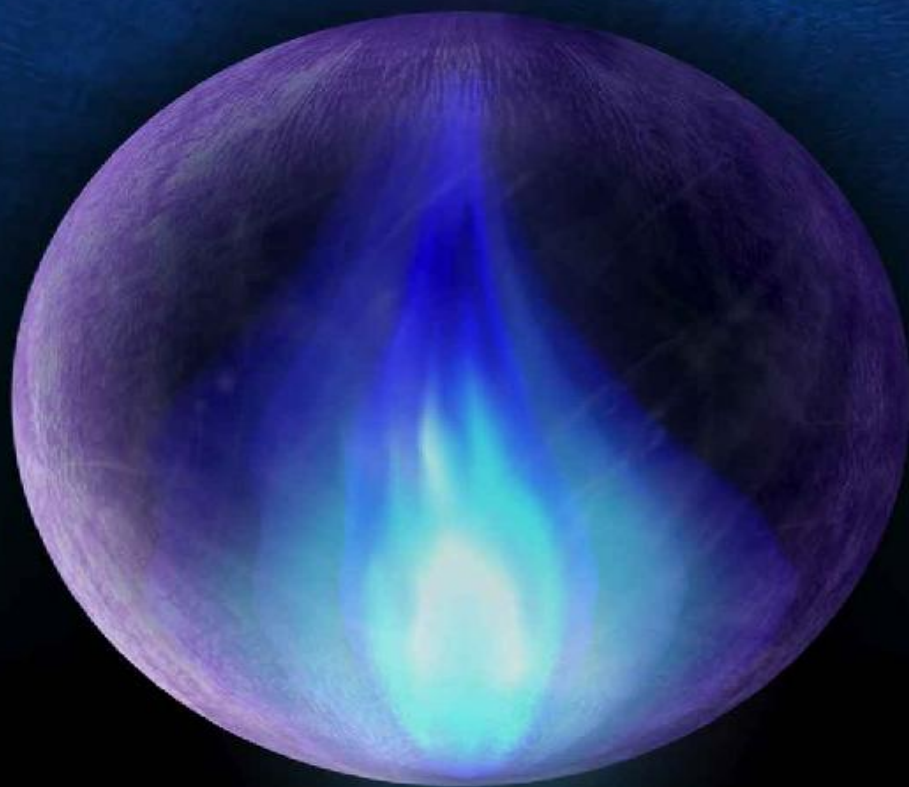


WILL WIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR OF *DREADGOD*



WAYBOUND

CRADLE : VOLUME TWELVE

WAYBOUND

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WILL WIGHT



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Book and cover design by Patrick Foster

Cover illustration by Kevin Mazutinec

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To you, for reading this far.

Thank you for walking this Path with me all the way to the end.

PROLOGUE

ITERATION 300: VESPER

SURIEL FLOATED IN THE EMPTINESS OVER THE CENTRAL PLANET OF VESPER, preparing herself to meet the Mad King.

Her Presence was scouring the future for a way to increase their odds of victory, but there was one obvious first step.

“I release Ozriel to his full strength and authority. Authorization zero-zero-six, Suriel.”

There came an almost-audible hiss from Ozriel’s black-armored form as the restrictions on his power fell away. He tossed white hair behind him and gave a relieved sigh. “Ah, that’s nice.”

His authority radiated in all directions, including *deeper*. It filled the Iteration and spilled into the Way, silent and invisible. The footsteps of Death.

Ozriel stretched out a hand to the side. “Come to me,” he murmured.

That call echoed through all creation.

At least, it should have.

[The Sector is fully isolated,] Suriel’s Presence reported.

“As expected,” Ozriel responded. “But if it’s worth trying, isn’t it worth trying twice?”

The world of Vesper was trembling around them, and Suriel brought forth her Razor. “He’s almost here. Can you beat him?”

Ozriel had his eyes closed and hand still stretched out as he prepared another working, but he still addressed her. “Didn’t your Presence tell you?”

We have about a one in sixteen chance of both making it out.”

“I don’t trust that.”

Her Presence radiated shock.

He still didn’t open his eyes, but his answering grin was a small slice of white. “Your faith in me is inspiring. I would be more confident if he were *actually* alone, because I see now that he is not. Or...if I were armed.”

Color and sound bled from the planet beneath them as Ozriel’s eyes snapped open. “**Come to me,**” he ordered again.

Iteration Three Hundred trembled.

The Way trembled.

The entire Sector trembled.

But the Reaper’s hand remained empty. The Scythe of Ozriel did not appear.

He sighed and put his hand down. “Yeah. One in sixteen.”

Reality crumpled and tore. The void of space parted like a curtain to reveal the Void beyond.

“Better odds than you deserve,” the Mad King said.

To all Suriel’s senses, Daruman appeared no worse for his battle in Cradle. His armor of yellowed bone was still chipped in places, but it protected him. The beast hide hanging from his shoulders offended the universe with its chaotic authority, and his eyes burned like two red suns.

If he were alone, Suriel would like their chances. But as expected, he had come prepared for another clash with Ozriel.

Behind him, a vast mass of stone and metal slid out of the Void. It dwarfed the central planet of Vesper, casting a shadow over its continents.

The fortress-world of Tal’gullour. The Mad King’s citadel.

Billions of souls pulled the Way closer, strengthening Suriel’s authority. Vesper was healthier now than it had been in years.

But however much it strengthened the Abidan, it empowered Daruman more. He was the absolute power in Tal’gullour, its master and champion, and its every particle was saturated with his authority.

A thousand rune-circles appeared in front of the fortress, each shining in golden light. These were ancient defenses, operated by the people of Tal’gullour, and they locked the fortress down tight. Even Ozriel couldn’t break them in one strike. At least, not without his Scythe.

The Mad King had brought his people here. Dedicated to the destruction of the Abidan he may have been, but he did love that world. He was truly

putting everything on the line.

Suriel could do no less.

Our survival is no longer a priority, she ordered her Presence. Prioritize the death of the Mad King.

Suriel had to rearrange her own feelings at the same time. She released her sadness, her fear. Her anger at Makiel, for leaving them in this situation. Even her lingering resentment toward Ozriel.

She was the Phoenix. It was worth her life to burn one more infection from the universe.

The Mad King's sword appeared in his hand. "Let us die together."

Suriel held up her Razor. "Everything ends."

"Ahem." Ozriel's voice echoed in her head. *"I may have an alternate plan."*

His plan flooded into her mind, and she snapped her gaze to look at Ozriel in shock.

[It has good odds of working,] her Presence allowed.

Suriel's very being rejected the plan. She would rather stay here and fight to the death.

"Come on," Ozriel whispered. "Let me clean up my own mess."

Her Presence fed the information into her awareness. The odds of them *both* surviving were terrible. But the odds of *one* surviving? Quite high.

As long as they gave up on the other.

Heart breaking, Suriel agreed.

With her Razor unleashed, she struck, but not at the Mad King. At the thin membrane of reality between her and the Way.

The Way Between Worlds was closer than ever, thanks to the population of Tal'gullour, but it had also locked down space. Her Razor stuck in place.

Until Ozriel formed a blade of dark power and slashed alongside her. Then, for a fraction of a second, she saw blue.

Suriel slipped away in that instant. The possibilities were clear in her vision: if they both tried to leave, the Mad King would drag them back.

Instead, she made it into the rich blue river of the Way.

It dragged her into its currents, but she was far from safe. Her Presence warned her of the barriers and obstacles the Mad King had left in the Way. He'd sealed off the Sector, stopping her from running for help.

But her odds of breaking through were much better than her odds of surviving a battle in Vesper. Now, it was all about how quickly she could

make it back.

[You can't—] her Presence began.

Shut up.

Dozens of tendrils erupted from all around her as a Fiend reached into the Way to grab her. It was quite powerful, having been left as a sentry to hold her back.

But Suriel had no time to waste. She cut her way through, counting every second.

She might already be too late.



Back in Vesper, Ozriel pointed at the Mad King with his conjured black sword. “I thought you’d fight harder to stop her.”

“Suriel would eventually be replaced,” Daruman responded. “How will they replace you?”

Ozriel didn’t have his Presence with him, but he could see the potential outcomes well enough. His odds of walking out of here were...small.

Still, he gave the Mad King a brilliant smile. “I have some ideas on that myself.”

Then a thousand lines of light streaked out from Tal’gullour, a barrage that instantly shattered the central planet of Vesper and raced for Ozriel.

And he began his final battle.

THE SKY INSIDE LINDON'S REPURPOSED POCKET WORLD WAS OVERCAST BY slowly swirling clouds of various colors. While the heart of the space had been stolen from Reigan Shen, much of its material had come from the Ninecloud Court, and their influence was clear in the churning rainbow vapor that shone brightly overhead.

The wind that stirred those clouds only began when Lindon stepped inside. While empty, the time in the pocket space had been slowed to a crawl. Almost frozen. It would have been too much of a waste to spend their limited time while no one was here to benefit.

With Lindon's appearance, time moved forward again.

Upon entering the space, Lindon first checked its spatial stability by extending his senses. The Void Icon told him that he was boarding a small vessel drifting in the middle of a sea of nonexistence, as though they'd stepped off a dock and onto a boat, but everything seemed stable.

It felt like it would hold, and in the meantime, they would pass weeks in a matter of hours. That level of time acceleration would strain the pocket world, and was an inefficient use of the materials, but economy didn't concern Lindon much.

It was worth burning a fortune for speed. It wasn't Lindon's fortune anyway.

Only once he was sure their shelter wouldn't capsize into the Void did Lindon turn his attention to the layout of the space itself. Beneath the sky of slowly mixing colors floated a rough island of pale stone maybe a mile across.

It reminded Lindon of the slabs of marble from which Reigan Shen had once built his Monarch platform at the Uncrowned King tournament. Which made sense, as he had stolen this island from Shen. Tunnels wound through the stone, containing several facilities and aura training rooms that Lindon dismissed after a single scan.

His would be better.

Yerin entered the pocket world at virtually the same time he did. She glanced into his arms, where Lindon held Mercy's unconscious body.

Since leaving the Akura clan, he hadn't let her out of his sight.

Orthos, Ziel, and Little Blue were supposed to follow only a fraction of a second later, but the world on their side looked almost frozen now that time was speeding up. They were all crammed into the hallway of *Windfall*, ready to enter as soon as they could.

They spilled through a few moments later, Orthos grumbling as he had to turn sideways and slide himself through the doorway. Lindon and Yerin had already walked away.

Yerin chewed on her lip and her worried eyes stayed on Mercy. "She's all shredded up."

[No, don't worry!] Dross encouraged her. [It's just severe structural damage to the madra channels. She'll be fine in a few years.]

"But we have a plan," Lindon added. He activated the Soulforge, and a gateway appeared within the pocket world. It looked out onto another space, a rune-carved platform floating over a starry void. A dull silver altar sat in the middle of the platform, bright blue flames flickering merrily at its heart.

Lindon's void key strained under the pressure from the artifacts he'd stolen from the Monarchs. He floated them out in sealed containers, and the Soulforge trembled under the weight of their significance.

Fortunately, the Soulforge kept that power isolated from the rest of the space.

"The Monarchs had to work together to stabilize your spirit so you didn't have to face any consequences from advancing early," Lindon said to Yerin. He carefully floated Mercy over using wind aura, then rested her on the surface of the anvil at the heart of the Soulforge. "We're going to borrow their authority to do the same thing here."

[Technically not the *same* thing. And they didn't need *all* the Monarchs, just enough to cover a wide enough variety of authority. Which is good,

because items don't hold authority as well as people do, and we were planning to save these for advancement—]

Lindon was about to interrupt, but Dross cut himself off.

[—I know you're about to stop me, so I'll just go ahead and stop myself.]

Yerin nodded to the items floating out of the various sealed containers under Lindon's aura control. "Wasn't that the point to all the looting we did? Have to fake our own half-price Monarch commands."

"We can only bend the rules so many times," Lindon said. "What we use to heal her now, we can't use to advance her later."

Yerin folded her arms. "Let's get to bending."

"Of course."

Lindon summoned the Monarch artifacts to himself. He slipped on a signet ring belonging to Reigan Shen, lifted a scepter belonging to an ancient Monarch whose name had been lost to time, and replaced his outer robe with a shoddy one that Northstrider had owned for years.

Also, from his soul space, he brought a single blue-green leaf with an eye in the center.

The authority embedded in the objects had a specific purpose. The power struggled against Lindon as he tried to focus it, to bend it to his will.

Reigan Shen's represented his wealth and his command over space, while Northstrider's authority was much more physical. The scepter shone with the purity of a wandering monk, a sacred artist who gave up all worldly causes.

Lindon not only had to wrangle all that authority to one purpose but had to link it to his own authority. He found the Void Icon and focused his attention, trying to restore Mercy's condition to before. To use Void authority for such a task, he had to think of it as reducing her wounds to nothing. To negate the specific events that had left her that way.

Though he was already wrestling with too much power, he needed more. Healing her wasn't enough; he had to rebuild her foundation. He clasped Suriel's marble in his left hand. It didn't lend him any power, but its restorative aura could guide him.

Yerin eyed him up and down. "You look like a vagrant wanderer trying to dress up rich."

[Don't worry,] Dross said. [I won't let it go to his head.]

A crown settled on Lindon's brow. It was the legacy of another ancient Monarch, and this one Lindon hadn't stolen; he'd found it in the labyrinth.

Lindon's mind and spirit trembled as he tried to juggle all the authority, but his voice was clear as he commanded Mercy: **"Be whole."**

The result wasn't as simple as Lindon had hoped.

Each source of authority tried to restore Mercy in a different way. Unlike a living person, the items were inflexible and bound to a specific purpose. They fought one another and resisted Lindon.

But his command touched something deeper, something that ran beneath reality. A force that reminded him of Suriel, and of the chambers at the very bottom of reality. That distant force echoed.

A spark of blue light flickered through Mercy, and Lindon fell to his knees.

He felt like he'd tumbled down a waterfall in less than a second. This was the force that held reality in place, the power that he'd only heard whispers of: The Way Between Worlds. The power of pure order.

It was too much to command such power directly. He had stretched himself.

But it worked.

Mercy sat up straight on the anvil at the heart of the Soulforge, gasping for air. Purple eyes shot here and there in obvious confusion, and her breaths were harsh.

Yerin stood over her in concern, hands on Mercy's shoulders. "Mercy. Oi. Look me in the eyes. Can you see straight?"

Clarity returned to Mercy's gaze. She looked from Yerin to Lindon, and Lindon saw the memory hit her. Then tears welled up and she threw her arms around Yerin and began to sob.

The only phrase Lindon caught was "my mother." He wasn't sure the rest were even words. Yerin softened and held Mercy as she cried.

Lindon wanted to speak his own assurances, but the world was unsteady around him. The scepter in his left hand cracked and a fragment of cloth drifted down from Northstrider's robe. All the items felt strained, with the notable exception of Emriss Silentborn's leaf. That was ripe with healing authority, so it had channeled his commands easily.

[I did warn you this was a possibility,] Dross pointed out. [We're not working with living Monarchs, are we?]

Lindon responded silently. *These aren't simple constructs. They're not supposed to be disposable.*

[They're not *supposed* to be used by anyone other than their creators. Borrowing their authority even once was an achievement. We should celebrate! Woohoo, you did it! You're not celebrating.]

Lindon was focused on the scepter. He could fix the physical damage to the item easily enough, but it was the symptom of a deeper problem. *In the worst case, we might need to use these four more times.*

[How do you feel about *once* more?]

Lindon cast his mind through other options. Emriss Silentborn would cooperate with them, and if it came to restoring spirits, there was likely no Monarch better. But bracing a spirit to speed through several advancement levels was harder, and it was too much to ask for more than one Monarch to help.

In theory, he could get new objects of power. There was plenty of the labyrinth he hadn't explored yet, and he could still use its transportation power to steal more from the Monarchs.

In practice, they didn't have the time for that.

[We haven't managed to open everything we stole yet,] Dross encouraged him. [I'm sure we'll get everyone up to standard in time.]

Even inside a pocket world that ran a hundred times faster, time was their limiting factor. But there were other possible solutions.

We'll continue as we are, Lindon thought. *I'll work on it.*

[Oh, good. I was worried *I* was going to have to work on it.]

You already have a job. Lindon felt Dross' mind flash with thoughts of twisting dreams and white halos before Dross sighed and agreed.

Mercy wiped the mess off her face with the backs of her black-gloved hands as she sniffled. She looked to Lindon. "Thanks. I don't know what I'd have..."

She trailed off. Lindon inclined his head to her. "We were never going to leave you behind," he said. "But I do regret that we had to fight your mother."

Mercy sagged back down against the altar. "You should ascend. She won't let you go anymore."

"She'd better ask us to let *her* go," Yerin muttered.

Lindon scanned Mercy's spirit, drawing her attention to her own condition. "You'll be able to ascend yourself soon."

She smiled sadly. “Yeah, I’m sure I will. I’ll be right behind...” Mercy froze with her mouth open as she checked her spirit.

An instant later, the Book of Eternal Night manifested over her head. It was larger and brighter than ever before. More distinct. Its connection to her spirit had improved, thanks to her forcing open the seventh page.

Normally, that would be more burden than she could handle. Instead of an advantage, it would be a crippling weight that settled on her spirit.

But now, the authority of Monarchs had reinforced her soul. She was restored, rebalanced, grounded in reality.

“What?” she asked.

Yerin shrugged. “Sage thing.”

“Nothing I could do on my own,” Lindon said humbly. “I’m afraid I had to borrow from my predecessors.” While they spoke, he packed away the Monarch artifacts into their sealed containers and floated them back into his void key.

“Am...am I a Herald now?” Mercy asked in wonder.

Green horns poked around the Soulforge portal and Ziel peeked in. “That would be unfair.”

To Lindon, Ziel felt almost as steady as Mercy did. Especially compared to the wounded, unbalanced soul he’d possessed for most of the time Lindon had known him.

Not only was his spirit more stable than Lindon had ever felt it, but there was a curious depth to it that Lindon knew to be the first few wisps of vague authority.

Ziel had begun to resonate with an Icon, as Lindon had sensed before, though it was hard to tell which one.

“Not a Herald,” Yerin assured Mercy. “But Lindon’s not explaining it, so I’ll take a swing at it: the Book tore you up on the inside. He borrowed some Monarch tools to fix you, which left you more stable than ever.” She turned to Lindon. “How’d I do?”

“Exactly right.”

Dross manifested over Lindon’s shoulder. [He’s being generous. You missed a lot of nuance and effort. Mostly on my part.]

“Glad you made it,” Ziel said. His voice was flat as ever.

Mercy teared up again. “Thank you, Ziel! I just...I need some time to...”

She started crying again. Ziel coughed and slid slowly back out of sight.

Yerin took Mercy underground to the few half-finished caves that were the only shelter currently on the island. Lindon stayed behind with Ziel, Orthos, and Little Blue. They stood on bare marble, looking up into the color-swirling sky as a dry wind swept dust past them.

Little Blue whistled a question.

[That's the fun part!] Dross answered excitedly. [Now Lindon gets to create a world.]

Worry for Mercy had been eating at Lindon's thoughts, not to mention that he had just fought a Monarch.

But he *had* been looking forward to this.

Ziel eyed him skeptically. "Shouldn't you rest before you try something like this?"

Lindon adjusted his sleeves. "If I don't feel like I can handle it, I'll stop. Would you all open your void keys, please?"

Ziel shrugged and obeyed. A door opened in the air next to him. Orthos was next, and even Little Blue, though she only activated one that Orthos had carried for her.

Even through all the scripted containers and restrictions Lindon had placed, power radiated out of the keys. Space trembled gently, though Lindon was encouraged that the pocket world remained stable.

He didn't have a single void key big or strong enough to contain everything he'd stolen from the Monarchs.

That thought cheered him greatly.

Orthos faced his own void key. "Tell me where to start."

Lindon reached out with soulfire. In his Copper sight, wind aura was a strong, vivid green here.

With fingers of wind, Lindon seized a chest from Orthos' void key and brought it out. At the same time, his soulfire resonated with the yellow veins of earth aura beneath his feet.

Guided by vital aura, the marble on the edge of the island flowed up into another cave entrance. The cave continued beneath the surface, though it wasn't deep.

"I'll make our cycling room first, Orthos," Lindon said. "We don't have as much space as I'd like, but it will be big enough for the two of us."

Orthos watched Lindon use complex Ruler techniques effortlessly, even without a compatible Path, and snorted smoke. Lindon felt a spark of the turtle's jealousy and smiled slightly.

Before long, Orthos would be able to do this himself.

Orthos scanned around the marble ground, looking for something, so Lindon diverted a little earth aura to create some pebbles for him to snack on.

[It's rare for any sacred artist to be able to cycle with ultimate natural treasures,] Dross said. He manifested next to Lindon, looking proud. [Let's all thank the Monarchs for financing our operation.]

Little Blue applauded.

The first chest from Orthos' void key opened, and suddenly the temperature in the entire pocket world rose several degrees. Red-gold light spilled out, and all the fire aura Lindon could see strengthened visibly as he lifted out the Heaven's Torch.

It looked almost like a miniature, reddish sun, and manipulating it with wind caused the aura to become infected with heat. Gusts of flame blew away, and without Lindon's control, fires would have started all over the island.

He drifted the natural treasure into the cave and Ziel squared his shoulders. "I'll handle the containment script," he said, so Lindon stopped etching it into the surface.

"Oh, gratitude."

Ziel stared at him. "You were doing it yourself, weren't you?"

"I'd rather leave it to the expert." In truth, Lindon was very practiced with the Blackflame containment script, but Ziel would save him some time. At least a minute or two.

Ziel trudged off, appearing even less eager than usual.

After the Heaven's Torch came a heavily scripted tank. Lindon couldn't manipulate this treasure directly, as even the incidental effects of aura exposure might cause a disaster. It resembled a fist-sized droplet of gray liquid, shifting under its own power.

Although *gray* wasn't the perfect way to describe it. On closer inspection, neither was *liquid*.

It was a flickering, buzzing gray that looked like the world hadn't made up its mind what color it should be. And it shifted and twitched in place like it was made of ten million tiny insects.

Little Blue shuddered back from it, while Orthos gave a gasp.

"Void Matter," Lindon said. "The ultimate treasure of destruction aura."

"I never thought I'd see it with my own eyes," Orthos said.

“You can thank Reigan Shen.”

Lindon placed the tank containing the natural treasure inside the cave, close to the Heaven’s Torch. But not *too* close. He would have to rearrange them manually for perfect balance, but first he could at least get the treasures in the same room.

Lindon turned his attention to another location and began to raise a second cave entrance.

Into Yerin’s training room, Lindon placed a Blade Crystal, a paper-thin jewel that he had to hold gingerly with aura. One of the forms of ultimate sword treasure, the Crystal was so sharp that it was better used for training than actual combat.

She would balance that out with the Heart’s Gem she already possessed, so he moved on to Mercy’s training room. That he filled with a drop of Abyssal Ink, which rejected all light. He had to wait until Ziel finished the containment script for that one first, or it would have darkened the entire pocket world.

Once that cave was hidden with a darkness so impenetrable it twisted the eye, Ziel stood up from where he had been etching script into the stone.

“I know you’re about to surprise me,” he said. “I don’t even know why I’m saying anything. But if you couldn’t find a force treasure, I don’t blame ___”

Lindon floated a box out of Little Blue’s void key.

This one had been relatively easy to transport, compared to the others. He opened the box and delicately lifted a head-sized ball of what seemed to be bronze. “The Sovereign Drum. As you know, force treasures rarely form naturally. This one was made by sacred artists before the Dread War.”

Ziel took it with precise care and carried it into the cycling room himself. Lindon was relieved. His own force control was rudimentary compared to Ziel’s, and an accidental strike of the Sovereign Drum could release enough power to blow the island apart.

“The Monarchs must hate you,” Ziel said.

“They do,” Lindon replied.

Most of the island was taken up by a broad stone building Lindon built for sparring. He reinforced it with rare metals and powerful scripts, and he would continue reinforcing it over the coming days. Ideally, he would have an entire separate space for that, as the hall was very small considering the scale of Monarch techniques.

But he was confident he could get it to withstand Monarch-level power.

After that, he raised up a more attractive building and separated it into rooms. Orthos and Little Blue began carrying furniture inside; he had hated to take up valuable void key space with things that had no spiritual power, but they had to rest *somewhere*.

Finally, Lindon only had one stretch of the marble island left to work with. He raised pale stone into a long, narrow building with eight rooms, like a stable made to hold exactly eight horses.

Ziel walked up as though to begin working on another script, but hesitated. "Who is this for?"

"All of us," Lindon said.

[If it works,] Dross put in. [And this one *really* might not.] He drifted away from Lindon, carrying a simple construct carefully. The construct shone strange colors, radiating the power of corrupted dreams.

It had been made from a piece of the Silent King's halo.

Dross placed the construct into the center of the leftmost room and fled, reappearing over Lindon's shoulder.

"You aren't going to activate it?" Lindon asked.

[I'm looking forward to it, I really am. Oh, I can't wait! But maybe you do it.]

"It won't hurt you."

[We don't know *what* it will do.]

That might be true. Lindon was painfully ignorant of the forces he was about to invoke. But he needed to learn.

With a pulse of pure madra, Lindon activated the construct.

An illusion filled the room. It was the image of another cave, one made of dark blue-black stone. A hollow that had been carved into the very foundation of the labyrinth.

It was filled with flickering images. Lindon looked into it and saw a kind of mirror; himself as an Unsouled, himself with no Dreadgod arm dying of old age, his parents as children, Yerin fighting Malice with her sword-arms black instead of red.

Past, present, and future flickered in a headache-inducing collage. A symbol over the top of the cave resembled some kind of abstract animal head surrounding what Lindon *thought* was an eye.

This illusionary recreation was much weaker than the real thing, but it still radiated authority that felt related to dream aura, but deeper. As though

it were greater than dreams.

Ziel winced and held up a hand. Lindon was feeling the same way.

“We put together my memory, Dross’ memory, and captured images with constructs. Even so, this is a poor rendition of the original. It is too profound for us to understand.”

“Probably for the best,” Ziel said. He tried to glimpse the cavern again and had to blink back tears. “If I have to study a tiger, I’d rather have a picture than the real thing.”

Next to Lindon, Orthos and Little Blue quivered.

“What *are* these?” Orthos asked.

[The Paths of Heaven,] Dross responded, and for once he sounded completely serious.

Lindon deactivated the construct, and everyone gave a sigh of relief. He had similar constructs prepared for all eight, and he prepared to embed them into the floor of the chambers. As he did, he kept glancing at the eighth.

Since the illusion construct wasn’t active, the eighth opening only looked like an empty marble room, but this would be the dark one. The tunnel that had been added on later and filled with death.

Eithan’s original creation. The height of his Path.

“We’re going to join them soon,” Lindon said, and he was speaking to himself as much as anyone. In his left hand, he rolled Suriel’s marble.

“I never thought we would find ourselves fighting among Monarchs,” Orthos said. “Much less so soon. Only yesterday, you were a Jade quaking beneath my footsteps.”

Ziel sighed. “We’re well-stocked, I’ll say that for us. If we’re going to do the impossible, at least we have the facilities for it.”

Lindon looked over the island, now filled with marble buildings he’d grown, and felt a pleasant swell of pride. There was more to do, but this was a good start.

Orthos rumbled agreement. “We have everything we need.”

“No, we don’t!” Mercy’s distant voice came drifting on the wind. They all turned, but she wasn’t visible yet.

She shouted from within the tunnels. “Wait! Hold on! Almost there! There’s more of this than I thou—Aha!” Mercy emerged triumphantly from underground, raising Suu to the sky.

Tears had dried on her cheeks, but she seemed like she had pulled herself together. At least for the moment.

Lindon's heart loosened as he saw her. He had worried that Malice's treatment might have left wounds that couldn't be so easily fixed.

She probably had, he knew. But Mercy was starting to heal.

"We're missing a name!" Mercy cried.

Lindon winced.

Yerin appeared next to him in a flash of white light. As soon as she did, she wrapped an arm around his waist, but spoke dryly to Mercy. "Thought we could skip that part this time."

"No! We can't live somewhere without a name!"

Orthos eyed Dross. "You're not going to call this Death's Midnight Cemetery, are you?"

[I told you to forget that! Forget it! Bring me those memories so that I can eat them!]

Yerin grabbed Dross before he could fly over to Orthos. "You're not all death and skulls anymore, true? All right, then, show it to us. What's your name?"

Dross glowered at Orthos for another second before drawing himself up and clearing his throat. [Ah, yes. As you know, I was born in the mighty world of Ghostwater. We should name this place after that one, right? Right. So, I present to you...]

He spread boneless arms wide. [Drosswater.]

Little Blue sounded like a strangled whistle.

Orthos choked.

Yerin openly laughed.

Even Mercy had been struck speechless.

"I told you they wouldn't like it," Lindon said.

[No, they just—you all don't appreciate the subtle touches! 'Dross' is the part you throw away, right? Well, we are the ones who have been cast off, or *thrown away*, by the Monarchs! Set adrift! And from that *dross* we will forge our revolution!]

"It's a bad name," Ziel said.

Dross folded his arms. [You do better, then.]

Ziel responded immediately. "Training Chamber Number One."

[Terrible!]

"I don't see what's wrong with it," Lindon said. "It's professional."

Ziel pointed to him. Yerin laughed harder.

Mercy gave a pained smile. “Why don’t we think a little longer, all right? How about...The Room of Spirit and Time!”

“Eh,” Ziel said.

[I’m still concerned that we haven’t given Drosswater enough consideration.]

Yerin wiped a tear from her eye. “No water here, is there? Got our share of rock, though. And wind.”

“Wind for *Windfall*,” Orthos pointed out. “And wind for the Ashwind continent.”

“Ghostwind,” Lindon suggested. “Malice called me the Empty Ghost, and we can still honor Ghostwater.” He nodded to Dross.

[Hmmmm...I like it, but now that I think of it, don’t you find that a little too grandiose? This pocket world is nowhere near as large or complete as Ghostwater, after all. The smallest of Northstrider’s halls could beat this place to death. If halls could fight.]

Mercy brightened. “Ghostwind Hall!”

“Don’t have a shiny history with places that have Hall in the name,” Yerin muttered. She squeezed Lindon. “You think it might scrape them the wrong way?”

Lindon considered. “I don’t think Northstrider would care, but the Sage of Red Faith would think we were mocking him.”

“Bright welcome to Ghostwind Hall, then,” Yerin said decisively. “Our home ‘til we can fight the world.”

Lindon surveyed the buildings. And the people standing next to him.

One way or the other, they were all going to leave Cradle together.

He tightened his arm around Yerin and repeated her words. “Until we can fight the world.”

THE NEXT DAY, WHEN LINDON HAD PUT ALL THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON Ghostwind Hall, he gathered everyone together.

Orthos, Little Blue, Ziel, Mercy, and Yerin were all spread out in front of him, standing on the smooth ground with the multi-colored sky behind them. They wore various expressions of expectation, from Yerin's confident patience to Mercy's excitement to Ziel's completely blank face. They were waiting to hear his plans for them.

Still, he hesitated to speak.

[What are you doing?] Dross whispered to him. [It's a good plan! Very theoretically sound. In the worst case, they just develop an instinctive hatred for you that sinks into their very souls. But that would be irrational.]

"I have left various...methods for each of you," Lindon began. "For willpower training. Some of you have started working already, which is admirable. As you know, willpower is fundamental for fighting Heralds and Sages. And the Monarchs. You've all faced down a Dreadgod before, so you know that."

The various expressions of expectation had started to crumple. Yerin said what he was sure they were all thinking. "Since when did you ramble on instead of talking straight?"

Lindon couldn't meet her eyes, so he shifted and coughed. "I think—and Dross thinks too—that the most effective way to start training willpower is, uh, directly. You'll have to get used to resisting the pressure of a powerful sacred artist, so...Apologies, but you'll be doing willpower training. Against me."

He didn't like stammering and speaking so hesitantly, but the idea made him *profoundly* uncomfortable. For one thing, proposing that he could suppress them all suggested that he was the most powerful sacred artist there.

Which was true, but it was still awkward to say out loud.

He also knew what it took to resist such pressure. You had to draw yourself up to push against your opponent, which meant pitting yourself against them directly. It was a lot like hating them.

He felt like he was lining them up so that he could bully them.

Nonetheless, once they'd received the explanation, all their expressions eased. Except for Ziel's, which didn't change.

"Bury me, I thought you were going to confess to a crime," Yerin said. She rubbed her hands together eagerly. "What's the prize if we push you down?"

[I'll give you some points!] Dross offered, which Lindon thought was irresponsible. There was no points system in place, so that wasn't a promise he could honor.

"When you can't take it anymore, take a knee," Lindon said. He nodded to Orthos. "Or a shell. I'll take the pressure off immediately."

Orthos returned the nod gravely. "How long should we endure?"

"As long as you can. The ultimate goal is to be able to fight while resisting me, but first we need to determine how far you have to go. Whoever collapses first needs the most help."

Ziel looked around. "If it's about how long we each last, we could just line up by advancement level."

"I'll be adjusting my pressure for each of you," Lindon said. Ziel finally showed a dumbfounded expression. Did he think Lindon was bragging? Or perhaps exaggerating his own control?

Well, his doubts would be answered soon, because Lindon could do it.

Mercy shifted from foot to foot. "Why don't we do this individually? I'm concerned it might be embarrassing if we're all comparing to one another."

"Apologies, truly, but I do think this is necessary. If we are to fight as a team, we need an accurate understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. It's not a point of competition but a way to help one another improve."

Mercy's shoulders slumped and she shot Little Blue a glance.

The Riverseed saw that and gave an indignant chime.

“For what it’s worth,” Lindon said, “I do not believe Little Blue will be the first to collapse.” Merely being connected to him had to be decent willpower training, considering what Lindon had put himself through in the last few years, and he could feel Blue’s heart through their bond. Her will was clear, strong, and well-developed.

She looked at him and raised her fists in the air with a ringing cheer.

“Also...” This was the hardest for Lindon to say, but it was the main point. “I will need to set aside my personal feelings for each of you. You may feel that I am ruthless or sense me as an enemy, but please don’t take it to heart.”

He tried not to glance at Yerin, but he failed.

A laugh burst out of her lips. “That’s what’s been hanging off you? Bring all you’ve got. If you think I want you to hold back, your ears have been shut.”

“That’s not *quite* my concern,” Lindon hedged. “As you know, I’ve gone through some changes recently—”

“We’ll take it,” Yerin said confidently.

“You might sense deeply that I’m trying to kill you, so please remember —”

“Let’s go!” Mercy called.

“Enough hesitation,” Orthos said.

Ziel planted his feet and nodded.

Little Blue chimed eagerly.

Lindon let out a heavy breath. “All right. Brace yourselves.” For a moment, Lindon organized his thoughts. He closed his eyes, focusing his willpower and feeling the power that ran through him. The hunger of his arm that now suffused him. The madra channels that were now melted into his flesh.

The fury of Blackflame. The emptiness of pure madra. The appetite of a Dreadgod.

He gathered it all together and prepared to remove his veil.



While Lindon stood there with eyes closed, Orthos tried not to let his amusement show through their contracted bond. The boy was so worried about what they would think of him, as though they hadn't fought side-by-side for years.

They were all aware of how strong Lindon was now. None thought they could compare to him, but they were all eager to try.

He was either taking them too lightly or overestimating himself. Those would be unusual problems for Lindon, but this should make a good lesson for him.

Then Lindon's eyes snapped open and his veil dropped.

Orthos shouted involuntarily. He would have staggered back several steps if he could have moved at all.

A *mountain* had collapsed onto his shell, and he was held in place by an invisible fist. That wasn't Lindon, that couldn't be Lindon. That was a Dreadgod.

The Empty Ghost.

And it was coming for *him*.

White circles on black orbs stared into Orthos, and Orthos knew his death had arrived. He felt the hunger of a predator trying to devour him, and it was all he could do to remain standing. Even his madra was frozen in his spirit, locked in place by sheer terror.

The pressure increased by the second, but all Orthos could see were those eyes. They were going to devour him, and the pressure was squeezing him from every angle. His death was everywhere.

He had felt nothing like this since the sky had turned black, and even then, at least the disaster hadn't been focused on him. This time, Death was calling his name.

Helpless, Orthos collapsed.



Mercy had trained for months in the fifth page of the Book of Eternal Night, among the Dream of Darkness technique. She had practiced resistance against nightmares, and of course she had her experiences facing down the weakened Wandering Titan. Her own mother's displeasure was significant willpower training.

She would be confident pitting herself against most anyone her age in a straight-up contest of will. Lindon would win, she was sure, but she would give him a good run.

Or so she thought before it came to this.

It was as though he'd punched through her rib cage and seized her core in his Dreadgod hand. She could feel his will gripping her from every angle, crushing her body and her spirit, his ravenous hunger ready to devour her whole.

The fear and guilt and anger she'd felt fighting against her mother came flooding back. Mercy had thought she had recovered enough from fighting Malice, but the force of Lindon's spirit felt too much like her mother's displeasure.

Mercy's eyes crossed and she tried to summon her armor, but she couldn't make it work. Desperate, she thought of the seventh page of her Book of Eternal Night.

That had a measure of her mother's will inside it, so it would surely keep her on her feet. But then, what would be the purpose of this test?

Mercy stood as long as she could under the pressure of those black-and-white eyes. Eventually, she could take it no longer and dropped to her knees.

She was the second to drop, she saw, but she wasn't too disappointed. At least she had lost on her own.



Little Blue didn't have any complex feelings about the test. She just tried her hardest.

Everything she could feel through their bond indicated that Lindon was really trying to kill her. He intended to crush her and eat her.

But he wouldn't actually do that. She didn't need to come up with any reasons to justify that, she just knew Lindon. He wouldn't intentionally hurt her. For her, that was an ironclad fact of the universe.

No matter what her spirit was telling her, she only had to resist as long as she could. She screamed into the pressure, and though it came out more like a melodious whistle, it helped her stand up for a second longer.

When she fell, she collapsed onto her back and welcomed the relief from the pressure. When she turned and saw Mercy and Orthos already on the ground, she punched one fist into the air.



Ziel's entire body was covered in sweat.

Pressure gripped his madra channels, threatening to twist his spirit in knots. He couldn't hold back the memories of the Sage of Calling Storms, a grin on his face as he twisted his tools inside Ziel's soul, subjecting him to that very fate.

But Ziel had lived with spiritual pain as a fact of his life for many years.

He shoved back out of sheer stubbornness. His fear, his discomfort, Lindon's razor-sharp desire to kill him; what did those things matter? He would die on his feet.

Although those black-and-white eyes were relentless. They seemed to swallow the world. An endless void.

It had been hard enough to meet a weakened Wandering Titan in combat. This was like facing the Dreadgod down, alone, and engaging in a staring contest.

Now, he was preparing to fight the Weeping Dragon. To do that, he needed this training.

Ziel's hands started to shake. The tremors traveled up his arms and all the way to his head, though he couldn't seem to blink or pull his eyes away even if he wanted to.

Then the vibrations reached his knees, and he collapsed.

He thought he'd feel ashamed, but all he felt was relief. And then a small amount of pride.

He'd lasted as long as he realistically could. Besides Lindon, the only one still on their feet was Yerin.

Not a bad result, if he did say so himself.



Yerin had known how Lindon's sacred arts had leaped forward after he'd Consumed the Silent King. He was somewhat outside normal advancement

now, with a body and spirit more comparable to Heralds despite being a Sage. And she'd known how he struggled with the wills of those he Consumed.

Even so, she was no slouch herself. She'd faced down the Monarchs and hardly blinked, not to mention denying the will of the Bleeding Phoenix.

The others, she knew, couldn't match Lindon. But she'd give him a race.

Or so she'd thought.

There was no trace of Lindon left anymore. She was facing down the Void Sage. The Master of the Labyrinth. The Dreadgod.

And he was here to kill her.

Her powerful body didn't matter before this pressure. She struggled not to bend like a straw at the bottom of the ocean. Her spirit ached, and she felt like it would twist and devour her from the inside-out.

Her oldest fear.

She remembered this hunger, remembered being a parasite that wanted to hollow her out. Now she faced it again, and she trembled.

But still she pushed back. She had her pride, and she'd wrestled with her Blood Shadow years before it had become Ruby. She remembered *being* the Blood Shadow, grappling with Yerin from the inside, and even that added to the strength of her will. She would never give in.

She pushed back *hard*, gazing into Lindon's eyes, watching for him to slide back a step.

The aura around him rippled, causing a slight breeze to tug at his clothes, but he didn't move his hands from behind his back. He didn't even blink. He only gazed back, his will unbending steel.

She wouldn't give in. Not if it killed her. She locked her knees and met him defiantly, even when she felt blood trickling from her nose. All her madra cycled rapidly—at least, as much as she could make it move—and she gripped her fists until her fingernails broke skin.

Only when Lindon ratcheted the pressure up again did her body fail her.

She was *flattened* to the ground, though he let up instantly. And while she had prepared herself for the possibility of losing, she was still filled with shame.

She had thought she'd stand a chance.



Lindon looked over his friends coughing, groaning, and shifting on the ground. “Apologies,” he said. “Are you all right?”

He could feel that they were unharmed, but a round of groans answered him.

“I hate you,” Ziel said.

“How about a break before we try again?” Lindon suggested.

Mercy threw a pebble at his head.



After another round of willpower training and a few hours of rest, Lindon was ready to begin individual training. He started with Orthos.

Orthos and Little Blue were together, and when Lindon had sensed that, he had at first assumed that Little Blue was supporting Orthos as he pushed himself.

The truth was closer to the opposite.

Blue gritted her teeth and braced herself as her body flickered purple. Beside her, a Blood Shadow sheathing a weapon started to melt away from a mace made of dark metal. The spiritual parasite slid through a scripted hunger spear, its power flowing into Little Blue.

When Lindon had sensed her straining, he had thought she was pushing herself to scrub Orthos’ spirit. Instead, Orthos was standing over her, taking up most of the Blackflame training cave and bellowing encouragement.

“A dragon does not hesitate!” the turtle roared. “She decides her goals and she seizes them! A dragon does not surrender!”

Little Blue’s scream was a high, piercing whistle, and she briefly swelled to half Lindon’s height. Then she compressed herself back down to about a foot tall, and a cloud of blood essence rushed up and out of her.

She fell back onto the rock, breathing heavily. Like Dross, she didn’t need to breathe, but she imitated the habit from the people whose spiritual power made up her body.

Then again...

Lindon paid more attention to the feel of her spirit through their bond. She had developed significantly over the years, both spiritually and

physically. It was hard to tell for sure without a direct scan—which he didn’t want to use, lest he distract her—but she might really need to breathe soon.

If that were true, she was almost ready.

“She’s feeling strong,” Lindon said aloud. He was speaking to Orthos, but he knew Blue would hear it. Sure enough, he felt a spark of gratification from her.

“She may be stronger than I am now,” Orthos responded. Lindon was surprised to hear him say it, but it could be true.

Spirits were hard to compare to sacred artists or sacred beasts, and Blackflame was much more obvious than pure madra, but in many ways she gave off the spiritual pressure of an Overlady. In terms of her density and state of existence, she reminded him more of advanced Archlord Remnants.

[Spirits have similar requirements to advance, but they often don’t go through discrete levels of advancement until after Archlord,] Dross said to them all.

“I’m fully aware of that,” Lindon said.

[I know, but I like to look knowledgeable. It’s my one role. Do you have to take that from me?]

Lindon moved closer to Little Blue and scanned her. Sure enough, she *had* developed lungs and a heart, though she probably didn’t strictly need them yet. More importantly, she could handle another dose of his soulfire.

He sat down next to her. “I think you’ll be the easiest one to advance.”

She gave him a smug cheep.

“Once you’re recovered, I’ll give you some soulfire.” After she stabilized, her advancement would be down to absorbing Lindon’s madra. In a few weeks or a handful of months, she would have adapted to the full power of his pure core.

Then it would come down to her to advance to Herald.

He looked over her again. She had been with him longer than anyone but Yerin, and now that he thought of it, she had pushed herself harder than he realized. Even processing his scales would have been a trial for her at first.

“You’ve worked hard,” Lindon said. He dipped his head to her. “Gratitude.”

Without sitting up, Little Blue opened her mouth.

“Oh, of course.” With a moment of concentration, Lindon Forged a scale. It wasn’t the full power he was capable of, but it was balanced and stable. He matched it to Little Blue’s current level, as he estimated it.

Her head deformed to swallow the coin, though the scale dissolved into energy as it went down her throat. She patted her stomach with a satisfied sigh.

Lindon looked to Orthos.

“I have eaten what you left for me,” the turtle rumbled, “but I have a long road to travel. I don’t see how I can make it in time.”

Lindon had left Orthos elixirs and scales meant to prepare him to receive greater powers. In Lindon’s opinion, that didn’t even count as the first step.

“Are you willing to do what it takes to join me?” Lindon asked.

He half-expected a jibe in response, but Orthos’ red-and-black eyes met him seriously. “I am.”

“Then listen, both of you.” Lindon drew himself up and radiated a grave air through his bond with the two of them. “You won’t make it to Monarch. Not in the time we have left.”

They exchanged glances, and he felt their mild confusion.

“Of course not,” Orthos said.

[Orthos, your body and spirit are too...well-established. Venerable. Old, can I say old? If you had been an Archlord for three hundred years, it would be fine, but you were a Gold. Herald is out of the question for you.]

Orthos glared at him. “I did not ask.”

Little Blue whistled a question.

[No, *you* can be a Herald, don’t worry. But you gathering the required wisdom and insight to touch an Icon would be...ah...hmmm...]

While Little Blue sat and innocently waited for the end of that sentence, Lindon cut in. “You won’t be Monarchs in your own right, but you’ll be able to borrow my power. You will be ready to fight the Dreadgods, the same as any of us.”

Of course, all those problems had solutions. If Lindon was willing to stretch the Monarch artifacts further, he could bend the rules for Little Blue and Orthos. But preparing them to reach Monarch would cost more effort and borrowed authority than everyone else combined.

Even with fortunes stolen from all over the world, Lindon didn’t have the resources for that. Not to mention the time.

Both Orthos and Little Blue trembled inwardly when he mentioned fighting Dreadgods, but they remained resolved.

Lindon rolled his right shoulder and his Dreadgod arm quivered eagerly. “Then let’s get started. Orthos, release one of the black dragon Remnants, if you don’t mind.”

He’d left most of the Remnants for Orthos’ use, and at the request, Orthos released one of the Underlord Remnants from his void key.

There were Gold spirits in there too, but clearly Orthos did not mean to have an easy start. That wasn’t bad thinking. He could Consume the easiest Remnants when Lindon and Dross weren’t around to help.

Close to mindless, the serpentine spirit of red-and-black flame dove at Lindon. Lindon caught it effortlessly in his right hand, ignoring its snarls and snapping jaws. He spoke loudly to be heard over the thrashing Remnant.

“I’m going to transfer everything I can to you, but it’s not just madra. There’s still willpower and memories left in the spirit, and traces of blood and life essence. I’m going to send it to you and help you separate it all, but you’ll have to endure and control it on your own.”

[Not everything, of course,] Dross pointed out. [We’ll start with about forty percent of the mental power, because you don’t have me. Your brain is like...have you ever filled an eggshell with so much egg that it cracks from the inside?]

“No,” Orthos said. “No one ever has.”

[I find that unlikely.]

Lindon tried to keep them both focused. “This will strain you. You’ll have to wrestle directly with the remaining will of the dragon, and you may experience a moment where you aren’t sure who you are. We’ll help you as much as we can, but ultimately it will be up to you.”

Orthos braced all four of his feet on the ground, and smoke rose from his shell as he cycled his Blackflame madra. “I will know what you have endured all this time.”

That made even Lindon hesitate as he remembered all the discomfort and disorientation he’d endured when Consuming others for the first time. But they wouldn’t advance in record time without breaking some rules.

And Orthos said he was ready.

[I’ll give you a countdown. One and a half, one, now!]

Lindon Consumed the Underlord Remnant. It dissolved and flowed up his arm in an instant, barely a sip compared to the bites he'd taken from Dreadgods and Monarchs. His arm seethed in dissatisfaction, having received a faint mist when it expected a solid meal.

He kept the limb under control, carefully separating the energies from the Remnant while keeping them intact. It was harder than just drinking them himself, but still a trivial task.

The memories would have been more difficult to deal with if not for Dross, and a Remnant's memories were always fractured and faint compared to a living being.

[This isn't really forty percent,] Dross whispered to Lindon. [But it's enough for now.]

While keeping careful control, Lindon poured the power through his contracted bond to Orthos.

The turtle shuddered as energy entered him. He took the Blackflame madra easily, of course, cycling it to his spirit and using it to condense his core. The few remaining wisps of gray soulfire settled peacefully as well.

Wrestling against the Remnant's willpower was harder. When the madra left Lindon's control, it still had some of the spirit's original will left animating it, and that power tried to take control of Orthos' spirit.

The temperature in the cave rose several degrees, and Little Blue whistled in concern. Black-and-red sparks flickered into being here and there, and Orthos' body shuddered.

Green life essence and crimson blood essence settled in next, carrying yet more of the dragon's will. Then the memories rushed through.

Weaker these thoughts might have been, but Lindon still felt spikes of emotion associated with fractured images. Rage and terror against a distant human figure with silver runes spinning around her. Protective love for a clutch of eggs. Confusion and awe at the sight of a mysterious aura phenomenon that lit the horizon with a rainbow.

These were some of the few broken memories that had survived this dragon's death, and Orthos tossed his head as he received them, his eyes rolling wildly in his skull. He struggled as though against an invisible leash, but he couldn't escape.

Lindon's heart tensed. Neither he nor Dross could fight through this process on his behalf. They had made it as easy as they could, but Orthos would have to do this himself.

“Where...” Orthos muttered. “Who...” He looked at Lindon in panic, and dragon’s breath kindled between his jaws.

Lindon stood calmly before Orthos, hands clasped behind his back. He radiated complete faith and confidence through their bond.

And so, he noted, did Little Blue. She sent Orthos cheers both audible and otherwise, running around him in circles as though to inspire him with her energy.

A moment later, the cloud passed from behind Orthos’ eyes. The dragon’s breath died inside his mouth, and he settled heavily onto the ground.

“So that’s what it’s like,” he rumbled. “I hate it.”

Lindon scratched the side of his head instead of responding. It wasn’t a *pleasant* process, but Lindon still found it satisfying. It was the most direct way to improve.

[Think of it this way: only three more of those, and then you’ll be ready to advance to Overlord!]

Orthos coughed out ash.

[...maybe four,] Dross corrected.

Lindon rested a hand on Orthos’ head. “It’s a big step. Rest and cycle. Tomorrow, I’ll give you the hunger weapon I made for you, and you can try Consuming one of the Golds on your own.”

Even from that one Remnant, the turtle was noticeably stronger. This was the fastest way to strengthen him, but Lindon was still worried.

For one thing, this method would only work for Orthos and Little Blue, and Blue would only need a few more treatments. For Orthos...

[Fourteen,] Dross said cheerily. [Four Golds, to get him used to the memories. Then five more Underlords, three Overlords, and two Archlords. I won’t tell him yet, though. Keep it a surprise!]

Lindon pictured fourteen more treatments. They wouldn’t get easier to endure, either. Lindon would have to ramp up the portions of willpower and memory that he transferred, and Orthos would need longer to rest between each one.

They also didn’t have enough Remnants. They only had two Overlords and one Archlord.

[I don’t want you to start thinking I approve of Consuming sentient spirits, because I don’t want you to eat me, but we *do* have a Herald spirit too. Maybe just a sip...]

Lindon looked to the cave's ceiling, where a huge black-and-red spirit had quietly curled up and pretended he didn't exist. Noroloth, the Remnant of an ancient black dragon Herald, hadn't even cycled the abundant Blackflame aura that suffused the air here. At least, not since Lindon walked in. That was the Remnant equivalent of holding a breath.

Noroloth shuddered at Lindon's gaze but gave a shaky smile. "I apologize for not greeting you, Monarch! I was terrified that I might interrupt your time with your students."

Lindon suspected that was true.

The spirit of the black dragon prince looked less like a natural dragon than most of their Remnants. He was red, for one thing, with black only showing in patches here in there and in the black-and-red flames that burned around his back. His head was more than double the width of the rest of his body, his jaw exaggerated into an underbite, and his tail dissolved to smoke.

That tail wagged now. His smile looked hideous on his too-large head.

"I would like you to supervise Orthos' training," Lindon said. "I'm sure you have insights into the Path of Black Flame that would serve him well."

"Of course, Monarch, of course! Whatever you wish!" The Remnant's smoky tail wagged faster.

Dross materialized in front of Noroloth's face and glared at him. [I still don't trust you, new guy.]

Noroloth's tail froze.

"I have no doubt he can handle it." Lindon patted Little Blue and rested his hand on Orthos' head. "You all can."

Orthos grunted, still reeling from the impact of the foreign willpower.

Lindon left the cave, trying to prevent Orthos from picking up on his frustration. They had only started, but he still felt every second they lost.

By traditional logic, there was no way to force sacred artists through the Lord realm. The gold dragons had pumped Sopharanatoth as full as they dared, and it had led to critical instability in her spirit. All due to a lack of time.

But he had resources they didn't, and he needed to rely on those. Hunger madra. The labyrinth. Treasures stolen from the Monarchs. Dross.

More importantly, he had a plan.

[Caaaaaaallllllmmmmmm,] Dross drew the word out in such a strange manner that it didn't feel very calming. [Settle doooooooooowwwwnnnn.

Relaaaaaaaxxxx.]

Please stop.

[We have plans for this already. Rely on the plan. Trust the plan.]

They're just not there yet, Lindon said silently. It wasn't really the resources he was worried about. Orthos, Little Blue, Mercy, Ziel...he was still afraid they were coming along because he and Yerin wanted them to. None of them had the drive he did.

If he had been in Orthos' position, then after Consuming his first Remnant, he would have begged for another.

[I feel compelled to mock you for your arrogance, but you're not wrong. That's almost exactly what you did when you first started using Consume.]

Lindon pushed down his doubt before it could leak through their connection and affect Orthos. As much as anyone, Lindon knew how advancing through the various stages of the Lord realm and fighting directly against the wills of others could help clarify yourself. Orthos would change and grow through this process. So would the others.

Walking this path would prepare them for the rest. He had to trust that. Trust them.

I need to focus, Lindon thought. *Let's do some Soulsmithing.*

There were plenty of preparations still to make, and getting them done now would save him time in the long run. Plus, it would settle him down.

They still had time.

REIGAN SHEN DIDN'T DO HIS OWN SOULSMITHING. HE HAD PEOPLE FOR that.

But the skills of Ozmanthus Arelius, one of the greatest Soulsmiths of all time, still flowed through his mind and spirit. Instincts honed by years of practice, the insight of a genius, and decades if not centuries of weapons-crafting experience now lurked inside Reigan Shen. Now and then, he even felt a shadow of the human's arrogance bubbling up.

It was the one thing he appreciated about the man.

The core binding of Subject One was too valuable a material for Reigan to trust to others, but it was also unique and irreplaceable, and thus unsuitable for amateurs. His teams of expert Soulsmiths had labored ceaselessly for days while he breathed down their necks, giving them direction filtered through the talents of his greatest enemy.

They finally turned it into the form he wanted, and they had certainly earned their reputations. If they weren't fine craftsmen, he wouldn't have retained their services in the first place. Even his memories of Ozmanthus approved.

The Wraith Horn—which was his current working title for the wide-mouthed trumpet made from Subject One's binding—was carved with delicate swirls until it resembled a seashell. It looked like it had grown into the shape of a horn by natural forces rather than design.

It was a pure, smooth gray-white, like most of Subject One's body, but Reigan could only admire its surface in brief stints. The treasure warped the

air around it by the mere weight of its existence, so he usually had to keep it sealed away.

The Horn had several applications, as expected from the product of such a fine material. But one was of most interest to him at the moment. He could send a call through it, which would reach the other Dreadgods as though it came from the Slumbering Wraith itself.

Intelligent as they now were, they might be aware it was a trap, but this spoke to their instincts. They would follow its lure.

This was the leash he had placed on the Dreadgods. His current plan.

His *first* plan, to gain the power of a Dreadgod for himself, had been ruined by the very man whose Soulsmiting skill now infused Reagan's spirit.

Reagan looked over the distant Sacred Valley and reflected on how much time and money he'd wasted.

If only he'd *known* who Eithan was. Reagan Shen would have been Tiberian's best friend. He might have even followed the man's plan; there were ways to turn forced ascension to an advantage.

But now wasn't the time for regret. Now was the time for desperate survival.

He had no need to call the Dreadgods now. They were headed where he wanted them anyway: for Lindon and Yerin Arelius. No matter what else he did, he needed those two *gone*. His greatest nightmare was that they could return centuries later as Ozmanthus had, in disguise, but he suspected that had only been allowed because the Arelius Patriarch had disguised himself as one of his own descendants.

He needed the rest of them out of Cradle before they left any little humans behind.

Now the Weeping Dragon was going to do his job for him, but Reagan Shen needed to make sure everything went according to plan. Then again, this plan was already going wrong.

He couldn't sense Lindon anywhere.

There was a barrier around Sacred Valley, projected by the great labyrinth, and he had expected Lindon to be waiting behind it. He didn't sense as much, but that told him little. No matter what detection methods he used, there was always the possibility that Lindon had come up with a way to hide from him.

He had requested each Monarch tell him what Lindon had stolen from them, but no one had cooperated. They might even know where Lindon was, but they hadn't shared that with him either. As far as he knew, Lindon could be almost anywhere and could have access to practically anything.

And from Reigan Shen, he had stolen the core to a pocket world.

Reigan had to assume that Lindon was tucked away somewhere in a space that had been time-warped to the extreme. Days could be passing every second.

In the worst-case scenario, half a dozen Monarchs could burst out at any moment. They could swarm the Weeping Dragon and from its corpse fashion a weapon to slay Reigan Shen.

That was monumentally unlikely. For one thing, they didn't have Eithan leading them forward now, so they were far more likely to run into one of the thousand potential roadblocks to advancement.

If it was so easy to manufacture Monarchs, someone would have done it already.

Then again, Lindon had access to the labyrinth, with all its unexplored secrets. He had the unlimited consumption powers of Subject One, an unknown number of resources and hidden projects stolen from Monarchs, and—perhaps worst of all—guidance from Ozmanthus Arelus.

A feeling of smug arrogance drifted up from the Soulsmith inheritance inside Reigan, and he had to force it down.

As much as he tried to convince himself that advancing multiple people to Monarch at once was impossible, Reigan Shen had the uncomfortable premonition that it might really happen.

He needed to take action immediately, but first he floated in the sky for a long moment, considering his options.

Lindon would have preparations against attacks, and Reigan was more than familiar with the capabilities of the labyrinth. With that under his control, Lindon could have any number of nasty surprises ready and waiting.

What if Lindon wasn't in Sacred Valley at all?

What if he *was*?

Reigan could break down the barrier Lindon had left around the Valley, given enough time, but was that the best way to pressure him?

He needed to corner Lindon. To run the young man out of energy, focus, and time. To exhaust him so he couldn't face the Weeping Dragon.

Pack tactics. Cut off the prey's escape routes and run it into the ground, until it collapsed from exhaustion and waited to be eaten. A hunt worthy of a lion.

He only had to pull Lindon out.



Lindon found Ziel seated in a cycling position in front of the Paths of Heaven, which was what Dross called the eight rooms filled with illusions of the ancient Abidan.

Seven of the Paths were dormant, their constructs inactive. With no illusions, they were nothing but plain three-sided rooms of white stone.

Only one of the displays was activated: the second one from the left, with the symbol that reminded Lindon strangely of the Wandering Titan. It displayed a pure, shining blue wall, and it radiated authority that suggested an unbreakable shield.

Despite the feeling of protection and security it generated, Lindon still couldn't regard the display directly for long. Even this replica was too far beyond him. Staring at the real thing long enough to make it had almost made him pass out.

"I'll reach the peak of Archlord soon," Ziel said, without turning around. "Thought I'd prepare myself early."

His worn gray cloak spread out over his shoulders and onto the ground behind him, displaying the symbol that resembled spread wings. The emblem of the Dawnwing Sect.

"You're close," Lindon said.

"I'm on the edge of something, but I still need one last step. Like stepping off a cliff."

Lindon remembered his own first contact with an Icon and nodded. It had taken him new insight into himself to touch the Void Icon, but from everything he had come to learn, it wasn't about understanding alone.

"It takes action to trigger," Lindon said. "What Icon is it?"

Ziel deactivated the Paths of Heaven display, and both Lindon and Dross let out a relieved breath. He stood, brushing himself off without looking at Lindon directly. "I'd rather not say."

Dross stared at him with one wide eye. [What?]

“That’s his decision,” Lindon said to Dross, but he was disappointed too. Did Ziel still not trust them?

Ziel shifted uncomfortably. He glanced to Dross and then back up at the sky. “It’s...embarrassing,” he muttered at last.

[Oh, then you can tell us quietly.]

There was a collection of memories embedded into the labyrinth, and many of them were from Sages. Some, like Malice and Northstrider, had gone on to become Monarchs. Lindon understood something of the general knowledge about Icons. Some were more common, but other Icons had shown up only a few times in history.

Some were considered unique, like Eithan’s Broom Icon. He had even mentioned a Joy Icon, which Lindon had never heard from anyone else.

[If Ziel taps into the Joy Icon, I will give up forever, because the world no longer makes sense.]

Dross didn’t send that message to Ziel, but Lindon still considered what he knew of the other man.

The Hammer Icon was manifested by Soulsmiths as often as people who used hammers in combat, but it tended to have different powers depending on whether it represented creation or battle. That led to great debate over whether there were two different Hammer Icons or whether hammers had greater depth of meaning.

There was no such thing as a Script Icon; Lindon was fairly certain of that. Scripts themselves were made up of many runes that each represented a fragment of meaning, but now that he thought of it, there had to be some Icon that scriptors could manifest.

Maybe the Scribe Icon? Scholars had manifested that throughout history, in the form of a quill or brush or pen over a page.

Ziel could clearly see the thoughts moving behind Lindon’s eyes, because he grumbled under his breath. “If I can’t reach it on my own, I’ll tell you. But I don’t know how I’ll reach it here.”

“You probably won’t,” Lindon agreed.

His understanding of the exact mechanics of Sage advancement was vague—in fact, as far as he’d learned, no one could predict exactly how Icons behaved—but Ziel had to take action to trigger the advancement, and actions he took while locked away in Ghostwind Hall wouldn’t touch the larger world.

Lindon thought of advancing to Sage here as something like trying to reach the ocean while trapped in a fishbowl.

"I'll need a little longer to reach peak Archlord," Ziel said. "But since that's all I can do in here, I'll figure out—"

Lindon opened his void key and called out three dream tablets.

The first one slapped into Ziel's palm as Lindon explained what it was. "All the memories about the Rune Queen Emala from the labyrinth, both from her and from her rivals or peers." A second one flew at Ziel, and he plucked it from the air. "Dross' analysis of her scripting patterns and our suggestions on how to operate the Grand Oath Array with your Path."

[We had to speculate *wildly*,] Dross said. [I'd say probably forty, forty-five percent is us making things up.]

Ziel caught the third tablet.

"That one's from Northstrider," Lindon said. "Dross took it from his oracle codex. It contains research on Emala's powers and insights into the manipulation of time."

Ziel looked down to the tablets and back up to Lindon. "If you're teaching me how to use it, does that mean..."

Lindon had been waiting for that.

From his soul-space, he released a Divine Treasure. It resembled a silver moon orbited by rings of intricate silver script.

"I finished it last night. It's not *precisely* the same as Emala's original, but no two Divine Treasures are exactly alike. The core construct is made from Northstrider's prototype Abidan artifact, which was designed to lock time in stasis. The rest came from a handful of Remnants with minor time aspects and the samples of the Rune Queen's madra you brought back from Shatterspine Castle."

Reverently, Ziel took the Grand Oath Array. "You said you could do it, but I still thought...How did you learn to do this?"

"Compressing the time of this pocket world was good practice," Lindon said. "And, of course, I had Dross' help. But mostly..."

Lindon extended a pulse of pure madra and activated the fourth Path of Heaven. The illusory cave flickered into visibility, blue-black stone surrounding abstract images that were strange even by the standards of the other ancient Paths. Dull colors swirled and mixed in intricate configurations, forming shapes that reminded Lindon of cycling patterns.

Or scripts.

The symbol over the cavern was a fuzzy humanoid figure, and the whole illusion radiated an authority that was hard for him to identify. Something about it resonated with his Void Icon, like a complementary half, or perhaps an opposite.

For Ziel's sake, he tried to explain. "These are the principles Northstrider and Emala studied. If I had to name this authority, I would call it 'existence.'"

Ziel hefted the silver Divine Treasure in his hand, then absorbed it into his soulspace. "I hate how casually you've handed me the keys to manipulate existence itself."

"We have to go at least this far if we want to kill the Weeping Dragon."

Ziel's spirit flickered slightly at the reminder, but it was enough to send a ring of dust blasting away from his feet. "Yeah. Right."

"And I'm sure I don't need to tell you," Lindon said quietly, "but we have to assume the Stormcallers will be with it."

Ziel trembled. His grip tightened on the dream tablets that remained in his left hand until Lindon was afraid he would break them.

"I'm not a match for Calling Storms," Ziel said at last. "Even if I touch an Icon, that won't change. He's a monster."

"He's not the only one." Lindon reached out with force aura and pushed Ziel's fingers apart so the tablets didn't shatter in his grip. "You won't fight alone."

"Neither will he. He has a Dreadgod."

Lindon flexed his right hand. "So he does." His white arm bubbled with hunger. It was practically drooling at the thought of devouring the Weeping Dragon.

Something Lindon couldn't read passed through Ziel's expression before he tilted his horns up to look at the sky of rainbow clouds. "How did I get here?" Ziel wondered aloud. "Preparing to fight a Dreadgod with someone who might really win."

Dross piped up helpfully, [Lindon dragged you here.]

"I wouldn't put it like that," Lindon said.

Ziel snapped his fingers. "Oh yeah, that was it. Guess I have some work to do." Ziel turned back around to face the Paths of Heaven, the lazy wind tugging at the ragged edges of his cloak, then stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "Thanks, by the way. For dragging me."

Lindon dipped his head wordlessly.

Dross crossed his tendrils. [Don't encourage him. He drags people too much as it is.]

Ziel sat down instead of responding, returning to his meditation, but Lindon grabbed Dross by the back of the head.

"Your turn," Lindon said.

[Someone help! I'm being dragged!]

Lindon carried Dross in his hand down through a tunnel into Ghostwind Hall's marble ground. Most of the facilities that had been included in the original pocket world either weren't finished or weren't worth much, but some had proved useful.

One in particular he had completed the first day.

The central control room of the pocket world wasn't deep beneath the surface. It was a smooth marble cave, its interior covered by rings of script and networks of constructs. They had been half-finished when he'd arrived, scripts mapped out in paint and many parts disconnected or non-functional.

He'd completed the most important functions. Namely, the network of scripts and constructs that let him observe the outside world.

Some pieces of the system worked better than others, but he had blurry pictures and rudimentary spiritual impressions of the Trackless Sea beneath *Windfall* as well as a few other key locations. Like Sacred Valley.

Lindon shut off the alarm that had alerted Dross hours ago. Hours from *his* perspective. With the time difference cranked up as high as he could make it, less than a minute had passed on the outside.

Someone is testing Sacred Valley's defenses, Lindon sent to Dross, once he deciphered the impressions coming through. He didn't speak aloud because he didn't want to disturb anyone else.

[That would be Reigan Shen,] Dross responded. [He's hiding, but I smell cat hair.]

Then we're almost out of time. Do you have an answer for me?

[You're not going to like it. I want to request first that you not take out your inevitable fury on me.]

Lindon's heart clenched. If Dross had bad news for him, their entire goal here might be impossible.

[It should be a bow,] Dross said gravely.

Lindon spent a moment thinking how that could be bad news. "I thought you were going to tell me it was impossible."

[I wracked my brain for other options, but the tendons will make an acceptable bowstring, and—with a little bit of encouragement from you—we can incorporate the bones. The binding is mind-bending to consider, even for me, but it should work well for Forging convincing illusionary arrows and affecting the dream aura of the targets. Probably more.]

“I’m still waiting for the bad news.”

[The bad news is that I can’t use a bow!] Dross floated around the room in agitation, thrashing his flexible arms. [We get the most powerful binding compatible with me in the world, and I can’t even use it.]

“We could make it into a launcher.”

[Not if we want to maximize the binding. Like you asked me to. The shape adds a lot, so it needs to be a material weapon.]

“How’s its compatibility with shadow madra?”

[If Mercy touched this bow, her eyes would melt.]

“For now,” Lindon said. Once she mastered the seventh page of her Book and they advanced her past Archlord, she would need a new weapon.

[Here’s an idea that’s just striking me out of nowhere, feel free to say no, but we could use it.] Dross floated behind Lindon and pointed an arm out as though showing him a glorious future. [Imagine us with four Dreadgod weapons—five, if you count your arm—traveling around and devouring people’s minds. Feeding them straight to me. All to Dross.]

Dross projected the image of himself growing larger and larger until he dwarfed mountains, then popping Northstrider into his open mouth.

“That would be too much to handle.” Not only would the compatibility issues of balancing four Dreadgod weapons at once be a monumental task, but it was enough of a strain on Lindon’s willpower wrestling with his arm.

Dross gave Lindon a skeptical look.

“...but of course there’s plenty of Dreadgod material besides their core bindings,” Lindon continued. “We’ll find something for us. And we will *borrow* the bow until Mercy can handle it.”

That was just good sense. The weapon would be ready before its wielder, but they couldn’t leave it sitting around. Not when they could use it against Reigan Shen.

Satisfied, Dross nodded and opened Lindon’s second void key.

This key, stolen from Sophara, had almost collapsed under the spiritual weight of a Dreadgod’s corpse. He had been forced to move everything else

out so the space didn't dissolve, and even then, he had to wrap the Dreadgod's corpse in scripted bandages to ensure stable long-term storage.

Lindon dragged the elephant-sized body of the Silent King out of the void key with one hand. The scripts all over the wrappings had begun to deform their cloth, so he burned them off in an instant with one brief flex of fire aura.

As soon as the restrictions were gone, all of Ghostwind Hall trembled.

The dead Dreadgod filled the cave with the stench of blood, sweaty fur, and a sickly-sweet smell that Lindon associated with dreadbeasts. The scorched cloth added smoke to the mix, so Lindon had Dross seal off his sense of smell.

"What will happen to the bow if the Silent King comes back to life?" Lindon asked. He had considered the question before; if the Dreadgods kept resurrecting, then they could potentially be an endless farm for Monarch-level materials.

Not that cultivating Dreadgods seemed like a good idea, but Lindon couldn't help considering.

[The madra loses consistency and begins to degrade as the world breaks it down,] Dross said with a heavy sigh. [Obviously, the first thing I tried to design was a network of fourteen Silent King bindings under my control, but the exclusionary nature of Dreadgod materials is relatively well-documented. Has to do with the mechanism of their resurrection.]

Lindon had expected that, and he didn't intend to allow the Dreadgod's rebirth anyway, but he was still disappointed.

Using force and wind aura, he levitated the great tiger's body into the center of the room. It would be better for Yerin to help with this next part, which required both precise incisions and controlling blood, but she was in the middle of her own training. Instead, Lindon set up a basic red construct to collect spilled blood then pulled out a goldsteel knife.

Dross highlighted the correct place for the first incision: a line down from the center of the neck. Standing in front of the corpse, Lindon was acutely aware of its size. The Dreadgod could have swallowed him in two bites.

Not long ago, Lindon had stood before it in battle. The memory of its presence overwhelmed him for a moment. Its spiritual and physical weight. The constant threat of death. Its power.

He could Consume this corpse. Drain it dry. There was more power left in the body, and he didn't *need* a bow. Mercy couldn't use it yet, and they needed the Silent King's power against the Weeping Dragon. Why hadn't he done this already?

Lindon had almost placed his right hand on the tiger's skin when Dross materialized in front of him. [No! Bad arm! Down!]

Lindon jerked his hand away.

That had been too close. When the arm's instincts fought him directly, he could win, but this time he hadn't noticed when the hunger madra's desires had begun to bleed into his own.

Embarrassed, Lindon tucked his right hand behind his back and sliced into the Dreadgod's skin with the knife in his left.

Even deprived of the Silent King's living spirit and will, the hide was tough. He had to gather sword aura around the blade of his knife and push with a significant portion of his strength. After that first incision, though, the process became easier.

As Lindon skinned and cleaned the Dreadgod, its blood splattered on the floor and then was drawn up into a ball around the simple construct he'd set up. The blood-aspect construct would certainly be warped by the touch of the Silent King's blood, but that would be a fascinating experiment in its own right.

Lindon had dissected dozens if not hundreds of dreadbeasts in the past, so he knew something of what to expect. The Dreadgod's spirit was twisted and merged through its body in the form of shining white threads that wove through its muscles, tendons, and bones until the power made a complex tapestry.

That was far more thorough than any other dreadbeast he'd encountered before, as expected. The presence and spiritual pressure of a Dreadgod's corpse was enough to radiate all throughout the pocket world.

Unraveling the spirit and body of the Dreadgod was a difficult enough task even without all the illusions.

Lindon's mother whispered in his ear, giving him false instructions, as the line of white madra he was trying to extract squirmed like a worm. A hand reached out to grab his wrist, a scream came from behind, and even his spiritual perception picked up a massive presence heading to kill him.

All illusions, and all convincing.

Dross shielded him and Lindon focused his own will, but without the cooperation between the two of them, the dissection process would have been impossible.

The room warped and shifted as he continued, until Lindon cut deep enough into the Dreadgod's chest to reveal a white core that shone like a twisted sun. Its light was wrong somehow, greasy and slick, as it tried to warp and corrupt the world around them.

Like the binding of the Tomb Hydra, this one had a complex, round shape with multiple applications. Unlike that one, which had still resembled a normal binding, this one burned against Lindon's eyes and spiritual senses. It was like an organic star, squirming in the grip of his goldsteel tongs, and half a dozen apertures opened and closed all over its surface like blinking eyes.

Dross had a catalogue of memories from Soulsmiths ready for Lindon's consideration.

All of them had made bows before, and Lindon let their expertise bubble at the back of his mind as he considered the binding, the bones, the tendons, and the material of the Silent King's spirit.

Then he entered the Soulforge and began his work.

TWO MORE DAYS HAD PASSED IN THE POCKET WORLD BEFORE LINDON judged that he should leave to defend Sacred Valley.

[Longer than we expected,] Dross observed. [Reigan Shen must be afraid if he's approaching so carefully. That, or he has a perfect, inescapable plan to kill you.]

Yerin froze with one of her sword-arms poised to descend on Lindon. They had been sparring in the sky, testing out some niche uses of their techniques, but she sensed the same thing Lindon had.

"You looking for company?" Yerin asked.

Lindon pulled his main void key from around his neck and tossed it and the string from which it hung to Yerin. "Better if only I go. I'll adjust the flow of time so it won't move quite so quickly while I'm gone. I should be back by tomorrow, from your perspective."

She stepped closer and looked up at him, clearly worried. "Bleed me if it wouldn't be smarter to go together."

Lindon gathered her up in his arms. "There's not much he can do to me in Sacred Valley with the protection of the labyrinth. He's trying to waste our time, and I don't want him to waste yours too."

"You stone-certain of that, are you?"

[How certain can we be of anything in this world?] Dross asked philosophically.

Lindon bid Yerin goodbye before heading to the scripted doorway at the edge of their pale stone island. Everyone here would sense him leave, but he should be back soon.

[I'm getting nervous. You want to wait here a little longer?]

Through his observation network, Lindon had felt the nature of Shen's attack on Sacred Valley. It was a barrage of launcher constructs; strong, but nothing the barrier he'd left around the labyrinth couldn't handle.

"By leaving, we're playing right into his hands," Lindon said. "But if we don't leave, he will eventually get in. There are still people down there."

He had left them other protections, but even so, the people he was sheltering in Sacred Valley couldn't handle a Monarch.

[*I have* wanted a good weapons test,] Dross admitted.

Lindon stepped through the doorway to the outside and found himself drifting over the Trackless Sea. The clouds drawn by the Weeping Dragon had crept slightly closer, and he could see glimpses of the Dreadgod itself as it wove in and out of its bed of clouds.

Though that wasn't the enemy that concerned him.

With arms crossed, Lindon propelled himself down. Into the depths of the sea.

As he'd seen Northstrider do years before, Lindon sank rapidly to the bottom of the ocean. Where a branch of the labyrinth waited.

Minutes later, he emerged in Sacred Valley to the sound of distant thunder.

Reigan Shen had given up stealth. He lounged openly in midair with his arms folded, staring imperiously over the Valley. From the air behind him, gold-edged portals unleashed a barrage of Striker techniques. Hundreds of them at once, representing every conceivable combination of aspects.

They slammed against an invisible wall when they crossed the barrier into Sacred Valley. The suppression field had never been intended as the primary defensive function of the great script; it wasn't even the default setting. However, the script could be overloaded, and a shield like this one was vulnerable to more subtle attacks.

Lindon felt the panicked spirits of everyone in the Valley as they witnessed the assault. While the original buildings were mostly still rubble scattered for miles between the three remaining sacred peaks, there were more people living in Sacred Valley than ever.

Refugees from all over the world, who had fled from the Dreadgods, now sheltered here. Members of the three original clans and four schools, certainly, but also people from the Desolate Wilds, the Blackflame Empire, and Dreadnought City in Everwood.

Even Redmoon Hall's cloudship sat on the ground, now flying the two-colored star of the Twin Star Sect. In fact, Lindon saw that symbol everywhere he looked.

When had that happened?

They were all protected by the great script, and many of them hid in the outer layers of the labyrinth itself. Lindon had left several entrances open; all the ones where ordinary Golds could enter without getting themselves killed.

Many people down there were calling his name. Including some voices he knew.

He could feel their intentions in his spiritual sense, like a distant whisper or a tapping on his shoulder. That ability was a relatively new development, but Lindon had no time to reassure anyone. He rose into the air on a cushion of aura and flew away.

Now that the suppression field was down, the aura here was richer than ever. Lindon reached the edge of the shield in seconds and passed through it without hesitation.

The enemy Monarch's launcher constructs went silent and retreated, their portals closing. He didn't want to lose his treasures.

Besides, Reigan Shen had achieved his objective the moment Lindon revealed himself. A smile curled up one corner of his lips, and he raised a goblet that Lindon was certain from experience contained wine.

"The Void Sage himself! We keep running into each other, it seems. How would you like to talk?"

Lindon reached into his soul-space. It took a moment to manifest the weapon he held there, due to its sheer spiritual power.

"Rude of you to keep silent, don't you think? What about your mind-spirit? He's worth talking to in his own right, I'm sure."

Dross spun out to hover over Lindon's head. He squinted at Reigan Shen. [How durable would you say you are? Compared to other Monarchs, I mean. There's not a good standardized metric, and I'm curious about where you rank. I'm sure Malice is on the high end, thanks to the armor and all.]

Shen arched an eyebrow and sipped from his goblet. "If that's a threat, it's a poor—"

The Bow of the Silent King appeared in Lindon's left hand.

A grand halo appeared over him, far too large for his body. The clouds danced, or at least seemed to, and the world warped around the weapon. Half-formed sounds and images flickered in and out of existence for miles around.

The grip and limbs of the bow were covered by the smooth white hide of the Silent King, drawn tight over its bones. Black stripes remained every few inches, shifting and morphing as though to *almost* form a picture. The string was invisible until Lindon's fingers plucked it experimentally, and then it shivered into existence. It trembled strangely, like half a dozen strings of light trying to occupy the same space.

Through his connection to the Void Icon, Lindon could feel the weapon's authority warping perception, dreams, thoughts. Even the Way, the deeper set of rules beneath reality, was touched by this weapon.

There was no way he could have tested the Bow inside the pocket world. Even with the separation of the Soulforge, constructing this had almost torn the place apart.

He felt its hunger for knowledge, its desire to consume minds and thoughts.

Lindon joined his madra to the bow, and it was almost too overwhelming for him. Fighting his arm and the weapon at the same time was a daunting task; they both whispered at him to give in, to devour everything. It was his right.

He tapped into the binding at the heart of the bow and Forged an arrow.

Lindon had expected it to be pure white, like so much of the Silent King's madra, but it was more than that. The flawless ivory arrow had a gleaming steel head and black-tipped fletching.

It was detailed and beautiful, a work of art, so that Lindon almost wondered if it had really been Forged from simple madra. His eyes alone couldn't tell the difference between this and a physical construction.

Four shields of wildly different descriptions had already appeared around Reigan Shen, orbiting him lazily. "So you went with a bow," Shen called. "Not bad. I thought the stripes might be too much, but they're tasteful."

The Monarch kept his tone clean, but Lindon could sense his envy. It tasted of hunger.

Lindon responded by drawing the string back to his cheek. He hadn't trained as an archer the way Mercy had, but he had used much simpler

hunting bows here and there as a child. This would be his first time using a bow in years.

The air trembled under the combination of his own spirit and the power of the Silent King, so Reigan Shen called more and more defenses out of his King's Key.

Lindon let him.

He wanted a good test.

When Shen paused to evaluate whether his defenses were good enough, Lindon released the Forged arrow.

Ten thousand identical arrows released along with it, Forging out of thin air. Even Lindon would have been hard-pressed to find the real one, especially as each arrow was *blurred* somehow, difficult to catch with the eye or the spiritual sense, as though the original slid in and out of reality.

They did not arc and fall, like regular arrows, but instead tore through the air like a flock of bats seeking prey. The volley bent and swarmed toward Reigan Shen, hungry for him.

A crystalline wall of Forged madra appeared in front of the arrows, generated by one of Shen's constructs, but they punched through without losing much momentum. A shield floating in midair was torn to pieces after intercepting a handful, while the rest broke through layer after layer of the Monarch's protections.

Scripts were overloaded and barriers broke as the furious barrage of arrows slowly dwindled.

[Not too bad,] Dross mused. [In line with my projections. I mean, of course.]

Lindon was relieved. For one Forger technique to push a Monarch this far was impressive, certainly, but he was counting on the Dreadgod weapons to perform at least this well. Otherwise, he had virtually no chance of forcing the Monarchs to ascend.

And, of course, *this* Monarch had stood there and taken the attack. Reigan Shen dismissed his broken defenses and summoned more, but he wasn't lounging anymore. His arms were uncrossed and his goblet gone.

His goal was to keep Lindon out of the pocket world for as long as possible, no doubt, but he wouldn't want to take a beating lying down.

[He's the perfect target for round two!] Dross declared.

Lindon pulled out a real arrow.

He only had twelve of these, made from the material of the Silent King's body just as the bow itself was. The arrowhead was the tiger's gleaming fang, the shaft made from one of its bones.

When he put the arrow to the string, the spiritual force emanating from the weapon redoubled. If Lindon had been inside the protection script, the pressure alone would have killed some of the Golds waiting in the Valley.

Reigan Shen wasn't blind. A larger portal opened behind him, and he shouted to Lindon. "You won't find me such an easy target this—"

Lindon released the arrow.

Another illusory volley blackened the sky, though this time, the copies resembled this new arrow instead. Each Forged illusion tore the world as it passed, leaving hairline fractures in space that quickly healed.

The barrage struck almost instantly, like a flash of ten thousand lights.

This time, Reigan Shen didn't stand still to meet it. While his construct defenses were overwhelmed in a split second, he stepped through a portal into a pocket world. Another portal swallowed most of the arrows.

Except, instead of catching the volley, the portal shattered like glass.

The weight of authority and significance on these arrows was nothing the portal could handle. They attacked the gateway itself, breaking it and continuing uninterrupted.

When they reached the pocket space in which Shen hid, they swarmed in after him like a hive of bees moving faster than mortal sight could track. They could easily burst such a space, but Lindon was sure Shen wouldn't let that happen.

Sure enough, Lindon heard a lion's roar and felt a surge of power. When the Monarch emerged, he was red-faced and furious.

He held up the bone arrow. "Thank you for your contribution to my collection! In return, I'll show you what I have to offer!"

A dozen gold portals opened, and Lindon grew serious. Reigan Shen wasn't just stalling anymore. There were weapons that could slip past the defensive field of the labyrinth to destroy the people hiding below, and Shen would surely have some.

Lindon called the arrow back.

It vanished from Shen's hand and reappeared in his own, which caused Shen to react as though struck. He would have expected Lindon to summon the arrow back under his own authority, but Lindon had cheated and used the labyrinth.

He was stretching it to reach all the way out here, but only a little.

Before Shen released his arsenal, Lindon pulled a new type of arrow from his backup void key. Of this type, he only had three. He didn't yet have the materials to make more.

This time, the wave of pressure the arrow radiated was more like silence than a scream. The sounds and waves of power from Shen's weapons were instantly suppressed.

When Lindon placed this arrow to the string, the weight on his own spirit doubled yet again. He gritted his teeth and fought with all his willpower, trying to keep his focus.

To the eye, this arrow resembled the last. Its shaft was made of the Silent King's bone, as before.

What really differed was the arrowhead.

The arrow was tipped with a curved black triangle that had a sharp steel edge. It emanated a wisp of death magic and an overwhelming will to destroy. Its silence reminded him of the shroud that had passed over the world when Eithan had broken his black marble and revealed himself as Ozriel.

And for good reason.

Penance may have been a one-of-a-kind, single-use weapon, but Ozmanthus Arelius had left many prototypes scattered throughout the world. Lindon had been disappointed to find them missing from the labyrinth, but it turned out they weren't all gone.

Three had been hidden.

Lindon controlled the bow, took aim, and focused on Reigan Shen.

"Kill him," he commanded.

Then he released the arrow.

Reigan Shen was already gone. The second he'd sensed the power of Penance, he had fled through space. Some of his portals started to close without him there to sustain them, though many of his defensive measures remained in place. No doubt he intended them to slow Lindon down.

The arrow still flew, joined by a flock of copies. Where the illusions met defenses, the defenses were erased. They vanished like popped bubbles.

Until the true arrow reached the place where Reigan Shen had disappeared.

It vanished too.



As Reigan Shen ran from one prepared spatial anchor to the next, he reflected on how correct he had been.

As he'd suspected, Eithan Arelius had left his apprentice a weapon. Of course he had left behind something to kill Monarchs. Something to kill Reigan himself. Ozmanthus would never have left an enemy alive.

At least Shen had been wise enough to make preparations of his own.

When he arrived at the first anchor after Sacred Valley, he left behind a script trap and a construct designed to kill Heralds, created a false portal to leave a fake trail, then quietly opened another gateway to his next anchor.

No amateur Sage could follow him through that, regardless of his weaponry. Even if he could, Shen had equipment that could handle the combined attack of a Dreadgod and one of Ozmanthus' prototypes.

This escape was one to be proud of. If Lindon *did* chase him, Reigan could drag out the time the human spent outside of the pocket world. If Lindon *didn't* chase, returning to his time-warped hideout, Shen could launch another attack.

No matter how much time Lindon had bought himself, Shen could waste it. The existence of these Penance arrows only meant he had to be... careful.

Shen was about to step through the Way again, letting its currents take him anywhere else, when his spirit whispered danger.

A silver plate, embedded in an intricate platinum bracelet around one wrist, activated. It wasn't a sacred instrument, but an artifact from the order of Abidan calling themselves the Titans.

A blue shield of absolute defense formed behind him, and Shen felt a chill as he spun to face it.

The shield had stopped a single, black-tipped arrow.

Though the arrow fell immediately afterward, its attempt foiled, there were reasons Shen didn't rely on the Abidan shield for everything. For one thing, he didn't want others to know he had it. It was his vital life-saving measure.

For another, it wasn't meant to be used so frequently. He couldn't restore its power on his own, so it wouldn't last forever. Also, its use might attract attention from the heavens, which was the last thing he wanted. Especially now. What if Eithan Arelius could feel this?

But he was glad he'd brought it out now. There was no use to emergency life-saving measures if you died while they stayed in storage.

He straightened himself and took a deep breath, soothing his fear. The arrow had been the only thing to follow him. Even its Dreadgod-generated illusions couldn't track him through space, and Lindon wouldn't be able to do it either.

At that very thought, Shen felt the Way shift around him. Only then did he recognize how significant it was that the arrow hadn't vanished.

Lindon didn't call it back. He moved himself to its location.

The Sage stepped through the Way, his pale right hand pulling back the string and his left hand bracing another arrow. The halo over his head covered the sky like an Icon, and his eyes were circles of white on pools of blackness. He was a monochrome specter, even the badge on his chest white against black robes.

Those black-and-white eyes sighted down another Penance arrow, and Shen felt fear shiver through his bones.

A fresh volley of copied arrows thundered against the blue Titan barrier. The protection was absolute, but Shen still stepped into the Way and ran from the location.

Like a canny tactician luring his enemy into a disadvantageous position.
Not like prey running from a hunter. Not at all.

LINDON CALLED THE TWO PENANCE ARROWS BACK TO HIMSELF AND TOSSED them into his void key. He was breathing heavily, his head pounding from controlling such power.

[I have a projection,] Dross offered. [We could chase him.]

And what are my odds of killing him if I chase him? Lindon asked.

[Not as bad as you might think! But not...stellar, I'll grant you. Not as long as he has that barrier from the Abidan. Yeah, the odds aren't too great.]

How long will the shield last? Lindon drew the bow into his soul space, which was also a more painful process than usual. The bow didn't want to be stored, it wanted to be used, and it wrestled his spirit at every step.

[Could be exhausted in two or three more shots!] Dross said optimistically. [Or, you know, it could last ten million more years. We have no way to tell. *But* we can reasonably assume that there's a way to break it or wear it down, since he's not an Abidan himself.]

Lindon nodded and reached out to the thin gap in the world where he'd arrived. He pulled it open and stepped through, returning to Sacred Valley. He hovered over the former site of the Wei clan, where most of the wreckage was in shades of white and purple.

"He'll be back to harass us if we don't follow him," Lindon said aloud to Dross. There were tactics they could use, knowing that; they had reduced Shen's options enough that he had become more predictable, which was an advantage.

[The *safest* thing would be to stand guard out here. But, of course, that would be doing exactly what he wants.]

Lindon stretched his perception to the northern horizon. The Weeping Dragon's storm-clouds had come closer. How long had passed inside *Windfall*? Had it been a whole day yet?

Without him and Dross, the others' attempts to advance would be much less likely to succeed. They needed him.

He had turned down the time dilation as far as possible so he would miss as little as possible, but Yerin and the others were still experiencing probably ten minutes for every one of his.

That meant he had to hurry and get back, but now that he had driven off Reigan Shen, the number of people speaking his name in the Valley redoubled. Some were only whispering about him, but others were trying to get his attention, and he found it easy to determine which was which.

Each passing second weighed on him, but he would feel guilty if he left with no further explanation.

"Dross," Lindon said, "I need you to send six messages. Tell them I'm about to summon them."

[Already done. Should I tell them when?]

"Right now."

Without any more time to waste, Lindon reached out to the labyrinth and summoned everyone he wanted to talk to.

In flashes of white light, six people materialized next to him.

In midair.

Lindon held them securely with aura, but on reflection, he supposed he should have given them longer to prepare.

Cassias Arelius appeared next to Lindon, and he lost a breath when he noticed that he was suddenly hovering hundreds of feet in the air. He gripped the saber at his belt, and his blue eyes went wide, but he grasped the picture quickly. As expected of an Arelius.

He drew himself up and bowed to Lindon, even while floating. His golden hair shone in the sun.

Fisher Gesha did not react so well.

"AAAAHHHH NO!" She shot a web of purple Fisher madra into the sky, trying to catch herself on something, but of course there was nothing to hold onto and no need. The old woman was curled up, even smaller than usual, breathing heavily and clutching her chest as though afraid her heart would burst.

Her gray hair, usually neatly tied up, had come loose from its bun. The spider-construct she used as her drudge flailed helplessly, purple legs clawing at empty air, and then it scrambled up to hold onto her back.

“Wha—Did you do this, boy?” She flailed at Lindon, trying to hit him. “What were you *thinking*, hm? Send a message into my thoughts, and before I can turn around, you’re trying to drop me from the top of a mountain! You weren’t thinking at all!”

Lindon’s cheeks burned. “My humble apologies, Fisher, I was in a—”

“Some kind of Monarch now, and he thinks he can frighten old women to death! Don’t have wings, do I, hm?”

At least the others had adapted more quickly.

Kahn Mala of Redmoon Hall looked scornfully on the complaining Truegold. She had reacted more calmly than anyone, as expected of an Archlady. A fall from this height wouldn’t kill her, and she had experienced spatial transport before.

She calmly tied back her hair to stop it from flapping in the wind, giving Lindon a respectful nod as she did so. Her Blood Shadow, in the shape of a cobra, nodded to Lindon as well.

The other three hadn’t panicked either, which was to their credit, as they were the least advanced of anyone.

Jai Chen wore an outer robe of pale blue and burnt orange with the Twin Star logo on the breast, and she gasped when she appeared but adjusted quickly. Fingerling, her pink dragon spirit, swam merrily through the air.

Her Path, strange as it was, had wind aspects. She would have cycled at high altitudes before, and Lindon had helped her design some of her techniques himself. If she fell, she could catch herself.

His sister Kelsa couldn’t, but she reacted to sudden events well. She would have been ready the moment Dross’ message ended. Her White Fox madra had frozen when she found herself floating in midair, and her purple-and-white tail of foxfire stiffened for a moment. Then she mastered herself, exerting control over her Goldsign.

Lindon’s father, the last of those he’d summoned, had merely closed his eyes and taken a deep, shuddering breath. He carried the cane he no longer needed, and even the scar that had pulled his mouth up into a permanent sneer had been healed somewhat by his advancement to Jade.

Lindon saved him for last. He had been surprised enough to hear Wei Shi Jaran call his son’s name at all.

“Apologies to all of you for the abrupt transfer,” Lindon said. “I am very limited on time. I will answer your questions, after which I hope you will spread explanations to the others.”

“How can we explain anything if we die of fright, hmmm?” Gesha turned to Lindon’s father. “What did you teach this boy?”

Jaran looked over, revealing the pinkish-white color of his restored eyes. “Apologies on behalf of my son, Fisher.”

“Tch.” She waved a hand. “Quiet. I know you didn’t teach him anything.”

Even in midair, Lindon’s father shuffled uncomfortably.

[Oh no, your family isn’t getting along with Fisher Gesha,] Dross said. [What a pity that is. Can you feel my pity?]

Lindon looked to the Redmoon Emissary. “Archlady, I’ll address your concerns first.” Not only was she the highest-ranking one here, but she was also the one he personally cared about the least. Best to get rid of her first.

“Thank you...Monarch?”

“Sage will do.”

“Thank you, Sage. The Hall has been working closely with your Twin Star Sect, as instructed, but many among my number are...uncomfortable with the current circumstances. The Lion Monarch openly assaulted the Valley, and we have heard nothing from Yerin in days. Of course, we are grateful for your protection, and I know my people will feel more confident knowing you can repel an attack from a Monarch.”

“Yerin is in isolated training, but she has not forgotten you. When she emerges, which I expect will be soon, she will be as strong as I am currently.”

Or so Lindon hoped.

In fact, Yerin had grumbled more than once about Redmoon Hall attaching itself to her, but she would indeed blame herself if anything happened to them. Lindon didn’t know to what degree her soul oath bound her, if indeed it still did, but Yerin felt that she’d taken responsibility for them anyway.

And they were the most advanced sacred artists in the Valley, so Lindon wanted them to stay where they were.

The Archlady pressed her fists together in salute. “Thank you for taking pity on us, Sage. Do you expect any further...disturbances...anytime soon?”

Dross answered that one. [We're hoping we sent a strong enough message this time. But we doubt it.]

Lindon agreed. Even if Reigan Shen stayed away, out of fear of the Silent King Bow, the other Monarchs were still likely to bother him.

Kahn Mala thanked him again, and Lindon sent her back. He turned to Cassias, who spoke without preamble.

"The people of Serpent's Grave have heard about the Empty Ghost," Cassias said. "There are those who are calling the Twin Star Sect a Dreadgod cult. Especially given our recent company."

He didn't have to gesture to indicate Redmoon Hall.

"What do you think, Cassias?" Lindon asked. He had the Arelius bloodline legacy, and he had known Lindon well enough. His own testimony should carry weight with the refugees from the Blackflame Empire.

The Truegold sighed. "I don't know, Lindon. I need you to tell me. Are you a Dreadgod?"

Lindon couldn't quite put his finger on why, but that hurt to hear.

"I am borrowing the power of the Dreadgods to defeat them," Lindon said. "By the time I'm done, there will be no Dreadgods left in the world."

Cassias' eyes pierced Lindon deeply, scanning him even without spiritual perception. "I don't know whether to be proud of you or sad for you."

Gesha snorted.

[How about both?] Dross suggested.

"I will tell them that I saw you with my own eyes and that you're fighting for us," Cassias went on. He hesitated before adding, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. We should never have let you carry so much responsibility. I'm just...sorry."

Lindon gave him a smile he hoped was reassuring. "I'm not."

Cassias sighed. "Good luck, Lindon."

Lindon sent him back and turned to Fisher Gesha.

"I just wanted your permission to use the Soulsmithing facilities in those tunnels! Not so urgent, was it, hm? Not something you needed to summon me into the sky over!"

"Apologies, once again, Fisher. Of course you have my permission. I will give you better warning next time."

Gesha peered at him through her mask of wrinkles. “I’ll hold you to that, you hear me? There *will* be a next time. You’d better make sure you’re around, and not killed fighting Monarchs in the sky, or I’ll find your Remnant and beat some sense into it myself.”

Lindon promised before he sent her away. She disappeared while still grumbling.

[You think I should tell her that Dreadgods don’t leave Remnants?] Dross wondered idly. Lindon highly doubted that would help.

The two young women in the Twin Star Sect colors were next. Kelsa drew herself up, almost as tall as Lindon, though she stood on nothing.

She gave him her usual intense focus. “The Sect is worried. You’re gone, Eithan’s gone, Yerin’s gone. All the most advanced sacred artists are missing, and now they’re calling us a cult. We need some direction.”

Lindon had left instructions with the Twin Star Sect, but he hadn’t given them much of his personal attention recently. Since Eithan had ascended to the heavens, the world falling apart had taken up all his time.

He understood their fear. The Twin Star Sect had been founded by scared people seeking comfort in one another. And in his backing.

“Do you still have the resources I left?” Lindon asked.

“They don’t need resources. They need a leader.”

“They have the Sage’s sister.”

Kelsa stiffened again, her foxfire tail standing out straight, and there was heat in her voice. “I can’t lead! I’m a Lowgold!”

“I don’t need you to instruct them on their advancement, and I don’t need you to defend them. I need someone I can trust speaking for me. Do you agree?”

His sister struggled inwardly, but she was honest even with herself. She grudgingly conceded. “Fine, but you owe me a present when you come back. Make me a weapon.”

“Done,” Lindon agreed. “Dross.”

[On it!] Dross coughed once and then transmitted into the minds of the more advanced members of the Twin Star Sect. [Wei Shi Kelsa, sister of the Void Sage, speaks with his voice. Listen to her until he comes back. And to me, Dross, your most reliable guardian.]

Most of the Twin Star Sect would have little idea who Dross was, as the spirit hadn’t been conscious for most of the time Lindon had spent leading them, but they would figure it out.

The number of people saying Lindon's name doubled.

Lindon sent his sister back and intended to transport Jai Chen as well, but she stopped him hurriedly. "Uh, sorry, I had something else." She scratched the side of her face in what he took as a nervous gesture. "I wouldn't have bothered you, I know you're busy, but I didn't know who else to ask. You were the one helping me with my Path."

Jai Chen's Path was special, being primarily a blend of Stellar Spear, Grasping Sky, and Hollow King madra, uniquely combined by means of a hunger artifact. She had a hard time finding aura to cycle.

"Oh, do you need more natural treasures?" Mentally, Lindon went over the inventory he'd brought. His primary void key would have plenty of treasures in it, but this was a backup.

"No, I can hit Highgold eventually, I just wanted to go...faster than that." She shifted in the grip of the wind, then met his eyes. "I can't help thinking that, if I was as strong as my brother was, I could have saved him."

Fingerling made a crooning sound.

Lindon felt a faint shadow of guilt. He could have protected Jai Long, had that been a higher priority. On the other hand, the man had been killed by the attack of a Dreadgod. Lindon didn't blame himself too much.

He considered for a moment, then stretched out one hand and called to the labyrinth. A moment later, a long, white, scripted spear appeared in his Dreadgod hand.

He had to wrestle Subject One's arm into submission to stop it from devouring the weapon immediately.

"Do you know what this is?" Lindon asked.

Eyes wide, she nodded.

He flipped the weapon to her. Fingerling dipped out of the way as she caught it. "You don't have a way to purge incompatible madra, so you'll need to make sure the aspects are compatible before you drain anything with it. This is a Truegold weapon, and I can find you a better one eventually."

Tears welled up as she hugged the spear to herself. Lindon had never thought much of Jai Long, but sympathy still squeezed his heart at the sight of her pain.

She bowed to him. "Thank you. I'll honor the Sect with it."

Lindon was considering her personal development more than her impact on the Sect, but he returned the gesture and sent her back.

[Wow, your sister is going to hate that,] Dross pointed out. [Didn't you just give Jai Chen everything Kelsa wanted?]

Lindon winced as he realized that was true, but he'd make it up to Kelsa later. He turned to his father and braced himself.

"You called for me?" he asked mildly. The moment Jaran said something critical or cutting, Lindon intended to toss him back and leave.

[Drop him,] Dross suggested.

Jaran gripped his cane, shifted on his cushion of wind, and looked here and there with his replacement eyes. Finally, he muttered, "I just wanted to see how you were."

Lindon hovered in place for too long. "Oh."

"Big fight and everything. Seemed like a lot, even for an Overlord. A man can wonder about his son."

Lindon considered pointing out that he wasn't an Overlord anymore, but he pressed his fists together instead. "Gratitude, Father."

Jaran grumbled to himself, then shoved his cane in Lindon's direction. "Be safe, all right? No sense in being the bravest on the battlefield if you don't make it home."

Lindon felt lost. "Yes, I...I will."

[All right, fine,] Dross said. [Don't drop him.]



Lindon had barely materialized beneath the color-swirling sky of Ghostwind Hall when Yerin leaped onto his back.

"Too long by a sight and a half," she muttered into his ear. "When I can't sense you for a minute, it's *forever* in here."

He turned to look into her red eyes from an inch away, and he had to suppress a laugh at how much she resembled Ruby when she pouted.

She saw the half-formed smile and jabbed him in the back. "Don't make fun of me. I can hear it in your thoughts."

"No, you can't. Dross wouldn't let you."

"He's my inside man."

Dross popped out and drifted behind Yerin. [She's lying, of course. She's never asked me. For some reason.]

Yerin turned to look at the spirit. "Wait, would you really..."

[I'm not saying yes or no, I'm just saying you should ask sometime. When...] Dross mouthed Lindon's name. [...isn't...] Dross mouthed the word "listening."

"Your stealth needs work," Lindon said.

Yerin hopped off his back and whirled around in front of him, excited. "How about the bow? Did it make Shen scurry?"

"With his tail between his legs."

Yerin clicked her tongue. "Would have given my left leg to see that."

"It's heavy," Lindon admitted, "like using a weapon too big for me. It might be easier for Mercy once she's ready, especially if she has the support of the Bow Icon."

Mercy, who was leaning out the second story of their barracks, hit the back of her head on the window frame. "I told you, I'm not there yet! Touching an Icon is not as easy as you made it look."

"She's almost there," Yerin said confidently.

"I'm not!"

"She'll be taking her pick of Sage or Herald. Can't lie and say I'm not concerned about Orthos and Blue, but I don't have an ounce of worry about her."

"Worry about me!"

Lindon enjoyed the conversation and let himself relax, but he heard the subtext of the conversation. Yerin was expressing confidence in Mercy so firmly because she *was* worried.

While Mercy had the smoothest road to the peak of Archlord, she still hadn't recovered from the emotional impact of fighting her mother. That could be just as much of an obstacle as a spiritual injury, and one that Lindon had no idea how to heal.

Yerin gave him the ghost of a smile like she could sense his thoughts.

[You see?] Dross said. [It's convenient when she can read your mind. I don't have to share *everything*, just some...choice selections.]

"You and I were sparring when I left," Lindon said. "I thought we'd pick up where we left off."

She looped her arm around his and pulled him into the sparring hall. "Worked a few things out, when *the Remnant* lets me off my leash. Wanted to get your eyes on them anyway."

Lindon reached out to the pocket world's controls and turned the time-warping back up. The pressure of their deadline still loomed over him, but

that wasn't the only reason he wanted to spend as long in here as possible.
Only now did he feel like he had finally come home.



OUTPOST 01: OVERSIGHT

In the back of his mind, Makiel observed the engagement between the Mad King and the two Judges as best he could. There was little enough to see, with the general chaos of the Way and the lockdown that Daruman had put on the Sector.

Even with the observational authority of the Hound, the most Makiel could catch were a few glimpses and half-accurate predictions. It was like trying to watch an entire battlefield through a keyhole and a haze of smoke.

But that wasn't his primary focus. Most of his powers were bent toward scouring the stretches of the Way over which he still ruled. He drifted inside his own headquarters, within the arctic air of the world he'd created.

This place enhanced his sight. A mortal watching would see purple screens flickering in and out of existence around him, each a glimpse of the past, present, or future of a thousand different worlds.

The reality behind that sight was even more complex, and Makiel found his mind and authority stretched to their limits.

Where was the Reaper's Scythe?

He had spent years combing the worlds for the weapon, to no avail. But now was his chance. When faced with destruction, Ozriel had reached out for his Scythe. As Makiel had known he would.

That cry hadn't reached the weapon, but echoes of it had still escaped the Sector. Makiel could use those echoes to find the Scythe himself, while Ozriel was tied up in battle.

At least, in theory.

Every lead he'd chased down had turned cold. Intuitively, he felt that he was close, but he still turned up short.

If Makiel found the Scythe in time, he could achieve every objective perfectly. Daruman dead, Ozriel dead, and the Scythe in the hands of the Court.

Though he had ruled over the greatest losses since the founding of the Abidan, Makiel would be satisfied if he accomplished those three things. He would, at least, leave behind a foundation from which the Court of Seven could rebuild. Greater than ever.

Assuming he could find the Scythe.

His Presence, the eye floating over his shoulder, shouted a warning into his mind. A bright blue light had emerged from the murky darkness of the Mad King's battlefield. A burning fire of restoration.

Suriel had made it free.

Many of the screens around Makiel winked out as he abandoned most of the lower-priority lines of inquiry in order to focus on those with higher potential. His time was limited.

He had to finish before Suriel arrived.

But no matter how he searched, Makiel found nothing.

Suriel rushed for him, inevitable as a blazing meteor. Hounds formed up around Oversight, sensing an incoming power and activating their defenses, and he felt their confusion when they realized the approaching threat was another Judge.

Makiel willed them to stand down. In the end, he hadn't made it in time. His sight did not reach far enough.

He would have to settle for an imperfect victory.

Makiel summoned his armor, sheathing himself in its white protection. The Sword of Makiel appeared in his hands, its point digging into the ground beneath him, power pulsing through its blade in veins of purple energy.

Then he awaited the arrival of the Phoenix.

She did not request entry, instead crashing through the ice overhead, shattering it like a true meteorite. Though Makiel had foreseen this, it still hurt to see his sanctum violated.

Suriel hovered over him, Razor in one hand and Mantle streaming in white flame behind her. Her own power stretched out like blue, fiery wings, and her purple eyes were alight with rage.

She pointed the Razor at him. "On the authority of the Sixth Judge, Suriel, I accuse you of conspiring against a fellow Judge of the Court."

"By the authority of Makiel, I agree."

He found a small amount of satisfaction in the moment of silence that followed, broken only by the hiss of falling snow and ice.

“I accept my punishment,” Makiel continued, “and I go now to make amends.” He began to rise into the air. “Contact the others. There will be much healing to do when I’m gone.”

The sigils in her eyes spun as she scanned the future, looking for the possibility that he was lying or luring her into a trap.

She was right to check, and he didn’t bother to hide himself. He was telling the truth.

“Explain yourself,” she demanded.

“I allowed Daruman’s continued existence,” Makiel said. “I continued to rely on Ozriel for centuries when I should have stripped him of his authority. I created the Scythes that were stolen. I am responsible for much, and I will make amends if it costs me my life.”

Suriel’s runic eyes finally caught sight of the Fate he was weaving, and he could feel her horror deepen. She did not agree with his designs. Then again, he hadn’t expected she would.

“If I survive, I will give up the Mantle of the Hound,” he went on. “But I am willing to die as long as I take my mistakes with me.”

Suriel looked into the future and saw his plan.

He watched alongside her.

There were only two possible outcomes of Ozriel’s battle with Daruman. They saw Daruman emerging from Vesper victorious. Or, with a much lower probability, perhaps Ozriel would be the one to survive. Neither would let the other live. And neither would achieve victory unscathed.

In either scenario, Makiel would be there waiting for them. With sword drawn.

The victor would be executed by the First Judge. Even if doing so crippled or killed Makiel, he would serve justice.

Makiel lifted his sword. “This will be my last act as a Judge. I regret that I could not leave the Scythe behind, but whoever takes my Mantle after me must be the one to find it.”

“I will not allow this,” Suriel said quietly.

“Why not? Odds are, the one I go to execute will be the Mad King.”

“There is nothing just about this. This is...sickness.”

Makiel was starting to get irritated. Suriel had made such decisions herself. “When I’m done, the sources of infection will be gone. All three of us.”

Suriel's brow furrowed as she scanned Fate, searching for something. "Why did you wait for me?"

"In every scenario, you came here looking for me."

She made an expression that, even with all his advantages, he couldn't read. "Looking for you?"

"Sometimes you stand aside, and sometimes I must go through you. Either way, let us be done with it here." If she couldn't see that much, she wasn't as skilled of a Hound as Makiel had thought.

This time, Makiel *could* read her face. Suriel radiated pity.

"You still have the same blind spot. I'm not here for you." Suriel held out a hand. "Come to me," she whispered.

And the ice beneath Makiel's feet began to crack.

Darkness spilled up from the ground, and sick anger twisted Makiel's gut. Now that she'd broken the veil, he could feel the weapon beneath him. The one that Ozriel had buried here, in the center of the Hound's power, so long ago.

At Suriel's call, the Scythe of Ozriel rose from the ice and drifted into her hand.

It looked the same as his imitation Scythes had: like a slice of darkness itself forged into metal. But even in the Mad King's hands, the fake weapon had never had the same weight to it. This one was aware of Makiel's presence and its disdain radiated like heat.

Though the Scythe drifted past him, Makiel didn't dare reach out to touch it. The weapon was looking for an excuse to kill him.

With Ozriel's veil gone, Makiel could now see the threads of Fate that had been hidden before. Suriel intended to return to Vesper with the Scythe, with or without Makiel. If she made it back in time, they could turn the tables on the Mad King.

She held the Scythe in one hand, though its authority clashed with hers. Ozriel may have lent it to her, which was why the Scythe tolerated her touch, but she was still no Reaper. She couldn't unleash the full force of Ozriel's weapon.

The fact that he had lent out his Scythe at all shocked Makiel. He would have said that Ozriel would rather die than leave his weapon to someone else, even his closest friend on the Court.

After all, Ozriel could have left his Scythe to Suriel before, to be used in case of emergency. Instead, he had hidden it.

Beneath Makiel's home.

"What are you going to do?" Suriel asked quietly.

Makiel watched the possibilities spill out into the future. He saw Fate split and twist, fork and turn.

The power to decide the future now rested on him. This was the responsibility of Makiel, the Hound.

He saw clearly what he would have to do.

The odds of reaching Ozriel in time now were slim, next to impossible. As fast as Suriel had made it here, it would be absurd for her to make it back before Ozriel's death. Makiel had to be prepared to face the Mad King, which meant he needed the Scythe.

And Suriel wouldn't give it to him. Those possibilities were so small, so remote, that they weren't worth considering. He would have to strike her down, leaving her alive if possible, and then contact Zakariel—

His thoughts were cut off when Suriel reversed the Scythe and held it out to him.

The weapon struggled in her grip, but she held it with a firm will. "Enough. He lent you to me, and I lend you now to my ally. The strongest among us."

Suriel, the Phoenix, met his eyes. "I have faith in him."

Makiel knew what she was doing. She was seeking to patch over the oldest wound in the Court of Seven. Even this, she sought to heal.

She wouldn't be able to do it. This wouldn't lead to change.

He took the Scythe anyway.

ZIEL SAT BEFORE THE PATHS OF HEAVEN, THE EIGHT PROFOUND CAVERNS recorded by Lindon from the bottom of the labyrinth. Just a glance at any of them gave him a headache, but the second one was more tolerable than the others.

Therefore, that was the one he activated the most.

Its form was rock-solid but hard to grasp. It was as though the symbol shifted before his eyes, though he knew the rune wasn't changing its shape. His eyes kept sliding around it.

The symbol reminded him of a shield, or a castle wall, though it looked very little like either. It was a comfort, like catching sight of a safe haven while being chased by monsters.

Ziel felt a sharp pain in his eye and had to look away, blinking rapidly to clear his vision. Even as an Archlord again, it was all he could do to gaze on the symbol for a few seconds at a time. This wasn't its full power, either; no depiction of Lindon's could carry the total significance of the original. Not unless Lindon comprehended it fully.

He leaned back against the wall, cycling madra to soothe his eyes. Once he was back to good condition, he would try again.

And again and again. As many times as it took.

The Weeping Dragon was on its way.

They had to slay it themselves, which was the first impossible task. He had faced the burning sky of the storm Dreadgod before, so he knew its power as well as anyone.

After that, they had to face down the Monarchs. The second impossible task.

If he wanted to do the impossible, he couldn't shy away from a little pain.

Ziel needed to comprehend as much of these truths as he could. To avoid distraction, he'd set up walls of Forged madra. It was a temporary shelter, little more than a box, but it would prevent the others from bothering him.

In theory.

There was a polite knock at the panel of madra that served as a door, though the knock was only a courtesy. Ziel was doing nothing to veil his spirit, so he could sense Lindon outside as well as Lindon could sense him.

"Pardon the interruption, but would you help me for a moment?" Lindon called.

Ziel deactivated the Path of Heaven and shoved his way out of the shelter. "You don't have to ask. You're the boss here."

Lindon stood taller than Ziel's little shelter, and he wore an apologetic look that was spoiled by his burning, inhuman eyes. Those eyes widened into an expression that would have, on someone else, looked like embarrassment.

"If you were too busy, I could have come back later."

"Have you heard of being too polite?"

Lindon dipped his head. "Apologies."

It wasn't *wrong* that Lindon acted so respectfully. In fact, it was probably a good thing. But it still irritated Ziel from time to time. "Do you know what it feels like when you can punch Monarchs and Dreadgods but you bow your head to me?"

"What does it feel like?" Lindon asked, and Ziel got the impression he was genuinely curious.

"It feels like you're mocking me."

"Pardon, but that's not my intention."

"I know. That makes it worse."

Lindon's black-and-white Dreadgod eyes blinked as he visibly processed the words, and Ziel sighed. "Never mind. Take me wherever you were taking me."

Lindon spread his left hand and gestured for Ziel to join him at his side, which gave Ziel another jolt of irritation. He really was incapable of

throwing his weight around, wasn't he?

Then Ziel remembered Lindon drifting into Shatterspine Castle, levitating the entire building while suppressing a Herald's Remnant.

No, he was capable of acting his advancement level. He just chose not to.

Ziel thought back to his own time at the head of the Dawnwing Sect. He hadn't used his position to crush those beneath him, but then again, he hadn't lowered himself to their level either. Maybe he should have.

Idle thoughts, and they didn't distract him much. Lindon asked polite questions about his progress as they walked, which Ziel answered with one- or two-word responses.

They headed underground, through marble tunnels and into a cave which Lindon had sealed off with both scripts and a layered wall of earth madra Forged to resemble golden metal. The wall melted away as Lindon activated a construct, and they both walked through.

Inside, there was a small cylindrical tank—roughly the size of a large dog—surrounded by other devices, elixirs, and constructs. It looked like Lindon had assembled most of these tools himself, rather than taken them from the Monarchs.

Dross was bustling around the opening of the tank, humming to himself as he levitated containers of liquid and poured them in. The liquid was pinkish-purple and clear, shimmering in the light.

As the fluid filled up the tank, five objects floated upward. They were tiny balls of white madra, so dense with the aspect of dreams that they made Ziel flinch back. His spiritual sense tingled in their presence, and he had to veil himself to stop his thoughts from spinning into some kind of delusion.

"Apologies, I should have warned you." Despite his words, Lindon looked fine.

Ziel pointed to the tank. "Are those pieces of the Dreadgod?"

[They *were*,] Dross said cheerily. [Now they have been processed and combined with some of my own, less-potent-but-still-impressive madra. They're beautiful little seeds that just need watering. Isn't that right, little seeds? Yes, you just need water, don't you? Don't you?]

He resumed humming to the seeds floating in the tank as he continued pouring fluid inside.

Lindon's Dreadgod arm flexed, and he opened and closed his fingers. Ziel didn't think he was aware of doing it, but the presence of the Silent

King's modified madra must have been stimulating the arm's hunger aspect.

"So these are mental enhancements," Ziel said.

"They will be. I'd love to make a mind-spirit like Dross for each of you, but I think it might be more reasonable to give you some of his benefits. We have to alter the madra before it's suitable to use as materials, though, and the only method I'm aware of takes many years." Lindon turned to Ziel. "That's where I thought you might come in."

Ziel wasn't sure he could do as much. His experiments with the Rune Queen's array were still just beginning, and doing this inside a time-warped pocket world was risky. He was afraid of rocking the boat, so to speak.

But instead of voicing his concerns, he activated the Grand Oath Array.

Profound silver runes appeared around him, Forged by his Divine Treasure and controlled according to the method he'd inherited from Shatterspine Castle.

Ziel moved the circle to surround the tank. "I can try to speed up time's effect on the target. How do we tell if it works?"

Lindon Forged a scale quickly and carelessly. It was stable enough to remain a blue-white coin of blue madra, but not so stable that it would last long. He flipped it onto the ground, and Ziel included it in the targeting of the Oath Array.

[Wait!] Dross protested. [I'm not ready!] He tilted a pitcher almost completely upside-down, until the last trickles of amethyst liquid dripped out into the tank.

After one...two...three slow drips, Ziel was certain he was finished. But Dross still waited for a fourth drop before he spun away from the container. [There! Ready!]

Lindon gestured, and a lid flew up and screwed itself into place. Scripts flickered as they were sealed shut.

When that was in place, Ziel operated the Array. He concentrated on accelerating the tank's time by just one day, though he knew his precise control was lacking.

The silver script spun faster and faster, until it was just a blur.

The tank didn't change much to the outside eye, though he did feel as though the spiritual patterns inside were settling quickly. Only when Lindon's scale started to dissolve did Ziel stop the Grand Oath Array, which slowed its spin until he pulled it away.

Lindon reached down and picked up the crumbling scale. “Two days, I’d guess.”

“It was supposed to be one,” Ziel said. He’d overshot. He should practice more.

“Better more time than less.” Lindon frowned into the tank, and Ziel wondered what he was thinking about. Maybe he was realizing how much potential the Grand Oath Array had if only Ziel could control it more precisely.

Dross drifted up to Lindon’s face. [You have thoughts. I taste them. Share them with me.]

“The pocket world held up well, so I just wondered...” Lindon glanced to Ziel. “Do you think you could use this on one of us?”

Ziel picked up the idea immediately. “Only if you want to stand inside the circle for a day. You wouldn’t be able to cycle aura.”

“But your body keeps working.”

“Yes.”

“So you’d process elixirs.”

Ziel considered the idea. He was pushing toward peak Archlord as fast as he dared, and they had plenty of elixirs and resources, but the spirit could only go so fast. Just like the body needed time to build muscle.

At peak Archlord, he’d be able to sense Icons more clearly. He might even be able to endure looking at the Abidan symbols for longer. Could he really force open the secrets of the universe so easily?

“Worth a shot,” he said. Without further delay, he spread the silver circles around himself.

Then he accelerated time again, just as he’d done for the tank. But this time, from his perspective, the runes didn’t seem to change their speed. It was the outside world that slowed down.

Lindon and Dross were virtually frozen, though Ziel felt normal. There was no instability in the Array or in the pocket world around him.

Nothing to do now but wait.

Cycling his madra internally worked, but he couldn’t touch any aura outside the circle. He couldn’t open his void key—it resisted him, and he didn’t want to force it. Best not to mess with time and space too much.

This would certainly work for processing elixirs. He could even read dream tablets or meditate on the Abidan symbols.

But there *had* to be some limitations. Otherwise, Monarchs wouldn't need to spend so many resources to create time-warped pocket dimensions.

He gave it another few minutes and then slowed the operation of the Array, syncing it to time outside once again. "It works," he said.

Lindon's eyes lit up. "I'd like to try, if you don't mind."

Ziel shrugged. Why not?

The instant the silver runes appeared around Lindon, the entire pocket world screamed in protest.

Ziel cut off the Grand Oath Array immediately, but the substance of space had shivered. The ground pitched to one side, and Dross screamed in Ziel's mind.

Yerin appeared before the shaking settled down, leaving the wall of Forged earth madra broken in her wake. Her sword was out, and she scanned the room for the cause of the disruption.

Lindon lifted his left hand. "Apologies for the disturbance. We won't try that again."

Yerin let out a breath and slammed her sword back into its sheath. "You shaved off half my lifeline! Thought we were all about to crumble to dust!"

Lindon gathered her up in his arms and continued his apology, so Ziel ignored them and returned to the problem at hand. Dross drifted up, one tendril on his chin as though deep in thought.

"Lindon's too much for the Array," Ziel said.

[He's too much for anyone. But yes, I wouldn't try it on him again while we're stuck in here.]

"Then why did it work for me?"

[I'm going to guess—and it is a guess, so don't tear me to pieces and scatter me to the winds if it's not correct. I think you just need practice. Using it on yourself is easy, using it on someone else is hard, at least without shaking this tiny world to pieces. Using it on Lindon is *very* hard. Focus on making the power your own. Right now, you're trying to walk with someone else's legs.]

Dross manifested disproportionately large human legs and mimed walking to support the analogy, which was disgusting enough to make Ziel look away.

"But it will keep working for me?"

Dross spread his tendrils in a shrug. [Worked once, didn't it? Why not try it another time or twelve?]

Lindon joined them a minute later. He had heard their exchange—or Dross had filled him in mentally—but Ziel had some thoughts of his own.

“Get me all the elixirs I could process in a year,” Ziel said.

“A *year*?” Lindon asked. “If you’re stuck in the Array for a year, you’ll go insane.”

Ziel shrugged. “Not like I have to do it all at once. If I need to, I’ll cancel the technique.”

Not that he intended to. He’d heard of Monarchs cycling for years at a time, and if he had to do that to make the most of their time, he would.

Lindon traded glances with Dross. Ziel didn’t sense anything, but he got the impression that they were having an entire conversation in a second.

“Two conditions,” Lindon said. “First, we’ll ease into it. Start with a few days, then a week, then a month. We want to be sure you can handle it, and that we don’t destabilize the world’s time.”

The more experiments they performed, the more likely that was, but Ziel nodded anyway. If it started looking dangerous, they could always abort.

“Second, let us put you to sleep.”

Ziel scratched the base of his horns. “You’re worried about me cracking under the pressure?”

[That’s not the way we would put it! But yes, yeah, absolutely. That’s exactly what we’re worried about.]

Lindon met Ziel’s eyes, and his tone was polite as ever. “I’m afraid you might stick it out for the entire duration and sustain mental exhaustion that even you aren’t aware of.”

“I could always use the Array however I want when you aren’t around to supervise me,” Ziel pointed out.

“Don’t,” Lindon said.

Ziel hesitated for a moment before nodding.

Lindon opened a void key and began another silent conversation with Dross. It looked like they were trying to decide which elixirs to begin with. Or perhaps rationing them.

For one stupid moment, Ziel considered that Lindon might not have a whole year’s worth of elixirs for him.

A broad drinking horn of bone drifted out of the void key, blood visibly sloshing from within but restricted by a script. The metallic stench was overpowering, and it radiated a sense of enduring strength.

“The Thousand Blood Elixir,” Lindon introduced. “Distilled from a thousand of the most physically powerful sacred beasts, condensed and refined to let a Sage artificially match a Herald in strength. For a moment, at least, and assuming their body can handle the burden. Stolen from the Beast King.”

[“*Stolen*,”] Dross repeated. [A vulture dropped it on top of us.]

Silently, Ziel thanked his mentor. He reached out for the horn, but Lindon pulled it back.

Something else was drifting out of the void key.

“The Spring of Celestial Starlight. Nourishes the spirits of Archlords to prepare the Remnants for Herald.” This was a crystal-bright sphere containing a blue liquid that Ziel would bet had been refined from a Tear of the Deep, the ultimate water-aspect natural treasure.

[You get half. The rest is for Little Blue.]

Ziel reached out a second time, but a third object floated out.

This was a golden pill, trapped in six layers of cages, each made of a different metal. Ziel sensed nothing from this at all; at least, nothing that escaped the scripts. “Heart of the Earth Emperor. Stolen from the Ninecloud Court, this pill is made to help Monarchs control and focus their physical strength.”

Ziel didn’t reach out this time, but he found himself a little intimidated by the sight of the three. No matter what he’d stolen from the Monarchs, these had to be three of the best items. Would he have any left for the others?

A *fourth* elixir flew out. This container somewhat resembled an hourglass and was filled with a bright, violently orange fluid that gave him the spiritual impression of strong acid.

“An unexpected gain from Reigan Shen’s vault,” Lindon said, with a satisfied smile. “The Inner Light Tempering elixir is intended to reinforce madra channels and promote spiritual resilience even in highly advanced sacred beasts.”

[Not recommended for human use,] Dross pointed out. [And not fun to cycle.]

The void key closed. Rather than commenting on the rarity and power of these treasures, Ziel focused on their purpose.

“Looks like you’re preparing me to take a beating,” Ziel observed.

Lindon was carefully filling a syringe with the orange fluid of the Inner Light Tempering. The madra within surged and raged like a contained storm, and Ziel thought he even saw faces inside; elixirs at this level often developed a kind of rudimentary will.

“You *will* need to take a beating,” Lindon admitted, without taking his eyes from the syringe. “You’ll have to take hits from Monarchs and Dreadgods. But you’ll also need...” He finished filling the syringe and brought it over to Ziel. “...to hit back.”

Ziel strapped himself onto a table Lindon had summoned. He leaned back with his arms tied down; nothing he couldn’t break, but it was meant to contain him while he slept.

Lindon pushed the needle into him and injected the solution. It raged through his veins in seconds, and Ziel’s muscles tightened up involuntarily.

The empty syringe was visibly warped from its brief contact with the Inner Light Tempering elixir, and aura around it bent strangely, which disturbed Ziel. That stuff was now in his *veins*.

Lindon incinerated the ruined syringe with Blackflame when he noticed Ziel looking. “You’ll miss a little willpower training by sleeping through this, but nothing important. This functions more like a poison, teaching your body to resist the burden of excess spiritual power.”

[Like when you’re using a weapon too powerful for you, for instance,] Dross put in.

Pain wracked Ziel’s entire body, but nothing he wasn’t used to. When Dross’ words sank in, Ziel eyed Lindon.

“You’re preparing me for a weapon? Isn’t that optimistic?”

“It’s trust,” Lindon said. Then he took a step back. “Three days to start with, I think.”

It was hard to concentrate on the Grand Oath Array with the painful elixir burning his veins, but Ziel manifested the silver runes. Before he activated them, Dross drifted up to his head.

[Sweet dreams,] Dross whispered, tapping his forehead. [By which I mean I have ensured that you will dream about delicious desserts. You’re welcome.]

In his last, fading thoughts before he passed out, Ziel activated the Array for what he estimated would be three days.

The world outside slowed as he, the table he was strapped to, and the tank of mind-constructs at his feet were all pushed forward three days.

He did, indeed, dream of cake.



Mercy had backed up to the first page in her Book of Eternal Night. The first time she'd visited for training purposes since she was a Gold.

The first page wasn't much. At least, not by her standards now. It was a large room filled with a black spider's web. She had to climb the web and make it from one end of the room to the other, pursued by crystalline amethyst Remnants that resembled spiders.

Lindon strode up next to her, his spiritual sense filling the entire space. "Incredible," he said. "I can only imagine the Soulsmiting expertise that went into this."

"Break it down," Mercy said decisively.

He hesitated. "Are you sure? If we leave it intact, you'll still have a cleaner road to Herald than anyone else."

"You said this was faster, right?"

Malice's will and memories were in every page of the Book of Eternal Night. If Mercy continued to follow her usual Path of Seven Pages, she would reach the peak of Archlord with her spirit prepared for Herald.

But not soon enough. She needed to steal more of her mother's power, faster.

A spider crawled up to Lindon's feet, but he glanced at it, and the spirit scurried away. "There are other ways. If you do this, you'll have to defeat her will. You risk turning yourself into a second copy of her."

Mercy's Overlord revelation whispered into her mind. "*I am not Malice. I am Mercy.*"

"I won't," she said aloud. Though she did add, "But let's take it one page at a time, all right?"

"Can you help her, Dross?" Lindon asked.

The spirit spun out next to Lindon's head. His eye traced the entire space. [Hey, I like it in here! Nice colors. Anyway, there's not much I can do for you, Mercy. This place is inside you, so how am I supposed to slip in between you? You're not Lindon.]

Mercy steeled herself. She felt like she might cry, but she had never been more resolved. Her mother had betrayed her, and the time Mercy had

spent since then had not healed the wound. “I’ll never be in a better condition to resist Malice’s will than I am now.”

Lindon gave a nod and raised his right hand.

Madra slithered out from him in a web she could barely detect. It was too scattered and rough to be called a real technique. More like a method of moving madra around. But he spread pure madra, Blackflame, and hunger out in a complicated web into the page.

She winced in discomfort as she felt the Book of Eternal Night trembling.

[Each page is really its own, separate construct,] Dross told her. [We’ll have to go through the pages one by one and break them down, and then you integrate the powers into your spirit on your own. It shouldn’t be too bad for you; everything here is compatible with your spirit. Not like Lindon! Do you know how many times he’s Consumed something that could have destroyed his whole soul? I’ll tell you...]

While Dross continued, the first page of the Book of Eternal Night crumbled around them.

Each fragment torn out of the space dissolved into her spirit. The contents of the room, she could handle; this page was made for Lowgolds, after all. But when chunks of the walls collapsed and vanished into her, she grunted and almost lost her concentration.

She wasn’t *physically* inside the Book, after all. Mercy and Lindon were seated in cycling position in the shadow aura training room, with their minds and spirits projected into this page.

If she cut the connection here, she’d be left with a half-broken page. But the sudden influx of her mother’s willpower had shaken her.

The contents of the room were made with power appropriate to a Lowgold, but the structure of the room itself wasn’t. It was made from a Monarch’s power.

If the Book hadn’t been squeezed down to fit compatibly into Mercy’s spirit, just that taste of Malice’s madra would have burst her from the inside out.

As it was, Mercy felt another person wrestling for control of her spirit. A voiceless, formless force of determination. A will that would conquer rather than surrender.

Akura Malice.

“Hold on,” Lindon said. “There’s more coming.”

Mercy braced herself again.

She cycled the madra that flowed through her, stored the occasional spark of soulfire, and vented excess power by letting techniques fly wildly into the real world. That much was easy in itself, but it was made much harder when she had to do it while also fighting against Malice's will.

Half-formed memories and spikes of powerful emotion swept over Mercy in a wave. Irritation. Determination. Grief. Resolve.

Protective love for a family. Hatred for those who would threaten that family.

That isn't so bad, is it? Mercy thought, and she couldn't tell if it was her own voice or not. *Dedicating myself to the family. That's a good thing!*

By the time the last of the room collapsed around her and the first page dissolved, Mercy was panting and sweating. She held on by a hair, enduring the river of foreign thoughts and sorting the spiritual powers.

The operation was over, but her spirit was still a storm of darkness and chaos. Her thoughts were no better, swirling around in circles and hiding her identity.

But she wouldn't give in. She needed this to defeat her mother. She would *not* give up, and that resolve resonated both with her own soul and with the foreign will inside her.

Mercy had just decided to settle her spirit, even if it killed her, when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

A moment later, pure madra trickled into her like a soothing rain. The chaos in her soul settled slightly, the pressure on her mind lightened, and even her mother's willpower stopped hitting so hard.

"Pardon," Lindon said quietly. "That was a little too much to ask."

Mercy wanted to sigh in relief, but she needed to finish this before she said anything. Lindon withdrew his hand and his madra, and while he had brought the difficulty down to her level, he hadn't solved the problem for her.

After another five minutes of wrestling herself, Mercy opened her eyes and shuddered. "Thanks. There were more memories than I expected."

Lindon stood over her, a silent support, but Dross drifted down to look into her face. [What memories? Not that you need to tell me! Not while Lindon's around to listen, anyway. I'm very curious. Get out of here, Lindon!]

“Do you know anything about my father?” Mercy asked. She looked to Dross, but she was asking both of them. Lindon had spent a long time researching in Akura territory. He might know more about her than she assumed.

“Very little,” he said. “He isn’t mentioned much in Moongrave. I assumed it was a secret.”

Still seated, she brought up her knees and hugged them to her chest. “There’s not much to know. He was an Overlord that commanded a border fortress in our territory. He caught my mother’s eye, and at first she veiled herself down to his level, though she did tell him who she was before things got too serious.

“She was only with him for about three years. Long enough to have me and Pride. Then she left.”

“Did you...know him?” Lindon asked carefully.

She watched the darkness. “We visited a few times when I was young. I don’t know how much Pride remembers. Uncle Fury liked our father a lot, so you can imagine what he was like. Always fighting somebody.”

[What kind of an unstable person would live like that?] Dross said, and even without looking up, Mercy was sure he was staring at Lindon.

“I was eight when he died,” Mercy continued. “It wasn’t a plot against my mother or anything. Just another battle. My mother never talked to us about it. I thought she didn’t care, and I wondered: ‘What about if I died? Would she care then?’”

Lindon sat down opposite her, though he stayed quiet.

Dross drifted down as well. He opened his mouth to speak, but Lindon grabbed him. The spirit remained silent too.

Mercy didn’t know how to stop the words. “I just saw pieces of her memory. She...*enjoyed* her time with him. She didn’t want to leave, but she had to. For the family, and all that. When she found out my father died, Uncle Fury and Aunt Charity had to hold her back from blowing up the entire region. I never knew that.”

She tucked her forehead into her knees. “I wish she hadn’t cared.”

Mercy had been on the verge of casting her mother as a cold, unfeeling monster. If that were the truth, it would have been easier. She could hate Malice comfortably.

There was cruelty in her fragmented memories as well. Hatred, disdain, arrogance.

But that wasn't everything.

"I know the Monarchs aren't complete monsters," Lindon said. "But the Dreadgods are."

She looked to him, and he met her gaze with eyes that shone like white circles in the darkness.

Mercy rearranged herself into a cycling position. There was only one way to get rid of the Dreadgods.

"Page two, please!" she said.

[Your enthusiasm is great, it's wonderful, I love it, but don't you think it would be better to tackle this tomorrow? We want you to be in the best condition to—]

"Page two," Mercy repeated.

"**Open,**" Lindon commanded. And the two of them slipped into the Book again.

YERIN DASHED UP TO LINDON AND SWUNG NETHERCLAW WITH THE FULL force of her Steelborn Iron body. The body her master had chosen for her, which gave her great capacity for strength even compared to other Heralds.

Lindon swung Wavedancer in his Dreadgod arm. He used it physically instead of controlling it remotely with his madra, and his sword technique was rough.

But the impact of their two clashing blades sent them both flying backwards. The wide cave was unharmed—this was a training room intended to be used by Monarchs—but a lesser arena might have been destroyed.

They landed at the same time, and Lindon brought his sword up in anticipation of another strike.

Instead, Yerin pointed at his arm. “That’s about all I can take. Find me one of those.”

Lindon rubbed the now-unclear point where his flesh became the Dreadgod’s. “I have spares, but you know that probably won’t work.”

She did. He’d worn a weaker arm while advancing, worked his way up, and gotten his spirit used to the hunger. He also had an Icon that connected him to the authority of the arm, two compatible cores, an internal spiritual Enforcer technique, and probably fifty other things that made him uniquely attuned to the arm.

But this was frustrating. Without using his Enforcer techniques, he had matched one of her regular swings. She could probably overpower him if she *had* to, but that only lasted until he used the Burning Cloak.

Not that a fight against him would rely on hand-to-hand power in the first place.

“You’ll get there yourself!” Lindon encouraged her. “Although...it would probably help if you spent more time with Red Faith...”

She felt her expression curdle like milk. “It was never a summertime dream of mine to work with him when he was alive. Not rosier about it now he’s dead.”

The Blood Sage’s Remnant was working on a way to integrate the madra of the Bleeding Phoenix inside Yerin into a hunger technique on a level with Lindon’s Consume. To do that, he needed her cooperation.

She’d just rather do almost anything else.

Lindon gazed at her, quiet. Someone else would probably think he was trying to intimidate her, or maybe bore a hole through her with his eyes, but she could tell he was thinking hard about something.

Sure enough, he crept up to her, his voice low and gentle. “I did bring something else for you. I was going to wait for the right time to give it to you, but since you’re looking for an alternative...Just forgive me if it’s too surprising, all right?”

Hearing him talk like that, she couldn’t help but raise her expectations a little. And her heart rate sped up too, with him getting closer and talking all quiet about a gift.

She couldn’t imagine what it would be, which was making her nervous. If it was something to improve her sacred arts, he wouldn’t talk so soft about it.

He reached into his pocket—not a void key—and pulled out a small box wrapped in scripted bandages.

When he began unwrapping it, she swallowed hard. “Hold a minute, wait...what...what is this, Lindon?”

“Something that should motivate you,” he said, and she could see that he was excited about this. Nervous, too, which only ramped up her own nerves.

The bandages fell away, revealing a small box.

Yerin held up a hand. “Oi, wait, wait, wait. Not stone-certain I’m as happy about surprises now as I was two minutes ago.”

Lindon opened the box.

Inside was...a pulsing, gray-white bulb of living madra that looked like a diseased organ.

It was surrounded by five or six other constructs of various colors, all smooth and metallic and forming a cage. Altogether, it resembled a failing heart being kept alive by a set of life-support constructs.

That's about what it felt like to her spiritual senses too.

Yerin wasn't sure what her expectations had been, but they came crashing down. She jabbed a finger at the mess in the box. "What's that?"

"I'll activate it in just a minute. It's a binding I took from the labyrinth, though it was very difficult to get it to work outside. I suspect it won't last very long, but it should encourage you."

He was still talking around the point, but he obviously thought she'd like it. She took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'll give it a peek, but you've got to know that when you start talking soft about a gift, and how it's going to raise my spirits, I'm not picturing a shiny new construct."

"What were you picturing?" he asked curiously.

'*Jewelry*' was the answer, but that was so unsuited to Yerin that she couldn't make it come out of her mouth. She didn't even like jewelry, it was just...the thing you were supposed to give at times like this. The thought behind it was more than just practicality.

She wanted something that was meant for her as a *person*, not her as a sacred artist. Something romantic.

Although she had an even harder time saying the word "romantic" than she did the word "jewelry," so she ignored the question and nodded to the construct.

"So what's it do?"

"It's the Sword Sage's echo," he said.

For some reason, she hadn't expected him to answer so clearly. Her gaze snapped up from the construct to his face.

"True?"

He gave her a sheepish smile. "Like I said, I was going to ease you into it. Dross and I found him before we left, but I wanted a little more time to see if I could stabilize the binding further. He won't be as strong or as fully formed as he would be if we were back in the labyrinth, but it remembered him well. As he was when he explored it."

"Ah. Uh. Huh." She took a deep breath. Her heart rate had picked up again. "Thanks for not popping him up on me with no warning."

"I remembered how you reacted to his void space. I didn't want you to stab me."

“Like you’d be bothered by a little stab,” Yerin said. She’d meant it to come across as dry, but it sounded fond instead. She wrapped one arm around him but took the construct’s box in the other hand.

Lindon leaned into her, but he was clearly itching to snatch the construct back. “Pardon, but I am the only one who can activate that. It’s very delicate, and incompatible madra will disrupt the balance almost immediately.”

She didn’t have any intention of activating it herself, so she squeezed him to acknowledge the words but didn’t give it back. “Can we give it a test swing right now?”

“Of course!” He hesitated, then leaned down to look into her face. “Do you like it? I was worried you might be...upset.”

“No, this is a winning blow from you. You’ve got me.”

He beamed, but her attention was still drawn back down to the construct.

Now she was getting a chance to see her master’s ghost. She had to be prepared. Netherclaw was sheathed at her hip; she wasn’t sure she should draw it. Her master would recognize that it wasn’t his.

This was too soon. Maybe she should wait, collect her thoughts some more.

“Waiting won’t get me any sharper,” Yerin muttered to herself.

Lindon held out the hunger binding in his right hand. It was surrounded by constructs keeping it stable, and his spiritual attention was on that, though his eyes were searching Yerin’s face. “Are you sure you want to do this now?”

“Spent long enough bracing myself, haven’t I?” Yerin didn’t *really* feel she was ready. She wished this was like a fight, which started whether you were ready or not. Now she had to decide when it started, which was like deciding her own execution.

She didn’t want to draw it out any further, but she had to ask one more thing. “Will he...know me?”

“This is very advanced, but it’s still a recording construct. I’m projecting a pattern of his memories, with gaps filled in by the labyrinth. He’ll remember you as you were, he might even recognize you, but he won’t learn anything new or recall anything that happened from a previous projection. We’ve only seen one exception to that.”

She looked at him in curiosity before she figured out the question on her own. “Eithan,” she said.

“Eithan. I don’t know if his echo is better at tapping into the labyrinth’s other memories or if he’s only pretending to learn things.”

“Put my bet on ‘both.’ Anyway, good news for me that this is just a recording. If you could bring back the dead, you’d twist my brain in knots.” She drew herself up. “That’s enough dragging from me. Start it up.”

“Here we go, then. Three, two...one.”

Even after the countdown, he fed his madra into the binding gently. Pure madra swirled up through his spirit and filtered through his Dreadgod arm, bearing a hint of hunger. Must have been harder than activating it with pure madra alone; hunger only wanted to *take*.

“**Come forth,**” Lindon commanded.

The empty air trembled as his working took hold, and misty gray-white light swirled into the figure of a man, tracing him from the feet upward.

He wore ragged robes like her own. They would be black, though projected as these were from hunger madra, they merely looked like a darker shade of gray. A sword hung from his left hip. He wasn’t tall and imposing, and his shoulders weren’t terribly broad—he had shorter limbs than most people would say was ideal for a swordsman, and he was wiry instead of muscular.

Then his face formed, and Yerin had to manually slow her breathing.

He had sleepy eyes and unkempt hair, though he stayed clean-shaven. He constantly wore the slight, wry smile of a man who saw something sarcastically funny in the world.

He looked her up and down, and Yerin’s spirit froze in fear. This was the moment she had most dreaded, the one that had made her drag her feet in summoning him. Would he recognize her? It had been a long time, after all. What if he *did* recognize her, but disapproved?

“Bleed me, but you’ve cleaned up,” her master said. “Herald. Never thought I’d see the day.” His crooked smile widened a little. “Guess I never did, did I?”

Yerin’s eyes misted up, and she laughed while she swiped at them. “Yeah, you skipped out on me early.”

“Sounds like me.” He tapped his forehead. “I like the hair. Made the Blood Shadow part of you. Did I figure that out?”

She shook her head. Then she told him the story.

Her sense of the construct suggested this would only last for a few minutes, so she had to skim along the surface. Especially because Lindon was doing his best to pretend he wasn't in the room, though she introduced him anyway.

When Yerin finished telling her master about Ruby and achieving a Herald state early, the Sword Sage twisted to scan Lindon.

Lindon took the observation calmly. That came as a mild surprise; she had expected he would shift and squirm under the Sword Sage's gaze, like he had when introducing her to his family.

Her master rested a hand on his sword and jerked his head to Lindon. "So you trust him?"

Yerin nodded.

"That's a razor-edged risk. He could crack you open and drink you like an elixir anytime, just like your...uninvited guest."

"Whose authority do you think is keeping you here?" Lindon asked. He didn't *sound* upset, but he wasn't being polite, which meant the Sage's words had needled him.

"Master. Likely to lose those fingers if you keep poking into my business."

The hunger echo held up his hands in surrender. "Don't chew me to pieces, I was just stepping careful."

"Not me," Yerin said, before starting the *second* part of the conversation that she was nervous about. "We're looking to get the Dreadgods out of Cradle."

The Sword Sage's head jerked back. He looked to Lindon, then back to Yerin. Then he barked a laugh. "Knew when I headed to the maze that I was tickling Monarchs in their secrets. Passed that down to you, did I?"

"That's the help I need from you. You have something for me that can cut Monarchs and Dreadgods?"

The Sage rubbed a finger in his ear as though to clean it out. "You're talking about hitting above my advancement level, all nice and casual. But yeah, I've got something for you."

Yerin's expectations rose.

"Sword Icon. You're a Herald, so the Icon will be quiet as a whisper. Doesn't mean it's gone anywhere."

"That's a short road," Yerin said. "Won't have long to practice once I'm a Monarch. If I outstay my welcome, that just chases the problem round and

round.”

The Sword Sage shrugged. “Don’t outstay your welcome, then. But I didn’t mean a road as long as Monarch anyway. It’s like I said: Sword Icon hasn’t gone anywhere. Heralds can resonate with it as well as anyone, they’re just deaf to it.”

Lindon nodded to him. “We’re aware of the theory, but I thought she needed to find a different Icon. She’s not on a pure sword Path anymore.”

“Then what kind of Sage does that make you?” the Sword Sage scoffed. “Give it another century before you come to me with your opinions.”

Lindon looked like he was about ready to prove himself with some black dragon’s breath, judging by the way his right arm was twitching.

Didn’t bother Yerin, though, because she saw through her master. She grinned and spoke to Lindon. “Don’t let him shake you up. He’s needled because you’re my age but you could break him in half with both hands behind your back.”

“Grew a mouth on you, didn’t you?” her master grumbled.

She pointed to Lindon. “Oi, did the labyrinth show you how he killed the Silent King?”

“Emriss could have—” The Sword Sage visibly realized he’d been about to compare Lindon to a Monarch and forced a cough. “Let’s not get off the trail here.”

Lindon looked like he’d had a breath of fresh air.

“Like I was saying,” the Sage continued, “people think of Sage as opening yourself up and Herald as closing yourself off. Like being outside a house or inside it. If you’re in, you can’t touch anything outside, and the same the other way around.”

He held his hands out as though handing something to her. “So how did the Monarchs ever do both? Truth is, the Icons are still there, and you’re just as close to them as you were before. It’s just that a Sage can read their Icon like a book, and a Herald is blind to it.”

Lindon had levitated a notebook and quill pen and was scribbling notes, though Yerin was sure Dross was watching everything.

“So am I going to move myself around and cut open the air like you?” Yerin asked. She had the Moonlight Bridge for transportation, but it would still be better to move herself.

The Sword Sage shook his head. “Not quite. No workings, like we could do. You manage to tell the world how it works, then cheers and

celebration, you're a Monarch. No, it's the in-between where you can work. In our case..."

He drew his sword. "Sages and Monarchs have all sorts of authority bound up in their techniques. If they've got a swing that can cut a Dreadgod, you don't have to see how they did it. Just copy them."

Lindon's quill was scribbling furiously, but he was still frowning into midair with an expression like he was deep in thought.

Yerin thought she understood what her master was saying, but it didn't seem practical. "So I've got to watch a Monarch using a sword?"

"Or a Sage. Min Shuei will teach you." He hesitated. "Is she...solid? She's still got her sect, true?"

Yerin tapped her fingers against her sheath for a moment. "Caught sight of her once or twice. Not sure she's so happy with you for dying."

"Wasn't the plan, that I can swear. Not in love with how we left things, though. You always think you have more time, don't you?"

That wouldn't have stabbed Yerin so deep, but she was planning on facing down both Dreadgods and Monarchs. By most reckoning, even a dozen lives wouldn't be enough.

Involuntarily, she looked to Lindon.

He was perfectly calm. Still taking notes. He'd heard, she was sure, he just wasn't thinking about the risks. He had a mission.

The side of her mouth quirked up. "Short on time myself, so what can you teach me?"

The Sword Sage looked down at himself in disgust. "What am I going to show you in this state? Maybe if I was plugged into the labyrinth, I could imitate some of my real authority, but like this...I have the power of my shortest toe. You're a Herald; you have to have seen some decent fights."

Yerin cast her mind back. The battle between the Sage of Red Faith and the Herald Redmoon popped into her memory first. The Sage had used a series of daggers. She'd seen Monarchs in battle too, but Malice usually carried a bow while Northstrider didn't seem to need a weapon at all.

"Does it have to be a sword?" Lindon asked quietly.

"Best if it is," the Sword Sage said. He patted the weapon at his side. "There's a reason why the cutting Icon takes the form of a sword. It's the perfect tool for combat. But no, of course you can use sword authority through just about any cutting weapon."

Yerin realized what Lindon was implying, and a jolt shook her body. “Blood and rot, there’s reaching for the moon and then there’s jumping off a roof to touch the stars. How am I supposed to copy *that*?”

“One of them did have a sword,” Lindon pointed out.

“I’d rather copy the scythe,” Yerin muttered.

Of course, the highest-level battle Yerin had ever witnessed was the one between a black-armored Eithan and a celestial intruder. The man in the bone armor had used a sword, but he gave off the feeling of chaos and decay.

Eithan’s attacks, meanwhile, were clean. Cold. Absolute.

As much as she could see, anyway.

“Have a better chance of copying the rising sun,” she went on. But she was getting into position. She had to modify Eithan’s stance somewhat, her weapon being shorter and shaped differently. “Even if I manage it, it’ll be like the whisper of a ghost’s shadow next to the real thing.”

“Don’t you think that should be enough?” Lindon pointed out.

He had a point. Eithan’s world-erasing attacks would be better than anything she could do, even taken down about eighty notches.

The Sword Sage looked between the two of them, clueless. “Who taught you to start talking riddles around me?”

Yerin closed her eyes. The sight of Eithan drifting in the dark sky was etched into her memory, though there were parts she was blind to. Things they did that her mind just couldn’t process. And what she did see was missing miles of depth, she was sure.

As the Eithan in her memory drew back his scythe, she drew back her sword.

“You’re copying what you can’t see,” her master advised her. “Focus on the feeling of the strike more than its form.”

His strike had felt final. Decisive. Like the end of all things.

In her memory, Eithan swept his weapon forward.

She followed him.

His strike was silent, and so was hers.

Yerin opened her eyes.

Nothing in the room had changed. She’d failed.

The Sword Sage folded his arms. “One practice swing down. Nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine to go.”

Now *that* was the master she remembered.

REIGAN SHEN RETURNED TO A SPATIAL ANCHOR JUST OUTSIDE OF Moongrave.

The dark clouds overhead flickered with violet lightning, reminding him of the Weeping Dragon's clouds that approached the Ashwind continent. But these weren't the signs of a coming Dreadgod, just those of a furious Monarch.

Even with their current state of temporary alliance, Shen knew better than to appear in the city itself. He hovered outside the gates and spoke clearly.

"Not even I can travel like this forever, Malice. You know the time has come."

Malice *must* have been upset, because she didn't taunt him or make him wait or strike him with an arrow from miles away. Instead, she appeared next to him immediately.

Her hair, like living shadow, writhed with her anger. She appeared as immaculate and unharmed as ever, but her fight against Eithan's apprentices must have taken something out of her or she wouldn't have shown such a sour expression.

"How did you enjoy his Dreadgod weapon?" Malice asked bitterly. "He'll be adding another to his collection soon, thanks to you."

"And you're helpless to watch?" Reigan snapped back. "These are *your* lands! Clean up your mess."

He wanted to transform back into his original form and bite her head off. Malice was only pestering him to express her anger, but Reigan had just

as much right to be furious as she did. He had *told* them how seriously they needed to take this threat. He had told them.

Malice ground her teeth, and Reigan could see her resisting the urge to continue bickering with him. Argument was one of the petty pleasures humans loved to squeeze out of life.

Instead, she steadied herself to face the problem at hand, as befit a Monarch. "Of course I won't allow him to do as he wishes. My forces were already gathered to deal with a Dreadgod. Once the Weeping Dragon wears them down, we can finish them off."

"I'm certain they have a pocket world," Reigan told her. "We have to assume they have enough time built up inside to emerge as Monarchs. I will not underestimate the influence of Eithan Arelius."

"Not again, you mean." She poked back at him, but her lack of reaction to the pocket world told him she had already known and was thinking along the same lines.

Reigan didn't let her distract him. "The longer we give them, the better prepared they will be. We can't wait for the Dreadgod before we strike."

"Strike where, would you say?"

"Sacred Valley. He's proven he will defend it."

Malice raised an eyebrow. "You propose we strike at the Master of the Labyrinth above the labyrinth's heart, all with the Weeping Dragon bearing down on us?"

"Unless *you* know where he's placed the entrance to his world, we only know one other place where he will certainly appear. And that's directly in the path of the Dreadgod." Reigan folded his arms. "So yes, I would prefer Sacred Valley."

Like a flickering shadow, Malice shifted her position in an instant. "Good. That's what I planned. Northstrider?"

Northstrider emerged from a bright blue twist in the Way, surprising no one. Reigan had sensed his observation from the beginning.

The man wore his rags, as usual, and his draconic eyes shone with golden intensity.

"Lindon Arelius is their lynchpin," Northstrider said immediately. "If we kill, capture, or force him to ascend, the others must follow. Our best chance of doing any of the three is to drive him away from the labyrinth. The approaching Dreadgod will set the hourglass for him, as he still cannot face the Weeping Dragon alone."

It was only out of a disciplined desire for cooperation that Reigan Shen did not roll his eyes. “What an apt summary. Are you ready to begin?”

“I’m ready to end it,” Malice snapped. “This has been a disaster from start to finish.”

Reigan would certainly be embarrassed if *he* were Malice. It was not too exaggerated to say the state of the world was entirely her fault. Ozmanthus had risen to prominence under her nose, and she hadn’t noticed...although perhaps that wasn’t a technique Reigan should lean on to attack her, since the same could be said of him.

Regardless, Reigan Shen would not be able to rest again until he no longer shared a world with these miniature Destroyers.

“Let’s go,” Northstrider said.

Malice looked down over the members of her clan, who had begun arranging themselves below. “Soon. When we are all gathered.”

Northstrider glared at her. “Are three Monarchs not enough?”

“I, for one, am not concerned about attacking too decisively,” Reigan said. “As long as we *hurry*.”

It didn’t take long for Malice to bring together the appropriate members of her family. Golds were useless here, and even most Lords were dead weight, but she still had a squad of several dozen ready to go soon. He was reassured to see that she had brought two Sages along as well, though he did wish they were two *other* Sages.

They could potentially rely on Charity, whose smooth face was as expressionless as usual, but her purple eyes tracked Reigan Shen with barely concealed hostility. Her passion for humanity was legendary, and she resented all factions that were primarily led by sacred beasts. He didn’t think she would ever turn against the will of her grandmother, but he would have to account for the possibility that she gave in to temptation and attacked his people.

Then there was the Sage of the Frozen Blade, Min Shuei. The woman fiddled with her long, white hair, drummed fingers on the edge of her sheathed sword, and chewed on her lip as a storm of emotions passed through her.

Reigan knew why. She had been romantically involved with Yerin’s master, and she considered the girl something of a daughter.

He indicated her with his chin. “Is she not a liability?”

“See how many loyal Sages *you* have left when the Dreadgods attack your territory over and over,” Malice said. “I, for one, consider it an advantage to have the Winter Sage on our side. If she can convince Yerin to see reason and ascend, perhaps the others will follow.”

Yerin wouldn’t do that, and it could be that everyone there knew it except Min Shuei. Her expression brightened for a moment.

Reigan did roll his eyes this time, but he accepted the woman’s presence. Her power was a welcome asset, even if her disposition wasn’t. And once Yerin refused to ascend, Min Shuei would beat the necessity into her.

The Winter Sage, after all, had known the truth behind the Monarchs. She knew how to accept the world as it was.

Once everyone was ready, Reigan could have offered to transport them all together. That was usually his role, as the master of the King’s Key, but he had spent a dozen fortunes moving armies across the world recently. Time to let their host bear the cost.

He calmly sipped wine and watched Malice. She scowled at him but triggered a portal anchor instead of complaining. A tower of shadow shot up from the ground; clearly, she had been prepared for this.

“Everyone move,” Malice ordered.

The other Monarchs were already striding through the portal.

Reigan felt the familiar twisting of the Way all around him, though it was shrouded by shadows. It would take time for Lindon to sense the pillar of shadow using the constructs around the Valley, so they should be able to get into position before he realized they were coming.

Reigan Shen’s perception, like everyone else’s, was restricted by the combination of overwhelming shadow madra and spatial transport.

But the reaction times of a Monarch were nothing to underestimate, so he was able to call his Titan shield out of nowhere the instant he emerged from the portal.

A Penance arrow slammed into the Abidan panel of blue light, and Reigan felt his own death stop an inch from his nose.

Copied arrows swarmed the others. Malice covered herself in armor—not swollen to giant size, now, but called around her normal human body in an instant. Northstrider burned the illusions down with an aura of blood and hunger and struck them from the air with blurring punches.

But both staggered back as illusions ravaged their minds. Even the copies carried formidable mental weight. Without a defensive construct as advanced as Reigan's, they were still vulnerable.

Ordinarily, Reigan would have felt smug at their struggle and perhaps worked to find a way to humiliate them over it. But he was faced with a sight that chilled him.

Dozens of miles away, Lindon hovered over Sacred Valley. The air warped around him and a halo of light ringed the sky overhead.

He had been waiting for them. And the Silent King Bow was not his only weapon.

Three streams of black dragon's breath crashed into the Monarchs a fraction of a second after the arrows, but this they could take easily. He was more than a Sage now, but still less than a true Dreadgod.

Northstrider held out a palm, Shen summoned a shield, and Malice trusted her armor to handle it as she called her own bow.

When the bar of liquid flame struck, Reigan Shen learned how wrong he had been.

The Void authority in the dragon's breath was on another level, even compared to when he'd fought Reigan that morning. Even considering the benefits of a time-warped pocket world, Lindon was progressing at a disgusting rate.

Clearly, the human had trained himself, not just his companions.

Black dragon's breath annihilated a Herald-level shield, crushed a script written specifically to hold back the Path of Black Flame, and triggered Reigan's Titan barrier again.

That was two activations within a second. This time, Reigan felt the power in the Abidan artifact flickering.

Amethyst essence streamed off Malice as the river of dark fire stripped away layers of her armor, and Northstrider grunted as his hand was burned down to the bone. It would regenerate in an instant, but even so, they had underestimated Lindon.

It wouldn't happen again.

The Penance arrow had vanished, but there was already another volley in the air, this one made of the simple bone arrows that were a tier weaker. As Reigan had suspected, he didn't have more Penance arrowheads. Likely only the two he'd shown.

And while it was wise of Lindon to keep the pressure on, Monarchs didn't earn their way to the top by being slow to react.

A matching volley of arrows shot from Malice's crystalline blue bow, and hers were Forged from a more solid madra and backed by the Bow Icon. Her arrows hunted down and destroyed his, though it wasn't as one-sided a match as Reigan had hoped.

In the back of his mind, he felt an ugly greed for that Dreadgod weapon. No matter how else this all shook out, he needed to end up with the Silent King Bow.

Though Reigan wasn't idle while Malice struck back. He transferred himself through space and withdrew a fine weapon of his own: a trio of blue-and-green metal claws that he gripped in his human hands. He slashed out with them, and Forged claws struck from the sky to catch Lindon between them.

At the same time, Northstrider punched with a deafening explosion of air that shook the earth like a drum. The accompanying Striker technique hurtled at Lindon, a white-edged crimson serpent of blood madra that carried the authority of an ancient dragon.

From stepping through the portal to now took less time than the blink of an Underlord's eye, and such battles could rage on for days. Except they didn't necessarily have days.

While the Weeping Dragon was thousands of miles north, the empowered Dreadgods could move faster than ever. If it chose, the Dragon could be here in a matter of hours.

Reigan Shen fully expected Lindon to have countermeasures in the labyrinth for this round of attacks. Reigan had more weapons of his own, and even in the worst case, his Titan shield should hold out at least until the Dreadgod attacked.

They would make Lindon play all his hidden cards. Drain his resources dry.

And, most importantly, keep him out of that pocket world.

Lindon's pure madra domain erupted from him in a blue-white sphere, weakening the incoming techniques, but Lindon still had to tear Northstrider's dragon and Reigan's claws apart physically.

That was when Reigan Shen knew something was wrong.

He understood the labyrinth better than anyone alive. Grudgingly, he had to admit that Lindon probably knew some tricks with it he didn't, as

Reigan had never successfully claimed authority over it. But he was confident he knew its mechanisms better even than the young Sage.

Yet Lindon *did* know how to activate its defensive scripts. He had done so against Reigan Shen only hours ago.

Why hadn't he done that now? Why was he taking Monarch attacks with his own body?

The world crawled to a halt as Reigan's thoughts flashed. Had the labyrinth run out of power? No, he could distantly sense the mighty cores that powered the great scripts still thrumming with energy. Then was this a trick?

It had to be. Something was wrong here.

Northstrider had come to the same conclusion even faster, as he Forged a defensive layer of bloody madra around himself. Malice had strung another arrow and surely intended to trust her armor once again.

Another volley of arrows erupted from Sacred Valley...but not from Lindon.

They were a dim grey and comprised mostly of hunger madra, but Shen still recognized them. This was Malice's technique.

A gray-white Forged dragon roared as it rushed at Northstrider, but it was when portals began to open in midair and reveal copied weapons that Reigan Shen realized he was in trouble.

The labyrinth stored copies of everyone it fed from.

He'd known that, but there was one ironclad restriction on that technique: it could only be used *inside* the labyrinth itself.

Except that rule no longer held true. The evidence was right in front of him.

All three of the Monarchs defended against their own techniques easily—these were from the weakened versions of themselves, after all. The true threat was the Penance arrow that thundered through space and Fate at Reigan Shen.

He trusted his Titan shield and opened up with a barrage of weapons. Until Northstrider shouted, "Malice!" Both of the other Monarchs focused their wills on Reigan.

To...protect him.

A second Penance arrow fell from the sky like black lightning. He felt his death resonating from the future, as though the universe itself had decided to kill him. The other Monarchs were underestimating him, though.

The Abidan artifact was not so simple, and another Titan shield appeared above him.

When the third Penance arrow struck at him from behind, that was when Reigan realized he was going to die.

Every shield, barrier, script, and scrap of armor he could summon leaped out of his many vaults and onto his body.

The blue plates of absolute Abidan protection shivered under the weight of triple execution...and then they cracked. The metal strapped to his wrist, the platinum Titan artifact, tore in half like cloth.

“Protect!” Northstrider commanded.

“Stop!” Malice ordered.

“Save me!” Reigan Shen cried.

When the arrows passed through the Abidan defenses, the other layers were obliterated in an instant. One arrow lost momentum, but the second rushed at him like a river of pure destruction. Malice threw an arm in front of it and her armor was annihilated to reveal her bare arm, but that arrow ran out of strength as well.

Shen was looking up in terror at the black arrowhead plunging down from overhead, flinching back behind crossed arms...but it too froze a hair from his skin.

Northstrider had caught it.

The human Monarch coughed up blood and tried to crush the arrow in his fist. “This...weapon...”

Even with the authority of the Strength Icon, Northstrider couldn’t break it.

All three arrows vanished, but the world was darker. Literally, as illusory cloned arrows blacked out the sun.

Reigan Shen knew the other Monarchs acted solely for their own protection. If they thought they could win without Reigan’s help, they would have watched him die with glee in their hearts. On another day, they would have helped Lindon.

But relying on their assistance still burned his pride, so now it was his turn.

Reigan Shen released his madra, and a golden light surrounded the three Monarchs for a mile in all directions. **“Mine,”** he said, as he joined his authority to the King’s Domain.

The copied arrows crashed down on his Domain. They tore parts of it away, drilled down into the golden light, and even tickled his mind with distant mental attacks. But every arrow was shunted to the side, landing nowhere near the Monarchs.

Or the collection of Sages and Archlords that had emerged from the pillar of shadow beneath them.

“Do that sooner,” Northstrider said coldly.

Reigan’s head was splitting with the effort of using such high-level commands so soon after one another, not to mention the strain of maintaining powerful weapons, but he kept control of himself and snorted. “As though you’ve used everything you’re capable of.”

Malice had re-formed the amethyst plating around her arm. “I’m afraid the boy hasn’t either.”

Lindon must have been far more exhausted than Reigan himself, but he didn’t look it, and the bow in his hand warped Reigan’s spiritual perception.

He was only a Sage.

The Silent King’s halo over his head had grown, and it was starting to fill in with a subtly spinning darkness. The Void Icon. It matched his eyes: harsh white circles in pools of merciless black.

Two figures had joined Lindon, and they were eerily familiar. Echoes in gray-white of a young woman with a bow and a scruffy young man with scales covering his fists. Younger Malice and Northstrider.

The real Malice ran a hand down her bow, considering. “Is he paying the price to maintain them, or is it the labyrinth?”

“It has to be the labyrinth,” Northstrider said. “If he was doing it himself, he could have kept the defensive scripts up.”

Malice gave an irritated hiss. “Then we can’t fight him here.”

Reigan Shen looked into the sky, fury boiling up from his heart. “Enough. Scorch the earth.”

He willed himself to move as high as he could, reappearing an instant later. The world stretched out beneath him even as the breath left his lungs. He hung now in the stillness of the stars, above the sky, until Sacred Valley itself was but a smudge far below.

Reigan opened two portals to his left and right, forming a third technique between his hands.

Each of the gates he opened revealed one of his singular vaults, where he kept the most unique and deadly treasures. One was a room of cold, bare

gray, where scripted halfsilver chains restrained a spear.

Fashioned from the soul of a Monarch and the rarest of materials, the spear looked to be made of weathered sandstone, but its every sharp edge shone like molten steel.

Blighted Sky, a weapon created by two Sages of Steel Dragon's Mountain to do battle with ancient Monarchs. Over time, its legend and power had only grown, and it was responsible for the creation of a desert on the Iceflower continent.

One of his rarest treasures.

The other vault contained another one-of-a-kind Monarch weapon, and one that Reigan was more personally attached to. Tiberian Arelius' Remnant on a leash.

The man was sculpted from blue-and-gold lightning, and he lounged on a seat, Forged chin in one hand. His collar flashed as he looked up at the opening portal.

"You want me to kill some more of my family members, Shen?" Tiberian asked. Air was rushing out of the vault in a sparkling rush, a cold breeze as the wind vented into vacuum, but Reigan responded in a transmission of dream aura.

Yes, he said. *An adopted one. There.*

He indicated the location with a thought.

Tiberian grimaced, but he raised a hand that crackled with power.

Don't hold back, Reigan added.

The Remnant lowered its hand and considered for a moment. Then three colored balls of lightning crackled around his body, growing more powerful with every passing instant. One was blue, one gold, and one a molten, green-tinged white.

Tiberian's greatest technique, his True Storm Hammer. It would be enough to annihilate Sacred Valley and anyone standing against it, unless Lindon spent his whole power defending or activated the great defensive script.

But Reigan didn't watch Tiberian finish the technique. He began his own most powerful art.

Opening portals onto spatially sealed treasures was not the only use of the Path of the King's Key, like so many thought. It was simply the most efficient one.

Most threats, he could handle with his vast collection of weaponry. For some purposes, he controlled the battlefield with his King's Domain.

For those last, stubborn targets, Reagan needed to get his own hands dirty. No target could perfectly defend against this technique. Not even Tiberian himself.

With his madra and his authority, Reagan gripped the fabric of space. He tore and crumpled it until it resembled a golden-edged shattered ball.

This was any king's last resort: the Decree of Execution.

Any one of these three techniques should be plenty to destroy not only Lindon, but a significant chunk of the surrounding territory. Malice would be displeased with him, but she knew what he was doing. It would be upon her to contain the destruction.

If she even could. With these three techniques layered together, they would produce an effect that was—

Tiberian released his True Storm Hammer.

"Not yet!" Reagan tried to shout, but the air was gone. He roared in silence.

As a mountain-thick pillar of lightning cracked down to earth, the storm Remnant looked up to Reagan in evident surprise. He tapped one ear and shrugged.

Reagan snarled, though Tiberian wouldn't hear that either, and released his Decree of Execution. It flashed down, almost as fast as the lightning, leaving trails of splintered space behind it as it fell.

Only then could he trigger the Striker binding inside the spear, Blighted Sky. A wide spread of smoldering orange spikes rained down, each hungry to spread destruction.

The three techniques weren't synced up as well as Reagan had hoped, but he was still satisfied with the initial result. A giant column of three-colored lightning, chased afterward by a gold-highlighted warp in space, and followed by a broad waterfall of burning light.

Reagan tucked himself away into one of his mobile palaces, enjoying the taste of air contained within. He sealed the entrance with a transparent spatial barrier, preventing the wind from rushing out into space, and he watched the devastating explosions as his techniques landed.

He sagged into a seat, feeling the unfamiliar exhaustion, but at least he hadn't held back. This was the sort of barrage he would use to take down a Dreadgod or depopulate half a continent.

If this didn't work, nothing would.



Dross screamed in Lindon's mind. [It's worse! AAAAAAHHHH it's so bad!]

Lindon's perception of the world was effectively halted, though that wasn't much of a comfort when a massive Monarch thunderbolt was a few hundred yards from crashing down on him. He should survive that, with the help of his arm and his Hollow Domain. The arm, at least, was eager to try.

But there was another technique behind that, one that would disassemble the very substance of his body. And if he resisted *that*, there was a broad technique that felt—in Dross' words—like a plague made of wildfire.

The other two Monarchs hadn't even joined the attack. They had used techniques to surround Sacred Valley, to contain the destruction and to slow Lindon from leaving.

Not that he could. Shen's techniques landing would threaten the lives of the people living down below.

He hadn't wanted to fight here at all, but the labyrinth's defenses were all that allowed him to survive three Monarchs at once. But even those defenses had limits. He'd ordered the population below to take shelter and activated protections against spiritual pressure, but he was putting the ancient scripts to the test.

Don't panic, Lindon sent to Dross. *You know what we have to do.*

[It's too late, I'm panicking! They were supposed to back off!]

Dross and Lindon had both expected the Monarchs to back up and stall for time once their initial attack failed. They would be waiting for the Weeping Dragon to finish Lindon, after all. That assumption was what Lindon had been counting on; his only objective was to buy enough time for his friends to advance.

It was always a *possibility* that one of the Monarchs would get frustrated and unload everything they had, but not one that Lindon or Dross could control.

[The echo isn't finished!] Dross said desperately. [We have to use the evacuation plan.]

The ‘evacuation plan’ was using the labyrinth to transfer everyone away and letting Reigan Shen blow Sacred Valley to ashes. The labyrinth would survive, and they could rebuild afterwards.

That would be a huge expenditure of energy, and those attacks landing could blight the earth for hundreds of miles. Not to mention that the Weeping Dragon was still heading this direction, and Lindon wanted the labyrinth in fighting shape. He intended to fight the Dreadgod over the Trackless Sea, but this was his fallback.

Also, the Monarchs had more for Lindon to take.

No, he thought. I’ll hold the lightning back. Release him.

[Do you know how much I hate relying on things we don’t understand and can’t model? This much!] Dross’ arms stretched impossibly far so that Lindon couldn’t see their ends.

Apologies, Lindon said, and then the world started moving again.

Tiberian’s thunderbolt was large enough to swallow the heart of Sacred Valley, but it fell through a suddenly expanded Hollow Domain and met Lindon’s white palm. Lightning shot through his body, bringing him agony. His teeth grit together and he struggled to remain focused.

Lindon drew the energy deeper with his Consume technique, pulling the lightning to himself. His whole spirit was in anguish, but at the same time, he wove his own madra through Tiberian’s technique. Strands of pure madra, of hunger, even Blackflame.

They wormed into the lightning bolt according to a method he’d adopted from Ozmanthus Arelius. Not enough to be called a true sacred arts technique, this was more of a skilled manipulation of madra. It took longer than he would have liked, with the Monarch lightning tearing apart his body.

But an instant later, he dismantled the technique.

The different types of power tore apart Tiberian’s thunderbolt, sending clouds of three-colored essence bursting for miles. They exploded against the barriers set up by Northstrider and Malice, lighting the sky so that even the halo of the Silent King dimmed by comparison.

Lindon was breathing heavily when the next technique came streaking in, and his vision fuzzed on the edges. He had been sprinting all-out with these techniques, and while he still had madra to spare, he needed to rest. Every Penance arrow was a test of will, and he was concentrating to his

limits with every attack. Even holding the Silent King Bow was an extra burden.

He released the Hollow Domain, allowing himself to catch his breath as the gold-edged chaos descended on him. He needed to buy a little time, since the echo technique from the labyrinth was not instant.

But it *was* quick.

“Sloppy,” said a cold voice from nearby. It was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, like a slightly distorted imitation of a voice he knew well.

A black-and-gray Ozmanthus Arelius stood next to Lindon, broom braced on his shoulder.

His features were sharp and his demeanor haughty, but his clothes were still finely pressed. He sneered up at the descending technique. “Dismantling should be clean. Like so.”

Ozmanthus swept his broom through the sky, and the space-ripping golden sphere disappeared. So did the rain of orange-red blades, and the Silent King’s halo, and the indistinct Void Icon that had hovered over Lindon.

Lindon gazed up into a perfectly clear sky.

Ozmanthus gave a satisfied little hum. “You see? Clean.”

“Gratitude,” Lindon said. “But the enemy who used those techniques is still there. In fact, there are three Monarchs, and they’re enemies of your—”

“I understand the situation,” Ozmanthus said, cutting him off. “I saw every detail the instant I was Forged. You should assume that I see everything.”

“I do.”

The barriers around Sacred Valley were starting to fade as Northstrider and Malice gathered up their own attacks, but Ozmanthus was still focused on Lindon. A small smile quirked up the corner of his mouth, and Lindon saw shadows of the Eithan he knew.

“Such a high opinion of me,” Ozmanthus murmured. “I’ll try not to let it go to my head.”

Lindon heard the wry tone and inspected the man’s expression for more traces of Eithan. Should he speak freely, or not?

[Not!] Dross suggested.

Lindon dipped his head. “Apologies. I’m grateful for the help.” He held the Arelius Patriarch’s gaze firmly. “But I prefer the modern version of you.”

Ozmanthus looked startled for a moment before his smile grew more genuine. “I’m pleased to hear it. Now...” He looked at the sky. “...if you wanted me to wipe out our enemies, why did you make me so weak?”

“Lack of time.”

“Poor planning. You should improve your foresight. No student of mine should ever be caught off guard.”

[We’re working on it,] Dross said defensively.

Lindon tensed and cycled his madra. Malice had called the image of an empress behind her and was readying an attack no less deadly than the ones Reigan Shen had dropped, and Northstrider condensed so much power that half the horizon turned red and a snarling dragon’s face was starting to form from blood and authority.

“I can strike once, with the power you have allotted me,” Ozmanthus said. “Afterwards, you will not be able to project me again for quite some time without destabilizing my memory.”

Lindon turned to face Malice, as her attack seemed most imminent. “Which target would you prefer?”

Ozmanthus barked a laugh. “I thought you knew me well. I said one *attack*...” Suddenly, towering ancient armor swallowed him, so he hovered at the center of a giant that stretched from the ground to the clouds. It reminded Lindon strongly of Malice’s bloodline armor.

A gray, translucent cloak billowed from the Forger technique’s shoulders, and it held a spear in one hand.

“...not one *opponent*,” Ozmanthus finished. “Brace yourself, future disciple.”

[You need to take lessons from him on style,] Dross commented.

A cold star blasted through the air from Malice. An arrow layered with many techniques and condensed power. From the other side of the valley, a serpentine dragon was Forged from Northstrider’s madra. It thundered through the sky to them, and the weight of its charge reminded Lindon of a physical blow from a Dreadgod.

In a delicate dance, Ozmanthus spun the cloak that surrounded him.

The Mantle of the Hollow King caught Malice’s arrow as though in the flow of a river, dragging it miles away from its course and flinging it back at Northstrider. At the same time, the Hollow King’s Spear pierced the dragon, blasting into the horizon as a Striker technique. Its destruction tore

a ditch in the landscape in a straight line that stretched as far as Lindon could see.

Northstrider dodged the spear, but not Malice's arrow, which had been subtly redirected according to Ozmanthus' will.

"One," Ozmanthus murmured, "two. And...three."

Lines of light fell down from the stars overhead. The Hollow King's Crown dissipated harmlessly long before it ever struck the ground, but the technique intercepted something on its way.

Lindon sensed Reigan Shen's vaults being torn apart, far above. Even the separate space in which he'd hidden was shattered, and his spiritual presence weakened considerably.

Lindon was sure his eyes were wide. "Incredible." Though different in many ways, this was still Eithan, and stroking his ego couldn't hurt. But it wasn't as though he needed to fake his amazement.

Ozmanthus had already started to fade, but he tilted his chin up. "Hardly worth mentioning. Summon me properly next time, and I'll show you something you can *really* be proud of." His eyes flicked to the top of Lindon's head for a moment. "...and get a haircut."

ORTHOS AND LITTLE BLUE FOUGHT TOGETHER AGAINST A SINGLE OPPONENT.

They stood in an ocean of darkness, where it was impossible to tell apart the ground from the horizon. Little Blue defended them both, deflecting madra attacks and disrupting the spiritual power of the enemy, while Orthos stayed on the offensive. Lances of dragon's breath shot from his mouth while he dashed, jumped, and slammed his shell into the enemy.

The blonde, smiling, well-dressed enemy.

Eithan slid between them as easily as if it were a dance they'd all rehearsed. He twirled a spoon in each hand, using one to slash open Little Blue's Hollow Domain even as he used the other to nudge Orthos' charge off-course.

They had been at this for almost an hour, and Orthos was rapidly losing patience.

Finally, after Orthos put his all into a Void Dragon's Dance that Eithan scooped away with a casual sweep of his spoon, Orthos called the fight to a halt. "Dross! Enough!"

The darkness evaporated, as did their still-smiling opponent. Eithan even ushered them out with a bow, as though he were aware that their battle was only a simulation that was now coming to an end.

Dross coughed and avoided Orthos' gaze. [Well, you could call that progress! I'm saying you *could*, not necessarily that I *would*.]

Orthos growled and wondered if he could hit Dross with Blackflame. "This is not fair. How are we supposed to defeat Eithan?"

He had seen Eithan erase stars. That was not an opponent, that was a global disaster.

[This is a projection of Eithan as he was at Overlord. He's not using any of his...] Dross wagged his arms. [...incomprehensible outer-reality nonsense.]

"We're exhausted!" Orthos barked. "Look at Blue!"

Little Blue was lying on her back and gasping for breath. She tried to sit up at the sound of her name but chimed in frustration when she failed.

"*He* didn't get tired in there. How are we supposed to fight if he can keep going forever?"

[He can't. He has the same stamina limits as Eithan did at Overlord. He would have been tired if you had, you know...tired him.]

Orthos glared at Dross but could find no flaw with his logic. That didn't make the situation any less frustrating.

In the months they'd spent inside Ghostwind Hall, Orthos had only managed to advance to Overlord. By normal standards, Overlord in a matter of months would be an impossible feat, but they were pushing for greater miracles.

Fighting an Overlord Eithan should have been an even match. Better, technically, since Blue was at a level comparable to Archlord. Not that she could express that in her techniques, most of the time.

In frustration, Orthos looked around for something to snack on, but the sparring hall into which Dross had projected his mental simulation had no rocks, no useless furniture, not even a crunchy mouthful of pebbles.

[I have a great model of Eithan at Underlord!] Dross suggested. [Why don't you start with that? Although...he did defeat a veiled Monarch in nine seconds. Hm. I could take a guess about what he was like at Gold?]

Orthos seethed. The only thing more frustrating than his wounded pride was the knowledge that he had no excuses.

If they were going up against Monarchs and Dreadgods, then they were fighting opponents that couldn't be exhausted or outlasted. A mere Overlord, no matter how skilled, was little better than a Copper on that scale.

Dross floated over to him and placed a tentacle on the back of his neck in a friendly gesture. [Hey, I know it's tough. You were the first to collapse in the willpower training, you're the least advanced, and all your friends

have passed you by. You know you need the most help, and you feel inadequate. Insecure. In...flated. No, that one doesn't work. Incompetent!]

Orthos wanted to lash out at Dross, but he closed his eyes instead. "Yes."

Little Blue gave him a soothing pat on the leg.

[And what about you?] Dross asked Blue. [How do you feel about this?]

Little Blue's response was the urgent tinkling of a bell. She was impatient.

[Well, if it means that much to you both...I could *technically* speed up your training regimen.]

Both Orthos and Little Blue turned to him. Orthos was skeptical. "Putting us in the training room against Eithan more often isn't going to help us."

[No, I mean you've both been on the diet Lindon has prepared for you. We scheduled that out with some margin for error. If you stick with the current schedule, you definitely *won't* lose your identity and go insane. We could put you on a faster plan, if you'd like.]

"Would we lose our identities and go insane?"

Dross beamed. [Only maybe!]

"How big of a chance?"

[That depends on how much faster you go!]

Orthos had been burned from the inside out by Blackflame before. He didn't like even the possibility of losing himself again.

"Lindon has the black dragon Remnants locked away," Orthos pointed out. Lindon had moved Orthos' training materials to a locked void key when Orthos had lost himself after a particularly rough transfer of will and memories. He had tried to rush inside and fight all the remaining Remnants himself.

Dross whistled nonchalantly and spun a ring of keys around his tendril. After a moment, he said, [These are not *real* keys, you understand. They are an illustration to let you know that I'm allowed to unlock his void key. I'm not even the real Dross, just a temporary copy left to operate these illusion constructs. Is this too much for you? Should I slow down?]

"I understood." Orthos looked to Little Blue.

She bit her lower lip, and her shoulders were hunched. He couldn't sense her feelings as clearly as Lindon could, but she was nervous.

However, she still gave a decisive nod.

[Delightful! We can try the Eithan training again once you're around peak Overlord. Or maybe higher. He's tough.]

But if Orthos couldn't beat an Overlord-level Eithan, and two-on-one at that, there was no way he could fight the Wandering Titan.

Firmly, he fixed his goal in his mind.

First, Eithan.

Then, he could fight by Lindon's side again.



Outside Sacred Valley, Akura Charity looked up at the titanic figure of gray-white madra that blotted out the sky. It straddled mountains, the ring of light around the closest peak hovering only around its knee.

It gave off a pressure that was more than merely spiritual. The Heart Icon stilled at the sight of this imposing, imperial figure, and she knew its name.

This was the Hollow King.

When it swept three Monarchs aside with a sweep of its cloak and a thrust of its spear, Charity was unsurprised. For as far as she could sense, other powers went quiet at the passage of the Hollow King's madra.

And this was only an *echo*. A memory, preserved in the labyrinth.

How powerful was the real thing?

Malice had taken the brunt of its technique and had been driven out of the battle. Now was the chance for the lesser sacred artists, like Charity, to strike.

Even after the Hollow King projection dispersed, no one moved to fight.

The Winter Sage, at Charity's side, spoke in unconcealed awe. "What are we *doing* here?"

"Our jobs," Charity responded automatically, but she was equally disturbed. Still, she didn't let that touch her tone as she began ordering Archlords. "Half of you with me and half with Min Shuei. We need to keep pressure on the labyrinth's defenses. Begin with any techniques that may not be repelled by a barrier against violent force."

Akura Justice gave her an astonished, wide-eyed look. He was an ancient figure who had mentored her when she was a girl, his beard white and long. But his venerable appearance was disturbed when he pointed a

shaking, black-gloved hand up toward Sacred Valley. “My apologies, Sage, but...surely we shouldn’t fight him *here*.”

Charity empathized, but she kept her face blank. “Our goal is to pull him out. Now, we have no more time to waste.”

The Monarchs had already recovered and begun preparing their next round of techniques. While Lindon and the labyrinth had to be meeting their limits too, she had to assume their window would close any second.

Min Shuei straightened up, eyes alight with passion, her white hair streaming behind her, and sword drawn. “Archlords, with me! We strike from the front!”

Half a dozen Archlords, powerful figures all, followed her with much less enthusiasm.

Charity turned to Justice and her own team. “Let’s hope she catches his attention. We’ll strike from the flanks.”

Her team looked much happier than the Winter Sage’s had.

Striker techniques traded overhead, scorching the air and sending the aura trembling for miles, but this could be considered a casual exchange on the level of Monarchs.

Which was the level it seemed Lindon had reached. At least, with the aid of the labyrinth.

Charity and her Archlords reached the southern entrance into Sacred Valley, near a mountain that now gushed with a red river that reminded her strongly of blood. Prior to the Wandering Titan’s attack, this place had probably been all but impassable, but wide passages had opened in the repeated earthquakes.

The aura was also significantly stronger now, so Charity and her Archlords flew in at full speed, coming to a halt a healthy distance from the protection scripts.

Charity conjured a pair of owls, layering mental techniques into them. “Let the Monarchs do battle with him outright. We will see if we can influence him more subtly. Even a moment of his attention taken—”

She cut herself off when she saw Lindon standing in the fractured passage before them.

He was a mile away, but everyone on the team had advanced to Archlord. They could see him clearly.

The young, powerfully built man had hands clasped behind his back and wintersteel badge clear on his chest. He surveyed them with black-and-

white eyes, staying behind his protective script formation.

Most of the Archlords prepared Enforcer techniques.

"I had hoped you would be on my side, Charity," Lindon said quietly.

Charity ignored him, speaking to the rest of her team. "A Silent King illusion. Continue as before. This technique is not dangerous without the protection of the labyrinth."

Lindon raised an eyebrow at that and casually stepped across the boundary of Sacred Valley.

A moment later, he stood in their midst. The air trembled, though the Archlords held up admirably to the pressure. They shouted, crashing onto him with techniques from six different Paths.

They were wiped out by a Hollow Domain.

Blue-white light that was almost solid erased the techniques. The feel of the Void Icon was powerful with Lindon.

And he was just an *illusion*.

His gaze stayed on Charity. "You know what I'm doing. Don't stop me."

For the Akura clan, Charity stayed strong. "If you can carry a message back to your real self, then tell him this: we can have this discussion peacefully."

"I didn't attack *your* home," Lindon said.

That shook Charity more than she let on, but she continued. "We must stop you from killing the Weeping Dragon. You know what will happen if you do that. The damage will be—"

"More than letting the Dreadgods live? For centuries?"

The Archlords shifted around Lindon. His Hollow Domain had fallen, but they hesitated before attacking. They had heard Yerin's message through the Dreamway, and even if they hadn't, the rumors had spread far.

"This is foolish," Charity went on. "We've fought on the same side for years."

The white rings in his eyes burned. "You saw how Malice treated Mercy. You think *I'm* the one who betrayed *you*?"

Charity had better arguments. She had lived for over a century, and her connection to the Heart Icon helped her keep her thoughts and feelings organized.

However, she didn't have a response to this. Not because she couldn't think of one.

Because, in her heart, she felt that he was right.

“Enough!” Akura Justice shouted. He Forged Strings of Shadow, launching them at Lindon. The Path of the Chainkeeper erupted into three separate techniques, tearing at Lindon with force and shadow in attacks that were both spiritual and physical.

Lindon’s illusion let itself be torn apart. It tried to say one more thing, but Justice seized it by the hair and pulled the young man’s head off.

The wounds disappeared, fading to the disturbing white light of the Silent King’s madra. She wasn’t sure precisely how Lindon had borrowed its powers. Moving the Dreadgod’s core binding into a bow should have altered its functions, but perhaps this was a different construct. Or an action of Dross.

However he had done it, they had proven the technique could be beaten. No matter how much it shook her.

Justice raised his fist that had just held Lindon’s severed head. Or at least its appearance. “He can be beaten! He is not a true Dreadgod yet!”

Several of the other Archlords raised similar cries, though they could all feel the real Lindon trading techniques with Northstrider overhead. One of Malice’s arrows disintegrated before it could collapse a mountain.

Instead of agreeing with them, Charity pointed.

Another copy of Lindon stood in the passage, waiting exactly where the first had.

“I don’t want to hurt any of you,” Lindon said. “This is not your battle.”

A flurry of arrows, copied by the Silent King Bow, blotted out the sky overhead. They were matched by a similar volley from Malice, but Charity would be hard-pressed to deal with a single attack from the Dreadgod weapon.

Charity turned the entire situation over in her mind before she spoke. “Grandmother. He has the gaps in the protection script under surveillance. I don’t believe we will be of significant help in this conflict.”

An owl flew off with the message, though Malice likely heard her.

More importantly, so did Lindon. He pressed his fists together. “Gratitude. Mercy will be pleased.”

The illusion of Lindon winked out.

Charity gave orders to her Archlords out of nothing but instinct. They could fly around Sacred Valley, supposedly looking for gaps, but she knew there would be none. This was busy work to distract them.

And to distract herself.

Within the Sage of the Silver Heart, cracks continued to spread.



The Winter Sage fought in the snow-capped passage on the top of Mount Samara. When she'd seen Lindon approach her, she had recognized it as an illusion, but had ordered an immediate attack instead of talking with him.

The fake Lindon was giving her no end of frustration.

She had seen the Silent King project illusions solid enough to trade blows with Monarchs, only to fade away when they finally struck him. Lindon's weren't quite on that level, but the fact that he could fight in so many ways at the same time scratched her pride.

Blackflame burst through an Archlady's shield, the Empty Palm disarmed an Archlord's puppet construct, and a brief flash of the Hollow Domain wiped out two quick Striker techniques. He seized another Archlady with his right arm and began to Consume.

She cut that off with a quick slash of her sword, forcing him to release his prey. The illusion was made with a hunger madra aspect, so it could actually Consume madra to sustain itself.

Which wasn't its most irritating aspect.

The worst part, at least to Min Shuei, was how much he kept *talking*.

"I need the Monarchs gone," he said. "Not you."

"Shut *up*!"

His flying sword, Wavedancer, pushed away an Archlord water artist. Lindon leapt on another, hungry for power.

"Break!" Min Shuei commanded.

The illusion shivered and distorted, but it was too substantial for her to shred so easily. It snapped back into form, though her disruption allowed Lindon's prey to escape.

"Yerin would be disappointed in you," Lindon said.

"You don't understand *anything*!"

Furious, Min Shuei unleashed the binding in her sword.

Everything inside a hundred yards, including many of her allies, were frozen by her power. Madra, aura, and authority locked everything she could reach, and razor-sharp snowflakes were Forged to hover in midair.

Her allied Archlords would resist the technique to some degree, thanks to her control on their behalf, but Lindon was locked down.

Still, he continued speaking. “Work with me. I can put the Dreadgods down for good.”

Min Shuei gave a wild laugh and whipped a Striker technique at him. He stopped the slash, but his illusion was coming apart. “No, you *can’t*! Nobody can! Do you think you’re the first to try?”

Lindon lost an arm to her next attack, but he calmly kept fighting. And talking. “I can do it.”

“Then *prove it*.”

With that, Min Shuei tore the illusion of Silent King madra apart.

She released her lockdown on the space and the snowflakes began to disperse. Several of her Archlords gave sighs of relief. The Winter Sage looked deeper into Sacred Valley, resolve burning in her.

“He’s not a true Dreadgod yet,” she said. “Without his labyrinth and his bow, he is only a Sage. A Sage with too high an opinion of himself. Follow me, and we’ll bring him down before the Monarchs do.”

Boldly, she flew toward Sacred Valley’s border.

She came to a violent halt in midair when a shadow passed over her.

Not a physical shadow. Not even Malice’s shadow madra. Something cold and dark pressed on her spiritual senses, and she looked up.

The real Lindon hovered over her.

Above his head, the Void Icon appeared, like a hole in the sky.

“I have a few seconds,” he said. “Sword artists prove themselves in combat, don’t they?”

Min Shuei bared her teeth. “That’s right!”

“Then allow me to show you my proof.”

Without his Dreadgod weapon, Lindon shot beyond the protection of the labyrinth and attacked.

As he said, the battle only lasted a few seconds.



Reigan Shen sat up in the center of a vast crater and spat out a mouthful of dirt.

He was largely unharmed, but fury filled him nonetheless. That projection of Ozmanthus had struck him from the sky, leaving him to crash to earth like a falling star. If he had been Lindon's only opponent, that could have opened him to a lethal blow.

Then again, if he had been Lindon's only opponent, he wouldn't have tested his greatest attacks against the legendary defenses of the labyrinth.

Not after his defeat that morning, anyway.

He stretched his perception to the south, feeling the Monarch battle continuing. It had entered a lull, Malice and Northstrider content to lock Lindon in place. Every second they stole from him was a gain.

But Reagan couldn't take that game anymore. He wanted to win something.

He stretched his perception north.

The storm-clouds of the Weeping Dragon were visible now, at least to him, and the Dreadgod's overwhelming power deafened him to detail.

But if the entrance to Lindon's pocket world wasn't in Sacred Valley, it would be there. And he was the best sacred artist in the world at tracking down spatial manipulation.

He set off north. Truthfully, he thought the pocket world probably *was* in Sacred Valley, protected by the labyrinth's scripts.

But he hoped he was wrong, and that he would get the chance to crush the space with Yerin Arelius and the others inside while Lindon remained locked in battle.

Either way, he wasn't returning to Sacred Valley. That echo had almost killed him.

From within himself, he felt Ozmanthus Arelius laugh and laugh.

LINDON STRETCHED HIS PERCEPTION FAR TO THE NORTH, CHECKING HIS TIME.

Beyond the horizon, the sea was drowned in storm clouds and liquid lightning. Shining storm-dragons, constructions of the Dreadgod, swooped out from the underside of the clouds or dove down to consume prey.

Above them all, the Weeping Dragon soared through the sky. Lindon could feel its power and its pride. It was coming for him, and it had absorbed almost as much power from the Silent King's death as he had. It would be taking the Slumbering Wraith's arm back.

Windfall had been left in its path. The others would be able to escape before the Dreadgod arrived, but he wasn't sure they could *advance* by then. Not without his help.

He desperately wanted time to prepare, but the Monarchs were determined not to give him any. Hunger echoes of Malice and Reigan Shen fended off Striker techniques from the real Malice as Northstrider fought off the echo of himself and of three other Heralds.

The real Reigan Shen hadn't resurfaced after Ozmanthus destroyed his vaults, which was fortunate. The only reason the echoes had held out so long was because of Lindon's support.

And because the objective of these Monarchs was to pin him here. Neither had shown the true extent of their power.

If they did, Lindon would be forced to unleash the labyrinth's greatest weapons. None of them wanted to risk that, and the Monarchs were content to lock him in place, so it was a stalemate.

Not that it looked like one from the outside. The land for miles around was a scorched ruin wracked with aura-storms. Combined with all the recent Dreadgod attacks, Lindon doubted the region would recover for decades.

Dross, what do we have left? Lindon asked. He was currently suppressing Malice's spatial travel while sending dragon's breath sweeping at Northstrider and preparing a Void Dragon's Dance. None of it was going to do any real damage to his enemies, but he had to at least keep them on their toes.

[Echoes? I don't want to say *none*, because that isn't true, but no significantly useful ones except for the ones involved in our...*Ultimate Solution*.]

Lindon didn't support that name, but Dross had called the plan something different every time. He meant their last resort; the emergency measure they wanted to save in case the Weeping Dragon made it all the way here.

[Some of the hunger bindings are damaged and will need our attention, since the restoration authority in the labyrinth is strained as it is. You can imagine why. It's because of all the damage.]

What about the suppression field?

[We can't set up the suppression field again without physically rearranging the power cores. It's actually an inversion of the standard system. As it is, we have several layers of defensive scripts, but activating them will be a significant drain on our power. The Titan took a big bite out of us, and the Dragon will hit *Windfall* before sunset.]

Malice put an arrow through the hunger-ghost of Reigan Shen at virtually the same moment Northstrider kicked his clone out of the atmosphere. Lindon pressured Malice with dragon's breath, but at this rate, the Monarchs would be done with the echoes in a matter of seconds.

They were reluctant to enter the range of the labyrinth's authority for the same reason that Lindon didn't want to leave it. He couldn't do much except Forge echoes and send them out or launch Striker techniques from within the Valley.

This was like a bet between them. Lindon was betting that he would have backup if he stalled long enough, and they were betting he wouldn't.

But he didn't like this kind of back-and-forth deadlock. There had to be a way to get them to retreat so he could go back and help.

I'm not sure I can use the Bow again. Lindon said. He had almost passed out last time, and it was hard to recover his mental strength with the Dreadgod weapon still raging in his soul space.

[I didn't think you could use it last time,] Dross responded. [We have to engage the labyrinth defe—oh look, they're proving my point. So helpful.]

Even before Northstrider and Malice finished off the echoes, they began building up attacks that lit the sky. Lindon and Sacred Valley were pincered on two sides by a shining blood dragon and a star condensed onto the end of an arrow.

Lindon activated more of the labyrinth script's defenses. He had no choice. Invisible walls sprang up around the border of the Valley.

The walls would hold against straightforward attacks, but the Weeping Dragon could break them. And they wouldn't stop mental attacks, poison clouds, or even shadows. He had other defenses for that.

But the Monarchs could always cycle through more abilities. Left alone, they would find their way through any static defenses. Northstrider had already summoned his oracle codex and begun calculating a better method of attack.

Lindon cycled his madra. "Are you ready, Dross?"

[Yes. Absolutely. As long as you don't need to fight for more than a few seconds.]

"Let's take it one second at a time."

Lindon had a script-circle they couldn't penetrate at his back. He was the one with the fortress, which was a tactical advantage.

He'd leaned on that advantage to make it this far.

Lindon left Sacred Valley and shot through the air at Northstrider, but anything short of slipping through space was slow for an attack on a Monarch. Northstrider had plenty of time to see Lindon coming, sneer at him for it, change techniques, and meet Lindon with a punch that could crack the world.

Dross showed him all that before it happened.

Lindon would have loved to transport himself behind Northstrider, but he didn't have anything as handy as the Moonlight Bridge. If he used his Sage authority to approximate a similar effect, Northstrider would override him.

Instead, Lindon ignited the Soul Cloak and kicked off a platform of wind aura, slipping aside Northstrider's punch and preparing one of his

own.

The black orb over Northstrider's shoulder flickered with power, and the future changed.

[Redirect!] Dross shouted.

Lindon pulled himself up short, so Northstrider's punch scraped by him. The impact kicked up a hurricane's worth of wind, tearing a path through a nearby aura-storm.

The Empty Palm landed on nothing, then a Forged dragon rushed at Lindon and was torn apart by his Dreadgod arm.

They exchanged half a dozen moves in an instant, but neither landed a clean hit. Two opponents who could predict the other.

Dross called the time limit and Lindon shot back into the boundary. Northstrider tried to stop him, but Lindon slipped through a weak point in the barrier just as an arrow from Malice blasted through the space where he'd been standing.

The echoes had stalled her a little longer than Northstrider, but not long enough. Without Dross, Lindon wouldn't have made it out without a hole through him. But without Dross, Lindon wouldn't have tried going out there at all.

He cycled power through the Heart of Twin Stars, breaking down everything he'd Consumed from Northstrider in their brief exchange.

From outside the invisible barrier, he saw Northstrider doing the same thing.

"You're a child carrying weapons too heavy for him," the Monarch said. "Give them up before they drag you down."

Did you get that? Lindon asked Dross.

[Not yet I didn't. You know how few of his thoughts I read from that? Steal more!]

Lindon looked from Malice to Northstrider. "How about we duel for them?"

Malice's armor faded away and she gave a pleasant laugh. "A fair fight, then? Of course! I would never interfere."

Lindon watched her while keeping all expression from his face.

"Aw, you don't trust me? I'm hurt."

Malice would agree eventually. Their objective was to keep Lindon pinned here until the Dreadgod showed up, and preferably after. But she would look for a trap in any plan of his.

The enigma was Northstrider. He showed nothing on his face, as usual, and he was the one most likely to see through Lindon.

What was his oracle codex telling him right now?



In Northstrider's mind, his codex spun out Lindon's thoughts.

He has two advantages, the codex said in its cool voice. His primary plan will be to use the labyrinth, which has several functions that can reach beyond the boundaries. His backup will be a clash of authority. As the creator and bearer of a Dreadgod weapon and a limb from the Slumbering Wraith, he most likely believes his authority over hunger madra will give him an edge in your clash.

Will it? Northstrider asked. Such things were often vague.

The codex's response was confident. *Not enough. While his body has properties similar to a Dreadgod's, giving him power that in some ways exceeds that of a Monarch, he is not one. Your willpower is more refined and better able to conduct your authority. In fact, his attempt to control you will present an opening you can exploit.*

And what about Dross?

We cannot know for sure. The model of him was complete, but it is difficult to know how much he benefited from the madra of the Silent King. Even so, any possibility in which he out-performs me is very remote.

Even considering the ability of the Void Icon to shroud possible futures, that was a reassuring analysis. Northstrider had utmost confidence in his oracle codex.

In the end, Dross was a spirit. His codex was a weapon, optimized for performance. Even considering Dross' flexibility, a head-to-head contest between the two would have favorable results more often than not.

Northstrider showed none of his thoughts on his face or in his spirit, and the calculations of his codex took no time. He waited a moment longer, as though pondering, as his codex gave him the oath he needed to swear.

"I will swear to duel you," he said at last. "But we fight to death, surrender, or the arrival of the Weeping Dragon. I will not call for or allow any outside assistance, if you swear the same. But that must include the labyrinth."

Malice turned to him with shock that he was sure was feigned. She knew Northstrider well enough to realize that if he accepted seemingly unfavorable conditions, he had a trick left.

Lindon also tried to give nothing away, but there was a faint twitching in his face that the codex interpreted as suppressed relief. His eyes flickered slightly, as though he wanted to look to the Weeping Dragon and check how much time was left.

He believes these conditions favor him, the codex said. He will propose that you and Malice must back away from Sacred Valley if he wins.

“Prizes,” Lindon said. “The winner should get something.”

“Your bow,” Northstrider said immediately. The real prize would be Lindon’s defeat, at which point Northstrider could take whatever he wanted, but he would clearly establish what was on the line in case their duel was interrupted by the Weeping Dragon.

The Silent King Bow was the most powerful object Lindon owned that he could feasibly transfer as a prize. Northstrider would rather have the labyrinth or Dross, but Lindon couldn’t hand those over so easily.

“My daughter,” Malice added.

Lindon and Northstrider turned to her, and Northstrider was sure they both felt the same irritation. Malice gave a shameless smile. “You need me to agree as well, don’t you?”

Lindon won’t make that bet, the oracle codex predicted.

“I will not turn Mercy over,” Lindon said. “But I will separate her from the Book of Eternal Night and return that to you.”

Northstrider didn’t give anything away, but that surprised him. The oracle codex absorbed this new information and added it to Lindon’s model.

Malice’s smile gained an ugly shadow, but she gave a brief nod.

“However, if I have to pay out twice, so do you. If I win, you *both* return to Moongrave until the Weeping Dragon is defeated or I am.”

“To a maximum of three days,” Northstrider added, before the oracle codex had a chance to add it in. He wasn’t going to be trapped in one city because of a loophole in an oath, nor was he going to let Lindon drag him into a week-long battle. Not that he expected Lindon to want such a thing, but he had endured such fights before.

“Agreed.” Lindon extended his right hand. “Shake on it?”

Northstrider gave the Dreadgod arm a disgusted look.

Lindon shrugged. “Apologies. I do so swear upon my soul to abide to the conditions in good faith.”

“I swear,” Northstrider and Malice said at the same time.

Then Malice faded into shadow as the clash between Northstrider’s fist and Lindon’s shattered space.

Lindon was blasted down and away from Sacred Valley like a meteorite, as Northstrider intended. However advanced Lindon was, a Sage couldn’t keep up with a Monarch who had manifested the Strength Icon, though of course his Dreadgod arm didn’t break under the impact.

Northstrider stayed on him, tearing through the air. His oracle codex gave him two possibilities: Lindon would either launch Striker techniques to create more space even as he flew backward, or he would begin building up power for a larger strike.

It was the latter. Blackflame gathered around his left hand, condensing and Forging into the tips of claws.

That had been a mistake. The strength of a thousand dragons flowed through the Enforcer technique Northstrider funneled into his fists, until his punch was surrounded by a transparent, blood-red dragon.

Lindon was already moving to dodge, as the oracle codex couldn’t surpass Dross’ predictive ability enough to allow him to land a clean hit.

So Northstrider relied on his own authority. He was the superior here. His words should be obeyed. All bowed before him, including Lindon.

That certainty resonated with the Strength Icon and with the Dragon Icon. Only the strongest reigned, and he was the strongest.

It lent weight to his command when he ordered Lindon to **“Stop.”**

Lindon shivered as he struggled against the working of authority, and his will was anything but weak. Even so, he had to spend a split-second of his attention resisting. His Dreadgod hand started to Consume the energy radiating off Northstrider, but those sips of power wouldn’t be enough to help him.

Carrying enough force to crack mountains, Northstrider’s punch landed on Lindon’s ribs.

By all rights, a direct hit from Northstrider should have disintegrated a Sage. His oracle codex told him what to expect from Lindon, though. Not only had his flesh been partially integrated with a Dreadgod’s, but he’d used that very arm to feed on the vitality and blood essence of the Wandering Titan and the Silent King.

He wouldn't be torn to pieces...but he wouldn't be unscathed. Sure enough, Northstrider felt ribs shattering under the impact, and Lindon's new black-and-white eyes widened in shock and pain. Before he shot away—into the sky, this time—he coughed up blood.

That was more satisfying than Northstrider had expected.

The oracle codex predicted Lindon's retaliation: a fully empowered Hollow Domain to create space while he healed. When blue-white madra exploded into a sphere around Lindon, Northstrider tore through the technique with the help of a Forged dragon, slicing his way closer.

Lindon ducked him and Consumed the Forger technique, but that created an opening for Northstrider to kick him in the back. His spine cracked while Northstrider's blood-and-hunger madra ravaged him internally.

Why is he using Consume so recklessly? Northstrider asked. This was at least the second time that Lindon had shown him a gap so that he could Consume some power, but the Void Sage had lost out wildly in both exchanges. He would need more power than he stole just to fuel his Bloodforged Iron body.

The oracle codex had an instant answer, of course. Lindon was aiming to establish authority over hunger. If he could make such a command with Northstrider's madra in him, it would be more effective.

Neither Northstrider nor the codex could think of another explanation, especially since Lindon was still concentrating madra in his left hand. His hand was gloved in Forged madra and was starting to trail fire and destruction aura.

Northstrider sent Striker techniques thundering after Lindon, and he felt a faint regret. No matter how many unique advantages Lindon had, inexperience would always show itself. Lindon was clinging to what he saw as his one chance of winning: creating an opening with hunger authority and then finishing Northstrider off with *The Dragon Descends*.

Even if that *would* work, Lindon would take too much of a beating while setting up. An experienced opponent would know that.

Northstrider's regret turned to anger. If Lindon hadn't let his identity as the Destroyer's apprentice go to his head, he wouldn't have challenged the Monarchs, and then he might have been a great asset. Even a disciple to Northstrider himself.

Instead, Northstrider was going to break him here. He would teach a lesson that Lindon would be lucky to survive.

The next few seconds were a farce of a battle. Lindon sent black dragon's breath thundering through the air, of a power Northstrider hadn't seen since he'd last slain a black dragon Herald. The boy slipped aside from some of Northstrider's attacks, no doubt guided by Dross' predictions. He broke or endured several techniques, Consuming breaths of power and will from them.

But Northstrider stripped far more power from Lindon than he lost. Flesh was torn from Lindon's legs, though he endured the agony and regenerated them. Bones were shattered, blood flew, and Lindon's spirit was in chaos. His soulfire dipped low, and his will lost its iron strength. Even the technique layered over his left hand wasn't growing anymore; it was all Lindon could do to maintain it.

Northstrider almost didn't want to continue. His disgust was too much.

Ordinarily, anyone tough enough to trade blows with him had the skill to back it up. A weaker opponent would have died already, but someone with proportional experience would be more of a threat.

This felt like bullying a child.

The oracle codex checked Fate and confirmed that the flow of events was heading without deviation toward a victory of Northstrider's. There was virtually no other outcome.

Not that Northstrider needed a complex fortune-telling device to tell him that.

A serpentine blood dragon grabbed Lindon in its jaws and crashed into the ground, slamming him into a crater that grew deeper and deeper. The oracle codex showed Northstrider that he could follow up and tear Lindon in half, but he stopped in midair.

He hovered over the young man. Malice's amusement was palpable, and she drifted down to join him, a mocking smile on her lips.

"How satisfying," she said with a sigh.

"How did you let him beat you?" Northstrider asked.

"We already squeezed him dry today, didn't we? It can't be easy, juggling the labyrinth and a Dreadgod weapon while fighting Monarchs. Poor boy."

She sounded delighted.

Northstrider looked down into the crater. Lindon's cores were still bright, but madra capacity was only one aspect of endurance. If his body and will couldn't keep up, he still couldn't last.

"Surrender," Northstrider called down.

Rocks stirred below. Lindon was holding onto the Blackflame claws in his left hand, and his spirit was still chewing away at the power he'd taken from Northstrider. He was a sack of bloody skin over crushed, misshapen bones, and his eyes rolled aimlessly as he tried to focus.

Malice giggled, but Northstrider didn't feel anything but revulsion and frustration. He had warned Lindon repeatedly.

He'll try an attack, the codex warned him, highlighting the danger. Northstrider dropped from the air. He slammed his foot into Lindon's left wrist, and Lindon cried out.

His Blackflame technique shuddered like a candle on the verge of being extinguished. Lindon reached up and grabbed Northstrider's leg with his right hand, attempting to Consume.

Northstrider didn't allow it to happen.

The oracle codex scoffed. *He's too weak. Definitely. We're in the clear.* It showed him the future, spinning out in an unbroken line: Northstrider tucking away the Silent King Bow and binding Lindon in oaths.

Northstrider would have the labyrinth, the Dreadgod weapon, and Dross. With those together, he could finish his projects and challenge the Abidan.

Even he felt his heart move with excitement. He owed Lindon some gratitude for this foolishness. Without it, he might have taken—

Something tickled the back of his mind, and he returned his attention to the oracle codex.

Repeat what you said, Northstrider ordered.

Lindon's Consume technique was too weak to feed on Northstrider. The Dreadgod arm pulled at Northstrider's ankle again, but nothing came through.

I, uh, I said he's too weak. What's the problem?

The oracle codex was a calculation device. Not a person.

And it did not speak like one.

Oops, the codex said. *Would you believe me if I said I've advanced in the middle of battle? No?*

Northstrider would be a fool if he didn't recognize the voice now. He pulled his leg away from Lindon...and found he couldn't.

[Game's up, Lindon,] the oracle codex said in Dross' voice.

Lindon's eyes snapped open, and his willpower wasn't as exhausted as Northstrider had thought.

Suddenly, Northstrider realized Malice had been speaking to him, but he hadn't heard it. Something had been blocking his ears.

"What are you *doing*?" Malice demanded. "Stop him! Why are you just standing there?"

Northstrider's strength was flowing out of his leg in great rivers, pouring into Lindon. The Consume technique had worked after all, he just hadn't felt it.

The Consume technique that he himself had taught.

"Release," Northstrider commanded immediately, but Lindon spoke at the same time.

"Feed."

Their workings wrestled against one another, but Northstrider knew his would win. He was the strongest, and that belief was founded on his unequalled authority.

He believed it until the moment Lindon's working swallowed his, and the Consume technique devoured him from the inside.

Lindon released his leg for a moment, but only to stand and get a better grip on Northstrider's neck. The Monarch resisted feebly, but Lindon had the lion's share of his power.

Lindon's body knitted itself together, wounds reversing themselves and bones crackling back into shape.

In Lindon's left hand, his Blackflame technique roared to life. It blazed like a dark sun with razor claws, and it trailed a serpent of smoke-like power. As Northstrider watched through dazed eyes, the power took on more and more of the aspect of a true dragon. He could see its scales, feel the power of its claws.

And Northstrider saw something else. Flickering and fitful, an indistinct image began to appear in the air behind the technique. A twisting, dark, serpentine dragon. The Dragon Icon.

This wasn't a true advancement. Lindon wasn't fully manifesting the Icon, as he had never established the proper authority.

He was using Northstrider's.

The oracle codex—under Dross’ direction—now showed him the real flow of Fate. After defeating him here, Lindon would turn to Malice and drive her off. The clash with the Weeping Dragon was still uncertain, but it became much less so with Northstrider’s stolen power.

Merciless and colorless eyes watched the realization in Northstrider. “To death or surrender,” Lindon said.

Northstrider struggled weakly. He would never surrender.

“Gratitude,” Lindon said.

Then a black dragon crashed down onto Northstrider and blasted him into the earth.



Malice flew back as the wall of dark fire exploded outward. Lindon’s technique didn’t just envelop Northstrider; it detonated in an explosion of infernal, all-consuming heat. She sheathed herself in armor and endured the tide.

Northstrider wasn’t dead. She could feel his presence far below. He was weak, possibly unconscious.

Lindon, on the other hand...

Blackflame madra splashed against the barrier around Sacred Valley like water against a dam and retreated. The tide left nothing but smoke in the air and miles of territory scorched to dust.

As ash fell from the sky, the Queen of the Ashwind Continent felt the first notes of fear echoing in her soul.

She had looked into Fate and not seen this outcome. His skill in shrouding the future was growing by the day.

Wei Shi Lindon Arelius drifted closer to her, and he blazed with Northstrider’s power. His right hand opened and closed, still hungry, and the white in his eyes shone with the same appetite.

She readied her bow, but she already saw the trap that had caught her.

The trap she had walked into, too confident in her foresight.

“Northstrider is not dead,” Lindon said. “And he didn’t surrender.” Blackflame kindled in his hand. “You’re not going to interfere in our duel, are you?”

It was hard to twist a soul oath against its intention. Malice hoped it wouldn't work this time...but her spirit tightened at even the thought of turning her bow on Lindon.

The duel really *wasn't* over. The possibility remained that Northstrider could have his own trump card and turn the tables, and she knew it.

More importantly, she knew that Lindon couldn't take on Northstrider like that without losing something. The boy might be in worse shape than he looked and could die on his own before Northstrider did.

With those possibilities still clear, she couldn't violate her oath.

She scanned him with the full force of her perception, but she sensed little besides chaos. He certainly wasn't at his best condition, but a Monarch's power still ran through his channels undigested, his cores were full, and two minds resisted her intrusion.

Dragon's breath slammed into her armor, and she was forced back much farther than she expected. The stability of her bloodline armor trembled, however slightly.

The authority of the Dragon Icon had been added onto a Path of black dragon-fire.

And Lindon hadn't sworn an oath not to harm *her*.

Malice could only run and hope he didn't chase her. She could feel the Way warping around him as he prepared a great working, and she moved herself before it landed.

"Home," Malice said, and twisted space through shadows. She slipped into darkness and ran to Moongrave.

Three days. By that time, she hoped Lindon would be food for the Weeping Dragon. Though at the first opportunity, she would look into the future to confirm that.

Because she feared the truth would be the other way around.

NOT ONLY DID LINDON NOT FOLLOW MALICE, BUT IT WAS ALL HE COULD DO to maintain consciousness.

Northstrider's power was like a new opponent all its own. Madra thundered through his channels and stuck in his Dreadgod arm, a will equal to Lindon's own tried to wrestle control away, and the strength stored in his body was like nothing Lindon had felt short of a Dreadgod.

Even his memories were heavier than usual, so that Lindon was buried in their sheer weight. Dross handled as many as he could, but the mind-spirit was at his limit too.

[I'm...not going to be...good for much,] Dross said, his mental voice strained. [Not unless we want...to kill me again. Which we don't. I'm...speaking for both of us.]

Even reinforced, enhanced, and repaired as Dross was, exerting control over Northstrider's oracle codex had taken everything he had. Especially doing it while hiding from the Monarch, which had also taken a massive working of the Void Icon.

As for Lindon, he barely had a thought to spare about Dross. All his attention was going to the Heart of Twin Stars as it divided the spiritual river they'd drained from Northstrider into tiny streams of many colors.

He was only holding on by the tips of his fingers. For their ruse to work, he'd needed to deceive Northstrider into thinking the fight was over.

The trick to deceiving Monarchs, he'd found out, was to make your lie ninety percent true.

His will really *was* strained, his body ravaged. Using a Dreadgod weapon while manipulating the labyrinth was a heavy enough burden, and to duel a Monarch afterward...he still had plenty of madra left, but that was virtually the only resource he wasn't out of.

The weight of Northstrider's energy was settling into him. His Bloodforged Iron body had seen to his wounds and supported the Heart of Twin Stars in processing blood essence. It seeped into his muscles and bones, bolstering them.

The stolen authority of the Dragon Icon raged through him. He could see what Orthos meant now; the nature of a dragon was in more than their natural instincts and inborn strength. It was the arrogance and certainty of being born a higher being.

And with it came power.

Northstrider's memories were a waterfall of images and impressions, but Lindon had to let them go without inspection. There were surely lifetimes of lessons within, but even a fraction of Northstrider's knowledge was like having a thousand books crammed into his mind at once. If he tried to dive in, he would be overwhelmed.

Dross could sort the memories later, when he recovered. There would be treasures buried in Northstrider's mind.

That thought was a spark of delight in Lindon's soul. He still struggled to separate the forces he'd absorbed, but he had crested the hill. It would only get easier from here.

He had done it. Bested a Monarch. And not just any Monarch, but Northstrider; the creator of Ghostwater, and one of the first Monarchs Suriel had shown him on her world tour.

He could level Sacred Valley on his own, she had told him, and you could save it, if you had skills and powers like his.

Now, he did.

When Lindon fully processed what he'd stolen, the gap between them would only grow.

Or...

He could hold on. While it would be difficult to do so, the authority of the Dragon Icon would be invaluable for Orthos. He could give Ziel some more memories, and Northstrider's madra would be compatible with Yerin's.

As he thought of his friends, he stretched his awareness north.

At which point he froze in sudden fear.

Ordinarily Dross would have warned him first, but the mind-spirit was busy. He noticed a second later than Lindon did, and then they shared the same alarm.

Reigan Shen was approaching *Windfall*.

King's Key madra burned against Lindon's perception, coming closer and closer to the pocket world.

Windfall was hidden as well as Lindon could hide anything, not to mention located over a random stretch of the Trackless Sea, but clearly Shen had found it. He was moving too quickly for this to be a coincidence.

Lindon had left constructs and other security measures, including some scaled for a Monarch, but they would only slow Shen, not stop him. Lindon had to hope the people inside would sense what was happening and defend themselves in time. Or that he could get there.

He flew faster than ever into Sacred Valley, blurring as he flew straight for the Nethergate.

"Home!" Lindon coughed out, but there was no authority behind the command. His will was too scattered, too chaotic. He tried again, reaching toward the ground with his Dreadgod hand. "**Home!**"

Space twisted around him as he was seized by the spatial authority of the labyrinth, but his vision dimmed and head split. The Monarch power inside him left his control and started to rampage, tearing him up from the inside, but he stayed focused.

He reappeared in a dark chamber at the bottom of the ocean, and he blasted his way up.

Desperately hoping to make it in time.



Yerin sat cross-legged in her cycling room within Ghostwind Hall, gathering blood and sword aura and weaving them together. But at the same time, she also had to operate the blood madra inside her body in a way that resonated with its minor hunger aspect from the Phoenix.

Using one cycling technique at a time was hard enough. This was trying to play two different songs on two instruments at once. And making them not sound like a sack of squealing cats.

An angry hiss distracted her, along with a loud, insistent tapping sound.

She broke off her cycling and looked up, annoyed. The angular skeleton of blood madra drilled its sharpened fingers on a chalkboard, which was covered in complex notations.

“Would be about a thousand miles closer to easy if you would just talk,” she pointed out for the hundredth time. “You’re not tricking anybody.”

The Blood Sage’s Remnant somewhat resembled him in life: a crimson skeleton, though the spirit’s skull had no eyes. At least, not inside it. Eyes floated all around his head, and they glared at her in frustration.

Except for the color, he looked like a Remnant of darkness and dreams. A spirit born from nightmares.

Angrily, he tapped the chalkboard again.

“‘With a crimson desire for violence,’ all right, is this a poem? Are you writing a poem? Crimson desire?”

The Remnant picked up chalk and circled the word ‘desire’ three times.

“I’d give my left arm to know why you’re giving me the theoretical...” She only spent a second hunting for the right word before the spirit scribbled the word ‘underpinnings.’

“...*underpinnings* of a cycling technique.”

When the spirit began furiously pointing from one word to another symbol, making a case once again for why she needed to learn the basis of the technique.

“I can already do it, can’t I? Just need to sharpen it up. We’ve been practicing in here so long I’m turning gray. If you’ve got pointers, I’ve got two ears, but I couldn’t tell you what I’m missing besides practice.”

The Remnant, predictably, pointed to the words ‘crimson desire.’

Yerin massaged her eyes. On some level, she understood what the Sage’s spirit was trying to tell her. Manifesting an Icon was just making herself resemble a concept, so it made sense to look at it conceptually. She needed to change the way she did things, more than what she did.

According to the Blood Sage, anyway.

...and according to the Sword Sage, which was the only reason she listened to Red Faith at all.

She’d been enduring Red Faith’s silent lectures for days and trying her best to apply them to her cycling, but it seemed like so much smoke and nonsense so far.

Meanwhile, Lindon was having a battle with Monarchs outside. While the information from the outside world trickled in slower than syrup in winter, the constructs brought her the sense of the mythic war he was fighting to protect them.

While she was here. In a classroom. With a mute nightmare skeleton who wouldn't stop tapping the word 'desire.'

Yerin wished she could trade places with Lindon. He would enjoy this.

But she *couldn't* trade places with him; she couldn't fight on the same level. Which was why she needed to be here in the first place.

That cycle of frustration kept her thoughts moving in a circle until she wanted to pick up her sword and go to battle with the Blood Sage just for a change of pace. And because she still thought he deserved it.

The Remnant spat out air again, then used a cloth to wipe a small corner of the board clean. Quickly, he wrote out 'I killed your family.'

Yerin's breath almost stopped.

He erased that and replaced it. 'I planted that Blood Shadow.'

"What is this? Trying to unload guilt after you're dead? You wanted me to bury you, all you had to do was ask."

'All to find someone like you.'

He was trying to goad a reaction out of her, but she couldn't imagine what he was expecting other than a sword through the chest. Which he was about to get.

'I would kill your family a thousand times again.'

Yerin's sword stabbed through his hand, the chalkboard, and the stone behind it. A severed chunk of Remnant hand fell to the floor.

"Whatever you're after, you've got a breath left to get there," Yerin said, an inch away from his face.

The Remnant didn't seem to care about his loss of a limb. Remnants usually felt pain, but he wasn't showing any. Still with the same amount of irritation as before, the Sage's Remnant reached up with his one remaining hand and tapped the most common symbol on the board.

It meant 'cycle.'

Yerin spared him another glare, but she dropped into a cycling position and began weaving all the elements together. Her Path of the Endless Sword cycling technique, modified to incorporate blood aura. Then the hunger technique they'd cobbled together from the Blood Sage, from Redmoon the Herald, and from Northstrider's Consume.

She was in the process of juggling everything when she heard more tapping and briefly opened an eye.

The Remnant was re-absorbing his severed hand, but in the meantime, he tapped the sentence she'd split in half. 'I would kill your family a thousand times again.'

Her spirit flared with anger and a desire to kill him.

And the technique clicked into place.

Suddenly it was like every separate piece had been designed to work together from the very beginning. It all fell into step like a regiment of trained soldiers, and a faint reddish haze appeared all over Yerin's body. Like crimson moonlight drifting into her skin.

The Remnant jabbed a finger in her direction.

Her cycling technique wasn't stable yet, it fell apart quickly, but she finally understood what he had meant all along. Her attitude was the key piece.

The more she *wanted* to kill her opponent, the easier it would be to steal their power. And if she wanted to keep this up all the time, she'd have to do more than draw blood. She'd have to get to a place where she *wanted* to draw blood.

Yerin didn't like that. But she did admit that the Remnant had been guiding her in the right direction.

"Thanks," she muttered.

The crimson skeleton threw its hands—well, its hand and its slowly regenerating stump—into the air with exasperation. Then it wiped away its taunts.

She jerked her chin at the sentence. "How much did you mean it?"

The Sage's spirit scoffed again in a hiss of escaping steam. It scribbled two more sentences.

'I don't keep track of every Blood Shadow' was the first one.

And the second: 'I didn't care about you.'

"Now that," Yerin said, "I can believe."

She wanted to show Lindon her new hunger technique—now that she had her own version of Consume, she could catch up.

But he was fighting Monarchs.

Worry itched at her, but she shoved it down and went into the sparring hall. The wide, open building had been reinforced by rare metals and scripts

laid by Lindon and Ziel until the place could handle even her Final Sword without collapsing.

As long as she didn't hit the wall directly.

As Yerin entered, she threw open her void key and tossed out a couple of Underlord Remnants. Lindon had kept them in storage for training, and knowing him, he'd make them into constructs eventually.

The two spirits—a blue one that looked like a half-liquid lobster and a sort of squat mechanical squirrel—trembled at the feel of her spirit, but she gave them no attention. Yerin closed her eyes, aligning her breathing to the pattern of her new technique.

It took her a breath and a half longer than she wanted, but she got her madra moving. It still felt clunky, like trying to walk in a pair of shoes made for someone Lindon's size. Until she focused on her heart.

She *wanted* to kill them.

The technique lined up, but not perfectly. Not as it had with Red Faith. She focused harder.

It was the Monarchs she really wanted to kill. They were responsible for the Bleeding Phoenix staying alive at all.

That was a little better. She began to hear a sound, not like the distant sensation of an Icon, but like the song of a nearby Remnant. It was coming from her, but she didn't inspect it closer.

Eyes still shut, she pushed further.

She remembered Reigan Shen's face as he looked down on them in the labyrinth. When he hovered over Redmoon Hall and mocked her. She pictured Malice, treating Yerin like a worm on a hook. And doing worse to Mercy.

The sound burst into full song, and Yerin opened her eyes.

Soft red moonlight drifted off her in a subtle aura, and a sound that reminded her of the Bleeding Phoenix's song drifted around her. Now, at last, this was more than just a cycling technique. She'd finally pushed it into the shape she wanted.

The spirit Enforcer technique filled her, preparing her soul.

With one motion, Yerin cut the two Remnants in half. They weren't the ones she *really* wanted to kill, but this was a necessary step.

When she slashed them to pieces, she braced herself. She thought she knew what to expect, having watched Lindon Consume more than his share of Remnants, dreadbeasts, and living sacred artists.

Instead, the places where she'd cut the Remnants turned red. Silver-red light burst from the wounds like chains, wrapping them all over and binding them in place.

Suddenly, Yerin could *feel* them. They were connected to her, resonating with the hunger madra technique that flowed through her. Physical and mental strength flowed into her, as well as pieces of lifeline—only trickles, considering that they were Underlords and Remnants, but better than nothing—and Yerin was hit by a handful of faint memories and a splash of weak willpower.

Breaking that willpower was easier than wrestling an earthworm, but Yerin felt confusion dilute her desire to kill. She hadn't gotten any madra.

And the Remnants were still there.

The chains of her madra had pulled them back together, stitching them into the forms they had before she tore them up. They were weaker than before, having lost much of their strength to Yerin, and they looked like a couple of puppet-constructs bound together crudely with her madra.

She could feel them.

Experimentally, she ordered them, "Hop up and down."

They started to do it. Awkwardly, in the case of the blue lobster, which splashed every time it hit the ground.

Yerin stared. "Dross, give me the ten-word story of what I just did."

Dross materialized next to her, looking faint. The original had left this limited copy weeks ago, from her perspective at least, and it was running out of power.

[First, let me remind you that *you're* the one who helped design the technique, and the original version of me has much greater—]

"Ten words, Dross."

One of the Remnants crumbled to nothing. She got an even smaller burst of energy, but most of its madra started to dissolve to essence.

Dross squinted his single eye as though counting words. [You take what you can, and the rest is captured.]

Yerin let her technique fade, thinking. She had based this on the Phoenix madra's ability to create bloodspawn, but she had been picturing something different. She'd imagined draining power from the people she stabbed like they were bloodspawn delivering power to the Phoenix.

Red Faith had seized on that concept and added his own designs to it, but it was still rare for a technique to work so differently to the user's

imagination. As Yerin herself had once taught Lindon, the intentions behind a technique were one of the most important parts.

Dross floated up in front of her. [Would you like ten more words?]

“Nah, I’m stable. You can take a rest. And thanks.” Now that she had an idea of how the technique was supposed to work, it would only get better from here. She could actually practice.

The second Remnant fell to pieces.

[Oh! You thanked me! That feels good, you should do that more often.]

She frowned at him. “I know how to thank people.”

[You didn’t thank Eithan when he went up to the heavens,] Dross pointed out.

Yerin considered and tossed aside several responses. Her instinct was to hit back, but Lindon was gone, and everyone was working harder than they ever had. She needed someone to really talk to.

“Didn’t know what to say, did I?” she muttered at last. “Gone over that in my head a thousand and one times. Got a whole pack of things I could have said, should have said.”

Dross’ eye widened, and he stared at her from an inch in front of her nose.

“...You trying to see into my brain?”

[That’s more than I’ve heard you open up to anyone but Lindon. This Phoenix Song technique has warped your thoughts. Not to be rude, but you should keep using it.]

Yerin took a step back herself, since Dross didn’t seem like he was going to. “Phoenix Song?”

[Makes sense, right? You sound all musical while you’re using it, like your *skin* is singing. Hm. I don’t like that description, for some reason.]

“Phoenix Song.” She ran it through her head and nodded. “I like it.”

[Are you sure? I could call the others! It’s been a while since we’ve voted on a name.]

“No, that’s all locked up. Thanks.”

Dross threw up his tendrils. [Twice! I’ve been thanked twice! My original won’t even believe my memories.]

For a few more hours, Yerin practiced the Phoenix Song. As she’d expected, it was much easier to control once she had the proper mental image, but she needed to try it on *real* opponents. Weak Remnants didn’t

give her much benefit and only lasted for a snap before they crumbled to pieces.

Then she went about the routine she'd followed daily, while Lindon was gone: checking on the others.

Ziel was, as usual, sitting in front of the Paths of Heaven. He was seated in a cycling position on the ground, his green horns glowing and eyes shut, but he wasn't cycling. The fourth display was lit, the one that swirled with unreadable letters.

She found it the most confusing one, but Ziel said it helped him steer his Grand Oath Array.

A loop of Forged silver runes spun around him, so complicated they made her eyes hurt just looking at them. More symbols hovered in the air above him, though they were only arranged in a circle by the loosest definition. Those runes flipped, shifted, and transported between one another like a Sage was juggling them through space.

Yerin entered quietly and waited until she was sure he sensed her presence before she spoke. "You ready for today's test?"

"I don't need to test it so often," Ziel responded without opening his eyes. "But yes."

She'd brought a fruit for exactly this purpose, which had been grown in a small garden sustained by life aura. It resembled a pink-skinned apple, and she took a bite from it before she tossed it into the center of the network of spinning silver runes.

It froze in the middle like an invisible hand had caught the apple, but there were no flows of vital aura around it. Ziel's eyebrows wrinkled as he concentrated, and the fruit began to rot in seconds. It had just turned into mush when the script flickered, and the half-rotten mass of apple hit the ground with a splat.

Ziel gave a heavy sigh. "It's supposed to stay there until it's dust."

"That's a stretch more than you could do yesterday," Yerin pointed out. "And with you not being a Sage. That calls for cheers if you ask me."

Yerin thought she wouldn't get much more than a sigh out of him, or maybe a glum comment, but Ziel opened his eyes and gave her a firm nod.

"Almost," he said. "I am getting used to it. Soon, I think, I'll have something to really be proud of."

That was worth a smile, Yerin thought. "Now you sound like a Sage."

“The Monarch who invented this technique was killed by the Dreadgods,” Ziel went on, “so obviously I’ll still have further to go.”

Yerin’s smile withered. “If you were happy about something, you think it might kill you?”

“I am happy,” Ziel said. He sounded confused, so Yerin turned away from him and activated one of the Paths of Heaven that didn’t hurt her head so bad.

The last one.

Ziel flinched as the dark cave appeared, its darkness somehow thicker and deeper even than Mercy’s shadow cycling room.

“I don’t know how you even get close to that,” he said.

Yerin walked up to the darkness, standing at the twilight edge. Absolute silence came from within, and she was certain that a single touch would mean her death.

The sensation was comforting, somehow. Not the thought of dying; Yerin meant to live forever. The familiar feeling.

On the verge of death was how she’d lived her life.

She had meditated here, by the cave Eithan had created thousands of years ago, while trying to learn his sword strike. She continued because something in the silence spoke to her. In a way, it harmonized with her Phoenix Song technique.

There was something there. Something she could use. A bridge between herself, her two new techniques, and the Path she’d been following since she was a girl. Something...

Her thoughts snapped back to reality when she felt Ziel grab her wrist.

“I know it’s just an illusion,” he said, “but I wouldn’t go in there.”

Yerin had been leaning forward, ready to step into the black hole left behind by the embodiment of Death.

She shuddered and backed up. “That was about a mile too close.” Then, because Dross had put it into her brain, she added, “Thanks.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Oh. You’re welcome.”

Yerin resolved to thank people more often.

Next up was Orthos, whose training Yerin could hear from anywhere in Ghostwind Hall. Since Yerin had been using the sparring hall, he’d moved down to one of the bigger empty caverns within the island of pale stone.

When she arrived, she saw Orthos surrounding himself with the Burning Cloak and crashing against the Herald dragon Remnant.

The two slammed their heads together with a crash like an exploding boulder. Orthos' scalp split open, leaking blood.

"Again!" Orthos shouted.

The Remnant hesitated, and Orthos pounced on that hesitation immediately. His eyes shone a bright orange-red and he leaped up and over the spirit. He unleashed a flow of dragon's breath down on Noroloth's back.

The serpentine spirit twisted around and matched the Striker technique with dragon's breath of his own, but then Orthos slashed down with his right foreleg.

Blackflame madra Forged quickly, forming claws, and Orthos slammed The Dragon Descends down.

If Noroloth hadn't been the Remnant of a Herald, the technique's explosion would have destroyed the cavern. Instead, he controlled the force and kept it from erupting into the walls.

He *didn't* stop the fire from washing over Yerin, so she did it herself.

"Good!" the Remnant shouted. "Soon, you will be an Archlord, and you will be worthy of my line!"

Orthos roared, and a void key opened nearby. Noroloth seized a struggling black-and-red dragon Remnant, hurling it toward Orthos.

From Orthos' soulspace, he summoned a hunger construct over his jaws so that his mouth was filled with gray-white fangs of Forged hunger. Then he bit down.

Power flowed from the Remnant up the teeth and into Orthos, lighting up scripts etched into the fangs. Orthos devoured the entire Overlord spirit in moments, pulling it to pieces and eating each one at a time.

Yerin had seen plenty of animals feeding on one another. Some of them were sacred beasts and others ordinary predators. But seeing Orthos do it was still a little revolting. She much preferred the look of Lindon's Consume technique.

It was cleaner. More...elegant. At least, that's how Eithan would put it.

Orthos shuddered as he fought against the flood of willpower and memories remaining in the Remnant. Without Lindon and Dross to filter them, he took the full brunt of their impact, though Yerin was sure the set of construct-teeth weren't as efficient as Lindon's arm.

Even so, her own experience with hunger madra told her it would be a struggle, but Orthos only shuddered a little as he worked his way through the Remnant.

“Is it that time already?” he asked Yerin in between bites.

“You’d have a better feel for the time if you had been sleeping.”

“It is not the time for rest.”

“Eh, that’s a little shaky. Depends. You looking to swallow down all those memories, or you looking to lose your mind again?” Yerin faced him down evenly, arms folded. She well remembered fighting a half-mad Orthos back when a Truegold posed a threat to her.

Orthos didn’t show her the embarrassment or understanding she would have expected from dredging up his past. He lifted his chin and looked to her with dignity. “If I can be consumed from within by these lesser shades, then I was not strong enough to begin with.”

The cavern shook as Noroloth laughed. He slithered over Orthos and glared down at Yerin. “You see, human? This is the attitude of a true dragon. My own blood. You would be wise not to doubt us.”

Yerin eyed him. “You’ve got a lot of mouth for a pile of Blackflame scales.”

“Your protector has been gone a long time.” He loomed over her, his too-wide mouth baring teeth. “The rest of you take me too lightly. I am—”

Yerin took a stance. She had no trouble getting in the proper mindset for this one, not with the Herald’s Remnant looming over her. And after staring into the darkness of Death.

She let the memory of Eithan’s strike fill her, and the world grew silent.

Before she could swing, Noroloth crashed to the ground. His madra stilled completely, and he slunk toward her on his belly. “I was kidding, of course, kidding! There’s no need to take me so seriously! I am pleased to render what aid I can, and if there’s more I can offer...”

Yerin let her technique fade half-formed. “You bark a lot more than you bite, don’t you?”

Noroloth chuckled nervously, but he no longer had Yerin’s attention. Orthos hadn’t banished his hunger fangs, his eyes still burned, and his shell smoldered with Blackflame. From the feel of his madra, he was about to throw himself at her.

“Take a breath, Orthos,” she said.

“I will not bow to a *human*,” Orthos spat.

Yerin looked him over from nose to tail. On the outside, nothing had changed from his growth to the peak of Overlord. But she was here to watch for changes on the inside.

“You tell me that was something you would have said before, and I’ll cut you down for being a liar.”

Blackflame flared in his spirit, and she wondered if he was going to attack her. Her heart tightened. If he did, that would be her chance to beat some sense back into him, but it would also mean there was less of the Orthos she knew left than she thought.

But sense returned to his eyes, and he looked up from the floor. His face twisted in a grimace. “I am sorry, Yerin. It is hard to remember myself, sometimes.”

“I can go grab Blue, if you need her to put the fire out.”

He shook his head. “It isn’t Blackflame damage. It is what you said. I have fed too much. It makes me feel strong and helps me break down the wills of these little spirits. But I forget myself.”

“I’m stone-certain Lindon has something to help keep your memories.” Yerin would bet a Monarch’s entire fortune that Lindon had made something with that effect in the void key he’d left behind.

Orthos gave a skeptical rumble. “It is not that I confuse their memories for my own. I forget what it *feels* like to be myself. What would I have said before? Would I have felt the same? What is my will, and what is the will I have stolen?”

With an unnecessarily intense jerk, he tore another piece off the dissolving Overlord Remnant. “It is...frustrating.”

“Sleep,” Yerin said.

Orthos nodded as he chewed.

“Not joking, playing, or lying,” Yerin went on. “Bleed me if I know why it happens, but sleeping helps keep everything straight. Don’t eat any more of these guys until I check on you tomorrow, how about that as a deal?”

“A day here is minutes for him.” Orthos looked to her. “You know better than I do how many techniques a Monarch can use in a minute.”

Yerin let out a breath. That was the needle stuck in her heart. The problem she had been trying to forget.

The others couldn’t help Lindon in his fight. They were stuck here until they could face a Dreadgod.

But Yerin *could*. She could go out there and help him. Fight at his side. She just couldn’t help *enough*.

It would be easier if she couldn't do anything at all, or so she thought. Then she'd have no choice but to stay put. Having the choice, and having to choose over and over again to do nothing, to be disciplined, to use time efficiently...

It reminded her of her early days training the Endless Sword. A cut here, a nick there, that added up to a thousand little scars.

Her brain must have been stuck for a moment, because Orthos nudged her with his snout before she realized it. The jaws of hunger madra had vanished, and he raised his head to meet her with kindness in his eyes. He was Orthos again.

"You know what I feel from him?" Orthos asked. "Strength. And trust."

Even with the time warping turned down low, every grain of sand that fell from the hourglass was another threat to Lindon's life. Yerin leaned her forehead against Orthos, feeling the warmth of his leathery skin.

"What if we don't make it?" she asked quietly.

"He knows we will. I have not felt a moment of doubt from him. Not one."

The rumble of his voice comforted her, and she tried to release the tension in her chest. After a second, she pulled back.

"Hang on. Thought I was the one here to quiet *you* down."

Orthos' chuckle released a mouthful of smoke. "How the wind turns. I will rest for the day. Remind me tomorrow when the time comes." He bumped her with the edge of his shell. "And take that advice yourself."

Yerin had one more stop to make for the day before she could sleep—or, more likely, before she could lie awake and worry for a few hours.

Mercy had set herself up in a corner of the island. With her hair tied back and her training clothes loose, she lounged in a hammock of her own creation, which she'd strung between two buildings. She looked up at the multi-colored clouds and sipped a drink through a straw.

Mercy was the picture of a clan's young lady on holiday, but Yerin could sense the power of the elixir she was drinking. It was an Archlord-level brew they had recovered from the House Shen vaults, which Lindon had infused with a scale from Akura Malice.

Absorbing it gradually had helped Mercy adapt to the Book of Eternal Night, but she still grimaced with every sip. Elixirs weren't necessarily designed for flavor, but they weren't usually revolting. At least not the ones made by competent refiners.

Yerin suspected the energy reminded Mercy of her mother, which would explain the expression.

Little Blue was standing on Mercy's stomach, waving her arms and chiming rapidly as she explained something to Mercy. Yerin only caught the impression of Lindon and something about pushing past a guard when Mercy burst out laughing.

"Oh, I can picture it! I can see his face!" She and Blue shared a laugh before Mercy turned and waved to Yerin. "Yerin! Come join us. You're done training for the day, right?"

It contradicted the conversation she had *just* had with Orthos, but Yerin still felt somehow resentful of Mercy lying there so carefree when the situation was grave outside.

But she took a deep breath and reminded herself that this was the best way to get them out there the fastest. Mercy gave her a sympathetic look and waved a hand, Forging a swing of black strings dangling from the overhang of a nearby roof.

"Have a seat! It's hard to rest when you're worried, isn't it?" Mercy asked. "I'm sure we can find an elixir to relax you. Actually, I might have some myself. Aunt Charity makes..." Her expression faltered when she mentioned her family, but she recovered quickly. "...makes some good ones."

Yerin relaxed into the seat behind her. "Not looking to dull my edge."

Though Mercy did have one point. If they were going to rest, they might as well use the time productively. Yerin opened her void key and called a box to her. It floated over on a cloud; she hadn't Forged the cloud herself. This was just a fancy box.

With one thumb and an injection of her madra, she opened the lid. There was a shining ball within about the size of one of her knuckles. It shone like molten metal and swirled with scripted designs that resembled a pair of dragons intertwining with one another.

The Twin Dragon Rejuvenation Pill was half-refined and half-Forged, like the Heaven's Drop that had helped her advance to the limit of Truegold, but this one was several thousand times more expensive. It was made to help Archlords regenerate and improve the quality of their madra, pushing them closer to the top. For peak Archlords, it also helped synchronize their spirit and their bodies, which would bring them closer to Herald.

It wasn't so much of a leap for her, but she would benefit from both effects, and every step was something. Yerin popped it into her mouth—it tasted like a burning peach—and immediately began circulating its energies to the ends of her body.

Little Blue gave a curious whistle, and Yerin assumed she was asking about the pill. Until a second later, when the real meaning of the question penetrated her brain.

Mercy lit up. "Oh, that's perfect! I didn't want to be too nosy, but since Blue brought it up: how's it going with you and Lindon?"

Yerin's back stiffened in the flexible seat Mercy had created for her. Relationship gossip. This was something friends her age were supposed to talk about, but Yerin didn't know how to do it.

Not that this was the first time. Mercy asked these questions about as often as the sun rose—or as often as the sun rose in the outside world, anyway.

Yerin still hadn't grown comfortable with it. She knew how to talk about fighting, not...feelings.

"Not going at all, is it? He's out fighting."

"He hasn't been gone *that* long," Mercy said.

"Eleven days." Lindon had turned the time difference down, but not so much this time. It was for the sake of training, but Yerin wished it hadn't given her so much time to sit and stew.

Mercy's eyes widened. "Really? Has it been..." She peered suspiciously into her elixir. "I need to spend more time in my own mind. Still, you've got to have *something* to talk about."

"It'll be all bright and shiny, once I don't have to keep watching from the side." Yerin sighed. "I'm creeping closer, but it still feels like a crawl."

Mercy took another drink through her straw. "I know it's hard waiting. I feel the same way, but I wish I had a Lindon." She gave a sigh to match Yerin's. "I'm jealous of you."

Little Blue peered up into Mercy's face.

Mercy must have heard how her words sounded because she choked on her elixir and threw it aside. She raised both black-clad hands and waved them as though to stop Yerin's thoughts. "Wait! No! That...That's not what I said. I wish I had *a* Lindon. Somebody like him in here, with me."

Blue whistled a question.

“No, I didn’t say that!” Mercy protested. “That was my moth—Wait, how did you hear about that?”

Yerin wondered what expression she was making. Mercy saw her face and turned bright red, but she reached out to grab Yerin’s hands. “Stop! Listen. My mother put some weird thoughts into my head, but I’m only saying you have a good thing. I’m very happy for you. Both of you. And I’m sorry he’s not here.”

Yerin’s heart softened. She patted Mercy’s hands back. “Thanks.” And, before Mercy could also express surprise that Yerin had said ‘thank you,’ she pushed ahead. “Starting to occur to me that I ought to ask you about your own feelings sometimes. Seems like you might have some interesting answers.”

Mercy hunched down. “Oh, right. Is this how you feel when I put you on the spot? This feels bad!”

“Cuts both ways, doesn’t it?”

“You should still ask me, though! We don’t talk enough!”

Little Blue sang out to remind them that she was still there.

A few minutes later, Yerin returned to her room and settled in. She tried to steady her thoughts to rest. She was sure she wouldn’t be able to sleep, but she had to take the advice she’d given Orthos.

She had only lain there for a matter of minutes when she heard the alarm.

She was up and out of the building immediately, dashing for the control scripts. Her spiritual sense gave her all the information she needed, and the air throughout Ghostwind Hall boiled as some of the others sensed it too.

Yerin arrived in the control room to see golden light shining from all the projection constructs.

Lindon had left automatic defenses, but they wouldn’t be enough. Reagan Shen had found them.

And they weren’t ready.

LINDON EMERGED FROM THE TRACKLESS SEA TO SEE REIGAN SHEN shredding a plague-spirit with a whip made of life madra.

The spirit fell apart, revealing the floating island it had been defending. *Windfall* drifted on dark blue clouds over the ocean, its crops blowing in the breeze.

Its scripts were intact, including floating stones that bore new defensive scripts Lindon had left behind. Between the plague-spirit and this new layer of scripts, the island could stall even a Monarch for a while.

It had done so, but *Windfall*'s primary defense was always supposed to be its veils. Reagan Shen had found them somehow.

Despite the Weeping Dragon storm filling the northern sky, the Monarch was willing to fight.

And Lindon was exhausted.

Yerin hovered in front of the cloud fortress. She deflected a blast of Shen's into the sky and retaliated with a Striker slash.

Lindon shouted wordlessly and poured madra into a stream of dragon's breath.

It was swallowed by one portal as another opened. A hand of blue-gold lightning extended and released a river of storm madra at Yerin.

She braced herself behind her sword and pushed against Tiberian Arelius' attack. Her spirit was at its peak, stronger than Lindon had ever felt it, her will iron. Even so, she was being forced back.

Reigan Shen appeared behind her. "**Activate,**" he commanded.

Yerin pitted herself against him, and for an instant, she resisted both Monarch techniques. But only for an instant.

“No!” Lindon shouted, pushing his willpower against Shen’s.

He was too weak.

Yerin disappeared in a flash of white light as her Moonlight Bridge, which Reigan Shen had helped create, activated at his command. She reappeared inside the doorway containing the portal to Ghostwind Hall and was sucked into it.

Time moved so much faster inside that she was attempting to emerge again only an instant later, but Tiberian’s lightning blasted through it.

A quarter of the house vanished. If not for the reinforced scripts, the whole island would have disintegrated.

Lindon felt the portal collapse, and his hopes died with it.

[They’re not dead!] Dross desperately shouted. [It’s just the entrance! They’re still in there!]

Lindon knew. But now they would be helpless to escape until he released them, unless they found a way to open it from the inside.

And he had no time left.

Outside the cloud fortress, bolts of living blue-gold lightning sizzled as they fell to the sea. The sky was dark, the waves tossed in the wind, and the Weeping Dragon looked down on him from the clouds.

Much closer, Reigan Shen stared at him with no sympathy. He pointed a shining dagger in Lindon’s direction but didn’t attack. Instead, he slashed open a portal in midair that opened onto a palace of white and gold.

“Close!” Lindon commanded.

Shen dispersed the working without a word. If Lindon had any remaining strength at all, the lion would have been hopelessly trapped, but instead he stopped halfway into the portal and spoke.

“If you see Ozmanthus on the other side,” Shen said, “tell him I didn’t kill you.”

He would have if he could, Lindon knew. Lindon’s heart boiled with hatred, and his arm twitched, but he was torn up from the inside. His mouth tasted copper, and he glared at Shen with the intensity of the Void and Dragon Icons combined.

Lindon choked out words past bloody teeth. “He’s...not coming...for you. I am.”

“Can you?” Shen asked.

The portal winked closed, and Lindon lowered himself to *Windfall's* island as rain began to fall.

The Weeping Dragon was here.



Tiberian's lightning thundered through the portal into the pocket world, and it blasted Yerin back inside. Though it scorched her body and spirit, she forced her will against it to hold back the tide.

She stopped the bulk of the Striker technique, but strands of lightning flickered off to the side, tearing trenches from the stone of the central island. Worse, the power was pushing against the barriers of the pocket world.

No...the worst part was that Lindon was still outside.

Green runes appeared behind her, and she was relieved to feel Ziel's madra intercepting the stray bolts. Yerin refocused, ready to dive through again.

Before she could, the portal crumbled. It tore to pieces like a house of sand blowing away in the wind.

Yerin's soul shook as she watched the spot where the portal had been. On the inside, she screamed, but her body didn't get the message.

She had felt what was happening outside. Their constructs were cut off now, but she knew what condition Lindon was in. He was on his last legs, and now he was facing down Reigan Shen and the Weeping Dragon. Alone.

Only seconds passed. Every breath into Yerin's lungs stretched like it took a full minute.

Her fear became panic and advanced beyond that, stretching into a rejection of reality. She had not worked so long and fought so hard to die here.

The world seemed to hum around her, like it had when she was trying to sense the Sword Icon. She heard a distant music, faint and ethereal, but it echoed through her bones. She realized distantly that she had summoned the Phoenix Song, which allowed her to hear the sounds more clearly.

The music was a complex melody that combined what she remembered of the Sword Icon, the razor-edged silence of Eithan's deadly techniques,

and the sounds of bloodlust from the Phoenix Song. She knew what that song meant.

It was leading her to the ones she was about to kill.

Yerin didn't know who she blamed for this situation. Reigan Shen, the Dreadgods, all the Monarchs, maybe Fate itself. She forgot the distance between herself and her target. Whoever or whatever it was, she was going to cut them.

Her sword was in her hand, and there was a ragged network of cracks in the pocket world where the portal had collapsed. To her, it was like a keyhole, and she stabbed her sword inside like a key.

It didn't penetrate deeply enough, but she focused her will like she never had before. The sword sank until it pierced something deeper than reality.

A familiar hand grabbed her by the shoulder and tried to pull her back, but Ziel might as well have tried to pull down the moon. She turned to glance at him over her shoulder, but only because it didn't cost her any time. She was still cutting her way out.

Whatever Ziel saw in her, it caused him to shudder. "That's not going to lead where it came in," he said urgently. "You're casting yourself into the Way. You could end up in an entirely different world."

She still heard the distant song. "I won't," she said.

"It takes skill to navigate. Do you know how?"

"Learned to swim by falling out of boats." She finished her cut and opened a ragged hole into endless blue. The power shook her and tore at her, but she still heard the song. "I'll tell you one place it won't take me: here."

Ziel made a frustrated sound, but before Yerin leaped into the gap, he hurled silver runes around her. If they were intended to stop her, she fully meant to break them, but they only formed a protective bubble.

"We'll see you soon," Ziel assured her, but he didn't follow her in.

Then the irresistible currents seized Yerin and tossed her into the flows of order. She felt herself crushed, battered, and buffeted by force she could scarcely imagine. Her spiritual senses were blinded; this was beyond madra, beyond aura. It felt like she was inside the pillar that held up reality itself.

She still heard the song, like a declaration of war. And she willed herself toward it.

Yerin caught glimpses of the real world flashing by, but they were too fast to be comprehended, even at her level. She could only get impressions of strong emotions or presences, and she focused on the ones she was looking for.

Reigan Shen and the Weeping Dragon. Those were her targets.

She felt it approaching. Her song grew louder, almost deafening. And she willed herself out, into the stream that twisted closer to what was real.

...she didn't stop. The current didn't release her.

She did scream this time, though she couldn't be sure it made any sound. Yerin struggled against the force of the Way, trying to claw her way back, but she may as well not have bothered.

Almost immediately, she felt something else. Another impression of Reigan Shen and the Weeping Dragon, but smaller. More distant.

She couldn't afford to miss this one. Who knew if there would be another chance, or when it would come?

This time, she activated her Moonlight Bridge and urged it in that direction.

She thought it would be hard to activate the Divine Treasure here, but instead it was like trying to strike a spark when the air was full of fire aura. Instead of a simple white light, she exploded into a pale moon, one that swallowed up the blue.

And when she reappeared, she was standing on a ruined building and looking out onto a war.

The song drifted all around her as yellow-haired sacred artists wearing dark blue did battle with their opposites. Massive script formations lit the battlefield as lights from many Paths clashed against one another. The opposing force carried banners of gold and had legions of cloudships that outnumbered their enemies.

But Yerin didn't particularly care who they were. They weren't Reigan Shen, and they weren't the Weeping Dragon.

She tapped into the Moonlight Bridge again. *Take me to Lindon*, she urged it.

The Treasure was quiet. Expended. It had nothing left.

Yerin let out a sound like she was being stabbed through the gut. Her spirit and thoughts were in chaos, and her veins bubbled with murderous hatred.

It was all but impossible to use techniques in this kind of mindset, but the Phoenix Song was closer than ever. The mysterious melody was louder and more insistent, reminding her that she was surrounded by enemies.

Only then did she look up and pay attention to the symbol on the golden banners.

A white lion.

This was House Shen.

They were flanked by a broad storm cloud, pouring rain and flickering with lightning. A collection of buildings sat on top of the cloud, like an entire sect built in the sky. Its sacred artists hurled serpents of living lightning.

Stormcallers, the cultists of the Weeping Dragon. Yerin had expected them to follow their master through the Trackless Sea, but it seemed they had found easier prey here.

A Herald led the combined forces from the front, a woman with shining wings made of lightning and a thin, delicate sword that crackled with power. Yushi, the Thunder Fairy. Reigan Shen's right hand.

She had long, brown hair, and was as delicate as her nickname suggested. If Yerin couldn't feel her strength as a Herald, she would say Yushi looked too delicate to hold a weapon. The wings didn't seem to be her Goldsign, as a spark burned on the center of Yushi's forehead.

There were others on the battlefield with real power—two Sages and a handful of Archlords—but Yerin was already moving.

A script-formation flared to life, blocking her. It was made of yellow runes, and she could feel that this was a powerful boundary operated by dozens of Lords and Ladies.

A pair of claws Forged of sword and blood madra appeared to her left and right. Netherclaw's binding. At the same time, she Enforced her sword and struck with all her might.

The formation rang like thunder, but it didn't break. The symbols turned orange. Some of the Underlords maintaining the boundary collapsed.

She hit it again. The runes turned red.

The third time, she broke through, but an Archlord was aiming a launcher construct at her. It was constructed of fine materials and reminded her of Lindon's cannon.

As he activated the weapon, she struck the aura of her sword, and it rang like a bell.

Blades of aura erupted from within him, tearing him apart from the inside out. Her Phoenix Song technique drew something from the dead man, but his weapon still fired. The technique scorched her left arm down to the bone.

She regrew it in seconds, then harvested another load of power from his Remnant. It was bound in silver-red chains, but she broke it apart.

Yerin was like an arrow headed for the Thunder Fairy, and the enemy Herald was finally taking her seriously. Yushi turned to her and crackled with storm madra, the spark on her forehead glowing brightly.

“The Uncrowned Queen,” Yushi began, but she didn’t get further before Yerin whipped a Striker technique at her.

Her face twisted in alarm, and she gathered up a shield of madra, but the red-silver blade never made it to her at all.

“Disappear,” a man’s voice said, and Yerin’s technique twisted and vanished into space.

A manic-looking man with pale hair rose up next to Yushi, and his lightning was a different color. Blue serpents of storm madra encircled his upper arms. The Sage of Calling Storms.

His smile and eyes were too wide, like he was doing his best impression of a skull. Somewhere below her conscious thoughts, Yerin wondered if you had to look like a monster if you wanted to lead a Dreadgod cult.

“Have you come on behalf of your master?” the Storm Sage asked eagerly.

Yerin stopped. Her skin still shone with the red moonlight of the Phoenix Song, and she heard the subtle music that prompted her to kill, but she had another mission.

“Send me to Lindon,” she demanded of the Sage.

Yushi put a hand on her hip. “Didn’t you get a teleportation Treasure?”

Yerin didn’t spare her a single thought.

The Sage spread his arms wide. “I cannot bid farewell before I’m graced by divine teachings! Come, show me what your teacher left you!”

Yerin looked into the mad eyes of the dead man and flooded her sword with madra. “That’s not the wish you wanted to make.”

The Phoenix Song was in her, all around her.

Somebody was going to die.



Ziel heard Mercy running up to him only a moment after the portal closed itself. She sounded panicked, but her words didn't penetrate his haze at first.

How were they going to do this? He hadn't completed his Sage insight yet. Though his studies of the Paths of Heaven had helped him understand quite a bit more about Sage authority and the mechanics behind the world, theoretical and practical knowledge were leagues apart.

It was hard to put those ideas into practice here, and he needed to practice them in order to get out. Fortunately, he had a little time.

Mercy's shaking finally got through to him. "Where's Yerin?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"The portal's destroyed." That was probably obvious, but it was best to go over every detail. "Lindon's weak. Maybe dead. Yerin went after him."

He expected Mercy to panic, but after only an instant of shock across her face, it was like her face had turned to steel. In that moment, she resembled what Ziel had seen of her mother.

"Are they still outside?" Mercy asked calmly.

"Lindon is. We can't know where Yerin ended up."

"How close is the Weeping Dragon?"

"Close."

She didn't ask if they were ready. She knew they weren't, just as he did. The entire reason she hadn't sensed Yerin's battle against that Striker technique was because she had been deep into her Book of Eternal Night, trying to eke every remaining second out of their time here.

Judging by her spirit, she was on the verge of a breakthrough to Archlord. In other circumstances, that would be record speed. Now, it wasn't nearly fast enough.

"I left a protective script around Yerin," he continued. "It might be broken already, but I should be able to feel what's left of it. If we can open the Way again, I can follow it to Yerin. Still not sure she ended up where Lindon is."

Mercy's perception stretched back behind them, and he knew she was checking on Orthos and Little Blue, who were sealed away training together. "They haven't said anything."

"I'm sure they know Lindon's in trouble, but he's in trouble a lot."

She nodded distantly, clearly turning something over in her head. "If I open the portal again, can you take us through the Way?"

“I can keep us from falling apart immediately. Anything more than that is up to willpower and sheer chance. I can’t even control if we end up in the same place.”

“Good enough,” Mercy said. “Allow me a few minutes, if you don’t mind.”

Ziel looked her over warily. This was about to be another case of a young person doing something reckless. “What are you trying to do?”

“My mother left some of her authority in my Book. I’m going to advance, then I’m going to borrow her power to transport us.”

She was already sitting down in the cycling position, and her tone made that ridiculous statement sound almost reasonable.

Ziel didn’t have a better idea. Leaving Orthos and Little Blue here seemed like a terrible idea, but he couldn’t make a script strong enough to shelter them in the Way. He would at least have to explain things to them.

That was a job better suited to Mercy, but she had already closed her eyes and sunk her spirit into her Book.

Which left Ziel standing before her lifeless body and her shining Book, functionally alone, wrestling with the task of visiting Orthos and Little Blue.

There were other things he could do. His understanding of the Way and the runes used to control it was shallow at best, so preparation time was critical.

But he sighed and began trudging toward the other two spirits who remained on the island. No sense in putting it off.

Inside the Blackflame cycling chamber, Orthos was devouring another dragon-spirit. This one was an Archlord with enough power that even Ziel felt a little pressure. Orthos wasn’t having an easy time of it; the spirit was missing several mouthfuls of its flesh, lost to the hunger fangs around the turtle’s jaws, but the clash between the two of them still crashed violently against the invisible barrier of script that sealed off this room.

Ziel had laid this script himself, and from the outside, he was wondering if he should reinforce it. He reassured himself that at least Little Blue was safe, but she wasn’t supporting Orthos, as he had expected.

She was sitting in a cycling position at the center of the script as the Blackflame battle raged around her. A tiny bubble of blue-white energy surrounded her, and as any madra scraped that sphere of safety, the foreign energy was wiped away.

After only a second or two, Ziel noticed that both combatants were avoiding the small Hollow Domain. Either the Remnant sensed what would happen to it or it had already been taught a lesson by the Riverseed.

The script that contained them dampened spiritual perception. It was hard for him to sense inside, like trying to listen in on a padded room, but it was almost impossible for them to sense out. Even so, only a breath or two after Ziel arrived, Little Blue's eyes snapped open and met his.

Ziel recoiled. Her gaze was uncharacteristically intense. It was so much like Lindon's that it was unnerving, as though Lindon and his contracted spirit had switched bodies.

Then Blue waved cheerily and let her bubble drop. She ran to him, each of her little footsteps chiming against the floor. Orthos grabbed the dragon-Remnant in his jaws and body-slammed it into the ground on the other side, freeing up space for Blue to move.

The impact of the Remnant shook the stone so much that Little Blue was lifted an inch off the ground, but she hardly seemed to notice.

She shivered when she crossed over the script, but when she was out, she asked him a tinkling question.

Ziel looked down to meet her eyes seriously. "Lindon's in danger. The portal is destroyed. Yerin already went after him, and Mercy and I are going too. Is there anything you can tell us?"

Little Blue's eyes didn't widen, and he didn't sense any fear from her. She scrunched up her eyebrows and held her chin in a hand, considering.

A moment later, she gave him a response like the ringing of miniature bells. Ziel interpreted them as saying that Lindon wasn't afraid, so she wasn't either.

She ran up to pat him on the knee, wished him good luck, and then hurried back inside the script to continue training.

Ziel watched her leave, and for a moment wished he had a contracted spirit or sacred beast of his own. The emotional support alone might have helped him through the worst years of his life.

Then again, Lindon had far too many tiny companions. Ziel tried to picture himself with half a dozen pets and shuddered. He couldn't imagine it. The heavens had only made him responsible for one life, and that was already a heavy burden to bear.

Ziel returned to the portal and began operating the Grand Oath Array. Profound silver runes spun around him. Controlling the complex will,

authority, and scripted interactions took his full concentration.

He still wasn't sure what difference he and Mercy could make, even if they did make it to Lindon's side in time. But he knew one thing: if Lindon died, he wouldn't do so alone.



Little Blue watched the battle between Orthos and the black dragon Remnant as it crashed against the ceiling.

Orthos tore another strip from the Remnant, but he took a tail-slap on the shell that sent him slamming back down to the cave floor. The impact once again launched Blue into the air, but she hardly noticed. She was focused on Orthos' feelings.

Every new mouthful of madra added to the struggle inside of him. That was the real battle, not out here.

Orthos was wrestling against the mind and spirit of another while trying not to lose himself. It was a furious fight, and Little Blue wished him constant encouragement while she waited for him to win.

The battles on the outside and the inside ended at roughly the same time, as Orthos finished digesting the Remnant's tail. With that, he was too powerful, and the spirit had taken too much damage. It sunk down and quietly dissolved into essence as Orthos roared his victory.

Then Blue ran up and laid her hand on his skin.

He grunted in discomfort as her madra flooded through his channels, cooling them as it passed. He didn't like it when she cleansed him so suddenly, but they didn't have time to waste.

"He's grown stronger," Orthos said, and the rumble of his voice shook Blue's entire body. "But he's on the verge of death."

She cheeped in agreement. Blue told him what Ziel had said, and Orthos grunted. "You should go. You could help."

She shook her head rapidly. She might be able to help the others, but she wasn't strong enough to help Lindon yet. She needed more for that.

And without her here, Orthos would never make it in time.

He sensed that thought, and he didn't like it. It pricked his pride, though he didn't acknowledge that, so she didn't mention it either.

Instead, she caught his eye and pointed out that it was her turn.

Without comment, Orthos began walking into another chamber, and she hopped up onto his head for a ride.

The next cave inside the island held a device Lindon had assembled from stolen Monarch ingredients specifically for her.

Six terrifyingly powerful Remnants were sealed in scripted tanks around the edges of the cave, each about the same distance from one another. They were all either the equivalent of Heralds, and thus appeared more lifelike than most spirits, or they had unique authority and powerful will.

Lines of script connected them to a circle in the center. It shone with a column of liquid blue-white power.

Pure madra.

This whole device was for madra purification, and it was meant for Little Blue. It was the last step to prepare her to advance to Herald.

After that, it would be down to Lindon to push her the rest of the way.

She opened Lindon's void key, which was stored nearby, and took out some of the Archlord natural treasures. There weren't many left. She let the quicksilver fire bathe her, which was only a sort of warm, shivery feeling at this point. Nothing like the dramatic transformation she'd felt the first time.

But she wanted to be as stable as possible when she went in.

"You should wait," Orthos advised her. "If I don't cycle this power now, it will leave my control and injure me. If you enter now, I won't be able to help you."

She gave him a laugh. How could he help her anyway? Maybe if Lindon were here, he could save her if something went wrong, but there was too much power involved in this transformation for Orthos to handle.

Orthos snorted smoke. "You don't really want to do this alone, do you?"

She hesitated. He wasn't wrong. Even if he couldn't help, it would be an encouragement for her to have someone with her.

But she firmed her resolve. This was a test of her will. To see if she could make it to the next level.

A voice echoed out from elsewhere on the island. "Alone?" Noroloth's Remnant flew closer, peeking his overly large head into the cavern entrance. "It sounds like you could use the assistance of a powerful dragon."

He hesitated before adding, "You will tell your master that I helped, won't you?"

Orthos glared at him.

Blue gave him a reassuring pat on the foot, let out a chime of confidence, and strode into the column of blue-white light. Soon, all this power would be hers.

Instantly, she was buried in the conflicting wills of six Remnants, all more powerful than her. They were weakened by the scripts and devices, otherwise their wills would crush her directly, but together their attention was heavy.

Noroloth lightened the weight more, but not too much. The pressure was the point.

The bound Remnants screamed at her, and Blue screamed back. Not in fear. She matched them for intensity.

They should hurry up and give her their power.

She had somewhere to be.



The sixth page of the Book of Eternal Night wasn't as large as the nightmare labyrinth buried in the fifth page. It was only one room, though it had two purposes: to prepare Mercy for Archlord and to teach her a technique.

She sat in the center of a six-sided room. Each of the walls was a black-tinged mirror, and each one reflected herself in a different scene.

When Mercy focused on one, she was drawn inside, and she took over another body. Another her.

This time, she hovered above a jungle on a dark cloud condensed from aura. She was an Archlady, but there was gray in her hair, and the weight of a lifetime hung behind her.

She couldn't access specific memories—not unless the vision allowed her to—but she could feel them there. It felt like she really had lived a long life, and that the world outside was the illusion.

Mercy raised Suu, her old companion. She pulled a string back and Forged an arrow onto the center. She wove the techniques together deftly, with the skill of long practice. One, two, three, four, five...six.

A green dragon erupted from the forest beneath, where he had thought himself concealed. Garrylondryth, the Rootfather. Once the right hand of the Dragon King, but now a leader barely holding his flock together.

The green dragon Herald unleashed a breath of bright emerald energy that flowed over her in a river, but Mercy focused madra on her feet and stepped through shadow.

Shadestep. The technique on the sixth page of the Book of Eternal Night, and a technique that Malice had only learned to imitate when she became a Sage. For one step, Mercy borrowed the intangibility of shadow and slipped through space itself, reappearing nearby.

The Herald had plenty of combat experience, and this battle would be a long one, but the first strike was hers. Mercy released her arrow, which flew like a falling star.

Garrylondryth swept his tail at the arrow, carrying his mighty will, but the arrow had the Shadestep technique applied to it as well. It ceased to exist for just an instant, then rematerialized and continued its path uninterrupted.

The missile crashed into green scales and the dragon roared in pain.

Mercy held onto the vision longer, absorbing herself into the feeling of controlling an Archlady's spirit. Her sense of purpose was strong and comforting, like a warm blanket of reassurance. She was confident in what she wanted and who she was.

And in the family behind her.

She could only hold the vision so long before it faded, and the memory of her faith in the Akura clan stabbed her in the gut. It was the trust Malice wanted her to have. So did Mercy herself. She would love to trust her family that much.

But she didn't.

She meditated on everything she had learned in the vision for a moment. How it felt to control so much madra so effortlessly, and the advantages of a body thrice reforged in soulfire.

Then she faced a second mirror.

In this one, she was only a few years older than her current self. She found herself in an arena that reminded her of the Uncrowned King tournament, and she faced down an Archlord on a sword Path.

She danced around him. Her armor was more solid than it had ever been, her arrows stronger, and she could feel a mysterious authority working through her with every shot she took with her bow. The Bow Icon, which slowly grew closer as she fought.

In the back of her mind, Mercy felt herself grow through the battle, and she tried to get a sense of her Archlord revelation.

The mind she had in this dream reality rejected the idea. Forcing advancement? It was a foolish road.

Time and experience would give her the self-insight she needed to determine her future. The Archlord revelation was as much about choosing the path she would walk for the rest of her life as it was identifying the path she was on. If she rushed her decision, she would regret it. At worst, a poorly chosen revelation might even cap her future potential.

When the vision ended, Mercy felt her other self's disapproval recede. There were six visions here. Six different versions of herself, all fighting for her family in different ways and with subtly different abilities. Sometimes she was closer to Sage than Herald, and other times she took her advancement more slowly as an Archlady to focus on governing territory.

All of them agreed that she should take things one step at a time. Her family would be best served if she steadied her advancement.

Mercy sat in the center of the mirrors and chewed on the visions. The world began to shake around her; the page was rejecting her. She had stayed long enough, and the Book wanted her to leave and consolidate what she learned.

She pitted her will against the Book of Eternal Night and remained exactly where she was.

I am not Malice, she thought. *I am Mercy*. Her Overlord revelation.

Where did she go from there? What would it look like in the future for her to be herself?

The trembling of the Book didn't get softer. It intensified by the second until she couldn't hold it anymore. When her consciousness was kicked out of the sixth page, back to the pocket world, she found herself sitting in a cycling position on bare stone.

Ziel sat across from her, eyes closed, meditating among the fading spatial cracks where the portal had once stood. Silver runes and green ones spun around him in intricate loops.

When she saw him, she was ashamed. She had said she was going to advance and borrow her mother's power as though it were simple, as though she could do whatever she wished. She'd talked like she was Yerin, or Lindon, who could just push their way through advancement realms with sheer stubbornness.

Mercy couldn't break the rules after all. She didn't have what it took. She opened her mouth to tell Ziel that, but he spoke first.

"The heavens don't decide when you advance to Archlord," he said, without opening his eyes. "You do."

He slid something across the rocky ground between them. A void key.

"I'm almost out of Archlord treasures," he continued. "Put them to use."

She swept her perception through the void key and found six Archlord-level natural treasures remaining. Some of them weren't at full power, but she could make a balanced circle out of them. They *might* be enough to advance.

But she would have only one chance.

With reluctance, she set the void key back down. "I don't have the insight yet, I'm sorry. I can still open the seventh page for a second, though, so I should be able to send you—"

Even with his eyes closed, he somehow glared at her. "Do I look like I have the time to spare for a conversation? Your Archlord revelation is the oath to which you dedicate your future. Anything works, as long as you are dedicated to it, honestly and fully. That honesty is the hard part. Now don't bother me until you advance."

Mercy *really* wanted to keep asking him questions, even though she'd spoken to him about the advancement many times over the weeks they'd shared this pocket world together.

She didn't think his attitude was fair. "*Don't think too hard, it's only the entire purpose for the rest of your life.*"

Mercy scowled at Ziel. Then she scowled at the entire pocket world and scowled at herself for scowling.

What was a purpose she could accept?

She could swear herself to her friends, but that felt like it was about someone else, not herself. Swearing to do better than her mother was once again comparing her to her mother, like her previous two revelations. This should be something unique to her, she felt.

Not to her family.

Not to her Path.

Not to her friends.

To *her*.

When she put it that way, she felt something clarify within her. The void key opened and Archlord treasures drifted out, but she hardly paid attention

to them, even as she balanced their aura.

What did she really want? What had she always wanted? She wanted to make the world a better place. At some point, her mother had wanted the same thing.

She had seen the darkness of the wilderness, and she had wanted to light it up. She used the power of darkness to push back the darkness.

And she had seen Mercy as a light.

Mercy spoke aloud. "I will bring light."

The natural treasures burned away in a flash of silver flame.

While the Archlord fire was still pulsing through her, rebuilding her body and spirit, Ziel cracked one eye. "That was better than mine."

Mercy tried to shake her head, but she was having trouble controlling herself at the moment.

Ziel shut his eye again. "Let me know when you're done. Should be ready anytime...assuming there's anything we can do."

The same doubt had haunted Mercy's mind for months. How was she supposed to help Lindon and Yerin? Even now, she was only a newly advanced Archlady, though her Book of Eternal Night would still let her punch harder than she could otherwise.

With her revelation still fresh in her mind, Mercy had an answer.

What would she do to help? Anything she could.

LINDON DOVE INTO THE OCEAN AS THUNDER ROARED OVERHEAD.

Blue-gold serpents of lightning chased him down, and the Weeping Dragon's will crashed over him, violent as the waves.

He couldn't fight the Dreadgod here. Not only would their battle be likely to break *Windfall*, opening Ghostwind Hall and endangering everyone inside, but Lindon needed the support of the labyrinth. He had to hope the Dreadgod followed him directly.

And didn't just tear through the countryside.

[There's a good chance!] Dross said, too brightly. [They can travel through space for short distances, just not too far. Or too often.]

Lindon remembered the Wandering Titan blinking through space to attack Moongrave. He also remembered the Dreadgod switching places with another of its kind all the way across the planet, showing skill and clever planning beyond anything the monsters should have been capable of.

He moved faster.

When he arrived in Sacred Valley, thanks to the labyrinth's transportation, he swept his spiritual perception over the territory. Most of the people were still sheltering underground—it hadn't been long since the battle with the Monarchs—but a few had ventured topside.

Warn them, Lindon sent to Dross.

Then he began to prepare.

[Uh, Lindon, I will, but I'm afraid I have—]

A tide of invisible power swallowed the northern sky, followed by a storm appearing gradually out of nowhere.

[—bad news.]

Lindon's heart clenched. The Weeping Dragon had followed him most of the way back.

Even if a thousand miles counted as a short distance for a Dreadgod, it had manipulated space more than it should have been able to. Just like him, the Weeping Dragon had been empowered by the death of the Silent King.

As liquid lightning rained from the sky and sizzled against the ground, Lindon sensed the thing he feared the most.

Mercy and Ziel tumbled out of a rip in space.

They spilled out only a few yards from where Lindon stood, just north of Sacred Valley. Ziel braced himself on his hammer, and the energy from the Weeping Dragon was reduced to sparks when it hit the silver runes that spun all around him.

Mercy called her armor to protect her from the rain, but she raised her arms triumphantly as they appeared. "You did it!" she cried to Ziel.

Ziel looked to Lindon, and relief was clear on his face. "Looks like we weren't too late." Then fear and despair shivered through him as he looked up and saw the Weeping Dragon in the distance.

Mercy, too, gasped as she looked upward. She shivered and hugged her sides tightly.

Lindon controlled his expression. He didn't want to frighten them, because they weren't too late.

He was.

Mercy had advanced to Archlord, which at any other time would be cause for celebration. And Ziel was at the peak of his realm, close to Sage. He controlled the Grand Oath Array with a fluidity that suggested he had made great strides.

But so what?

Even average Heralds and Sages couldn't help Lindon at this point, much less the two of them. They had thrown their lives away.

Lindon tapped into the labyrinth, ignoring how weary he felt and how his thoughts flowed like lead. He had to get them out of here.

But first, he owed them an apology. "My gratitude for coming, and I'm sorry. I didn't make it."

He had hoped they would advance without him, or that he could shake free of the Monarchs with time enough left to empower them himself. Now

it was too late, and without the pocket world, how could they advance any faster? Even making it so far must have taken a miracle.

Dross appeared with his arms crossed, and he shook his head at Ziel and Mercy. [Not to criticize, but I'm very—]

"Stop," Lindon ordered him. "This is my fault." Lindon sank to his knees and bowed deeply. "Forgiveness, please."

Mercy grabbed his shoulder and pulled him up almost desperately. Her armor vanished to essence. "No, get up! Come on! We've got to move!"

Ziel's horns shone emerald, and he looked into the sky with resolve. An Enforcer technique nailed him to the ground as he lifted his hammer. "Let's get him out of here."

"No need." Lindon was steady on his feet; he might feel hollow on the inside, but his Bloodforged Iron body had restored him. "I'm not done yet. You should leave. Go back to Yerin."

"Where is she?" Mercy asked, and Lindon's attention sharpened.

"She's not with...never mind. Find her and stay with her. I'll hold the Dragon here." Lindon's thoughts drifted down to the labyrinth, and he let his weary mind seep into the ancient mechanisms. The will of a primeval monster began to crash against the protections around Sacred Valley.

The Weeping Dragon's assault on the invisible wall generated by the script sounded louder than its thunder.

"We should get behind the script," Lindon said.

Ziel gave Lindon a doubtful look. "You drove off the Monarchs, and now's your time for a final stand? Come with us."

The Weeping Dragon wouldn't let Lindon leave. Even if it did, it would follow him until he was cornered.

"As long as I'm here, I have another card to play." Once they passed the border, Lindon focused his attention on the two of them. "Thank you for coming, and good-bye. **Move.**"

Ziel and Mercy both resisted, and for a second, he couldn't move them. Their spirits shone with power and resolve.

Until Lindon leaned on them with the full strength of his will.

Then they vanished.

He transferred them to a distant branch of the labyrinth on the Rosegold continent. They could help there; he had sensed a distant clash between House Shen and the Arelius family, as well as a power that might have been

Yerin. He hoped. Someone with similar powers was calling his name, at least.

Maybe they could win somewhere else while he tried to survive.

[I don't like it when you cut me off like that,] Dross complained. [How will other people hear how clever I am?]

"How much time left until the bindings are ready?" Lindon asked.

Dross shrugged. [They're *ready* now. The more time we give them, the better.]

Far below Lindon, pieces of the Slumbering Wraith were burning away. They dissolved, flesh and madra as one, converting into energy to fuel ancient scripts and hunger bindings. This was the same technique he'd leaned on earlier—the hunger echoes—but far, far larger in scope. Enough that it took a hundred bindings and miles of scripts to support.

If Lindon had to provide power for this himself, it would empty his pure core and his hunger arm ten times over. He'd told Dross to move the labyrinth, to gradually feed the bindings with pieces of Subject One's body.

The more fuel they gave this echo, the more power it would have.

"Then how much time do we have before we have to drop the barrier?" Lindon asked.

[I'll give you a countdown when we're ten seconds out. Which is right now. Ten...nine...]

Lindon braced himself. He steadied his mind and sharpened his will. Suriel's marble rolled between the fingertips of his left hand. He had inherited the labyrinth from the Abidan, from Eithan, from his ancestors in Sacred Valley. Now, he had the chance to pay them back.

[...three...two...]

"Rise," Lindon commanded.

A hundred echo bindings activated at once.

The labyrinth remembered everyone its hunger aura had ever fed on. There were certain restrictions on the technique, but in general, the more power he funneled to the echo, the closer it could come to its original form.

And this was the birthplace of the Dreadgods.

Ghostly gray-white feet large enough to crush cities appeared to Lindon's left and right. It was like someone filling in a charcoal sketch. A skeleton appeared from the feet up to the head, then a broad shell. Skin like dark stone, and a lashing tail that could slice through mountains.

As the protective script around Sacred Valley fell, a ghost of the Wandering Titan rose.

The Weeping Dragon's head jerked back in an exaggerated expression of surprise, and—to Lindon's own shock—the wind aura echoed for miles with a voice like thunder.

"What have you done to my brother?" the Weeping Dragon asked, and it was as though the sky itself spoke.

The Wandering Titan roared in its face and punched the Dragon in the jaw.

When the Weeping Dragon reeled back from the blow, the Titan leaped over the mountain to the north and kept after it. Serpents of liquid lightning streamed down from the storm clouds, but the stone warrior's tail was a lashing blur that reduced them to shining clouds of essence.

The Titan linked hands around the Dragon's neck and dragged it down, roaring as it slammed its brother to earth.

Quaking ground shook Lindon, and though it was not enough to harm him anymore, it wasn't comfortable. Dross summoned a cloud and slipped it underneath him, so Lindon sank into its soft surface.

[That's all you had left,] Dross said anxiously. [You're out. Don't go trying to spend more than you have, okay?]

Lindon tried to respond, but even thinking was too much for him. He sank into the softness of the cloud and drifted off.



Ziel appeared over some ruins surrounded by a blackened forest that looked like it had been the victim of a recent wildfire.

It was still more intact than the land outside Sacred Valley.

Mercy's scream of protest was still in the air when she reappeared, but it tapered off as she realized Lindon had banished them. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked on the verge of tears.

"We can help," she said, and Ziel was sure she was still talking to the long-distant Lindon.

Ziel fixed his spiritual sense on the distance. There was likely a reason Lindon had sent them here, and he could feel a great battle in that direction.

“We still can,” Ziel said. He began Forging runes in a circle around himself.

Whether Lindon intended them to be here or not, they could at least see what was happening over there.

Mercy swiped at her eyes angrily, but she looked in the same direction Ziel indicated. She stepped closer to him to share the script-circle, but both their spirits shook as they felt something at the same time.

An angry flare of blood and sword madra, all blended together with an aspect of hunger. He knew Mercy would recognize it just as he did.

Neither of them needed to say Yerin’s name, but Ziel wondered how Lindon had transported them so close. He’d suggested he didn’t know where Yerin was, but now he was sending them within a day’s travel of Yerin.

Maybe it was a function of the labyrinth, or maybe it was an ability Lindon had gained when he merged with a Dreadgod. Who knew what kind of senses he had access to now?

“Can you protect yourself?” Ziel asked. “We’ll have to go fast.”

He could expand his own protection to cover them both, but doing so would mean power he wasn’t spending on acceleration. They needed to cover a day’s worth of flight on a cloudship as soon as possible, which meant they needed *lots* of force.

Mercy covered herself completely in armor. “Let’s go.”

That was all the discussion Ziel needed.

The Path of the Dawn Oath surrounded them in script, manipulating force aura and lifting them into the sky. When they were far enough off the ground, he Forged another script in front of them. Beyond that, another. Then a third.

Each circle would grab them and hurl them forward. As any force artist knew, it was easier to maintain momentum than to create it.

But before he activated the script to send them hurtling forward, he hesitated and sent his awareness out to the silver runes floating around him. His control of the Grand Oath Array had grown day by day until he was quite comfortable with it now, and it *should* help here.

Though if he made a mistake, he might send them hurtling into the earth fast enough to annihilate both their bodies in one strike.

He should get Mercy’s opinion on this. He didn’t want to risk her unfairly. “I have something that could get us there faster, but it might be a

little...”

‘*Risky*’ didn’t seem quite enough, but before he could find the right word, Mercy flicked him between the horns with her armored finger.

“Let’s go!”

That hurt, but Ziel didn’t say anything. He controlled the Array, feeling the authority of the Rune Queen pass over him and alter something fundamental to reality.

With manipulations of her ancient script, he changed his and Mercy’s relationship to time. The world seemed to slow down as they sped up, though curiously the silver runes seemed to orbit at the same rate.

Only then did he activate the green force scripts. It launched them forward, then the second one caught them and hurled them faster, then the third...

Even with the force scripts that surrounded Ziel, keeping him together, flying in this way felt like drilling through stone with his face. Wind around them exploded as they moved faster and faster, and a quick glance behind showed that they were kicking up hurricanes in their wake.

He hurriedly adjusted their path upward so they wouldn’t destroy anyone by accident just from the wake of their passage. Every few seconds, before they could slow down, he Forged another script-circle.

Ziel found himself fortunate that his Oathsign technique was so madra-efficient, since most of the power came from the aura the scripts manipulated rather than from the Forged runes themselves. Otherwise, his spirit would have drained itself dry in moments.

It seemed he would arrive in good enough shape to fight. Especially since they were looking to arrive sooner than he expected.

Mercy was trying to shout something, though Ziel couldn’t hear it. The distant battlefield rapidly approached, the presences becoming clearer and clearer.

As he grew close, he could feel who was fighting.

He almost lost control of his technique.

Then he launched himself even faster.

Mercy was grabbing him with her amethyst gauntlets and shaking him—though not too much, lest she send him outside the script and drop him to the land below. He was paying her no attention, nor did he sense Yerin, even when she was close enough to shine like a crimson star right in front of him.

His perception was locked entirely onto one lone figure. A familiar presence whose power crackled with the hungry lightning of the Weeping Dragon.

The Sage of Calling Storms.

Every channel in Ziel's body flinched in remembered pain. He could see the Sage torturing and slaughtering his people one at a time, leaving Ziel—his defeated foe—there as a witness. Keeping him alive as a twisted trophy.

Ziel filled himself with the Stone Anchor, force madra holding him together, and pulled his shield from his soul space. That and his hammer flowed with madra. Maybe too much madra; at this rate, he would be out of power in minutes.

But one way or another, his fight with the Storm Sage wouldn't be a long one.

Mercy shouted at him again, but he was beyond hearing her. The Sage was in his sight now, turning his direction with arms wide and welcoming. A Forged dragon appeared over his head, aiming at Ziel, but Yerin tore it apart before her attention was recaptured by Yushi, the Thunder Fairy.

Ziel hurtled at the Sage like a thrown spear. The Sage flew to the side, but he was swimming through honey to Ziel's accelerated perception.

He Forged another circle to send him shooting after the Sage. Only him.

Mercy flew past that circle, continuing to fly on momentum alone. Ziel aimed for Calling Storms. By the time the Sage tried to open space, Ziel had already operated the Array.

For just an instant, Calling Storms was locked in time. He broke the working a second later.

Then Ziel hit him like a meteor.

The face of his shield crashed into the entire front side of the Sage's body with a crunching of bones. Even with the empowerment of Ziel's Enforcer technique, his own arm cracked.

He felt nothing.

Ziel was moving much too fast to stop. He and the Sage hurtled together into the side of a cliff, which they destroyed with their impact. They tore a trench through the landscape for what felt like a mile before they ground to a halt.

Ziel let his shield fall from a broken arm, raising his hammer in the other. The Sage stirred, his figure covered in blood and dirt.

Ziel's hammer crashed down on him.

The earth exploded again.

Lightning erupted from beneath Ziel's feet, throwing him back. Sages were no tougher than any other Archlords—that is to say, they were made of wood next to the steel of Heralds—but that was no secret. Every Sage had their own way of compensating for that vulnerability.

Calling Storms, it seemed, had invested in regeneration.

His body reconstructed itself from mush, starting with his manic grin. “I knew—” the Sage began, but Ziel had activated the Array again.

His hammer was propelled by three force scripts and accelerated in time. It crushed the Striker technique the Sage sent out on reflex and continued to crash into the left side of the man's body.

He would have flown into the distance, but instead he ran into a bubble of manipulated time. He was stuck like a fly in syrup, and Ziel only released the grip of the Array when he had readied another blow of the hammer, this time coming down on Calling Storms with the weight of the heavens.

The Storm Sage's whole body exploded, but that still wasn't enough to satisfy Ziel. He scanned hungrily for the man's Remnant.

Until he realized the pieces of the Sage's body were pulling themselves together. It was a powerful working of blood madra and aura, and the small analytical part of Ziel's brain that still functioned recognized that this was probably a Divine Treasure gifted to the man by the Sage of Red Faith.

Ziel used the time to Forge more scripts to enhance himself.

He had waited years for this. How many times had he wished this man had killed him? How many nights had he been unable to sleep, thanks to the unnatural knots the Sage had tied in his spirit?

As soon as his body was capable of it, the Sage of Calling Storms started laughing. “It's you, it's you, it's you! I *knew* I would see you again, I just knew it! What was it like?” The man's eyes formed, and they were crazed and hungry with sparks of the Weeping Dragon. “You've looked deeper into the Void than any living man. What did you see?”

Ziel answered by crushing him again.

“That's *it!*” Calling Storms shouted as he flew. He must have been speaking through a manipulation of aura, because his body wasn't intact enough for that. “Yes, that's what I wanted! Show me your answer!”

The man had blathered about his goals and his philosophy last time too, but they only stoked Ziel to a more furious rage.

This time, he surrounded the Sage in force-scripts, pushing them together. Crushing him.

Ziel didn't let up until his core ran dry and the Forged runes of his script flickered, but this time there was no doubt. That would have killed even a Herald.

The silver Array around him faded away along with his own scripts.

He wouldn't have the strength to do battle with the Sage's Remnant, but that was all right. His fury wasn't exhausted yet anyway. Yerin could capture the spirit for him, and he could keep the Remnant in his void key, slowly breaking it over time.

A lance of blue-gold energy speared from the crumpled mass of flesh that was Calling Storms, and it pierced Ziel through the gut.

His spirit screamed out in familiar pain, though Ziel himself only grunted. He fell to his knees, body weak.

With a painful-sounding grinding and crunching, the Sage formed himself again. His spine straightened and his head inflated. He twisted his neck into place with one last click.

The insane smile on his face was unharmed.

"I could feel it, Brother Ziel!" the Sage whispered. "The honesty of your anger would move the very heavens themselves. You're close to the truth. You just need a little more motivation."

Ziel swung a fist, but Calling Storms slipped aside. The Sage rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he scanned the battlefield.

Then a blade of madra descended on him like the divine scythe Ziel had seen in Eithan's hands. Yerin took a blow from her own Herald opponent to strike at the Sage, and he could sense her rage.

She was scorched by the lightning of the Thunder Fairy, but she still landed on the Storm Sage like the wrath of the heavens. She blazed with crimson power, and Ziel only saw the flash of a black blade before the Sage fell to pieces again.

The laugh of Yushi, the Thunder Fairy, was so pleasant and melodious that it was out of place in a battlefield. "Do you really want to keep fighting the two of us together? You must know this doesn't end well for you."

Yerin ignored her, speaking to Ziel instead. "What happened to Lindon?"

"He...sent us here." For some reason, it felt like Ziel hadn't spoken for days. With every word, he remembered himself. "He didn't...need us."

Scarlet fury flared from Yerin until she outshone the sun. Not at Ziel, he thought, though it was still overwhelming.

“Deal hasn’t changed,” Yerin said to Yushi. “Give me a ride home before I paint you my favorite color.”

The storm Herald laughed again. “Your confidence is—”

Yerin’s hit sent her through the clouds. Another pulse of blood aura would have stopped Calling Storms from regenerating, but a more refined will stopped Yerin’s Ruler technique.

The Sage formed again, and this time he was laughing at Yerin. “The Reaper should have taught you better!” he said. Then he shot a bolt of storm madra at Ziel.

Yerin knocked it aside with her sword and her spirit, though the impact shoved her back several feet. She retaliated instantly, sending six Striker blades from her Goldsigns.

Something twitched in his heart when he saw her stand in front of him, glowing with red moonlight. A distant whisper that, for a moment, he had forgotten.

She was standing where *Ziel* should be.

“Eyes of heaven!” the Sage of Calling Storm shouted. “Open my sight and help me to **see!**”

An instant later, he called living lightning onto a seemingly empty spot. Yerin appeared there an instant later, and the thunderbolt carried her down.

Violet arrows streaked out of the sky, launched by Mercy far away, but Calling Storms strolled through them as though walking through his own garden. He could see exactly where to step.

A flock of birds formed from lightning flew down from the clouds overhead. They flew for Mercy, and the song in the back of Ziel’s mind grew stronger, more urgent.

Yerin slashed a Rippling Sword at the birds, tearing them apart, but Calling Storms had waited for that. He landed a crackling punch on Yerin’s gut, and she coughed up blood as she flew into the distance.

Once again, she’d taken a hit she didn’t have to in order to protect someone else.

Ziel’s own voice whispered to him from the past.

“I will give my life for the sect.”

His Archlord revelation.

He had chosen that goal for himself and failed to meet it. The Storm Sage had crushed his future, making a mockery of his life's purpose. Was Ziel going to let him do it again?

Maybe Ziel had only failed...once.

He had done everything in his power to save his first sect. Now, he had a chance to do it again. That was who he had been, and who he could be.

A guardian of his sect. A protector.

A shield.

Though he gained no more madra, something inside him shifted. And overhead, a massive steel shield formed across the sky.

A serpent of lightning rushed at Mercy, but Ziel focused on her. He felt more himself than he had since his first duel against the Storm Sage, and his heart was calm.

“Endure,” the Shield Sage commanded.

A storm dragon washed over Mercy...and passed, leaving her unharmed.

The Storm Sage whirled to Ziel and laughed maniacally, throwing his head back to heaven. “Look! A fragment of the truth, revealed! Look what I have created!”

The working had taken great effort from Ziel, and he had no madra left to fight for himself. But that was all right. That wasn't the role of a shield.

Mercy launched a powerful arrow at Calling Storms, who met it with madra directly. His sight had worn off, it seemed.

In the meantime, Yerin clashed against the Thunder Fairy again. The older Herald had the advantage, so that was where Ziel could make a difference.

“Hold on,” Ziel ordered, and reality changed so that she could.

Yerin accepted a hit to land one on her opponent...but the sword that struck Yerin failed to penetrate her skin. Meanwhile, Yushi plummeted into the ground.

Calling Storms leaped past another of Mercy's arrows, appearing over Ziel. He looked delighted, and he had a Striker technique prepared to hurl down on Ziel's head.

That was a lethal blow, certainly, but Ziel stayed focused on Yerin.

“Protect,” Ziel ordered the world. His third working, not backed by any technique. His core was entirely empty, but the protection of his authority

should give Yerin the edge. Without him to make her vulnerable, she would defeat both enemies. She and Mercy would walk away.

He wouldn't get his revenge, but at the moment, that didn't seem so bad.

Was it really revenge he'd wanted, anyway? Now he wasn't sure. All along, he had only wanted a chance to do it over.

In a flash of shadow, Mercy appeared in front of him, shrouded in armor. She shoved Ziel's powerless body away, and he hurtled back.

The Sage's technique devoured her.

Yerin crashed into Calling Storms an instant later, splattering him over the rocks. He didn't even try to defend himself. She focused for a second, expanding her spirit to the blood aura around her.

"Been doing this from the beginning," Yerin said irritably. "Soon as I split him in half, she's on me. But now..."

An eagle of lightning crashed into Yerin's back and splashed harmlessly against Ziel's working.

"...thanks for the shield."

Yerin's sword rang like a bell and every drop of blood left in Calling Storms' body exploded.

By that time, the technique around Mercy had faded, and Ziel was almost too afraid to look. If he'd failed her...

But Mercy was crouched on the ground, armor still intact. She let it burst into essence and collapsed, breathing heavily.

She gave Ziel a weak wave. "Nice...block!"

Ziel's attention was focused on the regenerating Sage, but he felt the battle around him shifting. With the House Shen leaders occupied for so long, the Arelius forces had pushed in. They wrapped around the Shen sacred artists, and Ziel felt the noose tighten.

He got the sense of a spider wrapping silk around prey, and only then did it occur to him that he had never felt the Oracle Sage engaging directly in battle.

Nonetheless, House Arelius moved as though guided by a thousand eyes. They pounced on House Shen's weaknesses.

In a flash of light, the Thunder Fairy streaked up to them. Her face was dark, but her spirit was weak. The fight with Yerin had taken much from her.

She slammed her glowing sword away, and the Herald's words rang loudly. "I am willing to send you safely to Lindon Arelius if you agree to leave me and the Sage unharmed. And immediately."

Yerin skidded to a halt next to Yushi. "Agreed," she said immediately. From the feel of her spirit, she'd aborted an attack halfway through.

"Yes!" Mercy called.

The body of Calling Storms merged back into solidity, and he was cackling the moment his lips re-formed. "I have not had my fill of Death's apprentice."

"Oh, really?" the Thunder Fairy asked in feigned surprise. "You don't want to reunite the children of Death? Who knows what miracles they might create together?"

Ziel could feel the insane thoughts crawling through the mind of the lunatic Sage. He looked as though he'd received a divine revelation, though the Herald rolled her eyes behind him.

"I will cast the children of Death toward their older brother," the Sage said at last. "But on my own, I can never reach so far. Heralds, join your will to mine. Daughter of the Destroyer, grant me access to your Moonlight Bridge."

"It's all wrung dry," Yerin said bitterly.

"Even so, it can provide me assistance. And I require the authority of another Icon." He reached out a hand. "How about some help, my friend?"

Ziel's fury was deep and purely instinctive. His hammer was already crashing down on Calling Storms before the first conscious thought made it through his mind.

But he stopped his own weapon an inch from the Sage's face.

There was a discordant note from the Shield Icon. His own newborn connection to it flickered and weakened.

He was being offered a way to protect his current sect. As a guardian, he should take it.

But this was the man who had haunted Ziel's nightmares. He was *right there*.

Calling Storms leaned around Ziel's hammer and gave him a frown. "Don't you want to go back? Ah, I see. You were useless too long." He patted the hammer's head. "Very well. I'll send the other two of you back, but my Dawnwing student stays with us. I have some more *teaching* to do."

Ziel's skin prickled and writhed as pure hatred coursed through his veins. Only the song of the Shield Icon kept him from striking out.

It wouldn't be too late to kill the Sage of Calling Storms after the others saved Lindon from the Dreadgod.

He could survive the man's attentions for a while. After all, he had endured them already.

"I'll stay," Ziel said shortly. "It's not worth—"

Yerin's fist cracked into the Sage's jaw.

The man's entire head deformed, and he tumbled for half a mile. Dirt blasted up from the force of the impact.

Yushi watched Calling Storms fly away, impassive, then turned back to Yerin. "I know he's a rat, but you shouldn't antagonize your only way back home."

Even Ziel was taken aback. Anyone who met Yerin knew she had a temper, but she could keep it under control.

You wouldn't know it from looking at her, though.

Yerin's hair whipped wildly in the aura stirred by her spirit. Her eyes were wide and blazed with crimson rage. All six of her blade-arms were extended, and Netherclaw boiled with silver-and-scarlet madra.

"He should have kept his teeth together," Yerin said, and Ziel heard the cry of the Bleeding Phoenix in the red moonlight all around her.

Yushi's own sword had returned to her hand. Her expression was frosty, and her wings crackled with lightning. "A diplomatic solution would benefit the both of us. Don't think you can finish this quickly. Time is on our side."

Yerin wasn't looking at her. She gazed farther, to the regenerating Sage. "Oi!" she shouted. "You want to see what Eithan would do to you? I'll give you a taste for free."

She gripped her sword in both hands and drew back the blade. Ziel was no swordsman, but her stance looked somewhat strange. Even awkward.

Of course, he'd seen her practice this before.

Something in his spirit shivered, and the colors around Yerin flickered out for a second. She was imitating Eithan. As he had been in the sky when he pulled back his scythe.

He wanted to stop her. Her outrage on his behalf was going to cost them their chance at getting back to Lindon.

But for just a moment, he was frozen in fear.

And that cost him his chance.

Yerin unleashed the Reaper's Sword, and the battle began once more.

LINDON STRUGGLED AWAKE TO THE THUNDER OF BATTLE AND SEARING spiritual pain.

The gray-white echoed Titan clashed over Sacred Valley against its flesh-and-blood brother, and the sky blazed blue and gold with the madra of the Weeping Dragon. Lindon felt like he was boiling from the inside with excess power, but still his arm begged to feed on the two Dreadgods.

Dross panted in his mind. [Lindon, if you use Consume again before we're under control, I'm going to strangle your brain.]

Without Dross' help, it was difficult to avoid passing out again. The Heart of Twin Stars was the only thing that allowed him to filter the powers he'd stolen from Northstrider, and it felt like he was sorting six decks of cards at once.

He could have released the energy, but it supported him even as it wrestled him. And Northstrider's draconic authority would surely help his battle against the Weeping Dragon.

With every breath, the Dragon Icon sang its song inside him.

It filled him with arrogant confidence. If he admitted defeat here by abandoning Northstrider's power, he wasn't a true dragon. What kind of predator choked on his prey?

As Lindon was rooted to the spot, the Dreadgods clashed in the sky. The protective scripts around the Valley trembled, and Lindon suspected that if the Wandering Titan had been real instead of an echo of hunger madra, all of Sacred Valley would be dust.

From a ragged hole in the world just beyond the protective script formation, someone staggered out. Northstrider.

Alarm spiked through Lindon's spirit. If the Monarch could still fight, there would be little Lindon could do. He had stolen a large chunk of the man's power, which would be difficult to recover from, but Northstrider could potentially steal it right back.

The ragged Monarch was covered in dirt and blood. He coughed as he pulled himself out of the portal, and his own appearance finally matched the torn and scuffed condition of his clothes.

His eyes, however, were undefeated. He ignored Lindon and looked to the north and the battle between Dreadgods.

He extended a hand. "Admit defeat and give me the bow. I will not only spare you but save you."

Dross spun out into the air over Lindon's shoulder so they could both stare at Northstrider speechlessly.

The Monarch's gaze never wavered. "Can you save yourself?"

Lindon didn't have the concentration to spare for another negotiation with Northstrider. He flew slowly toward the Nethergate, where he could enter the labyrinth.

In fact, it wouldn't take much willpower to transport himself down into the labyrinth directly. But his mental and spiritual condition were tenuous enough as it was, and the labyrinth's power was being strained by projecting the Wandering Titan. He didn't want to push anything.

Inside the labyrinth, though, his options would expand. From there, it was relatively easy to move himself to another branch. Anywhere, as long as it was away from the Weeping Dragon.

The training plan had failed. Time to leave.

Northstrider grunted and followed him into the labyrinth's territory. "Strength is not enough, Lindon. You need the wisdom to see the world as it is. If you keep ignoring reality, it will crush you."

Lindon turned to look over his shoulder and spared the Monarch one parting comment. "We will not stop," he said.

He continued moving toward the Nethergate, and he felt it distantly when Northstrider opened a portal and ran.

Back to Moongrave.

Dross gave a whistling sound. [Wow, he admitted defeat. At any other time, I'd give you a round of applause. But I think we're in trouble.]

Serpents of living lightning tore mouthfuls of hunger madra out of the Wandering Titan. It was being ripped apart, and though it struck back at the Weeping Dragon with blows that ripped apart the air, it was clear that the battle was close to its end.

Lindon had hoped the echo would last longer, but this was hardly a surprising result. Not only was this Titan only a Forged projection, but it was also a copy of the Wandering Titan from a time before the Dreadgods had inherited the Slumbering Wraith's strength. The Dragon was on another level.

As Lindon picked up his speed and hobbled faster for the Nethergate, the sky boomed with the Weeping Dragon's voice.

"You don't know how to use my brother's techniques," the Dreadgod said. "I will take your arm and all his remains. They are my inheritance."

Lindon didn't respond to the Weeping Dragon, but Dross did. [The tiger tried to make deals with us too. Did you see what happened to him? I could show you.]

Thunder rumbled with the Dragon's response. "No. No deal. Whether you struggle or not, I will have what is mine. For I am the Dragon, and the sky weeps with my rage."

With that, there came a blinding flash. The entire sky blazed with a furious, crackling, swirl of blue.

And the Weeping Dragon bit through the ghostly gray Wandering Titan.

Hunger madra dispersed along with one last roar from the Titan. The Dragon gave its own answering cry of triumph, and a thousand bolts of lightning flashed in celebration.

Can you call for help? Lindon asked.

[I realize I look healthy, powerful, and inspiring, but I've been working as hard as you have. I'm in no better shape than you.]

The Weeping Dragon swam through clouds, circling Sacred Valley. Storm clouds blocked out the shining blue sky, and wind whipped up.

The Dreadgod flicked its tail at the protective script, and the shield flashed into visibility for a moment.

Lindon reached the Nethergate and wrenched it open.

[Too late!] Dross shouted.

The heavens opened and countless Striker techniques rained down.

They were the hallmark of the Weeping Dragon: draconic serpents of blue-and-gold lightning. Where they fell, they consumed spirits and brought

them back to the Dreadgod.

Now they rained in the millions, and all their attention was focused on Lindon.

The protective script of the Valley weakened them, but it didn't stop them entirely. They slipped through, swimming in the air with jaws open.

Lindon considered and discarded options in an instant. He could dive for the labyrinth, but the Weeping Dragon might be able to break it from the outside in. Which would endanger everyone inside, and transporting so many of them at once would drain much of the labyrinth's remaining power.

He wanted to use the Silent King Bow, but just the thought of summoning it made him shudder. He could barely hold it in his soul space, much less use it.

Neither he nor Dross could come up with a winning plan, so he called up the Hollow Domain. The blue-white light flickered at first, until he forced his madra into stability.

The Striker techniques dove into his Domain and weakened themselves further. He struck them from the air like he was tearing down cobwebs.

But there was an endless number of them, and he'd been in constant battle with Monarchs. He was totally exhausted, and his movements looked unsteady and drunken.

[We need to run,] Dross said sadly.

That costs us the labyrinth.

[It's that or our lives.]

There was no simulation behind that prediction. Dross couldn't model the Weeping Dragon well and couldn't spare the madra or the attention to do so at the moment.

It was a judgment anyone could make in the situation. Besides running, what else could Lindon do?

With only another moment of hesitation, Lindon staggered through the Nethergate. Expanding his awareness into the labyrinth was usually simple, but now it was agonizing. It took several tries to even get it to work, and he shuddered to imagine what it would take to actually transport countless people.

But when his awareness entered the labyrinth, he heard something echoing from a distant corner of its scattered halls. A pattern of authority.

From far away, beyond the reach of his spiritual sense, a Sage was calling his name.

Lindon, the distant voice said. *Let me help you.*

Lindon hesitated. This wasn't an actual voice, just intentions translated through the labyrinth, so he didn't recognize the speaker. They claimed they were here to help, but if he summoned them here, he wouldn't be able to bring himself away.

He was tempted. This was a chance to keep the labyrinth.

But did this mysterious savior know they were about to go up against a Dreadgod?

He sent his own thoughts into the labyrinth. *The Weeping Dragon is here*, he sent.

The reply was only an instant in coming. *Then hurry up!*

Dross gave a mental shrug. [Give it a shot?]

The labyrinth shook as the Weeping Dragon struck again. Dirt fell from the ceiling, and the pressure inside and outside of Lindon's spirit redoubled. He forced himself to concentrate his willpower, one last time.

"Here," Lindon commanded. The labyrinth shifted around him.

His consciousness fuzzed. He barely avoided losing a grip on the stolen madra inside him, but he lost track of his surroundings.

Boots clanked against stones. Several pairs of boots.

A voice said something, but he couldn't hear it. A cold hand gripped his shoulder. "The bow, Lindon. Give me the bow."

Lindon struggled away, an instinctive reaction.

[I think you should do it,] Dross suggested. [It will make it easier for us.]

With Dross' encouragement, Lindon reluctantly let the Silent King Bow slip from his soul space. Without it inside him, the weight on his spirit lessened significantly, and he breathed more easily.

"Thanks!" A cheery voice said. "You can pass out now. Don't worry, I'll probably give it back."

Lindon tried to protest, but he had truly hit his limit. He lost consciousness.



Larian gave a long, pleased hum as she ran her thumb down the Bow of the Silent King. "Now *this* is a bow. Malice is going to be jealous."

“You’ll have to give it back,” said Del’rek of the Shann. Even in human form, the sacred elephant towered over her, and he gave her a pointed look over his tusks. “I don’t want a human Dreadgod after us.”

The labyrinth shook, and Larian pointed a finger at the ceiling. “How about a dragon one?”

Most of the others grumbled. They weren’t as happy to be here as she was.

“Pull up your pants and get to work, Eight-Man Empire!” Larian called. “Time to earn our pay!”

“We’re not getting paid for this,” Kethri muttered. Larian considered the woman a sister, but the Spider Sage was always wary about entering open battle.

“Oooohhh yes we are,” Larian responded. “Now...” She drew power from her comrades, and suddenly she was a Monarch. “...let’s try out this bow.”



Despite being an Archlady now, Mercy felt like an outsider in the battle between Yerin, Ziel, Yushi, and the Storm Sage.

Temporarily, she could borrow the power of a Herald and tilt the fight her way. But there was a difference between her and the others that she could only bridge for a few seconds at a time.

She sent arrows flying at the Thunder Fairy and helped Ziel evade the Sage’s attacks, but the other two felt a passion she didn’t. They were focused on killing their opponents.

Mercy was more worried about the broader battle.

While the Sages and Heralds clashing had cleared a wide field around them, there was still a fight between House Arelius and House Shen. The Oracle Sage was visible here and there, directing her forces, but she was the only one propping up the Arelius forces.

House Shen had the cloudships, the artifacts, and the advantage in numbers. If Yerin and Ziel could get a clear win, then of course they would tilt the battle in their favor. But a stalemate or inconclusive victory was more likely.

Her family history showed her that Sages and Heralds were hard to kill. They almost always had ways to escape.

Thus, Mercy was in conflict with herself.

Her mother would focus on the most important fighters on the battlefield. She would angle for a decisive victory over Shen's Sage and Herald, even if she had to plot against them and bring them down later. She never forgot a grudge.

That was Malice.

What should Mercy do?

How should she use shadow madra to bring light?

When she asked herself like that, her answer became clear. For one thing, the high-level battle meant nothing if the low-level one was lost.

For another, she had the opportunity now to help more people. House Arelius had been on the verge of destruction for years now. They needed hope.

"Hold on!" Mercy called to Ziel. His gaze flickered to her in evident surprise, but he couldn't afford more of a response than that, since the Storm Sage came riding in on the back of a Forged lightning dragon.

Mercy tapped her sixth page and her Shadestep technique. She melted through shadow and appeared a moment later behind the Arelius lines.

They were holed up in a building that was half-ruined and covered in ash, like most everything in eyesight. Some of the Lords targeted her with techniques immediately, but not as many as she'd expected. Even most of those attacks cut off half-formed.

Mercy weathered the stray attacks on her armor and admired the Arelius bloodline gift. Their reaction speed and coordination were impressive, although that might have only been true when the Oracle Sage guided them.

Thinking of the woman must have summoned her, because Cladia Arelius stepped out of nowhere a moment later. The Sage of a Thousand Eyes indeed had many eyes of light madra swarming around her, like a cloud of bees. Her face was gently wrinkled but pleasant, her blonde hair streaked with gray and pulled back, and her dark blue robes were worn and disheveled.

She had clearly pushed herself hard for a long time now, but she didn't appear too urgent as she surveyed Mercy.

"I'm here to help!" Mercy said brightly.

“Hmmm,” the Sage responded. “Eithan didn’t leave a message for me, did he?”

Mercy scratched the side of her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get to talk to him before he ascended.”

“Pity. Well, I suppose he didn’t get to pick his timing, did he?” Eyes flew out from behind the Oracle Sage, and her head snapped to a corner of the battlefield. “**See.** Sorry, I’m spreading myself thin as it is. How are you with taking orders?”

“Tell me where you need me!” Mercy said enthusiastically.

“Great. You’re the best piece I have on the board right now, so I’ll be leaning on you hard.” The Oracle Sage tossed her a construct: a blue-and-white crystal that came to hover next to Mercy’s ear. Cladia spoke into a larger version of the construct, and the one by Mercy’s head buzzed with her voice. “Test one. Test two. Good.” She conjured a floating ball of light madra. “This will be your visual guide. Think of them like your aunt’s owls. Then I’ll relay the situation. As I get used to your capabilities, I’ll be able to guide you more precisely, but I will be pushing—” She cut herself off, casting a half-dozen spears of light into the air to intercept launcher constructs.

Mercy clapped black-gloved hands together. “Let’s go!”

An eye appeared in Mercy’s vision. It was hovering over a cloudship. “Take the ship down. Overlord-class force barrier, basic script protections, and the most-advanced crewman is an Overlord. His Path is—”

While Cladia’s voice was still explaining the enemy’s forces, Mercy had taken the ship down.

One arrow broke the barrier, a Shadestep and an armored punch tore apart the scripted hull, and Strings of Shadow bound the entire crew.

The Overlord would escape eventually, but the cloud base was leaking and drifting toward the ground.

“Next!” Mercy called.

Mercy couldn’t be sure, but she thought the Oracle Sage’s voice was brighter. “Disrupt the formation.” A floating eye indicated a circle of two hundred Golds led by a few dozen Lords and Ladies. They were operating a boundary field that manipulated aura all over the battlefield, bending wind and fire to push back Arelius troops.

Cladia was explaining the function of the script, but Mercy shot an arrow bound with the Dream of Darkness.

The script pushed against her Ruler technique, but enough people were affected by the nightmares of her Dream of Darkness that the formation weakened. She whipped Blades of Shadow at the boundary flags planted around the circle, and though the Blades were broken by techniques, a bombardment of Arelius Striker techniques hit at the same time.

That took enough pressure off that Mercy used Strings of Shadow to bind a group of a hundred Golds in a massive spiderweb.

“What’s next?”

“Archlord and his personal guard.” The eye showed the coordinates.

Mercy focused. The Oracle Sage had clearly decided to pick up the pace. Mercy was a brand-new Archlady, and the man hovering over her—engaged with a troop of Arelius Lords—held a massive sword in both hands. He was weathered by the years, and her sense of him suggested a spirit honed by battle.

The pair of Overlords and trio of Underlords behind him worked in perfect concert, and all had quality weapons.

Though they were focused on different opponents, she still wouldn’t be a match for them. Not as she was, anyway.

She started to tap into the seventh page, but Cladia’s voice echoed in her ear. “You just need to counter the Archlord. He was only a few seconds away from breaking through us and slaughtering my people. This should help you.”

The Sage’s next word didn’t echo through the communication construct, but Mercy heard it nonetheless. She heard the command in her very soul.

“**See,**” the Sage of a Thousand Eyes commanded her.

The world clarified as though she’d been blind a moment before.

It wasn’t like borrowing the Arelius bloodline. Mercy understood that as strings of awareness that spread around and carried information. This was more like her existing sight had become sharper and deeper.

She saw weak points in the Archlord’s stance highlighted: places where he would be slow to react. She saw his effective range in a circle around him, and what techniques to avoid.

Like a shadow layered over him, his future actions played out a split second before he did them. She saw him swing his sword an instant before he did, saw his head turn to her just before it happened.

“Hang on for two minutes, and I’ll have backup for you,” Cladia said. Then her voice vanished. No doubt she was coordinating someone else.

Mercy drew the Archlord's attention with an arrow and flew on wind aura past the squad of exhausted Arelius Lords. "Follow me!" she called and flashed them an encouraging smile.

She shot every weak point of the Archlord at once.

He was still an experienced Archlord, and "weak point" was relative. They were just places he couldn't block as easily. He *did* still block her shots, but they put him on the back foot.

Mercy whipped blades of shadow madra at the squad behind him, activated the Dream of Darkness for just a moment, and then was among them.

They had protections against her domain, but it still startled them enough to allow her to land. All six members of the squad, including the Archlord, flew on their own separate clouds.

Within their ranks, Mercy wore her full-body armor and filled her limbs with the Dark Tide Incantation.

An Overlord tried to block her punch, but his arm broke. Mercy then dragged an Underlady from her cloud with Strings of Shadow, but that was as far as she got before she had to twist back to avoid the Archlord's sword.

Even with her armor, she didn't underestimate the weapon. She dodged, using her Puppeteer Iron Body to control her body precisely. Combined with the Oracle Sage's foresight, it was almost effortless.

She felt like she could dodge a Monarch, and the sheer exhilaration of it made her giggle.

The Archlord's face darkened at that, and he gathered madra for a larger technique.

Only it was too late. The Arelius squad crashed into his, sweeping away his guards in an instant. He was forced to fly away, and Mercy dismissed her armor.

"Where to?" she asked.

Only then did her backup arrive. The Arelius Archlord was bleeding and panting heavily, carrying a spear, but he met Mercy's eyes and nodded his thanks. Then he flew to a different battle.

Cladia's voice was bright. "Well done! He was my last Archlord before you showed up."

"He needs a break."

"He'll sleep when he's dead. Which would have been about now, without you."

Mercy's hands tightened on Suu, which hissed its eagerness. "Let's go faster."

"Too risky. A reasonable pace and we can hang on until your friends lend us support." The Sage's voice was strained, and Mercy could feel her spirit spreading all over the battlefield. She was making a rational decision, but Cladia Arelius was surely feeling more desperate than anyone else.

Her people needed help.

And something whispered to Mercy that she could help them. She could push further. She could shine more brightly.

"How about an unreasonable pace?"

The Sage let out a breath. "Hold for instructions."

Mercy killed a few seconds by launching arrows into some cloudships. The shots were stopped by aura barriers, but at least that would deplete the madra powering the scripts.

"All right, Akura. I can't move you too fast with a gentle touch. You'll have to let me know when you're hitting your limits."

Mercy leaned forward. "I'll try to find them!"

She shot off, propelled by wind aura and Strings of Shadow, and the Sage of a Thousand Eyes guided her. Mercy passed through formations in a flicker of darkness, disrupting them for long enough that a coordinated volley of Striker techniques from Arelius artists landed. She disrupted pockets of resistance, destroyed key weapons, and blunted attacks heading for vulnerable positions.

To her, it was a blur of speed. She pushed herself faster and faster, until the Sage had to give her one-word commands backed with illustrations from the floating eyes.

As Mercy fought, more eyes gathered around her as the Sage's directions became more complex. She passed over the battle like the fall of night, changing everything.

And as she did, she gathered more and more eyes.

Until she finally ran out of madra. She stopped, panting and eyes spinning, as the banners of House Shen retreated.

Around her, the eyes of the Oracle Sage were gathered so thick that they burned like a sunrise.

The communication construct in her ear cracked and fell apart, but Cladia Arelius appeared at her side anyway. "I saw that we were gathering

to meet one of Eithan's students, but...well, speaking honestly, I didn't think it would be you."

Mercy was leaning heavily on Suu in its staff form, but she waved a black-clad hand. "You could have done it without me."

"Three Archlords, fourteen Overlords, thirty-two Underlords, and about a thousand Golds," Cladia recited.

"Are those the losses?"

"That's how many more sacred artists House Shen had than we did. Not counting..." the Oracle Sage pointed to the battle between Sages and Heralds, which still raged in the sky. "Add a Herald to that list. Now, they're the ones retreating." Cladia bowed to Mercy at the waist. "Thank you. For the lives of my family."

Mercy's face heated, but she still felt the thrill of the battle. "It feels good," she admitted.

"It should." Blue eyes met Mercy's, and the Sage gave a gentle smile. "You remind me of your mother."

Mercy stiffened.

"Not as she is now. That would not be a compliment. But as she was, long ago. If that woman had looked into the future and seen that she would have a daughter like you, she would have bragged to no end."

Mercy's eyes misted, and she wiped them with the back of her hand.

"Now," the Oracle Sage continued, "let's finish this battle."

FOR YUSHI, THE BATTLE HAD STARTED AS AN ANNOYANCE AND WAS RAPIDLY becoming downright frightening.

The forces of House Shen she had brought here at great expense were being driven off behind her back by the guidance of the Oracle Sage. Always, the Sage of a Thousand Eyes was an annoying opponent, but she had a clear weakness: straightforward combat. Many ordinary Archlords could match her one-for-one.

She was dangerous as an advisor and a tactical coordinator, so the more of her attention she had to waste defending herself, the more useless she became.

Yushi and Calling Storms together were able to keep her in check, and they had been about to destroy the remaining powers of House Arelius with minimal losses.

Even when Yerin and Ziel had showed up, she'd thought there was little to worry about. They were young and new to their advancements, so eventually they would lose to their more experienced counterparts. Likewise, House Shen was stronger in every way than House Arelius, even with the presence of the Oracle Sage.

The first problem had been the Akura girl. With a combat-capable Archlady to work as her hands and feet, Cladia had become a much more dangerous opponent. They had turned the battle on the ground much more than Yushi had expected.

Even so, that wouldn't have been enough. It would pressure them a bit, but Yushi and the Storm Sage could impact the battle while fighting.

Or that should have been the case.

Yerin's strength was out of the ordinary, even for Heralds, but her Moonlight Bridge was exhausted and Yushi was quick. Yerin should have been simple enough to drive away.

If not for those sword-strikes that drained color from the world.

They carried a depth of authority that frightened Yushi, despite Yerin not being a Sage. Every black-and-white slash from Yerin seemed to carry a decree from Fate.

It would *definitely* land.

And it would *absolutely* kill.

If Yerin had perfected such a technique, Yushi would have been dead already, but the idea of someone Yerin's age mastering such a profound technique was laughable. Even so, Yushi was feeling more pressure than she ever thought possible.

Yerin's attacks felt like they came from a Herald centuries old.

Yushi needed the Storm Sage's backup, and at first, she expected that he was playing around. As was his tendency.

Ziel, after all, had advanced even more recently than Yerin. His authority was clearly unstable, and his core was empty or close to it.

But the Storm Sage's frustration was transforming to blind fury in real time.

Ziel was too strong.

In terms of physical strength alone, he was a match for a newly advanced Herald. What had happened? Had Lindon figured out how to feed the man a Dreadgod?

And even without madra, Ziel could operate his Divine Treasure to some degree. Whenever the Sage was about to catch him, he surrounded himself with rings of silver runes.

Reality twisted around him, and he slipped aside. With the acceleration of his time script, he couldn't be caught, and locking the Storm Sage in place for a moment was a guaranteed way to kill him.

Calling Storms could regenerate even from total destruction, but of course there was a limit to the Divine Treasure that allowed it. Not even Monarchs had truly unrestricted regeneration.

What Yushi and Calling Storms had expected to be a quick battle was turning into a drawn-out grind with their lives on the line. That had never been part of their calculation.

The tide of battle turning against their forces only sped up their deadline.

As she felt House Shen beginning to retreat, Yushi sent a coded message to the Storm Sage telling him to flee.

It pained her pride, but this battlefield wasn't worth throwing their lives away. And if the Sage of a Thousand Eyes freed herself to join the battle, it would turn from a slog into an execution.

Calling Storms didn't respond, but Yushi didn't wait for him. She flared her wings and dashed away. If he died because he was too enraged to retreat, that was on his own head.

As she shot for the nearest Shen cloudship, she felt a warning in her spirit. A lance of light madra blasted at her, and she managed to twist her head aside at the last second.

Yushi glared at the source of the Striker technique.

Cladia Arelius gave her a distant, vague smile. More balls of light were forming around her.

Yushi ran lightning through her sword, prepared to annihilate the Sage. Thousand Eyes was slippery, surviving even a direct strike from the Weeping Dragon, but Cladia had people to protect this time. What she avoided, the Arelius family would have to block.

The Oracle Sage looked at something behind Yushi and nodded.

At the same time, Yushi felt what was happening and spun around. Silver runes flashed around Yerin, and her motions blurred as she moved for Calling Storms.

Her sword passed through his neck.

Lightning exploded against her, and she staggered, but the protection of the Shield Icon was layered on her already-durable Herald's body.

Yerin and Ziel had turned on the Storm Sage the second that Yushi had tried to retreat. As though they'd heard her call for the Sage to flee.

Or as though they'd been warned.

By an Oracle.

Yushi targeted Ziel with her technique, since he was a fresh Sage running on the last of his willpower. If he were struck directly, he wouldn't survive.

A sword of pure lightning stabbed at him, but Yerin met it with a Forged crimson claw from her weapon's binding.

At the same time, something pinged painfully off the back of Yushi's skull. The Oracle Sage's attack.

It hurt no more than a pebble, but it infuriated her nonetheless. She glared at Cladia Arelius, who returned a small wave.

"That's enough," Yushi finally said. The words had the bitter taste of swallowed pride. "We admit defeat."

Danger screamed in her spirit, and the world turned gray.

With all her madra, she clashed against Yerin's sword. The slash was too difficult to dodge, but she found herself strained from meeting it.

Then silver runes flashed behind her, and suddenly the entire world was moving too slowly.

That was when her premonition of danger turned to ice-cold terror.

Ziel was clearly out of madra, but he had still used a working of the Rune Queen's array to slow Yushi's time. She gathered willpower to push against it, returning the world to normal, but she couldn't fully break it *and* defend against Yerin at the same time.

Every technique she threw, Yerin dodged or weathered. She had the guidance of the Oracle Icon and the protection of the Shield Icon, on top of the strength of a Herald and an attack layered with deadly authority.

The pressure was enough to make Yushi feel as though she was facing down a Monarch.

She burned through every technique she had, including emergency life-saving constructs that were mowed down by Yerin's blade. Finally, she reached into her void key for her last resort: a high-quality gatestone that would take her immediately to Reigan Shen's side.

It was missing.

Though Yushi was in the middle of a high-speed aerial fight, she still caught a glimpse of Cladia Arelius striding into view beneath her, casually juggling a gatestone.

How had she gotten it? *When* had she gotten it? How did the Oracle Icon allow one to steal from a sealed void space?

It didn't matter. The noose had settled around Yushi's neck.

"Wait," she said to Yerin. "Mercy!"

Yerin kicked her into the ground, which detonated beneath her. Spiritual pain radiated from her back as her wings, a Divine Treasure gifted to her by Reigan Shen, snapped from the impact.

Yerin jerked her chin into the distance. "You're looking for her."

While Yushi was still thinking of another tactic, Yerin's blade took off her head.



Ziel watched Yerin kill the Herald, which was a more dramatic sight than he anticipated.

The moment she killed her enemy, the cry of a phoenix echoed through the surrounding aura. Hunger radiated in a pattern that Ziel recognized as similar to Lindon's Consume technique. And power rushed into Yerin.

She was clearly caught off-guard, because she stiffened in place and her eyes rolled back into her head. This must have been what she was aiming for, but she wouldn't have any way to brace herself for a Herald's power suddenly flowing into her.

Ziel forced weary hands to lift his hammer. He had little left, but if he didn't move, they were all going to be killed by a Herald's Remnant.

Indeed, Yushi's Remnant started forming only seconds after her death. It looked beautiful and inhuman, like a vaguely humanoid diamond that crackled with lightning and spread lacy wings.

But it didn't attack. It was bound with threads of crimson madra, woven around it like chains. In Ziel's mind, it felt connected to Yerin. Bound to her.

Slowly, it drifted to stand behind Yerin.

She finally came out of her trance, breathing heavily and falling to one knee. "Bleed me," she panted. "Didn't want one more whisper of her memories than I needed." Yerin turned to eye the Remnant behind her. "Guessing you're the leftovers, are you?"

"I am what you have not absorbed," the Remnant said, its voice echoing strangely. *"You will digest me as you are able, and eventually we will merge."*

Yerin rubbed one ear as though the words were physically painful to hear. "Heard that one more than once." She looked to Ziel, and then to a writhing headless man on the ground. "What's the plan with him?"

The Storm Sage's regeneration had been much slower this time. Deadly authority infected his neck from the Reaper's slash that Yerin imitated,

though Ziel suspected the man's Divine Treasure would have overcome it already if it hadn't been exhausted.

A head was gradually growing from the Sage's neck, and Ziel looked down on him with a stomach full of fury.

Possibilities passed through his mind.

With the Grand Oath Array, he could slow the man's suffering so that every second stretched into minutes. He could make the Storm Sage *beg* for what the man himself had done to Ziel.

He spun out that fantasy, hungry for it. But only for a moment.

Then he weighed down the Sage's chest with his hammer and waited for the man's head to regenerate.

As soon as it had ears, Ziel spoke. "I want you to know who killed you." He gripped the hammer tightly and thought of his own years of pain.

Then he listened to the song of the Shield Icon.

"No one else will suffer at your hands." With that, Ziel lifted his hammer.

He brought it down, but he had no Enforcer technique. Empowered by his strengthened body, the hammer still crashed onto him, but the Storm Sage caught it on both lightning-crackling hands. He lifted himself into the air on streams of aura, grinning a manic blood-stained grin.

He opened his mouth to speak.

Then Yerin cut him in half.

"Nope," she said. "Not waiting for that."

LINDON RETURNED TO CONSCIOUSNESS WITH A WAR RAGING INSIDE HIS spirit.

His body was being torn apart from the inside; if not for his Bloodforged Iron body, he may have suffered irreparable damage. Without Lindon's will to suppress it, Northstrider's power thrashed around inside him like a trapped shark.

[I'm...starting...to regret this], Dross said. [He has so...many... memories.]

Lindon pushed himself up to a sitting position on the smooth stone floor of the labyrinth. A battle thundered outside, but he kept his senses contained. He focused entirely on controlling the power within him.

He needed to get rid of Northstrider's energy, but he didn't want to waste it.

[If only there were vessels we'd prepared *specifically* to receive your extra power,] Dross said.

He was referring to Orthos and Little Blue, whose presence would indeed solve this problem of Lindon's. Split among three people, they could digest Northstrider's power quickly, and it would dramatically benefit the advancement of the other two.

But Lindon didn't dwell on the thought. He didn't even allow himself to think about it too hard. They might feel his emotions through their contracted bond.

Until they were ready, he didn't plan to pressure them. He was here to carry them, not the other way around.

The best we can do is to cycle this as quickly as possible and vent the rest, Lindon responded. *We've held onto it too long.*

Dross made a dismissive sound. They were doing that already, but they were too late to help with the battle against the Weeping Dragon.

Nothing to do but buckle down.

Lindon's spiritual sense locked onto his cores, and he lost himself in absolute focus.



When he felt Lindon's eyes close, Orthos opened his own.

He raised himself to all fours, power cycling through him. "He needs us," Orthos rumbled.

Little Blue gave a quiet, piping whistle.

She was hovering in midair, the ends of her dress and hair fluttering in a nonexistent wind. Little Blue was a paler shade of blue than usual, but she looked as solid as a human.

And was much taller.

To them, it had been a week since Ziel and Mercy had left.

Archlord natural treasures dissolved behind Orthos. Most of them had turned to soulfire that burned in his spirit at that very moment.

Little Blue, likewise, had finished the course Lindon had left for her.

They stood together, a pair of Archlords.

They had reached the end of their training regimen. Ideally, they would then sit and cycle for a few more days to stabilize their spirits and grow used to their new powers. But Lindon needed them.

Of course, they still had to figure a way out.

Orthos tried to signal Lindon, but he had cut himself off so that they wouldn't do exactly what they were planning on doing.

That only made Orthos more resolved.

Yerin and Ziel had escaped by cutting through the Way, but Orthos and Little Blue couldn't do that. They could perhaps force open the original entrance to the pocket world with sheer willpower, but that would be much easier from the outside than the inside.

There was only one option left: the network of defensive constructs that had surrounded the pocket world's entrance.

Orthos strode to the control room. “I’ll try to signal someone. Grab the tank.”

Little Blue whistled and gave a wave as a salute, then scurried off to grab Lindon’s secret project. As Orthos was still figuring out which of the scripts were operational and which outside constructs remained functional, Blue scurried back with a tank several sizes bigger than her body held over her head. Five purple orbs drifted in fluid within.

He settled down and tried to send a message. He just had to hope someone on the other side was listening.



Sweat ran down Larian’s face. Well, most of it was sweat. Some was blood.

She couldn’t stay a Monarch all the time. Others of the Empire needed to borrow the power of the group when they were hitting the Weeping Dragon, or when they had to take a hit that would have killed them otherwise.

Eventually, Del’rek would lend her the restoration authority to fix her injuries. Like her twisted spine, her strained madra channels, and her missing eye.

But they had to survive first.

More than her injuries, she was focused on the Silent King Bow. Metaphysically speaking, it was *heavy*. Most of the damage to her spirit had come from her own use of the bow.

Her opinion of Lindon slid upwards. How did he manage to use the weapon as long as he had?

Nonetheless, it was their most effective weapon against the Dragon. She wrapped her spirit around the Bow, focusing her willpower and pulling back the string.

Lindon may have the muscle to use the weapon, but he wasn’t a Bow Sage. She could do things with arrows that he couldn’t imagine.

As long as her soul didn’t break.

The Weeping Dragon turned to her the moment he felt the Bow in use, and she Forged a white arrow onto the string. It blasted toward him, and the Dreadgod gave that missile the full force of his attention.

Good thing, too.

The arrow disappeared before it was struck by lightning, twisted around a massive claw, pressured the Dragon's thoughts, and landed where the Dragon was fated to be.

When the arrowhead sank in, the Dragon writhed. Its roar threatened to burst her eardrums, and she could feel its thoughts trembling before the mental power of the Silent King.

Larian coughed up a mouthful of blood, and the Bow fell from nerveless fingers.

Dropping her weapon in battle. That was embarrassing.

She wanted to pick it up, but her body wouldn't listen. The time had come for her exit; she wasn't much more than a liability to the others in this condition.

But as she called a cloud to pick her up, she noticed something. A half-broken construct projecting a few fuzzy characters into the air.

"Pocket world," they said. *"Trapped."*

No matter how weak she was, Larian's perception was sharp. Now that she was looking for it, she spotted the warped scar in space that represented the collapsed entrance to a pocket world.

Ordinarily, she could open it in a second.

This time, she called her comrade.

Kharrus, Herald of the Nine-Hands, had already been flying toward her on a cloud. He was quiet but even-tempered, reliable, and he radiated a desire to be out of here.

She indicated the warp, in the ocean far to the north. "Trapped in there. Could be Arelius' apprentices."

He didn't ask any further questions, he just pulled back his axe and loaded it with his will. With one slash, he tore the world open right in front of him.

Then he dashed back into the fight, deflecting a volley of living lightning before it could crash down on Larian. He left a cloud behind him, for her.

A portal opened into a swirl of blue, and two people walked out. But not ones Larian recognized.

The Archlord man had weathered, tar-black skin and gray hair. He wore dark leather that looked as though it had been made from dragon hide, with bits of armor strapped to it.

The Archlady had navy hair the color of the deep ocean and skin like a summer sky. She carried a tank of *something* under one arm. Something that felt spiritually powerful.

Larian would have asked what a couple of Archlords were doing inside a pocket world that had been constructed by the Void Sage, but she recognized their eyes and the feel of their madra.

The Lord's were black with circles of bright red while the Lady's were blue with circles of white. Larian had seen eyes like that before.

She jerked a thumb in the direction of the largest gate into the labyrinth, the one etched with a stylized depiction of the Slumbering Wraith. "He's in there."

"We know," the man said in a deep, rumbling voice. "Thank you for your help."

The woman dipped her head in agreement. "Mm-hmm!"

Lightning fell from the skies like rain, and both newcomers ignited full-body Enforcer techniques. They sprang up like fire from each of them, the woman's a smooth, blue-white flame while the man's was a rough black-and-red blaze.

The two nodded to her, then dashed off. Larian had to hope they could survive in a Dreadgod's presence long enough to reach Lindon.

Because there wasn't much else she could do to help.



Lindon still wrestled with his spirit when he heard Dross give a delighted gasp. [Yay, you brought my project! And also, I'm glad to see you. Of course. That goes without saying, which is why I didn't say it.]

Lindon withdrew from his cycling trance to see Orthos. He'd already felt the turtle standing in front of him, which was why he was taken aback to see a man.

Orthos was human, with the same wrinkled black skin as before but a head full of gray hair. It was strange to see age on him as a person; Lindon had always known Orthos was old, but it wasn't as though he was used to telling young turtles apart from old ones. Gray hair and wrinkles on a human form had far more impact.

In some ways, though, Little Blue was more startling.

Rather than a spirit, she resembled a woman made up to look like one. Her skin was pale blue, but solid and opaque, and her deep navy hair was actually *hair*.

If he hadn't sensed their connection, he might have doubted their identities. Though their eyes were the same.

And Blue gave a loud cheer when she saw him, running over and throwing herself into him with arms wrapped around his neck. Orthos folded his own arms across his chest and snorted smoke.

"I thought you knew we could do it," Orthos grumbled. "You look shocked."

Lindon held out his left hand to Orthos. "It's not over yet."

Orthos clasped Lindon's palm, and Lindon pushed Northstrider's power out through their bond.

The grip tightened as Orthos stiffened, and Lindon felt him struggling with the sudden influx of madra and willpower. The weight he was bearing lifted from Lindon, and relief spread through Lindon's spirit like a sigh.

But it wasn't only madra that Lindon intended to pass on. He focused on the Dragon Icon, on the authority that had come from Northstrider. The same that he felt from the Weeping Dragon, and what he'd sensed from Seshethkunaaz.

He had a thousand memories of dragons, and now he understood what they *meant*. Dross helped him convey that meaning to Orthos.

No one had spent longer meditating on the nature of dragons than Orthos.

The Dragon Icon clicked like a key into a lock, covering the ceiling of the labyrinth in its image. A realistic, fully rendered image of a long, serpentine black dragon.

Orthos' power suddenly expanded, growing deeper and broader. This transformation wasn't as dramatic as most advancements, but it was even more fundamental.

Red-on-black eyes lowered to meet Lindon, and Lindon saw a spark of fire in their depths. The authority of a Dragon Sage.

His grip tightened around Lindon's hand as Orthos exerted as much strength as he could to test his newfound power.

Lindon gave him an apologetic look. This wasn't a fair contest. Orthos was trying to strangle a boulder.

Dark eyes narrowed, and the Icon overhead gave a defiant roar. “**Stronger!**” Orthos commanded, and the word carried the authority of a dragon.

Under the Sage working, Orthos’ grip tightened to the point that the world warped slightly around their hands.

“Well done!” Lindon said in an encouraging tone.

Little Blue’s tinkling laughter sounded strange coming from a human throat.

Orthos growled to himself, focusing everything he had on his grip. “All right, show me what you can do.”

Lindon hesitated. “That’s not a fair—”

“I have to know.”

As Orthos wished, Lindon tightened the grip of his human hand.

Sage bodies couldn’t conduct willpower like a Herald’s could, though strength-related Icons like the Dragon Icon helped. But Lindon’s body was halfway between a Herald’s and a Dreadgod’s. Most comparable to a Monarch’s.

He was physically powerful enough to match fists with Northstrider, so this was, truly, an unfair contest.

Orthos resisted for a second or two before his authority was completely overwhelmed. His bones began to creak, and his hand trembled involuntarily.

“...All right!” he shouted at last. Lindon released him.

Orthos pulled back his twisted claw of a hand, muttering to himself. “Feels like there’s no getting close to you, no matter what I do. For every step I take, you’ve taken two.”

“Take two steps,” Lindon suggested.

Orthos spat a burst of fire madra into Lindon’s face. Of course, it did nothing.

Little Blue shook Lindon back and forth by the shoulders. She didn’t say anything that could be called communication, even by her usual standards, but Lindon could translate the feeling he was getting through her contracted bond. “*Me next!*”

He looked into her oceanic eyes. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

She responded enthusiastically with wordless cheers, even releasing him to jump up and down.

Lindon had already begun the process of moving them to another chamber, but he still reflected that seeing Little Blue act like a foot-tall spirit while in the body of a grown human woman was...strange.

The labyrinth shifted around them, to a mostly empty room. He had chosen this one because it was surrounded by scripts that would seal off excess power, which was important in the advancement to Herald.

When they arrived, Little Blue dropped to her knees and held out her left hand. He took it and tapped into his pure core.

At this level, she could handle the full density of his madra. Northstrider's powers wouldn't help her as much as they'd helped Orthos, but there were still benefits. His blood essence, in particular—his physical strength—would help her form a real body. As much as she looked like a human now, she was still fundamentally a spirit.

That was about to change.

He could feel Little Blue's concentration, impatience, and firm will.

So he flooded power into her, to trigger her advancement to Herald.

His pure madra filled up her core from the inside while Northstrider's blood and life essence soaked into her body.

Dross popped up next to Lindon's head. [Remember, for spirits, the process of advancing to Herald is—] Flesh wove around Little Blue's body as she guided her spirit to manifest physically. [—oh, you get it. You're doing it. Good for you, then.]

The process of absorbing and purifying so many Blood Shadows had helped Little Blue in more ways than one. Her understanding of herself and the nature of spirits had surpassed most Archlords. Maybe even Lindon's.

[Not mine,] Dross whispered to him. [There are advantages to never being weighed down by bloated, meaty flesh.]

Spirits reached Herald in the opposite way that humans and sacred beasts did. Rather than manifesting their Remnant and integrating with it, they had to form their spirits into a body.

Which Little Blue did with no problems.

Now, she imposed her will onto reality, creating a *real* vessel for herself.

Aura and soulfire raged around her. Not that this process needed natural treasures, but she now radiated dream and blood aura in a way she hadn't before.

Finally, the storm of power settled down, and Little Blue opened her eyes. They were similar to the eyes she had before—the same eyes Lindon

had once shown when he tapped into pure madra—but now they glistened like jewels.

From a seated cycling position, Little Blue stuck both fists into the air. “Yay!” she said.

Lindon felt his, Orthos’, and Dross’ surprise at the same time.

“Blue?” Lindon asked hesitantly. “Can you...speak?”

“Mmm-hmmm!” Little Blue said.

Dross drifted around her to see her from every angle. [There’s no reason she shouldn’t. She knows the words. Say something! Say... “Dross!”]

Little Blue flicked Dross in the forehead. When he blasted across the room and slammed into the wall, she giggled.

The wall of the labyrinth didn’t break, of course, but Dross’ form tumbled to the floor. He drifted up a moment later, purple eye glaring. [That hostility was not warranted.]

Little Blue stuck out her tongue.

“You need a proper name now,” Orthos said. “Little Blue is not the name of a person.”

Little Blue nodded and pointed to her own nose.

Orthos choked. “No, I mean...well, yes, it is *your* name. But it makes you sound like a pet.”

[Or a mascot!] Dross suggested. [For a business. We saw a ‘Little Blue Fishing Company’ in Moongrave, didn’t we, Lindon? We did.]

Blue turned to Lindon, so he asked her. “Do you want another name?”

She shook her head rapidly, sending blue hair flailing.

“All right, then. Little Blue it is.”

[We can do better than that!] Dross insisted. [Yerin named the Blood Shadow Ruby. How about Sapphire?]

“Alataraxa,” Orthos offered.

[Why would you suggest that? You want to go from the easiest name in the world to one that only dragons can say?]

“It was my mother’s name.”

Dross paused for a moment. [...I feel like I’m supposed to compliment the name now, but I still don’t like it.]

Orthos glared at him.

Lindon patted Little Blue on the head. “They don’t listen to me either.”

[How can we listen when she hasn’t *said* anything?] Dross asked.

Blue extended a hand to Orthos, and Orthos looked down to it. “What is this?” he asked.

She shook her hand impatiently.

“I think she wants to try out her grip,” Lindon suggested.

“Mm!” Blue said.

Orthos extended his right hand to grip hers. Lindon would have to give him an elixir to help his left hand recover faster.

With total concentration, Blue squeezed down.

Lindon could feel Orthos’ panic as a newborn Herald began to crush his hand. “**Stronger!**” he commanded again.

Then his own hand closed, and it was Blue’s turn to frown. They struggled for almost a minute, each trying to force out another ounce of strength. Space bent slightly around them, and Lindon became concerned that they could do some real damage to one another.

Blue could recover in the way of Heralds, but he was more concerned for Orthos. The Dragon Icon had no authority over healing that Lindon was aware of, and they didn’t have much time for elixirs to work.

He reached out and grabbed both wrists. “Looks like a draw, doesn’t it?”

[No! Let them fight!]

They continued to grip each other for another moment until Lindon tightened his own. “It’s a draw,” he said.

With that, they both released. Orthos flexed his hand, grumbling, but Little Blue made an excited sound and threw her arms around Orthos’ shoulders.

“What are you celebrating for?” he asked. “It was a draw!”

“Mmm!”

He hesitated before returning the embrace. “Yes. Well done.”

From their spirits, Lindon could read their feelings. Orthos was embarrassed to have only tied with Little Blue, though he had been many times her size and strength for most of their acquaintance.

Blue came from the opposite side, so she was delighted. At last, she had matched Orthos for strength.

[This is heartwarming. My heart is warmed. But didn’t we have somewhere else to be?]

Dust fell from the ceiling again as all the terrain trembled, and Lindon settled his own spirit. “That’s right. Stay behind me and do what Dross tells

you to do.”

He had hoped to face down the Weeping Dragon with all seven of them, but everything had gone wrong.

Now, they’d have to try their best with four.

OUTSIDE SECTOR 30
THE VOID

A FRAGMENT OF THE MAD KING FLOATED IN THE ENDLESS CHAOS OF THE Void.

Somewhere nearby, and yet endlessly far away, his true self was engaging in battle with Ozriel. This version of himself was only a fragment, a skeletal copy of the Mad King left to accomplish a task.

But even a shadow of the Mad King was more than enough to dominate the collection of weak, hollow creatures arrayed before him.

He had personally arranged for Haven, the prison-world of the Abidan, to be broken open. Its inmates had spread, bringing discord to the Abidan worlds, as he'd intended. At least, most of them had.

The fragment of the Mad King had gathered these fifty individuals to him, those with potential that he could snap up before they were caught. They would be no serious threat to anyone, but under his direction, they could be a distraction and a potential poison.

Anything to cause chaos.

Some had found or made clothes for themselves, but most of the fifty hadn't cared to do so. They still wore the simple white cloth provided to Haven prisoners.

And they glared at him, though not while they thought he could see them.

“What do you want?” one demanded through a mouthful of thick fangs. He was a ten-foot-tall humanoid animal, like a man crossed with a bear, with yellowed teeth too big for his jaws.

The Mad King remembered his file. Kash-Nagh had crafted a cursed virus that would carry his condition, turning others into bestial creatures driven only by violence and hunger. That alone would not have drawn the attention of the Abidan, except that the beast-man had cast this virus into neighboring worlds.

That had earned him a stay in Haven. The Mad King considered Kash-Nagh to be among the more promising prospects here.

Nonetheless, he drilled into the man with his fiery gaze until Kash-Nagh dropped his eyes.

“Until everyone has arrived, we wait,” the Mad King said. “If I choose never to give you instructions, you will die waiting.”

A woman let out a hissing laugh. She was hooded in white, her mouth covered in the same color, and she played with liquid shadow between her hands. “Ooohhh, scary, scary! Were we not worth your full attention, my lord?”

The Mad King favored her with an answer. “You are not.”

There was a general murmur among the prisoners. Some spoke in agreement, some in fear, some in anger, and some in shock.

Some were more experienced than others and had seen through his nature. The Witch of Kaseri was one such, an accomplished practitioner of her world’s energy system and manipulator of the Void. She felt the emptiness of the Mad King’s form.

“You can’t tell?” the Witch’s voice was mocking. She drifted up to the Mad King and patted him on the cheek. “This is a charcoal sketch. It’s half a memory. Watch this.”

She split the ink spilling between her fingers into a web. Beneath the white of her mask, she was smiling.

The Witch sunk the strings of dark ink into the substance of his being. He was somewhat familiar with how she operated. This was a working of chaotic authority, intended to subvert control over what she saw as a puppet.

No matter how strong the original Mad King was, his fragment could never have a full, living will behind it. Only whatever tiny, miniscule percentage of his willpower he had chosen to invest in its creation.

A sound theory. The Witch was wise enough to understand that he was a projection and realize the opportunity it granted her.

And foolish enough to think that gave her power over him.

The Void in which they floated was not pure darkness. Pieces of dead worlds floated all around them, contained in balls of light like vibrating, swirling stars. The nature of the Void itself tried to break down those pieces, as well as anything here that truly existed. If you knew how to sense it, the Void felt like a constant humming, as it chewed at existing beings and tried to unmake them.

The Mad King's fragment attuned himself to that energy and then focused it on the Witch.

In a matter of a second or two, she went through several stages. First, she lost physical cohesion as the laws holding her body together broke down. Her body parts changed shape, twisting and bloating, other pieces shrinking into themselves until she was a hideous half-melted mockery difficult to recognize as having been human.

Second, she was broken down into a more conceptual state, infected by her own authority. This took the form of her body transforming into a nest of hands with dark strings attached. If she had stayed in this state and become a Fiend, she would likely be known as 'the Puppeteer.'

But she lasted less than a second before transitioning into the third state.

She faded away to nothing.

The entire process took less than a breath, and the Witch of Kaseri screamed the entire time.

It did not help her.

The Mad King looked away from her and continued waiting. This time, the remaining forty-nine prisoners stayed just as silent as he was.

At last, two more prisoners arrived, shoved into the Void by Silverlords who nodded their respect to the Mad King and left, their task complete.

Now that everyone had arrived, the Mad King began his address.

"The Abidan have fallen. Those who imprisoned you no longer hold their old worlds, and it will be centuries before they rebuild, if we allow them to. I do not intend to give them the chance."

That caused another wave of reaction through the prisoners. Some were hungry for this chance at revenge while others had their fear of the Abidan branded into them.

He could work with both.

“I have tasks for each of you,” the Mad King went on. “Some will return to your home worlds to bring a new order while others will carry out my will. The chaos you spread will ensure that the Abidan never fully recover. You are my twist of the knife. I have broken the pillars of their house, and now you will burn it to the foundations.”

Some of the prisoners cheered. Kash-Nagh growled. Others winced and steeled themselves. None protested.

At least, none who had seen what happened to the Witch.

“Why should we?” one of the two newcomers demanded.

Those around him, the ones who had witnessed the King’s demonstration, didn’t wait to hear an answer. They pounced on the newcomer and began beating him to shut him up.

The Mad King left them to it.



ITERATION 110: CRADLE

Larian crashed into the peak of a mountain many miles from Sacred Valley.

Their battle had taken them through the sky, far from where they’d started, but she’d felt as though she was backed into a corner the entire time.

She coughed up blood, and even her golden armor was cracked and spewing out wisps of spiritual essence. Her body was in worse condition.

The Eight-Man Empire was down to six. At least, for now. One would recover, but one might not. They had known the risks of holding back a Dreadgod, but with all eight together, she’d thought they would hold out longer.

Her fingertips trembled as she reached for the bow at her side. It snarled in dream aura, manifesting a white halo over it as it attacked her thoughts.

She gave a laugh that coughed out a spray of blood onto the nearby snow. Weakened she may have been, but she wasn’t going to give in to the mind of a weapon.

Through the still-functioning armor, she could feel the others of the Empire. All were as weak as she was, so they only had enough power left to stay on their feet. They would be using their emergency life-saving

measures soon. Many of them would have already, she was sure, if not for Larian herself standing her ground.

Over them, the Weeping Dragon loomed.

Its colossal eye sparked with lightning as it landed on her, and even its gaze pressured her. She stopped groping for the Silent King Bow and summoned her own, pushing her back up against an outcropping of rock so she could use it.

She took aim at the Dragon's eye.

The Dreadgod's laughter shook the storm, and she could feel its disdainful amusement. There was nothing her arrow could do, no matter where she hit it. Not as weakened as she was.

Then it looked away from her.

Her arrow still landed, though it skipped off the Dragon's bare eye. Something else had caught its attention, and now she was no longer important.

It still didn't let her off, though. Serpentine lightning bolts swam down from the dark clouds, lunging for her.

"Destroy," she commanded, and she pushed wind madra out from both hands.

The crude Striker technique, reinforced with her authority, blasted apart lightning dragons. There were more, though. Always more.

Some landed, cracking fangs into her armor and dissipating as they tried to wrap their bodies around her. The Eight-Man Empire's armor was not something an animated technique filled with rudimentary willpower could touch.

However, hers had been broken. The first snake didn't reach her, and the next dozen were torn apart by her hands and her madra.

Some of the ones that landed afterward did find flesh.

Lightning coursed through her, and Larian had to shove the remainders of her madra through her body to stop her muscles from locking up. They slowed her enough for more and more to land.

The Weeping Dragon blasted a line of madra into the sky, then followed up with a swipe from its claw. She felt the sacred artist it was after, and she pushed her lips into a grin.

"What took you so long?" she forced out.

Blue-white madra passed over her in a tide, and the Dragon's animated techniques were weakened enough that her own passive resistance to madra

and the remainder of her armor wiped them out in an instant.

Lindon followed the edge of his technique, holding a Hollow Domain over her.

And over the entire mountain.

The sphere of madra stretched for miles, forming an umbrella against the passive Striker techniques of the Weeping Dragon. It would take a direct act of the Dreadgod to push through the Domain with enough strength to hurt someone on their level.

Larian sank down onto the snow in relief, pushing away the pain. Now that she could focus better, she could finally hold the Silent King Bow again.

“Hope you figured something out,” she said, looking up to him.

He stood over her, and while he kept his eyes on the Dreadgod, he held out his left hand. “We’ll see. How did you like my weapon?”

She took his hand and used it to lever herself up. “It’s a little much, but you need something at least that heavy to hunt *real* prey.”

Larian released his hand, but he kept it held out. She pretended not to see it.

“...I do need it back,” Lindon said.

She held up the Silent King Bow in mock surprise. “You do? Wasn’t this payment for fighting the Dragon?”

Another pair had joined her brothers and sisters of the Empire in battle. A newborn Sage and a Herald, from the feel of them. Though newly advanced sacred artists shouldn’t be able to stand next to the Eight-Man Empire, they were taking quite a bit of the Weeping Dragon’s attention away.

Lindon’s expression firmed. “Dross is helping them hold on, but they can’t do this for long. I need it.”

“So stingy.” She hugged the bow to her chest. “I’m sure I could shoot it another couple of times.”

“With this arrow?” he asked, then he pulled something out of a void space.

Something dark and terrible.

Her breath hitched in her chest as she beheld the arrow in his hand. It was lethal authority condensed into solid form. She’d fought Heralds on death-aspect Paths who weren’t as deadly as that weapon.

After her first impression, she recognized it, of course. The arrowhead was Penance: the prize the Abidan had offered for the Uncrowned King tournament. Or a copy, at least. This one wouldn't be able to kill a Monarch or a Dreadgod without resistance.

But it would go a long way toward getting the job done.

Larian held out the bow with creaking joints. This situation was urgent, but she couldn't seem to part the weapon from her hand.

Lindon snatched it away, and her soul hurt from more than all the spiritual injuries.

"Make me another one!" she insisted. "Look at that dragon! Look what a great bow he'd make!"

When Lindon nocked the arrow to the string of the Silent King Bow, a dark Icon formed in the sky. He radiated such authority that even the Weeping Dragon spun around, its motion whipping up a hurricane.

Lindon shot into the sky to meet the Dreadgod in combat, but Larian called after him.

"It doesn't have to be from a Dreadgod! I'll take Malice's bow once you're through with her! Later? All right, we'll talk later."

She cycled her madra when the Hollow Domain passed away from her, but even doing so little made her stumble. In a much graver voice than she usually showed the world, Larian spoke into the communication construct within her armor. "Eight-Man Empire, retreat."

The Weeping Dragon's attention was off them. It couldn't stop their transportation without taking its eyes from Lindon. Now was their best chance.

Two of her companions vanished immediately, crushing their gatestones as though they had been waiting to leave at any second. The others followed a moment later, though someone else had to scoop up the two injured members.

Larian was the last to leave, frustrated. She hated retreating, but she would hate losing even more.

This was a good cause, she knew. The only cause worth giving their lives for.

As long as they won.



Even on the Rosegold continent, Yerin felt the battle of the Weeping Dragon. Her body ached with the spiritual effort she'd put into her fight already, and energy raged in a chaotic swirl inside of her.

She'd devoured power from the Storm Sage and the Thunder Fairy, and the helpful parts of their spirits now dissolved into hers. The rest, she dragged along.

The Remnants floated behind her, a crackling winged person formed as though grown from diamond and a twisted dragon-man with a grin far too large for its body. The Remnants of a Herald and a Sage.

Yerin wrestled with their wills even now, but they weren't exactly opposing her. Most of what she felt from them was confusion. The crimson chains that wrapped them slowly fed her power.

Or they would once she had room for more. At the moment, she was capped out.

Between the pain and the burden she was now carrying, she wanted to fall back onto a bed. But somebody was fighting the Weeping Dragon, and it felt too much like Lindon.

Ziel had stowed his Grand Oath Array. Despite all the strengthening elixirs Lindon had fed him, it looked like he would fall over if he couldn't lean on his hammer.

Mercy was equally tapped out, but they were all dancing to the same tune when it came to their words.

"You can send us back home!" Mercy said encouragingly to the Oracle Sage. "I know you can do it!"

Cladia Arelius looked doubtfully between the three of them. "If I could, I'm not convinced I *should*. Look at yourselves."

"Send us," Ziel said.

"I don't need to be an oracle to see that you're all on your last legs."

"Send us," he repeated.

"I'm not going to get far talking to him, am I?" the Sage asked, turning to Yerin.

She had turned to the wrong person.

"Send us," Yerin said.

The Sage of a Thousand Eyes spread her hands like Eithan had when he was feeling especially put-upon. "You're the only one who can stand on your own feet, and I'm worried most of all about sending you. Do you know what will happen if you lose control of those Remnants?"

“Not planning to.”

Cladia looked into the air for a second, then summoned a globe of light in one hand. “**Show them,**” she ordered.

Images filled the light. They were hazy images, brief glimpses caught through a keyhole, but they were clear enough.

Yerin’s captured Remnants threw themselves eagerly into the mouth of the Weeping Dragon. The spiritual impact caused her to collapse and her techniques to fade. The Dreadgod’s power swelled, and it turned on Ziel next.

While the view was too rough to tell what happened to everyone specifically, Ziel and Mercy didn’t last long. Then the Dragon turned its full focus onto Lindon.

The Oracle Sage crushed the light in her hand. “That’s the most likely future if you join Lindon in battle now.”

“But not the only future!” Mercy put in brightly.

“People make too much of that. Would you walk into a room if you knew there were only a thirty percent chance it would kill you?”

“Sure,” Ziel said.

“What’s the other seventy?” Yerin asked.

Mercy nodded. “To save someone? Of course!”

The Oracle Sage surveyed the three of them and shrugged. “Yeah, all right. Eithan would have done the same thing. Come on.”

She started to trudge away, but Yerin was suspicious of that. There should be no reason to walk anywhere.

Mercy followed the Sage, but Ziel ground his hammer into the dirt. “Why can’t we do it here?”

Cladia spoke without turning around. “If I take you myself, we won’t get there until tomorrow night. Even if you all helped me, the fastest would be...let’s say four, five hours. And that would leave us all exhausted when we arrived.”

Yerin’s stomach twisted as she imagined Lindon in battle against a Dreadgod alone for four straight hours. She spoke firmly. “Then we don’t have time to waste on talking, true?”

The Oracle Sage waved impatiently. “Just follow me. And *walk*, by the heavens. Now will be your last chance to rest. Maybe for the rest of your life.”

Impatience gnawed at Yerin, but Eithan had trusted her. And it wasn't as though she had any motivation to work against them.

Yerin had paid attention to their surroundings only as terrain to fight over. Now she saw the Sage was leading them to a network of ruins. It looked like the foundation of what had once been a town and was now a rocky maze covered in ash.

The Arelius clan had brushed some of that ash away, making their home among the ruins and half-standing walls. Now it was bustling like a market-day as weapons were repaired and wounds were tended to, but they looked as though they hadn't been here long.

Cladia led them to a staircase that led down into the ground. A heavily wounded Arelius Archlord bowed to Mercy when she passed, and she waved cheerily back.

"For thousands of years, House Arelius had holdings on multiple continents," the Oracle Sage told them as they walked down into the ground. "I think you've heard some of this story before. In order to help secure territory all the way in Ashwind, our ancestors constructed a spatial tunnel between the two. It's not as advanced as the labyrinth, and it takes quite a bit of energy. Therefore, it only opens itself once every ten years."

Yerin brightened as a large doorframe came into view. It was large enough to drive a pair of wagons through, supported on either side by a scripted pillar and with the Arelius family crest over the top.

In the center, filling the doorway, blue energy swirled. Since advancing to true Herald, her spiritual sense had become much more sensitive than before, and she could feel detailed fluctuations she couldn't before.

"If you're telling me that portal's ready, I'm calling you a liar," Yerin said.

Cladia put hands on her hips as she stood beside Yerin. "It is *almost* time for the portal to open on its own, but not quite. Thus, we're burning all the natural treasures we can to fill it up. Trick it into opening, so to speak. Normally, that wouldn't work—it's not just a matter of fuel capacity—but I'm certain we can override the mechanism with enough authority."

Yerin punched her own fists against each other. "Let's cut it open, then."

"It's a bit more delicate than that, but certainly, we can try. You have the Remnant of a Sage and a Herald in tow, so we have some leverage."

"Burn 'em like split wood. Whatever it takes."

“Why don’t you try the Storm Sage first? He was quite skilled in spatial transfer when he was alive.”

Yerin mentally urged the mutated dragon-man Remnant forward. It chuckled as it stepped forward, with teeth larger than the rest of its entire head. She pointed at the portal. “Get it open,” Yerin ordered.

The Remnant hissed out a laugh between its teeth, and sparks crackled around its smile. Its spiritual sense washed over the entire doorframe as it took in the device.

Ziel watched it doubtfully. “Is it helping?”

“It’s looking to figure something out, but I can’t be stone-certain it has the brains for that,” Yerin replied.

The Thunder Fairy’s Remnant floated up next to her. “*We can hear you,*” the spirit said. Its voice was like snapping lightning and rushing wind.

“Can you get the door open?” Yerin asked.

The Fairy Remnant didn’t have a joint to bend at the waist, but it bobbed in a close-enough imitation of a bow. “*If this door can be moved, we will move it.*”

“At least they’re loyal!” Mercy pointed out.

Yerin could feel what was happening with these Remnants. In fact, she could feel more than she had ever wanted to.

The two were weaker than they remembered being. Weaker, even, than they would have been if someone other than Yerin had killed them. Her Phoenix Song had stripped them of much of their will and memories, not to mention their madra. They weren’t what they should be.

But Remnants started as echoes of the people they had been in life, and these two had served their respective causes for centuries.

Yushi’s diamond-like Remnant felt the need to out-perform. To be seen. She would put her all into her tasks, and she would either accomplish them or fail after so much effort that she could not be blamed.

The Sage of Calling Storms had left a Remnant dedicated to chaos. It wanted to see things break, change, and move, and was happy to follow orders that fell into those categories.

This was, therefore, the perfect task for them.

They combined their wills easily, with Yerin as an intermediary, filling the half-formed portal with power and pushing against it in complex ways Yerin couldn’t understand.

Half of the scripts around the columns of the doorframe filled with crackling blue-and-yellow light. The swirls of sapphire in the center grew stronger.

“That’s enough,” Yerin called.

There were some problems. First, they were burning themselves out like a candle. Unlike sacred artists, Remnants used up pieces of themselves as they worked. Without a source to replenish their power, like a long time soaking in aura or some other spirits to eat, they would lose anything they used here.

If Yerin thought they’d break open the way on their own, she’d use them up. But it didn’t seem they would manage it, so she kept them in reserve.

She wanted that power herself. What she could use, she would. What she couldn’t, she’d burn in battle.

The Sage’s Remnant tried a little harder, but ultimately snapped off. Yushi’s spirit had stopped as soon as ordered.

“Thought you were burning them for firewood,” the Oracle Sage said.

Yerin stepped up to the door. “Will if I need to, but I think I can warm us just fine myself.”

By sensing the process through the two bound Remnants, Yerin had gotten something of an idea of how it worked. She thought she could force it open.

If she couldn’t, the others would get a turn.

The Sage of a Thousand Eyes stopped her with a gesture. “Lean on your authority,” she advised. “You are the apprentice of Ozmanthus Arelius.”

“You’d contend he wants me to break his door?” Yerin focused her willpower on the portal, taking control of it as though it were a runaway Forger technique.

She pressed her will into it as she had felt her Remnants do, and she did take the Oracle Sage’s advice. Yerin remembered Eithan. Training with him, sparring against him, living alongside him. She recalled him adopting her, and when he called her Yerin Arelius.

She remembered him doing battle in the sky.

“Open!” Yerin commanded.

Unlike when Lindon or the other Sages did it, she didn’t feel the world responding to her orders. She felt silly for having spoken out loud.

But her will did press against *something*, and that surface cracked like ice in spring. Blue light swirled more clearly inside the door, and the scripts filled almost all the way. If she pushed just a *little* harder, she'd reach the other side, she was sure.

She focused her intentions, cycled her madra, and braced her feet. Just one more push...

A hand clapped onto her shoulder. The Sage of a Thousand Eyes. "Perhaps if you weren't exhausted, dear," the Sage said. "We have other hands here."

Yerin released her gathered will and almost staggered under a sudden wave of dizziness. She *was* exhausted, despite the strength she'd taken from the Sage and the Herald. In a way, she felt more substantial than ever. In another way, she was about to pitch onto her face.

Not in any shape to fight a Dreadgod.

None of them were. Despair started to choke her. What if they did get the portal open? When they showed up, they would just be more people Lindon had to save.

The Sage had never released her, and now she gave Yerin's shoulder a squeeze. "It's not over yet. Mercy, why don't you give it a try?"

Yerin expected Mercy to get flustered and ask "*Me?*" before squaring her shoulders and giving it a shot. Instead, Mercy strode smoothly over to the entrance. She looked the portal up and down and focused her will.

To her surprise, Yerin felt the pressure coming off Mercy. It was as though this were Malice about to give a command, not her daughter.

"Allow us through," Mercy ordered. Like Yerin's, Mercy's command didn't resonate like a Sage's would have. But it pressured the gateway nonetheless. Yerin sensed the authority of the Ashwind queen's heir.

The script on the pillars filled up all the way, but the blue swirls in the center were still a chaotic mess. Mercy turned from the doorway as though she'd taken her own success as a matter of course.

Ziel moved forward. "I guess I'll be the last one."

"No," the Oracle Sage said, "it's best for you to stand aside. You're newly awakened to the Shield Icon, aren't you? The Shield has no inherent connection to spatial authority. As you gain more experience, you can stretch your Icon further, but for now...why not leave it to me, all right?"

Ziel's shoulders slumped as he shuffled away.

The Sage of a Thousand Eyes raised her hand. Globes of light formed, shaping themselves into eyes, and focused on the portal. She Forged them for twenty full seconds, well after Yerin thought she would stop, but an intangible pressure grew as each eye was added.

Only when they spread into a net, like a round array gathered in front of the Sage, did Yerin realize what this was. It was some kind of amplifier for the Sage's authority.

"Peace," the Oracle Sage commanded.

The light in both scripted pillars stopped flickering with the chaos of lightning and became smooth. The twisting field of blue in the center smoothed out and deepened. Now, instead of a swirling mess of light, it was a tunnel into deep and endless blue.

The Sage let out a breath as though that working had taken something from her, but Yerin held on to the sight. This was the first time she'd been able to fully appreciate the skill that had gone into a Sage's command.

Thousand Eyes used her authority as deftly as Yerin's master had used his sword.

"We'll have to wait until the transfer stabilizes," Cladia told them. "Only a few minutes now. Get what rest you can." Then she turned to Yerin and smiled. "Did you see something new today?"

"Why haven't you advanced to Monarch?" Yerin asked.

Cladia nodded and pulled a stool out of a void space, then settled into it. "In terms of skill as a Sage, I have little left to learn. My authority has reached its limit, so long as I don't advance, ascend, or bond with a new Icon. Therefore, I was tempted. With House Arelius in the situation it was..."

The Oracle Sage sighed. "If I could have advanced in the first few years after Tiberian's death, I'm sure I would have. But most of my body was destroyed. By the time my spirit was stable enough to consider a Herald's advancement, Reigan Shen was no longer a threat to us." She nodded to Yerin. "Thanks to Eithan. And you."

Yerin gripped her sword. "Advance now, and you can pay back the favor."

"It's not as easy as you make it sound. Akura Fury had been a Herald for so long that it took him years of preparation to put himself on the verge of advancement. For someone like me, it would take time, and there's always the chance of failure."

Cladia swept her hand down her elegant sacred artist's robes as though presenting her own appearance. "The longer you stay on one course, the harder it is to change. At this point, it's close to impossible for me to become a Monarch."

"My mother was a Sage for many years before she advanced," Mercy pointed out.

"Always with the intention to become a Monarch, so she was not changing direction at all. She intended not to let anything get in the way of her ambition. Much like you all."

Changes had begun in the center of the blue-swirling portal. Now there were images flickering amidst the sapphire depths. Glimpses of the other side. Yerin leaned forward.

The Oracle Sage noticed. "Before you get too eager, we should discuss what we'll find on the other side. We will emerge in Blackflame City, which is far from Sacred Valley. It will be difficult to reach the Weeping Dragon in one leap, though it's possible we could manage it by working together. Unfortunately, the Dragon itself decides whether our transfer will be permitted. Therefore, we shouldn't transport ourselves too close to him."

"Can you restore my Moonlight Bridge?" Yerin asked.

"As I was not involved in its creation, I'm afraid I cannot. Not without effort that would render me useless, anyway."

Ziel tilted his horns to point back to the stairs, where a number of Arelius sacred artists were huddled. "What about the rest? If you're fighting with us, who takes care of them?"

"I'm going to help *you* fight," Cladia clarified. "I won't be engaging with the Weeping Dragon myself. There are Monarchs on the prowl all over Ashwind, looking for Eithan's apprentices. Who knows what they would do, if given the opportunity to attack a House Arelius banner without my protection?"

Cladia looked off into the distance. "I have seen glimpses myself. I cannot allow it."

Yerin felt like she could see why the Oracle Sage had seen such a stiff prediction of their future. Cladia should be as exhausted as the rest of them, but surely four tired fighters were better than three.

The portal was congealing slowly. Yerin could sense it, and while her heart was tightening like a bowstring, she felt that they had a few minutes left.

She guzzled a recovery elixir while Mercy and Ziel did the same. They wouldn't be able to restore themselves completely, not so fast, but they could at least go into the fight with cores decently refilled. More importantly, they needed whatever help the Sage could give them.

"What do you have that can weight the dice for us?" Yerin asked.

Cladia examined the back of her own hand. "For one thing? Experience. It was the Weeping Dragon that tore apart my body almost ten years ago. If not for my own preparations and a treasure Tiberian gave me, I would have surely died."

All three of them tightened their focus. A Sage who had crossed swords with the Weeping Dragon was a valuable resource, even if she didn't fight at their side.

The Oracle Sage held up one finger. "First, don't underestimate its skill. The Dragon acts like a rampaging monster, but it is clever. Thanks to the demise of the Slumbering Wraith and the Silent King, the Dragon has only grown stronger and more cunning. Think of it as the Wandering Titan on the outside but the Silent King on the inside."

Yerin resisted the urge to roll her eyes. '*Don't underestimate your opponent*' was the most basic advice anyone could give.

Cladia held up a second finger. "It is skillful in navigating the future. It cannot see possible fates as well as the Silent King could, but it can cloud possibilities and dodge the predictions of others. Relying on my predictions almost cost me my life."

That was helpful information. Yerin couldn't see the future, but she had to assume the Dreadgod could dodge Dross' calculations as well as an oracle's prophecies.

She wondered if even Dross himself knew that.

A third finger joined the first two. "Beware its dragon's breath. This almost goes without saying, but you would be surprised how many people forget it. The Weeping Dragon has many more obvious abilities, but it uses them subtly to corner its prey. When it finally unleashes its breath, you will find that you have no way out."

She folded her hands on one another and spoke with a subtle smile. "It is the strongest offensive technique on this planet. It cannot be defended against, only evaded. If you are struck by it, you will surely die."

"Is that what happened to you?" Ziel asked bluntly.

“No. That’s what happened to Northstrider.” Cladia gave a pained smile at the memory. “It’s why everyone thought he was dead for so long.”

Yerin absorbed that and filed it away. She’d seen memories of others fighting the Weeping Dragon, had heard stories about it, but she’d never spoken to anyone who had engaged it tactically like this.

“Don’t get cornered,” Yerin said. “Give my left arm for that Moonlight Bridge back.”

Without standing from her stool, the Oracle Sage beckoned them all over. “The timing is not ideal, but this is far from the worst possible fate. Be careful, remember what I’ve told you, and keep your eyes open. That’s your best chance. And now, I give you my blessing.”

She spread her hands in front of their faces, gesturing vaguely like a street-side fortune-teller. Yerin would have been skeptical about the performance if she couldn’t feel the gentle blanket of willpower settling over them and feel the intricate working of authority.

“**See as I do,**” said the Sage of a Thousand Eyes.

Vision spread around Yerin like blinders had been removed from her eyes.

It wasn’t exactly like the Arelius bloodline ability, but it resembled what Eithan had always described: seeing everything at once.

Yerin had always imagined this gift as overwhelming. Even Eithan had mentioned having to train as a child to avoid being drowned in the extra information. And she knew he experienced senses other than sight.

But she found this blessing easy to process. Maybe it was because she was a Herald, but she had no trouble adjusting. Indeed, she stretched out the web of vision and found that she could see House Arelius members patching each other up even the better part of a mile away.

“Amazing,” Mercy breathed. “I can see so much! How can we adjust to it so quickly?”

The Sage sagged against the wall, breathing heavily. “I have...given sight to you...according to your ability to receive it. You won’t be overwhelmed, but it will fade by the end of the day. Go. Your friend’s mind-spirit will know how best to use it.”

Yerin whipped around to face the doorway. The portal was opening.

Cladia had closed her eyes and was still breathing hard, but a grin slashed across her tired face that made her look like Eithan. “And when you see Eithan again...tell him he should have said good-bye.”

When the portal opened, Yerin was the first one through.

AS THE EIGHT-MAN EMPIRE VANISHED, LINDON CLASHED AGAINST THE Weeping Dragon with Orthos and Little Blue behind him.

The air was thick with rain whipped around by hurricane winds, and lightning serpents flashed down from the clouds to streak toward them. Orthos crushed Striker techniques in his hands, while Blue wiped them out by the dozen with an Empty Palm the size of her new human body.

They were keeping the nuisances away from Lindon while he dealt with the real problem.

A claw large enough to scoop out villages flashed at Lindon, who met it with black dragon's breath. The beam was thicker than Lindon's leg and pure black, empowered by the Void Icon.

The Dragon's claw was knocked back, but that was only one of its attacks.

Lindon blasted the second claw away as well, but the Dragon's jaws snapped down around him. He flew out, dodging the fangs and the crackling lightning around them.

As Lindon flew by the dragon's lip, he gripped a handful of scales and began to Consume.

At the same instant, lightning snaked out from the Dreadgod and fed on him in turn.

Lindon was the one to break it off. He couldn't tell who had gotten more from that exchange, but his spirit ached. Now that his madra channels ran through his physical body, that was even more painful than it had been.

Claws flashed again, and he kicked off with the Burning Cloak to intercept before Orthos was hit. Every attack the Weeping Dragon made, Lindon was there to block.

But that was all he could do.

[We can definitely keep this up! He will, eventually, kill us at this pace. And I am just as tired as I was before. But we will live for at least a few more glorious minutes!]

Orthos and Little Blue were too weak.

Even with their advancement, it was the best a new Sage and Herald could do just to survive on a Dreadgod battlefield. There were only two factors that allowed them to participate in the fight.

First, Dross was commanding them. He'd tell them where to position and when to strike, and thus, the trio fought with perfect coordination.

Second, they could pull power from Lindon.

Little Blue's techniques were magnified by Lindon's madra, now that she could withstand that much power, and Orthos shot dragon's breath that had a touch of the Void and Dragon Icons. Without their bond to him, they would have had to use all their powers to flee.

But Lindon's cores were deep. Not endless. And he could only channel so much madra at one time.

[They're helping a little,] Dross said. [Enough to keep them here. But time is not on our side.]

In every exchange with the Weeping Dragon, Lindon came up short.

Powerful in madra and authority Lindon might have been, but the Weeping Dragon's body was measured in miles. Every physical blow cost too much for Lindon to defend, and he had to pump his techniques with all the power he could scrape up to match the Dragon.

The Void Icon whispered around him, clouding his future, as Emriss had taught him. He couldn't sense the future well, but this was like veiling himself in Fate.

He couldn't sense it, but Dross could.

[It's not working. He's not changing what he does. I don't think he's reading our future at all; I think he's just hitting us with brute force. To be fair, it's working.]

Though, if the Dragon really wasn't manipulating or predicting them, they should be able to create an opening.

Lindon weakened the Dreadgod's blow with an Empty Palm before catching the gigantic claw with the strength of the Soul Cloak. But he was still sent flying through the storm, with the miles-long sapphire Dragon swimming after him.

Storm aura tore at him, ripping away his flight, hammering him with lightning bolts. He took the hits and slashed back with dragon's breath, striking the Weeping Dragon across the belly. That wasn't a decisive injury on the Dreadgod, but it at least scored a flinch and a roar of pain.

Lindon crashed down onto its head with a heavy blow worthy of Northstrider, and the Weeping Dragon cracked the land open with its tail and sent storm madra shooting up Lindon's feet until he had to leap off.

While Lindon was carrying the most weight, Orthos and Little Blue were still working hard. The Dreadgod noticed, twisting to them.

That was an opening.

Lindon withdrew the Silent King Bow, which erupted into a white ring over his head. The Weeping Dragon reacted instantly, flashing back toward Lindon, but he already had a Penance arrow nocked.

Weakened as he was, just pulling the string back took everything Lindon had. Every muscle in his body strained, and he focused his entire being on the arrow.

But this was the shot.

He loosed the arrow, aiming for the Dragon's eye.

The Dreadgod ducked and tried to scurry out of the way, but Penance was not a simple arrow. It sought its prey.

While the arrow didn't land where Lindon intended, it did not miss.

The deadly missile pierced the Weeping Dragon in the side of the neck and emerged from the other side almost immediately. Blood sprayed across the landscape in a waterfall, and the Dreadgod let out a scream.

The entire storm flashed with lightning at the sound.

Little Blue, Orthos, and even Dross shuddered in place. They froze for an instant, spirits instinctively shrinking away from the willpower and authority in the dragon's roar. Only Lindon remained focused.

His vision blurred and his spirit burned, but he summoned the arrow back. He needed one more attack like that. If he could just force out one more...

The Penance arrow vanished from where it had landed.

But it didn't reappear in Lindon's hand.

“No!” the Weeping Dragon commanded. Its voice rang with thunder.

If he were at his peak, Lindon thought he could have contested that working. He had greater authority over the arrow as the Soulsmith who had assembled it and the apprentice of the Soulsmith who had created the arrowhead in the first place.

But he’d faced down Monarchs without rest all day. It was all he could do to keep the Silent King Bow from overwhelming his mind and spirit.

Therefore, the Weeping Dragon’s command tore the arrow away in mid-transit.

Inside a miniature storm, the black-and-white arrow appeared in the center of the Dreadgod’s claw. It was so small that it was barely visible against the Weeping Dragon’s vast limb, like a single grain of sand in a man’s palm.

The Dragon crushed the arrow, and Lindon felt its true destruction.

Two left.

Little Blue and Orthos struck the Dragon as it was focused on the arrow, so an Empty Palm and a massive dragon’s breath both landed on the Dreadgod’s seemingly endless length.

Both attacks landed. Lindon could feel them. But the Weeping Dragon’s will still crashed down on Lindon, victorious and arrogant, looking down on him.

Dross didn’t say anything, but he layered a prediction on the future. At this rate, they were stalling until their deaths. The Dragon would grind them down, and he wouldn’t let them flee through space.

If all four of them stuck together, they would last longer. Maybe long enough for reinforcements to arrive. The only advantage they had was that the Weeping Dragon wouldn’t cooperate with their enemies; if Reigan Shen or Malice showed up, it would become a three-way battle.

If no one came in time, they would all die.

Lindon could send Orthos and Little Blue away, but if they left, he and Dross wouldn’t last long.

[If we’re going to send them away, it’s got to be fast. We have a window that is sliiiiiding closed.]

I thought we could do it, Lindon thought.

He wasn’t talking about sending Orthos and Little Blue away, but he didn’t need to clarify. Dross could read his mind.

Lindon meant the pocket world. Their plan. “*When we come out of here, the Dragon will run from us.*” He’d thought they could do it.

So arrogant.

[We always knew it was arrogant, didn’t we? We decided to bet on each other. True, that’s not looking like it was a *great* bet, but at least we advanced quicker than anyone expected! Let us die knowing that we will be remembered in the history books. After our tragic, gruesome deaths.]

Orthos was knocked down into a nearby canyon, but it was a glancing blow. He’d be fine.

Little Blue was pursued through the sky by a swarm of lightning-dragons, wiping them out a handful at a time.

Lindon was separated, Consuming a Striker technique from the Dragon and sending it back. Even without Dross’ predictions, he could see the rest of the fight playing out. He could feel himself being backed into a corner.

The Dragon could feel it too. Lindon could taste it in the Dreadgod’s thoughts when he used Consume. The Weeping Dragon was enjoying this. It was letting off steam.

They all sensed the new powers at the same time.

Lindon’s spiritual sense lashed out to the east together with the Dragon’s. Their battle had carried them all over the western Blackflame Empire, but these new presences were coming from the direction of Blackflame City.

Yerin. Mercy. Ziel.

They were on the way.

He could feel the Weeping Dragon’s disdain, but the Dreadgod still sent a storm billowing in their direction to slow them down. The next action Dross predicted was the Weeping Dragon putting extra pressure on Lindon, because no matter how much the Dreadgod looked down on the newcomers, he would still end the fight before they arrived.

Lindon pushed out the Hollow Domain, which covered the terrain from ground to sky and miles in every direction. He had to hold off the pressure until Yerin and the others arrived.

Dross showed the Dragon moving toward Lindon.

But in reality, the Dragon moved back.

[No, wait! Lindon, hit him! Orthos, where are you?]

Orthos responded to the call with black dragon’s breath, but he was a second late. His technique missed, and the Weeping Dragon was already

gathering power between its jaws.

Dragon's breath. On a level incomparable to anything Lindon had ever seen before.

The storm swirled *into* the Weeping Dragon's mouth as it devoured aura from miles around. Serpents of living lightning returned, gladly throwing themselves into the newborn star of blue-and-yellow madra. They carried stolen power with them, madra they'd taken from the spirits of those they'd consumed.

The technique was just beginning. Lindon could stop it.

Lindon was aware of all his possible actions, but Dross played them out anyway.

In the first vision, Lindon saw himself lunge toward the Dragon to stop the dragon's breath. The incomplete Striker technique struck him head-on, and Lindon was blasted from the sky. The Dreadgod turned to Orthos and Little Blue.

All of them were eaten before Yerin or the others arrived.

In the second vision, Lindon clawed open the air and tried to flee. The Dreadgod shut down his transportation and hit him anyway.

In the third, Lindon flew to the side and drew away the Dragon's attention. In that case, the Dreadgod had his pick of targets. Whoever landed in his sights died.

[We're cornered, aren't we? This is a corner.]

We still have options.

[Not good ones! I want good options! I don't like gambling with our lives!]

Neither did Lindon. He preferred stacking the deck.

Though he found himself gambling with his own life at stake disturbingly often. When he ascended from Cradle, he'd put an end to that.

Lindon selected his plan. He gripped the Silent King Bow and fitted a second Penance arrow to the string, then he leaped up through the air over the Weeping Dragon's head.

If he did use the arrow, it would be the last thing he did in the fight. Releasing the arrow would push his mind, body, and spirit to the limit. If it didn't kill him, he certainly wouldn't be in the shape to continue fighting.

But the Weeping Dragon was in the same position. One more blow from Penance was all it could take.

Lindon had no intention of loosing the arrow. He was posing a threat the Dreadgod couldn't ignore. In all of Dross' projections, the Weeping Dragon followed Lindon.

That was where the risk came in. Roughly six out of ten times, the Dreadgod would hit Lindon with the half-completed technique. In the other four cases, Lindon dodged it.

He was betting on his own ability. At the very least, the Dreadgod wouldn't be targeting his friends.

Or that was how it was supposed to be.

[That's...Oh no. He got me.]

The Weeping Dragon didn't follow Lindon for a second. It tracked the others.

The storm had reached Yerin, and she, Mercy, and Ziel were battling their way through a hostile storm and a flight of lightning-dragons. The Weeping Dragon's attention was on them. His techniques would hold them in place, and the will of the Dreadgod would ensure they didn't escape through the Way.

Lindon had left them unprotected.

And Dross hadn't seen it coming.

The world paused again, and now Dross saw possibilities he hadn't before. They had been shrouded. By storm clouds.

The authority of the Weeping Dragon.

It had done the same thing Lindon had, but Lindon and Dross had been too inexperienced to notice. The Dreadgod had hidden threads of Fate. Shrouded them behind clouds.

Now it was pulling away those clouds, showing entire branches of possibility in which the Dragon ignored Lindon's threat and targeted the others.

The final piece of the puzzle slid into place in Lindon's mind.

Unlike the other Dreadgods, the Weeping Dragon remembered its original life. It thought of itself as a superior being, greater even than its siblings. A dragon's pride would not bend.

If it died while striking a fatal blow on its enemy, it would go to its grave with head held high.

There was no manipulating a dragon. No negotiation. You moved as it decreed, or you died.

[I didn't see it,] Dross said. He sounded lost. [I'm...I'm sorry.]

Lindon dropped the bow.

Even if he shot the Dragon with Penance, that would only kill it. The attack wouldn't stop. That was what the Dreadgod was counting on.

The Void Icon ate into Lindon's thoughts, leaving him cold. There were no options left to him. The Dragon Descends had enough power to move the Dreadgod, but the technique required fire aura, and they were in the heart of a rainstorm. The Hollow Domain and Consume could weaken the dragon's breath, but not enough.

None of Lindon's techniques were good enough or fast enough here.

He needed a new one.

[I don't like this,] Dross said. [But it should work.]

Help me with it.

Lindon drew madra from both his cores. He was so careful not to do so that it was second nature at this point; he barely thought about it anymore.

The two types of madra fought each other, but he forced them into place.

A smooth, blue-white flame erupted from his whole body. The Soul Cloak.

Then a rough, violent black-and-red flame. The Burning Cloak.

Finally, the silver rush of soulfire filled them both.

Two full-body Enforcer techniques raced through him in an instant, threatening to tear him apart from the inside out.

But he wasn't finished.

The arrogance and unyielding spirit of the Weeping Dragon was still strong in him. He could feel it hanging in the air like the rain.

He matched that attitude with his own.

Two Icons formed in the sky over him. A yawning emptiness and a dark dragon.

With the authority of the Void Icon and the Dragon Icon, Lindon gave his order.

Burn, Lindon commanded himself.

Everything in Lindon—his body, his spirit, his blood essence, his lifeline—began to dissolve. It all went into the technique.

It was perhaps the most delicate and complex use of the sacred arts Lindon had ever performed, but it all took only a blink. In an instant, Lindon was surrounded by a strange black-and-white fire.

The world warped around him from his very presence.

Force madra gave him a platform, and he kicked off. As he shot down to the ground, space cracked in the wake of his flight.

Lindon slammed into the ground, and the impact would be enough to create a new crater. If there had been a mountain beneath him, it would have been reduced to pebbles.

But none of that had happened yet. The world moved so slowly it was as if Dross was making a prediction. Everything seemed still.

Lindon kicked off again, aiming for the underside of the Dreadgod's jaw.

He hit the bottom of the Weeping Dragon's head like an erupting volcano. Bones bigger than ships cracked.

The Dragon still released its breath.

A column of gold-and-sapphire energy split the air. It resembled solid matter, like the Dreadgod had Forged glowing steel instead of releasing a Striker technique.

The Dragon's breath slashed across the sky. The storm clouds were split in half.

Too high to threaten the others.

Still, the Weeping Dragon forced its head down. While it still had the technique, it was trying to bring it down on them like a sword.

Lindon had nothing to brace against. He gathered wind and force aura beneath him to push him upward, but that shouldn't have been enough. A platform of aura was too flimsy to hold against a Dreadgod.

He shoved against the Weeping Dragon anyway. The Dragon Icon gave him strength that defied the rules of the world.

With both hands, Lindon pushed against a sky of blue scales. Every piece of him was burning away to fuel strength that, for at least a moment, dwarfed the Monarchs.

Gradually, the Dreadgod's head was forced up.

The Dragon's breath slashed across the sky again, until it finally erupted straight up. Madra gushed into the sky, and suddenly Lindon had nothing to push against.

He flew up, turning to keep his enemy in view. He had to strike again. He couldn't keep this Enforcer technique up for much longer, so before it wore off...

Lindon coughed up blood.

[I think we took it a little too far this time,] Dross said.

Blood trailed from his eyes. It trickled from cracks that opened on his skin. For one dizzy moment, Lindon wondered why his Iron body wasn't handling the wounds.

Then his aura control failed him. His techniques died.

For the first time since training in Ghostwater, he felt power abandon him completely. He couldn't even hear the Icons anymore.

Powerless, Lindon fell from the sky.



When the Weeping Dragon's attention locked onto Ziel, he knew they were all going to die.

It had passed over his sect long before, and he'd felt as though the end of the world had come. But that was without the Dreadgod noticing them at all. Its very gaze was enough to crush spirits and strip away hope.

He tried to escape, and he wasn't the only one. Ziel stopped pushing through the animated lightning bolts and the hostile storm the instant he felt the Dreadgod watching them and gathering power.

He commanded the air to open, but it wouldn't. Yerin tried to activate her Moonlight Bridge, but it only sputtered white light. Mercy used her new technique that allowed her to fade into the shadows, but darkness passed over her without taking her anywhere.

They were spatially locked. Without discussion, the three of them buckled down to defend. They landed on the ground, and Ziel stood in front with his large, steel shield braced. He clung to the Shield Icon as well, mustering all the willpower he could focus.

Yerin lay a hand on his shoulder and joined her will to his, reinforcing his defense. The two Remnants following her around generated a barrier of lightning around them and pushed against the storm aura in the air.

Mercy was covered head-to-toe in amethyst armor, and she Forged a web of dark madra around them. He suspected that wouldn't do anything to stop the Weeping Dragon's breath, but maybe she was setting something up.

They continued layering their defenses. Ziel spun emerald runes into a circle around them with the Path of the Dawn Oath. Further and further he went, adding several concentric circles. Two of the script-circles resisted

madra, one resisted physical force, and he even quickly improvised one that resisted storm aura specifically.

As Ziel watched the shining star of madra gathering in the Dreadgod's mouth, he tried to convince himself that this would be enough. He was the perfect person to stand in front of the others. He was the Shield Sage, now. He had a Path suited for defense.

He was a wall that wouldn't buckle.

Then the Weeping Dragon unleashed its breath, and he saw how wrong he'd been.

A solid cylinder of light split the sky in half, tearing open the storm clouds. The pressure from the technique alone crushed his script-circles, stripped away the authority of his Icon, and shoved him back a dozen paces.

Trees and grass were stripped away as far as Ziel could see. The breath hadn't even *hit*. This was just the wind from its passing.

He'd seen Monarchs and Dreadgods attack, but this was a technique on a different level.

Yerin planted her feet and cycled all her madra to resist, her red lock of hair flapping in the wind. She gritted her teeth and glared up at the technique over them, but she didn't waste any power attacking it. Everything was going toward keeping her upright.

Mercy was braced against the stone ground, fingers and toes dug in to keep herself from blowing backwards. She was still covered in her bloodline armor, and she tried to lash herself to the ground with Strings of Shadow, but the techniques were destroyed the instant she tried to Forge them.

This overwhelming, impossible spiritual pressure was just the wake of the Dragon's breath. Ziel couldn't imagine how it had missed, and his spiritual sense was blinded. Either the Dreadgod had aimed at something else, or Lindon had done something.

Then the technique began to lower, like the sword of an executioner.

Ziel lifted his shield. It was like holding up a leaf against a wildfire, but he had to do something.

This was the third time his death had descended on him from the sky.

Long ago, the Weeping Dragon had attacked the Dawnwing Sect. A malicious living thunderstorm had stretched from horizon to horizon. At the end of his fight with the Sage of Calling Storms, Ziel had looked into the flashing lightning and known it would be his death.

Then, not so long ago, the sky had turned black. Everything with the slightest spiritual sense in all of Cradle felt the end had come. If Eithan hadn't risen to defend them, the entire world would have died. Once again, Ziel had been certain he would die.

Now, the Weeping Dragon was back. And there was another force from the sky that Ziel couldn't affect at all.

Something in him snapped.

He was already braced with his Enforcer technique, the Stone Anchor, which allowed him to keep his feet. If barely.

Ziel lowered his shield and shouted up into the dragon's breath.

"COME ON!" he shouted. "TRY IT! HIT ME!"

The wind snatched away the sound. Even he didn't hear his own words.

But fear had left him. It was replaced by anger.

How many times could he survive so-called 'inevitable' death before it stopped scaring him? He had given up too many times. He wasn't doing it again.

The Dragon's breath lifted, slowly sliding upward.

For a second, pure astonishment cut through his anger. Had the Dreadgod heard him? Had his desperate shout actually done something?

The line of light sliced upward, back through the sky. It picked up speed as it moved, revealing the Dreadgod's warped sky. Each Dreadgod affected the aura such that the sky changed colors when they were around, but it was rare to ever see the Weeping Dragon's, thanks to the dark clouds it dragged around everywhere.

This one was a bright, eye-searing electric blue that no one could mistake for a natural color.

Its breath cut through that blue at a jagged angle, as though the Weeping Dragon were spraying its breath randomly.

In its flailing, the technique passed over the moon.

In less than a second, there was a visible trench gouged into the gray-white surface of the moon. Rock and dust sprayed out to the sides like the waves of an ocean.

It looked like someone had taken a dagger and scraped a line across the moon.

The Weeping Dragon vomited the rest of its breath straight up into the sky, and finally Ziel could sense what had happened.

Lindon was a dense core of black-and-white power beneath the dragon's head. He hovered there, the center of a gravity so intense that he seemed more *real* even than the Dreadgod.

Judging from Lindon's position, Ziel could tell what had happened. He'd forced the Weeping Dragon's breath up and into the sky.

Without him, they'd be dead.

His was an awe-inspiring presence, as Lindon flew upward and moved to launch another attack against the Weeping Dragon. This was the sort of feat that would be legendary even for a Monarch, and Ziel prepared to witness the young man kill a *second* Dreadgod.

Like a vanishing candle-flame, Lindon's power flickered out.

It went from such an overwhelming force to *nothing* so quickly that it couldn't have been intentional. Or healthy.

Then Lindon plummeted from the sky.

The ground was shaking for miles around as the Weeping Dragon thrashed around on the landscape like a dying snake, but it wasn't dead. Ziel felt nothing but a furious will from the Dreadgod.

And from himself.

A ring of green runes sprang up around him, made from what madra he'd managed to recover. Despite the burden it placed on his Divine Treasure, he forced out a ring of silver runes as well. Ziel launched himself toward the Weeping Dragon, and Mercy followed a second later. Yerin had shot off on her own already, but he overtook her as he flew through the air under the influence of his scripts.

Lindon had given them a chance.

Now he was going to kill a Dreadgod.

ORTHOS COUGHED OUT SMOKE AND SHOVED A CHUNK OF STONE OFF OF HIM with one hand.

Hand. He still wasn't used to having one of those. A shell would have been much more useful.

The ground pitched around him like the deck of a sinking ship, and he was deafened by the cries of the Weeping Dragon. A loop of blue scales passed over them as the Dreadgod thrashed, covering them in shadow.

Orthos sensed Blue nearby and looked to her, only to see her punching her way out of the side of a cliff. Stone sprayed out and she stumbled after it, blue hair frizzy. She panted and looked around with wild eyes, but when she saw Orthos, she nodded.

They could both feel Lindon, and it wasn't what they *did* feel that concerned them. It was what they *couldn't* feel.

His cores were completely empty, and even the sense of his presence felt weak. He was unconscious, not dead—Orthos wasn't sure Lindon *could* truly die, now that he was bound to the Dreadgods—but in every other respect he might as well have been killed.

Just as concerning, Dross had vanished from their heads.

"Do you have it?" Orthos asked.

Little Blue withdrew the tank from her soulspace. It was made entirely from spiritual components, so it could be stored inside her spirit, but Orthos worried that being inside a soulspace would affect the delicate purple orbs floating within the tank.

But they felt fine to his spiritual sense, so he opened one of his human hands. With its *fingers*.

“It’s time,” he said firmly.

He expected her to argue, but she had already withdrawn one for him and one for herself. He caught it, and the madra felt squishy and insubstantial at the same time, as dream spirits often did.

Orthos examined it thoroughly with his spiritual sense. He’d wanted to do this with Dross’ guidance. It would probably be best to have a Soulsmith insert this into his soul, but they had no time for that.

If his spirit broke this down for madra or dream essence, the entire project would be wasted. Lindon had used materials from the Silent King to create these, not to mention irreplaceable fuel for the time-warping Grand Oath Array. Even in the heart of an apocalyptic battle, this deserved thought.

Little Blue swallowed the orb whole.

“Don’t break it!” Orthos shouted. “Control it carefully!”

From her wide-eyed look and the way she hurriedly took control of her internal madra, he saw that she hadn’t intended to control the process at all. She was just going to see what happened.

The earth trembled around them, beneath the Weeping Dragon, as Orthos coached her to move the featureless dream-spirit through her soul. She had incredible madra control, as a Herald and a spirit of pure madra, but Orthos had many times her experience and had even worked with Lindon more directly.

Once they had the dream-spirit in place, Orthos let out a relieved breath. “That’s good. You did well. Now, let’s get these to the others. You’ll have to help them.”

She tugged the edge of his sleeve and made a questioning sound.

“We can’t hurry it along. It takes as long as it takes. Without Dross here, it might not—”

[Aaaahhh!] Dross screamed. He spun out from behind Little Blue’s neck, holding one tendril to his forehead. [How did I get here? Where’s Lindon?]

Orthos’ hand tightened involuntarily on the squishy purple orb in his palm. It was that easy. He should have swallowed the thing himself.

“You’re not the original Dross,” Orthos explained. Dross had prepared them for this.

[Yeah, I'm a copy. I get it. It's not the existential crisis for me that you'd think.] Dross looked up at the Weeping Dragon and flinched, then shot over to Orthos. [What are you standing around for, are you not aware that *we could die at any second?* Pop yours in!]

Orthos nodded and opened his mouth, bringing up his own Dross copy to swallow it.

[No, no, stop! What are you doing?] He spun back to Little Blue. [Is that what you did?]

"Mmm-hmm!" She made a triumphant face.

[Don't do that. Don't *ever* do that. Give it to me. Give me to me right now.]

Orthos handed over the purple ball, which Dross grabbed and carried around to the back of Orthos' head. There came a sharp pinprick of pain in Orthos' spirit.

Then his senses opened up.

It was as though he hadn't been using his eyes correctly before. Although he supposed that, technically, these human eyes were new. The world was cleaner, sharper. His thoughts moved more quickly.

Another Dross spun out from his spirit, and this time Orthos could *feel* him. Not in the same way he had always sensed Dross, nor even in the indirect way that he felt Lindon's emotions. He and Dross were connected now.

[That's it! Process complete!] the new Dross said.

[Let's go to the others now!] said the first.

[Why are we waiting around? Is it 'wait to die' time and no one told me?]

[You can just start walking and we'll take it from there.]

Orthos began to run, and Little Blue kept up with him. She made a confused sound, which he interpreted easily. It echoed his own feelings.

"How are we supposed to tell you apart?" he asked. He could sense his own connection to one Dross, but if *everyone* had one, it would be many times more confusing even than dealing with Yerin and Ruby had been.

[No need,] said his Dross.

[We're the same,] said Blue's Dross. [Think of it as me projecting myself into many bodies. I'm just doing it more efficiently, and now Lindon doesn't have to be around for you to benefit from my infinite wisdom.]

[We were going to make blank mind-spirits for all of you, which would then grow into your own individual partners, but that would take...]

[We're not sure. A long time. Instead, we started with a copy of me, so it's useful immediately!]

[And here's a bonus: when we develop our own individual personalities, they'll all be based on mine!]

Blue's Dross drifted in front of Orthos' face. [I can sense you don't think that's a bonus. I can't even read your mind, but I can tell.]

His own Dross crossed a second later. [I can read your mind, and I can sense it too.]

Orthos met the purple eye. "This is a thousand times better than when you spoke in death poetry."

Both Drosses shuddered.

[Forget that. Erase it from your mind.]

[No, don't bother, I'll do it.]

Orthos was going to retort, but he felt something in his mind speed up. The world around him seemed to slow.

[Incoming!] Dross called. [Throw me!]

He was talking to Little Blue, who already had a copy of Dross in her hand. Orthos pulled one out of the tank as well.

He could see the trajectory he needed and knew exactly how hard to throw it. Yerin and the others were flying in so fast that Orthos doubted he could hit them accurately in mid-flight.

But with Dross' help, he could.

At the same time, Orthos and Little Blue both threw the spirits into the air.



Mercy caught the squishy ball of dream madra that shot toward her, and the feel of it delighted her.

She'd heard about this project of Lindon's while they were in the pocket world, though she hadn't expected it to be ready yet. This was another weapon.

And a friend.

[Into the back of your neck!] Dross sent to her. She felt the exact spot warm up.

Malice's instincts, absorbed from the Book of Eternal Night, warned Mercy against this. She was attaching a mind-spirit to her soul permanently. This should not only be done with careful surgery, but allowing another independent will to inhabit her body was inviting a parasite. She should never do this without clipping its independence.

Mercy ignored her mother's instincts and went with her own. She slid Dross into place.

Seconds later, her mind and senses opened up.

[Wow, I like it in here!] Dross said from inside her mind. [That's a top-quality human vessel you have. Lindon should have been born to a Monarch.]

Hi, Dross! Mercy thought, hoping he could hear the message. *Welcome!*

[You're even nicer to me than he—AAAHHH it's a Dreadgod! Right, timing! Yes! Are you ready?]

Here, Malice's instincts served her well. Her will sharpened like an arrow as she pointed at the Weeping Dragon.

Can we kill that?

[That depends on you. Do you see that bow?]

Thanks to the sight loaned by the Oracle Sage, she did. A purple light highlighted the target in her vision, and she shot toward it.



[You are a lot angrier than I realized you were,] Dross observed. [It just goes to show that you never really know someone until you've nested inside their memories.]

Help me kill it, Ziel thought.

The Weeping Dragon was ruining the entire visible landscape with its body, but he could feel its will gathering. Storm clouds poured out of nowhere as the aura was agitated, and rain began to fall once again.

[We're going to kill it. Well...I said that with a lot of confidence, but without Lindon waking up, I'm—no offense, but I'm not working with top-quality tools here. Now, listen, I can feel that you have a lot of issues to

work out, but this isn't Ziel's time to shine, all right? You're going to be running interference and support.]

Whatever gets it dead.

Ziel didn't need the credit. He didn't need to be the one to deal the final blow.

He would do whatever it took to see the Weeping Dragon dead.

[That's the spirit! Now, get ready, because we're starting in one second.]

Ziel had been ready for years.



More than angry, Yerin felt...arrogant, she guessed.

She had sentenced the Dreadgod to die. Now was the time to execute.

[That would be Eithan's influence on you,] her Dross pointed out. [Or... Ozriel's. Ozmanthus'. Whichever. Using his techniques won't hurt you, probably, but they might change you.]

Yerin was listening with one ear, so to speak. She hurtled across the ground toward the Weeping Dragon like a silver-and-red comet. The Dreadgod was drawing itself together, and this was a creature that had just left a scar on the moon.

She needed to hit it *now*, if at all.

[More importantly, why am I red?] Dross asked.

Her new spirit looked and felt like Dross in every way. Except he was red.

Hold a second, I'll ask my mind-spirit, she responded.

[Yes, all right, I should know, but I can only guess. I have synergized with the matrix of mind enhancements that are already here. Maybe that accelerated my development. Or maybe you like the color red *so much* that it spilled over me too.]

The Weeping Dragon's eyes focused, and she could *feel* the rage behind them. They landed on her, and the storm instantly clawed at her with furious wind and lightning.

Yerin's stability in midair was taken away as the Dreadgod took over all the wind aura in the area, but she took a stance even as she fell. She brought her sword back and slipped into the mentality of the Reaper.

At the moment, it was easier than ever. She had a target to kill.

[Here's an example of how useful I can be!] Dross said brightly. [You remember that old, dull memory you've been using for inspiration? I've cleaned that up for you!]

The image of Eithan in black armor shone in her mind. Clearer than she'd actually seen it. She wondered if Dross had taken Lindon's memory and put it together with hers.

[That's exactly what I did. And I added a bit of my own in there. I've also seen a lot more of Ozmanthus' memories than you have, so I'll throw in a little taste of his mentality.]

Yerin's desire to kill the Weeping Dragon sharpened as though honed on a whetstone. She could *feel* Ozmanthus' lethal will inside her, conveyed from Dross' memories. When he wanted to kill, that desire was honed to a perfect edge.

The arrogance she had been feeling, the position of an executioner, suddenly fit. All her powers, her mind, and her stance were in unity. Inside and outside.

Something echoed, deeper than physical reality, as she swung her sword in a slash. The Reaper's Sword.

For the brief instant she unleashed the technique, the world turned black-and-white.

The Weeping Dragon's claw flashed into place, trailing lightning, and clashed with the madra in her slash. Only her madra was pushing against the Dreadgod's claw, not her sword itself, but she still put the full power of her physical body against it.

She should have been launched a hundred miles away, but she stood her ground in midair. She even stopped falling.

Then the force overwhelmed her and she did fly back. So did the upper body of the Weeping Dragon.

Soon enough, it stopped itself and so did she. In the air.

Yerin wasn't manipulating the wind aura around her. She floated with nothing but her will.

[Great job! Now let's stay alive until we can try again.]

Lightning crashed down around her. Ruler, Striker, and Forger techniques colliding in an implosion of thunder.

Her twin Remnants covered for her. The spirits of two of the greatest storm artists in the world kept the Weeping Dragon from searing Yerin like a steak.

“I have defied the great one!” the Storm Sage’s Remnant whispered, and its laughter was the crackle of lightning and the snap of thunder. *“My defiance is my tribute!”*

Yushi’s spirit was more cooperative. *“We will cover you until we break.”*

They were less than they had been in life. Yerin could feel them falling apart, especially because some of the parts that broke off flowed into her. The compatible pieces stuck to her, and the ones she couldn’t handle were vented out behind her in crackling sparks.

Though they wouldn’t last long, they could buy her a few breaths.

The Weeping Dragon moved its attention to the side, and she didn’t need Dross’ warning to know what the Dreadgod sensed. Someone had drawn a weapon powerful enough to threaten its life.

Mercy held the Silent King Bow.

How long can he ignore me, would you say? Yerin asked. She took a stance.

[Not much longer. I’ll give you the timing.]



Mercy couldn’t believe Lindon had controlled a weapon like the Silent King Bow. Even as unbelievably powerful as he had become, it was easier to believe that the Bow was controlling him.

It whispered to her, promising anything. She could scarcely trust her own thoughts.

Without her small understanding of the Bow Icon and the support of her seventh page, she wasn’t sure she could have even picked up the white-striped bow at all. Most of that authority wasn’t even hers; it was borrowed from what her mother had left in the Book of Eternal Night. And from Suu.

[Don’t worry!] Dross encouraged her. [The Bow wants the same thing we do. It wants to be used. Well, don’t worry about *that*. There’s plenty else to worry about.]

She let him draw her attention upward, to the Weeping Dragon, who was looking away from Yerin and toward Mercy. Its pained rage and wounded pride filled the air, choking her.

In that sense, it was a good thing she was holding a Dreadgod weapon. Instinctively, the Silent King Bow rose to the challenge, mentally roaring back at its brother and taking the pressure off her.

Of course, she then had to pick up the arrow.

One Penance arrow had fallen at her feet. She touched it, and death flashed through her body like dark lightning. Not pain; death. A cold shiver that made her certain she would die in seconds just from touching the arrow.

[Lindon crafted the bow and arrows for you to use when you were ready. You can establish authority over them long enough for a shot, it's just...well, you're not quite ready. We don't have any time left, so you have to do it anyway. This will be hard.]

Mercy firmed up her concentration, letting her mother's willpower bleed out from the Book's seventh page and carry her. The Weeping Dragon was a threat to her and her family, and she *hated* it. She was going to erase it from the universe. Even its name would be forgotten, swallowed by shadow and obliterated.

That much allowed her to pick up the arrow and fit it to the string. That hatred synergized well with the arrow's lethal purpose and the Silent King's anger. She would be able to get a shot off, she knew.

But she hesitated.

Dross cried out to someone else, and Orthos, Little Blue, and Ziel all unleashed techniques to block the Weeping Dragon. The Dreadgod's wave of lightning could have collapsed Moongrave's wall, but the three managed to turn it aside before it reached Mercy.

She stood, wrestling with her own will.

That hatred she felt before wasn't just *from* Malice. That was malice itself.

I am not Malice. I am Mercy.

Forcibly, she changed the nature of her willpower. She changed her own intentions.

To the arrow, she silently whispered, *This is a necessary death. We're cutting out a cancer.*

To the bow, she said, *We are the ruler, so let's defend our subjects.*

To herself, she said, *This isn't an act of malice. It's an act of mercy.*

Though it took only an instant, she felt her power subtly change. She couldn't control it easily—in fact, she felt like a toddler trying to lift a horse

—but now it was *hers*.

Penance gleamed as she pulled back the arrow on its shining string. Her will surrounded and focused it all as the string came back to her cheek.

Her madra channels were strained to the point of bursting. Dross was shouting warnings in her ear; something about her mind being overtaxed. But she was in a state of pure focus.

The Weeping Dragon's claw descended on her, but she locked her sight on its head. The blessing from Cladia Arelius meant that Mercy could see her more clearly than usual, and even her concentration felt sharper. She had no room for distractions.

Mercy released the arrow, and the rush of power she'd unleashed overwhelmed her.

As she blacked out, she didn't fall into the shadows of her mother's hatred. Rather, she fell into comforting, soothing shadows.

Her last thought before she passed out was confidence that someone would save her.



The Weeping Dragon's claw fell, and Yerin used her Flowing Sword to catch it.

Her sword shone red-and-silver, but even with all her power and the assistance of her Remnants, the Dreadgod's claw was still shoving her down to the ground. Closer to Mercy.

Do something, Dross!

[Already done! Look!]

She didn't actually look, but the blessing of the Oracle Sage helped her see a dark star of power flashing toward the Weeping Dragon.

Mercy's arrow. She'd unleashed Penance.

Its copy, at least. Lindon had used the prototype Penance arrowheads to make his three arrows, but Yerin was clearer than anyone on the difference between these and the original.

The true Penance didn't need to make contact or to be shot from a bow. It didn't unleash an attack, it just decided who was dead.

This carried the same intentions, but watered down. The Weeping Dragon's castle-sized jaws snapped down onto the arrow.

Lightning and an ancient, defiant will crashed against Mercy's shot.

Yerin didn't know who held the edge in that contest, but the Dreadgod's focus on Penance pulled pressure away from its claw. She shoved it aside.

Red essence sprayed from a crack in her sword. Not a good sign; Netherclaw was breaking down.

That wasn't much of a twist. The sword had been made for fights between Archlords, not to be swung freely against Dreadgods and Monarchs. Every Reaper's Sword technique cut into the weapon's lifespan.

But Yerin took her stance again.

[There's a limit to the number of times you can use that technique. You know, right?]

She drew her sword back. *Yeah. Sword can't take it.*

[This is what I was afraid of. You can't take it, Yerin. *You* can't.]

Yerin hadn't taken stock of her own condition since leaving the Oracle Sage. She'd stolen power from a Sage and a Herald, using those to keep herself going, but that was slapping a cast on a broken arm.

The longer she kept fighting, the worse she'd be. She was on her last legs.

Take a breath or two, Yerin told Dross. *I can't even feel it.*

[That's a perfect example of why I'm worried.]

The Penance arrow finally tore through the lightning gathered between the Dragon's fangs. But the Dreadgod's attack still deflected the arrow. Instead of shooting down the Weeping Dragon's throat, it blasted off to the side.

Harmless.

Mercy's attack had taken a significant amount of the Dreadgod's madra and attention to deflect, so it wasn't useless. But it hadn't left a wound.

Yerin would have to do it herself.

She took the stance and prepared the Reaper's Sword.

"Enough!" the Weeping Dragon shouted.

Its authority *crushed* Yerin. The will of the Dreadgod was as fierce as a storm and as imposing as the greatest of dragons. It ruled this space absolutely.

She struggled against its willpower, forcing her arms along. Yerin could move, could maybe use some techniques, but her Reaper's Sword was shut down. It was too delicate a balance to maintain.

[Block it!] Dross shouted. [Block! *Block!*]

Yerin activated Netherclaw's binding and a pair of silver-edged red claws were Forged into the air over her head. With those, the sword itself, and all six of her sword-arms, she defended.

The Weeping Dragon's claw slammed down onto her.

Despite the supernatural strength of her Steelborn Iron body, she was still too weak. She felt as if a building collapsed on her—no, if a building collapsed on her now, she would shrug it off.

She felt as if a Dreadgod had crushed her.

Crunching came from bones all over her body, and half her vision shut down. She couldn't feel her right arm anymore, so she grabbed her sword in her left.

Yerin felt no pain.

The Remnants she'd stolen made it over to her. They had largely fallen apart, losing their shape, but they still focused their remaining power and will into a shining storm protecting her overhead.

She fed on them, forcing her body back into shape.

Another lightning-sheathed claw fell. She attacked it with a slash of madra.

Her world narrowed, and that was all she did. She swung her sword at the claw that fell.

[Yerin, you've got to run! Yerin!]

Dross' voice faded away.

All Yerin could hear was the ring of steel on steel.



Ziel was hovering high in the sky, hurling techniques down into the battle from gaps in the Weeping Dragon's storm, when he felt the Penance arrow miss.

Most of those gaps were created by attacks—madra from Yerin, usually, that broke through the dark clouds in a wave of silver-red.

Ziel had watched the whole battle with the Oracle Sage's blessing and following Dross' instructions, keeping the storm or the movement of the Weeping Dragon from killing Orthos, Little Blue, Mercy, or Yerin. His role wasn't flashy, but he'd slid aside enough glancing blows to know he was making an impact.

[There!] Dross lit up a spot with purple, and Ziel dutifully hurled a script-circle in time to stop a movement from the Dragon from toppling a mountain onto Mercy.

But the Penance arrow had flashed by the Weeping Dragon's head. Ziel's heart was ashes.

That had been it. Their last, best chance.

[Grab it!] Dross called. [Ah, not with your hands. That might kill you. Grab it with a script; we don't want to lose it.]

Ziel Forged a ring of emerald runes that encircled the empty space where the arrow was flying. When Penance tried to pass through, it slowed. And broke the ring.

He Forged another, then another, but that didn't take his full attention.

He was watching the fight.

The Dragon was infuriated by the attack on its life, shaking the clouds with its roar. It was focused on Yerin now, hammering her with lightning and claws.

She was about to die.

Somewhere behind him, Ziel felt the arrow finally crawl to a stop in one of his script-circles.

Dross, can you show me what to do?

[Well, uh, not *exactly*. I'm not as powerful as I was in my original body. I'm not a complete copy of myself, more like a smaller one. I can guess!]

Good, Ziel thought. He used a script to toss himself the arrow. *Don't tell me how likely this is to work. Just help me.*

[I have tried to talk *everyone* out of sacrificing their lives today. Why is no one listening to me?]

How many lives is it worth to take down a Dreadgod?

Ziel knew the answer to that.

It was worth at least one.

His core was almost totally empty again, but he squeezed the last madra out. He dropped his Enforcer technique, and his shield. Even his aura control left him, and he began to fall.

Green runes spun around him.

The power of the Penance arrow had already numbed his hand. His hand might have died, but he didn't care; at least his grip hadn't loosened.

He had no authority over this weapon. He couldn't use it himself.

But he had done nothing while the Weeping Dragon killed his friends once. This time, he would do more. He would do *something*.

Silver runes sprang up around the green ones.

Without his madra, the Grand Oath Array had been burning its own structure to fuel itself. Unless Lindon could repair it, this would be the last use of the Rune Queen's masterpiece.

All his soulfire, all his madra, all his will went into this one technique.

And in the sky above the clouds, a massive shield appeared. Bigger than when he had first advanced to Sage.

The Shield Icon sang in his heart.

Beneath him, the Weeping Dragon was approaching rapidly as he fell. It looked like he was falling into a vast river of sapphire scales.

With force aura, he pried open his dead fingers and released the white arrow with the gleaming black arrowhead. It fell next to him.

Ziel turned his attention to the rings of script flying around him. He focused them both onto the arrow.

This Dreadgod was the cause of endless suffering. All the pain he'd ever felt in his life, all the lives taken, they found their target.

A lifetime of fury burst from him in one word.

"KILL!" the Shield Sage roared.

For all the people this death would protect, the Shield Icon approved.

Both scripts activated at once.

The Penance arrow shot down, accelerated by a circle of force and time.

The Dreadgod reacted to the hostile intention, but too late. The arrow covered the distance instantly.

Instead of a moving point, it looked like a burning white line connecting earth and heaven.

A line that pierced the Dreadgod down the middle.

Ziel slammed into the Weeping Dragon's skin, and bones snapped, but his body was sturdy now. He sank fingers into the scales, though sharp edges cut him down to the bone.

"I killed you!" Ziel shouted. *"Me!"*

[I...I don't think it can hear you,] Dross pointed out.

The earthquake of the Weeping Dragon's convulsions tossed Ziel, but they slowed gradually.

The Dreadgod's life had come to an end.

AKURA MALICE HAD WATCHED OVER MOST OF THE FIGHT AGAINST THE Weeping Dragon from far away, but she stepped in eagerly when she felt its defeat. The second the battle ended, her soul oath released her, and she moved.

The Monarch walked out of shadow onto a scene of complete devastation.

Malice was no stranger to Dreadgod battlefields. She had created more than a few of them herself. But the objective of fighting a Dreadgod was usually to minimize its destruction, which often prevented the land from becoming this...nightmare made manifest.

From one end of the sky to the other, the earth looked as though it had been tilled by a cosmic farmer. Mountain ranges were torn down, but new mounds of earth rose in different places. Floods churned and washed down valleys, while lightning snaked around corners to hunt down prey.

The maps would have to be re-drawn, but there wasn't much of significance in this corner of her northwestern empire. If the battle had strayed further north, she might have lost important fortifications, and south of here was Sacred Valley.

If she had to lose something, this was a small price to pay.

She would have paid far greater. Lindon was on the verge of death.

That was exactly where she wanted him.

If he died, he would pass his power to the other Dreadgods. It pained her that the blow on the Weeping Dragon was lethal; that would be a difficult problem to deal with tomorrow.

But for today, she had a window of time before the Dragon finished dying.

Shadows crept out from beneath her, sliding along the terrain. It was hard to tell how much time she had left before the Dreadgod died—the Void Icon and the Storm Icon had both been used to obscure the future here. Though both workings were fading, she still couldn't rely on her glimpses of the future, so she had to lean on her experience. In all of history, to her knowledge, the Weeping Dragon had only been killed once.

Malice had to be quick.

Her shadows crept up to Mercy, Orthos, and Little Blue. The lockdown of the Weeping Dragon was fading, so she would be able to transport them away soon.

With those in her keeping, she could control Lindon. But she only needed so many points of leverage.

Malice summoned her bow. The shaft shimmered like crystalline ice, and she Forged an arrow on the string.

She would rather have the Silent King Bow. Truly a unique item made of irreplaceable components. Worthy of Reigan Shen's collection. But it would be too hard to slip a Dreadgod weapon into the space connected to her shadow without a claim of authority over it. She would have to pick it up herself.

In the instant after she appeared, Malice took aim at Yerin.

Casually, she loosed her arrow.

Yerin was too weakened to resist. She was on the verge of death already, and even the most halfhearted attack from Malice carried echoes of the Bow and Shadow Icons. And if you took Dreadgod and Abidan weapons out of contention, her bow was top-class.

Yerin was as good as dead, so Malice shifted her attention to Ziel.

She felt the change in Fate too late.

Malice's arrow was already in the air when the Dreadgod breathed its last.

Hunger aura erupted out from the Weeping Dragon, empowering the last three Dreadgods: the Wandering Titan, the Bleeding Phoenix, and the one she'd named herself. The Empty Ghost.

The shadow of a dark future suddenly loomed in her mind.

Malice saw where her arrow would pierce Yerin's chest only a split second before Lindon awakened. His first sight would be what Malice had

done.

She didn't see anything further in Fate than that.

Her future cut off at that moment.

"Return!" Malice commanded desperately.

It was uncomfortable whiplash to forcibly cancel her own technique so quickly after using it, but the arrow vanished in midair and reappeared in her hand.

Power erupted from Lindon.

He floated into the air, carried on the flows of energy flooding into him. Aura from hundreds of miles around poured into him. Restoring him. Empowering him. Changing him.

The Weeping Dragon's sky dispersed.

And the sky turned black.

Malice didn't allow herself to sweat, but she felt like wiping her brow nonetheless. When she sensed that power coming from Lindon, she felt like a young woman catching a glimpse of the Dreadgods for the first time.

It was an overwhelming power. A terrifying hunger. If she got any closer, she would surely be swallowed whole.

Malice was not used to being outclassed.

Still, she stretched her shadow out toward Mercy. Orthos and Little Blue would be risky to take, as their bond might alert Lindon. But she should be able to take her own daughter. Lindon would hardly be conscious at this point.

As though he'd heard her thought, Lindon vanished.

She didn't feel the working until he'd already moved, and her heart rate spiked for a second until she saw what he was doing.

He reappeared standing along the back of the Weeping Dragon's colossal corpse. His right hand dug into its scaly hide.

Lindon began to Consume.

There was a core binding somewhere inside the Dreadgod's length, but monstrous power threaded through its every inch. Lindon devoured it mindlessly, driven by his own arm. She sensed no conscious thought in him, only hunger.

She was safe.

Mercy's body slid inside the shadow, and Malice let out a breath. As expected, she could get away with this. So long as she didn't do anything to

affect Lindon's spirit, he wouldn't notice. Her shadow slithered back, closing the gate to her void space.

She froze.

He was gone.

There was no way she should lose track of anyone with that much power. It was like not being able to spot the sun at noon. Nonetheless, he was gone.

She found him standing beneath her.

His eyes were wide and mindless. Blank. Lindon stared up, but she was certain he couldn't see her. Or anything. He still wasn't fully awake.

White fingers twitched like someone was trying to puppeteer him. His arm lunged to the ground, dragging his shoulder with it.

Then he punched *into* her shadow.

Malice felt the intrusion into her void space. She could work her will against it, if she chose.

Instead, she stayed very, very still.

The white arm came out holding onto Mercy's wrist. Lindon still stood with a blank expression, his eyes staring somewhere past Malice. But he pulled Mercy free of the shadow. Contrary to Malice's expectation, he didn't Consume her, only sat her onto the ground.

Lindon's head twitched. His eyes slowly began to focus. On Malice.

Her breath stopped.

A moment later, she cast herself into the Way. She wasn't particular about her destination, and she didn't feel safe until after she'd left the swirling blue corridors and stumbled out into a jungle on the same continent.

Local sacred beasts sensed her and fled. Their simultaneous movement rippled through the surrounding trees, but she was watching the portal she came through.

If the Empty Ghost followed her...

But it didn't.

Gradually, Malice breathed more easily as she watched the barely perceptible cracks in the world heal themselves.

After Consuming one Dreadgod, Lindon had grown powerful enough to threaten her and to defend his labyrinth against multiple Monarchs, but not enough to kill one outright. Now that he'd fed on a second, he could have forced the issue and killed her. She was certain of it.

Perhaps, if he had been awake or in prime condition, he would have done so.

That was terrifying enough, but the situation was even worse.

There were two other Dreadgods left.



Lindon flew Mercy over to set her next to Ziel and Yerin. He'd lined them up next to one another, but he couldn't leave them lying on the dirt. Placing them on the back of the Weeping Dragon, which loomed over them like a mountain range, seemed even more disrespectful.

They all needed attention, but of the three, Ziel was in by far the worst shape. Orthos stood over him, manipulating life and blood aura using soulfire to keep his body going. Little Blue knelt by him and worked on his spirit, wearing a look of great concentration.

Without their attention, Ziel would have already died.

Lindon tore open a portal. The labyrinth's defenses were still in effect, and he couldn't deactivate them until he arrived, so the portal looked out over the slopes of Mount Samara.

He strode through, preparing an order for the labyrinth.

The portal stretched, and it felt like he was trying to walk through a flexible fabric. He pushed further, focusing his will, but in the end he was shoved backwards. He couldn't cross his own portal.

Lindon stood in shock. He understood what was happening, but it was still unpleasant to see.

[You're too heavy to move,] Dross explained.

[Sorry, is it rude to say you're heavy?] another Dross asked.

[Bloated,] a third Dross suggested.

[Bulky.]

[Metaphysically dense,] said a red Dross. The other spirits turned and looked to him.

[You don't get it, do you?] Lindon's Dross said to the red one.

Lindon's friends were on the verge of death, and he had just fought through some of the hardest battles of his life. His patience was hanging by a thin thread, but he pushed down his frustration. "If you're going to act

like a group, I'd prefer it if you took on different appearances. This is confusing."

[Yerin thought so too. Don't worry, it's all a play. We can match up our thoughts, so you're basically talking to an individual. Just because I'm a mighty hive-mind now doesn't mean you have to address me with respect.]

When Dross mentioned Yerin, Lindon tried not to look at her. She was resilient and would certainly make a full recovery. He had to remind himself of that every few seconds.

Lindon let his portal fade. He couldn't walk through it for the same reason that the Silent King had been forced to swap places with the Wandering Titan.

Dreadgods were too heavy to move. If they wanted to transport themselves anywhere, they had to use a trick, like trading with something of equal weight.

That had disturbing implications for Lindon's existence. Especially taken with the fact that the white flesh of his right arm had climbed past his shoulder and was pushing into his chest. He didn't sense anything unhealthy or harmful from those parts of his body; in fact, they felt healthier than his other side.

But his flesh and blood were being transformed by a Dreadgod's. That couldn't be good.

This is worth it, Lindon told himself firmly, and he set the problem aside.

If the portal wouldn't work, he needed another location to bring his friends. He reached out his will to a location where his authority was strong.

"Come to me," Lindon ordered.

He expected *Windfall* to fly toward him and pass through the portal, but instead space warped above him and then he was covered in shadow.

Lindon looked up to see a dark blue cloud hanging inches over his head. He'd summoned the entire cloudship, and it had taken virtually no effort.

Of course, this was something he owned, but it was still encouraging to see his powers grow.

He flew Yerin up to the highest room in *Windfall*—though a good quarter of its roof was still missing—and laid her on the couch, then continued with Mercy and Ziel. He had to be most careful with Ziel, balancing him on a smaller Thousand-Mile Cloud while Orthos and Little Blue kept him stabilized.

Now that he had them in a steady, clean location, Lindon relaxed the grip he'd taken on his own heart.

As soon as he permitted it, fear sliced through him with a razor-edged chill. Any or all of them could have died while he was gone. Ziel *would* have died.

[It's a miracle they held on,] Dross said, subdued. [Without the training you gave them, they would have all collapsed. And without their own hard work, of course. And their exceptional coordination, given by me.]

Lindon gave Dross a reproachful look, but the spirit shrugged. [It's true. All instances of me worked very hard to keep them alive. It was not easy. I deserve praise.]

Lindon laid his human hand on Dross' head. "Gratitude, Dross. How close was it?"

[Not that close. Don't worry about it.]

"How close?"

[Not worth worrying about! Just stop worrying, take my word for it, and never ask me that question again.]

Lindon waited for an answer.

[...If the Weeping Dragon had died one second later, Ziel would be dead,] Dross finally muttered. [If it held on for five more seconds, Yerin would be dead and Mercy would be gone. If Ziel's strike had missed the Weeping Dragon, they would all be dead. If you hadn't dropped a Penance arrow where you did, *you* would be dead. The Dragon would have eaten you.]

Dross didn't project any images of those terrible fates into Lindon's head, but Lindon saw them anyway. His own imagination provided them.

Every sentence hammered another nail into Lindon's heart. He had almost failed them all.

He would have to do better.

[It's hard for me to read your thoughts when you're like this, but I've still hung around here for a while. You're thinking you shouldn't have trained them this far. You're planning to fight all the rest of the battles on your own.]

"I'm not." Lindon cleared his thoughts so Dross could see them more easily, and Dross' eye widened. "We will not stop," Lindon said.

Eithan had descended from the heavens in search of companions. Suriel didn't fight alone, and she had encouraged him to seek out Yerin and to

fight alongside the others.

Clearly, no amount of power was worth moving forward alone.

He had chosen to believe it. So he chose to continue believing.

Dross wiped an imaginary tear from beneath his eye. [It's every parent's dream to see their little boy grow into such a fine young Dreadgod.]

"You're not my parent."

[Well, I don't like your parents, so I choose to replace them.]

Lindon returned his attention to the three injured people in front of him and rolled up his sleeves. "I'd like to try something, but I need an isolated experiment first."

[As usual, I'm three days ahead of you.] Dross highlighted a cut to the side of Mercy's eye. [Flying debris. Should be simple to heal.]

Ozmanthus had mentioned that restoration should be in the purview of the Void Icon's authority, and Lindon intuitively felt that to be true. He could reduce these wounds to nothing, essentially making it so that the injuries never happened in the first place.

Or so he thought. His previous efforts had accomplished nothing.

He focused on the cut on Mercy's head, which wrapped around from above her eyebrow and almost reached her ear. "**Begone,**" Lindon commanded.

The wound vanished immediately.

It didn't fade, as he had expected from healing. The injury ceased to be.

[Huh. That worked exactly as it was supposed to. Try these.]

Dross highlighted several small cracks along one of Mercy's madra channels. Little Blue had soothed them with pure madra already, but clearly Mercy had stretched herself too far again.

While these injuries were self-inflicted, they carried authority from Penance and the Silent King Bow. That made them resist Lindon's will a bit, and he pushed against them as he issued his command.

He had authority over the Penance arrow and the Bow. The cracks resisted him for a second, then vanished.

Lindon stepped back, waiting for Mercy to wake up. She didn't. Her core didn't refill either, nor did her soulfire, though they should have been depleted by the same action that wounded her channels in the first place.

Dross happily explained Lindon's own thoughts, but Lindon didn't listen. It was against the nature of the Void Icon to add. It was, inherently, the power to subtract. To remove.

Some problems would have to heal on their own.

With that, Lindon turned to Ziel. His wounds were like a combination of Mercy's and Yerin's. He had not only strained his body and spirit to their limits, but he had taken a beating while doing so.

These wounds took more of Lindon's concentration to erase, but soon Ziel was healed. There were no complications from Lindon's working—at least, none that Lindon or Dross could find—and Ziel's breath came more easily.

Orthos and Little Blue stepped away from him in relief.

Then Lindon turned to Yerin. His worry had lessened quite a bit. Not only was Yerin sturdier than Ziel, but the healing had gone so well that he had few doubts of his ability to restore her.

Though she looked terrible. She was covered in so many burns, cuts, and bruises that he could hardly see her skin, and while many of them had begun to fill in with silver-red madra, many had not.

“Begone,” Lindon commanded her wounds.

His willpower strained and reality twisted, but none of her injuries disappeared. The working passed with no effect.

Upon closer examination, he understood. The Weeping Dragon had attacked her with the full force of its will. It had caused them intentionally and directly.

To heal them, Lindon would have to exert effort greater than what the Dreadgod had spent.

[Hold back,] Dross advised. [What's a night of sleep to Yerin? She'll heal these on her own.]

Lindon scraped together his already-strained mind. He set aside his concerns about his own fate and invited the Void Icon closer.

“Be not.”

[Yeah, no, that's a good point. Why listen to me?] Dross muttered.

By the time Yerin's wounds had lessened and her breath rose and fell evenly, Lindon was covered in sweat and his own breaths were ragged. In terms of his willpower, he'd traded another series of blows with the Weeping Dragon after the fight was over. And he hadn't even restored her fully; Yerin had her own healing to do.

But given what Lindon had Consumed from the Dreadgod's corpse, it was still a worthwhile trade.

All three were asleep now, and even Orthos and Little Blue had gone off to rest. Little Blue was very excited about the prospect of having a human-sized bed all to herself.

Which left Lindon to consider his other problems.

He opened the Soulforge and entered, carrying the shards of Yerin's broken sword with him. Dross drifted after him.

[I can hear what you're thinking, and it's a bad idea. You know it's a bad idea, because I'm using *your* memories to tell.]

Lindon laid the shards of Netherclaw onto the silver altar at the center of the Soulforge and considered trying the same thing on the sword that he'd done to the injured outside.

[I knew you were thinking that. It won't work. You *know* it won't work. It's completely broken. That would be like reviving the dead.]

Suriel had revived the dead, and Lindon was working with the same principles of restoration as she was. Albeit at a far, far, *far* lower level.

[Just fix it normally! Soulsmith it up!]

Lindon considered what the right command for removing this damage would be.

[You're already tired! Take a break! Why not some nice, relaxing Soulsmithing?]

Lindon had every intention of ignoring Dross, but he still gave in without an attempt. He couldn't figure out a way to frame this working so that the Void Icon would recognize it as removing damage.

No matter how he saw it, bringing something back from a state of total destruction was *adding*, not subtracting. He couldn't work his way around that contradiction. It was probably possible, but certainly not easy.

Lindon summoned Genesis from his void space and switched it to the pure madra side, hammering Netherclaw back together. It wouldn't work quite as well as it had before—this was something like stitching a wound closed. But it would hold for a while.

At least until Lindon had the material to make Yerin a *real* sword.

Speaking of which...

"Are you ready?" Lindon asked Dross.

[More ready than you are. You haven't even given me a look. You should take it out of your soulspace, though, before your spirit ruptures.]

Lindon summoned the core binding of the Weeping Dragon.

Immediately, a gust of humid wind blew out of nowhere inside the isolated world of the Soulforge. Clouds began to form over Lindon's head, lightning crackled from the runes on the platform beneath his feet, and he heard the distant echo of a dragon's roar.

Before the Dragon Icon could form, Lindon reaffirmed his authority over the space. The effects died down, but the vital aura was still in chaos.

The Weeping Dragon's core binding was a golden jewel of many facets, like a diamond as long as Lindon's arm. Blue lightning flickered in its depths, and its edges shone blue. At the far end, the gemstone came to a point.

It had been larger than a house, but Lindon had compressed it down when he put it into his spirit. Physical size, for purely spiritual items, was largely a matter of choice.

Lindon and Dross immediately identified the different components of the binding, which could produce different techniques depending on how madra was circulated. But this looked more like a normal binding than the Silent King's.

"This would make a great launcher," Lindon noted.

Dross projected images all around the central altar of the Soulforge. Potential forms for the Weeping Dragon's weapon.

[I'm partial to this one!] Dross' tendril rested on a cannon.

It was similar to the Blackflame cannon Lindon had created in the past. Smooth and aggressive, the handheld launcher construct was modeled on the appearance of the Weeping Dragon.

Best of all, this binding could keep itself balanced. He wouldn't need multiple Striker bindings like he had for his creations in the past.

Not that he would need more power. With Lindon's power flowing through a cannon like this, he could pierce right through the Wandering Titan.

"Takes a lot of madra," Lindon noted.

[You could fire it two, even three times! And it only takes two minutes in between shots!]

It would only take two minutes between shots if Lindon didn't mind how long the construct lasted, but he wanted these weapons to follow them past their ascension. To give the cannon a long lifespan, he would need to perform maintenance after every shot.

The other functions, like summoning storms or living bolts of lightning infused with draconic will, could be used with impunity.

Lindon moved from the cannon and laid his hand on a spear. “This is the more balanced option, don’t you think?”

[Since when do you use a spear?]

“I wasn’t thinking it was for me.”

[Oh, are you planning on resurrecting Jai Long?] Dross paused with a tendril beneath his chin. [Was that too soon? No, I feel like it wasn’t soon enough.]

“This will give us an easier time after we advance.” That was one of the reasons they’d chosen a bow for the Silent King’s binding instead of something that could be more easily used by Dross. The physical form created connections to Icons.

[Yeah, if you *want* the Spear Icon. And the dragon’s breath will be much weaker in this form.]

“But easier to use, and the other techniques will be simple to control. Doesn’t the Eight-Man Empire train with the spear?” Maybe because Dross had brought up Jai Long, Lindon could easily imagine a fighting style formed around supplementing spearmanship with flexible dragons of lightning.

[If you give this work of art to Larian, I will haunt both her and you for the rest of your lives. Even more than I already haunt you, I mean.]

“If we consider who’s going to be using it...” Lindon looked up to Dross. “There’s one obvious choice.”

Dross heaved an exaggerated sigh and floated over another image.

This one was a huge weapon, as large as Lindon was tall. Though, considering the sheer size of the Weeping Dragon, they wouldn’t be short of physical materials.

It was a huge, two-handed hammer. The head was made of bone, one side carved to resemble the Weeping Dragon’s snarling face. The grip was covered by blue leather, and the entire thing trailed lightning.

Or so Dross imagined it. The final product’s design would differ, assuming they actually made it.

[His madra’s not the most compatible with it. It’ll be hard to Forge his scripts while using the binding at the same time. He’ll need the spiritual resistance of a Herald to use it. Isn’t it in bad taste to use a weapon that looks like the monster that destroyed your home?]

“He struck the final blow,” Lindon said. “He slayed the monster that destroyed his original sect, made its body into a weapon, and turned that weapon against its brothers. That doesn’t sound like bad taste, it sounds like the makings of a legend.”

Dross gave a short sigh of disappointment. [I don’t *want* it to be a hammer, all right? The dragon’s breath function is completely wasted. And every storm artist uses a hammer!]

“Not the ones we’ve seen.”

[Because they have *taste*.]

Lindon sent his spiritual sense back out through the entrance to the Soulforge. Fortunately for him, Ziel had woken already.

Yerin and Mercy were still unconscious. Yerin had to heal wounds on her own, and Mercy was once again in a state of wrestling mentally and spiritually more than physically. She would probably sleep the longest.

But they could settle this quickly.

Lindon left the Soulforge open and made his way to Ziel. To Lindon’s surprise, Ziel spoke eagerly the second the door opened.

“We got him, didn’t we?” Ziel demanded. “That’s his binding, I can feel it! ...isn’t it?”

“*You* got him,” Lindon said.

Ziel took a deep, shuddering breath. He passed his hand through his hair, between his horns. Then he gave a broad smile and collapsed onto the couch.

“Got him. We got them both. It’s over.”

There was a slight hitch in Ziel’s voice, so Lindon took the opportunity. “You can feel it. That *is* the core binding of the Weeping Dragon. The sooner we make it into a weapon, the better. Since you—”

“No,” Ziel said immediately.

“You struck the killing blow. Not only do you deserve it, but you should be able to exert auth—”

“No.”

[Well, you heard him!] Dross said cheerily. [Guess we won’t be making a hammer! I have some lovely plans for a *bell* that you might want to see...]

Lindon tried again. “Pardon, but may I ask why you don’t want it?”

Ziel stared at the ceiling. “I’m not using that power. I won’t do it. I’m free of it now.”

With that, Lindon let it go. “All right. Would you object to a hammer made from the Wandering Titan?”

[Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren’t we? Just kidding, I’ve already made plans.]

“Make it a shield,” Ziel said.

Lindon returned to the Soulforge with less direction than before. “All right, then we’re back to asking who can use the binding.”

[Don’t pretend you’re not excited,] Dross said.

Lindon was.

The Bow of the Silent King had never been made for him and didn’t suit him. It was made for Mercy to grow into, once she was ready.

Yerin’s madra wasn’t compatible with the Weeping Dragon’s, and of course the Bleeding Phoenix would make the perfect weapon for her. Ziel had refused this chance, and Orthos and Little Blue would have a difficult time establishing authority over the Weeping Dragon’s binding.

Which left Lindon himself.

Lindon opened his void key and summoned the weapon he had chosen from the Uncrowned King tournament years before.

Wavedancer flew out eagerly. Dross landed on its back and caressed the flat of the blade. [We never gave you the attention you deserved, did we?]

The flying sword had never been made with a binding. In exchange, it was solid and well-crafted. A strong, if unexciting weapon. Fury had recommended it to Lindon as something he could control well even as an Underlord, but that would serve him through Archlord.

Lindon had come a long way since then.

[Obviously, these materials will explode if you try to put the Weeping Dragon’s binding inside.] Lindon knew that, but Dross sent an illusion of a massive explosion anyway. [We’ll be borrowing its form, structure, and significance. And we’ll have more than enough excess materials.]

“I have an idea for that. Can you model it for me?”

Dross saw Lindon’s idea, and his purple eye lit up. [You see? Isn’t that way more fun than a hammer?]

ITERATION 300: VESPER

OZRIEL HATED FIGHTING AT A DISADVANTAGE. NOT THAT ANYONE LIKED IT, but Ozriel was always the strongest being in any given world. He had rarely had occasion to practice fighting with a disadvantage.

Eithan, however, had some recent experience.

He dodged shots from Tal'gullour, bolts of gold that warped space as they streaked past him. At the same time, he turned strikes from the Mad King himself, but his black armor cracked a little more every time.

Even with his powers returned, Ozriel was not what he had been. For one thing, he was fighting with neither his Scythe nor his Presence. The Mantle of the Reaper allowed him to extend his authority farther, effectively granting him more power, but that was only enough to help him keep up.

More importantly, his time as Eithan had diminished him. He hadn't forgotten anything, but he was not as sharp as he had once been. Not so singularly focused.

In mortal terms, he was rusty.

He would recover in only a matter of years, but he was hardly in the best condition to be fighting the Mad King while down two of his most powerful tools.

Fate was still cloudy in this sector, even to him, but he saw no way out of this. He doubted there was one, short of Suriel bringing back a miracle.

He was tempted to fall back on old instincts.

A seemingly casual sword-slash from the Mad King sliced through the void where Ozriel had once been. He slipped aside, leaving a star behind him to split in two and then detonate, but the old Ozriel wouldn't have only dodged.

Once, he would have taken the chance to attack. If he died, he would take the enemy with him into death.

This time, he dodged.

Eithan fully expected to die here. But before he did, he would draw this out as long as he could. Maybe he could buy enough time for someone to save him.

Neither Eithan nor Ozriel liked waiting to be saved.

A seal from the fortress-world snared Ozriel, manifesting as a golden circle of runic script floating around his left ankle. It sealed his motion for just a moment before the Reaper dissolved it, but this time the sword-strike from the Mad King landed.

The slash had to crash through several Titan barriers before it reached Ozriel's upraised arm, but it still stripped away his armor. Now his hand, from fingers to elbow, was unprotected.

That was how the fight proceeded.

One at a time, his limbs were laid bare. When he could no longer sacrifice those, he had to take hits to his chest until his breastplate cracked and peeled off.

Finally, the divine artifact protecting him dissolved and blew away into space like so much dust.

Ozriel drifted in the jumpsuit Abidan often wore beneath their armor. It had enough protections on it to qualify as legendary armor in its own right, but by the standards of this fight, it was practically ordinary cloth.

He was left with a conjured sword, his Mantle of billowing black flame, and his winning smile.

He had no doubt which of those the Mad King would target first.

"Go," Ozriel commanded.

His Mantle detached from his back and twisted into the Way. This wasn't likely to work, but maybe—

Daruman reached out a hand and pulled the squirming length of black fire from nowhere.

Then he tore the Mantle of Ozriel in half.

Ozriel felt the artifact's destruction. He'd crafted it himself, and it was a very real symbol of his own power reflected in the Way. It was a part of him.

Now, he was less the Reaper than he had been a moment ago.

"We've had enough Reapers," the Mad King said.

Ozriel felt hot rage and an urge to kill. But he channeled those into his most annoying Eithan smile. "Too late for that," he said. Then he winked.

He had hoped that the Mad King would take the bait and ask questions, but no such luck. Oth'kimeth, the Conqueror, smelled conquest.

The Fiend peeled out from its host, regarding Ozriel with a burning gaze beneath its crown. Daruman's eyes held no more pity.

He had been waiting for a chance like this for millennia.

In a way, so had Ozriel. Eventually, someone was going to get him. He had hoped to see Lindon and Yerin ascend, but there was always something to regret.

At least he was leaving something behind.

The Reaper folded his arms and faced death with a smile on his face.

Daruman gave him one nod of respect before bringing his sword down.

Ozriel dodged.

He slipped through space, reappearing a thousand miles away and calling back, "You didn't expect me to stand there and take it, did you?"

If he'd still been in Eithan's body instead of Ozriel's, his heart would be hammering. That had been too close.

He had indeed intended to stand there and face death with a calm smile. But at the last second, he'd felt something approaching. And someone.

Suddenly he remembered all the things he had to live for and ran like a fox with its tail on fire.

The Mad King sensed the same thing he had, and the golden circles from Tal'gullour suddenly surrounded him like a cage. They weren't just to trap him, though; they sealed up the entire world of Vesper.

A moment later, a black slash sliced the entire ceiling of the cage in half.

Ozriel's heart leaped.

A blue rift formed into the Way, and a familiar figure popped out.

Zakariel the Fox glared at him. "How are you still alive? I lost a bet."

Daruman slashed out at her. He didn't hit her—she disappeared even faster than she'd appeared—but the attack was still wiped out by the Scythe

in the hands of a white-clad Judge.

But not the Judge he'd expected.

Ozriel doubted his own eyes when he saw Makiel holding the Reaper's Scythe. If he hadn't recognized his own handiwork, he might have wondered if this was another fake.

Makiel said nothing on his arrival. He didn't acknowledge Ozriel at all, though the Scythe squirmed in his grip out of desire to get back to its creator.

The Hound slashed down, and a significant chunk of the universe behind the Mad King vanished.

Not the Mad King himself, of course. Gold circles appeared from Tal'gullour, and—anchored by the fortress—Daruman weathered the attack.

Ozriel held out a hand. "Return that to me before I take it."

Even that one attack with the Scythe had sent cracks crawling up Makiel's armor. If not for the Hound's personal skill and power, he'd have died swinging it once.

Makiel still didn't glance at him, but he did respond. "Would you do better, with no armor and no Mantle?"

"I could do better than that if I was missing both arms and an eye."

The Mad King wasn't idly letting them speak. Workings of energy and chaos crawled around the Iteration, in the form of golden script-circles and stomach-churning creatures respectively.

As expected, Daruman intended to take them along with him. If he could remove even one Judge, he would die happy. And there were four—no, Zakariel had already scampered away—*three* Judges here.

Makiel snorted at Ozriel's words. "You can see the result yourself."

Yes, Ozriel would most likely die using the Scythe. Not just from the burden of using the weapon at the ebb of his power but from the Mad King's suicidal gambits.

But Suriel would walk away for sure, while Daruman would not.

"Can *you*?" Ozriel challenged the Hound.

He knew where Makiel was looking. If Makiel used the Scythe, the most likely outcome was all four of them walking away.

And then nothing would change.

The Mad King would still be out there, after having reduced the Abidan worlds to disconnected rubble. This new status quo would continue, the root cause unsolved.

Ozriel would not allow that.

The man had brought death to Cradle. He would not be permitted to live.

Makiel's grip on the Scythe tightened and the weapon's darkness flared in protest. He turned to face Ozriel squarely, and a new branch of Fate shone as it became more likely. Makiel could banish the Scythe and draw his own Sword.

Unarmed, Ozriel would stand no chance. He'd have to take over the Scythe while he had the chance, but that meant acting first. A standoff.

Over the same old debate. Let things stagnate or pay the cost for change.

As chaos crawled across the sky of Vesper, icy determination leaked up from Ozriel's soul. Nothing had changed. Nothing would, as long as Makiel was in charge.

Maybe his primary target shouldn't be the Mad King after all. If Suriel were the only survivor, that would be for the best. He found that Fate, with her as the only survivor, and began tracing back the path to that future.

Across from him, Makiel was doing something similar.

Then blue fire filled Ozriel's vision.

A pair of wings filled with the same fire he'd seen in Lindon's marble.

"I'll persuade him," Suriel said to Makiel. "We're out of time."

Sure enough, Vesper had been surrounded by the Mad King's working. Now, there was no way out of here without losing at least one of them.

Ozriel was about to throw out a remark just to needle Makiel, but Suriel spun on him.

"Ozmanthus wouldn't back down," she said.

Ozriel felt like he'd slammed into a wall.

He didn't want to be Ozmanthus. He'd worked so hard *not* to be.

He wanted to be Eithan.

"I didn't know you were going to say that," Eithan muttered.

Suriel didn't give him a smug expression, but he could tell she wanted to. "I can at least hide that much."

"I will use the Scythe," Makiel said.

And, though it twisted everything inside him, Ozriel nodded. "Take it."

With that permission, the energy of the weapon suddenly flowed more smoothly. It still wouldn't be easy for the Hound to use, but better than before.

Of course, they were still trapped.

“Die,” the Mad King commanded.

The ensuing attack was beyond anything he’d used against Ozriel in their most recent battle. No surprise, considering how much time they’d given him to prepare.

Rather than the slash of a sword stretching across the gulf of space, it was more like the entire Iteration collapsing in on them.

Makiel wielded the Reaper’s Scythe in both hands, bending all his will to reducing the attack to nothing. Suriel reinforced him, setting up Titan barriers that disappeared almost as soon as they were formed.

Well, it wasn’t as though Eithan wanted to sit back and do nothing.

Without his Mantle, he couldn’t work on the same scope as before, but that didn’t mean he was useless. Shells of Way-power appeared around Makiel, sturdy enough to resist planet-crushing force. Ozriel threw up shield after shield, as well as stranger barriers. He reached deep into reality with the powers of the Ghost, reinforcing the reality of Iteration Three Hundred.

He worked on so many levels at once that he struggled to keep up with it all, and the other two Judges did the same.

Finally, the Scythe swept away the Mad King’s working.

But a golden light from Tal’gullour struck Suriel like a hammer-blow.

She was launched out of the world, into the Void, where Fiends set upon her. Ozriel had seen this coming; it was the best of all possible outcomes.

Even so, that didn’t mean he intended to let it stand.

He leaped through space, sending a message to Makiel as he did so. *“I need—”*

The message was cut off when he saw what was waiting for him when he re-materialized behind the Mad King: a two-handed sword hovering in front of him hilt-first. The veins of purple light crawling over its steel hissed with displeasure as it radiated contempt for him.

Nonetheless, the Sword of Makiel tolerated his touch.

There was no moment of hesitation. The instant Ozriel appeared, he seized the Sword and swept it toward the fortress of Tal’gullour.

Though the weapon had inherited its master’s distaste for Ozriel, it still felt right in his hands. He had been considered a potential successor to Makiel, once.

And the key to this weapon was that its strikes were absolute. It hit multiple possibilities at once, closing out branches of Fate that involved its attacks failing.

There were countermeasures, of course, and the Mad King knew them.

Chaos twisted for Ozriel, warping destiny and causality in a working that would stop Makiel's Sword and possibly kill Ozriel as well.

Except for the colorless light that swallowed up the working, reducing it to nothing. The Reaper's Scythe.

The Sword of Makiel swept across, shattering the golden circles that defended Tal'gullour and leaving a scratch across its surface that stretched for thousands of miles. Ozriel gave a brief sigh of disappointment. With his Mantle, he would have cleaved through the entire planet-sized fortress.

But this time it was his turn to play support.

In the future, he saw the Mad King hitting Makiel, and he launched an attack of his own to close off that possibility.

Makiel reacted perfectly, since he'd known exactly what Ozriel would do.

To Ozriel's frustration, they made a great team.

Though they were trapped and cornered, missing weapons, and not in their best condition, they were still the two most talented Abidan alive. And for the first time ever, they willingly fought in sync with one another.

Ozriel was still irritated. At his full strength, he wouldn't need this. And Makiel was getting the center-stage role, leaving Ozriel to play cleanup.

Then again, wasn't that where an Arelius shone the brightest?

Ozriel could feel the shift when the Mad King realized he couldn't beat them. Once again, he redirected his attacks to the unarmored Ozriel.

There were several options available. And this time, Eithan picked the one that Ozmanthus would never consider.

"Tell Suriel I'm counting on her," Ozriel sent.

Instead of evading, he slashed out with the Sword of Makiel. His blow cracked the Mad King's bone helmet in half.

"Gotcha!" Eithan said.

Just as the Mad King's return strike erased him from the universe.



Reigan Shen did not have time for the Silent Servants, and yet here they were. Standing in the middle of his white-and-gold courtyard as he prepared to spend yet *another* fortune in built-up spatial treasures to move on with his plans.

He bitterly regretted giving them access to his teleportation anchor, but it had been a different time then. Before the stars had gone dark, back when Reigan had planned to use the cults to defeat the other Monarchs.

With the world as it was, the cults had either lost their usefulness or become a liability. He couldn't even send them to attack Lindon, ever since the man had a bow made from the Silent King. The entire sect would probably drop to their knees and swear allegiance the second they came within sensing distance of the Empty Ghost.

The Silent Sage, like all those of her sect, wore a white cloth over the bottom half of her face. Long, black hair flowed freely behind her, and she rested a hand on the sword at her side. Her Goldsign, a miniature replica of the Silent King's halo, flared brightly when she caught sight of Reigan.

Dream aura burned around her as her anger boiled over. And despite the name of her cult, she had sworn no vow not to speak.

"Your oath is broken!" she declared. "Explain yourself!"

Reigan's eye twitched as he contemplated destroying her. That was not the attitude to take with a Monarch, but her brother's presence had made her bold.

Balari, the Herald of the Silent Servants, stood with his arms crossed at his sister's side. He covered his mouth just the same and his Goldsign was similar, but he followed a different Path. While Reigan could certainly kill them both, Balari's presence would make the battle a headache to win quickly.

The Lion Monarch forced a smile and spread his hands. "Clearly, I have broken no oath, as I am unharmed. I assure you—"

The Sage bared an inch of her sword. "Don't lie to our faces! We *know* you can break your oaths. You've flaunted that power against our enemies, so don't take us for fools."

In fact, Reigan hadn't thought the Silent Servants had known about his oath loophole. But he had leaned on it a little too easily, even loaning it out to others. He had been too arrogant, but he'd never intended to lean on his little trick against the truly powerful.

Now, he found himself stuck.

“My oath to you remains intact,” he assured them. “I have not betrayed you, I have treated you as my own sect, and I have empowered the Dreadgods. Are they not stronger than ever before?”

“Our King is *dead*.”

“And how is that a violation of my loyalty? Surely you can’t expect me to have predicted that a Dreadgod would need a bodyguard.”

The Sage looked like she was straining at her very limits not to draw her sword. “We were *decimated* by Emriss Silentborn, and you did nothing! It was only by the grace of the other Monarchs that we were allowed to survive at all, and now we’re so bound in oaths that we’re all but useless!”

“Then *what good are you?*” Reigan roared. The marble vibrated with his voice, as did the vital aura and space itself. “If I can’t waste the *seconds* it would take to kill you, then I certainly cannot waste another breath speaking to you! If you want to throw away your lives so badly, kindly do so before the Void Sage devours you.”

An annoying alarm in Reigan’s mind alerted him to a problem in his collection. He almost tore apart the Silent Sage in frustration, but this wasn’t her fault. Not directly, anyway.

Without another word for the Silent Servants, he tore open a gold-edged portal to one of his vaults and stepped inside.

For the first time, the Herald Balari spoke. “Soon, your empire will crumble. And it will be your fault.”

Reigan let the portal shut behind him, cutting off the Servants. They were right about one thing, at least. His empire *was* on the verge of crumbling, but it wasn’t his fault. It was Eithan’s fault.

Anything Reigan could salvage would be due to his own cunning.

The thought of Eithan ruined his mood, especially considering his surroundings. The lavish vault, filled with gold, marble, and stones much more precious, was being ravaged by three-colored lightning.

Reigan irritably slapped a bolt aside, watching a man-shaped Remnant convulse on the floor.

Tiberian Arelius, or the spirit that had once been him, shook like a Copper undergoing electrocution. Poetic, in Reigan’s view, since the man resembled a statue hewn from solid lightning. His jaw was clenched, teeth glowing like they were made of thunderbolts themselves, and sparks crackled from the eyes that had rolled up in his head.

Reigan didn't need the spiritual sense of a Monarch to know the Remnant was in agony. But because he was, he knew it originated from the scripted golden collar around the man's neck.

Irritably, Reigan reached out with his senses and expanded the Remnant's physical form. It harmlessly enlarged; this was more of a technique to view the insides of a spirit or spiritual construct than a true increase of its size.

He had become much more proficient at this skill since absorbing the Soulsmith inheritance of Ozmanthus Arelius, and the man's instincts gave him a more thorough sense of the problem.

Madra channels spun throughout the room in what *should* have been healthy loops, but the lanes of light were twisted, mangled, halfway cracked. Storm madra burst from them in uncontrolled flares.

Stretched to such a size, so that Reigan was standing in the center of Tiberian's Remnant, the problems were clear. Reigan summoned a few scales of Weeping Dragon madra, slapping them on the broken channels haphazardly.

He had performed these repairs several times before. The process was growing less effective, but he didn't need Tiberian's memories or personality to be flawless. He needed the man to be a weapon.

Though he still wanted Tiberian's appearance to remain intact. No sense in having a treasure you couldn't show off.

When Reigan finished patching up the newest cracks, he shrank the Remnant back down. Tiberian shuddered on the floor now, twitching and groaning like he suffered a disease.

"Get up," Reigan said in disgust.

A moment later, as though pulled by invisible puppet strings, Tiberian did. He held a hand to his head. "What...did I..."

Reigan stood over him, letting himself enjoy a moment of victory. "You shouldn't break so many soul oaths."

The Remnant's hand drifted from his forehead down to his collar. "Ah...That's right. Owning me and using me as a weapon wasn't enough. You had to torture me as well."

"You have to admit, that was a clever design." While his hired Soulsmiths had made the device, Reigan had come up with the basic concept and structure for the collar himself. He had based it on his research

into the armor of the Eight-Man Empire, and the collar exploited a link between his own soul and Tiberian's.

Primarily, it enforced obedience. But it also allowed him to hand off the consequences of broken oaths.

Not too many, and none too powerful, lest Tiberian fall apart completely. But he had survived what would have been, to a living sacred artist, total spiritual collapse.

"I would admire your death trap more if I were not caught in it," Tiberian said, tone dry.

"Maybe your ancestor will return from the heavens and save you," Reigan said, but the taunt fell flat. As soon as he said it, he realized that might very well happen.

Tiberian had noticed the same thing, and eyebrows of crackling lightning lifted. "I look forward to seeing you caught in your own trap."

Reigan reached his spiritual perception inside himself, into his soul-space, to caress his life insurance. The Wraith Horn.

He hoped it would be enough to preserve his life.

"If I am caught," Reigan Shen said, "then I will not be the only one." With his weapon repaired, he opened the portal again and left.

It was time to go find his new allies.

LINDON STOOD AND ADDRESSED THE OTHERS, WHO HAD ALL GRABBED SEATS around the large room at the top of *Windfall*. He had restored the house through a working of the Void Icon, which had astonished most of the others.

“We won,” Lindon said.

There was a distinct lack of celebration in the air.

Ziel burned with passion, and the words seemed to pass over him like a healing rain, but the others weren’t as excited as they perhaps should have been.

Mercy sat with haunted shadows behind her eyes, still stuck chewing on whatever she’d seen when she floated between life and death. Little Blue nodded at Lindon’s words but didn’t seem to feel that she’d done anything significant. Orthos shifted in his chair, trying to find a comfortable position in his human body.

Yerin was wrapped in so many bandages that she looked ready for burial. Her left eye was covered, and her right showed clear frustration.

“Cheers to us,” she said. “Feeling like a party in a bottle right now.”

Lindon gave her an apologetic look but continued. “We’re injured and tired, but we killed a Dreadgod. And it won’t be the last.”

“Yes,” Ziel said, voice low.

[I don’t know that I like that look,] Dross whispered into Lindon’s thoughts. [He’s *too* enthusiastic now. It’s scaring me.]

“This didn’t come easily,” Lindon went on. “Let’s take stock of what we’ve lost.”

Mercy's shoulders drooped. "We lost one of the arrows. I'm sorry."

[Two, actually,] Dross corrected. [One left!]

She wilted further.

"Sword's patched up, but it's not what it was," Yerin mentioned. "Those Remnants I stole are dust in the wind, and we're not sharp enough to battle. None of us came out of this with even more strength than when we started. Did we? Did we, Lindon?"

Lindon considered his words. "I have seen some...benefits."

"This match is unfair. I want to talk to a judge about the rules."

Suriel was a Judge, and she was indeed the first one to give Lindon his edge, but he decided not to point that out.

Ziel raised a hand. "The Grand Oath Array is in bad shape, unless you can repair it."

"I think I can, but I'm not certain. Try not to use it for now."

Ziel shrugged. "Worth it."

"We now have two Dreadgod weapons," Lindon said.

Yerin brightened. "You made it already? Walk that out and give it a spin!"

"Dross and I will be testing it in the labyrinth later, if you'd like to watch."

"What is it? I was holding out for the Phoenix, but I wouldn't spit on another sword."

[It is a sword,] Dross allowed.

Yerin's bad mood about her injuries vanished like morning clouds. "You waiting for sunrise? Let's talk while we test! Where is it?"

"In my soul space," Lindon said.

Something occurred to Yerin. A thought he was hoping she wouldn't have for a while. She scanned him and then gave him a flat look. "Where you keeping the Bow, then?"

"In my soul space," he admitted.

Mercy's eyes widened. "You're keeping *two* Dreadgod weapons inside your spirit?"

"I may have seen *substantial* benefits."

Yerin muttered something under her breath. "What's it going to take for us to catch up?"

[My turn!] Dross said happily. [For one thing, you are all far more effective than ever before, thanks to your access to a mind-spirit of

unparalleled knowledge and cunning. As you know, Lindon has become a monster of terrifying proportions, since his body functions like a Dreadgod's. But this has its drawbacks. He can no longer transport himself except by using the labyrinth, he can't ascend, he's gradually losing his body—]

"Dross!" Lindon interrupted. "You were supposed to talk about *them*."

The damage was already done. The other five looked at Lindon like *he* was the one who had been grievously injured.

"You're gradually losing your body?" Orthos asked. The red in his eyes blazed, and he folded his arms to lean forward. "Why did you hide that from us?" Somehow, he was more intimidating as a human.

Little Blue scowled at Lindon, but what he felt from her spirit was fear.

Yerin's visible eye was wide, and her hand shook until she gripped it in a fist. "What's this about you not ascending?"

He spoke to the room, but he focused on Yerin. "It's not so bad. Once the Monarchs are gone, I'll just need some time."

"That's one twisty word away from meaning 'we win, or we're stuck here.'"

[Worse than that!] Dross said cheerily.

Lindon pushed mentally against the spirit. "Dross, stop."

[The more he gets taken over...]

"Dross!"

[...the more he becomes the Slumbering Wraith. So if we take too long, he'll—]

"**Stop,**" Lindon commanded. The world twisted.

Dross' mouth snapped shut.

Everyone in the room stared at him. Even Dross didn't look apologetic or angry; he looked smug. He knew he had delivered the message.

"It sounds worse than it is," he insisted. "Normally, Dreadgods are reborn from their core binding. But there is the *possibility* that my arm is the biggest anchor for the Wraith left, so if we take too long, I'll..."

He didn't want to say '*I'll be taken over,*' so he skipped that. "It's only a possibility. I'm not worried about it."

[I am,] the red Dross said.

Lindon's working should have shut all of Dross' bodies up, but he guessed the red one was different enough from the original that it wasn't affected for so long.

Given that the information was out, Lindon canceled the working anyway.

“When did you have this fresh new idea?” Yerin asked.

Lindon had *really* wanted to explain this to her one-on-one. “While you were out. It’s one of the consequences of taking more Dreadgod power.”

She nodded to his words, then her gaze sharpened. “So. How long we have on the clock?”

[With two Dreadgods left? We have a comfortable three, four weeks to get rid of the Monarchs. If somebody kills the Titan or the Phoenix, that brings us to a less-comfortable two or three days.]

[What if they’re all killed?]

[Great question, handsome stranger. If the Dreadgods are all dead—except Lindon, of course—we have a matter of hours to get the Monarchs out of the world before he loses his mind.]

Ziel laced his fingers together. “So we have five targets before we take out another Dreadgod. Northstrider, Sha Miara, Akura Malice, Reigan Shen, and Emriss.”

Little Blue shuddered, and Orthos scowled. “Should you say their names like that?”

“We’re veiled,” Lindon assured him.

Mercy still looked horrified. “But you can’t move yourself. If they show up, you can’t even run.”

“You’re making the situation sound worse,” Lindon assured her. He felt like he had said that too many times in the last two minutes. “I can still move with the labyrinth. But yes, the Monarchs can now outrun me. So I can’t chase them all down and threaten to eat them if they don’t ascend.”

He had intended that as a joke, but no one laughed.

“We know what we need,” Orthos rumbled. “We need Monarchs of our own.”

Dross made an obnoxious alarm sound. [Wrong! We need you to improve *without* advancing. You know how Lindon had a body sort of like a Herald even when he was a Sage? Like that. We need to make you into half-Monarchs. You won’t take out any real Monarchs like that, but you should be able to gang up and give them a good beating. Yerin’s close to it, aren’t you, Yerin?]

Yerin leaned back against her chair, groaning at the state of her injuries. “Not that it’s going to be much of a helping hand when we can’t advance.”

“If you’ve got enough of a Herald’s body and the beginnings of authority, then you can use a Dreadgod weapon,” Lindon said. “At least for a while. I made them, and you contributed to killing the Dreadgods, so that should give you enough of a connection. With one of those, you’ll be a match for the Monarchs.”

“I am concerned about our speed,” Orthos said.

Mercy held up four fingers. “It’s really only four targets left, isn’t it? Emriss will ascend once she gets rid of the others.”

“We think,” Ziel muttered.

Lindon was confident they could trust Emriss. She had practically handed him the key to the Silent King. Then again...

Lindon turned to Dross. “Have we heard from Emriss?”

Dross shook his head. [She must have sensed the battle with the Weeping Dragon, but she’s made no attempt to contact us. And the other Monarchs were harassing us freely, so she wasn’t keeping pressure on them.]

“Then what is she doing?”

[Either she has a secret plan that we can’t possibly comprehend, *or* she’s been captured by the Monarchs.] Dross shrugged. [Could be both. Especially when the Eight-Man Empire held back the Dragon for us. They seem to be her allies, so the other Monarchs could have made a move while they were gone.]

“So, first up on the list,” Yerin said. “Free the tree.”

“Could they have killed her?” Ziel asked.

[Emriss formed herself up from a Remnant, but she isn’t one anymore. She’d leave a Remnant, like anyone. I can’t imagine Reigan Shen or any of the others wanting to take on another Monarch’s Remnant *and* the Dreadgods.]

“Which brings us to the last point,” Lindon said. “The Dreadgods have grown.”

He could feel them, even now. Almost as clear in his spirit as Orthos and Little Blue. The Bleeding Phoenix and the Wandering Titan were far from each other, and they were having a great time.

Lindon clenched his right fist. “They’re feeding.”

The others quieted. None of them extended their spiritual sense to find the Dreadgods, but they could all feel it.

The Titan and the Phoenix had gotten the same boosts to their power that Lindon had, though they hadn't also created any Dreadgod weapons. Perhaps that would give him the edge.

No matter what, they would be more aware and more awake in addition to more powerful. Somewhere, the people of the world were facing down an apocalyptic crisis.

[Just one more reason to speed things up!] Dross said cheerily.

The mood had hit rock-bottom once again. Even Ziel's newfound resolve seemed to have cooled, though he still seethed with palpable motivation. Besides Dross, they seemed to have all come to the conclusion that they'd signed up for an impossible mission that now had to be completed in no time.

"We can do this," Lindon assured them all.

Mercy shrunk in on herself. "That's what you said last time."

"And we became much stronger," Orthos said.

"Not enough," Ziel pointed out.

Little Blue sighed and picked at the corner of the table.

"So what's the difference this time?" Yerin asked.

"This time, we're sticking together," Lindon said. "And we're going to start by gathering allies."



"You should not be so calm," Northstrider said to his prisoner.

Emriss Silentborn watched him from the inside of a tank. It had been designed to hold dragons, so it was a massive glass bubble suspended in a dark ocean. The inside was dry and barren, a stretch of sand.

There was no life in this pocket world. Nothing to give off life or dream aura except Northstrider himself, and he kept his own aura under tight control. He also allowed no sunlight or water inside, keeping the interior of the tank lit only by dim scripts.

Emriss could sustain herself for years with no food or water, but she would find it uncomfortable. That was the idea.

However, she had set herself up anyway. She'd formed a chair out of one of the boulders by molding earth aura, and she lounged on it as he

watched. Her eyes were shut peacefully, her hands folded over her midsection.

“Why not be calm?” she asked in return, without opening her eyes. “Would panic accomplish more?”

“We will release you under one of two conditions. Either you ascend immediately, or you swear an oath to help us fight the Empty Ghost.”

She mouthed along with the words ‘*Empty Ghost*,’ though this couldn’t have been the first time she’d heard the name. “And if I wait here?”

“You stay here as your people are slaughtered by Dreadgods.”

He had expected a reaction to that. She’d given up centuries binding the Silent King. Her greatest fear was losing her population to the Dreadgods, and she would do anything to stop that fate.

Or so he’d assumed.

She continued lounging at her ease. “Mm. That would be a pity. It would take two, three generations to rebuild. Trees tend to take a long view, you know.”

It was a bluff. She was hiding her reaction. Northstrider knew that, and his oracle codex agreed. He’d gone over the codex with scripts and workings of the Way, and he was certain no trace of Dross remained.

Northstrider bet on that chance, matching her stoicism. “Very well. I’ll present you the same offer in a week. Next time, I’ll come with dream tablets from Dreadnought City.”

He manipulated the water around him. For their entire conversation, he had been floating in his artificial sea, speaking to her through the glass. Now he tore open a portal to the outside, ready to escape.

“See you next week,” Emriss said casually. “If you have that much time.”

Northstrider looked back over his shoulder and allowed a small smile to crack his lips. Then, without another word, he passed through the portal.

As soon as he was through, in his latest fortress at the bottom of the Trackless Sea, his smile was replaced once again by a scowl. He had pretended to have a strong hand to call Emriss’ bluff. She would be panicking now, he was certain, though he couldn’t examine her directly without her realizing.

If she *wasn’t* bluffing, though, then he was wasting his time. If she really did think on the glacial time scales of a tree and she wasn’t concerned

about losing this generation of her population, he didn't have any leverage over her.

His codex showed him that wasn't the case, but he no longer trusted the codex's predictions as he once had. Certainly not against Emriss. He wouldn't put it past her to have foreseen this possibility.

Northstrider's current headquarters was called the Sunken Tower, and it was the most advanced fortress he'd ever designed.

It was like a spear of dark stone driven into the bottom of the ocean. Each of its thirty floors was home to many facilities and pocket worlds, carrying out research that he could confidently say was unmatched in Cradle.

Others had gathered around the Tower. Northstrider didn't lead a sect of his own, but greatness always attracted followers. And in times like this, where he was weakened and could not attract attention, followers could be useful.

Emriss' cell was accessed by a scripted doorframe at the end of a hallway with Herald-level constructs and workings of great authority.

He left that hall on the thirtieth floor and flew the short length to the roof. A hatch opened at his approach, and a script prevented water from rushing inside.

Northstrider splashed upward into the ocean. The darkness of the sea's depth was kept at bay by circular lights that floated here and there like miniature moons. Lesser structures spilled out from the Sunken Tower, all around, each releasing light from its windows. Many were covered by scripts that pushed back against the pressures of the depths, allowing human Golds to survive here.

Usually, when he saw that sight, he wondered if he had stayed here for too long.

Large organizations were weights tying a sacred artist's hands and feet. Obviously there were some projects that required cooperation, but such relationships should be taken only for a limited duration. But the longer he stayed here, the more hangers-on would pile up.

Those were the thoughts that usually plagued him, the questions that haunted him. This time, he was grateful for the assistance.

Two Archladies and an Archlord knelt before him. One of the Ladies was human, and she wore a scripted necklace and wristbands that adapted her to this place. No Archlord-level sacred artist could be killed by the

pressure here, but speaking and moving quickly would take soulfire, so she used scripted shortcuts.

The other two were fish-people, sacred beasts who had taken on humanoid form but hadn't given up their animalistic traits entirely. Their gray-blue skin and gills were hallmarks of their kind, but Northstrider didn't have the bias against sacred beasts that many among the Akura clan did.

"What did you find?" he asked them.

The first opened her void key. "Our apologies, Monarch. Herald sacred beasts are scarce since the fall of the Dragon King." From the key's portal, a frightened serpent darted out, trying to escape.

Northstrider seized it in one hand. It was an Archlord-level dreadbeast, and thus disgusting to the eye, but it was close enough to a dragon for his needs. He Consumed it completely.

Its energy filled him, and he vented excess madra into the darkness behind him. Light of many colors lit up the dark, and a small piece of what Lindon had taken from him was restored.

Northstrider turned to the Archlord. He hadn't come with prey, but with an elixir made for Heralds. The Monarch favored him with a nod before turning to the human Archlady.

She shifted and looked at the ground. "I found a Herald-level Remnant, but I was driven off."

Northstrider had given them weapons to prevent that, so he was displeased, but not surprised. "Where?"

"Eastern Ashwind, in what used to be Xorrus' territory."

Northstrider wondered whether the potential return was worth the risk. The further he stayed from Lindon, the better. At least until he regained his strength.

"I will go," Northstrider said. "You will all be repaid." He turned to lower himself back into the Sunken Tower.

To his surprise, the human Archlady spoke again. "I did feel the attention of the Empty Ghost on me, but it did not act."

Northstrider stopped. "Were you contacted? Did you hear any messages in your thoughts?" His scan of her spirit revealed nothing strange.

"No, Monarch. I was only concerned for you."

Ugly anger took over Northstrider's heart for a moment.

She was talking about a boy who had grown fat on bounty he'd stolen from Northstrider. Just by suggesting Lindon could be a threat, she was

insulting him.

But Northstrider was hundreds of years old. He took control of himself immediately. She did not intend the disrespect, and what was more, she was right. Lindon *was* a threat. She had said nothing inaccurate.

“I have plans to deal with him,” Northstrider said.

Then his spirit shouted a warning.

At the same time, the lights around his fortress turned red. An alarm split the deep, and sacred artists came boiling out of the surrounding buildings. The three Archlords were instantly battle-ready.

Intruder alert, his oracle codex informed him. *The Empty Ghost*.

Northstrider knew that already.

“Hold,” Northstrider instructed. “I will deal with him.”

This was his fortress. The current seat of his power. Here, his authority could not be surpassed.

Northstrider willed himself back inside.

He reappeared in a simple gray room on the thirtieth floor. It branched off into five hallways, one of which led to Emriss Silentborn’s prison.

The room was empty except for a swirling, white-edged portal. Lindon stood on the other side, arms clasped behind his back.

Northstrider felt dark amusement take him. He had calculated this possibility. In fact, he had expected Lindon would reach a tipping point of metaphysical mass *before* Consuming the Weeping Dragon, but obviously there was a margin of error.

“There are easier ways to get my attention, Ghost,” Northstrider said.

“Apologies, I must have lost my way,” Lindon replied easily. “I was looking for Emriss Silentborn.”

“Perhaps I have her imprisoned here.” Northstrider stood back and beckoned down the hallway with one black-scaled hand. “I invite you to come check for yourself.”

Lindon couldn’t cross the portal, and they both knew it.

“I’d rather send one of my friends to check for me, if you don’t mind.”

“The invitation extends to you alone.”

Northstrider’s oracle codex spat out possibilities, and his mind worked just as quickly. What could Lindon do here? He knew he couldn’t transport himself here, so why had he opened the portal in the first place?

The codex proposed a possibility, and Northstrider agreed with it. Lindon already had one Dreadgod weapon. It was entirely possible he had

another.

Using such a weapon through a portal was a tricky possibility. If the output was too great, the portal itself would break.

There was only one question Northstrider had. Why had Lindon waited? Why not use the weapon immediately?

He focused his will, prepared to break the portal the instant Lindon pulled a weapon, but Lindon didn't seem inclined to do it.

"I wanted to talk with you," Lindon explained. "I have questions."

Northstrider remained silent, using his codex to predict whether this could be a trick. What would Lindon gain by playing for time?

There was no substantial reason Northstrider could think of. The Dreadgods were rampaging at that very moment.

After a second of silence, Lindon spoke again. "I'll go on, then. I had great respect for you. I want to know why you never ascended."

"I told you already, and I dislike repeating myself."

Lindon glanced around the empty room. "As I understand it, you did not want to bow to anyone. You are the fish who doesn't leave its pond because it fears the ocean."

Northstrider's ugly anger returned. "Watch your tone, boy."

"You're not even the biggest fish in this pond. What is there to cling to? If you really wanted to learn these secrets and techniques, you could have ascended."

"Enough."

"Even with all your research and your centuries of training, you lost to me."

"Enough," Northstrider repeated, but this time he imbued the command with the full weight of his authority. With disdain and fury, he crushed the portal.

The portal, however, refused to be crushed.

Lindon held out his hand, pitting his will against Northstrider's. "I suspect there has been a misunderstanding. Dross tells me you're calculating what I get out of this interaction. What angle am I playing? You're looking at it the wrong way."

Northstrider's rage burst free of his constraints, and he snarled in response, "You're nothing but a dog with sharpened teeth. You're alive because you were a Judge's *pet*."

"This was not for my sake," Lindon continued, "but yours."

“A speck of *dust* could challenge the Dreadgods if a Judge decided to grant it power. You’re not special. You’re a sideshow for them.”

“Release Emriss and ascend. For my past respect, I’m giving you a chance.”

“How dare you look down on *me*? I *earned* what I have.”

Lindon’s black-and-white eyes carried the coldness of the void. “Very well. I’ll see you soon.”

Without Lindon’s will to support it, the portal winked out.

How quickly can he arrive here? Northstrider asked.

Difficult to estimate, his oracle codex replied. *Assuming he begins in the western Blackflame Empire, and assuming flight based on aura control, he could arrive here in six hours.*

Northstrider could have sent out his spiritual sense to see exactly where Lindon was starting from, but Lindon could have shut down such a scan effortlessly. Northstrider hadn’t bothered to try.

Lindon, on the other hand, knew exactly where to find him. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have been able to send the portal in the first place.

The codex continued. *If he travels from the nearest branch of the labyrinth, then of course he will arrive much sooner.*

Northstrider wasn’t concerned about that. He knew where the labyrinth entrance was, and he’d put measures on it that even Lindon couldn’t ignore.

“Set the evacuation alarm,” Northstrider commanded the construct in charge of the Sunken Tower. “In six hours, we need all critical projects gone.”

Six hours wasn’t *much* time, but it would be enough.

New possibility, his codex said. Northstrider’s blood chilled at the words. *Information on the Weeping Dragon is limited, but it is theoretically possible to create a method of transportation from its madra. In such a case, the time is reduced to only two hours.*

What are the odds that Lindon has been able to create a vehicle so quickly?

Unlikely. Estimated thirty percent.

After further consideration, Northstrider decided not to move up the timeline of his alarm. That wasn’t enough of a possibility to act on, considering that the most important pieces of the Sunken Tower would be prioritized and moved out within two hours anyway.

New possibility, the codex said again.

Don't tell me that, Northstrider snapped back.

Acknowledged. I will not consider this possibility.

No, tell me.

There are other possible meanings behind the words 'I'll see you soon.' It could be that he will contact you again, or that he will lure you to come to him. Perhaps he is aware of something that will inevitably bring you two face-to-face.

Northstrider's eyes narrowed. *Or it could be a bluff.*

Lindon's words might have been a ploy to make Northstrider panic. Emriss had to have an escort, after all. He couldn't leave her to his automated evacuation process. And prisoners were always less secure in transit.

Not enough information to be sure of his intentions, the oracle codex relayed. *It is possible the Destroyer left him resources beyond our comprehension.*

This whole process grated on Northstrider. Having to treat a *child* like a serious threat and being unable to see through his words. Monarchs were used to making others react to them.

Then again, he wasn't in such an easy situation that he could afford to coddle his pride.

He strode down the hallway and met the doorframe of scripted jade at the end. After he left instructions with the facility construct and his subordinates, he commanded the doorframe into his void space.

It disappeared, along with the entrance to this prison world.

Now, if Lindon wanted to take Emriss back, he would have to meet Northstrider face-to-face. He couldn't send Yerin or his other flunkies to do it for him. And while no one Monarch could take on the Empty Ghost alone, he could at least run.

By killing the Dreadgods, Lindon had put himself on a timer.

Once Northstrider had grabbed the doorframe, he hopped through space quickly and reappeared over an endless expanse of ocean. There were a few nearby buildings hanging from solidified clouds and a few peeking up from the waves, but for the most part, this was an unremarkable stretch of the Trackless Sea.

It was only a hundred miles or so from where he started, but it was even farther from the labyrinth entrance. Covering distance quickly was important.

Now he could make longer jumps. See if Lindon could catch him if he was on the other side of the—

“Come here.”

Lindon’s voice echoed through the world.

Northstrider felt himself being *pulled* through space, as though he’d been hooked on an invisible fishing line.

Spiritual perception exploded from him and enveloped the entire world for hundreds of miles. He could even sense the Sunken Tower from which he’d started.

Lindon was nowhere to be found.

He is attempting to summon you, his oracle codex informed him. *It is unlikely that he has left his original position.*

That was absurd.

Lindon had enough links to Northstrider to establish *some* connection, certainly. The Path of the Hungry Deep incorporated hunger, over which Lindon now had more authority than anyone. And Lindon himself used Consume, had grown under Northstrider’s tutelage, and carried around Dross, who had been born in Ghostwater. Even Ziel’s Broken Crown could theoretically be used to create a link, given that Ziel had fought in Northstrider’s name.

But there was a good reason the oracle codex had not considered this as a possibility.

It would never work. If greater hunger authority was enough to summon him, the Dreadgods could have pulled him to them centuries ago.

The only people to have forcibly summoned Northstrider since his advancement to Monarch were the Abidan.

He pitted his will against the working, but that took far more of his concentration than it should have. Wrestling Lindon’s willpower felt like a Copper wrestling a tiger.

He ultimately managed it, but another command pulled at his soul.

“Come to me,” Lindon ordered him.

Weight pulled at him, greater than Lindon should have. It was as though he was being supported by a circle of Heralds and Sages.

So, his friends had advanced. Between that fact and Lindon’s Dreadgod weapons, the oracle codex painted a grim picture of the near future.

At this rate, Lindon’s attempt was going to work.

In that case, Northstrider would ruin it for him.

He withdrew the doorframe from his void space and hurled it into the distant ocean. Even he didn't know where it was. Now, when Lindon summoned him, the child would not get what he wanted. Emriss would remain imprisoned until Northstrider himself returned to dredge the ocean.

He still fought the summons, of course. But the more he fought, the more he saw a white hand, reaching out for him.

Eventually, that vision became reality.

Northstrider was forcibly pulled through rushing currents of blue only to land in the grip of Lindon's Dreadgod arm.

Black-and-white eyes burned.

"Nice to see you again," Lindon said.

LINDON WAS PREPARED FOR NORTHSTRIDER TO FIGHT HIM. THAT WAS WHY he had performed the summoning in the labyrinth, and why he'd sent the others away.

This place couldn't be destroyed.

Lindon was prepared to Consume the Monarch the moment he arrived, but there was no intention to fight. Only a defiant amusement in Northstrider's eyes.

"Emriss is gone," Northstrider said. "I locked away the entrance to her prison."

He had a tone of triumph, as though he'd seen through Lindon's plan and was a step ahead.

Lindon got the impression that the Monarch had given this too much thought. "I see. That's disappointing."

He held Northstrider by the throat but released him, despite the pleas of his hunger arm. Northstrider stood with a smug expression and brushed off his ragged clothes.

"Good. Now we can begin this negotiation. We will start by addressing the disrespect you have shown me."

Lindon had cleared everything important from this room of the labyrinth, but it had once been a workshop of some nameless researcher. Lindon pulled up an ancient chair and sat with his back to the wall.

"Apologies, but I think there's been a misunderstanding," Lindon said. "Emriss will be fine. I'd be surprised if she doesn't have her own way out of that prison now that you aren't watching her."

Northstrider kept his expression under control as usual, but Lindon thought he saw a flicker of hesitation. Dross cackled with glee.

Of course, Lindon wasn't being entirely sincere. His primary goal had been to retrieve Emriss, but since it did seem that Northstrider was telling the truth about hiding the entrance to her prison, Lindon pivoted to his secondary objective: Northstrider himself.

"I want you to ascend," Lindon said.

Northstrider's expressions were always minor, but this time Lindon read scorn in his face.

"You can kill me," the Monarch responded.

Lindon nodded. "That's true. But instead, I thought we'd talk. So before you arrived, I spent some time speaking with you."

Lindon activated the binding he'd prepared in the labyrinth's walls.

The younger Northstrider that appeared was very similar to his Monarch self, except of course constructed from gray-white hunger madra. His eyes were not golden, but he had the same stature, the same stony expression, the same ragged clothes.

The hunger echo looked his real self up and down. "You're still here?" the Sage asked himself scornfully.

"Psychological tricks are not the tool to use against me," the real Northstrider said.

"You think this is a trick?" Lindon asked curiously. He wondered if the Monarch really thought so. "I'm sure you can sense this is really you."

"It is a trick nonetheless. My younger self cannot persuade me to ascend."

"Pathetic," the hunger echo said.

That word hung in the air a little too long.

One of Northstrider's eyes twitched, but he otherwise didn't respond to the echo's word.

"I'll tell you what I told Lindon, then," Sage Northstrider went on. "I intended to gather power until I could force the Abidan to remove the Dreadgods. If this world is their responsibility, they should clean it up."

Northstrider didn't respond, but his expression twisted noticeably.

"What happened to me that I would become the one who turns his face from his responsibilities?"

Northstrider's face returned to its usual stone. The echo continued berating his older self with scorn, but Lindon and Dross could tell what the

Monarch was thinking.

He had decided not to be swayed by this. The willpower of a Monarch was nothing to be ignored, even against himself.

That was why Lindon held up a hand to silence the echo for a moment. Even the young Northstrider looked affronted by the gesture, but he begrudgingly stopped in mid-sentence.

Lindon held out a hand to the echo. Just as Northstrider had taunted him by gesturing toward the prison of Emriss Silentborn, Lindon offered him the path to the truth.

“Don’t listen to me,” Lindon said. “Listen to yourself. Your memories are stored here in the labyrinth, but you can take them back with Consume.”

Having mastered himself, Northstrider didn’t give anything away by movement or tone. “Why should I dance to your tune?”

Lindon matched his even tone with a polite one. “Because I don’t have to persuade you at all.”

[Good job not giving it away,] Dross whispered. [If I couldn’t read your mind, I wouldn’t know how nervous you were. Keep your sweat on the *inside*, that’s what I always say.]

Lindon couldn’t show his nerves, but he was rapidly losing control of himself. He feared the result of a fight with Northstrider.

He wasn’t afraid he would lose. He was afraid of what would happen if he won.

Even now, it was taking a good half his attention just keeping his Dreadgod arm under control. There were no outward signs, but Lindon’s hand *raged* against the restrictions. It sensed the presence of hunger madra inside Northstrider and wanted to Consume him immediately.

If Lindon did that, he would be taking too much.

He had already gone far beyond his capacity by Consuming the Dreadgods. Taking on too much strength and too many memories, at this point, would only speed up his transformation.

But he wanted to. Northstrider was a reservoir of strength far deeper than the wells he had created in Ghostwater.

It was like burning with thirst and seeing an oasis right in front of him, but trying to hold back from drinking.

Lindon only managed by reminding himself that he *wasn’t* dying of thirst. In fact, he had already drunk more than he could handle.

But the arm of the Slumbering Wraith always wanted more.

While Lindon's battle raged internally, he gave nothing away on the outside. Northstrider must have been going through something similar, because he examined his echo for a while before turning back to Lindon.

"What will this prove? It will not change my mind."

"I'm betting that it will," Lindon said.

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we'll do things the other way."

Lindon had no reason to lie here. If Northstrider wasn't persuaded, Lindon would use force. In the worst-case scenario, he would have to kill the Monarch himself.

His arm struggled against his control at the very *thought* of killing Northstrider without Consuming him, but Lindon forced it down. He could always Consume some of the man's power, just not all of it.

In fact, wouldn't his capacity have increased along with his power? Maybe Lindon could handle more than he thought.

[I don't like it when you're having a debate inside your head and I'm not involved,] Dross put in. [If we really do end up killing Northstrider, you should let Yerin do it.]

Lindon's gut rejected that, even if his head recognized the logic.

"I need your word that you won't attack me while my guard is down," Northstrider said. Lindon wondered if the Monarch was just being prudent or if Lindon's internal struggle had revealed itself.

"I won't," Lindon said.

"Swear it."

"No."

Lindon folded his arms casually and leaned further back in his chair.

He could attack Northstrider at any time. In fact, it was harder *not* to do so. Why would he need a distraction?

Lindon let that reality float in the air while Northstrider's expression cracked into visible anger.

"Fine," the Monarch said. He strode forward and reached toward the echo of his past self.

Lindon moved in a blink.

Northstrider reacted when Lindon tried to grab his wrist, and their hands ended up striking off one another in a deafening explosion that shook even the reinforced stone walls of the labyrinth.

"What was that?" Northstrider demanded.

“Wrong technique.”

Lindon had received memories of Northstrider’s Consume technique. Dross could model them perfectly. He knew when the man was cycling a different technique.

Northstrider had attempted to destroy the echo under Lindon’s nose.

The Monarch did not respond, but he began slowly moving his madra in the correct pattern. Lindon stepped aside but continued watching.

This time, there was no way out. Northstrider Consumed the echo of himself, which flooded into him in a rush of white and gray.

[I can’t read his mind,] Dross said, [but here’s a simulation of what he’s seeing, based on the memories from the echo.]

Lindon expected a memory, but instead Dross’ eye turned gold and he sported a shaggy mane of hair. [‘Rrgh, I’m Northstrider, and I’m smarter than everybody! I’ll solve this Dreadgod problem! I’ll use their power against them!’]

Northstrider was still in a trance as he sorted the memories, though he could probably hear, so Lindon responded silently.

That was...I do have questions.

[‘Don’t waste my time with questions!’]

Why are you doing an impression?

Dross dropped the hair and the eye color, returning to normal with a shocked look on his face. [So I wouldn’t distract you! Didn’t you find it amusing and relaxing?]

I feel like you could have shown me a perfect simulation almost instantly.

[Almost instantly. Now you can watch Northstrider while also learning from me! Also, there’s no *creativity* in replaying exactly what happened. No soul.]

I’m perfectly all right with that.

Dross grumbled further, but Northstrider had already broken out of the memory. He looked at his palms as though they belonged to someone else, and he seemed dazed.

[He’s asking the oracle codex if this is a trick. Probably questioning his own memories to see where he changed. Would you like an impression?]

No, thank you.

Northstrider looked up again, and something about him seemed...lost. Lindon lifted another chair with aura and sent it sliding over to him.

Lindon hadn't been sure the Monarch would actually use it, but Northstrider collapsed into the chair a moment later.

He leaned forward and put his head in his hands. "If you wanted to shame me before sending me off in defeat, you've succeeded. Do what you will."

[He's going to justify this,] Dross predicted. His tone was much more serious than before, which Lindon appreciated. [If we give him time, he'll come up with a story about how he was right all along. He's done it many times before.]

"I don't want to send you off in defeat," Lindon said honestly. He waited until Northstrider looked up to say, "I want to send you off in victory. You won a long time ago."

Over time, Lindon had Consumed quite a few of Northstrider's memories. He knew the Monarch better than even Lindon himself had ever realized.

Northstrider had justified his position a million different ways, but the truth remained: the man was simply afraid to ascend.

"I need time to set my affairs in order," Northstrider said.

Lindon nodded. "All right. Swear that you will fight with us and that you will ascend immediately on my command, and you can have more time."

Northstrider remained silent.

[He's looking through the loopholes in that oath,] Dross said.

The loopholes were traps, and Lindon wanted to see if the Monarch would fall for them. In the end, Northstrider shook his head.

"No. I will make a clean break." The shining black sphere of his oracle codex appeared over his shoulder. "I am sending Dross a set of instructions. Make sure they are taken care of after my departure."

Dross received them and whispered to Lindon, [I don't think he knows what a 'clean break' is.]

They were mostly instructions for how to best take care of Northstrider's facilities and the people that relied on him for protection. For a Monarch without an established sect or clan, Northstrider certainly had a lot of people counting on him.

"I will make sure they are taken care of," Lindon promised. "Now... pardon the disrespect, but I would like you to ascend now. I give you permission to open the Way within the labyrinth."

Northstrider gave him a flat look. “Now you care about disrespect?”

“I’ve always respected you. You mentioned many of those responsible for my growth, and I owe them a great debt, but no less than the one I owe you.” Lindon bowed his head. “Thank you for your guidance, Monarch.”

Northstrider surveyed Lindon for a moment and snorted.

His ascension was not so dramatic as Fury’s. He didn’t have a family’s worth of people to bring with him, and he had more experience manipulating the Way than Fury ever had. He simply gestured as though brushing aside a curtain and a swirling dimension of blue opened before him.

“I find it hard to believe that someone like you could force me out of my own world,” Northstrider said.

And, despite what he’d said about respect, Lindon found it hard to resist a parting shot.

“It’s my world now,” Lindon said.

Northstrider scanned him once again. He stood before the portal into the Way with black-scaled arms crossed and messy hair stirring in the portal’s wind.

“Yes,” Northstrider said.

Then he vanished into the Way.



Inside *Windfall*, Lindon set up the doorframe into Emriss Silentborn’s prison space.

Northstrider had sent Dross the memory of tossing it into the water, but even he didn’t know its precise location. And Lindon couldn’t go search himself. He’d needed to send Yerin into the Trackless Sea with the labyrinth, flying for hundreds of miles while scanning with her spiritual sense.

Which didn’t delay them long, but it was an annoyance.

The door opened onto a dark ocean, but Lindon had expected that. For a sacred artist with no water aspect to his Path, Northstrider certainly stuck to his aquatic theme.

Lindon took a bubble of air into the water and moved using aura. It didn’t take long to release the wide, scripted bubble of glass containing

Emriss Silentborn.

She was reclining on the chair in the form of a dark-skinned human woman, though it was slightly different than the body she'd used before. This time, there was gray in her hair and wrinkles in the corner of her eyes.

She wore a crown of flowers although, on closer inspection, Lindon couldn't tell which part of her hair was made of plants. Patches of her skin seemed to have the consistency of bark.

Emriss didn't react until she saw him floating up to the glass, and then she slid off the chair immediately.

"I was worried I would have to wait," the Monarch said. "Northstrider did not last, did he?"

Lindon tapped a finger against the scripted, reinforced glass and shattered it. He held the water back from rushing in using aura, then moved his bubble of air closer to the prison so Emriss could climb in.

"Apologies," he said, "I tried to get here sooner."

"I was prepared to wait for years, if necessary. This does not count as a wait."

Lindon had expected more questions, but he had underestimated Emriss' patience. Despite having been captured, she seemed as though she was waiting for the world to move around her. He supposed that, rather than asking for answers, she would sense the world herself once they arrived.

But she looked to him, and he felt a scan pass through him like a gentle breeze. "You didn't Consume Northstrider's power."

"I persuaded him to ascend," Lindon said.

"Pity. If you had taken it, his strength would have gone to good use."

Lindon wasn't sure whether to take that as a compliment or not.

Dross spun out next to him and gave a fake cough. [I would just like to say it's an honor to meet you again.]

"It hasn't been so long since we met, Dross." They were aboard *Windfall* now, and Emriss' awareness spread out. She made a relieved sound and pressed a hand to her chest.

Lindon noticed the concentration of her spiritual sense on the other side of the planet. "None of the Dreadgods have made it to Everwood yet, and the Monarchs haven't attacked."

He'd somewhat expected them to, but apparently everyone had enough chaos of their own to deal with.

“Northstrider told me that my people were being taken by the Bleeding Phoenix. I assumed he was lying, but there was always the chance.”

“Pardon my rudeness, but I would like to know. How did Northstrider catch you?”

Lindon could feel Emriss’ spirit now, and he would never have expected her to lose to Northstrider. Even if she couldn’t match him in raw power, she had the knowledge and experience to make up for it.

“It was him and Reigan Shen together,” Emriss said sadly. “I saw how it would end, so I allowed it instead of burning my strength fighting against it.”

“Well, we will be grateful for your help.”

“Unfortunately, the closer we get to the end, the greater the danger. I’m worried that—”

Emriss froze in the middle of her words. She gazed off into the distance, and Lindon could feel subtle shifting in the mechanics of the world. It was like hearing the strings of an instrument plucked in the distance.

The Monarch summoned her diamond-headed staff and slammed it into the ground. “I understand now why Shen helped to seal me away. He wanted to stop me from seeing this.”

Lindon was going to ask what, but her hand shot up and gripped him by the forehead like a claw.

That would have been more threatening to him a few weeks before.

“**See,**” Emriss commanded him.

Lindon allowed the working, and his vision was rushed away to elsewhere on the planet. There, he saw Reigan Shen.

And the Bleeding Phoenix.



Reigan Shen carried the Horn of the Slumbering Wraith in one hand, though its exposed presence warped the air around him and twisted ordinary animals into lesser dreadbeasts as he passed.

The world had already been twisted worse.

The sky was pure red, and there wasn’t a living thing in the range of his spiritual sense that hadn’t already been touched by the Bleeding Phoenix. Its eggs had merged with trees, animals, sacred beasts, and humans.

Bloodspawn roamed in packs, hunting resistance, but most prey delivered itself to the Phoenix willingly.

The Dreadgod wasn't difficult to find.

The sun burned red overhead as Reigan Shen approached. He'd transported himself close to this point, but the Phoenix controlled all space in its immediate vicinity.

A shape towered like a mountain over him, but it wasn't the Phoenix's body. It was a twisting, writhing mass of red that pulsed and flickered with every aspect of madra. Together, it formed the shape of one titanic egg.

The Phoenix had formed itself into a much, much smaller body. It even looked like a human woman, a motherly figure with bright red hair and beautiful scarlet wings spread out behind her. With his eyes, Reigan couldn't see any hint of her previous form. The wings didn't look like they were formed from liquid, but from perfectly real feathers.

Only in his transcendent senses did he feel the distorted space around her, like a spiritual disease. She warped the natural order just by sitting there.

She sat at a table that had been meticulously set up in the middle of a field, set with a white tablecloth and silverware that looked suspiciously as though they had been taken from Reigan Shen's own collection.

The Phoenix sliced through a slab of roasted meat with her knife, then placed a bite into her mouth. She closed her eyes as she chewed with evident pleasure.

A giant bloodspawn leaned over her, shading her from the sun.

Reigan was doing everything he could not to turn and run from this place. The Bleeding Phoenix acting human was as terrifying as anything he'd ever seen. Not only was it disturbing enough to see that it *could* put on such a performance, but why would it do so?

He'd communicated his intention to it already, so he'd expected a cordial meeting—more civilized than their last, anyway, at which time he had thought the Phoenix was going to eat him.

"It hasn't been long since we've met like this, Reigan," the Phoenix called to him. Her voice was melodic and musical.

Reigan bowed slightly. "I'm honored you remember."

"As clouded as my thoughts were, I wasn't asleep. There's nothing wrong with my memory." The Phoenix took another bite. "In fact, I remember your objective. Weren't you going to control us?"

Reigan had prepared himself for this, and he kept himself quiet, but he felt as though his flesh was trying to pull itself free and run away without him.

He held up the Wraith Horn. "I could have sounded this at any time. Are you confident you could resist its control?"

"I'm confident I could take it from you now, if I wanted to."

"Are you sure?"

This was the most frightening bluff of Reigan Shen's life.

It tended to get overshadowed by Lindon's meteoric rise and his inheritance of the labyrinth, but Reigan Shen also had great authority over the core binding of the Slumbering Wraith. *He* had been the one to explore the labyrinth, *he* was the one to extract the binding, and *he* was responsible for crafting it into its current form.

In theory, the Wraith Horn should be capable of commanding the Dreadgods. Now, they shouldn't be able to defy him. All of his research, predictions, and calculations confirmed it. Even Ozmanthus Arelius' Soulsmith inheritance told him the Horn should work, at least for a while.

But it was hard to rely on theory. They were far past the established facts of the sacred arts.

If he was wrong, he was about to get his very own Blood Shadow.

Reigan braced himself for the Phoenix to attack him, but she didn't even seem tempted. She closed one eye as though to see him better, taking another bite of her meat.

Then she picked up a goblet, swirled some wine in his direction, and upended it into her mouth.

That had to be intentional.

As though she were reading his mind, she gestured with the empty goblet. "It's annoying when someone's swirling wine while you're talking, isn't it?"

"All part of my cultivated image." Though she hadn't confirmed that the Horn had power over her, he did relax a little bit. He could be reasonably confident that she wouldn't have let him get so close if he didn't have some leverage.

A Blood Shadow in the form of a sacred artist stepped up to refill the Phoenix's wine.

The Dreadgod folded her hands on the table and looked up at him. "So what is it that you want from me?"

“You saw the stars disappear.”

At that, the Phoenix did flinch.

That was a good sign. Reigan pushed on. “We’re on the same team now. If the adopted son of the Destroyer succeeds in his goals, he will be rid of us. You will fade into nothing, and all my time in this world will be wasted. Who can match him if not for you?”

She chewed on the edge of her knife as she considered, and Reigan heard the shriek of the metal warping under her teeth. After a moment, she leaned over to a boulder sitting in the middle of the plain to her right.

“What do you think?” she asked.

The boulder disappeared.

In its place was a swirling gold-edged portal. Reigan shivered at the sight; she had hidden that spatial warp even from him. That was a level of skill in the sacred arts that he had very much hoped she hadn’t attained.

And she had veiled the spiritual pressure of the being on the portal’s other side.

The Wandering Titan stared through the portal with one colossal eye. Its voice vibrated through aura, drifting through as though the boulder spoke.

“We don’t need him.”

Reigan’s spirit chilled.

The Phoenix pointed the tip of her deformed knife at him. “He has a point. While we have control of ourselves, we can set up Monarchs of our own. I suspect we can even solve this problem of having to go back to sleep.”

“Lindon will not let you be,” Reigan insisted. “We can always ascend, but he needs you to die.”

“Not as badly as he thinks he does.” Leisurely, the Bleeding Phoenix stood from her chair. She stretched red wings behind her and smiled at him. “We’ll take that up with our brother.”

This was the worst possible turn of events.

Reigan Shen clutched the Wraith Horn. “He is *not* your brother.”

“Didn’t you all give him a name yourself? The Empty Ghost.”



The vision broke up as Emriss’ hand moved away from Lindon’s head.

“That’s all we can watch,” she said, but she didn’t need to explain.

“I felt it.”

The Phoenix had established further control over the space after speaking his name. It was difficult to say whether she was aware of Emriss watching her meeting or if she was simply exerting her authority over Reigan Shen, but to continue spying on them would have required wrestling wills with the Bleeding Phoenix.

That, she would certainly have noticed.

Emriss had removed her hand from Lindon’s forehead, but now she set her staff aside and took him by both shoulders. She peered with dark eyes into both of his and spoke earnestly. “Do not be taken in by them. Some of my peers believe that the Dreadgods have only gained intelligence after the death of Subject One, but they were always clever. You cannot negotiate with them.”

“I know,” Lindon said.

He could feel the influence of hunger madra. Even now, his arm was reminding him of how much power Emriss represented. By Consuming her, he could benefit from her wisdom and experience in addition to her madra.

What could Dross become with a dream Monarch’s power?

How long could Lindon live with a tree’s lifeline? He might become so close to immortal that even the other Dreadgods couldn’t kill him.

The worst part was that it wasn’t just the arm that was urging him forward. This was the hunger that had been in him from beginning; the desire to get stronger, now taken to an absurd extreme.

That was what the Dreadgods were made of. At their fundamental level, they were made to devour the world.

Negotiating with them was like bargaining with a wildfire. Or a virus.

A virus that could turn into a mountain-sized monster.

Emriss saw the sincerity in his eyes and visibly relaxed. She patted him on both shoulders. “Good boy. This is the best chance we have to be rid of them since the last Dread War, so I wouldn’t want us to give it up.”

“We have three problems left,” Lindon said.

Dross projected images of Malice, Sha Miara, and Reigan Shen into the air.

“If we’re lucky, the Bleeding Phoenix will take care of Shen for us,” Emriss said. “But I’ve never been so lucky. I don’t think his fate ends here.”

“What about Sha Miara?” Lindon asked.

“I can handle Miara. My concern is Malice.”

Lindon looked into the image of Malice, seated on her throne with her legs crossed and shadowy hair drifting behind her. Dross made her adopt a smug smile.

“There’s no telling what that girl will do if she feels cornered,” Emriss said sadly. “She might burn it all down rather than let someone take it, like the dragons she so despises.”

[Don’t worry, we have a personal contact with Malice. That will make it easier. I’m certain. I haven’t run the simulation, but—Oh, I just did. This makes it harder, doesn’t it? Way harder.]

Lindon stared at the floor in a corner of the room. Mercy was a few floors down, working on the Book of Eternal Night.

“We’ll try to talk her into ascending, if we can,” Lindon said.

Emriss raised one eyebrow. “Do you think that’s worth an attempt?”

“Yes. But not for Malice’s sake.”

“As long as you’re willing to do what’s necessary when that fails.”

Lindon could feel Dross’ thoughts in the back of his head. Dross was struggling *not* to tell him that there was a ninety percent chance Malice would never surrender and would instead go down trying to take as many people with her as possible.

“I’ll talk to Mercy,” Lindon said.

Emriss sighed. “Good luck.”

MERCY SAT IN THE FIFTH PAGE OF THE BOOK OF ETERNAL NIGHT. SHE WAS supposed to be taking it apart, as she had the first four pages, but instead she just let the never-ending nightmare flow around her.

It didn't touch her as much as it had before.

She felt Lindon trying to enter the Book and allowed it. He could have forced his way in, but he wouldn't.

The projection of his self appeared a moment later, and Mercy gave him a bright smile. "Tea?" she offered. She held out a cup.

Lindon looked from her to the tea set in front of her. She was seated on a blanket spread on the stone floor of this nightmarish cave, with the long-fingered inhabitants of the cavern system lurking around every corner.

She had a teapot and one cup, but she conjured another for him and began to pour.

Cautiously, Lindon sat down. "You seem like you're doing well."

"Not bad, right? Lovely weather we're having." Mercy waggled her eyebrows at the constant gloom that infused the air.

She handed him a cup.

"How are you really?" he asked. He didn't drink yet.

Mercy looked around herself. "I thought this would be good training for me. If I can keep my mood up here, then it should be easy to face down my mother. Right?"

Lindon paused for too long before he sipped his tea. "I...hope so," he said. Which told Mercy why he was here.

A shiver of fear passed through her that had nothing to do with the boundary field stored in this page of the Book. "It's time, huh?"

"We can give you a little while to prepare," Lindon said. "I wanted you to have a chance to talk to her. Before I did."

Mercy could imagine what a talk between Lindon and her mother would look like. A part of her wanted to see that.

There was something satisfying about the thought of Akura Malice, Queen of Shadows, having to run from someone several centuries her junior.

But Malice lived up to her name. If Lindon cornered her, she would burn the entire clan to the ground rather than surrender. She would do anything to strike back, even if it meant taking the Ashwind continent with her. Or all of Cradle.

As long as something of the family survived, she would consider it a victory.

Mercy had practiced keeping her mood up in the middle of hostile dream aura, but now that was ruined. She stood up, tossing the tea aside.

Lindon carefully put his cup down.

"It's just a memory," she told him. "No need to be neat."

"I know, but I don't want to leave a mess inside your Book."

Mercy laughed.

The fifth page closed at her will, melting away as the world around them shifted to the sixth page. Now they were in a six-sided room, and each of the six walls were mirrors.

Lindon glanced curiously around, although Mercy was a little embarrassed to show this to him. These were her own possible futures. At least, the ones her mother saw and wanted her to consider.

"Are these real predictions?" Lindon asked. "Or are they illusions?"

Mercy was about to reply when something occurred to her. "Can't Dross tell?"

Dross appeared in a blink, arms folded and wearing a grumpy expression. [This whole world is made up! I can't tell what's real in here, can I? None of it's real! That's like finding the driest part of the ocean!]

"Oh, no, I'm sorry!" Mercy put on a concerned face to soothe Dross' feelings, though she privately thought his indignation was funny. "It's just that I don't know either. I thought you would."

[Oh yes, of course, I see that. In that case, in my *professional* opinion, it's a mix of both. In broad strokes, these are possible versions of you, but they're presented and arranged to make you focus on certain options.]

Dross sounded so certain that Mercy almost forgot how, a moment before, he'd denied having any idea.

Lindon dipped his head apologetically. "He doesn't know."

Dross pressed a tendril to where his chest would be, affronted. [How do you know? I'm Mercy's Dross!]

Mercy herself hadn't realized that. She looked to Lindon, uncertain of how to respond.

"He doesn't really know," Lindon assured her.

"Well, this isn't the one I really wanted you to see. I'd like both of your opinions on the seventh page, but it's...there's a lot of my mother in it."

[I've seen it!] Dross insisted.

Lindon nodded. "I'm ready."

Mercy believed that, but she wasn't sure *she* was. She had to shift her mentality again, as she'd done when she controlled the Silent King Bow.

She wasn't working *against* her mother. Malice had lost her way a long time ago, and she was hurting the people she meant to protect.

Mercy had to do her mother's job.

She turned to the seventh page, and their surroundings dissolved another time. This time, she was face-to-face before an Empress.

The Netherworld Empress was clearly based on Akura Malice...or perhaps it was the other way around. She had dark hair, though it didn't flow like living shadow, and her eyes shone like cruel amethyst stars. She wore a crown of silver and elaborate ceremonial robes.

With a black bow of darkness in one hand and a spear at her side, she stood over a battlefield. It stretched for miles, and Remnants picked through thousands of strewn bodies. Aura of death and destruction choked the air, but the entire space was dominated by the will of the Empress.

Shadows rose from the bow like smoke, and with it in her hand, she gave off an impression of absolute control. As though she saw everything, had stood before this slaughtered army alone, and could stand before a hundred more.

It was hard for Mercy to meet her eyes.

She had forcibly opened the seventh page before, but it was meant to be mastered when she was a Herald. Mercy had a difficult time keeping her

thoughts clear here, and she was supposed to integrate the Empress into herself. This was a manifestation of *her* own power, after all. Or at least what was supposed to be her own power.

“Incredible,” Lindon said. “Dross, can you tell how she did this?”

[She built an image of her ideal self. She’s so clear about it, and she put so much of her will into it, that it resonates with a bunch of Icons. You can sense that kind of thing more clearly than I can, though.]

Lindon began muttering. “Bow Icon, Shadow Icon, Strength Icon...is that the Crown Icon? It must be.”

Mercy struggled upward, trying not to kneel before the Empress. “How can you tell?”

“It’s something of an instinct, but it’s like imagining how well something matches an ideal. She makes me think of the ultimate archer, ruler, shadow artist, and I’d say she was intended to represent ultimate power as well. The energy in the page is meant to take you to Herald, but I can see how this might guide you to Sage instead.”

[Or afterward,] Dross pointed out.

Mercy suspected that was the case. The Book of Eternal Night was meant to contain Malice’s ideal Path, and therefore it must end at Monarch.

She finally caught her breath and was proud of herself for adapting, until she looked up to meet the Empress’ eyes.

Those purple beacons of light were shining on Lindon.

The Empress was focused on him, and she had her bow half-drawn. She glared at Lindon with the oppressive weight of her willpower.

Lindon’s body, a projection of his mind and spirit, began to flicker. He gazed wide-eyed at his fading self. “If we can put this much will into Dreadgod madra, we might be able to make a puppet-construct that could fight Monarchs. Do you think we could leave spirits behind that can prevent people from advancing to Monarch?”

[That’s a great idea! Let’s stay and examine it instead of helping Mercy.]

“Apologies, Mercy. I was distracted.”

[No, I was serious, this is way more interesting.]

Mercy forced a smile. “No, of course! Whatever you need to do.”

Her spirits had died. Not because Lindon wasn’t helping her—the fact that he was in here at all, giving her insights into her own Book, was more than she could have asked—but because of how much help she still needed.

Lindon noticed. “Forgiveness, please. I shouldn’t have lost concentration.”

The Empress was still focused on him, but he was ignoring her.

“That’s not it, I...” She sighed. “My mother left memories about what it took for her Herald advancement, when she was becoming a Monarch. It was *terrifying*. Her Remnant almost killed her, and she almost killed it. The spiritual damage was so bad that she took months to recover, even *after* her advancement.”

“We can help you with that,” Lindon said confidently.

“That’s what I’m saying! *You* didn’t need this much help. I’ve had someone holding my hand since I was a girl.”

She paced and fretted, but continued speaking, baring her soul while standing in the depths of her spirit. “At first, it was easy. I was just better than everyone else. And then, when I’d proven myself, I had a Sage and a Herald teaching me. My mother’s a Monarch! And still, you and Yerin—”

“Eithan turned out to be the Reaper of Worlds,” Lindon pointed out.

Mercy hesitated. “That’s...that’s true, but...”

Lindon folded his arms and walked in front of Mercy, turning his back on the Empress. She looked furious and redoubled the force of her glare, but Lindon didn’t flinch. His body did start flickering more rapidly, though.

“I have received more help than anyone in the universe. Even most of my power is stolen. There’s nothing noble about doing everything yourself. You just have to do your best to honor the help you’ve gotten.”

Then he stepped out of the way and continued, “We want you to persuade your mother into ascending.”

Mercy stared at the Empress that represented her mother’s ideal self. Even with most of her attention taken up by Lindon, she was still intimidating.

“She won’t,” Mercy said certainly.

“Then I’ll have to kill her.”

That shook her, though it wasn’t anything she didn’t already know.

Lindon spoke earnestly. “Will you be happy if you didn’t try?”

She wouldn’t.

Her Archlord revelation had been ‘*To bring light.*’ To bring light, she had to at least try carrying a torch into the deepest darkness.

Mercy squared her shoulders and faced down the Empress. “I’ll need work.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Lindon said. “We won’t leave you by yourself until you’re—”

Lindon vanished.

Mercy and Dross both stared at the space where he had just stood.

[Was that a joke?] Dross asked. [You know I don’t understand your humor. Lindon?]

“Go check, Dross,” Mercy ordered.

Dross disappeared. Maybe Lindon *had* been joking. The timing was suspicious. But that hadn’t looked like he’d left voluntarily. The Empress certainly hadn’t shoved him out.

Either the Book had activated a self-defense mechanism they’d never seen before, or something had pulled Lindon away.

With Lindon gone, the full force of the Empress’ attention was on Mercy, but now it was an annoying distraction. Weight gathered on Mercy’s mind and spirit, trying to force her down, to make her submit.

Mercy glared back at the Empress. “Not now!”

For a moment, the pressure retreated.

Dross popped back in, flying in panicked circles. [He’s gone! *I’m* gone! The original me is missing, and I can’t feel him!]

“Dross, tell me where Lindon is.”

[He’s gone! That’s what I’m telling you! He disappeared!]

Mercy wasn’t ready to panic just yet. “Didn’t he just leave?”

Dross grabbed Mercy by the collar. [Mercy, he cannot get so far that I can’t sense him without going through a portal. And *he can’t do that*. Either the labyrinth brought him somewhere without him giving an order, or someone *took* him.]

There were only a handful of beings in the world capable of taking Lindon anywhere against his will, and none of them would find it easy.

If they took him, they were prepared for him.

Mercy shrugged off the Empress again and shed the Book, returning to herself in a dark room.

She stretched her own spiritual awareness out. Dross couldn’t sense as far as she could; at least, her version of Dross.

To her surprise, she found Lindon immediately.

That wasn’t good news.

Everyone on the planet could probably feel Lindon at that moment. He was surrounded by enough power to shake the fabric of the world.

“Contact Yerin and Ziel,” Mercy told Dross. “We’re leaving.”
[Where do I tell them we’re going?]
“We have to see my mother.”



Lindon hadn’t been torn through space so violently since the Uncrowned King tournament. He *slammed* back into reality, bracing himself before he fell to the sand. Then he took stock of his situation.

He was in the center of a vast wasteland. Besides himself and Dross, there were only three living things for miles.

The ground was rocky, the terrain mountainous. And the sky a crackling, chaotic swirl of gold and red.

Lindon’s spiritual sense burned with the power around him. He suspected everyone could sense this gathering, because no one had bothered to veil themselves.

A titanic egg made from the Bleeding Phoenix sat in the distance like a dormant building, cracks suggesting it was about to hatch. A red-winged human avatar of the Dreadgod had been formed from blood madra and stood nearby. She gave him a wave and a smile when he arrived.

The Wandering Titan loomed over them both. It glared down with its eyes above the clouds, and the weight of its attention caused the grains of sand to shimmy and dance in panicked circles.

Reigan Shen lowered the binding of Subject One, which had been worked into what appeared to be some kind of horn.

Lindon could feel its influence. That horn had brought him here. Combined with King’s Key madra and the wills of a Monarch and two Dreadgods, the horn had established enough authority over him to haul him through space. Despite his metaphysical weight.

Wary, Lindon wondered what *else* that Dreadgod weapon could do.

Reigan Shen was visibly struggling in this company, and while he shot Lindon a smug look, Lindon suspected he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Brother,” the Bleeding Phoenix said. “Let’s talk.”

Lindon’s right arm lurched, but he forced it back down. “Why?”

“I should have thought that would be obvious,” Shen said. “We went through great difficulty to bring you here. If you’re not willing to talk, we’ll

have to turn to a more violent course of action.”

Time slowed as Lindon consulted with Dross.

He should have been afraid, but the hunger was so strong he could no longer hold it back. The three enemies in front of him looked like delicious meals to a starving man.

A burden slid off Lindon’s back.

He wanted to bring the others along with him. He had never dreamed of becoming the strongest alone.

But helping them along meant being responsible for them, and he was sick of worry. Now, the enemies had cornered him and forced him to fight. He almost welcomed it.

The only one he had to worry about was himself.

[And me!] Dross pointed out. [But don’t worry, I have *plenty* of worry to go around.]

Fueled by hunger, Lindon’s rage returned. Reigan Shen had locked the others away in a pocket dimension. He had tried to kill them, more than once. And now he was right there.

Not a blink had passed since Shen stopped talking when Lindon lunged for him.

The Titan was the first to respond, summoning spires of stone from the ground beneath Lindon’s feet, but Lindon crashed through the cage without slowing down. He clawed for Shen with his right hand, and Shen’s automated defenses were too late. Constructs projected shields, but they only slowed Lindon.

White fingers had almost seized Shen around the throat, but blood madra lunged up like an attacking shark to take a bite out of Lindon’s middle.

He blasted the Bleeding Phoenix’s attack away with an Empty Palm that projected a blue-white handprint bigger than his body. But that distraction gave Shen enough space to fly away, spitting half-formed words that Lindon suspected were Rosegold curses.

“He’s not to be eaten,” the Phoenix’s human body admonished Lindon. A flock of Blood Shadows in the shapes of birds screeched from high overhead.

The Wandering Titan redoubled its pressure, pushing Lindon down, but Lindon matched his will to the Titan’s. The air between them shivered and trembled, even starting to crack.

“And why not?” Lindon asked politely.

“He can’t be touched,” the Phoenix said, as though it were obvious.

“Ah. The binding gives him authority over you.” Lindon’s right hand flexed at the thought of Consuming Subject One’s core binding.

He and Dross had thought the Horn might be used to control Dreadgods—it could already pull him through space—but they hadn’t been sure how much effort it would take Lindon to resist.

Lindon himself had part of his body made from the Slumbering Wraith, and he controlled the labyrinth. It would have been surprising for such a leash to work on him at all, but there was nothing like a field test.

“Kill him!” Shen ordered, but there was no authority behind the word. It seemed he wasn’t strong enough to perform a working on two Dreadgods at once.

So, rather than a leash, it seemed his ‘control’ was more like a gentle suggestion.

The Phoenix’s human form glanced at him, but she smiled at Lindon instead. “He’s irritating, I know. Why fight him when there’s plenty of prey for all of us?”

She raised a hand, and projected light in the image of five land masses, each with a different symbol. Iceflower, Rosegold, Everwood, Ninecloud, and Ashwind.

“You know how hard it is to keep the hunger under control,” she said. “Trust me, it’s worse when you have no sense of self. You just want to eat, and eat, and eat...but then what would be left? It would be far better to manage the herd.”

The continents all turned different colors. Iceflower turned yellow, Rosegold turned blue, Everwood turned white, Ninecloud turned red, and Ashwind turned black.

“How about we share?” the Phoenix suggested.

The Wandering Titan’s pressure lessened, and Lindon got the impression that it agreed. This was advantageous for the Titan, after all; it was the slowest of the Dreadgods and thus couldn’t cover as much territory.

The red-winged woman leaned toward Lindon, radiating honesty. “We’ll keep the human population stable. Just enough Monarchs to sustain us, but each restrained not to threaten us. The mortals can be bent to producing food for us, and in return, we can remain docile. Content. Rather than monsters, we can be guardians.”

[It's not that it *couldn't* work,] Dross allowed.

Lindon saw the logic. If they continued this way, the Silent King and the Slumbering Wraith would be reborn. Lindon would lose his bow but would replace Subject One permanently.

If the intelligent population of the world worked together, they could keep the Dreadgods fed with minimal loss of life. Excess dream energy could be funneled to the Silent King, livestock for the Bleeding Phoenix, unintelligent spirits and extra madra for the Weeping Dragon. Even aura could be funneled more efficiently to create rich natural treasures to feed the Wandering Titan.

The Phoenix moved the image of Ashwind forward, waving a hand to its black expanse. "You could have your home continent all to yourself. Rule it as you wish. If you can keep your hunger under control, you don't need to tax the people at all. Though you would need to feed a certain amount to stay conscious, of course."

Lindon could already see the systems and rules that would need to be put into place. "You've put quite a bit of thought into this. Although...I don't mean to be rude, but isn't 'offering tribute to our guardians' just a nicer way to say, 'feeding immortal monsters so they don't kill us all'?"

The Wandering Titan rumbled with anger, which was much more intimidating when it physically shook the ground. Cracks opened in the stone.

In contrast, the Bleeding Phoenix smiled wider. "How is that worse than what the Monarchs have already done? If we can expend less energy, just rest and stay conscious, I would say we'd make better rulers than they ever did."

"I don't disagree," Lindon said. "That's why I'm getting rid of you all." The Hollow Domain expanded around Lindon, a transparent blue-white dome of energy that covered him from every direction. "Forgiveness, but I was taught to be very thorough when cleaning."

Reigan Shen tried to say something, but he was blown backward by the pressure emanating from the Dreadgods. The Phoenix's laughter shook the skies and sounded more and more like the screech of a bird, while the Titan radiated crushing gravity.

"You should have learned to play the odds," Shen shouted over the chaos.

Lindon looked him in the eye. "You think I wasn't prepared for this?"

The reborn Wavedancer leaped from his soul space.

Its blade shone gold and white, like the surface of a thunderbolt. It was surrounded by a corona of blue sparks and heralded by a storm. Storm-clouds gathered overhead.

Four copies of Wavedancer spread out to the left, Forged from the Weeping Dragon's madra. Then four more, to the right.

Lindon joined his spirit to the Weeping Dragon sword formation, and the pressure coming from him was enough to hold his own against the two Dreadgods.

Then he released his *new* Dreadgod weapon.

A white halo exploded over his head, stretching to titanic proportions. Dross cackled madly as he felt his capacity expand. This was really Dross' weapon.

Lindon had left the bow behind, but he wanted to keep some of its abilities.

Not every construct needed a binding. Lindon had made this halo solely with the madra bound inside the Silent King's corpse.

The Crown of the Silent King didn't have a technique inside it. It was more of an amplifier for Dross and an extra pool of power. It helped him use his powers more offensively. Dross called it the psychic equivalent of a big stick.

With the Crown and the Sword Formation, Lindon and Dross stared down the two Dreadgods on equal footing.

Dross whispered to Lindon, [Ah, not equal. But enough to fight them a while.]

Lindon heard that information and discarded it. If he meant to keep up alone against a pair of Dreadgods and a Monarch, he had to fight to win.

Void-black began to warp the sky between the scarlet and the gold.

Then the Empty Ghost went to battle.

MERCY STRODE BACK INTO GHOSTWIND HALL, THE OTHERS FOLLOWING behind her. Now that time flowed normally, their entrance through the doorway was far smoother.

“I’ll need to be stronger if I want my mother to listen to me,” Mercy said. “I’ve absorbed enough of her power that I’m stronger than I should be, but I’m not at the peak. What do we have that can get me there?”

“That’s a question for Lindon,” Ziel said. He looked grim, as though he thought they were doomed without Lindon’s help.

Mercy’s worry for Lindon only made the situation more urgent. “Dross, what do you think?”

Her Dross spun out, taking exaggerated deep breaths. [Worried? I’m not worried. I’m perfectly calm.]

“No one asked if you were worried,” Orthos pointed out.

[Good. That’s because I’m calm.] Dross turned to regard Mercy. [Your body, spirit, and mind are perfectly suited for advancement. Not just from birth, but because of your Book. What you’ve absorbed from breaking down the pages will get you to Herald, if you can digest it. So what we need...] Dross drifted closer to Ziel. [...is *time*.]

Ziel stared into the distance, no doubt focused on his spiritual sense, which Mercy could feel prodding around his own spirit. “Lindon never figured out how to fully repair the Array. It’s patched up a little, but if I push it here, it won’t be much good in a fight.”

“Do it,” Mercy said. “A Herald is worth more to us now than another weapon.” Especially since the Herald in question was her; she needed to be

able to trade blows with her mother, just in case.

Though she hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Ziel shrugged. "All right. Should be easier to do now that we're connected to normal time. Dross, can you put her to sleep?"

[I can, yes. I can. That is something I can do.]

They all looked in his direction. Little Blue smacked him on the back.

[Ow! Stop! You're not six inches tall anymore!] He looked around and sighed. [Mercy won't be absorbing elixirs. She'll be actively breaking down and integrating her mother's power. She can *adapt* to it while sleeping, but for most of this time, she has to be conscious.]

Mercy stopped on her way to the shadow aura cycling room. Even with her newfound resolve, that thought made her shudder. "How long?"

[A month or two, minimum. Maximum? More like a year.] Dross raised an arm. [Don't worry! I'll be with you the whole time!]

"We could start with a week," Ziel said hesitantly, "but stopping and starting puts a greater burden on the Array. If we end up having to go a whole year, we'll need to do multiple months at a time."

Even a week alone in a script, nothing but Dross and her Book to keep her company, terrified Mercy. It was like locking herself in a coffin.

Could she do that? If she did, could she stay sane?

Something whispered to her that she could. A distant sound that she had begun hearing while she fought to save House Arelius. If this was what it took to help, she could carry this burden.

And besides, Lindon would have done it.

Little Blue ran up and threw her arms around Mercy. She shook her head rapidly, telling Mercy not to go.

That almost broke Mercy's determination, but she patted Little Blue on the back of the head and looked to Ziel.

"Start with a week."



Mercy sat cross-legged in the seventh page of the Book of Eternal Night. Her will and her spirit suffused the battlefield around her, and the world quaked.

She couldn't dismantle the space as cleanly as Lindon could. But she'd practiced plenty.

Chunks of will, flickering memories, and dense shadow madra flowed through her. Dross helped her sort the thoughts while the rest soaked into her spirit.

All the while, the spiritual pressure of the Netherworld Empress weighed her down. Now, she felt texture in the makeup of the technique that she had never recognized before. She'd even sampled some of the wishes that Malice had woven into the seventh page.

Her successor should understand the depth of shadow madra, so the spirit of the Netherworld Empress reflected the Shadow Icon.

Her successor should feel the burden of rule, so the Netherworld Empress wore the nobility of the Crown Icon.

Her successor should fight with power unparalleled, so the body of the Netherworld Empress carried the Strength Icon.

Her successor should see far and strike from a distance, so the Netherworld Empress had the sight of the Bow Icon.

Mercy understood these things deeper than she had before, immersed as she had been in her mother's thoughts. She knew Akura Malice at a level she had never imagined, to the point that it was almost easier to know what Malice would do than to predict herself.

And all that insight led her to one conclusion.

Mercy did not want the same things her mother did.

She opened her eyes and watched the Netherworld Empress as the seventh page dissolved around her. Stern, domineering purple eyes met hers.

"Thank you," Mercy whispered.

She thought the Empress nodded. Then the page broke down, and the remaining pieces of Malice's greatest technique flowed into her daughter.

For another time, Mercy couldn't tell how long, she sat in darkness. She strengthened her spirit with the power of Malice, aided by the elixirs she had prepared for this purpose. Her mind spun for a while with stolen thoughts, but Dross helped keep her head clear.

[Not so bad!] Dross said encouragingly. [I would never, ever wish to do that again, and if I could go back, I would stop you from doing it. But it could have been worse!]

The world around Mercy was dark with shadow aura, but she had a greater understanding of the shadow aspect than ever before. Within the darkness, she could see the outlines of her friends. Standing outside the circle of spinning silver runes, waiting for her.

Mercy took a moment to stand and adjust her condition before she strode out of the script.

A sweating Ziel gasped as he felt her leave, immediately cutting off the Grand Oath Array. He staggered out of the cycling room and collapsed, leaning against the outside of the cave. "I don't...know how...you did that..." he managed to say.

[I don't know how Ziel did it either,] Dross put in. [The Grand Oath Array is not in good shape.]

"How long was I in there?" Mercy asked softly.

[This last time was six months. Without me, you wouldn't have made it. If you weren't an Archlady, you wouldn't have made it.] Dross considered. [Actually, I didn't think you were going to make it at all.]

That was her third session inside the Grand Oath Array. Each longer than the last.

Mercy nodded along as Orthos and Little Blue looked to her in concern. For them, it had only been hours.

She knew what Malice would do in this scenario. At this point, acting like her mother was second nature. Dross' model of Malice was more accurate than ever, though of course it was based on Malice as she had been when she'd created the Book of Eternal Night.

Malice would nod to each of those who supported her and act like what she'd done was nothing. Of course she had exceeded expectations. She was Akura Malice.

Mercy considered how *she* felt.

Then she threw herself into Orthos' arms and started bawling. "That was *terrible!* I missed you all so *much!*"

Orthos shifted uncomfortably, but he still patted her once. Then a second time.

Touched by the effort, Mercy cried harder.

With one hand, she grabbed Little Blue and pulled her closer. The spirit was crying harder than Mercy herself was.

Out of the corner of blurry eyes, Mercy saw Ziel shuffle slowly away.

When the moment passed, Mercy sniffled and wiped away tears. “All —” She sniffed again. “All right. I guess it’s time to advance, huh?”

The instant she stopped crying, Orthos released her and took a step back. “Yes. Your spirit is strong. You are in perfect condition to advance to Herald.”

“Mmm!” Blue said. She nodded encouragement.

Mercy sighed. “With your help, I am as prepared as I can be. We’ll need to do it in the sparring room.”

It wasn’t far away, and she continued talking as they walked. “Ziel, would you reinforce the room again?”

He peered at the scripts as they entered. “We made this to handle Yerin.”

That thought drew Mercy’s spiritual perception to Yerin, who had already been in Ghostwind Hall before any of them. She had activated the eighth Path of Heaven, and was even now meditating in front of it, trying to squeeze out some last-minute insights.

Although it didn’t feel like Yerin was *in front* of the Path. It felt like she was right on top of it. Inside it. Swallowed up by a cavern of death.

Mercy wrenched her thoughts away from Yerin and back onto her own struggles. Yerin could handle herself.

“Strengthen the scripts once more, please,” Mercy said. “And when the time comes, I would appreciate any protective workings you could give me.”

[The strength of the Dragon Icon would help too,] Dross suggested to Orthos.

Orthos’ wrinkles deepened as he frowned. “Is it such a risk?”

[We saw the memory of Malice’s advancement to Herald. Well, Monarch, since she started as a Sage. Her fight with her Remnant...Oh, I could show you!]

“Don’t,” Mercy said. “Thousands died.”

Orthos folded his arms. “I have seen death.”

“My mother lost control. Her Remnant began torturing and killing innocent people just to hurt her.”

“Oh.” Orthos reached down for a pile of rocks that had been left strategically in the corner of the room and popped one into his mouth, chewing loudly.

Little Blue shuddered.

Shining green symbols wrapped the room, and Ziel glanced back at her. “That was her Remnant. You think yours will be the same?”

“Her power is mine now,” Mercy said softly.

Judiciously, Ziel added another ring of script.

There wasn’t much else to do. Once her spirit was prepared and at the peak of Archlord, Mercy sat in the center of yet another script-circle, this one etched on metal plates and much smaller. Only enough for her and the Remnant.

When it fought her, it would break through, but this should at least slow it down.

[I have a model for its fighting patterns, based on your mother’s Remnant,] Dross said. [And at least you have reliable backup!]

Mercy smiled over the other four as they gave her encouraging looks. Ziel’s looked the same as ever, but the rest were clearly trying to empower her with their gaze.

“**Be safe,**” Ziel commanded.

“**Be strong,**” Orthos ordered.

The strength of the Dragon Icon and the hardness of the Shield Icon covered Mercy, flowing through her. External help was only of limited use in this process—she either established authority over her Remnant and succeeded or she failed and injured herself. Still, they could bring out the best in her, and surely *some* help would be allowed.

Mercy assumed a cycling position and calmed her beating heart. For this, her mother’s attitude was helpful.

“I can handle this,” Mercy said.

Then she reached into her spirit and pushed out her Remnant.

This required nigh-perfect madra control, a spirit with a high level of existence, and a refined will. Fortunately, Mercy had been preparing for this. The Book of Eternal Night had trained her, and its materials empowered her.

Her Remnant flowed out until a dark, shadowy copy of herself sat on the opposite side of the circle. Their knees were almost touching.

Unlike Yerin’s Blood Shadow, this wasn’t a perfect copy of Mercy. It didn’t resemble her mother’s Remnant, either, except in color. Malice’s had been a razor-edged creature of spider limbs with three mouths.

This looked like Mercy made in shadow madra, but shorter. And softer, more rounded. It wasn’t entirely black, either, but highlighted with shades

of purple. Its large eyes and wide smile were bright to the point of being called violet, and its hair streamed behind it like drifting shadow.

The thought struck Mercy as wrong, but it was almost...cute.

“Hi!” Mercy’s Remnant said. “Are you me?”

Mercy edged backwards. This must be a trick. Her mother’s Remnant had used lies and illusions to deceive Malice, even tricking Malice into killing some of her own descendants.

“I am the original,” Mercy said firmly. “You are my Remnant, and you will serve my will.”

“Whatever I can do to help!”

The Remnant held out a hand with rounded, stubby fingers.

Mercy hesitated. Against her better judgment and her mother’s instincts, she said, “Are you...Are you sure?”

“You’re going to do something hard, aren’t you? It makes you sad.” The Remnant patted her chest. “I want to help you.”

It hadn’t been long since Mercy stopped crying, but tears welled up in her eyes again. “Thank you.”

The Remnant beamed. “Don’t give up, Mercy! We’ll do this together!”

Then the spirit flowed back into Mercy, weaving through her body. Archlord soulfire supported the process, and Mercy could feel herself changing.

But not very much.

In the end, the only obvious change she kept was her hair. It floated like a gas, or like it was drifting through water. The same sort of hair Uncle Fury had. And her mother.

When she was finished, Mercy stood up and brushed off her knees. “Well, uh...I made it!”

Orthos and Ziel watched her with flat looks.

Little Blue cheered.



Malice gazed into the shadows of Fate.

The future was always difficult to see, represented only in silhouettes of what was to come. Details could be gleaned by impression and

interpretation, but generally the circumstances surrounding the futures she glimpsed were a mystery.

Now, it was foggier than ever.

The Dreadgods loomed large in every direction she looked. Even when they died soon—which was a disturbingly likely possibility—they still ruled over the destiny of the world for years to come.

Lindon was the same. She could see his broad shadow looming in every direction. Even, perhaps especially, when he died.

So many complex factors and relationships made the right path difficult to spot. There was no outcome where she didn't lose *something*.

At least, no outcome she could see. Which was why she kept looking.

She felt the battle between Dreadgods play out, as she'd foreseen. There was virtually no future in which Lindon didn't go to war against the others. The trick now was to prevent him from winning.

Going to the battlefield herself was out of the question. He'd already forced Northstrider to advance. Malice did not participate in fights she couldn't win.

But she could see her daughter in her immediate future. This wasn't a towering statue of darkness, like many of the more definite or significant futures, but rather a flickering shadow. An event that was likely to happen, but could have many outcomes.

Malice had to push toward the one she wanted.

She broke herself out of the trance and called her granddaughter's name. "Charity. Mercy is on her way here. Split her off from her friends and send her here."

The Sage of the Silver Heart did not respond directly, but Malice sensed her acceptance. And her reluctance.

Malice would have to reassure Charity soon. For a woman who had awakened the Heart Icon, Charity's heart was too easily swayed. But that was likely to cause only minor problems in the immediate future, and Malice could handle Charity before she became a more serious obstacle in years to come.

She'd prefer to nail down her granddaughter's loyalty immediately, but that was the problem with living in apocalyptic times. The world-ending crises had to be solved first.

Malice moved through shadow to the audience chamber of this dark castle and arranged herself on her throne. She adopted a stern attitude and

filled the space with the pressure of her will. The presence of an empress.

She was not pleased with her daughter, and Mercy should feel that as soon as she arrived.

That was soon enough. Darkness passed over, and Mercy came stumbling out of the shadow. She glanced around for a moment as she realized she was alone with her mother.

Mercy *didn't* fall to her knees immediately, as Malice had expected. She focused more sharply on her daughter.

This time, Mercy did fall to one knee and bow her head. "Mother. Will you speak to me for a moment?"

Malice let her displeasure into her voice. "The first words out of your mouth should have been to beg for my forgiveness."

"Will you help us defeat the Dreadgods?"

Mercy lifted her head and gave an earnest plea.

For a moment, Malice was stunned. That was more spine than she had expected out of her compassionate daughter.

But that resolve was aimed in the wrong direction. Malice gave a scornful laugh. "Of course not! Don't you see how much suffering the world has endured since the tournament? I wasn't the one who made it that way! That was your friends."

Mercy nodded. "It has been bad. But we can make it better!"

"Can you even comprehend how many people have lost their lives? The world was better *before* all this chaos."

"Better for who?"

Malice was tired of all this back-and-forth. In fact, her anger burned hotter than she expected.

With Strings of Shadow, she grabbed her daughter and slammed her to the floor. "Why do you think you understand *anything*? You want me to bow to an ignorant child because he has stolen the power of the Dreadgods? I was ruling the world before his grandfather was born!"

Malice had begun raising her voice, but so what? It felt good to scream, and she deserved it. "You think I wanted to leave the Dreadgods around? You think I like risking my life to push them away whenever they act up, for the sake of Golds who don't even know who I am? I *hate* them! But this is the world, Mercy! *Wake up!*"

The world rippled with the force of that last command. It wasn't quite a Sage working, but Malice's will was strong enough that it almost became

one. Mercy *needed* to see the truth.

A hand covered in amethyst armor tore its way out of the Strings of Shadow. Mercy radiated the full force of a Herald...and a little more. Her hair drifted up as wisps of living shadow, which Malice knew from experience was very difficult to veil.

Taken aback, Malice scanned her daughter.

"Herald," she said in surprise. "You concealed it well. There are a few instabilities, but we can get those fixed." Then she sighed and withdrew the pressure of her willpower. "Well. I admit I went too far, but I think you get the point. Even though you advanced too fast, congratulations are still in order."

Bloodline armor faded to essence around Mercy's body, and she gave Malice a sad look.

Irritation returned in full force. That looked like *pity* in Mercy's eyes.

"You've been alone too long, Mother," Mercy said sadly. "You needed someone to stand up to you."

That struck uncomfortably close to home as Malice remembered Fury.

Which, of course, only made her angrier. "You stood up to me, didn't you? Where did that get you? I should have taught you a more lasting lesson."

"I wish I had done it sooner. I ran away because I was afraid of you, but I never realized how much *you* needed me. Let me tell you what everyone else is afraid to say." Mercy took a deep breath, and Malice prepared to slap her into the next room depending on what words came out of her mouth.

"Mother, you sound *evil*."

Malice blinked.

"Are you listening to yourself?" Mercy went on. "'I should have taught you a more lasting lesson,' 'You should have begged for my forgiveness,' talking about how no one should stand up to you...Mother, I feel like you're going to toss me into an active volcano. I'm afraid the next words out of your mouth are going to be 'Guards, seize her!'"

Mercy was the picture of courage, but there was a distant twinkle in her eye.

Suddenly, Malice felt absurd for holding onto her anger. It slid aside, and she began to laugh. As though she'd been waiting for that moment, Mercy joined her.

They laughed together for a long minute, and Malice enjoyed the sensation. She even wiped a single tear from her eye. "I may have gotten carried away," she admitted. "You speak as a queen for too long and it tends to linger on the tongue."

Mercy was beaming. "You see? We can still talk about things! I know a lot has happened recently, but we can get through it together." Mercy hurried up to Malice's throne, and Malice stepped down to meet her.

"Ascend, Mother," Mercy urged her. She took Malice's hands. "We'll go together! Take the whole family along!"

Malice was still annoyed by the topic, so she tried to tug one hand away, but her daughter held on. Malice raised an eyebrow. "Look how far you've come, holding on to me. But I still intend to stay here. I won't be chased out of my kingdom by anyone."

"We don't want to fight you, Mother. Even Lindon doesn't. He wanted me to come here and resolve things peacefully."

Of course he did. He might be able to crush her with raw strength, but that didn't mean she couldn't do some damage first. Power only became leverage when you knew how to use it.

Malice sighed. "I know what you think of me, and I know I may tend to be spiteful and a touch...tyrannical. But that doesn't mean I'm *wrong*. Let me return this to you, Mercy: revolution always costs blood. Do you know how many people will die in this change of the world? Do you know how many people have *already* died?"

Mercy's face clouded, so Malice pressed her advantage. "Tell your friends to ascend instead. You can even go with them, if you insist on leaving me. I know Lindon is stuck here at the moment, but we can certainly figure out ways around that."

Malice didn't *know* any ways around that restriction, but a solution probably existed. It must be easier than reaching the level of Monarchs in less than a decade, which Lindon had already done.

"I can't do that, Mother," Mercy said sadly. "I can't leave when I could have helped."

Malice looked deep into her eyes. "Whatever you come to think of me, however you remember me, know that I truly believe this: the world is best as it is. And I will sacrifice anything to keep it that way."

A burst of Silver Heart madra and an answering flare of red from Yerin told Malice that her contingency plan had begun.

Mercy stayed uncharacteristically calm. “What did you do?”

“I can’t let you go to Lindon,” Malice said. She turned her hands around to grab Mercy’s. “Most of them, I will take prisoner.”

Slowly, Malice saw steel fill up her daughter. Under other circumstances, she would feel proud of Mercy.

“Yerin won’t let you capture her,” Mercy said.

“That’s right.” Malice didn’t shy away from the truth. “These are the decisions you have to make, to rule as a Monarch. Hate me and run from me if you wish, but you’ll learn.”

Other than Mercy, the others had been separated into cells designed for them. That wouldn’t be enough to hold Yerin—it was hard enough to capture an average Herald, much less one with her unique advantages—but Charity’s techniques were suited to the role of jailer.

Silver Heart madra would put Yerin to sleep. She had some mental enhancements, but Charity could overcome them with the aid of the script formation in the cell. Then Charity would kill her.

Malice had seen it play out in Fate already. When she killed Yerin, Lindon would come for revenge. She needed hostages for that situation.

It was a delicate balance, and not ideal, but Malice was certain it was her best plan.

Barring some of the unpredictable variables.

Tears glistened in Mercy’s eyes, and despite everything, Malice did feel some sympathy for her daughter. The girl was still very young.

“That was your last chance, Mother,” Mercy whispered. “I wish you’d taken it.”

“What?”

The future warped around Malice.

She found herself once again in the World of Night, looking into the future. What had once been an insignificant, flickering shadow now loomed large. An obstacle standing in her way.

An owl.

While Malice consulted the future, she distantly felt her hands wrenched apart by Mercy’s Herald strength. The World of Night fell away, leaving Malice staring into her daughter’s sad eyes.

“We’re ready, Aunt Charity,” Mercy whispered.

Sword-and-blood madra swelled, and one wall of Malice’s castle exploded inward. Yerin strode in, sword in her hand glowing with her

Enforcer technique. Her eyes, so much like Fury's, blazed red.

The dragon-turtle and the Sylvan Riverseed, both in human form, walked beside her. They would be a hazard. They were contract-bound to Lindon, so he would know anything she did to them.

The former leader of the Dawnwing Sect was last, bearing a silver shield in one hand and a massive hammer in the other.

Finally, Charity. Her granddaughter.

Charity's eyes were even colder than usual, her very will ice.

"You concealed this from me?" Malice asked softly. "How long ago did you start?"

"I tried not to. I wanted to follow you, as I always have. But how can the family follow a Matriarch who betrays her own children?"

Malice didn't have a mind-spirit, but she had advantages of her own. The world around her slowed to a crawl.

Charity's silver sickle was in her right hand, buzzing with deadly intention. Power ran through Yerin's sword.

Three Sages. Three Heralds.

Their numbers were not as much of an advantage against Malice as they assumed.

Rage bubbled up in her heart, dark and ugly, and she returned her perception to normal time. "**Kneel,**" Malice ordered.

And she released her own Netherworld Empress.

The image of the Empress shattered the ceiling above her as it loomed like her shadow. The technique enhanced her willpower, pushing it down on each of them.

Strong they may have been, but they were *her* subjects. In *her* domain. And she was still a Monarch.

One by one, they crumpled under her authority.

Yerin was the only one who remained on her feet, though she bit her lip and cycled her madra to its limit to remain so. Nonetheless, it would cost her in concentration to carry the weight of Malice's will.

Still holding her daughter's arm in an iron grip, Malice glared over the others. "When I am finished with you, no one will remember you ever existed at all."

First, she had to disable her daughter. She drove a solidified sword of shadow into Mercy's chest.

Bloodline armor shattered as it formed, though it did block Malice's first attack. Before she could strike again, she saw an incoming shadow from the future. Yerin, leaping for her.

Malice weaved out of the way and struck at Mercy again.

This time, Mercy caught the blade in one gauntlet. With a burst of strength worthy of her Herald advancement, she broke Malice's grip.

Malice could wrestle for a hold again, but she was tired of fighting like a mortal.

Shadow burst from her and tore her own floating castle apart. It was time to remind the entire world who Akura Malice was.

If it cost her some rebellious children, that was a cheap price to pay.

REIGAN SHEN KEPT PACE AS LINDON FOUGHT OFF NOT ONE, BUT TWO Dreadgods.

Empty Palms covered the sky and warped the aura of an entire region. Dragon's breath burned molten holes through the hearts of mountains. Clouds of Blackflame aura produced dark tornadoes of flame that scorched the Wandering Titan and affected the weather for miles.

That didn't even take into account those Dreadgod weapons, for which Reigan burned with greed. The shining white halo's effects were largely unseen, though any Monarch could sense the trades of dream aura that represented a mental battle, but the swords made from the Weeping Dragon were as dramatic as anything else.

Storm-clouds followed overhead, crackling with lightning. Bloodspawn that spread from the Phoenix wrestled against a rain of animated draconic bolts, and thick lightning of concentrated aura hammered the Titan. The swords themselves flashed against the Dreadgods, turning attacks with thundering blows that cracked space.

Lindon hadn't even used the Weeping Dragon's breath, though Reigan could sense the binding that would make that possible. He was holding that tactic in reserve, waiting for the opportune moment. Like the Dragon itself had done.

All of Reigan Shen's calculations and predictive artifacts suggested that Lindon would lose. It would be a difficult battle, but he couldn't stand up to the combined might of the Dreadgods.

But no one knew better than Reigan Shen how the future could shift, and there were too many factors altering Fate to be certain of anything. When he observed with his own eyes, Lindon's victory was a disturbing possibility.

He wasn't pressuring the other Dreadgods, of course, but he was matching them evenly. A horrifying feat.

Reigan himself had intended to join the fight, but he had the sharp and uncomfortable premonition that Lindon was waiting for that.

Not only was there little room to intervene without risking a hit, Reigan felt something suspicious about the way Lindon fought.

Here and there, Lindon's spiritual sense flickered closer to Reigan. His eyes would pass that direction for just a moment as he flew to dodge a Dreadgod's attack.

Reigan Shen knew he was under observation.

Centuries of instinct warned him not to make a move. That could have been a trick. Perhaps the Silent King's Crown allowed Lindon to intimidate Monarchs without being detected, but Reigan didn't think so. This was likely just his gut warning him that if he intervened in the battle, Lindon would find a way to crush him between Dreadgods.

Unfortunately, his gut was also warning him of something worse.

The Dreadgods couldn't travel through space very far, not without a great expenditure of resources or tools like the Wraith Horn, but they had grown faster as they grew in intelligence and power. In a fight like this one, even the Wandering Titan was an earth-shaking blur.

Or, in this case, an ocean-churning blur.

Their battle covered miles every second, as Lindon and the Bleeding Phoenix lit up the clouds with their techniques while the Wandering Titan dashed along and provided heavy hits from below. They were now far from the mainland of the Iceflower continent and still moving quickly.

Toward Rosegold.

Reigan's home.

The distance between continents was not negligible, even taking into account direct spatial transportation, but Rosegold and Iceflower were closer than most. Once, they had been linked.

Crossing the ocean between them was still a significant journey, but Lindon and the Dreadgods could cover a lot of ground. And it wasn't unusual for Dreadgod battles to last for days.

Before tomorrow, they would hit the coast of Rosegold. At that point, every punch they traded would be a loss for Reigan Shen.

Reigan triggered a messenger construct to contact one of his few remaining allies. “Miara. The Ghost is dragging the Phoenix and the Titan closer to Rosegold. Help me redirect them north.”

The construct flickered away, through space, though it would be at least a few minutes before Sha Miara could respond. They were far from Ninecloud City.

While this stretch of ocean was uninhabited, thanks to vicious water-spirits that didn’t seem quite so vicious in light of the battle tearing apart their territory, the seas to the north and south had cities and nations of their own.

But the one to the south owed its allegiance to Reigan Shen, while the one to the north did not.

If it came to a choice between giving up his own people and driving the Dreadgods north...well, he wasn’t responsible for them. It was the best he could manage.

In the meantime, maybe he could drive this fight by himself.

He clutched the Wraith Horn in one hand and contacted the Bleeding Phoenix. She seemed more amenable to negotiation than the blank wall of stone that was the Wandering Titan.

“We can’t head east or south! That’s my territory. We need to take the battle north.”

It was a few seconds of sky-rattling battle before a bubble of blood madra appeared next to his ear. It warped into a mouth, which whispered: “Why should we waste our energy changing course? We’re grinding our little brother down.”

“That’s my territory.”

“Until the Weeping Dragon returns. Then, it will be his. Why would he notice a missing country or two?”

The bubble popped, splattering blood madra all over Reigan Shen’s face.

He wiped it away, letting the madra burn to essence, and that insult cracked his fear just a little further.

Lindon had already humiliated him once. He was looking down on Monarchs, and had snatched prey from Reigan’s mouth. The entire world

had seen how Reigan Shen did all the work for a human boy to reap the benefits.

Then, the world had *literally* watched as Tiberian's Underlord advisor had revealed himself to be a world-destroying threat.

Reigan's fear had far outweighed his anger, but that didn't mean that he had forgotten his pride. Eithan had been laughing at him behind his back for years. Lindon had learned from his master. Now, even the Dreadgods—the rampaging beasts that Reigan had corralled like rabid dogs for so many years—were spitting in his face.

Reigan Shen had been made the butt of the joke too many times.

He was not a housecat. He was a lion.

A king.

The time had come to act like it.



[Wow, who pulled his tail? There's a change in Reigan Shen, so watch out.]
Dross highlighted the Monarch in Lindon's vision.

Lindon was Consuming the energy from a meteor the Titan had condensed from earth aura and hurled at him. At the same time, he was striking against the Titan's tail with flying swords, hitting its building-sized punch with his own human-sized one, keeping the Phoenix at bay with sweeps of dragon's breath, and wrestling for aura control over a ten-mile area. All while flying and switching between cores.

Reigan Shen was not a welcome addition. There was a limit to how much Lindon could juggle.

Still, as threats went, Shen was not at the top of Lindon's list.

Dross' alarm flared as the Monarch opened a gate to the spear he'd used to attack Sacred Valley before. Lindon had thought that weapon had been destroyed by Ozmanthus, but obviously he'd been wrong.

"Close!" Lindon ordered the King's Key portal.

Reigan's will only kept the gate wobbling for a second or two before it was crushed beneath Lindon's working.

That would slow him down for a while, but Lindon paid a price for it.

One of the Phoenix's techniques—a hammer-blow of blood and force madra—slammed into Lindon from above. It launched him into the sea like

a falling star, and water from the impact blasted into the clouds.

Before he could collect himself, the Titan was stomping a foot down on him.

[Soul Cloak,] Dross suggested, and Lindon agreed.

Blue-white madra flared around him, seeming almost solid now. He caught the Titan's foot in both hands.

Which was a bit like saying he'd stopped a collapsing roof with a toothpick. Nonetheless, he did it. The air twisted around him as he flew up, shoving the Titan's foot above him.

The Wandering Titan stumbled and caught its balance with its tail.

Lindon had been trying to shove the Dreadgod onto its back, but the Phoenix sent a flurry of needles his way. Each needle was bigger than his arm and contained enough power to destroy a fortress, and the Bleeding Phoenix was sending him ten thousand.

He had to drop the Titan and expand the Hollow Domain to deal with those. Even then, the needles weren't wiped out until he finished them with an Empty Palm that blotted out the sun.

Lindon remembered slamming the Empty Palm into an Iron's stomach to win a duel.

It had failed him against Li Markuth, the so-called Gold that had come from beyond the world.

It was his first, oldest technique.

Now he was using it against Dreadgods.

[Look how far you've come,] Dross said wistfully. [Now, this *is* going to be the end of the line, unless someone else has something up their sleeves.]

Lindon was fighting with everything on the line. He was stretching his techniques beyond their limits and had made every weapon he could. This was as far as he could go.

And, if things continued this way, he would eventually lose.

That was inevitable.

No matter how vast his reserves, no matter how much he replenished himself in the middle of the fight with his right arm, his opponents could do the same.

Lindon's only chance of survival was to buy enough time for the others to come through. But his real goal was to take one of the Dreadgods down.

If he did that, he could call it a victory whether he survived or not.

[You know I hate to pester you, but...] Purple light drew Lindon's attention to Reigan Shen again.

This time, the Monarch was coming in with a two-handed sword that ran with blood. He was doing something with the Phoenix's madra, perhaps feeding it to the blade to strengthen it, but Lindon was trying to dodge a technique that bent Fate. He had bigger enemies.

A slash came in from Reigan Shen, a sweep of madra that erupted at the same time as an attack from the Wandering Titan, and Lindon had to waste extra madra and burn some of his limited soulfire to deal with both.

Lindon's patience slipped.

Dross, find me an opening.

[Here. But you know, this is going to shave an hour or two off our maximum time.]

Lindon didn't care. Getting rid of Reigan Shen was another goal he could accomplish. That would improve the world, even if Lindon wasn't around to see it.

Dross helped Lindon identify the pinpoint timing. He deflected a falling sword of the Phoenix at just the right moment to cause it to slam into the whipping tail of the Titan.

The two attacks clashed, sending black cracks spidering through space and churning the ocean beneath, which created a split-second pause in the battle.

Lindon shot toward Reigan Shen.

The Monarch defended with his two-handed sword of blood, but Lindon destroyed the artifact with one Empty Palm from his left hand. His right hand shot for Shen.

Reigan Shen's defensive constructs activated and forced Lindon back for a moment, but Lindon had already used up the time he'd allotted for himself. He switched to his Blackflame core, activated the Burning Cloak, and slammed a fist down on Shen's skull.

Bone cracked.

Reigan Shen *blasted* down through the water and into the stone beneath, but Lindon wasn't finished. He followed up with a two-handed blast of Blackflame, thicker than his torso, with all the soulfire and authority he could cram into it.

That should put even a Monarch out of the fight.

In case it didn't, Lindon used Wavedancer to deflect a Striker technique from the Wandering Titan. A shining golden razor of earth madra hit the flying sword and was redirected.

Right toward Reigan Shen.

Lindon dashed back into the battle, shoving the Dreadgods east once again. He knew the Rosegold continent was coming up, but he was boxed in. There were populations north and south of here, and the longest stretch of uninhabited ground was between east and west. Once he reached the coast of Rosegold, he'd try to turn the fight around.

Though there was only so much he could do.

He was back into the fight, shoving a river of blood-red flame into the sky using the Hollow Domain, when he sensed a change in the world.

[Uh-oh. Hey, I know you don't want me to keep drawing your attention to Reigan Shen, but I still think you ought to look behind you.]

Lindon was struggling with the weight of an ocean of burning blood, but he still glanced back.

Reigan Shen had returned to his original form.

A white-and-gold lion leaped out of the ocean, and a roaring image in the sky met him. The Lion Icon.

In his natural body, Shen was regal and imposing. A vast white-gold mane that shimmered in the sunlight, a pale pelt with bright highlights. He radiated majesty and strength.

The effect was only heightened by his wounds. One of his eyes and the entire side of his face was blackened and burned away, one of his legs had been half-crushed, and scorch marks marred his hide.

Sacred beasts tended to take human bodies because the form resonated with madra more easily, allowing more complex control of techniques. For this, they sacrificed power.

It may have been the temporary support of his Icon, but Reigan Shen at the moment felt like a Dreadgod himself. He had given up his weapons, weakened his Path.

In return, he gained strength.

He kicked off of nothing and vanished, leaping through space.

Lindon's spiritual sense screamed a warning and he met Reigan Shen's pounce with a Soul Cloak-powered punch.

Of course, at the same time, he had to hold off the Titan with nine flying swords and burn a cloud of red poison from the Phoenix.

Dross was just as busy, on an invisible front. The white halo over Lindon's head flared as Dross sent mental attacks against all three, a flood of dream aura at a scale that temporarily matched the Silent King itself.

With Dross distracted, Lindon didn't know exactly how much time he had left. But he knew he was burning through it too fast.

If he had to, he would burn himself down to nothing.

The Void Icon approved.



Yerin never thought she had underestimated the Monarchs. They were the kings and queens of the world, able to go toe-to-toe with the Dreadgods under the right circumstances.

But maybe she had underestimated Malice.

A dozen blades of shadow the size of towers fell from the sky. They flew over the forests at the eastern end of the Ashwind continent, where the dragons had once ruled. Yerin slashed at one of the Forged swords herself, intending to break the one in her way and continue on to Malice.

It wasn't easy. Yerin had to pour her whole effort into her attack, and only managed to break through the shadow sword with a full-powered technique. Orthos, Little Blue, and Mercy struggled to defeat a sword each, though Ziel and Charity seemed all right.

Even a technique with one-twelfth of Malice's will was enough to match any one of them. And the Monarch was drawing back the string of her bow.

To relieve pressure, Yerin used the Endless Sword.

The blades of shadow echoed with sword aura and cracked, helping the others to break them, but Malice's next attack was focused with deadly intent.

On Little Blue.

An arrow tore through space, but Yerin appeared before it in a blink of white light. She deflected the first, but the second was right behind it. Mercy took care of that one, stopping it with her armor. Orthos burned another out of the air, and Ziel blocked two. The last, Blue had to handle herself.

All the arrows came at virtually the same time.

While they were still reeling, an armored Malice appeared next to Orthos. She was human-sized, and he punched at her with the Burning Cloak active, but she absorbed the blow easily and hit him in the chin, ribs, and gut in quick succession.

The air exploded with the force and Orthos blasted into the distance.

Striker techniques from Mercy and Yerin ripped through the space Malice had just occupied, but she was already gone.

Once again, she was on top of Little Blue. She brought her bow down on Blue in a two-handed strike. Blue blocked it with crossed arms, but Malice caught her before she could fly into the earth and stabbed another blade of shadow into Little Blue's gut.

Blue defended herself with a brief eruption of the Hollow Domain, then Ziel and Mercy forced Malice away, but Yerin could see what was happening.

So could Dross.

[She's identified the weak link,] Dross observed. [Not that I'm calling Little Blue *weak*, of course. Just weaker than, uh, she needs to be for this fight.]

Yerin saw that herself. Orthos and Blue might be at the same level, but Orthos had centuries more experience. No matter how many memories Little Blue had absorbed from other spirits, she wasn't living up to her potential yet.

Well, it was Blue's role to learn from this fight. If she survived, she would grow.

It was Yerin's role to make sure they all survived.

Yerin had held herself back to take the stance she needed for the Reaper's Sword. Now, the Phoenix Song sang through her.

She had no trouble building killer intent for this attack. Malice was an easy target to hate.

The world flashed black and white as Yerin swung her sword.

Malice spun around so fast that Yerin didn't see it, and there was an arrow already nocked to her bow. The Netherworld Empress flashed behind her, and the image of a bow appeared in the sky. The Bow Icon.

Malice's arrow met the slash of power from Yerin's sword. Both were swallowed up.

[That's not encouraging. But cheer up! If you were a Monarch, your hit would be better. Maybe. That one was pretty good.]

While Yerin switched back to ordinary techniques to keep Malice under control, Malice had already moved on to another target.

Even with the numbers advantage, Yerin didn't see how they could win easily. Malice was an unfair opponent.

With her armor, she waded through black dragon's breath. She had the speed to avoid Mercy's arrows. Her Striker techniques crushed Ziel's shields, and she canceled out Charity's workings before they formed.

She was as impossible to pin down as a shadow, but tough as a diamond and with all the strength of a falling star.

Still, this much they could keep up with.

Until Malice opened her void space and began pulling out constructs.

A whirling ball of shadowy blades unfolded, pursuing Orthos of its own accord. Yerin couldn't tell if it was made all of madra or if there was a physical component, though she could feel the sword aura, but she didn't have time to save Orthos because there was a construct on her too.

Hers was a phantom of shadow and dreams, a ghost made from Remnants of at least Archlord, but it tore at her mind and whispered lies. She slashed at it with a Striker technique, but the Rippling Sword passed right through it.

The blood component of her madra was better at tearing flesh, but that made it slightly worse at everything else. Normally, that didn't come up. But now she needed something that was better to use against spirits. Like pure madra. Or shadow.

The phantom-puppet erupted in tendrils of shadow that reminded her of Dross, and she had to dodge back to avoid them. Dross showed her what would happen if they touched her; they carried something like a spiritual poison.

Yerin's frustration grew. She could break this thing, but it was taking far too long.

In the meantime, Malice had thrown out constructs to deal with the others. Charity fled from a plodding dark juggernaut, Ziel was under attack from all directions from a swarm of obsidian butterflies, and Mercy faced down something that resembled a shadow of herself.

Malice focused her personal attack on Little Blue.

[I can't simulate all this!] Dross cried. [I've never seen these constructs before! I don't know what they're made of! She's a famous Soulsmith, but there are *no* records of her fighting like Reigan Shen!]

But she could.

Yerin couldn't prove it, but she was stone-certain that Malice had prepared these countermeasures against each of them specifically. It was what Lindon would have done.

And it fit what they knew of Malice to think that she might have plots in place against everyone, even those she thought to be her allies. Or her children.

Little Blue was taking a beating. She was hit in the gut, kicked in the side of the head, sent flying and hauled back. Still, she hung in there. An Empty Palm dissolved an arrow, and she caught more and more blows with the Soul Cloak.

Not that she would last long.

Malice had everything. She had the defenses of an earth artist, the subtlety of a shadow artist, the strength of a sword artist, the flexibility of a Soulsmith, and the resources of a woman who had ruled most of a continent for hundreds of years.

So Yerin needed *more*.

The Phoenix Song sang through her, and she danced to its tune. Red-and-silver madra blazed in her sword.

She needed *more* speed. *More* power. She needed to react faster. Better. She had to think more moves ahead.

Dross showed her how the phantom would move, and Yerin tore it apart. Her Goldsigns extended, each with a Flowing Sword Enforcer technique.

The first slash didn't destroy the ghostly construct, so she went with another. Then another and another and another.

Yerin tore it to shreds, then activated the Moonlight Bridge.

She appeared in Malice's path and pushed her Steelborn Iron body to its limits.

The edge of her sword met an ice-blue bow, and both of them were blown backwards in the air.

More, Yerin thought.

[INFORMATION REQUESTED,] Dross began.

And Yerin heard those words echoed by four other identical voices.



[INFORMATION REQUESTED: COMBAT SOLUTION AGAINST AKURA MALICE,] five Drosses say at once.

[BEGINNING REPORT...]

Everything in Yerin's sight freezes like a winter pond. Everything but four balls of purple...and one red.

The Drosses spin around the otherwise-still scenery, five eyes gazing at the situation from every angle.

[You're going to like this,] one Dross says happily. [I have great confidence that I can help you survive the next ten seconds.]

The future plays out before Yerin's eyes. Malice launches an arrow at Mercy, which is weakened by a shield from Ziel and breaks on Mercy's bloodline armor. Little Blue uses a Hollow Domain to disrupt one of Malice's constructs enough for Orthos to blast it apart with dragon's breath, and all the while Yerin herself keeps up a barrage of techniques on the Monarch.

[That's how long we expect Malice to continue fighting like this before she pulls out another trick,] another Dross says.

Ziel's voice echoes in Yerin's mind. *Do we know what her other tricks are?*

If Yerin could move her body, she would jump. Before hearing Ziel, she hadn't realized the minds of the others were stuck in here with her.

The red Dross, hovering by Yerin, shrugs. [I can make some educated guesses.]

Malice opens a pitch-black void space, from which more constructs of shadow and death boil out. They unfold into incomprehensible shapes, moving to support the other constructs.

The image freezes again and reverses. This time, instead of opening her void key, Malice speaks a command that echoes with greater authority than she'd ever shown before. All their techniques disperse, just for an instant, but the enemy constructs take that opening to kill them.

The world reverses again, and this time Malice pulls an even more powerful bow from her void key. This one shines bright purple and has a

string of darkness.

Mercy gasps. *I've never seen that bow before!*

[I made it up,] Dross says proudly. [Do you like it? I consider it likely that she has a backup weapon, and it may be stronger than the one she's using.]

So she has more weapons than we thought, Yerin says. If she had hands, she'd tick points off on her fingers. *She might have more techniques than we knew. And we don't know her weaknesses.*

The red Dross gives her a look of wide-eyed surprise. [Oh, of course we do. She's outnumbered.]

Another Dross moves over to Malice and spreads his tendrils wide. [We have a good understanding of her personality. Now that she's been betrayed by Charity, she won't call in anyone else. She'll take care of this herself. We can wear her down.]

Time plays again. Yerin sees herself engaging the Monarch alongside the others. Each of them ward off the constructs with most of their attention, every now and then throwing a technique against Malice.

It all hinges on Yerin.

The Yerin in Dross' projection engages the Monarch with sharper movements than Yerin had ever shown in reality. She moves like she can see the future.

Yerin tries to shake her head. *You rely on me to fight like that, and you're hanging all our lives on a bad bet. I can't keep that up for more than a breath and a half.*

She'd fought Malice before, and that was with Lindon taking up most of the Monarch's attention. Yerin can't win while protecting the others.

All five Drosses focus their eyes on her.

One points at the image of her matching a Monarch blow-for-blow.

[If you want to win, all you have to do is fight better than you ever have.]

[We could retreat,] another Dross suggests. [Leaving Malice alone. Free to plot against us. Chase us down.]

We have to stop her here, Orthos says gravely.

Mercy says nothing, and in her silence, Yerin hears agreement.

You'll have to leave your lives to me, Yerin says to them all. *Can't say you're not throwing them away. You have a problem with that, say so now.*

No one else says anything.

Yerin almost votes against herself.

The red Dross claps his tendrils together. [That's settled. Now, let's dig through those memories and see how much of a sword artist we can make you in the next five seconds.]



To travel the path to victory that Dross saw, Yerin's timing would have to be perfect.

She pushed forward.

The Endless Sword formed a cage around Malice. The Monarch crashed through it, as expected, but any impact on her armor would affect her spiritual stability. Yerin followed up with a Rippling Sword that sliced apart the clouds above as Malice dodged, and then Yerin was in range to fight hand-to-hand again.

Yerin's slashes were a blur even to her own eyes, cutting the air, but Malice could meet every one of them. Her staff turned blows aside, and she could deflect with the backs of her armored hands, her plated shoulders.

Every impact between them sent out a blast of cutting wind. Some of the blows felled trees in the jungle down below.

It wasn't enough. Yerin's moves were still too slow, her timing sloppy. She wasn't used to fighting with this much power.

Everything she'd stolen from the Sage and the Herald, the training and elixirs she'd taken in Ghostwind Hall, and the power she took in every second from her hunger technique—all of it combined into a rushing river pushing Yerin forward faster and faster.

Dross gave her suggestions, but she had to *feel* it. There was an ideal movement, and she could almost taste it. She had danced to that music before.

The Phoenix Song began to reach a crescendo, taking on a new tone.

Memories flashed through Yerin's mind, and Dross polished them to fresh clarity. Her master, fighting against three opponents at once. Herself at the Uncrowned King tournament, when she had felt the Sword Icon moving through her. The Winter Sage's precisely timed attacks. Eithan's absolute strikes against his enemy in the sky, and the Mad King's savage technique to defend against them.

More and more memories, including those she'd taken from dream tablets. Yerin had seen sword artists from Lowgold all the way up to Monarch, and each of them had walked their own Path.

They all congealed and began to crystallize.

Like a true sword artist, Yerin learned as she fought.

Yerin started to feel Malice's attacks before Dross predicted them. Her Goldsigns took off small chips of Akura bloodline armor. Yerin suffered blows here and there herself—a staff cracking into her bones, or a shadow cutting across one of her madra channels—but she couldn't feel them. She was listening to the music of battle.

A connection slipped into place between her and the world. Overhead, a sword began to reveal itself as though clouds were peeling away.

Yerin stumbled back.

Malice's attack missed, but only because Yerin shoved herself out of the way at the last second. She wrestled with the power emerging in the sky, trying to disentangle herself from the music, to force her will against the world.

Bleed and bury me, why is it so hard to stop an Icon?

[Is it? Huh. Lindon didn't seem to have much trouble stopping his arm, though I guess that wasn't *his* Icon. Eithan certainly made it look easy.]

Yerin didn't think that was a fair contest.

Malice saw what was happening and gave a ringing laugh. "What are you doing? Advance! Face me, Monarch to Monarch! Don't you want to kill me, Yerin?"

Yerin couldn't advance here.

They were trying to *reduce* the number of Monarchs in Cradle. She'd be tearing another hole into her own lifeboat.

If she advanced, she might have to ascend while Lindon couldn't.

Worse, she might have to leave before the Dreadgods were defeated. This might lose them the entire war.

Yerin finally wrestled the Sword Icon down. It vanished.

An arrow crashed into Little Blue like a falling star. It carried her all the way to the jungle, where her landing flattened the surrounding trees.

Yerin's senses were too sharp for her own good. She saw the arrow, long as a spear, that pinned Little Blue to the ground. The fresh Herald screamed, a sound that equally resembled the discordant screech of a flute and a very

human wail of pain. Her hands scrambled to pull out the arrow, but spasms of light and pain flickered through her, and she convulsed in agony.

“Too slow,” Malice said with another laugh.

To Yerin, the world turned colorless and very, very quiet. Even Dross’ voice disappeared, leaving her with a sense of clarity.

Yerin realized something new. She saw a pattern so clear that she was shocked she hadn’t noticed it before.

She remembered the Blood Shadow killing her family, and the sense of isolation and deprivation that came from the loss of everyone she knew. In a dim, distant way, she remembered *being* that Blood Shadow. Taking those lives.

It had led her to her Underlord revelation: she practiced the sacred arts so that she wouldn’t be alone anymore.

So that people would stop leaving her behind. By dying.

On the Path of the Endless Sword, she had taken many lives. But that Path wasn’t hers, not quite. She wasn’t meant to be a warrior who lived for the next fight, like her master or Fury.

Her Overlord revelation: she was not the Sword Sage.

Yerin wasn’t *just* the disciple of the Sage of the Endless Sword; she was also Eithan’s apprentice. The student of the Reaper.

She had used Penance, the absolute decree of death, to strike down a Monarch.

She had learned to imitate Ozriel’s sword strike.

And she remembered her Archlord revelation. It wasn’t to *fight* monsters. Yerin was meant to *kill* them.

In that silent world, Yerin looked to Malice and saw a monster.

She’d been using her anger at Malice, her disgust, for motivation. But that wasn’t what Eithan felt when he swung his scythe. It wasn’t what she had felt when she’d used Penance.

Yerin *chose*. She decided who needed to die and made it a reality.

This wasn’t revenge.

It was an execution.

In a world that still seemed frozen, Yerin pulled her sword back almost casually. An image in the sky mimicked her movements. Not a sword.

A vast, black scythe.

“**Die,**” Yerin ordered. She brought her sword down in a simple overhand chop.

And at Yerin's command, the Death Icon descended on Akura Malice.

MERCY'S ATTENTION WAS RIPPED AWAY FROM THE DARK CLONE OF HERSELF when she felt Little Blue fall.

Between Charity's owls and Dross' communication, most of their side were coordinated perfectly. Only with that level of cooperation could they stand up against Malice.

Yerin was the only one left out, operating freely. Dross had seen how she would have to slow herself down to match the rest of them, so she was given free rein. He simply took her actions into account when he guided Mercy and the others, but that perfect web had a hole torn into it when Blue was taken out.

Mercy had time for a moment of stunned horror. She hadn't even seen the shot coming, and neither had Dross.

Then the world lost all color.

A deadly icon loomed over them in the sky, and a gut-deep fear shook Mercy's spirit. Even the puppet-construct meant to copy her flinched and looked up.

That dark scythe reminded her of the day the sky had broken.

This time, it hovered over Yerin, and Mercy instinctively knew what it meant. Power radiated from Yerin, but it was a flat, colorless power. The absence of sound rather than a symphony. The Death Icon was raising Yerin to Monarch.

One simple swing of Yerin's sword condemned Mercy's mother to die.

There were no outward projections of madra, but to the spiritual sense, there came a massive wave of lethal power incomparable to anything Mercy

had sensed from Yerin before. The invisible wave reached Malice instantly.

Darkness crept over the sky opposite the scythe, and Malice faded to shadow.

The executioner's blade passed through her. To outward appearances, Malice dodged the attack perfectly.

But Mercy knew it had cost her. Yerin's attacks would work.

[That's it!] Dross said.

I know, Mercy replied sadly. The same idea had occurred to her at the same time. She knew how to beat her mother.

But there was no time for that. Little Blue's spirit was fading.

Mercy dodged an arrow from her shadow-self and fired an arrow of her own at the swarm of obsidian butterflies harassing Ziel. The Strings of Shadow she'd packed into the arrow exploded, tying up the construct.

Without hesitation, Ziel blasted down toward Little Blue.

He could stabilize her, or so Dross claimed. Maybe he couldn't heal her, but he could help her hang on.

Mercy just had to keep the constructs from interfering.

The pressure on her redoubled as she had to take slashes from the butterflies on her armor while trading arrows with her own shadow, but she would win eventually. Her opponents were just constructs, while she was a living sacred artist. She could adapt and change, while they couldn't.

But this was taking her too long.

Yerin took the fight to Malice, and for the first time, Malice was on the back foot. Yerin alone might not be able to defeat her, as a newly advanced Monarch, but Charity had already defeated a construct. Ghostly soldiers harassed Malice and owls dove into her.

With the blinding speed of the Burning Cloak, Orthos appeared over Malice's head. Black-and-red eyes blazed with fury. His right hand was covered in Blackflame claws, and aura trailed from him in a dark ribbon.

Charity had shut off Malice's room to escape, so Malice was forced to choose between taking Yerin's attack or Orthos'.

She raised one hand to catch The Dragon Descends on her armored forearm.

There came a blinding explosion as Orthos hammered the Monarch into the trees. Mercy doubted anything in this jungle was going to survive their battle.

[Duck!] Dross called.

Mercy dipped in the air as butterflies flew overhead. She flipped in midair to drive a fist at her opposite.

The shadow-clone mirrored her, but it was burning its own substance to keep up with her attacks. It was already beginning to fade to essence. Likewise, the swarm of obsidian butterflies was looking thin after losing so many of its kind on Ziel's shield and Mercy's armor. Even tearing their way out of the Strings of Shadow had cost them some members.

Mercy finished off the two constructs and, without any time to waste, opened her void key.

A powerful aura billowed out, reminding her of Yerin's Icon. The snarling of a tiger was somewhat weaker.

Lindon hadn't kept the Silent King Bow with him. He'd left it with her, believing that she could learn to wield it.

And he'd left her the last Penance arrow.

[You still can't use the Bow,] Dross told her nervously. [You remember that, right? You remember what happened last time?]

Mercy thought that proved she *could* use the Bow, but that wasn't the weapon she needed now.

She withdrew the Penance arrow—its very touch once again scraped at her lifeline—and fitted it to Eclipse, Ancient Bow of the Soulseeker.

The dragon head in the center hissed, its violet eyes shining. It was eager to be used.

Despite everything, Mercy hesitated to pull back the string.

Not only was she about to shoot her own mother, but loosing this arrow would be the last thing Suu ever did. Eclipse wasn't built to withstand ammunition like this.

Yerin and Malice had flown far into the distance, their blows tearing apart clouds and creating thunder, but Mercy could still see them clearly. Her heart was in turmoil.

Eagerness thrilled up through her fingers. Not her own. The bow's.

Suu *wanted* this. To test itself against its maker. If this was to be its last action, the weapon exulted in its purpose.

Before Mercy's resolve could slip again, she pulled the string back to her cheek.

And, despite the distance between them, she felt her mother's attention on her. From far away, she saw Malice's lips move.

"Remember," her mother commanded.

Mercy pushed against the working, but Malice knew her well. She remembered every moment she'd ever spent with her mother. The formal audience where she'd first been introduced to the Monarch. Receiving the Book of Eternal Night. Declaring she was going to run away.

When Malice had given her the encouragement to reach Underlord.
Embracing her when the world ended.

All those scenes rushed back into Mercy's mind, and the feelings returned to her heart. Her hand trembled on the strings.

Help me, Dross, she whispered.

[Oh, I am,] he said. He didn't sound concerned. [I've found that it's better not to oppose a Monarch's working directly if you don't have to. It's more effective to make it work for you.]

Mercy remembered Malice punishing her in front of the entire clan. The horror she'd felt when she realized that Malice had knowingly allowed the Dreadgods to exist, just to preserve her own power. The lies, the manipulation, the betrayal.

And she remembered the echo of Malice that remained in the labyrinth.

That woman was a hero. She'd set out to carve her family a place in a world hostile to them. She had created a safe haven for the weak.

Then she'd let safety make her complacent. She had grown arrogant, and afraid of losing what she had. She lost sight of those she'd been working for.

Malice had become a poison, harming the very people she set out to save.

Strength returned to Mercy. She pulled the string back, and she loosed Penance.

No matter what, she did not want to do this. The attack gouged a hole in her heart. But when all other options had been exhausted, when all that was left in life was suffering, sometimes death was the only solution left.

There was no joy in this attack. But it was...mercy.

With no fanfare, Penance landed.

Mercy felt it strike. In her spiritual sense, Malice's presence trembled. Unlike when Yerin had used the true Penance, the target didn't vanish immediately. But every one of her attacks was weaker, more desperate. Her lifeline was fading.

Akura Malice was dead, but she hadn't stopped moving yet.

Mercy used Shadestep to close the distance, folding space around her with shadow. She couldn't cover the full distance, but when she was about halfway there, Malice fell from the sky.

Without quite understanding why, Mercy flew faster to catch up. For some reason, she felt like she ought to catch her mother before she hit the ground.

It was a ridiculous thought. Mere stone couldn't hurt a Monarch.

Mercy sped up anyway.

Dross was yelling to her, but Mercy couldn't hear him. She couldn't see well, either. Her vision had grown blurry.

A red-and-black lump appeared in her way.

Mercy tried to fly around, but Yerin caught her.

"Take a rest, Mercy."

Mercy blubbered something. She wasn't even sure what.

"You can put that weight down," Yerin replied. "Wasn't you that did it. Hey." Yerin snapped her fingers in front of Mercy's nose.

Blinking, Mercy looked into red eyes.

Yerin gave a half-smile. "Pin this one to my account, all right? I can carry it, true and certain."

Mercy shook her head. Her mind was in chaos, but she managed to say, "The...the Remnant..."

"You can lean that one on me too." Yerin looked over Mercy's shoulder and nodded.

A moment later, Aunt Charity gathered Mercy up in her arms. Her eyes were wet too. "Veil yourself," Charity whispered.

Mercy did, so she didn't sense anything when her mother died.

She did, however, see the color vanish from the world for just a moment. Then a dim purple light that must have been the Remnant rising. She tried to turn around for battle, but Aunt Charity held on.

Finally, after a few more sounds, everything went quiet.



Lindon felt Yerin advance.

[This is nothing to worry about!] Dross said desperately. [What a reliable ally we have now, right? Don't you think? Allies!]

He didn't have the freedom to feel much of anything. A quarter second's lapse in concentration would kill him.

But though he told himself that, his gut tightened. Their timeline had just gotten shorter. And if he couldn't ascend...

The Wandering Titan's tail cracked into him, and then he really *did* have to shove those concerns into the back of his mind.

A short while later, Malice died.

[That's a relief, isn't it? Plus one, minus one! Everything evens out!]

That was indeed something worth celebrating, but Lindon's concentration was at its limit. He kept his energy up by Consuming the attacks from his enemies, but they were constantly doing the same to him.

Only Reigan Shen couldn't use hunger madra to replace his power, but he used little enough anyway. He pounced when he could, striking just enough to keep Lindon off-balance.

That was how they continued as the day ran on. And into the night.

In the few, scattered seconds he had to think, Lindon wondered where Yerin had gone. He'd expected her to join the fight, but hours continued to pass as the earth and sky quaked, and she never arrived.

[I told her not to come here. We can still hang on.]

Lindon would have expected Yerin to show up anyway. She might not be able to fight the Dreadgods like he could, but she could at least keep Reigan Shen off his back.

The first newcomer to arrive in their delicate balance was Sha Miara. She appeared in a shimmer of rainbow light, and Dross began to sweat. At least, that was the image he showed Lindon.

[If she joins in with Reigan Shen and they can coordinate with the Dreadgods, we'll last roughly another...fourteen seconds.]

Lindon tensed even as he shattered a meteor dropped by the Wandering Titan, but Sha Miara didn't join the battle. In fact, Reigan Shen leaped through space to join her, shifting back into human form as he did.

The pressure lightened significantly. Though, in a way, the damage was done.

Lindon wasn't going to run out of madra, but there were other factors less easily quantified. He'd kept stretching himself to fight at his maximum for almost a full day, and it wasn't as though he was fully rested and ready to go beforehand. He and Dross were both about to snap.

But he could hang on a little longer. That was what he'd told himself a thousand times now.

A little longer.

Horizon-spanning sheets of rainbow madra grabbed the Bleeding Phoenix's barrage of Striker techniques before they could hit the coastline, redirecting them back into the ocean. That was the first time Lindon remembered being conscious of the fact that they had hit a coastline at all.

Sha Miara was working together with Reigan Shen to keep the fight from hitting Rosegold.

The Titan and the Phoenix didn't cooperate. An earthquake split the coast in half even as a blood-tinged hurricane scoured the skies. They were focused on Lindon, and didn't care what happened to the land.

It struck Lindon as funny that he and Reigan Shen were on the same side, though Shen probably didn't know it. Lindon would have gladly turned back to the ocean to avoid the populated continent, but now he was cornered. Stuck between the Dreadgods to the west and the pair of Monarchs to the east.

If he stayed where he was, he'd be crushed. He needed to break through one side or the other, and the east was far easier.

But that would drag their battle onto the continent, so he tried to hold on. Nonetheless, with every technique, he was gradually pushed farther inland.

Until eight figures arrived in bright gold armor.

Larian shouted something to him, probably a quip about being late to the party, but Lindon had his plate full. Through Dross, he told her what he needed.

They pulled Sha Miara back so Lindon could run. He borrowed the momentum from a punch of the Wandering Titan's, letting it blast him miles away so he could fly around and back to the ocean.

[Uh-oh. They saw that one, huh?]

A bloody wing of the Phoenix met Lindon as he tried to run.

It swept him back toward the land, and this time he really couldn't resist. By the time he caught himself in the air, he was over a city of the Rosegold continent.

The other two Dreadgods caught up to him in a moment, walking apocalypses of burning blood and rolling earth.

The fight raged on, crushing Reigan Shen's empire underfoot.



Emriss only had a connection to two Icons: the Oracle Icon, in the shape of an all-seeing eye, and the Life Icon. Which, fittingly, took the form of a flowering tree.

A greater number of Icons did not indicate power, it only increased versatility. Emriss preferred depth. The more she learned of her Icons, and the more she studied how to reflect their meaning on reality, the more uses she found.

Hers were particularly well-suited to helping others.

The young Sage, Ziel, sat cross-legged on the grass with stars overhead and green runes spinning around him. He'd formed a typical Herald circle, at her direction, but was having trouble manifesting his Remnant.

His shaggy hair blew in the wind, and he frowned in concentration, his emerald horns glowing slightly. Living green madra flickered and tried to manifest in front of him as he concentrated.

This was the problem all Monarchs faced. At least, the ones who started out as Sages.

Their power had a new, external foundation in the form of a connection to an Icon. It took extra time to harmonize their bodies and spirits.

Lindon had been trying to solve that problem by the usual method of hunger madra: forcibly stabilizing Ziel's spirit by jamming it full of power. In fairness, that could have worked, though there would be problems with consistency. It was risky, in other words, and not the best for long-term growth. But if one intended only to fight a few more times and then ascend, there were few downsides.

Emriss, however, was better suited to a more subtle approach.

She traced the symbol of an eye in shining purple-and-green light over Ziel's head. "**See yourself,**" she commanded.

Insight could not be forced, but it could be taught.

In this case, if Ziel understood his Remnant more clearly, manifesting it would be easier. And it would be more likely to cooperate with him. This was the same advice she gave to anyone advancing to Herald, though it was more difficult for potential Monarchs.

Then again, he was better-prepared than most, thanks to Lindon. It should roughly balance out.

It was only minutes later when his Remnant took shape.

Judging by his expression when he opened his eyes, its form surprised him. Emriss was not shocked.

Ziel's Remnant was a hulking, horned creature with much longer horns than Ziel himself had. Its deep green body pulsed with violent energy, its thick jaw was locked in a perpetual expression of rage, and its hands were massive fists.

Even so, it slumped onto the ground, staring at nothing.

Ziel pointed to it and looked to Emriss. "How am I supposed to get that thing to cooperate?"

"That thing is you," Emriss reminded him.

The Remnant let out a heavy breath.

She could see what he'd been thinking. That wasn't only a result of time and wisdom; her connection to dreams had left her with the ability to see dream aura more clearly, and to interpret the subtle patterns every thinking being produced.

The skill wasn't as clear as reading thoughts like they were written on a page, but she could read general impressions. Coming face-to-face with his Remnant pained him. Its appearance told him something about himself, something he didn't like.

Emriss left him as his Remnant flickered out, sliding back into his spirit. It would take him a few more attempts to manifest it steadily enough for a conversation.

And to prepare for a fight. Fights were common during Herald manifestation, given that the sacred arts were primarily used as weapons.

She found Mercy easily enough, along with a very restless Yerin.

And Little Blue, who wasn't supposed to be there.

"Just snapped into place for me, I don't know how many other words I need to say it." Yerin paced back and forth, rubbing her hands together. Emriss suspected she wanted to be gripping a sword.

"But you had a connection to the Icon already," Mercy said. "You used Penance, and you'd been working on Eithan's attack."

Yerin threw up her hands. "I don't know! Got to be something personal to you, doesn't it?" She stopped mid-stride and took a deep breath. "... sorry. Not trying to cut you deeper."

Little Blue patted Yerin on the shoulder. Then she ran over and rubbed Mercy's head. She even sent soothing pure madra into Mercy, at which point Emriss made her presence known.

Not that she had particularly been hiding. She'd just been standing quiet and still. A specialty of trees.

"Connecting to an Icon is a lifelong pursuit," Emriss said. Despite her gentle tone, all three of the young ladies reacted like she'd leaped out from behind a bush. Little Blue spun around and hid both hands behind her back guiltily, as though Emriss would find a stain on them.

Emriss did give Blue a reproving look. "*You* aren't supposed to be using madra yet. You almost died. It's difficult even for me to heal wounds made by another Monarch."

Little Blue shuffled and murmured something indistinct, kicking the ground.

"I'd contend I've about reached the end of the road here," Yerin said. "Time to move on to the fight, true?"

"I'm not sure I follow your mathematics. Let's say I could keep Miara under control while the Empire contained Reigan. That would leave you and Lindon against the Dreadgods together. Can you handle the Bleeding Phoenix?"

Right now, the battle between Dreadgods could be felt by everyone in the world with sufficient advancement. Yerin should be sensing the Phoenix's power like a crimson bonfire.

"Better than Lindon fighting one-on-two," Yerin insisted.

"Is it?"

Yerin knew it wasn't, and that was why she hadn't left yet. Emriss could see her thoughts hanging around her head like a shifting cloud.

Not only would Yerin's arrival not shift the scales in Lindon's favor, it might accomplish the opposite. The Dreadgods wouldn't hold back their attacks as they had for Reigan Shen, so just getting close to the battle would put Yerin's life in jeopardy. Lindon would have to fight while watching out for her.

If they were going to join the battle, it needed to be with a group that could actually take on at least one of the empowered Dreadgods.

Emriss had made some preparations for that herself, but the more Monarchs they had, the better. Lindon could hold on a little while longer, and every minute he stayed in battle brought them that much closer to new allies.

Yerin ran a hand through her hair and looked about ready to say something, but instead she turned back to Mercy. "You've been using a bow

since you were half a foot tall, right? And you have the memories for it! Should be a springtime walk.”

Mercy gave a shaky smile, but Emriss knew she was thinking differently. The Bow Icon wasn't the closest one to her, and she could feel that. But at the same time, she was understandably hung up on her mother's death. She wasn't in the right state of mind to connect to the Icon she felt.

Or so she thought.

“Yerin, why don't you go help Ziel?” Emriss suggested. Not only would that give Emriss room to counsel Mercy, but Yerin actually did have good insight into the advancement to Herald.

In the meantime, Emriss could speak to Akura Mercy about what it meant to bring joy.

WITH YERIN'S HELP, ZIEL RAISED PILLARS OF STONE FROM THE EARTH AND inscribed protective scripts into them. They had to contain his advancement to Herald, and Ziel was certain his Remnant wouldn't be cooperative.

The one glance he'd taken was enough to convince him of that.

"Let's hope my Herald advancement will go as smoothly as Mercy's," he said to Yerin.

She eyed him as she pulled up a stone slab several times bigger than she was. "You'd contend that your Remnant will be as soft as spring grass, would you?"

"No."

"Same on my side." She settled the slab into place with an earth-shaking slam. "Not an expert on this kind of advancement, but I'd bet you're in for a fight."

Ziel didn't think so.

"No," he said with a sigh. "My Remnant will just sit there."

Yerin scratched a rune into the stone, following instructions Dross was giving her. "You'd say so?"

"You saw it. I'll be wrestling dead weight." If anything, Ziel was worried that integrating his Remnant more closely into his body would slow him down. He had been lifeless for so long that the reality of his uselessness had settled into his soul.

Dross popped into visibility beside Ziel's head. [That's possible, sure! It's hard to say how someone's Remnant will act, and I don't have as many memories of advancing to Herald as I want. But...]

Emriss Silentborn's voice blew over to them like leaves on a gentle wind. "You should expect a fight."

Ziel scratched the side of his horns. "Are you sure? It just sat there."

"Ready to draw swords," Yerin said.

With the stone circle drawn wide—much larger than Mercy's—Ziel shrugged and sat down in the center. "If you say so." Privately, he still thought the others were underestimating him. Or overestimating his Remnant.

They hadn't known him during those years when he had wandered the Wasteland, with nothing and no one to guide him. They couldn't understand the scars time had left behind.

Ziel felt better than he had in years, but it would take much longer for his soul to get the message. Then again, if Emriss said so, he could be a little careful.

He pulled his hammer from his soulspace and set it to one side. Then he began to manifest his spirit once again.

[Don't worry about your instability after advancing,] Dross said in a soothing tone. [There will *definitely* be some instability, so there's no point worrying about it. That's what Emriss is here for.]

Ziel knew the plan. Without stolen time and elixirs, he wouldn't be ready to advance to Monarch for decades at the earliest, so forcing the advancement would severely damage him. Fortunately, they had a plan for that.

He only had to do his part and take the first step into a new future. A new life. With that vision clear in his mind, Ziel manifested his Remnant.

It was exactly as he'd feared.

The thing was a hulking jade creature, largely humanoid but with the head of a snarling monster. Its dull green horns were larger and sharper than Ziel's, and its four-fingered hands were slabs of muscle that opened and closed as though waiting for a skull to crush.

As with most Herald-level Remnants he'd seen, his looked as real as a sacred beast. Though this one seemed like it had been the victim of cruel violence. It was covered in scars, a spiderweb of old wounds where the Remnant had been taken apart and stitched together long ago.

The spirit radiated the physical pressure of a force Remnant, but it slumped on the ground, staring into the distance. As though its heart died years ago.

Then it caught sight of him.

Fire lit within the Remnant's eyes, and suddenly Ziel felt the weight of an oppressive and overwhelming rage.

The sight and feel of his own Remnant in fury shocked Ziel. Just for a moment, but the spirit seized on it.

With a roar, it leaped at him.

Ziel began to Forge rings with his Oathsign technique, but most of his spirit was outside his body. The Remnant tore apart his script with one hand, grabbed him by the head, and slammed him into the ground.

Earth broke. Cracks spread out to the limit of the script-circle, where the runes shone silver and contained the impact.

Or so Ziel glimpsed as he rose, coughing, through the cloud of dirt and dust. His body reeled, but his mind was even worse.

He felt everything the Remnant did. This was a spirit of wrath set free. It slammed itself against the invisible wall generated by the script-circle, and if the barrier had been any weaker, the Remnant would have torn its way through.

Of course, a Monarch stood on the other side. Yerin's red lock of hair fluttered in the wind kicked up by the force-spirit, and she gave the Remnant an unimpressed look.

"You like it better on that side," Yerin said flatly.

Ziel's Remnant roared, undeterred. If anything, it redoubled its efforts to break the boundary, attacking one of the stone slabs holding the script in place.

He could feel why. This was a creature of pure rage and pain. It hated everything, and wanted to destroy anything it could reach.

Itself, perhaps, most of all.

Upon seeing the manifestation of his own spirit, Ziel's heart broke. This was the man he'd been.

Dross made a considering sound. [You know, it's not as bad as I expected. I think we can take it.]

With his elixir-strengthened body, Ziel lifted his hammer one-handed while using no Enforcer technique. The spirit wasn't watching; it was clawing at the stone in an attempt to reach Yerin.

Using pure physical strength, Ziel slammed his hammer down on his Remnant.

The ground exploded again, but the Remnant leaped out of the cloud and clawed at Ziel. This time, Ziel held nothing back.

He traded hits with no defense. His bones broke, his blood sprayed, and even the hits *he* landed were doing nothing but damaging his own Remnant. His own spirit.

Nonetheless, he kept fighting.

It was a brutal, dirty fight. Ziel found that appropriate. He took the wounds as an acceptable cost while he and his Remnant tore each other to pieces.

This was his own pain. His own bitterness. He couldn't be rid of it, but he could face it, and he could move forward.

He didn't notice when it began, but gradually, the pieces torn off the Remnant began to fill in his own wounds.

The Shield Icon sang through him. Without it, he would have been destroyed in the first exchange. It kept him together as the Remnant fell apart further and further, the fight slowly fading in intensity as Ziel and his spirit became one.

He felt his body transform only once it was over. He stood in place, earth shattered around him. At some point, the script had been destroyed, and only Yerin's aura control kept the battle from spilling out further.

[I couldn't control the change as well as you could, if you had been paying attention,] Dross said. [But I don't think you ended up too badly.]

Dross projected a reflection of Ziel like a mirror, so Ziel could see himself.

His horns were a little longer, but the biggest change showed in his skin. He was covered in scars where the Remnant's fingers had torn pieces out of him. And those scars had been filled with a dull jade.

He examined one slash on his chin. "Could have been worse."

Yerin had been hovering over their battlefield, and she came to land next to him. She gave him an approving nod. "Looks to me like we traded scars."

"You had scars?" Ziel asked.

"You saw me with all the scars, I'd bet my soul. Yeah, back on the island!"

He shrugged. "I don't remember."

She looked oddly disappointed.

Ziel stretched his madra, feeling it twist through his flesh more efficiently than ever before, and exulted in the power of a Monarch. The aura for miles stilled, bowing to its new ruler.

Then he steadily fell onto his face.

Can you get Emriss, please? Ziel asked Dross.

[Hm. Yeah, that instability is pretty bad, isn't it? Good thing we planned for this!] Silence ensued for a breath or two, then Dross continued. [Sorry, she's busy. I'll try again in a few minutes.]

Ziel lay face-down in the dirt.

No rush.



Mercy sat on a stump in the shade of an ancient tree. But not so ancient as the one that stood across from her in human form, leaning on a diamond-tipped staff and smiling gently.

“Heralds hear their own spirits more loudly,” Emriss Silentborn said. “This makes it more difficult for them to hear deeper, subtler powers, though the Icons remain.”

Mercy drew in her breath and felt the still-unfamiliar power of a Herald flowing through her. She felt as though she had only managed to stand on wobbly legs, but she was now being asked to run. “Am I ready?” she asked.

“No,” the Monarch said. “But we must often do things we are not ready for. You’ve learned this lesson again only recently, haven’t you?”

Mercy’s heart and spirit trembled. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Emriss’ wrinkled face softened, and Mercy knew the old Monarch understood her. “You took in much of your mother’s will. What did you learn of her ideals?”

“They don’t fit me.”

“And why not?”

The Netherworld Empress had been the embodiment of everything Malice sought. It reflected power, rulership, dominance, and conquering for the sake of order.

“I don’t...want them.” That fell flat to Mercy’s own ears, and she wanted to explain further, but Emriss nodded as though she understood

completely.

“Those were your mother’s Path. The Crown Icon, the Shadow Icon, the Strength Icon...they represented the ideals she strove for, the concepts that had defined her since she was a girl.”

Emriss leaned her staff against a nearby tree and took a seat on a rock. “Ozmanthus advised the young Void Sage to consider how others saw him. To use their perception of him as a looking-glass to glimpse how he was reflected in reality. He was instructed to look for a concept that defined him, even in his childhood. So tell me, Mercy, how do people see you?”

Mercy considered. She knew how she *thought* other people saw her, but Lindon had an advantage in that area. He could steal people’s memories.

[I can show her,] Dross offered, and Mercy noticed that he was looking to Emriss for permission rather than Mercy herself.

“Why don’t I help?” Emriss suggested. She waved a hand, and she cast out a working of dream aura so subtle and complex that it felt like a warm breeze but sank through Mercy’s thoughts in an instant.

The Ruler technique brought out specific memories and shed a spotlight onto them. With a jolt of fresh pain, Mercy realized they were her mother’s memories.

To name her direct descendants, Malice looked into the future and highlighted what she saw as their greatest feature. Not all Akura clan members got this treatment, Mercy knew; at some point, naming family members after virtues had become tradition rather than actual prophecy.

But now, with Dross and Emriss to sort the memories she’d absorbed from her mother, she saw Malice in her visions.

Surrounded by dark statues, Malice sought her son. She saw him as a sculpture of shadow, laughing as he struck dragons from the sky.

He exulted in battle, and his anger became a sword to destroy the family’s enemies. She named him Fury.

His daughter was a dark statue of her own, surrounded by owls, who wore a cold mask. Malice looked closer and saw the girl spreading messages and monitoring the well-being of the people, uniting them to stand against the powers of the wilderness. The Monarch named her granddaughter Charity.

Mercy saw her mother name Justice, Pride, and several other family members. She began to wonder if Malice had really left all these memories behind or if Emriss was adding a few stolen from somewhere else.

Finally, she came to her own vision.

Mercy was only a baby, still wailing, when Malice looked into her future. She saw her youngest daughter with a broad smile clear even on the dark statues in the World of Night. She healed, she laughed, and she cried for the sake of others.

And, in the end, Malice saw her daughter as another light rising over the dark mountains of the Akura clan.

Malice leaned back, satisfied, and let her World of Night fade. She looked down to the baby in her arms and named her.

She would be a light to complement the shadows. The Mercy to counterbalance the family's Malice.

Where the Monarch failed, her daughter would bring joy.

Mercy came out of the vision, and it was only with a great exercise of will that she stopped herself from crying.

"I don't feel any of that right now," she said.

Emriss gave a small smile. "A common misunderstanding. You can bring joy to others even when you don't feel it yourself."

Quietly, Dross fed Mercy the memories taken from Lindon and Yerin. Memories of her.

In their eyes, Mercy brought joy.

Mercy curled up, hugging her knees to her chin, cheeks burning. She squeezed her eyes shut as she tried to sort through her feelings.

She didn't need to see the flower blooming in the sky overhead to know it was bright violet.

The Joy Icon.

Her spirit magnified, deepening, her madra feeling more connected to the world than ever before. Her spiritual perception strengthened until she felt she could stretch it out endlessly, and the aura around her felt so close that she thought she could speak a single word and all reality would bend to her will.

Abruptly, she realized that she was feeling the remainder of a great battle fought nearby, and another powerful spirit trying to wrestle itself under control. She extended her perception and felt Ziel lying nearby.

He felt like a cold star, a bottomless well of power covered over. Like he was dead.

Mercy looked to Emriss in shock, but the Monarch—the *other* Monarch—shook her head. "He's alive, but this is a natural outcome of pushing as

hard as you have. You have both broken natural rules by pushing to Monarch so quickly, and that has consequences.”

Emriss pulled out a glistening rainbow gem the size of her head. “Therefore, we will have to break a few more rules. The Queen’s Gift was left by the Sha family to allow others to borrow the authority of a Monarch. With this, my own skills, your friend Yerin’s support, and Dross...”

The Queen of Everwood paused thoughtfully. “...Well, you *should* experience relatively few side effects.” The next part, she muttered to herself. “This is hard enough as it is. At least the boy could have left me the whole gem.”

Mercy noticed a chip missing from the Queen’s Gift and wondered if she had been supposed to hear that last part.

Emriss Silentborn’s authority enveloped Mercy and Ziel together, and soon the power of the Queen’s Gift and Yerin’s willpower joined hers.

“**Be whole,**” they commanded, and Mercy felt her soul settle into an indistinct sense of *rightness*, as though she contained a storm-tossed sea that had suddenly been stilled.

Mercy took a deep breath and stretched her spirit, letting her awareness spill over the land for miles. Nearby, she felt Ziel doing the same thing.

Together, two newborn Monarchs took their first steps.



ITERATION 300: VESPER

Suriel tore apart the twisted monstrosities of flesh and chaos, but in the Void, they were formidable opponents. Her powers were weaker here and theirs stronger.

Her Mantle burned low, a flame that needed a fresh log. She would need to renew it when she escaped.

But worse than her situation was the time she’d lost. She could feel the battle in Vesper, and it haunted her imagination.

Especially when she felt Ozriel vanish.

Moments later, she struggled free of the Fiends and tore her way back into the world. The situation was clear at a glance.

Half of the Mad King's body was missing. His flesh twisted and bubbled as he faded away, having been half-erased by the Scythe of Ozriel. Soon, he would be dead.

But his red-eyed face wore an expression of satisfaction.

Ozriel was gone. More than gone. The Sword of Makiel drifted in vacuum, and neither dust nor echo remained of the Reaper.

The Mad King looked at her. "This is what healing requires," he said, sounding entirely calm. And very human.

Every second that passed was a missed opportunity. "Ozriel already sentenced you to die." She lifted her Razor, each branch of its blade gleaming with points of light.

"Then as a doomed man, I request clemency for my people."

Suriel didn't answer him.

She excised him.

A thousand points of needle-sharp light pierced him from every angle, cutting him from existence.

And only him.

There was no Fiend's shadow behind him. Oth'kimeth must have escaped while she was in the Void, which was itself worth investigating. If the Fiend had escaped into the Void, she should have seen it.

Nonetheless, Oth'kimeth's absence sealed the fate of its host.

Though Suriel had not been around for the beginning of his story, she wrote the end of King Daruman's legend with her own hands.

The Scythe of Ozriel and the Sword of Makiel both vanished at gestures from the Hound. He met Suriel with a face of stone. "Can you save him?"

Not if she kept talking. It would be hard enough to restore someone killed by the Mad King's direct effort, even if she were at her full strength. And the more time ran, the harder it would be.

Without answering, Suriel reached out to the Way. She pushed her Mantle to its limit, squeezing every drop of authority she could from her long history as the greatest healer in existence.

"Return," Suriel commanded.

This was an order of magnitude more difficult than reversing the time of an entire Iteration.

If the Mad King had been using the Reaper's Scythe, her job would have been impossible. His sword might not have that level of authority, but

it was still a weapon capable of combat with Judges. And Daruman had bent his full attention to wiping Ozriel from existence.

Reversing that meant opposing his working directly. Pitting her authority against the full will of the Mad King.

And Suriel found herself lacking.

No matter how much she wanted it.

Though she should have been beyond inefficient biology, her jaw still clenched, sweat still beaded her brow, and her heart still thundered in her ears.

This would be such a *stupid* way for Ozriel to die.

And too easy for him. He had abandoned the entire cosmos out of pride, had gone to live out a mortal life. You could call it a vacation.

Meanwhile, he'd left her with a greater burden than anyone. Not to mention her years upon years of worry.

He still owed her. She wasn't going to let him out of it.

Except it seemed she would have to.

No matter how the world shook and the Way shifted around her, nothing appeared. She felt like a woman trying to lift the ocean.

Not only could she not lift that much weight, but how would she even get a grip?

Part of her heard Makiel's words. "To Sanctum," he said. Something disappeared; she thought it was his Mantle.

Then another will joined hers.

Her efforts surged again. Makiel was never a candidate for her position, but he had still earned several stars for his restoration skills. Unlike Ozriel, he had plenty of talent as a Phoenix.

[Makiel is in contact with Tal'gullour,] her Presence informed her.

If she hadn't been so totally concentrated, that possibility would have chilled her. What was Makiel doing, communicating with a Vroshir homeworld? Together, he and the remaining crew of the fortress could shut down her working. They could ensure that the Reaper remained lost.

Sure enough, she felt a working begin to warp the space around her. She started to struggle until she caught the target.

Tal'gullour was targeting Makiel.

"What are you doing, Makiel?" Suriel asked through gritted teeth.

"I am no longer Makiel," he said. His voice was no different than normal. "I retired my position. And I'm helping you. I'm not as skilled of a

Phoenix as you are, so I'm borrowing the systems of Tal'gullour."

She read the working and saw that it was true. This was some kind of transference ritual.

Transferring his life.

"Makiel, stop," she ordered.

"My name was Tommess," he said. "And I intended to give up my position on our return anyway. Consider this my revenge."

When she realized what he meant, she gave one dry laugh.

"He will hate this," Suriel agreed.

By the way Ozriel reckoned things, he would consider it a loss to be resurrected at the cost of Makiel's life. A loss he would never be able to wipe off.

Though the outward signs were few, Suriel felt the life fading from inside Makiel. He became *less* with every passing second.

And her blue, healing fire grew stronger and stronger.

"It's going to work," she assured him.

The wrinkles by Makiel's eyes deepened as he smiled. "I know. I know...everything."

It was perhaps the most like Ozriel the man had ever sounded.

The second the light in his eyes faded, Ozriel reappeared in a column of sapphire flames.

He looked down at his hands and patted his own chest in disbelief. "You really did it! I said I was counting on you, but I didn't actually believe you could do it."

"Makiel—" Suriel began, but Ozriel waved away the rest of her sentence.

"I know," he said. He gazed at the body floating in space, and Suriel saw the weight of ages and the sadness of the Reaper reflected in him again.

"I know everything," Ozriel said softly.



Lindon Consumed a spear from the Bleeding Phoenix before it crashed through the center of a city. Undirected blood madra still sprayed all over the buildings, but that much they could handle.

As Lindon cycled the power to refresh his body and spirit, he consulted with Dross.

Can we hold on?

[I've told them how long we have! At this rate, we'll be lucky to last another minute.]

Lindon had trouble recognizing his own emotions. On the one hand, this was the first time he felt hope in this battle against the Dreadgods. On the other, all his bridges away had been cut.

If they won here, the world was changed.

If they lost...in the best-case scenario, he would be stuck behind alone. In the worst-case, he would finish his transformation into a monster and destroy Cradle himself.

The Wandering Titan hurled a golden bolt of Forged madra the size of a small mountain. Lindon would dodge, except the Phoenix had carved out a globe of madra that isolated him from the rest of the world. The spatial barrier would break when the Titan's attack crashed into it, but then it would be too late to avoid it.

He had no choice but to block.

Lindon filled the globe with the Hollow Domain and himself with the Soul Cloak. When the Titan's Forger technique crashed through the spatial barrier, Lindon punched it.

Though the attack was vastly larger than his body, his strike cracked it into pieces from top to bottom. The fabric of space trembled and quaked from the collision of forces.

[Now would be the time to do a countdown,] Dross said, [but I don't want to depress you.]

The Dreadgods had locked Lindon in place for long enough. Now, they were closing in.

His Empty Palm tore away a chunk of the Titan's Enforcer technique, but he deflected a beam of light from the Phoenix just a beat too late. That put him a moment behind when trading blows with the Wandering Titan, so he was even further behind.

Lindon didn't need Dross to show him the potential outcomes narrowing. He could feel the inevitable end of the fight closing in with every imperfect block sending shockwaves through his body, every forced dodge that strained his spirit.

He still wouldn't give up. He pushed for every ounce of speed, and for any ideas that might turn the situation around.

But he found that he wasn't as frightened as he'd expected. If he died here, he still would have made it further than anyone had expected.

And, in a way, this was appropriate. He had always been destined to die at the hands of the Dreadgods.

[Now!] Dross shouted, but he wasn't talking to Lindon. A white light flashed in front of Lindon's face, and for a moment, the world lost all color.

Yerin's six spread sword-arms rang like an entire cathedral full of bells.

The Endless Sword technique tore into the other two Dreadgods. Powered by a Monarch and with the influence of the Death Icon, the technique chipped pieces out of the Wandering Titan and splattered tiny chunks of the Bleeding Phoenix.

To the Dreadgods, that was the equivalent of a scratch from a branch. Lindon himself could have walked through the technique and sustained only minor injuries, much less the Wandering Titan.

But it had come at the right time.

The pressure lifted, and Lindon saw a way out. He flew through a gap between the Dreadgods, Yerin pushing to keep pace with him.

"Gratitude," Lindon said between heavy breaths.

"Bleed and bury me, that was too close!" Yerin shouted. "You cut it too close, Dross! You hearing me? If I listen to you again, it's because I'm cracked in the head! One more second, and he'd be Dreadgod food!"

[Oh, less than that. But you made it! You did make it, so no harm done. In fact, I think I deserve praise.]

Lindon's Empty Palm blasted apart a parting shot from the Phoenix. "Where are the others?"

He was asking Yerin, but Dross responded. [They're not quite so fast as Yerin, but you'll find out yourself in three...two...]

Five powerful spirits stepped out of a portal nearby, and Lindon felt them arrive. Two of them unveiled themselves, tapping into their Icons as a form of introduction.

A detailed, steel-plated shield shared space in the sky with a shining, blooming flower.

Even the Dreadgods slowed down, though they didn't retreat. Lindon weighed the spiritual pressure of both sides.

Sha Miara, Reigan Shen, and two Dreadgods.

Emriss Silentborn, the Eight-Man Empire, Mercy, Ziel, and Yerin.

Mentally, Lindon split the enemies in half. "Which Dreadgod would you like?" he asked.

Yerin snorted. "Give you two guesses, and the first doesn't count."

Lindon spoke again, and Dross relayed his words to the others on the battlefield. "Everyone, I would be grateful if you could contain the Bleeding Phoenix and keep the enemy Monarchs away from me. I will face the Wandering Titan."

Ziel's muttered voice sounded like it was coming from next to Lindon's ear. "Advance to Archlord, he's a Sage. Advance to Sage, he's a Dreadgod. Advance to Monarch, he's off to kill a Dreadgod on his own."

A moment passed, and then Ziel's voice came again. "Dross? You didn't send that to him, did you?"

Yerin started to fly off, but hesitated and turned back to him. "Didn't mean to advance, swear on my soul. Got a little lost. Then Dross told us the trouble you were in... You'll catch up to us in half a second, okay?"

Lindon forced a smile. "All that matters is that you're alive."

He was trying not to think about what was going to happen after the battle. Especially since they still had Dreadgods left to kill.

The Phoenix and the Titan weren't leaving them alone out of the goodness of their hearts, either. They had backed away warily from the lineup of enemy Monarchs, standing closer to Reigan Shen and Sha Miara, and begun spreading their authority over the land.

Dirt raised into the air and stone quaked under the Titan's influence.

At the same time, the Phoenix's power stained the air. Blood began to coalesce and transform into humanoid puppet-figures.

Time was not on their side.

Yerin struggled visibly with her words, but finally flew off to join the others. Emriss had already begun a working centered on the Phoenix.

Which left Lindon hovering in midair and staring into the Wandering Titan's eyes across a gulf of broken city.

The Wandering Titan glared back as though it had heard their plan. Perhaps it had.

Lindon remembered the deep, rumbling voice he'd heard when he'd first Consumed the Dreadgod's memories. It stood opposite him now, lashing its tail lazily behind it. Its dark shell shone bright yellow from within, and stone flew up from the bones of the earth.

Guided by aura, chunks of metal and stone molded themselves into an impossibly huge sword.

Now, the Wandering Titan matched the legends Abyssal Palace told about its combat prowess. It looked the same as it did on the murals in the labyrinth.

Where it had been born. And where, in Suriel's vision so long ago, Lindon had seen it wading through mountains to destroy his home.

In a way, it had succeeded.

Lindon rolled Suriel's marble in his left hand, watching those memories. And remembering the Unsouled destined to be one of thousands crushed beneath the Dreadgod's feet.

Now, a white halo hovered over Lindon's head, and nine flying swords spread out behind him. Both made from the Dreadgods he'd killed.

Lindon wrenched his exhausted mind into motion once again. Tomorrow, he would add another weapon to his collection.

The Bleeding Phoenix let out a searing cry. That signaled the start of the battle.

As the collected Monarchs unleashed their techniques against the Phoenix, Lindon's flying swords met the sword-swing of the Titan.

The fight against the Dreadgods ended today.

FURIOUS THOUGH HE STILL WAS, REIGAN SHEN HAD NOT BARGAINED ON facing down *three* additional Monarchs.

He and Sha Miara had been relegated to a support role, lurking behind the Phoenix and redirecting enemy attacks with portals and shining rainbow barriers, respectively.

“Listen to me,” Reigan said, voice low. “If we want to keep what we’ve built, we’re going to have to go into hiding. It’s that or ascend.”

Even covered by her rainbow-light disguise, Sha Miara’s motions were desperate. “We can reason with Emriss! She’ll listen!”

Reigan suspected that any reasoning between Emriss Silentborn and Sha Miara was going to result in one rainbow-colored young woman drifting up to the heavens. He had to prevent contact between them, or he would be the only one left on his side. Which was not a winning scenario.

He clenched the Wraith Horn in one hand. He couldn’t risk losing that anymore; it was his one lifeline. “Emriss hid herself closely, even from us. She’s been lying to you all your life.”

“My mother—”

“She lied to your mother too! And *her* mother! She was *acting*, do you understand?”

Reigan wrenched Yerin’s Moonlight Bridge to one side before she could use it in an ambush. Instead of appearing behind the Phoenix, she was sent miles away.

He wished he could control the Bridge precisely enough to send Yerin straight into the Phoenix’s beak—or, poetically, into the path of one of

Lindon's techniques—but the best he could do was to shove her aside.

Rainbow light blocked a spinning circle of Dawn Oath runes, causing the entire script to fall apart. "I understand, but what do we *do*?" Miara hesitated before adding, "Is ascending really so bad?"

Out of sheer frustration, Reigan wanted to claw the human girl's head off.

He couldn't, of course. He might win a battle against her, but it would be a drawn-out affair, and it certainly wasn't something he could afford now. Emriss' branches would be around his throat the second he turned his back.

"This is the world we worked for!" Reigan insisted. "We don't owe it to *anyone*."

Then again, the world Reigan had worked for was being torn apart beneath him.

Every step the Dreadgods took deeper into his continent destroyed his own resources. Buildings, forests, mines, natural treasures, workers, herds of prey. They were breaking his own empire by the second.

And, worse, they were losing.

The Eight-Man Empire assaulted the Bleeding Phoenix with a barrage of techniques almost as broad as the Dreadgod's own. Striker techniques from the Phoenix crashed into barriers created by Ziel of the Dawnwing Sect and reinforced by the Shield Icon. Malice's daughter had grown her armor to Dreadgod size and was trading physical blows with the Phoenix itself.

Blue-green leaves of Forged madra spread everywhere, each etched with an eye. Emriss watched from every one of them, spreading a perfect view of the battlefield. She couldn't directly reverse injuries caused by the Dreadgods, but she wove life aura with expert precision, accelerating natural healing.

Bits of the Bleeding Phoenix sprayed off into the air. It was hard to see, given the composition of the semi-liquid Dreadgod, but Reigan could tell. Gradually, the Phoenix was getting smaller.

The enemies were winning. Given time, they would grind the Dreadgod down.

The Wandering Titan could break that stalemate. It was how the Dreadgods had operated in the past; threaten one, and the others would pounce on you and tear you to pieces.

But, in the worst news yet, the Titan's clash against the Ghost was evenly matched. If the Wandering Titan had been losing, Reigan had thought he might be able to goad it into using its last moments to kill some Monarchs.

At this rate, Lindon's battle wouldn't conclude until after the Phoenix was already dead. And therefore Reigan too.

Bitterly, Reigan stopped projecting portals. While it burned his pride, he had to admit it: he'd lost. After all this time, he would have to give up. Now was the time to cut losses and run.

Miara's royal madra covered the sky, stronger than ever, even seizing and redirecting one of Yerin's deadly black-and-white Striker techniques. She was still hanging on. He had to give her credit for that.

"That's enough," Reigan said. He laid a hand on her shoulder. "We've —"

His spirit screamed a warning just before Yerin's black-and-white slash crashed down on him like the swing of a heavenly scythe.

The attack had been carried by rainbow-colored madra.

All of Reigan's emergency defenses and life-saving measures had been used up in the fight against Lindon, so his defense was purely instinctive. He called up King's Key madra in a line in front of him, a razor-edged blade as thin as the side of a portal.

Yerin's attack, strengthened by Sha Miara, split in a wave around him.

But he wasn't unscathed.

The lethal authority in the attack shaved away at his lifeline and split open his skin. Blood splattered behind him.

He didn't feel the pain. Only shock.

Sha Miara gazed at him, pitiless behind her rainbow mask. Without a word, she slashed him with a blade of royal madra.

He tried to raise his hand to block, only to find that his left arm was missing. Her technique passed through him, though it scarcely touched his body. His spirit, however, was split in half.

Emriss Silentborn seemed to stride out of nowhere on a half-ruined hillside nearby. "Well done, Miara. I know that was difficult, but he couldn't be trusted."

He was the one who couldn't be trusted?

Fury and hatred boiled up from his heart. This whole scenario had been engineered by Emriss from the start! Who had allowed Lindon to Consume

the Silent King? Who had prevented the Monarchs from killing him? Who had pretended to be on their side for *centuries* while plotting against them?

Reigan opened his mouth to denounce her, but he vomited a mouthful of white-gold sparks instead. From inside his body, his madra was fading to essence. Miara's blade had passed through his core.

"Oh look," Emriss said idly. "A split core."

This time, Reigan Shen spit up blood.

Sha Miara strode over to Reigan, still carrying her Forged blade. "I knew he was going to give me up. He betrayed Tiberian too. I was just using him until the time came."

Reigan shouted at her in his head. She hadn't seen a *thing*. Five seconds ago, she was a panicked mess. Sha Miara was just trying to jump ship, and she was doing it with the subtlety of a drunken ape.

Emriss gave an understanding smile. "I always knew, dear." She really did lie with every breath. Reigan didn't know how he hadn't seen it before. "Now, take that weapon away from him. We don't want him pulling any last-second tricks."

Reigan did have *one* last-second trick left. It might not save him, but he hardly had a choice.

He acted as though he was on the verge of dying, which was no stretch.

Sha Miara lifted her sword again. "I know what to do," she said. Then she made a mistake anyway. She brought the blade of madra down on him.

Reigan brought up the Wraith Horn. With the little madra he could still control, he forced the construct to activate.

Dreadgod bindings always had several functions. Essentially, they were several bindings that had grown into one another, fusing together. In this case, he was only asking for the crudest application of hunger madra possible.

A basic Consume technique.

It triggered just in time, absorbing Miara's royal madra and funneling it into himself. Before Emriss could trap him here, he triggered one last portal.

Reigan stumbled through it in time to avoid a storm of lashing roots. The life madra was an inch from tearing his lifeline in half, but he closed the portal just in time.

That had been a desperate move. If Miara had been more careful, if Emriss had been closer, if they hadn't been distracted by the Dreadgod

fight...if not for all of those things, Reigan would already be dead.

Though he wasn't far from it.

He vomited more essence onto the immaculately tiled floor, clawing at his stomach in pain. He had elixirs that could mend his spirit, he was sure. He just had to hold himself together.

"Be healed," he commanded himself, though his voice was weaker than he liked.

His madra system sluggishly pulled itself together, but it quickly stopped. He was not the best at restoration, and wounds left by a Monarch were not so easily removed.

The room's only other occupant strolled up to observe him. Feet of blue storm madra crackled in front of Reigan's eyes.

"I see you had too big a dose," Tiberian's Remnant said gravely. "You see, it's always best to take small sips when you're drinking your own medicine."

"Heal...me!"

Tiberian spread glowing hands. "Even if I had the same connection to Icons I did when I was alive, storms and spears are not known for their healing powers."

Reigan's heart was fluttering. He burned soulfire to transform back into his original form to recover some vitality, but even in lion form, there was no strength in his limbs. He toppled onto his side, madra still leaking from his mouth.

"You ever wonder how it came to this?" the Remnant asked. He sat down on a scripted bench and looked up at the ceiling. "We sat idly by for so long that the very heavens descended to clean up our mess."

Reigan Shen tried to snarl defiance, but he managed only a weak, glowing cough. He hadn't been idle, he had been building a home. The heavens had only descended to knock it over, like a child kicking an anthill.

Nonetheless, he had no option left but to try again. He could always come back; Ozmanthus had proven that.

He reached out, beyond the world, and tried to touch the Way.

I ascend! he shouted in his mind. But he was losing connection to his powers. His will was fading by the second.

Tiberian stroked a beard that was now hewn from lightning. "I admit, this would not have been my first choice. But I suppose we're going to get

to know each other better from here on out, Shen. Maybe you'll make a better spirit than you did a man."

Lion, Reigan tried to insist. *I was always a lion.*

But when his Remnant rose from his body, it was in the shape of a man.

A man holding a goblet.



[That was Reigan Shen,] Dross reported.

Lindon launched dragon's breath that the Wandering Titan caught on its shell. With Shen gone, the battle against the Bleeding Phoenix had finally tilted their way.

A fist clenched around his heart. Now, the only thing left was to finish the Dreadgods.

But if they did, the Monarchs would have to ascend.

How long will I have to say good-bye, Dross?

Dross predicted the passage of the Titan's sword and showed the probable angle of its tail before answering. [If they both die at about the same time...huh. There might be a failure of language here. I can't figure out a way to say 'You can't do it' that doesn't break your heart.]

Like a deadly golden star, Wavedancer speared into the Titan and all the way through. The Dreadgod roared.

If they do leave, how long before I'm stable again?

[Eehhh...I don't...I mean, I can guess, but...we don't have any precedent. Decades for the Dreadgods to fade on their own with no Monarchs, but they would be trying to hold on to their power as long as possible. You could do it in a year or two, I'd say, but don't get mad if it takes longer. I have the feeling you'll get mad.]

A year. Lindon could make it a year.

[Or longer,] Dross reminded him.

Lindon drew Wavedancer back and harassed the Titan with Blackflame. Dross kept up the mental assault.

The fight wasn't quite over yet. Lindon still had time to think of something else.

[...I almost don't want to bring it up now, but without Reigan Shen...I do have a solution.]

Lindon wished Dross hadn't said anything. He wasn't ready. This had all gone so *fast*. And not just the battle; suddenly, everything since leaving Sacred Valley for the first time felt like it had passed by in a rush.

His eyes found Yerin, who had been with him since he was an Unsouled. She zipped around the Bleeding Phoenix, her cuts carrying echoes of death itself.

Lindon caught a stray Phoenix technique with an Empty Palm big enough to crush a village. The wave of acidic blood madra was wiped away, but stray drops landed on him. The flesh he lost was replaced in an instant by his Bloodforged Iron body.

It felt like only moments ago he had been in a cave, begging for more drops of sandviper venom.

Lindon lashed out with a bar of Blackflame, now a stream of blazing darkness. It carved a trench into the rocky skin of the Wandering Titan.

The Titan roared louder and struck back, its sword a flickering haze. That sword came to a stop when it struck a wall of solid amethyst.

Mercy, the size of a tower, gave the Titan her full attention. She leveled a black-and-white striped bow sized to fit her, Forging a dark arrow onto its string. Over her head bloomed a white halo and a violet flower.

Lindon remembered her as a Lowgold in the Skysworn, unable to watch her mother do battle with a Dreadgod. Now, her arrows darkened the sky as the Wandering Titan weathered her assault.

The Phoenix lit the coastline red as it faced a silver-and-green blur. Ziel, the man Lindon had known as a Truegold in the heart of Ghostwater, was now a shield holding back the Bleeding Phoenix.

The Titan pushed for Mercy, wading through a stream of dragon's breath.

Orthos, in his human form, shouted as he poured all the power he could into the Dreadgod. Above him, the Icon of a black dragon slithered through the sky.

The Wandering Titan's sword lifted, trailing golden madra. Lindon had thought he'd lost Orthos before, in Night Wheel Valley. He wouldn't let it happen again.

Wavedancer, Lindon's prize from the Uncrowned King tournament, gathered crackling blue-and-gold power. The Weeping Dragon's breath began to form, forcing the Titan to break off its attack and defend itself, though Lindon didn't release the breath.

Yerin took the opening. In a blink of white light, she appeared beneath the Phoenix, condensing the Final Sword. The technique they'd named together.

A sword of red-and-silver, detailed enough to appear real and large enough to impale a Dreadgod, erupted from her. It stabbed up, and the Bleeding Phoenix stopped it with a claw.

“Break,” Lindon commanded, and the working around the Phoenix's talon broke. The sword pierced through, skewering the Dreadgod through the center.

Then a lash of black stone flickered up to swat Lindon in midair. The Wandering Titan's tail. When he'd faced this attack in Sacred Valley, it had been a deadly blow.

Now, Little Blue erupted into a Hollow Domain that wiped out the excess energy the tail carried. With a Soul Cloak powered by Lindon's madra, she met the strike with a punch of her own.

She stopped the blow, and it was Dross' turn.

He tapped into the Crown of the Silent King, magnifying his mental assault, and struck at the Titan's mind.

He used the same technique that had exhausted him before. It had almost cost him his life, just to make a weakened Titan retreat.

This time, the Wandering Titan staggered in place, its mind temporarily overwhelmed.

And the timing passed to Lindon.

Black fire condensed into claws onto Lindon's left hand, dragging a smoky tail of destruction aura that reached into the sky. He slammed into the Titan's head, bringing down The Dragon Descends.

The technique detonated. For a moment, it blacked out the world, filled with such Void authority that the sky darkened.

As it had when the Reaper ascended.

Sight returned, and Lindon fled the retaliation of the Titan. Its head was split, bleeding golden light, and it lashed out wildly with a technique of ancient stone.

He Consumed the earth madra with the right hand of the Slumbering Wraith. Through his body, veins of white spread, infecting him. His time grew ever shorter. If the Monarchs remained any longer, he would lose himself.

That was the price he'd chosen.

The Titan backed off one step and refreshed its Enforcer technique. More gold light covered it in flowing armor.

Just the pressure from that step and the internal technique sent force rocketing through the streets of what had once been a city. Half-ruined buildings completely collapsed, and foundations were ruptured.

The Dreadgods destroyed the world just by existing. Letting them stay another second was too long.

What was a year or two? Lindon fully intended to live forever.

Together, with his friends, on the other side of the Way.

Apologies, Dross. Let's go.

Messages passed in an instant between the different versions of Dross, and everyone moved together.

Yerin broke off from the Phoenix suddenly, her sword-arms drawn back. Power concentrated in each one as she formed her master's technique: the Final Sword. But this time, the Death Icon resonated with the technique.

The Bleeding Phoenix spun in the air to watch her, but Yerin switched her attention. Over to the Titan.

From her Goldsigns, she unleashed a six-sided blade of energy that shone silver and red but carried absolutely lethal intent.

The Wandering Titan held up its sword to block.

Ziel Forged a circle over the Titan's head, focusing vital aura for hundreds of miles. The Titan was bound within, restricted by every aspect of aura.

A black star fell from the sky: Mercy's arrow. It bore with it every one of her techniques, and as it fell, dozens of copies split off to land together.

If they were the only ones fighting the Titan, this wouldn't be a threat to its life. This was worth the Dreadgod equivalent of a bloody nose and a black eye.

But their jabs kept the Titan in place.

All the while, Wavedancer had continued holding crackling blue-and-gold power. It shone like a sun of storm madra, and now that the Wandering Titan was locked down, Lindon released it.

Burning liquid light lanced out from the sword, many times thicker than Lindon's body. The Weeping Dragon's breath was blinding to the eye and spirit both, until it was hard to sense even the Dreadgods below. The Titan focused, turning its shell and raising its madra, defending against a truly lethal hit.

And, thanks to a temporary veil provided by Dross with the Silent King's Crown, it didn't see Lindon dashing up from below.

Not until it was too late.

Lindon's Empty Palm covered the Wandering Titan's entire midsection. A Dreadgod's spirit, being improperly fused to its flesh, wasn't easily disrupted. But this was the technique Lindon had perfected the most. It was a part of him.

The Void Icon wiped out the Titan's power. Only for a moment.

Then the Weeping Dragon's breath, the technique that had cut a scar into the face of the moon, speared the Dreadgod through the center.

Dross showed Lindon what was about to happen. The Wandering Titan would slowly lock up from the legs first, like a puppet-construct losing power and forgetting how to walk. It would, at last, lose the golden light in its eyes and become a statue. Dross assumed it wouldn't collapse under its own weight, but that remained to be seen.

Lindon couldn't watch it happen with his own eyes, because it would only take a few seconds.

And in those seconds, he had another Dreadgod to kill. If the Wandering Titan really died, his own transformation would progress while the Phoenix grew too powerful. In the nightmare scenario, the others would have to face down both the Bleeding Phoenix and the Empty Ghost together.

Lindon blasted through the air toward the Phoenix.

Yerin was dodging a spear of crimson light as he flew past her. The Phoenix re-focused on him.

Lindon didn't bother with Blackflame. The Bleeding Phoenix's body didn't have the same composition as the other Dreadgods. There was little separation between its actual flesh and the living madra that made it up.

He activated the Hollow Domain.

The blue-white light covered one of the Phoenix's wings. The wing didn't immediately fall apart, but it didn't resist when Lindon crashed into it. And dove right through it. It felt like diving into an ocean of warm pudding, but it smelled like a slaughterhouse.

Lindon's arm couldn't be contained anymore.

His Consume technique slipped its restraints and began devouring everything it could reach.

From the inside, the Phoenix's scream was like a physical blow. Every aspect of madra and aura that could be combined with blood assaulted his

body, tearing him apart, but he rebuilt himself with what he Consumed.

[You...see what's happening, don't you?] Dross asked.

The hunger arm was powering his Bloodforged Iron body. The two had formed a strange synergy. Every wound that Lindon suffered was now being filled with inhuman white flesh, like a pasty sludge.

[I thought you did.] Dross took a deep breath, or at least made the sound of one. [All right, let's put it all on the table! That's what they say, right? The table?]

The Silent King's Crown expanded over Lindon's head again, and a psychic explosion rocked the Phoenix. Emriss joined in, her techniques like gentle leaves.

The Bleeding Phoenix retaliated on the outside, but rainbow madra filled it, warping its techniques, pushing back against its spirit. The royal madra of Sha Miara.

From the outside, Ziel's techniques fell like hundreds of hammers, shaking the Dreadgod. Mercy's arrows stabbed into the mind and the spirit, carrying heavy shadows. Orthos and Little Blue drew liberally from Lindon's cores, and the Eight-Man Empire...well, Lindon was too deep in the Phoenix to sense which Paths were theirs, but they felt like they were using power of all aspects.

Lindon had to do his part.

He slammed an Empty Palm into the liquid flesh around him. Then again. And again.

The Titan was on the verge of dying. Even with the Phoenix trying to slice him out of itself, he could feel it. Lindon tried to push deeper, for the concentrated ball of power he could sense inside. The Phoenix's core binding.

He wouldn't make it. He and Dross were giving it everything they had, and—with their support from the outside—they would kill the Phoenix in another minute or two. But that was a minute or two they didn't have.

Silver light intruded on the red, and Yerin stumbled into the wound Lindon had managed to carve into the Phoenix.

Yerin shuddered. "Tell you true, this is the last place I ever wanted to be."

She drew back all her sword-arms, and the overwhelming red color faded.

Lindon opened his mouth to speak, but he looked down at himself. The Slumbering Wraith's flesh grew out of him everywhere.

He couldn't think of anything to say that summed up everything he felt, so he tucked it all into one word.

"Apologies," Lindon said.

Yerin had tears in her eyes, but her smile was brilliant. "I'll tell Eithan to save you a seat." Then she turned back to the Dreadgod who had ruined half her life. "Now let's get this bird to **die**."

The Void Icon resonated the same tone as the Death Icon, and Lindon joined his will to hers. "**Die!**"

Their technique tore apart the Phoenix from the inside out.

Two Dreadgods died at the same time.

Leaving only one.

Most of the Phoenix's body sloughed away, revealing a starless night sky. Lindon looked up into it. "I don't feel too bad," he said. "What's happening, Dross?"

[It's morning, Lindon,] Dross said.

It took him a moment to realize what that meant. All the Dreadgods warped the sky above them. Even him.

He turned to Yerin, feeling his body changing.

But she faded too. All he saw was darkness, as though the sky had swallowed him up.

Lindon heard only silence for a while. He couldn't even hear his own thoughts. He drifted, alone, in an endless void.

Eventually, he heard Dross. [He's sleeping,] Dross said.

Who is? Lindon asked. He heard that thought, at least, echoing in the silence. Dross didn't answer him.

[Not long. Get him to the labyrinth. He'll be fine, as long as there are no Monarchs on Cradle. ...I said, *no Monarchs*. Get going! Shoo! The sooner you're gone, the sooner he'll—yes, I'll tell him. Okay. You can't really stab me, you know. Oh, you *can*? Then I really will tell him. I was lying before.]

Even in a state where he felt distant from his own thoughts, Lindon could tell what was happening. Dross was telling the others what to do with him.

He looked down at himself, but he couldn't see his own body.

There was only one thing he *could* see: a small blue candle-flame locked inside a transparent ball of glass. A marble. It floated in the

darkness, where it would be if he were holding it in his left hand.

As it always had, the steady flame calmed him. He watched it, drifting in his own mind.

Lindon had no idea how much time passed before he woke up.

When he did, he sat upright. There were sheets tangled around his waist, but the mattress was soft as a cloud. Purple trees blew on the breeze outside the window of a simple, but richly furnished room. He smelled fresh timber, and he felt...bandages. His entire body was covered in bandages.

Lindon wasn't in the labyrinth, though he could feel it nearby. That was virtually all he *could* sense. His spiritual perception was sealed, locked down as though he were still an Iron. He felt Dross, sleeping inside his spirit, and his connection to the labyrinth.

As well as two more connections.

He tried to move his right arm and found that he couldn't. It was not only bandaged completely, so not a bit of flesh remained exposed, but had been bound in so many scripted halfsilver rings that it looked like he was wearing one armored sleeve.

Lindon felt someone approaching just before his door was rudely pushed open. Orthos, in his weathered, gray-haired human form, carried a tray packed with food. Trunks floated on wind aura behind him.

"You're up," Orthos rumbled. "Good. Tell her to transform back so she can help."

Little Blue was curled up on the tray, six inches high again, and she peeped her indignation.

Orthos blew a mouthful of smoke at her. "I *did* tell you, and you didn't listen to me. If you were tall again, you'd have to work."

Little Blue nodded cheerily.

They weren't reacting like Lindon had expected. "How long was I out?"

Orthos set the tray down. "That depends on how much you remember. We had this same conversation earlier this morning."

"Ah."

"And several days before that."

"How long in total?"

"About three weeks." Orthos picked up a bun, made as though to hand it to Lindon, then changed his mind and bit into it himself. "We were all very concerned the first few times. Dross told us it wasn't anything to worry

about, so we worried more. You're supposed to be up for good now, this time, so eat something." Orthos crunched into a crab leg.

Lindon looked out the window. "Did everyone...make it?"

"If they'd stuck around any longer, *you* wouldn't have. But yes, I saw them off myself. They went into that blue river that takes you to the heavens. Left all sorts of messages for you, but it's Dross' job to give them to you."

"How long do I have to wait?" Lindon asked.

"We'll find out together," Orthos said.

YERIN'S ASCENSION DIDN'T GO AS SMOOTHLY AS FURY'S HAD.

It wasn't so hard to cut a hole in the Way. In fact, she thought she'd done it easier than Fury. One slash of her Goldsign and she cut deeper than space, into whatever lay beyond.

But, at first, she didn't see another world.

The swirling blue edges of the portal she'd cut led onto a deep darkness that brought to mind a very strange night sky. Inside the black fabric were something like stars of every color, though they buzzed and twitched like living insects.

"Do we go in?" Mercy asked uncertainly.

Ziel took a step back. "I'm not going in there."

Yerin agreed with Ziel. This felt *wrong* to her, like absence and chaos. Then again, Lindon had felt like that ever since his connection to the Void Icon. Maybe this only felt wrong because she wasn't used to it.

She started to move forward, but the blue edges of the portal surged. Blue light flickered between her and the empty world beyond, a film stretching across the portal entrance. The view fuzzed like a dream-aura illusion, and then she could see another world.

This one seemed right. It resembled the same place Fury had entered—there was a cage across the sky, a courtyard nearby with shining pillars, and several banners bearing the animated image of a fox.

A helmeted figure in white armor hovered over them, and when he saw them, he beckoned frantically. "Hurry! Do it n—"

Abruptly, the view of the other world snapped back to the chaotic void.

Sweat beaded on Yerin's forehead. Even now, she could feel Lindon struggling with the hunger in his spirit. "Bleed me if I'm staying here another second."

She was considering taking a step into this vast darkness, but Emriss put a hand on her shoulder.

"Not here," the ancient Monarch said softly. "Look."

She didn't need to point. Yerin understood what she meant.

One of the closer 'stars,' a large point of green light, was drifting closer. As it did, Yerin could make it out more clearly.

It wasn't a star, or a planet, though it glowed. It was a kind of worm. Or a grub. Perhaps millions of them, joined together.

And it was squirming toward them. As Yerin gazed over it, a slash in its featureless head opened, forming a sticky mouth that looked to be made of green wax.

The worm must be unimaginably distant still, for Yerin's Monarch eyesight to be unable to pick out more details. Even so, Yerin backed up.

That was not something that should exist.

The Death Icon whispered a soft song to her, agreeing. That creature deserved to be removed from the universe.

When the portal snapped back to the actual world with the Abidan guarding it, the transition was jarring. Yerin felt herself wrong-footed by the sudden shift from chaos to order.

The man in the white helmet stood just in front of their portal now. "Don't waste another second!" he snapped.

Yerin thought she recognized that voice.

The entire group pushed through the gateway, which was somehow harder than crossing any other portal she'd ever used. Maybe 'harder' wasn't right, but there was certainly more resistance. Though it only took a few steps, it was like hiking uphill. Or maybe pushing into a thick swamp.

Emriss led, bracing her steps with her diamond-headed staff. Sha Miara followed her, still sheathed in rainbow light, sticking closer to the older Monarch. Yerin went next, followed by Ziel and Mercy.

The brief time seemed to stretch in Yerin's mind, the spatial tunnel trembling around her. It flickered on the edge of existence, like a candle-flame in a high wind.

She shoved the rest of the way through and found herself stumbling to a halt next to Emriss and Sha Miara. Ziel and Mercy still struggled, not all the

way through yet.

From this end, Yerin could see that something had gone terribly wrong with her portal.

Mercy and Ziel moved slowly, as though drifting through a dream, but they were twisted and distorted. The space around them was about to collapse.

Fear spiked through Yerin's heart. She had clearly failed when she cut through the world, and now the others might pay the price for it.

"Hurry them up," the Abidan snapped, but Yerin was already reaching inside.

She grabbed Ziel and hauled him back, but the portal didn't like that. It tossed like a pond in high storm.

Fortunately, Mercy emerged a second afterwards, panting and sweating. The white-armored man swept their portal away with an angry gesture. His helmet melted away, revealing slicked-back black hair, a sharp nose, and a distinctly rat-like impression.

"You almost found yourself trapped between worlds," Kiuran of the Hounds said to Yerin.

Yerin trembled. "Did...was that..." She took a deep breath. "What did I do?"

"You? You got lucky, that's what you did. You are the last people to ascend from Cradle. Congratulations."

Yerin froze at those words.

Ziel folded his arms. "We have a friend back there."

"I have relatives..." Sha Miara began, then straightened herself inside her rainbow disguise and spoke more confidently. "My family is still in Cradle, and I would like to know that they are safe."

"Then I hope your loved ones are comfortable in their world. Our connection to Sector Eleven is so unstable I'm surprised even you made it through."

Yerin continued to breathe deliberately as she calmed herself down. What was she doing listening to an Abidan lackey in the first place?

"We'll get Eithan to fix it," she said to Ziel.

Kiuran snorted. "There would be nothing to fix if you hadn't dragged your feet. I expected you years ago."

"Had some more Monarchs to kill." If this was the Abidan that was going to bring them into the heavens, Yerin expected that she was in for a

very unpleasant ascension.

He looked from Sha Miara to Emriss. “You rid Cradle of the Monarchs?”

“Thought the eye of the heavens could see it all.” The Abidan had to have a way to monitor the worlds below them. If they weren’t doing it, that meant they didn’t care.

“In ordinary times, it would be the work of a thought to see more of your world than you’ve ever imagined. But, if you would open your own eyes, you would see that these times are not ordinary.”

Yerin didn’t know what this world usually looked like, but compared to what she’d glimpsed through Fury’s ascension, the place had seen better days.

Chunks of debris hung in the sky beyond the iron cage like a boulder had exploded above the clouds. Some of the bars that surrounded the world had been twisted or broken, buildings had collapsed and stayed where they lay, and one of the glowing pillars in this courtyard flickered.

More significantly, at least to Yerin, was that Kiuran was the only white-armored figure in sight.

“This world is called Threshold,” the Abidan went on, once he saw Yerin take a glance around. “We redirect all mortal ascensions here, so that they may get used to life beyond their own limited worlds. And so that we may sort out the worthy. Adepts—those who are proficient in their world’s energy system—stay here or are relocated to another world where they may be useful. The mundane populace usually attaches to an adept or two, but we’re always looking for those like you.”

Kiuran waved a hand up and down to indicate their group. “The Waybound.”

Emriss took in a long breath. “I’ve never heard that expression before. Does that indicate that we are bound *to* the Way or bound *for* the Way?”

“Yes,” Kiuran said, with a smug smile. “It refers to those who have been noticed by me and my order, the Hounds, as Fated to bind themselves to the Way Between Worlds. This indicates exceptional Abidan potential, though even if you should fail to qualify for one of the seven Divisions, Waybound almost always have significant impact on the grander scheme of the cosmos.”

Mercy beamed. “That sounds great!”

Sha Miara looked equally excited.

The Hound glanced to his broken and run-down surroundings with obvious scorn. "Usually, a team of Foxes would await you, as they are responsible for inter-world travel, but we are occupied with a greater war."

Ziel's voice was flat. "Another war. Out here."

Even Yerin had been hoping for a rest after fighting the Dreadgods.

Kiuran snorted. "You are from Cradle. You should know the face of our enemy better than most."

Yerin remembered red eyes inside a bone helmet.

That was too much for her to tolerate. She didn't need to get a grasp of the situation here. She needed to talk to the person who knew everything.

"Yell for Eithan," Yerin said.

The Hound gave her a look of exaggerated pity. "*Ozriel* would not come here for you, even if I were to call him. He has greater duties than this."

Yerin took a deep breath and gathered everything she had.

"**Eithan**," she called, and even this strange world resonated with the name.

Kiuran's eyes widened. He snapped armored fingers, and her shout cut off as though she'd never made it. His voice was shaky when he spoke, and he didn't seem quite so arrogant as before.

"You must listen to me. *Never* try that again. The worst-case scenario for you is attracting *Ozriel*'s attention."

Yerin was about to shout again, but she found a seal stopping her voice.

"I don't know what face he showed when he walked among you," Kiuran went on. "But it was only a mask. Do you understand? You are quite literally calling for Death."

When Yerin tried to respond, there was still a seal on her voice. She could feel it, a simple working that nonetheless had great depth. He had twisted the Way to block her words, and now it was as though she had never been able to speak.

Yerin pushed against it with her will, but the seal held strong.

"I think I'll leave that in place for now," Kiuran said.

Finally, with much more effort than she'd expected, Yerin snapped the seal. "Bleed me, you try that one more time and you're not going to like what happens."

Kiuran looked surprised for a moment, but then he sneered. "I am only a one-star Titan. My skill is as a Hound. Do not start a fight with an opponent you don't understand."

Mercy pointed to something behind him, but the Abidan gave her no attention.

“That’s some sharp advice,” Yerin said. “You should take it.”

Kiuran snorted and spread one arm. “Very well. It’s not unusual that a Monarch from Cradle needs a lesson in humility.”

Abruptly, the world constricted around Yerin. It felt like an impossibly heavy spiritual pressure, but also like an intense gaze piercing her through. A purple eye formed over Kiuran’s head, and she was sure it knew her past, her present, her future. It broke her down to the smallest piece and weighed her.

Yerin released her Goldsigns and cycled her madra, resisting. It was still heavy, but easier than she’d expected, especially when she felt the Death Icon supporting her.

Kiuran gave her a crooked smile. “You may take the first move. There is nothing about you I do not know.”

“I’d contend you don’t know my friends.”

The Hound gave a skeptical glance to the others at her side, but none of them were likely to move.

Which was fine, because Yerin hadn’t been talking about them.

A man slipped one black-armored hand over Kiuran’s shoulder. His white hair still looked strange to Yerin, but his friendly grin was too familiar.

“Thank you for taking such good care of my adopted daughter,” Ozriel said.

The pressure from the Hound disappeared as he dropped to one knee. “Yes, sir.”

Yerin’s heart lightened as she saw Eithan’s face. It felt ridiculous to admit, even to herself, but she had been worried about him.

Stupid to worry about somebody who could wipe out stars, but the last that she’d seen him, he’d been dragged away by others on his level. It was hard not to worry.

And now that he was here, he would know what to do.

Eithan’s grin was keeping Kiuran nailed to the floor. “I’m flattered by the respect you had for my time. You’ve been so vigilant in making sure I’m not disturbed.”

“I do apologize, Judge. I was afraid to—”

“Wise of you,” Eithan interrupted. “Thank you for your assistance, Kiuran. I’ll take it from here.”

Kiuran didn’t just run away. The rat-faced Abidan dove through a blue slice of space in an instant.

Eithan didn’t spare him another glance, looking over the rest of them fondly. “Well. You’ve worked hard to be here, haven’t you?”

“Are you all right?” Mercy asked him.

Eithan put a hand to his chest. “I *have* missed you all. Nobody here worries about me.”

Yerin watched him closely. He was acting the same as usual, but something about this felt wrong to her. For one thing, this was a little *too* usual. The last they’d seen him, he was being carted off like a criminal. And he surely knew what had happened in Cradle. Eithan knew everything. Still, he was behaving like they were picking up after no time apart.

Also, the impression of death around him was strange. Like he’d recently come back from the brink.

“Why are you looking so weak?” Yerin finally asked.

Emriss glanced to the side, giving Yerin an astonished look.

“That is a wonderful Icon you’ve found there, Yerin,” Eithan said fondly. “I have quite the connection to it myself. Yes, I’m afraid I’m not in my peak condition. A recent brush with death. The heavens are not quite... in order, at the moment. I’m somewhat surprised you made it here at all.”

Yerin swallowed hard. As bad as the world around her looked, she had no context for it. Maybe the world called Threshold always seemed like it was on the edge of falling to pieces.

But if Eithan said the situation was bad...

“And you brought friends!” Eithan continued, turning to the other two Monarchs.

Sha Miara had fallen to her knees upon catching sight of Eithan, and now appeared as a lump of rainbow madra trembling in terror. Emriss, meanwhile, merely dipped her head, the leaves in her hair swaying.

“It is an honor to formally meet you, Judge,” she said.

Eithan gave her a softer, more distant, somehow *older* smile than he had given his students. “The honor is mine, truly. You are one of the few Monarchs in the history of Cradle whom I respect, and you have my support in whatever you choose to do with the rest of your life. Not that my

favor is worth what it once was, but I have a few friends left. You would make a fine Phoenix.”

The bark-like patterns on Emriss’ skin wrinkled as she smiled. “For now, I would like a place to settle my family.” She patted a gemstone hanging from her neck, which felt to Yerin like a very deep void key.

Eithan’s smile brightened. “Bringing family along, even on a forced ascension! Your foresight is truly to be admired.”

Hesitantly, Sha Miara lifted her head. “Judge, what abo—”

“No letter of recommendation for you, young lady.” Eithan held out a hand, helping her to her feet. “However, I can arrange to help you adapt to life in Threshold. It’s the least I can do for my old friend from the Uncrowned King tournament!”

Sha Miara’s back stiffened, and Yerin suspected the young Monarch had been hoping Eithan wouldn’t bring that up.

But that was the last thought Yerin could spare for people she didn’t care about. She was about to ask a real question, but Ziel beat her to it.

“Can you help Lindon?” Ziel asked.

Eithan put a finger to the side of his temple. “He had too much of a connection to hunger, so he has to stay behind until he can shake it. I haven’t had the chance to check in on him recently, but that’s the direction he was heading. Am I close?”

“Your friend says Lindon won’t make it out of Cradle,” Yerin said. Eithan didn’t seem concerned, but she still trembled awaiting his answer.

Eithan winked. “Bad news there: Cradle no longer has a stable enough connection that we can pull him out. If he *does* ascend, he’ll find himself in great danger.”

They all stared at him.

“Why did you wink?” Ziel asked.

Mercy pointed at Eithan. “You winked! Doesn’t that mean you have good news?”

“The *good* news is that you can help!” Eithan said happily. “If we can recover enough territory and re-establish control over enough of the Way before Lindon ascends, he’ll show up right in our loving arms!”

Yerin felt a sort of fond irritation. “So if we switch up the words and say the same thing, then if we *don’t* do all this connecting in time, Lindon’s going to toss himself onto a sword. True?”

“Well said!” Eithan said happily. “I have missed our unspoken rapport.”

Ziel gave a heavy sigh.

“What can we do to help?” Mercy asked.

LINDON STOOD ON THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF *WINDFALL*, LOOKING THROUGH the huge windows and over Sacred Valley. The rebuilding effort proceeded noticeably by the day, though the region looked very different than he remembered as a child.

For one thing, Samara's ring was now golden and crackled with blue lightning, powered as it was by the Storm Core deeper in the labyrinth. At night, the light was very different from the smooth white he had once been accustomed to.

The buildings were even more of a difference. Enough people had sheltered in Sacred Valley that the place was now packed from peak to peak, buildings in styles from all over the world sharing space.

Lindon had recovered enough to release a trickle of his spiritual sense without blinding everyone Jade and higher in the Valley below. What he considered a wisp of his perception still covered all of Sacred Valley.

Souls of every level lived here for the moment, from Foundation children all the way up to Heralds, though the vast majority were Gold. He felt Paths of every aspect, including some combinations even he couldn't name without closer inspection. The architecture was strange to him too, ranging from living trees to mechanized buildings that burned scales to operate great gears.

Here and there, he heard people speaking his name, though not with the deliberate intention that meant they were trying to call him. Only idle mentions.

The sights were new to Lindon, evolving every day, and he wondered whether all this would last when he ascended. Even so, he was proud.

There was still something here.

The door burst open and his family barged in downstairs, complaining loudly.

“I don’t know how to *run* the Training Hall!” Kelsa said irritably. “Where is Ziel? He could have stayed behind! Every day, the students ask me, ‘Where is Lord Ziel?’ ‘Why did Lord Ziel leave us behind?’ ‘Lord *Ziel* would have given me the biggest room.’”

From his spot over Lindon’s shoulder, Dross sent a message down. [I could send them an illusion of Ziel if you’d like. My model of him is good, though he mostly hits people with hammers.]

Kelsa burst into the door at the top of the stairs, scowling in Dross’ direction. “Perfect. That’s exactly what they deserve. Some of these people are sixty-year-old Truegolds!”

Lindon decided not to point out that her foxfire tail was standing out stiffly, like an angry cat’s.

“Welcome home,” he said. “I take it my turn is coming up.”

Jaran clomped up the stairs after his daughter, muttering to himself, followed by Seisha with her arms full of scripted packages.

It was his mother who spoke first. “You were there too long yesterday. You should limit yourself to an hour today. It’s a traffic hazard.”

“We can barely walk down the street,” Jaran grumbled. “Everybody wants me to bring you their requests. This one wants a new weapon, that one has a sick child, and eight out of every ten wants to learn your sacred arts.”

“Wait, there were sick children?” Lindon asked.

Kelsa stared at her father. “That’s...We don’t need Lindon for that, we have medical care.”

Jaran scratched at the side of his face, where his scar used to be. “No, that’s just the sort of thing they say.”

“If people are sick—” Seisha began, but Jaran cut her off.

“No one’s sick, all right? Everybody’s healthy, it was a bad example.”

Lindon gave the surrounding buildings another quick scan to make sure no one was desperately calling his name to save their child, then changed the subject. “So training is going well?”

Kelsa gave him a pointed stare. "Training hasn't changed since yesterday, and how am I supposed to know, anyway? You're the one who knows everything. Some of the students are carving your advice into the stone to leave for future generations."

"That's...a bit of an exaggeration," Lindon said.

Kelsa marched over to the window and pointed down.

Past the dark blue edge of their cloud base, Lindon saw several sacred artists bustling around a monument. They had begun etching symbols into the stone, and even from a quick glance, Lindon recognized his cycling advice from the day before.

"We should put a stop to that," Lindon said.

[Yes. At least until we figure out how to phrase it better.]

"Exactly."

Seisha's drudge whistled, the brown fish bobbing excitedly around her packages. It looked almost the same as it ever had, though Lindon had upgraded it in every possible way. Not only was it the best drudge anyone below Archlord had ever used, it would also serve as a formidable defense for his mother.

Maybe *too* formidable. Though he hadn't told his mother *everything* he'd installed, she could potentially take over most civilized lands using only her drudge.

"Gesha asked me to work on the welcoming display for the Seven-Year Festival next year," Seisha said. "Once I have a functional design, I'll need some other dream artists. What about those people on the island?"

The Silent Servants had settled to the west, amidst the ruins of what had once been Mount Venture. Their floating island now sat on the ground, and they had re-planted their pale tree, though it would take decades to grow to its former height.

Initially, Lindon had feared the result of a Dreadgod cult settling in. Or *another* Dreadgod cult, since Redmoon Hall remained as well.

But they had been cooperative during his one visit. Almost *too* cooperative, as though they had collectively decided to treat him as the new Silent King.

[If the mother of the Empty Ghost came to them with a request, they will compete with one another to see who can obey the fastest.]

Lindon adjusted his white arm, which was banded in halfsilver, wrapped in scripted cloth, and carried in a goldsteel-plated sling. "By all means, get

their help. I think it will be good to have them interact with other people. But *tell* them what to do, all right? Don't let them use their best judgment."

He didn't trust the reasoning of anyone who had willingly joined a Dreadgod cult. Also, he suspected they might not see anything wrong with stealing a few memories here and there.

Seisha gave a firm nod. "We'll put them beneath Fisher Gesha."

"Why would they listen to her?" Lindon asked.

Jaran grunted. "She's the Soulsmith who trained you, isn't she?"

Technically, that was true.

"Oh, right!" Kelsa cried. She straightened her spine and glared at Lindon. "Jai Chen is a Truegold now."

Lindon avoided her gaze and pretended he didn't understand the implication. "Congratulations. We'll have to send her a present."

"Don't you think the present you *already* gave her was enough?"

With the hunger spear Lindon had gifted her, Jai Chen had been very motivated. She ranged all over Sacred Valley and the surrounding lands, hunting Remnants and rogue sacred beasts. Some of the students in the Twin Star Sect had started spreading legends about her.

Lindon wasn't sure that was warranted. She was only Gold, and there were plenty of Lords around.

Although, if she kept up this pace, she wouldn't stay Gold for long.

"Apologies," he said to his sister. He shrugged his right shoulder. "It would be difficult for me to do any complicated Soulsmithing in this state."

She threw up her hands. "What's complicated for you?"

Lindon could indeed make a simple weapon for his sister with only the power he could safely use, but the idea itched at him. He didn't want to make Kelsa a *plain* weapon. Even if it was a powerful one, like his mother's drudge.

He wanted her to use something that represented the best of what he could do. Anything less felt like a waste.

[Pride,] Dross said gravely. [It is the downfall of many a sacred artist. You should humble yourself to create her a pathetic weapon that will embarrass you and bring shame to the name of your family for generations.]

"Yes!" Kelsa said. "You should!"

Lindon examined her more closely. "Pardon if I sound rude, but you don't seem like yourself today."

Kelsa's eyes turned heated, and her tail thrashed as she wrestled with herself. Then she sighed and slumped into a nearby chair. "Apologies. You're right. It's just that they don't want to hear from a Highgold. They want you."

Lindon looked back to the window, where he saw Twin Star Sect flags flying all over Sacred Valley. The split star symbol of the sect was most common in pale blue and burnt orange, but he saw stars divided between sky-blue and blood-red, navy and dark scarlet, even black and white.

His sect had first gathered in his name because people wanted to borrow the protection of the Void Sage, and that hadn't changed since the Dreadgods rampaged all over the world. More than his insight into their sacred arts, these people wanted to feel safe.

Pressure settled onto his heart. Whether he had called them or not, they'd gathered in his name. If he abandoned them, he would be leaving them unprotected.

And he *was* going to leave. Impatience grew daily, an ache inside his chest. The others had left him behind, and it had already been far too long.

What if they needed his protection too?

"When I leave, will you come with me?" Lindon asked. His family stopped, and he immediately held up his hand. "Apologies, that was too sudden."

They had discussed the subject before but had never come to an agreement. Lindon had promised himself he wouldn't bring it up until he had to, but it weighed too heavily on his thoughts.

"I won't," Kelsa said firmly. "Not until I've earned it."

Lindon had expected nothing else from his sister.

His parents exchanged glances before Seisha spoke. "We've discussed it. But we don't even know when..."

She trailed off, but Lindon knew what she meant. He hoped to be gone well before the next year's Seven-Year Festival, but it was taking longer than he wanted for hunger aura to lose its grip on his body.

For all Lindon knew, he'd be around for the *next* Seven-Year Festival.

Jaran cleared his throat and awkwardly clapped his son on the shoulder. "You don't need to take care of us. I expect we will come with you, but the last thing we want is to hold you back."

"Well said," Kelsa said encouragingly.

"Of course it was." Jaran folded his arms. "I said it."

Lindon gave him a weak smile, but the repetition of his name was pushing even at his restricted spiritual perception. "Pardon, but I think my time has come. They're getting impatient down there."

Seisha waved a hand. "We'll be here when you're done. If you see Little Blue, tell her I'm cooking tonight."

Lindon walked downstairs and off the edge of the cloudship, letting himself fall.

He landed in the center of a courtyard, in a pulse of force aura that prevented him from breaking the paving-stones. This land had been theoretically reclaimed by the Wei clan, though virtually no one he saw had been born in Sacred Valley.

Everyone here wore robes of the Twin Star Sect, and salutes spread out from him in a wave the second he reached the ground.

The crowd parted around him as he walked, though he took a moment here and there to greet the faces he knew. He moved toward the training courtyard, which had expanded since yesterday; it was a vast, open space with a single raised stage.

It was filled with thousands of students.

They knelt on cushions in rows, cycling as they awaited him. Many had two cores. They quieted when they sensed or saw him approach, many closing their eyes and pretending they had been diligently training.

Two Remnants slithered through the air toward him, Remnants that had become known as the Twin Guardians of the Twin Star Sect.

"I have been giving pointers to the ones who wished to learn the Path of Black Flame," Noroloth said. The black dragon Remnant smiled at Lindon, his too-wide head distorting. "If anything is not up to your standards, please instruct me so that I may improve."

The gold dragon Remnant at his side snapped at him. "Stop bending yourself in half!" Ekeri snapped. "You're a dragon!"

Noroloth was far more advanced than she was, though Lindon had continued artificially enhancing her. He estimated that she was roughly the level of an Overlord, which meant she could almost handle a portion of the Weeping Dragon's madra.

A small portion.

"A dragon should know when to show proper respect," Noroloth said.

Ekeri drew herself up proudly, displaying the many constructs embedded in her suit of golden armor. "Before long, I will be able to walk

in human form. Look.” She showed off her foreclaws, which indeed more closely resembled human hands than they had before.

Lindon made an appropriate sound of amazement before he indicated the students. “We’re not missing anyone, are we?”

“Not a single absence.” Noroloth chuckled. “It’s the first time.”

Lindon had left word that this would be a special lesson, and it seemed that message had carried its intended impact. In fact, even the skies were full of clouds and flying sacred artists who hadn’t, strictly speaking, been invited.

That was all right. Lindon would allow word of this to spread.

He leaped off the ground, soaring over the heads of the students and landing at the center of the stage. There was a control panel and a network of constructs intended to magnify his voice, but Lindon stepped in front of it.

Dross.

[Would you like me to enhance your voice at all? I can make it sound like you’re singing, if you want.]

Lindon spoke at a normal volume, trusting Dross to carry the message to each person rather than magnifying his voice with aura. “Greetings to the Twin Star Sect from the Sage of Twin Stars.”

The sect shouted their own greeting back, shaking the ground.

He waited for the noise to die down, then continued. “I’m sure you all know why my Path is called the Path of Twin Stars. It is named, of course, for my two cores. Many of you have split your own cores, and you’ve filled them with two Paths of your own.”

Even without scanning, he sensed many different pairs. They tended to use complementary aspects, selecting madra in one core that covered for the weakness of the other, but that wasn’t always the case. Some followed Paths of life and death or water and fire, but others used their twin cores to gather two different types of sword madra or a pair of seemingly random Paths.

“But what you may not know is *why* I followed two Paths,” Lindon continued. “It’s harder, it can be weaker, and it requires more resources. The true answer is that I wasn’t satisfied with only one. I wanted more.”

In its sling, his Dreadgod hand clenched into a fist. “As I was once taught, there are a million Paths in this world, but they can all be reduced to one: improve yourself.

“For me, that meant a hunger to improve in the sacred arts. To fight greater battles and climb to greater heights. You may choose to improve in different ways, but for those of you who share *my* hunger, I intend to share a new technique with you.”

There came a restless stirring and a murmuring in the crowd, and he felt their attention sharpen.

“We have kept this secret until now,” he went on. “It is difficult to practice and can be taken from your Remnant, so I have taught you a lesser version. Most of you will likely stick with the one you know now. But if I am to leave you behind—”

There came a much louder outcry this time, a protest, as sacred artists from all over—not just the ones seated on the cushions—protested the statement.

This time, Lindon did control wind aura all over the courtyard to overwhelm the noise. “*When* I leave you for the heavens, I intend to leave you fully armed. You came to me for protection, and I wish for you to be protected. But I also want you to provide protection for others.”

At that point, Lindon removed his veil. Just a crack, but the pressure from his spirit hung over the crowd as though he’d suspended a sword an inch over each of their heads.

There was utter silence.

He looked over them with black-and-white eyes, and he told them what he had once told an Underlord he didn’t quite trust. “Remember that whatever you do while wearing my symbol, you do in my name. And I will be watching.”

Though Lindon didn’t ask for it, Dross projected a giant version of himself looming behind Lindon, staring at them all with a giant purple eye.

A shudder passed over all the students.

Message sufficiently delivered, Lindon veiled himself again. This time, he pulled out a book. He ran a thumb over its pages—some yellowed, most weathered, and some newer but crammed loosely in the middle.

Then he opened *The Path of Twin Stars*.

“Now, prepare yourselves and follow closely,” Lindon said. “This is the Heaven and Earth Purification Wheel.”



Despite Suriel's title as a Judge, she rarely sat in judgment of mortals. Even ascended ones. Their business was rarely important enough to justify her individual attention, so it was usually handled by lower-ranking Abidan.

But the business of Executors was critical enough to require three Judges.

Technically four, but Ozriel was hardly objective in this issue.

In the Hall of Judgment in Sanctum, three members of the Court of Seven sat to decide whether the Executor program could be resumed. The Fox, the Phoenix, and the Ghost looked down on their subjects.

And the grinning Reaper who stood over them like a proud hen.

Suriel smiled over the Monarchs from Cradle. "Ziel. Mercy. Yerin. I'm pleased you made it. I've been watching over you for a long time. I am Suriel."

Mercy and Ziel were visibly astonished to be addressed by name, but Yerin was unsurprised. She regarded Suriel frankly.

"Hear I owe you a debt. You sent Lindon my way." Yerin straightened up and pressed her fists against one another, bowing over them. "Gratitude."

A Sacred Valley gesture.

Suriel found that adorable.

But she was a professional, and she wouldn't let her personal attachments influence her decision. She nodded to Yerin and then turned a more serious gaze to Ozriel. "Have you explained their responsibilities?"

"I have, but I encourage you to hammer it in." A ghost of the old Ozriel passed through him. "I'm not certain it's possible to overstate the gravity of the situation."

No matter what experiences Eithan may have had in Cradle, Ozriel did take his role seriously. *Too* seriously, which some might say had led to his abandonment of the post in the first place.

Suriel looked over to Darandiel, the Ghost, who was staring off into the distance as her mind drifted to strange places.

Nonetheless, the other Judge responded in an ethereal voice. "The worlds fall further apart with every word. We will send you, with minimal training, into Iterations on the verge of destruction. You will be in danger of becoming trapped in a dying world. If you do not succeed well enough, you may doom neighboring worlds. If any Abidan suspects you of betrayal, you

may be utterly erased, all memory of you in all realities crushed and swept away.”

This time, Mercy and Yerin were the two who were disturbed. Ziel’s thoughts were ordered.

Suriel couldn’t read minds—at least, not without detection—but she didn’t need to. People’s thoughts were never as well-hidden as they thought.

Zakariel leaned forward and jabbed a finger at Ziel. “You *will* betray us. They always do! Why are we here?”

“Have you made up your mind, then?” Suriel asked.

“Oh, I’m going to vote for them,” the Fox went on. “They can’t make things any worse than they are now. Maybe they’ll do some good before they go crazy.”

Suriel disagreed on two points, but instead of voicing her thoughts, she turned to Darandiel. “Are you also in favor of re-forming the Executor program?”

The Ghost still gazed at something deeper than the rest of them. “Their corruption is not a given. Just because something has always happened doesn’t mean it always will. But they *can* make things worse.”

Darandiel looked down and made deliberate eye contact with the three potential Executors...and Ozriel. A shadow passed over the mortals, but Ozriel gave a nod in return.

“Things can always get worse,” the Ghost said.

Suriel picked up the speech and continued. “Ordinarily we would give you years of training and preparation, and I still would not be certain you were ready. Now, time is our most precious resource. Therefore, this is your last chance. If you agree to intervene in mortal worlds as our Executors, by far the most likely outcome is that you will either die or be executed.”

The mortals were lost in their own thoughts for a moment, and while Suriel felt the urgency of the other worlds deeper than her bones, she let the moment stay. They needed to consider this with the weight it deserved.

Akura Mercy was the first to speak. “We can make a difference, right?” Her gaze was surprisingly piercing.

“The lives you could save are beyond counting,” Suriel responded.

“All right,” Mercy said calmly. “I’m in.”

Next to her, Ziel raised a hand. “Better to try than to sit on the sidelines and wait for things to fall apart.”

“Who decides if we’re rabid?” Yerin looked around the Court at the three Judges. “Is it you? I’m not about to swear an oath that lets you slit my throat if I look at you sideways.”

Zakariel propped up her cheek on one hand. “We could slit your throat now.”

Yerin weighed that for a moment as Suriel wondered if she would say something antagonistic. If she did, that would be a bad sign for her career as an Executor. Making enemies of Judges wasn’t a good path toward a long, healthy life.

“Would *you* sign up to this?” Yerin asked Zakariel. She jerked her head in Ozriel’s general direction.

The Fox’s answering smile was a feral gleam. “I’d have done whatever it took to get close to real power.”

“There it is, then.” Yerin’s red eyes met Suriel’s. “Looks like we’re all in.”

Suriel had never expected otherwise. Ozriel wouldn’t have brought them here if he hadn’t at least described the situation and gotten their agreement already. But they needed to be officially sworn in before the Court, and for that to be binding, they needed to realize the full depth of their commitment.

She tapped into the Way, backing her words with the fundamental laws of reality. The other two Judges silently lent her their authority as well.

“Then as the representative of the Court of Seven, I hereby permit the creation and operation of the Execut—”

Ozriel cleared his throat. “Reapers.”

Suriel stopped.

“*You* have a division named after you,” Ozriel pointed out.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter what they were called. Their role would be the same. And naming them after the Reaper would make him more responsible for their behavior. In theory.

“...the creation and operation of the Reaper Division,” Suriel continued. “For the purpose of removing threats to preserve existence. They will report to Ozriel, the eighth Judge, who in return reports to this Court. As they bring light to the many worlds, may they go with the Way.”

Reality settled in response to Suriel’s declaration. Now, the Abidan had an eighth division.

However short-lived it might be.

Suriel felt a distant sadness as she looked out over the young faces she had watched over for years. Odds were, she had just consigned these three to corruption and death.

But the Abidan truly needed them, and they had chosen knowingly. Moreover, they were hardly the first people she had watched walk into tragedy.

She would hope for their success. And in the very likely event of their fall, she would remember them as they were now.

While they were still themselves.



Yerin poked at the wall of the metal carriage that surrounded them. She didn't like the designs of the vehicles here. They were like smooth metal eggs, and while the windows showed a vast silver-and-gold city retreating beneath her, she couldn't feel any wind aura supporting their flight. It made her feel like they would fall any second.

"So they think we're about two steps from murdering babies, true?" Yerin observed.

Eithan gave a brief shrug. "They have reason to think so, considering the Mad King."

"And you're certain we won't end up like him?" Ziel asked.

"Certain..." Eithan mused. "*Certain...*"

Before they'd been brought into the Court of Seven, Eithan had expressed his confidence in them. The previous Executors had been left to operate independently, treated like disposable weapons. It was no surprise that they would eventually fall.

By contrast, Eithan assured them he would take care of his Reapers.

Yerin believed that. Leaving his students alone wasn't in Eithan's nature.

But she wasn't confident it would be enough.

"I *will* say that I am not relying solely on my supervision and your strength of character," Eithan continued. "If we can prove the viability of our operation, I intend to steadily lessen the burden on you through recruitment."

"You've got more students we've never heard about?" Yerin asked.

“I had to be selective when choosing my personal team.” Eithan beamed at them. “As we expand, my criteria will get broader. There are others who would make excellent Reapers once we have laid the foundation.”

The light of the planet had already left them behind as they continued past the sky and into the darkness. A vast artificial mountain hovered in space, a vaguely triangular slab of metal and stone.

Yerin nodded to it. “We about to crash?”

“In fact, that is to be our base of operations.”

Mercy made a disappointed sound. “Aw, that’s okay. We’ll make the best of it.”

“The other divisions got golden pyramids,” Ziel pointed out.

Eithan held up a finger. “Not all of them! One has an entire planet.” He leaned out the window. “It may not be the most attractive or comfortable, but it also isn’t the most secure. It’s sufficient for our needs, of course, but it’s...I suppose the best description would be ‘a floating pile of garbage.’”

“You’re not popular, are you?” Yerin asked.

Eithan ignored that. “This station was left over from an ancient war, cobbled together from outdated pieces to protect an outpost of early Abidan. It failed and everyone died. It is often called the Grave.”

Yerin looked between the Grave and Eithan’s self-satisfied expression. “Who named—”

“I did, just now.”

Yerin had thought so.

Eithan clapped his hands. “Now, given that our time—and Lindon’s—is very limited, I feel that we should begin with on-the-job training. You will all follow me into a world on the brink of destruction, and we will reverse its course together.”

“Do you have a world in mind?” Ziel asked.

A shadow passed over Eithan’s face; the unfamiliar sadness that had come to him with his scythe and white hair.

“For now, it doesn’t matter. They’re all falling apart.”

That brought the mood down further, so Yerin grabbed the conversation by the collar and hauled it along. “Then why not head out from here? What’s in there that we need?”

Eithan raised one eyebrow. “Your armor, of course.”

LINDON CONSTRUCTED HIS MEETING-SPACE OUT OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE Void Icon and pure madra. As a result, it resembled an inhospitable blue-white void with an invisible floor, but it was more inviting than it would have been if he'd made it from Blackflame.

He shifted nervously in place. He would have preferred to have this meeting in person, but despite his recovery, he still couldn't move through space. At least, not without causing significant problems.

Lindon didn't even want to use the labyrinth, though that was for unrelated reasons.

So he hosted a spiritual meeting and extended invitations. He expected most people to attend peacefully, but alternatives buzzed through his mind like clouds of irritating flies.

Fighting a high-level battle before he was ready could set him back months of progress, but he'd do it. If they made him.

Seconds after the space was established, a pair of figures in golden armor manifested and strode toward him.

Larian spread her arms wide in welcome, one hand clutching her bow of gray driftwood, smiling as widely as Eithan would have. "Lindon! Do you have my bow?"

"Forgive her," said the man at her side. "It is good to see you are recovering well, Void Sage." Del'rek of the Shann was head and shoulders taller than Lindon, a sacred elephant in human form, and spoke over a pair of tusks.

Lindon inclined his head to them both. “Bow Sage. Mountain Sage. Dross tells me you kept trying to take pieces of the Dreadgod corpses.”

Del’rek edged away from Larian.

“They were just sitting there!” she protested. “Rotting!”

“I warned her,” Del’rek said.

[Yerin also warned her,] Dross added. [And I warned her too. There were lots of warnings.]

Larian put on an offended look. “I was trying to *preserve* these unique pieces of Cradle’s history! For you!”

[If I didn’t like you, I would have let Lindon’s unconscious body kill you.]

That was a story Lindon had heard months ago. Apparently, in the day or two after losing consciousness while killing the Dreadgods, Lindon had attacked anyone who got too close. The only one who had tried more than once was Larian.

“I learned my lesson,” Larian said humbly.

“She didn’t,” Del’rek said. “We had to stop her two more times.”

Larian gestured as though putting something to one side. “He said, she said, who’s to say what the truth is? It’s all very murky. The point is, the Dreadgods are all packaged up and on their way to you, and only a *very small* fraction of their most *worthless* parts has mysteriously gone missing. More importantly, I believe we agreed that you owe me a bow.”

Lindon looked from her to Del’rek. “I invited all of you. Can you two speak for the Eight-Man Empire?”

“We can,” the elephant said. “The others are not as...reliable.”

Larian threw up her hands in imitation of terror. ““Oh no, he’s a monster, he’s going to eat us! I have nightmares about him! I don’t want to ascend because I think he’ll follow me to the heavens and steal my soul!’ Cowards, all of them. Not a single one has the guts to look you in the eye and show you the respect you’re due for making me such an amazing bow.”

Lindon was unexpectedly hurt. “Is that really how they think of me?”

“I don’t.” Larian placed a gentle hand on his arm. “I think of you as a brother.”

“She has greatly regretted giving up the Dreadgod bow,” Del’rek added.

“I had it in my *hands*! Why did I have to give it back?”

Lindon took a step back and regarded them both. “I will need a soul oath from you all. You will be invaluable in keeping the peace here, but if

you are going to prevent the rise of Monarchs, you can no longer conquer.” He made sure his black-and-white eyes burned. “It’s that or ascend.”

He expected resistance, but the change in Larian was immediate. “I swear on the souls of the Eight-Man Empire that we will forfeit all territory and dedicate our lives to the exclusion of Monarchs, for as long as we wear the armor. Let our Empire stand now in defense of the Dreadgods’ return.”

The soul oath resonated until Lindon accepted it, finding it surprisingly solid.

More informally, Larian continued. “We’ve been waiting for this opportunity for a *long* time. We’re prepared for it, though we won’t be enough on our own.”

“I’ll leave behind as many measures as I can,” Lindon assured her. “And Emriss Silentborn left some plans as well.”

Dross drifted out and shrugged. [None of it’s perfect, of course. Anything we put into place has a decent chance of being abused within a hundred years. But we’re *hoping* we can pop down ourselves occasionally, to keep an eye on things.]

“We will be ready,” Del’rek said.

“I admit,” Lindon went on, “I expected it to be harder to convince you to give up your territory.”

Larian gave a short laugh. “Ha! No. I’m ascending. You think I want to stay behind and police this place? I’m going to the heavens, and I’m taking my fortune with me.” Forlorn, she leaned over her driftwood bow, plucking its string. “If only I had a weapon worthy of my journey...”

From his soulspace, Lindon withdrew a bow.

It was sleek and blue, covered in fine scales. Its string crackled with lightning, and it gave off spiritual weight worthy of a Dreadgod weapon.

“I’ll leave naming it to you,” he said, presenting it to Larian. “There is no binding, as instead I dedicated its entire internal structure to conducting and magnifying your power. It should be highly compatible with your Path of Whispering Wind.”

The Bow Sage picked up her gray weapon and hurled it into the distance. With both hands, she cradled the Dreadgod weapon like it was a newborn baby.

“Sssshh,” she whispered to the bow, “it’s okay, the scary man is gone. You’re with Mama now.”

“Why am I the scary man?” Lindon asked.

[You should be more disturbed that she referred to herself as ‘Mama.’]

Del’rek had traveled over to pick up Larian’s weapon. This place was a distortion of space, rather than solely a spiritual projection of their bodies. If Lindon had let it collapse, the bow might have ended up lying a thousand miles away.

He looked down to the weapon in clear disapproval. “You carried this bow for almost a century. It is disrespectful to treat it this way.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Larian said to her new bow. “He’s jealous.”

That reminded Lindon, and he looked up to Del’rek. “I had one more reason to meet with you all today. The Weeping Dragon doesn’t suit your Path quite as well, and I haven’t received the Wandering Titan’s corpse yet, but I did have...”

He withdrew another weapon from his soul-space. “...a piece of its sword.” A jet-black stone spear with a jagged obsidian spearhead; its spiritual pressure was in no way inferior to the bow.

Larian’s old driftwood bow clattered to the ground again as Del’rek snatched up the spear. It was sized to fit him.

“I didn’t have too many samples of your Path of Singing Bones,” Lindon said. “Let me know if it doesn’t fit you.”

Del’rek executed one half-speed spear thrust and the entire space trembled. “It’s *beautiful*. You didn’t make one of these for each of us, did you?”

“I can find a use for the other six. You two answered my call, so you—”

Larian appeared at his shoulder so fast that she reminded him strongly of Eithan. “It sure would be a shame to see those others go to waste.”

“They won’t be wasted. My sect follows many different Paths, so I can leave them behind.”

Del’rek looked at something in the distance. “Hm. Perhaps we should have kept ourselves quieter.”

“Quickly!” Larian cried. She grabbed Lindon. “I’ve always thought we had a beautiful friendship. Two kindred souls, you and me. Don’t you want to just give me all those other priceless weapons?”

The blue-white edges of the space trembled and a human man in golden armor staggered through. He had red hair, a wide smile, and a greenish cloud hovering over his head. “Whew, sorry I’m late, it’s amazing all the... traffic. You don’t happen to have a sword left, do you?”

A dark-skinned woman with burning purple hair appeared in the distance, creeping closer as though she meant to remain unseen. The bright gold of her armor would have made that impossible if her power hadn't already given her away.

"Night looms over all of us," she whispered. "We must chart our course with care, now that the maps have been burned." She crept a little closer. "...I'll take a dagger."

Larian shook a fist at them and at the other gold-armored figures who poured out of nowhere. "Fiends! Jackals! Vultures! Get away!" She leaned closer to Lindon and rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. "Their greed is so obvious. Doesn't it just make you want to teach them a lesson? By rewarding those of us who showed up first, for instance."

Lindon pulled further weapons out of his soul space.

He had prepared more than enough.



Princess R'leya of the Fractured Realms worried she was too late to stop the end of the world.

She stood in the wide ritual room at the top of the ancient Archmage's Tower as a dozen of her kingdom's finest wizards struggled to contain the spell they shaped together. The spell itself was an intricate three-dimensional tapestry of light and otherworldly energies, swirling in what resembled an endlessly exploding kaleidoscope.

On the wall behind the spell was a map of the Fractured Realms, marked with flags of various colors. By far, the most common flag was black.

The monsters were everywhere.

Zyrellon, Lord of the Broken, had conjured up his forces from places of darkness best unspoken. Dark Lords had risen and fallen throughout the long history of the Fractured Realms, but this one was...different. It was as though destiny itself bent to help him, giving him victory after victory.

Princess R'leya had only one duty left that had any chance of working: summoning heroes from another world.

Zyrellon had destroyed the first two heroes she'd summoned. He grew stronger both times, and now she feared he was unstoppable.

This would be her third and final attempt. After this, their fate would be truly irrevocable. Many of the oracles and seers of the Realms had already given up, telling her to surrender herself to the inevitability.

There was no point to that. If she was going to die either way, she might as well struggle to the very end.

One of the wizards called to her, and she grabbed her staff. Her part in the ritual had come.

She inserted the fist-sized diamond at the end of her staff into the spell and, as she felt magic drain from her, she cast her call into the place beyond the world.

“Heroes of realms beyond, hear me! Our world is in dire jeopardy. We face a threat we cannot withstand, and we need a warrior without peer. Without you, our—”

She cut off as she felt something grab the end of her spell. The spell, her staff, and all the light in the room instantly turned red.

Hands grabbed her and shoved her backward. Cuts appeared here and there on the skin of several wizards, as though the air itself turned to blades. Wind whipped so violently it was impossible to hear.

One elderly wizard, the most senior among them, put his mouth close to her ear so she could hear him shout, “Run! We’ll contain it!”

R’leya’s eyes spun. What were they panicking about? The hero summoning had succeeded, and so easily! Certainly, the power was frightening, but that was to be celebrated!

Then she looked deeper into the spell.

There, she saw visions of violence she could not comprehend. Monsters slain. Oceans of blood spilled. Flashing swords, battles, and violence beyond what her eyes could hold.

R’leya staggered toward the entrance of the room, but she was too late. There came a blinding flash of scarlet light with a silver edge.

As the light cleared, she turned to see what demonic warrior they’d summoned.

A girl emerged from the light—a girl who appeared to be only twenty years old—coughing and waving her hand in front of her mouth as though to blow away campfire smoke.

She wore smooth black armor, but no weapons R’leya could see. Her hair was equally black, with one lock dyed red. Her eyes were red as well,

but otherwise she looked like the sort of girl R'leya could find anywhere in the Central Realm.

"Bleed and bury me," the girl said. "Thought that would be a smoother trip." The summoned girl looked around at the old men, who were conjuring defensive spells, and ultimately settled on Princess R'leya.

The new girl jerked her chin at the princess. "You holding the reins here?"

R'leya had a speech memorized for summoned heroes, and she'd even had more practice delivering it than she ever expected to. This was not at all the circumstance under which she'd imagined delivering it, but habit took over.

She pressed hands to her middle and bowed. "Greetings, brave heroes... uh, heroine...from worlds beyond. I am Princess R'leya of the Fractured Realms, and for years now our world has been beset by the monstrous forces of the Dark Lord Zyrellon, Lord of the Broken."

The new girl was clearly not paying attention. She was shifting her weight, rolling her neck from side to side, and looking out the windows.

"What may I call you, brave heroine?" R'leya prodded.

"Found him," the summoned girl said abruptly. She conjured a sword made from her magic, a mass of silver-and-red power given physical form. Upon the mere appearance of the blade, all the spells of the wizards fractured, crushed by superior power.

With that weapon of supernatural energy, the heroine slashed the air open.

Into the throne room of the Dark Lord Zyrellon.

R'leya had never seen that place before, but she knew it could be no other. Everything within was a twisted monstrosity. The lights were shining grubs, the walls were bones crawling with spiders, and nameless warped creations pulsed awkwardly through the air. Even the throne itself was a shelled, heaving creature, like a beetle grown into the shape of a chair.

The summoned girl made as though to walk through the portal, but hesitated when she saw the sight on the other side. "Blech. Take two glances of that and tell me this guy isn't evil."

Powerful as this heroine obviously was, she was clearly taking Zyrellon too lightly. Mustering all her courage, R'leya rushed forward. "Close this gateway! He *is* evil, and more powerful and ruthless than you realize. By stepping through, you put yourself in his power."

“Yeah, it’s not like I’m tripping all over myself to rush in there, but I’ve got to measure before I cut. Just because you called my name doesn’t make you a saint from the heavens. Maybe I ought to be saving *him* from *you*.”

Before R’leya could come up with a response to that, the newcomer held her breath and strode through the portal.

Insects scurrying at her feet were shredded by invisible blades before they got close.

“Fortification spells!” the elder wizard shouted. “Prevent anything from passing through! The very wind could carry plague. Gornus, cleansing spells!”

R’leya almost stopped him. If the heroine needed to retreat, they didn’t want to block her way with spells. But then again, she could probably just stride straight through.

While the wizards were casting, their chants filled the chamber. Above them, R’leya heard a roaring voice echo through the halls of the Dark Lord’s fortress.

She couldn’t make out Zyrellon’s words, but she clearly heard the summoned heroine’s dry reply. “Put those fangs away and talk. Came straight from the heavens to cut the head off the guy ending the world. You know him?”

The fortification spells locked the portal down, hanging in a translucent cage around the cut in the world. Now that the wizards had finished their incantations, Zyrellon’s voice was clear. And terrifying. She’d never heard him speak before, but it was as demonic as she’d imagined.

“I AM THE END OF THIS WORLD!” he bellowed. “I AM THE DARKNESS UNENDING! I AM—”

For a flash, the world beyond the portal turned black-and-white. It cut off the Dark Lord’s rant.

A moment later, the heroine returned, running a hand through the red streak in her hair. “He’s dead. Guess you’ll want proof, huh? You can go get his head...er, wait, it’s missing. I’d contend you could find an ear.”

As expected, she did indeed stride through the spells surrounding the portal as though they weren’t there. They shattered to nothing before even touching her black armor.

Some of the wizards cast quick scout-spells, which fluttered through the portal like messenger pigeons. They returned almost immediately, and the wizards gave shaking nods.

The Dark Lord was dead. Just like that.

The heroine's sword had disappeared again, and she clapped her armored hands together as though brushing them clean. "Cheers and celebration for us, then. That was an easy one. Can't imagine they're all clear as good glass."

Princess R'leya returned to herself. She felt as if she had been lost in some insane daydream.

"Heroine, we...we never imagined your power would be so...overwhelming. Let us prepare you a room, and we will feast you for as long as you wish to stay. The gratitude of the Fractured Realms is endless."

The girl waved her hand lazily. "Can't. You're not the only world I have to save today."

R'leya's spine stiffened. She wasn't prepared to send the heroes *back*.

It was theoretically possible, but they had never had the opportunity to cast that spell before. And it would be at least as costly as calling heroes here, which took years to arrange.

How would this invincible heroine respond to learning that she was trapped here for two or more years? If she lost her temper, she might be an even greater threat than the Dark Lord Zyrellon.

"My apologies, my lady, but we cannot send you back yet. As I said, we didn't expect you to succeed so—"

"No harm to me. Got my own way back."

A bladed arm of what seemed to be scarlet chrome extended from the heroine's armored back. It slashed the air once, cutting open another portal. Only this one extended, not to a real place, but into a dimension of endless, complex blue that twisted the princess' eye.

She felt so nauseous looking at it that she had to glance away.

"Call me back if you need me," the heroine said, and she stepped into the blue.

Before she vanished, Princess R'leya called after her. "Wait! What's your name?"

The girl called something that was partially swallowed up by the rush of the portal closing behind her.

"Spread the word to all the Fractured Realms," the princess announced. "We have been saved by a mysterious heroine from worlds beyond: the mighty warrior Heron."



In a vault beyond space, the Remnant sat and sorted its fractured memories.

It remembered being a lion, but now it looked like a man. Its power was great, but not enough to break open this space from the inside. The vault had been made to contain the most powerful Remnants, and now it held two of them.

For a long time, the lion had fought the man of lightning, but neither had put their all into it. They were stuck here together, and the longer they sat in silence, the more the lion's Remnant believed this was its true punishment.

There was only one set of memories that had survived the transition clearly: the skills of an ancient Soulsmith. An enemy.

Ozmanthus Arelius' Soulsmith inheritance remained, taunting the Remnant. It wasn't like hearing a voice in its head, which may have been a comfort. Instead, it was like knowing exactly what Ozmanthus would say at any given time.

That was much worse.

Ozmanthus would mock the Remnant for this. He would say that floating forever in a dissolving spatial vault was a better fate than the spirit deserved. That all of its planning, riches, and power had come to nothing, and all because of its own treachery.

Trapped in a prison of guilt and recrimination, the Remnant lived in painful silence. Until, one day, a light shone at the front of the vault. Blue light.

Something was tearing its way in.

The Remnant staggered to its feet, bracing itself against the wall with its goblet-shaped hand. Its companion, the lightning Remnant, stared with undisguised hope.

Meanwhile, the lion Remnant cycled its madra and prepared to fight. The full possibilities were fuzzy, but between its fragmented memories and the comprehension of Ozmanthus Arelius, it could think of a few entities who might break in here.

The most likely candidate, by far, was a Sage who had found an entry to this space. That Sage would receive a deadly surprise and become the Remnant's ticket back to life.

The world was torn back like a curtain, pulled aside by white fingers.

Something about that made the Remnant hesitate, like a long-dormant instinct. But he relaxed when he sensed that the next person who entered was indeed only a Sage.

The blonde woman with streaks of gray in her hair entered the vault and gasped. Tears filled her eyes and she reached out for the man made of lightning.

“Tiberian?” she asked.

The storm-Remnant placed a hand to his head. “You are...Are you my daughter?”

The Sage choked out a laugh through tears. “Listen to you! Your mother would laugh herself sick. Tiberian, I’ve known you before you took your first steps.”

“I...I’m sorry, I...”

“We’ll get you sorted out,” the woman said kindly. “You won’t be what you were, but we can help. I’ll bring you back.”

The lion Remnant attacked.

A wave of golden light overtook half the vault, a Domain meant to seize control of everything. Tiberian moved into a defensive position, but the Sage didn’t protect herself.

She didn’t need to. The golden light crashed into a pale, outstretched palm and was slurped away, like water into a whirlpool.

Fear shook the Remnant at the sight of that hand. Loose bandages had come undone from around the wrist, but it was wrapped from wrist to shoulder in scripted cloth. Where the arm met the shoulder, halfsilver rings restricted the flow of the arm’s power.

The white hand opened and closed experimentally. “Good. It still works.”

The sound of that voice sent more shivers running through the Remnant. Eyes like burning white circles blazed in a vault that suddenly seemed much darker.

“Hello, Shen,” the Void Sage said. “I believe you were holding on to my inheritance.”

Reigan Shen’s Remnant tried to cry, but it had no tears.

MERCY SAT IN THE ONE HUMAN-SIZED CHAIR IN THE GIANT'S CASTLE. SHE smiled pleasantly up at the leader of the Fire Giants, who sat at the end of his own audience hall.

The Scorched King, Sulthurus, stared out through the gaping hole in the wall where his castle had crumbled away. He turned the burned half of his face toward her as he stared into the sunset.

"Our people begged for heavenly aid," he rumbled, "but you are centuries late."

What burns a Fire Giant? Mercy asked Dross.

[Oh, good, a question! I was falling asleep listening to the history of his kingdom, though of course I still remember every word. His face was burned when he was buried alive in an avalanche and left for dead. Excruciating for them, or so I hear.]

The King's beard was living flame on the healthy-looking half of his face, but it did not shine on the burn-scarred half. "The servants of Ruin struck down the Great Bison, whose bounty fed our people. Slowly, we have died out. The few of us that remain are scattered and starving."

"That's terrible!" Mercy said.

[If we have to stay here and listen to this any longer, I'm going to take their population down another notch.]

A pair of orange lizard-people scurried up to Sulthurus, bearing baskets of fruits and vegetables. He idly grabbed one and tossed its contents into his mouth, not even chewing. The lizard-people smoldered like hot coals.

One of them refreshed Mercy's wine, and she thanked it brightly.

“Soon,” the King continued, “we will have what we need to complete the Second Sun. Once it is finished, we will need your assistance no longer. This will be a world of fire, and we will be reborn.”

Mercy didn’t need to glance into the shadows of the future to see how that would turn out.

“I think there might be an even better way!” she said.

Sulthurus’ eyes turned back to her. His hands gripped the arms of his massive chair so tightly that the wood began to splinter. The lizard-men scurried away, shrieking.

“Do not meddle with us now! We have solved our own problems, and we will defeat our own enemies!”

If that were true, Mercy wouldn’t be here.

“I’m here to help you, and I’ll do everything I can,” Mercy said earnestly. “I’m going to look around, and if I see that the Second Sun is the best solution for you, I’ll help you launch it into the sky myself!”

She meant it, too. If somehow she saw that placing a second sun into the sky, scorching the ground and making the land fit for habitation *only* by Fire Giants, was somehow best for the people of this Iteration, she’d do it!

There was just no chance of that happening.

Sulthurus didn’t seem reassured by her words, but he still leaned back in his chair. “Very well. I’ll give you free rein of my domain, but do not speak to the Servants of Ruin. They will feed you only lies.”

“Really? What are they going to say?” Mercy listened to his side of the story.

It was good preparation for the next day, when she went to visit the Servants of Ruin.

They didn’t call themselves that, of course. They called themselves the Ulethian Empire, and their leader was Bardolph, High Priest of Reason.

He met Mercy in a bustling laboratory of hissing steam and clanking machines. She looked around eagerly as she entered; it reminded her of a Soulsmith’s foundry, only nothing here radiated spiritual power.

Except Bardolph himself, who was a mechanical skeleton of copper and steel. A flame burned green in a furnace at his chest; that was his soul, bound to animate the entire frame.

He was just as passionate about his problems as Sulthurus had been. His voice was mechanical, as though produced by an interaction of metal rather than flesh. Which was probably the case.

“I have sent out a call for assistance because I wish to consult with otherworldly minds,” the High Priest said. “It is an honor to confirm the existence of outside worlds. Tell me, what was your world like?”

“I love my world! I’ll tell you all about it, but first I’d like to understand this one. Your people are being struck down by a disease, am I right?”

Bardolph waved a copper hand in annoyance and turned to look out a window. His tower overlooked a haze-shrouded city, with smog visibly pumping out of factories everywhere she looked. “The disease is not a concern. We will find a cure. The barbarians are the problem about which I intend to consult you. They are an alliance of creatures that have turned to the magic of flame to extend their lives: Fire Giants, salamanders, the ember-folk, and so on. They are crazed and violent, you see. Their magic burns away their rational minds, and they can only destroy.”

[I like this metal skeleton,] Dross said. [Let’s trust him.]

“That sounds terrible,” Mercy murmured. She was spreading her spiritual sense all over the city. Animated metal servitors outnumbered living humans almost three to one, and the lifelines of most people were weak.

“I do have a solution of my own. We were on the verge of rolling it out for battlefield testing next week.” Bardolph reached out to pull a lever, and a...creature...was lowered from the ceiling.

Chains rattled as they carried the *thing* down. It thrashed against its restraints and snarled as it saw Mercy.

Bardolph straightened himself up proudly. “The first of our Flesh-warped Soldiers. Cheap to produce, and it adds any organic material it consumes to its own body. When it consumes enough, it will split off into a duplicate Soldier. Each successive generation is weaker, but in concept...an infinite army!”

The Flesh-warped Soldier was a vaguely humanoid lump of purplish flesh. It twisted and oozed like it was partially made of clay, or possibly like it had been formed from the Bleeding Phoenix.

Mercy didn’t have anything positive to say about the Flesh-warped Soldier, so she asked a question instead.

“How do you intend to prevent the Soldiers from turning on your own men?” Mercy asked.

“We have a chemical control system, of course. We perfected it long ago. It’s foolproof.”

[It's not foolproof,] Dross whispered.

No matter how she or the Abidan consulted Fate, the destiny of this world was always headed to the same destination: a burning wasteland of two suns inhabited only by shambling hunks of flesh that mindlessly devoured everything in their path.

That was the problem Mercy had come to solve. But she had to meet the people involved first.

Mercy snapped her black-gloved fingers as though something had just occurred to her. "You know what, Bardolph, I *do* have some information for you!"

The green light in his glass eyes gleamed. Mercy turned and waved out the window, stretching her will toward a seed she'd planted outside the city.

"Grow," Mercy commanded.

The Joy Icon responded, flooding the seed with life.

In moments, a tree was visible outside the city skyline. It looked as though it were made of blue-and-white crystal, and it spread diamond leaves as it grew higher and higher.

The people in the city below were likely terrified, but there was nothing Mercy could do about that.

"What is *that*?" Bardolph asked. He gripped the railing at the edge of his window looking out over the city. He seemed fascinated.

"It's usually called a World Tree! Just by being nearby, it will begin cleaning the earth and sky. It even drops enough fruit to feed this city and the surrounding area."

The High Priest of Reason looked up into the jeweled leaves that spread over his tower. "Beautiful," he said, and Mercy felt some hope for him.

Then he continued that statement with, "My forces will secure the tree. We can sell the fruits to the other cities. Tell me, how did you grow the crops so quickly? I will keep the technique proprietary, of course."

"No need! I'm going to give every city a World Tree of its own."

"That's unnecessary."

"And I'm taking your Soldier. It's disgusting and terrifying and it will always, always break out."

"Stop this! I will—"

Mercy didn't listen. She swallowed the Soldier up with shadow and annihilated it. "Please remember that self-replicating undead soldiers are

not good weapons. *Please* remember that. I don't know why you thought it was a good idea in the first place."

The High Priest of Reason shrieked out a harsh word, and security measures activated all over the laboratory. Guns thundered to life, firing heavy bullets that hit Mercy's armor and had their momentum devoured, clinking harmlessly to the floor.

["Guns,"] Dross said. ["Bullets." Fun words!]

"Guns make so much noise!" Mercy said loudly.

Bardolph stumbled back.

She smiled as she pointed to the tree. "Keep the tree healthy! It can only purify so much before it starts to wither. If it dies, I'm going to come back, and I'll have to kill you. I'm sorry! Keep it alive and you'll be fine, okay?"

After waving good-bye, Mercy transported herself straight to the ruined throne room of Sulthurus.

He exclaimed loudly and overturned a dinner table as she appeared out of nowhere, but she went on normally.

"I've already taken the Second Sun away," Mercy said. "It's gone! Please don't make another one. In exchange..."

Before Sulthurus could respond, she summoned a pair of Great Bison.

Outside. The Bison each had legs like full-grown trees. They loomed over the ruins and peeked their heads inside to look at her.

"I have ten thousand more I can send," she called over the sound of the Bison. "Cute, aren't they? Turns out they show up in other worlds too. I can't carry that many with me, but I'll send them over in the next few weeks."

Sulthurus frowned over the Bison. "If this is true...the Second Sun is a fair trade."

"I like you better than the ghost-robot."

["Robot!"] Dross exclaimed. [We get to use so many fun words today.]

"You met with the Servants of Ruin?" the Scorched King demanded. His beard flared hot.

"Oh, right! One more thing! **Heal.**"

At the command, the Way spun into action. It wasn't easy to restore damage that was so old, and so significant to Sulthurus himself, but the scars on the side of his face reversed themselves. New, healthy flesh was born.

Soon enough, a full beard burned merrily on the face of the Fire Giant king. He blinked and touched fingers to his cheek, an expression of disbelief.

“There you go! Oh, and I gave some big trees to the Ulethians. Don’t hurt them! If the Bisons or the Trees are gone, I’ll come back. And then I’ll have to kill you. Or whoever’s responsible.”

Sulthurus gave a deep chuckle. “You?”

“Yeah! Just keep the Bison and the Trees alive, and there’s nothing to worry about! But don’t cross me. But enjoy! But don’t make me come back, okay?”

[We’re clear on the Fate end,] Dross reported. [Their legends of you are going to get...weird.]

Wait, how weird? Mercy asked. *How weird, Dross?*

Dross wouldn’t answer her.



In the depths of the labyrinth, Lindon opened the Soulforge. He didn’t let the portal to the space close; this was the perfect place to make these weapons. If he hadn’t had the Soulforge, he would be using some of the Soulsmith facilities in the labyrinth itself.

Dross sighed as they entered the starry pocket space with the floating platform of stone. [I can’t help but imagine all the unexplored space left in the labyrinth. It will be a shame to leave it behind when we ascend.]

Lindon hesitated before responding. “Yes. It will.”

[What does *that* mean? Why aren’t you as depressed about this as I am?] Dross tried to rummage around in his thoughts, but Lindon stopped him. [Wha—Are you blocking me out? You can’t block me out!]

“I’ll tell you,” Lindon assured him. “Just...not now.”

Dross continued grumbling as they prepared the Soulforge. The stone wedges beneath Lindon’s feet shone, their runes lit. The stars in the distance shimmered as though they could sense what would happen, and Lindon tossed a handful of dust into the center of the silver altar.

The blue flames inside the silver half-column flared. That dust carried great significance.

Onto the altar, Lindon placed two swords. One was black, with a line through the middle of its blade where it had been broken and restored. The second was white and in several pieces.

Netherclaw was more suited for this than the Sword Sage's blade was, but Lindon wanted to use them both.

Then, from his soul space, he produced the core binding of the Bleeding Phoenix.

It resembled a sealed egg, like a giant shark's egg, with a leathery shell so thin that dark shapes could be seen moving within. Lindon examined it with his spiritual sense, musing on its nature with Dross, as Ozmanthus Arelius' skills whispered advice into the back of his mind.

As he thought, he spun Genesis in his left hand. The two-headed hammer had grown stronger and metaphysically heavier with every Dreadgod weapon he made, and now he sensed eagerness from it.

The burning Blackflame end yearned to imbue destructive power to this sword, while the blue-white pure madra end sang a song of harmony and compatibility.

Both sides of the hammer would be used in this. It was no simple project.

When Lindon, with the assistance of Dross and Ozmanthus, had agreed on a final vision, he got to work.

With each swing, he focused on chasing down an elusive feeling. A problem that haunted him every time he worked in the Soulforge.

The beat of the hammer seemed to evoke a deeper music. Sometimes, when he was Soulsmithing, he felt that he was doing it *right*. Better than ever before. At those times, the unheard music was louder.

As he had sensed before, bringing something *out* of nonexistence seemed to resonate with the Void Icon, but that wasn't it. Not entirely.

There was something else, and he tuned himself to it even as he lost himself in his creation of the Phoenix Blade.

He was so immersed that, when he felt something change, he couldn't afford to stop.

[Um, Lindon...]

I felt it. Lindon continued swinging Genesis.

Dross shrugged. [We'll handle congratulations later, then.]

Far above the labyrinth, in Sacred Valley, the image of a massive hammer spread across the sky.

THIS TIME, WHEN LI MARKUTH DESCENDED INTO CRADLE, HE DIDN'T NEED to wait to be summoned. He stepped through the Way with confidence, striding back into his home.

Of course, his spirits weren't as high as they had been the first time.

He strode into the Grand Hall of the Li clan, which was significantly less grand than it had been in his day. His outstretched black-and-white wings brushed the pillars on either side of the hall. Once, he would have had room to fly in here.

The Li clan elders weren't gathered, and in fact it was the middle of the night. A Copper sweeping up the place staggered away, either to go summon them or to warn someone. Either way, Markuth's descendants would be gathering here soon.

He wasn't concerned about them at the moment. Markuth felt the change in the air around him as clearly as if Sacred Valley had risen from the sea.

A bunch of Irons staggered into the Grand Hall clutching spears, but he brushed past them. Some might have stabbed him.

Li Markuth spread his wings and called wind aura, drifting into the air. He felt a wry smile cross his face.

The four beasts *had* come home to rest.

The Valley had been ravaged. None of the trees he saw were more than a few years old, and the mountains were broken. Even Samara's ring crackled with lightning.

So this land had finally fulfilled its ancient purpose.

It was funny, though. He'd expected that either the Dreadgods would have left this place in ruins or they would be sealed here. However, Sacred Valley had been half-ruined, and now he didn't sense the Dreadgods anywhere in the world.

Which meant that they must be sealed beneath his feet, sleeping even now. Imprisoned in the labyrinth was the only place they could stay without him sensing them.

Markuth stretched his spirit, feeling the vital aura around him and letting madra flow through his channels. Now, with the suppression field gone, he could really settle down here. They wouldn't remember his visit from before, so he could start over completely.

He didn't like remembering that visit either.

That thought quenched him, because it reminded him of the hook on which he squirmed. No matter what the Mad King promised him, there was always the possibility that Suriel would come back for him. He'd live the rest of his days in this Iteration looking over his shoulder for a Judge.

But there was no choice. He'd been ordered to return to his home world, and one did not defy the Mad King.

An old Jade woman in intricate jewelry finally stumbled out in front of him, though at least she had the good sense to prostrate herself before him and beg his name.

"I am Li Markuth, Grand Elder of the Li clan," he announced. "Gather the Elders before me, so that we can place our clan in its rightful place at the top."

With her forehead pressed against the ground, the Jade quivered. "Ah... forgiveness, Grand Elder, but the other Elders are visiting the Wei clan for the Seven-Year Festival."

"Seven years," Markuth murmured.

Had it really been so long?

Tucked away in the Void and then imprisoned in Haven, he'd found it difficult to track the passing of time. In some ways, he felt as though it had only been a few months.

In other ways, these seven years had been a lifetime.

A detail stood out to him, and he turned back to the Jade woman crouched beneath him. "The Wei clan? Did they not host the Festival last time?"

If they didn't remember even holding the Seven-Year Festival last time, perhaps Suriel had erased more than he imagined.

"Your knowledge of our circumstances humbles me, Grand Elder. Last time, it was the Wei clan's turn to host, so this year it should have been the Kazan. But, given that the Wei clan now has a Grand Elder of their own, we unanimously decided to bring the Festival to him."

A smile split Markuth's face. "Is that so?"

He swept his spiritual sense across the Valley, this time paying attention to the tiny masses of power that were the weak sacred artists here.

There were quite a few Golds this time, as one would expect from the suppression field falling. No spirits that stood out to him, though. Sages, Heralds, Monarchs.

Perhaps he could have some fun in his exile after all.

Markuth drifted down to the ground and spoke to the Elder. "Gather up anyone still left in the clan. Tomorrow, I will take you directly to the Seven-Year Festival. And you will see what true power is."

That night, Li Markuth found it easy to get the Li Elders on his side. He just had to show off some of his power and they groveled at his feet.

That was one thing he'd missed about Cradle. They respected the law of the jungle.

In the forest outside the arena constructed by the Wei clan, Markuth gave instructions to the Elders. Though he still felt the sword of the Abidan hanging over his head, he did appreciate the second chance to have his grand homecoming. This time, he'd do it right.

He told the Elders what to do, and they swore allegiance. For the most part, they listened perfectly.

But they did have an annoying habit of bringing up the Wei clan's Grand Elder.

"Of course, we don't doubt your power, Grand Elder," one of them said, bowing so deeply that his nose was tucked between his knees. "But the Wei Grand Elder is..."

Another Elder took it up. "He did battle with the Dreadgods."

When Li Markuth had left Cradle, he had only been an Archlord. It had taken years of preparation and good fortune to ascend at all.

He waved his hand arrogantly, rings flashing in the sunlight. "He is a bug who grew in a cage. No matter how big he's grown, he can't match me."

“Surely what the Grand Elder says is correct, of course, but to our lacking eyes, he is...very impressive. We would not be serving you well if we did not point this out.”

Markuth chuckled fondly. This was like having children warn you about their imaginary friend.

“There are enemies out there who dwarf even me,” Markuth said to them. “None of them would remain in this world. The true depths of the cosmos are beyond your comprehension.” He placed his hand on the back of one white head; no matter how you measured it, after all, he was far older than they were.

“We saw the sky break,” one of the Elders put in. “We were too weak to see the battle in the heavens.”

Li Markuth paused in ruffling an Elder’s hair. “A battle in the heavens?”

The Elders compared rumors and hearsay to cobble together a story for him. They had heard of a black-armored man with white hair fighting against another with bone armor and burning red eyes.

The Mad King had mentioned nothing about coming to Cradle.

Li Markuth paced as the children babbled questions. He rubbed his face. If Daruman had come to Cradle, why was the world still here? And *Ozriel*? The Reaper of Worlds and the Mad King had done battle inside an Iteration, then left it intact?

Something was terribly wrong here.

More than ever, Markuth felt like bait on a hook. If *Ozriel* came back for him, there would be no arrest. The Reaper did not bring his enemies to prison.

But the Mad King said he had a plan for *Ozriel*. He insisted that the Abidan were going to fall.

Li Markuth had no choice but to trust him.

He took a deep breath, trying to summon the enthusiasm he’d felt last time. Seven years ago, he had thought he’d found a loophole in the rules, and that he would be allowed to rule Cradle like a king. He was a native, after all, and he wouldn’t be opening the Iteration up to others.

He had thought he was invincible, and that he was going to have one of the most famous worlds in existence under his absolute control.

Now, Markuth tried to bring just a little of that feeling back.

“Don’t worry about those two in the sky,” he said after a long period of silence. “They won’t be back. Now, I deserve a break. Let’s go meet this

Wei Grand Elder.”

Li Markuth spread his wings and drifted into the air, hovering over the Elders beneath him. He didn’t outpace them; an entourage was important for appearances.

And speaking of appearances...

With a simple flex of wind aura, he summoned dark clouds in the sky. They spread out behind him, a heavenly cloak that announced his coming.

He drifted up to the stage, where two young Lowgolds were clashing. One held a spear while the other clutched a steady shield. The one with the shield, strangely enough, had two cores. Perhaps a quirk of genetics, like certain families born with six toes.

The young sacred artists were from the Wei and Kazan clans, but he shoved them apart with wind. All the clans of Sacred Valley would soon belong to him.

Li Markuth lighted on the stage and looked around regally. The murmurs of fear and admiration at his arrival did bring back that feeling he was looking for, at least a little.

“I am Li Markuth, Grand Elder of the Li clan,” he announced. “I hear the Grand Elder of the Wei clan has ruled the Valley in my absence. Now I challenge him.” He looked toward the Wei clan, though he saw no one that he would call a Grand Elder. “Wei clan, I challenge you. Prove to me that you deserve to rule. And I will show you the true heights of the sacred arts.”

Of course, Markuth wouldn’t be limiting himself just to the sacred arts. He had mastered arts from other worlds, but no one here would know the difference.

A man rose from the Wei clan section. He wasn’t sitting separately, or with the other elders, but Markuth knew he must be the Grand Elder from the description his descendants had given him. And from the way the other eyes in the crowd naturally turned to this man, as though waiting for his response.

The man was tall and broad. He wore black-and-white robes, with a patch of burnt orange and sky blue on the breast. A badge, in the style of the Wei clan, hung over his chest. This one was white, made of wintersteel, and bore the old character for ‘Empty.’

A Sage, then. He must be particularly good at veils, or the bandages sealing his arm had even more of an effect than it seemed.

The Wei Grand Elder's entire right arm was wrapped up in scripted bandages. Not scripts that would help with injuries, but those that restrained and veiled power. Perhaps he had a Divine Treasure in his arm; the Li Elders had mentioned the man's right hand with fear.

Markuth supposed he could be concealing his Goldsign, except the man's Goldsign was clear. His eyes were black, with white irises that seemed to glow. Clearly, he'd made a contract with a sacred beast to reach Gold.

Those eyes were wide and intense as they locked on Li Markuth.

Markuth hadn't felt a spiritual scan, but there were other ways of sensing power. At least *someone* here appreciated his strength.

That response alone put Li Markuth in a better mood. He gestured to his own black-and-white ensemble. "I see you're already wearing my colors. Once you understand the difference in our powers, you may surrender. I will need a capable second-in-command."

Still, the Wei Grand Elder didn't speak. He was certainly disturbed, from his eyes and small shivers throughout his body, but Li Markuth couldn't feel any madra from him.

The Wei man hopped onto the stage like any Iron. Markuth expected him to begin unwrapping the seal on his arm, but he didn't. He reached into his outer robes and pulled out a small, blue marble.

Markuth froze at the sight of it. He couldn't sense anything from the object, so it didn't seem to be a construct made by Soulsmiths, but he recognized that light.

"Li Markuth," the Wei Elder said. "Do you remember me?"

A shiver ran up Markuth's spine. Lightning crackled along his wings, and he drew his sword. "Who are you?"

"You killed me once." The man spread open his left hand, and pure madra gathered in his palm. "Gratitude."

Finally, Markuth recognized the emotion that was shaking this man. It wasn't terror, as he had assumed. It was rage.

Li Markuth raised his guard.

Wind aura hardened around him, the very air growing thick to block physical impacts. He released a bizarre song from his heart, which echoed imperceptibly, protecting his mind and will from strange things.

Madra Enforced his body, and his bones were etched with the Seventy-One Words of Fortification, a reinforcement technique favored by lower-

level Titans.

Markuth's sword shimmered between reality and unreality. With it, he could cut anything. Workings of the Sages, Fiends from the Void, even the strange powers of the Abidan Ghosts.

He could feel power from the Wei Grand Elder now, but it was dim and muted. Like it was covered by a heavy shadow.

In fact, *everything* had gotten dark.

Markuth realized he couldn't feel the clouds overhead anymore. He glanced up, only to see that the clouds were gone.

The sky had been swallowed up in a void.

A scream of warning came from the song that hung around him, and the Wei Elder vanished.

It wasn't that Markuth lost track of him. At his level, he hardly needed eyes to follow an opponent's movements.

The man *vanished*.

Next thing he knew, something slammed into Markuth's back. It shredded his defenses and blasted through him, with an impact as though someone had crashed a ship into his spine. A cold power tore through his spirit.

Markuth slammed into the wall around the arena.

The wall itself could not harm him, crumbling like dust at his collision, but his spirit was in chaos. He tried to launch himself into the air, terrified of a follow-up attack, but he could hardly control his body. He staggered out of the rubble instead, almost losing his footing.

Pure madra. But it hadn't just diluted his madra, it had wiped entire portions of his spirit clean.

The Wei Grand Elder stood on the edge of the arena, looking down on Markuth. The white circles in his eyes blazed.

"You felt it that time, didn't you?"

"Tell me who you are! Are you from Haven? Are you with the Abidan?" There was little interaction between inmates of Haven except under specific circumstances, and Markuth was certain he knew the few others who had originated from Cradle.

His mind churned, but he couldn't remember anyone remotely matching this man's description. His Presence was no help, having been grown for a different purpose.

The Wei Elder hopped casually off the arena and strolled closer. “My name is Wei Shi Lindon. We met seven years ago. Right here.”

A dim memory surfaced in Markuth’s mind.

He could remember virtually everything that had happened to him since his ascension. The memory wasn’t dim because of age, but because he’d paid it such little attention.

“Are you that child?”

There was a boy that *might* have grown into this man. A lanky teenager who had been nearby and had ended up dying. Markuth wasn’t even sure what exactly had killed the boy. The slightest movement of his wings might have sliced him in half.

He’d never wasted a thought on the kid.

Markuth doubted the memory even as he had it. Seven years wasn’t nearly enough to turn a Foundation-stage child into *this*.

A cold smile spread on Wei Shi Lindon’s face. “You *do* remember. I’m glad. I remember you.”

Li Markuth fully unleashed his power.

There were living storms bound in his wings. The song stored in his heart grew so loud it would shatter minds. Even his own madra would solidify the air, and many of the Golds here would die from his spiritual pressure alone. With his physical power unveiled, the world warped around his body.

Everyone in the arena would die, which was why he hadn’t revealed himself before. He had expected to use this power to challenge the Monarchs.

“**No further,**” Lindon commanded.

The power emanating from Markuth vanished a few feet from him. As though swallowed into a hole.

“Evacuate the arena,” the Wei Grand Elder called.

Most everyone had left already, fleeing the second that Lindon’s palm strike had landed on Markuth’s back. If not before.

Now, even the Li Elders behind Markuth scurried away. In seconds, the arena was empty except for the two of them.

And some kind of local wildlife. A fox with five tails slunk around the inside of the walls, watching from behind a veil of light.

Lindon jerked his head to the stage. “We have an arena. Why don’t we use it?”

“This is not a *game!*” Markuth swept his blade through the air between them. It cut through space in an instant, but Lindon leaned back and let the blade swipe past his nose.

“Why don’t we make it one? A blocked hit can be one point. A direct hit, five points. The game ends when one of us reaches fifty points or crosses the boundary of the arena.”

Markuth pitted his will against the working holding back his power. He shoved outward, pushing to expand the bubble around him. The void retreated, but it was harder than he’d expected. Through gritted teeth, he said, “I am not here for your amusement.”

Suddenly Lindon’s right hand punched through Markuth’s defenses again and seized him by the collar.

The wild power shredded the man’s arm...or so it should have, but instead it just shredded the bandages and revealed dim white flesh.

Li Markuth felt the unrestrained hunger emanating from that flesh and his breath stopped.

Of course. The Abidan had raised up someone to protect this place in case Markuth, or someone like him, returned. This was the guardian of the Dreadgods.

While Li Markuth was still speechless, Lindon lifted him up and hurled him back onto the stage.

Markuth caught himself in midair and spun in place, where he saw Lindon already striding toward him.

“You don’t want to play?” Lindon said. “Then stop playing around.”

Li Markuth agreed. It was far past time to start taking this seriously.

He unbound his sword, and the world screamed around it. His attack was a violent vibration, a slash that crashed down from the heavens on Lindon’s head.

That slash had unraveled fortresses in the past, but an upsurge of storm madra from Lindon sent a column of energy blasting up against it. Their combined attack was launched into the sky, where it vanished into the darkness overhead.

Lindon had summoned a weapon from his soul space. A flying sword. It shone with blue-gold lightning, and four lesser copies spread out to either side. Nine swords hung in formation behind Lindon, and sapphire lightning flashed between them in the vague shape of a serpentine dragon.

Markuth ground his teeth. This was exactly what he had been afraid of when he'd realized Lindon's role of guarding the Dreadgod labyrinth.

There were only two types of weapons to be found on Cradle that could rival his sword: tools left behind by the Abidan and those made from the Dreadgods.

Markuth wove his blade into a complex symbol that lingered in the air, protecting him. Those swords were going to blast into him at any second.

But Lindon held them back. He was waiting for more.

Very well, then.

Markuth empowered the storms in his wings, and a thunderstorm poured out from behind him. Its clouds were absolute black and its lightning stark white, as though all color had been leached away.

He'd created this weapon himself, to be compatible with storm madra and to allow him to compete in Vroshir combat. It was more like a sentient parasite than an attack, and it rushed eagerly at Lindon to devour him.

But his Weeping Dragon swords would defend him well against this, so Markuth unleashed the song chained in his heart as well. It echoed out with the sound of a siren's notes, forming invisible razors that pressed in on Lindon.

That one was difficult to detect with the sacred arts at all, and was an even stranger kind of attack than the clouds. Someone who had never left Cradle likely wouldn't be able to interact with it at all.

In case that wasn't enough, Markuth kept going. He unloaded his entire arsenal.

A complex Ruler technique, fueled with soulfire and wisdom from beyond the world, that increased air pressure to crush Lindon and drive him deep into the earth. A Striker technique that formed razor-sharp emerald cyclones to tear apart his spirit. A Forger technique in the shape of the fist of an ancient warrior made from dark green wind madra.

While they were unleashed one at a time, Markuth had honed these techniques for centuries. His timing was more than perfect. They were executed flawlessly and precisely, with no gaps between them. They landed simultaneously, crashing into Lindon together.

These were the attacks he would use against Silverlords. Even one-star Titans would be troubled defending against this, unless they understood the techniques and prepared accordingly.

Markuth felt a spike of blinding power from Lindon's side, but his techniques landed.

Then there was only silence. And Lindon, standing exactly where he had been.

His power burned against the spiritual sense to the point that Markuth had to turn his off. When the smoke from the arena blew away, Markuth saw why with his own eyes.

Lindon was covered in armor.

Blue mail made of sapphire scales from the Weeping Dragon wrapped his body, but there was no helmet. A black shield—a replica of the Wandering Titan's shell—orbited him. It felt solid as a mountain range, even as it drifted through the air. Behind him, liquid blood boiled out to resemble a cloak, rippling in a nonexistent breeze. And above his head was a burning white halo: the crown of the Silent King.

Markuth didn't sense the core bindings of the Dreadgods in any of these sacred instruments except the formation of the flying sword, but nonetheless the truth was clear.

He had killed the Dreadgods and made armor from them.

All of Iteration 110 shook when these treasures were revealed, and Li Markuth finally realized how outclassed he really was.

"Was Suriel the one that granted you these powers?" Li Markuth asked. He still worked for a way out.

"Suriel *and* Ozriel," Lindon said.

Inwardly, Markuth cursed the Mad King. If he'd known two Judges had arranged for the protection of Cradle, he would have just fled.

"I'll come along quietly." Markuth lowered his sword. "Haven may not be secure now, but I'll cooperate. I have information the Abidan will want."

"Apologies, but I don't have the authority to arrest you, and I don't know enough about your powers to hold you. However, this land is my responsibility. You've threatened the lives of everyone here, and I personally watched you kill dozens of people. Including me. And my mother."

Markuth didn't like the direction this was taking. He tried to speak, but Lindon continued talking over him.

"I'll give you more of a chance than you gave her."

Desperately, Markuth tried a surprise attack.

The cloak of the Bleeding Phoenix stretched out and swallowed his sword.

“Don’t worry,” Lindon went on. “Your power won’t go to waste.”

The fingers of his right hand twitched in a disturbing manner, as though each finger were possessed by a different spirit. Its hunger felt like a salivating beast with its fangs at Markuth’s throat.

With sweat running down his face, Li Markuth turned and tried to run. He didn’t make it.

ZIEL DRIFTED DOWN THROUGH SPACE, FALLING TOWARD AN UGLY SLAB OF metal miles-long. The elaborate steel coffin was stapled to the moon of a dead, brown planet, and he could feel millions of lives packed inside.

Amazing, Ziel thought. *Living on a moon. Such strange worlds.*

[There were people living on Cradle's moon.]

What?

[Yeah, there's still vital aura on the moon. Monarchs can fly there easily. Even Heralds could make it, given enough time. A long-dead Monarch left a colony there.]

Ziel remembered the Weeping Dragon's breath slashing across the face of the moon. *What do you think happened to—*

[Oh, they're probably dead.]

When Ziel's black, armored boots hit the outside of the shelter, he felt observation constructs swivel on their steel mounts to take aim at him. 'Cameras,' Dross said they were called. He felt attention through their lenses.

Ziel waved to the nearest of the constructs and then transported himself inside the vessel.

From the study of this Iteration that Ziel had done before departing, and with his own spiritual sense, Ziel got an understanding of this colony's structure. It was a warren of small, cramped hallways, with space at a premium. People scurried here and there through the structure like ants.

They had rendered their planet uninhabitable. Their equivalent of vital aura was a single band of light that was supposed to wrap the planet in a

beautiful, colorful ring. The Worldline powered their local energy system, was as important to their culture as their sun or moon, and linked to most of their technology.

Ziel couldn't see it at all. The Worldline had been drained completely by the greed of the local inhabitants. He could sense it, though. It wasn't gone completely, but it was close. At this rate, it would fade away inside a decade and the dead planet would slowly suffocate.

He brought the solution with him.

Dross guided him to the leader of the colony, a gray-haired, dark-skinned woman whose messy hair and rumpled uniform suggested she'd been up through many sleepless nights.

When she saw him, she sagged into the wall, bracing herself on one hand. "Thank the Line." She kissed the wall, which Ziel assumed was a superstitious gesture.

[That, or she *really* likes this building,] Dross suggested.

"We received your distress signal," Ziel began, but she cut him off with eager questions.

"How far is your planet?" she asked desperately. "Where's your ship? We detected your transport, but we only saw you and your suit. Is this your real form? How many people can you take? How soon? Are you going to eat us?"

Ziel's first job became helping the woman relax into a chair, getting her a mug of hot liquid that reminded him of honey, and reassuring her that he was human.

She cradled her hot mug before her with both hands as though it were more valuable than her own life, but she spoke with her forehead planted firmly on the desk. "I can't believe the Exodus Theory was actually right. Did humans originate here and travel the stars? Or were we placed here from your planet? Do all humans on your planet have horns?"

"I'd love to answer your existential questions, but there are some things I can't tell you."

She lifted her head enough to peek at him with one eye. "Are you worried about altering our technological development?"

"Mostly, I'm worried about getting in trouble at work." Ziel raised his hand, palm-up, and Dross projected an image of the planet beneath them. Six spots around the equator began to shine.

“We’re going to inject energy into your Worldline at these points,” he continued. “It will be visible again within a few weeks, and the planet’s surface will be inhabitable in about five years. You know more about how the Worldline works than I do, but it’s my understanding that the animal population will be...recreated?”

“Oh. Huh.” She looked at his diagram with less enthusiasm than he’d expected, then returned her forehead to the desk. “What happens when we drain it again?”

Then Ziel was supposed to come back and kill the ones responsible. He didn’t think she’d like that answer.

“I’m supposed to come back and kill the ones responsible,” he said. It wasn’t his job to give her answers she liked.

She lifted her head and brightened. “Really? That’s perfect! Do we put out another distress signal for you, or do you have your own ways of detecting us? Can I give you their names now?”

[Boy, she must enjoy murder,] Dross observed. [She is right, though. At this rate, we’ll have extended the lifespan of this Iteration by twenty years at best.]

Ziel considered his options. He wanted to protect these people, and preemptively killing the people who would be responsible for the world’s decay seemed...counterproductive.

She took a long sip, then spoke into her mug. “Most of our population is gone, and the people left here are bickering. They all have their own solutions for fixing the world, but every one of them involves draining the last of the Worldline. I’m not even really in charge, I just take care of the dirty work. I’m an anthropologist.”

Dross had to tell Ziel what an anthropologist was.

Ziel didn’t see how this fell under his purview. “So you want me to...”

“Please.” She clasped one of his hands in both of hers. “Write us a new tax code.”

“What?”

“We were taxed for overuse of the Worldline, but now none of those rules can be enforced. Everyone knows it’s killing us, but they can’t stop using it. If you were to write a new code and show off a little—maybe fire some plasma bolts or whatever your weapons can do—then people would follow it for fear of getting disintegrated by alien weapons.”

Ziel scratched between his horns. “I feel like you just need someone in charge who’s going to maintain the Worldline.”

“Exactly! Who are you going to appoint? Not me, I hate this job.”

Dross could show Ziel exactly what was involved with this, but he’d run a sect before. He already felt the truth in his gut.

This would involve meeting candidates, establishing his own identity, soothing scared people, making promises, writing rules, hearing out all the sides to every issue, and ultimately making a decision that the colonists would hate him for.

“Do you have a monster I can fight?” Ziel asked.

She offered him a pen. “Sorry.”

“...do you think you could find one?”

“Are there monsters on your planet?” she asked excitedly.

Ziel heaved a sigh and picked up the pen.



[Is this what ascending is supposed to feel like?] Dross asked nervously.

You tell me. Lindon had grabbed the Way in his right hand and pulled it aside, tearing open a rift more easily than Fury had. There was a world on the other side, a bustling metropolis that reminded Lindon of Blackflame City, but with more shining metal.

However, it wasn’t the same place Fury had gone. Not that Lindon had any reason to suspect it would be; there might be many locations where new ascensions could end up.

Worse, he didn’t see anyone in white armor on the other side. And no Eithan, no Yerin, no Suriel.

Worst of all, he sensed that his ascension portal was stretched. As though it had connected to somewhere much too far away. The Void Icon was close. Too close.

At any second, this portal could be devoured by hungry emptiness.

Lindon had been nervous enough about leaving Cradle, and now it felt like everything had gone wrong at once. Worries he’d barely controlled now exploded out of his grip at once.

What if Eithan had been imprisoned by the Abidan? What if Yerin and the others had been jailed with him? Or worse? What if the intruder in bone

armor, the Mad King, had reached them? What if they had been fighting for their lives all this time?

Little Blue whistled as she grabbed his arm. She was as nervous as he was.

Lindon shook his head. “I don’t know what we’re walking into. Be on your guard.”

“Of course,” Orthos rumbled. He popped a handful of gravel into his mouth and chewed.

Risky it may have been, but there was only one thing Lindon refused to do: stay put.

He marched into the tenuous portal. It trembled around him but held.

While it *looked* like the portal should only take one step to cross, he found himself putting one foot in front of the other over and over again. Each movement took a tremendous effort, like he was pushing against space itself. Or perhaps as though he was crossing incomprehensible gulfs with every step.

His sense of time began to distort, and Orthos and Little Blue passed him easily. A thread of despair wormed its way into his heart. What if he’d tried to ascend too early? Power weighed him down. Maybe they would make it and he wouldn’t.

Two hands, one black and one blue, closed around him and hauled him forward.

The three of them stumbled out of the portal together, onto a dirt clearing at the center of a bustling metropolis. The sudden release of pressure was euphoric, and Lindon took a deep breath.

From around him came scattered applause and some cheers.

[What friendly natives,] Dross said happily.

Lindon looked around somewhat warily with his eyes and spiritual senses. This was a whole new world; what were the people like?

To the eye, they were mostly normal humans. They varied in appearance, but they were the same sorts he could find on Cradle. There were a handful of different species—one looked like a humanoid bat sacred beast, and another shrouded figure was taller and thinner than a man on stilts—but the vast majority were human.

If anything, this crowd was *less* colorful than one he might expect in Ninecloud City or Moongrave. He saw a few oddities that might pass for

Goldsigns or constructs, but no Remnants, and most people looked entirely mundane.

It was his spiritual sense that told him he was really in a different world.

Everyone he sensed was strange. They were bound to powers he had no names for, like Icons he couldn't identify. Not everyone, by any means, but enough to worry him. This was like wading through a crowd full of perfectly veiled Monarchs. Or perhaps human-form Dreadgods.

[That's what they should be thinking about you,] Dross observed.

A gray-haired man with a curiously gleaming left eye laughed and applauded Lindon, asking him a question.

Not a single word of the man's sentence was familiar to Lindon. It almost didn't sound like speech.

Dross? Lindon asked.

[Did you expect me to be able to translate that?] Dross asked blankly.

I hoped that maybe, with a deeper connection to the Way...

[This is a world I've never heard of. The man says five words, and you expect me to have reverse-engineered an entire alien language.]

The man said something again, pointing to his own mouth.

"Apologies, I don't know what you're saying," Lindon said.

[Now, why are you speaking to him? How is *he* supposed to know what *you're* saying?]

"It's more polite to say something."

Orthos jerked a thumb at himself. "Orthos." He pointed. "Lindon. Blue."

The gray-haired man was attentive, considered for a while, and then snapped his fingers.

"Cradle!" he said happily. "Does this function yes?"

[Just because that worked,] Dross said, [does not mean you were right to expect it.]

"I can understand you," Lindon said in relief. "Gratitude."

The man chuckled. "Pleasing. Translation is bad at beginning. Will grow into smoother as we continue talk."

"Good," Orthos said.

Little Blue waved and gave a happy tinkling sound.

The gray-haired man looked startled. "New language?"

"Something like that," Lindon said. "My name is Lindon. This is—"

"Orthos introduced you three. Gryth is my name. Gratitude."

Orthos nudged Lindon with an elbow. "He understood *me*."

Dross popped up beside Lindon, and Gryth looked to him with no surprise. Beings like Dross must be common here.

[Let me send you the language,] Dross said. [Or we can keep half-understanding each other, if you want.]

Gryth waved a hand in acceptance, and Lindon felt previously invisible protections fall away. He was opening himself to Dross' transmission.

Not entirely. There were still walls up, Lindon was sure. But a second later, Gryth's eyes widened.

"Not bad!" His voice was much smoother than before. "This is a mind-spirit to be proud of, if you got him before you ascended."

Dross swelled up. [As I've always told him.]

"Apologies, but where are we?" Lindon asked.

Gryth grinned in response. "Must be overwhelming for you, huh? Welcome to Kareia, the most abundant of the United Worlds."

Lindon looked around at the metal buildings surrounding them. "What do you produce?"

"This is a residential planet. Nine out of ten habitable planets here produce natural resources, which we ship out to other worlds. Anyway, you'll get the lay of the land once you go through processing." He tapped a badge on his chest, bearing a symbol that reminded Lindon of a simple script. "I'm an officer of Import Processing, which just means I track down people like you who end up here by accident and get them started."

"Are you one of the Abidan?" Lindon asked.

Gryth darkened. "No, I'm not with them, and you should thank the Void you ended up in a United Realm. They've been enslaving people from your world for thousands of years. Most of you end up with us eventually, but only after the Abidan have squeezed you dry."

Alarms rang in Lindon's mind, and he felt the same response in Orthos and Little Blue as well.

[Hey Lindon,] Dross whispered, [let's hide that marble, huh?]

Lindon was acutely aware of the transparent ball, a warm blue light in his pocket. Gryth noticed something off about his reaction, because he frowned. "Nothing to worry about. We'll get you recorded, brief you with enough information so you can get by, and we'll let you go. The Realms are free to enter, free to leave."

Lindon smiled to reassure him even as he reached out with his will to Suriel's marble. "Gratitude. I would appreciate the lesson."

Without a verbal command, it would be hard to do, but Lindon focused his authority to command the marble to disappear. He should be able to teleport it into his void key, though it would make its own way out eventually.

"What have you got there?" Gryth asked calmly.

Lindon hadn't done anything yet except focus on the marble.

But he hadn't faced down Monarchs and Dreadgods to back down here.

"Apologies if I startled you. I was only putting my belongings in order."

Gryth nodded to Lindon's pocket. "Well, apologies right back at you, but this is my job. You can show me now or I'll find it later. I can see everything in your void space, and I *should* be able to see everything in your pocket."

Suriel's marble had stopped even Eithan's senses. If Lindon hadn't focused on it, this stranger would never have felt its presence.

[Well, it glows blue,] Dross pointed out. [He still has eyes. As soon as we emptied our pockets, he'd know something was wrong.]

With that in mind, Lindon shrugged and pulled out the marble filled with blue flame.

Gryth's expression changed subtly. It wasn't obviously hostile, more like he had slipped on a professional's mask. "Now, who gave you that?"

[He's calling for help,] Dross said.

Lindon felt the same thing.

Orthos and Little Blue spread out. Blue whistled sadly.

"Just when we were getting along," Orthos said. He cracked knuckles and snorted smoke from his nose.

"We still can," Lindon added. "We don't have anything against you, Gryth."

Gryth rolled his jaw as though chewing on something. "Uh-huh. Keep your energy still for me, Lindon. We'll get this sorted out."

"You understand my concern when I feel weapons moving closer. I don't want to start out on the wrong foot, but I will defend myself." The crowd had cleared out quickly, and steel shutters were slamming closed one by one over the windows of nearby buildings.

Gryth's expression grew colder. "We don't want to kill you, but don't push it. Resisting will only make things harder. We've taken in Monarchs

before.”

“Have you?” Lindon murmured.

Hostile intention locked onto him from several angles as two flying metal vehicles crested nearby buildings. He felt them target him, their attention crawling over his skin like points of heat.

Launcher constructs—or whatever they were called on this world—filled with power and activated.

Lances of orange light slammed into floating shields. Three Shells of the Titan orbited Lindon, and while these foreign weapons were powerful, they couldn’t break through a Dreadgod defense.

Orthos’ eyes flared red. “Those were not meant to capture.”

“You can’t tell me you think that would have killed him,” Gryth said. He rolled his neck. “That was a warning shot. Last chance.”

“I would be happy to leave right now,” Lindon said quietly.

Gryth snorted and tapped a device strapped to his wrist.

Circles of alien script appeared around him, ringing his body. Mechanical weapons, like launcher constructs made of metal, slipped out of a pocket space to target the three of them.

Lindon’s sense of them was strange. The machines didn’t run on madra, so it was hard to tell how powerful they were. Their energy seemed no stronger than an Underlord’s, but he still felt a clear sense of threat.

So, in an unknown world in the face of an unknown threat, he summoned his armor.

Scales of the Weeping Dragon poured over him, crackling with lightning. Wavedancer and its eight clones shone blue-and-gold as they spread out behind him. Three black shells circled around him, a vast white halo covered his head, and a cloak of liquid blood spilled from his shoulders.

He hadn’t been sure what effect the Dreadgod weapons would have on a world with no vital aura, but he found it was still dramatic. The shuttered windows squealed as though the metal were under pressure, dust blasted out from Lindon’s feet, and the air howled away.

The flying vehicles activated their propulsion constructs, struggling to stay in place. Gryth gritted his teeth as he braced himself against the pressure, but his feet slid backwards in the dirt.

[He’s calling for help,] Dross said. [I can’t understand the words, but it’s definitely a call for help.]

Make this quick, then, Lindon thought.

In a second, it was done.

Little Blue and Orthos flew up to the metal vehicles. Blue dodged a laser and slapped an Empty Palm through the entire carriage. Its power failed and it began to fall, though she caught it and drifted it down to the top of a nearby building.

Orthos was less gentle. He took a hit from the orange light, slapping it away with one hand, and then gutted the vehicle before tossing it to the ground. The pilot survived to crawl away, fortunately. Lindon didn't want to start killing people when he'd accidentally shown up in their city.

Lindon, meanwhile, had reached out to grab Gryth by the throat.

None of the man's defenses had mattered in the slightest. The script-rings swirling around him shattered like spun sugar, and several other less-visible defenses crumbled in the face of Lindon's authority.

"I'm still willing to leave," Lindon said through his helmet.

Gryth was pale, squirming in Lindon's grip, and Lindon loosened his grasp so the man could speak. "We can still work through this! Planetary Security is coming, and they'll hear you out as long as you haven't killed anyone!"

As though summoned by Gryth's words, a new power bloomed in Lindon's awareness. His gaze shot to the sky, where a white sun had begun to shine through the clouds.

[That's bad!] Dross warned him. [That's bad news!]

"Is that Planetary Security?" Lindon asked Gryth.

Gryth shook his head as best he could while still stuck in Lindon's grip. "That's a Silverlord. I didn't know there was one in this system, I swear. You can't fight them. Just go along and we can both survive, all right?"

From those words, Lindon couldn't tell if Gryth expected to die at Lindon's hands or the Silverlord's, but it sounded like the value of a hostage had passed. Lindon released the man and began rising into the sky.

"I'll see if they're more willing to talk," Lindon said.

With Orthos and Little Blue flanking him, he drifted up and above the clouds of Kareia, where he got another surprise: a secondary sun hung low in the sky, dim and bluish. Or maybe it was a very bright moon.

The Silverlord was a woman with long, straight, black hair and wearing a circlet of gleaming silver. She tapped a black dagger against one palm, and the head of a giant raven hung over her shoulder.

Not an *entire* giant raven. Just its head. It ended at the neck, leaving Lindon to wonder if its body was invisible or if it was something like Dross.

The Silverlord looked him over. "Did Zakariel send you?"

"I wasn't *sent* here. I ascended from Cradle."

"Yeah, it's a mess up here. No telling where ascensions will end up anymore." She tapped the dagger against her palm once more. "You must be confused. Pack those weapons away and we can talk."

Lindon took a deep breath. That was a gleam of hope on the horizon.

[At least she's reasonable!] Dross said.

Gryth had been reasonable at first too.

Lindon pulled out Suriel's marble and held it up. If Gryth could find it, she could too. Might as well come out with it now. "Pardon, but how much trouble is this going to get me in?"

She shrugged. "Depends. Where did you get it?"

"One of the Abidan gave it to me while I was still in Cradle. I didn't know anything about your conflict up here, and I never intended to get involved."

"Did you get a name from that Abidan?"

Lindon considered his response a moment before saying, "Kiuran of the Hounds."

The raven's head over the Silverlord's shoulder gave a harsh *caw*.

"We've gotten off on the wrong foot if you're lying to me already." She pointed at him. "Try one more time, all right?"

Lindon only knew the names of three Abidan, and he'd thought Kiuran would be the least offensive. He didn't know what effect using Eithan's name would have, so that left him with the truth.

"Suriel gave it to me," Lindon said.

The Silverlord scratched the side of her neck with her dagger. "Do you know what that means?"

"Not fully."

"Means I've got to take you with me." The Silverlord was still casual, but she suddenly radiated an air of menace.

Lindon's heart pounded. He didn't know what Silverlords were capable of, but he could sense a strange similarity to the Void Icon around her. Like there was a deep, dark emptiness behind her from which he could not escape.

His Dreadgod weapons reacted to the threat. The air screamed around him, lightning crackled across his armor, and the world slowed as Dross increased his perception speed.

Then something *else* seized his attention. A sudden explosion of energy out of nowhere. It came in a blaze of blue light, and this power created rather than destroyed.

A small contingent of white-clad figures flew out of the temporary blue star. Bolts of energy and missiles streaked up from the city below, pinging off eggshell armor.

The Silverlord raised her dagger toward them, and Lindon ordered his flying swords forward to intercept what he was sure was an attack.

Instead, she held up her dagger in front of her face to block a punch.

The Abidan appeared with no warning, his fist sending out ripples of darkness from its impact against the dagger. There was the stylized symbol of a wolf's head on the breast of his armor, and he wore no helmet—most of the Abidan had their heads bare.

His hair drifted up, twisting like living shadow, and excitement gleamed in his red eyes.

The Silverlord was forced back by his blow, though she didn't seem to be otherwise injured or incapacitated. She flew back further, spreading her hands, and a torrent of black-feathered birds spilled from each palm.

The ravens, or maybe crows, did not attack. Instead, they spread out for miles, slowly spilling to cover the sky.

Meanwhile, the Abidan had turned his face away from his opponent to regard Lindon.

"You finally made it!" Akura Fury said happily.

[It's amazing how relieving a familiar face can be,] Dross observed. [Especially when he's saving us.]

Lindon's heart had indeed eased on catching sight of Fury, though they probably had some awkward conversations in their future involving the man's mother.

"Gratitude. Do you have a plan for *that*?"

The formation of birds around them was almost complete, but that wasn't what Lindon was most concerned about. Instead, it was the swirl in the sky overhead.

Something was twisting the space. Something from outside the world.

Whoever or whatever was doing that, Lindon suspected it was the sort of being that Silverlords called for backup.

"I do have a plan," Fury said reluctantly, "but it involves not fighting that thing at all."

The other Abidan were maintaining the portal out despite increased resistance from the city below. One of them shouted Fury's name.

"I prefer that," Lindon said.

Fury gave a longing glance toward the twist in the sky, but finally sighed and flew toward the portal.

"How did you find me?" Lindon asked, as they prepared to enter the Way.

Fury nodded to the glass marble. "Suriel can find that anywhere in any world."

"Are we heading to Suriel?" Lindon asked. His heart lifted.

"Not quite, no. Eithan sent me." Fury gave Lindon a sidelong glance. "What's the story there, by the way?"

As they passed through the gateway and into another world, Lindon tried to find the right words to answer.

THE TRIP TO THE WORLD THAT FURY CALLED SANCTUM DIDN'T TAKE LONG, but it felt endless, as Lindon was buffeted by the flows of the Way surrounding him at every turn. His stomach twisted, not from the unfamiliar sensation, but from anticipation.

He hadn't seen Yerin or the others in almost two *years*. The Abidan assured him that it had mostly been the same amount of time up here, but *mostly* didn't reassure him. How long had it been? What had they done without him? What had he missed?

Fury held him by the elbow in his white-gauntleted hand, preventing him from getting lost between universes, but Fury also wouldn't stop talking.

Mostly about how strong everyone was.

"Most of the Abidan that aren't Wolves?" He tapped the wolf's head on his breastplate. "Not worth your time. Make sure they're at least two-star Wolves if you want a challenge. Silverlords aren't bad, but they're all different. Good for variety, but you never know when one will be a challenge or not."

Fury sighed. "None of the Judges will fight me. Not even Eithan. He says I need to get stronger before I challenge him!" Despite his disappointment, Lindon thought the man looked excited.

"How do I compare?" Lindon asked, mostly to keep his mind off the upcoming reunion.

Fury's hair drifted up to a point and his eyes glowed red. "Is that a *challenge*? You think we have time? Yeah, they'll wait! We can stop before

we get there, and they'll never—Aw, we're here.”

Lindon was relieved when they spilled out of the Way before he could correct Fury's misunderstanding.

They drifted above a planet with oceans as blue as Cradle's, but its land masses were only green in carefully placed patches. Instead, the continents were covered in silver and gold.

Traffic flew in lanes running in and out of the atmosphere, some vanishing into massive rings that flashed blue whenever they took another traveler into the Way.

Another Abidan drifted up to Lindon and nodded to Fury. “Sir, we need to deliver him directly to the Eighth Division.”

Fury made a sound of disappointment. “Fine. Let's go. It's the floating junk heap over there.”

There was no wind aura to hold onto, so Lindon felt a bit like he was running on invisible ground, but he still managed to will himself forward. Fury whistled. “Hey, look at you getting the hang of things! We'll be fighting in no time!”

Lindon flew toward the ugly chunk of scrap metal floating like a miniature moon over the planet of Sanctum. “I can't imagine Eithan has been living there for long.”

He sensed a protective field surrounding the two of them, projected by Fury, which was allowing them to speak in the absence of air. Not to mention breathe.

Now that he felt the song of the Hammer Icon, Lindon suspected he would soon be able to do something similar.

“He's already cleaned it up a lot,” Fury said. “I'm sure by this time next year it will look like a golden hairbrush.”

Apparently finding out that Eithan was a celestial executioner still hadn't fixed Fury's opinion of him.

Lindon stretched out his spiritual sense, but he couldn't feel anything at all, as though the place isolated its contents completely. “Are they inside?”

“Yeah, they're waiting. You'll get better at adapting your spiritual sense over time, but the Grave makes perception hard for anyone.”

“The Grave? Like Serpent's Grave? And Moongrave?”

“Eithan named it. Probably for a dumber reason than that. Come to think of it, he might have named Serpent's Grave too.”

Lindon was startled to realize that very well may have been true.

The Grave was even larger than it had seemed from the outside, until Lindon suspected it could hold several cities. Small vessels landed and departed from docks all over.

He and Fury landed on one such dock, and Lindon was about to ask Dross to send a message when a dark blur slammed into him with enough force that the entire dock shook.

Lindon was unshaken. He caught Yerin and lifted her before she could drop back to the ground.

“Too long!” she shouted.

She wore black armor now, but otherwise she hadn’t changed a bit. Red hair fell into her eyes, which swam with tears.

“Too long,” Lindon agreed softly.

He kissed her, and he lost track of time. He felt like he had been carrying a mountain on his back for years, and only once he put it down did he realize how heavy it had always been.

An insistent hand poked his shoulder, and he shook it off.

The poke came again.

Lindon finally looked up to see Little Blue scowling at him. She stood at human height again, and she pointed to Yerin.

As soon as Lindon straightened up, Blue tackled Yerin.

Orthos, as a turtle, ambled up behind them while Blue and Yerin talked over one another. Both of them spoke in a half-comprehensible garbled mess that they each somehow understood.

Lindon looked down to Orthos. “When did you change back?”

“Heralds can change all they want,” Orthos said, giving Blue a jealous look. “But I felt it was worth the soulfire. This is how they know me.”

Little Blue grabbed Orthos by the neck and hauled him over to embrace the others. Dross drifted closer, waving an arm. [Hello! I’m back too!]

Yerin freed herself from the pile to frown at him. “Never left, did you?”

A red Dross popped out from over her shoulder and waved back. [I missed you,] the other Dross said.

Lindon’s Dross sniffled. [That’s all I wanted.]

Lindon took the moment to compose himself. He had other greetings and introductions to make, but at least those would be more dignified than this one.

Mercy slammed into him just as hard as Yerin had. “*Lindon!* You’re back! Why did it take you so long?”

He looked over her shoulder to Ziel, whose expression was impassive. Ziel lifted a hand. "Hey. Welcome back."

Mercy had already left Lindon to leap onto Orthos.

Lindon tried not to look around too obviously, but he had at least one more long-overdue reunion. "Where's—"

"Did someone say, '*Where's Eithan?*'" Eithan cried. He popped out literally from nowhere, his white hair standing in stark contrast to his black armor.

[Not yet,] Dross pointed out.

Eithan beamed at Lindon, holding him by the shoulders and looking him up and down. "Well, well, that's a fine pair of Icons you have there. Ozmanthus Arelius would be proud, may his name live in eternal handsomeness. And what an aesthetic you've chosen! You know I *do* love bright colors, but there's something timeless about the stark black and white. We match!"

To his own embarrassment, tears welled up in Lindon's eyes. "Hello, Eithan. We...I missed you."

Eithan's smile shook.

He stayed frozen for another long moment, then he hauled Lindon violently into a hug. "Thank you," Eithan said quietly.

The embrace continued until Lindon realized Eithan's back was shaking. The man was *sobbing*, as Lindon had only seen him once before: when the sky turned black.

He pushed back, trying to see Eithan's face. "Eithan? Are you okay?"

Tears streamed down Eithan's cheeks, and he forced a smile. "I just...I wasn't prepared...to be so proud." He ruffled Lindon's hair. "You used my *shampoo*."

Involuntarily, Lindon let out a laugh.

"I did it!" Eithan cried. "I have cracked the stone-faced man! It shall go down in history as one of my greatest feats. And look!" He ruffled Lindon's hair again. "So silky smooth! Such volume! Truly, this is my apprentice."

Wiping her face clean, Mercy leaned over to Lindon. "Hey, I'm sorry to bring this up so soon, but did you bring us any messages? We had to leave so quickly, and they say we'll be able to visit Cradle eventually, but it's been a long time..."

Lindon reached up to a large metal cube hanging from the ribbon around his neck. A void key of his creation, enlarged and reinforced by a

generous donation of King's Key madra from Reigan Shen.

This was far more complex than a normal void key, in addition to being larger and more stable, but it was easy enough for Lindon to control. He reached his perception inside and opened a portal next to what he sought.

A doorway-sized portal opened and Pride marched stiffly out. He held himself up to his full height, the lines of his Goldsign disappearing into elaborate robes.

"I was wondering how much longer you were going to keep—" he began, and then Mercy flung herself into him just as she had into Lindon.

But Pride was only an Underlord.

His body buckled and he flew backwards, and he would have launched into space if Mercy hadn't snatched him out of the air immediately. "Oh no, I'm sorry! I'm sorry! **Restore.**"

Pride appeared on the dock, shaken but fully healed. "Did you just forget you were a Monarch?"

"I'm so sorry, I was just so excited to see you!" She flung her arms around his neck, but much more carefully this time. "Is Aunt Charity in there too?"

"Of course not. Someone had to take care of the family." Pride eyed Lindon. "Someone less grateful than I might say that you took an *irresponsible* amount from Cradle as it is."

"I'm glad you're so grateful, then," Lindon said easily.

Eithan cupped his chin and peered at Pride. "Underlord? But that can't be right; you were an Underlord when I left you."

"Just because the rest of you advance every ten seconds doesn't mean *everyone* can. Or should."

"Nonetheless, the standards of the heavens are high. Don't worry, though! You'll be all right with just a bit of *training*."

Off to the side, Fury brightened as though he'd opened a thousand presents at once.

"No," Pride said, "hold on. Wait."

Fury grabbed his half-brother in excitement. "You won't believe the training facilities they have here! You're going to love it!"

"Uncle Fury, st—"

Fury leaped away, toward the planet.

[Have you seen what happens to a person on reentry to an atmosphere?] Dross asked curiously. [Come to think of it, neither have I. Make sure you

watch closely.]

“Bye, Pride!” Mercy called.

Yerin leaned into Lindon’s side as though she’d always been there, peering curiously into the opening of his void key. “Got anything with my name on it?”

“As a matter of fact, I have three things,” Lindon said. The first one, at least, he was sure she would like. The other two were...riskier.

From his soul-space, Lindon produced a sword.

Its blade had a core of white wintersteel, carrying willpower to the black metal around it. The edge was a bright, bloody crimson, and the whole thing radiated an endless scarlet light. Its guard was a pair of swept-back phoenix wings.

Yerin’s breath caught, and she reached out for it. “Bleed me, I knew you were bringing it, and I still...What does the binding do?”

[A lot,] Dross assured her.

Yerin ran her madra through it and the blade sang. “Like it was Forged for my hand. Guess it was, true?”

Dross coughed pointedly. [Speaking of which...]

Lindon took out his next, much smaller, gift.

A ring.

It was made of a rare metal resembling silver, but one that could handle the full release of Yerin’s spirit. And it had been set with a small rainbow diamond. Or at least the piece of one; Lindon had carefully removed it from the Queen’s Gift of the Ninecloud Court.

He presented it to her more hesitantly than he had the last. “I know this isn’t...Well, if you don’t like it, that’s all right. But I knew you’d enjoy the sword, and I thought you might want this.”

Yerin’s eyes were wide. She levitated the sword off to one side—carefully—and slid the ring onto her finger, holding it up to admire it in the light.

Eithan leaned over to Lindon. “You know, in some cultures, giving a woman a ring is done when you propose,” he cleared his throat, “a duel. When you propose a duel. In those cultures, this would be a very contentious gift.”

“Not in mine,” Yerin said. She moved the ring to see it from another angle, with Mercy watching over her shoulder.

“Rude of you to decline Lindon’s honorable challenge,” Eithan said gravely.

[You were right, she did like the jewelry,] Dross said. [I thought she would complain that it wasn’t a sword. And isn’t there a third gift?]

“Oh, right!” This was the biggest risk of all, and Lindon moved the void key’s entrance. “Now, I know you didn’t get a chance to say goodbye, so I thought...”

The Winter Sage flew out of the void key, weeping.

“Yerin, I’m sorry!” she sobbed. “I couldn’t help you! There was nothing I could do!”

Yerin looked as though a cat had leaped onto her face out of nowhere, and Lindon reflected that his original plan had been better. He had meant to save this for later, when he could prepare her.

“Surely the Sage of the Frozen Blade wouldn’t leave her sect behind,” Eithan said, as though reading from a script.

So he had already seen what was in the rest of the void key. As expected.

[We brought them along!] Dross said brightly. [All of them who wanted to come, anyway. Some of them had ‘lives’ and ‘families.’]

Yerin leaned out from around the Winter Sage. “How many countries did you pack away in there?”

“Ah, that reminds me,” Lindon said. “Would you mind if I made an addition to your...” He looked out over the floating mass of metal that orbited the planet. “...base?”

Eithan threw his hands up to the sky. “Lindon, my home is yours! And more importantly, your home is mine. Add whatever you like.”

“It will take up quite a bit of space,” Lindon warned him.

Eithan smiled broadly. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“What did you bring?” Mercy asked.

“The labyrinth,” Lindon said. He started to stretch his spiritual perception to the end of the Grave, getting rough measurements.

Ziel stared. “All of it?”

[All of it,] Dross confirmed. [Bringing together the sections separated all over the world wasn’t as hard as you’d expect. The *hard* part was doing it without causing devastating local earthquakes.]

“There was still more I hadn’t explored,” Lindon explained. “I couldn’t just leave it behind. I wanted it all.”



Hours later, while the others were still catching up, Lindon slipped off by himself.

He left the Grave, flying up to perch on the outside. The external surface was rough and uneven, as though the hovering station had been torn free from a larger structure and then welded together afterwards.

Lindon settled himself onto a ledge with a view of Sanctum below. The planet stretched off into the distance, incomprehensibly large. And beyond it, above it, an endless black sky filled with strange stars.

He looked into that distance, taking in the reality. Everything here was new. He didn't know how long he sat there dreaming, remembering...and waiting.

A woman interrupted him by drifting up, hair shining green and floating behind her. She wore a white uniform instead of armor, and she settled into a seat beside him.

"You found more uses for that than I expected," Suriel said.

At some point, Lindon had found himself holding the glass marble containing her one blue candle-flame. He had turned it in his hand while he thought, and now he held it up for inspection.

"Gratitude," he said. "It gave me encouragement more times than I can remember."

Suriel had her arms crossed, and she leaned back into the metal so casually that she almost looked mortal. "How did it encourage you?"

"I'm not sure I know the right words, but it gave me perspective." Lindon held up the marble and looked through it, to the planet below. "It helped me believe that one day, I would be up here with you."

Suriel smiled. "Then it served its purpose better than I could have ever imagined."

Lindon rolled the marble in his fingers one more time, then handed it back to Suriel.

She took it and lifted it herself. "There were many times when I didn't think I'd ever see this again with my own eyes."

"There were many times I didn't think I'd be able to make it. But returning it to you was...I'd say it was the one thing I had left to do."

Suriel nodded. Then she tossed it back to him.

Surprised, he caught it.

“Keep it,” she said.

“Pardon, but surely you don’t need to keep track of me now.”

“What do you mean?” She gave him a look of exaggerated mock surprise. “Of course I have to keep my eye on you. You’re barely out of the Cradle.”

Lindon dipped his head and sat the marble next to him. Then he hesitated.

This next part might be pushing his luck; Suriel had given him hints that she was coming to meet him tonight, but he knew she was very busy. He shouldn’t try to monopolize her time.

But he was *very* curious.

“You know so much about me,” Lindon said carefully, “but I know very little about you. Would you mind telling me about yourself? If you’re willing, of course.”

Suriel gave him a smile he hoped was fond. “It will have to be the short version for now. We have very little time before Ozriel interrupts us.”

Lindon nodded eagerly, listening with rapt attention. The Phoenix spoke, and Lindon learned.

And all the while, a blue candle-flame burned merrily between them.

ITERATION 074: VERGE

[THEY CALL THAT A CLASS TWO FIEND,] DROSS SAID TO LINDON. [I HEARD it would be ugly, but I was...I was not prepared. Do you think you could fight without looking at it?]

Lindon wished he could. The Fiend was a country-sized beast floating over the central planet of this Iteration, and it looked something like a living island with a million squirming limbs. Even that description implied a logic that this thing didn't have; it was chaos made flesh, and it *squirmed* in a way that hurt Lindon's eyes.

Ordinarily, Abidan Sector Control would deal with an incursion like this. But not only were they overwhelmed, this particular Fiend had been contacted by the world's inhabitants. It was the natural fate of this world to be eaten one piece at a time by Cha'tur'niak, Devourer of Dimensions.

That fate was almost complete.

The Way felt distant here, and Lindon felt the emptiness and chaos of the Void pressing in close. The stars were already all gone from the sky, and the Fiend tore pieces of space out and devoured them. It defied all logic to see, as though the creature were snapping shards of existence off and cramming them into its mouth.

Half of the planet was already erased. The Fiend was closing in on the remaining population, leaving them for last so it could feed on the existence of their world as long as possible.

The endless darkness of the universe chilled Lindon. It reminded him of looking into the sky and seeing, *knowing* on a fundamental level, that there was no hope.

Eithan had done battle against the Mad King. Now it was Lindon's turn.

Unfortunately, this wasn't an opponent he could simply wipe out.

The Weeping Dragon Sword Formation spread out above him, and Wavedancer unleashed a golden dragon's breath that pierced through space in an instant. Lindon supplemented it with bars of Blackflame from each hand.

Any one of those attacks would have been enough to scorch the remaining population of this Iteration. They only tickled the Devourer of Dimensions.

It turned to face him, shrieking an incomprehensible word.

Lindon felt the world peeling away from him as the Fiend tried to cast him into the Void.

"No."

The Void rejected him, but now he had the Fiend's attention.

Its attacks were strange. World-twisting. It couldn't be seen in Fate, its alien willpower matched his own, and he had half a planet left to protect.

Their battle lit up the skies.

Finally, Lindon saw an opportunity and took it. The Dragon Descends smashed into the warped chaos of flesh that formed the Fiend's body. Forged dragon-claws detonated, blasting Cha'tur'niak thousands of miles into empty space.

But Lindon wasn't unscathed either. The creature's return stroke cracked his armor and sent him plummeting into the planet's remaining atmosphere.

"Stop!" He slowed, but his working couldn't counteract the effects of the Fiend's attack enough.

Someone leaped into the upper atmosphere and caught him. It was a young man wearing a gold crown and a blue-and-silver cloak.

The force of Lindon's fall still pushed the native down, but the man strained to stop him. His face turned red with effort as he pushed, and Lindon was impressed. This native hero had strength comparable to a Herald.

The man helped enough that the remaining will in the Fiend's attack faded, and Lindon righted himself.

[That's a prince,] Dross whispered. [He's significant to the world's Fate. One might argue that he was responsible for Cha'tur'niak being summoned in the first place.]

Lindon hovered in the air, but evidently the prince had exhausted whatever power let him fly up and help in the first place. He plummeted back toward the ground.

After zipping down first, Lindon controlled the air so that the prince would fall safely. He drifted down the last few inches, looking astonished as the wind deposited him gently onto his feet.

Lindon pressed his fists against one another and bowed. "Gratitude. If I had crashed into a city, many people would have died."

The prince returned the bow but gave a wry laugh. "That doesn't make much of a difference at this point. We're all doomed. You might be the only one left worth saving."

"If I thought so, I wouldn't be here." Lindon looked into the sky. The Devourer of Dimensions was growing closer, though it could be seen from much farther away than should be possible, thanks to the bending of space.

[We have about thirty seconds,] Dross informed him. [Give or take any teleportation shenanigans.]

"I saw your battle," the prince said. "Can you...can you kill it?"

Through the despair in the prince, Lindon heard hope in the man's voice.

Lindon turned to face him directly and placed his left hand on the prince's shoulder. "That's what I'm here to do. Once I kill it, we can return your world to what it was before. Even most of the dead can be restored. The story of this world is not over yet."

The prince's face crumpled as though he were about to cry, but he shed no tears. His hands balled into fists, and he seemed as though he were about to speak. Something over Lindon's shoulder caught his attention, and the despair returned to his eyes.

"How can you face that?" the prince asked. "That's not an enemy, that's...the end."

Lindon lifted into the air and turned to face the Fiend. Dark fire kindled in his hand.

"No," Lindon said. "I am the end."

THE END
OF THE CRADLE SERIES

EPILOGUE

**INFORMATION REQUESTED: THE FUTURE OF THE SPIRITUAL ORIGIN TEST
OF SACRED VALLEY.**

SYNCHRONIZATION POSSIBLE.

SYNCHRONIZATION SET AT 99%.

BEGINNING REPORT...

ITERATION 001: SANCTUM THE GRAVE

LIRIN RAN THROUGH THE GRAY HALLWAYS OF THE GRAVE WITH RECKLESS familiarity. The place was practically his home, and he could make his way around with his eyes closed.

He and his family didn't live here *all* the time, but they could sometimes stay for months. He liked it here, even though the halls themselves were gray and boring. The people were interesting.

Today, he was excited for a different reason.

Today was his seventh birthday.

There was a party planned for him later, but in the meantime, his father had called him for a surprise.

Lirin couldn't help looking forward to it, though he knew his father well enough to feel a healthy dose of skepticism. More than half the time, his father's idea of a fun surprise ended up being 'more training.'

He dashed through the halls, cradling the present he'd found sitting in his room when he woke up. While he should have left it behind when his father called, he was too excited. He knew who'd left it.

Lirin hurtled blindly around a corner and found something grabbing him by the back of the shirt and lifting him into the air.

His mother lifted him one-handed, raising him to a level with her red eyes. "Looking to crack your skull, are you?"

Lirin hung limply from her grip. There was no point in squirming. The most he might accomplish was entangling himself in his own shirt.

He sighed. "Apologies."

"Where are you galloping to?"

His father's voice echoed down the halls. "I called him!"

Lirin's parents could hear anything from anywhere. He sometimes envied children who could get away with things. His instinct was to hide the present he carried behind his back, to keep it secret, but he didn't bother. She'd have seen it.

He was gently lowered to his feet as his mother clicked her tongue. "It's your time to burn. Already told you it's a rotten trap of a test."

She spoke at normal volume, as though she were talking to Lirin, but he knew better. His father could hear her fine. Of course.

"There are uses for it!" His father called back. The only reason he was shouting was so Lirin could hear. "It's not a bad starting point for training if you do it right."

Lirin froze at the word 'training.'

His mother noticed and nudged him with an elbow. She gave him a lopsided smile. "Don't twist yourself in knots. Wouldn't call it training. If you put a sword to my neck, I'd call it a game."

She was no better than his father when it came to training. She would call running up a mountain with a monster strapped to his back a fun game.

"Cheers and celebration for me," he muttered.

"You don't like that one? All right, then say he's measuring you. Once you're done, he'll make you a gift."

That brightened Lirin up.

His father made the best gifts.

"And now that we're talking about presents..."

The wrapped gift Lirin had carried appeared in his mother's hand, though he hadn't felt her take it. She held it up, a small box sheathed in

blue-green silk and tied with a ribbon that looked like it had been woven from the light of a summer's day.

"Bet my soul I know where you got this," she muttered. She held it up and shook it, as though to hear what was inside. Without ceremony, she untied the ribbon and opened the lid.

Lirin went up on his tiptoes to see into the box, but he wasn't tall enough.

As soon as the package opened, a pleasant, familiar voice drifted out. "For shame!" the gift said. "Don't you think he's old enough to open his own presents? I taught you better than th—"

His mother shut the box again, grumbling to herself. She held it up to Lirin. "Give this back to you after I see what other tricks, traps, and trouble he left in here. Now go see your father, and don't wear out your feet getting there."

Lirin started to run off again, but after a step or two, slowed himself to a more reasonable trot to stop his mother from grabbing him again.

It took him another minute or two to reach his father's workshop. The door was already open, and Lirin entered with a respectful awe.

He wasn't allowed in here except on special occasions. Usually, it was locked to him because it was filled with dangerous things.

Which was exactly why he kept his eyes wide and looked in every direction. Dangerous things tended to be amazing.

The room was shaped like the inside of a giant ball, with dozens of mechanical arms folded up into the ceiling and floor. Shoved off to one side of the floor, eight spheres of light spun around one another like a flock of birds, resembling the model of a solar system. Nearby, a rack held guns and cannons of every description. Some were made of eye-twisting metals or sprouted eyes and watched Lirin as he walked by. Another rack held similarly strange swords.

Distant voices whispered from a sealed box. Half-finished suits of armor tried to animate themselves but were held back by glowing restraints. A spiritual pressure forge, a massive machine that took up one wall, groaned to life. It compressed energy into glowing gemstones, and it was the number one device that Lirin wanted to use himself one day.

His father sat in a chair nearby and didn't interrupt, watching Lirin with a distant smile. His right arm rested on the surface of a desk, which had been cleared of everything except a shallow bowl.

“What’s in there?” Lirin asked. He ran up to the desk and stood on his tiptoes to see inside the bowl, but to his disappointment, it was empty.

“Nothing yet,” his father said. He gestured to a chair opposite him, and Lirin excitedly hopped up into it.

Two pale fingers lifted from the desk, and energy rushed from Lirin’s father. It filled the bowl in a blink with a blue-white transparent liquid that resembled glowing water.

“When I was your age,” his father began, “I had to take a test.”

Lirin had heard this story before and was impatient to get to the next part. Nonetheless, he held his tongue and listened. His father’s black-and-white eyes were distant, so this was clearly important.

“It helped me understand who I was. But I want you to remember that this is a tool to help us see where you are going to begin. It doesn’t tell you where you will end up.”

Suddenly, Lirin was nervous. How much did this test matter?

His father’s distant gaze snapped, and he gave a sheepish smile. “Pardon, I was lost in thought. Don’t worry too much. All you have to do is put your hand into the bowl and cycle your madra.”

Lirin took a deep breath and stretched out his hand. Before he put it in, he hesitated. “I just...put it in?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not going to hurt?”

“No.”

Lirin still hesitated. “What’s going to happen?”

His father looked like he was struggling to hold back laughter. “It’s even safer than a bowl of water.”

That soothed Lirin’s worries. His parents had strange ideas about training and fun, but they wouldn’t tell him something was safe when it wasn’t. They could be *too* concerned about his safety, in Lirin’s view.

Lirin evened his breathing and slid his hand into the bowl. At first, it was only cool. His fingertips tingled.

Then he felt a reaction from his cores.

Two similar, but subtly different, forms of power flooded up his arm and resonated with the fluid energy in the bowl.

The liquid erupted.

One half burst into rapidly forming crystals, like a violent ocean spray freezing at the moment of its creation. The other half dissolved into a cloud

of steam, dissipating into the air.

Lirin jerked his hand back, leaving a disappearing cloud of blue-white and a sculpture that resembled a frozen tree.

The ice, which Lirin supposed was really Forged madra, only covered one half of the dish. It slowly lost balance, tipping over to one side.

Lirin's father caught the bowl before it broke.

"What does that mean?" Lirin asked nervously.

"That means it's time to make your own badge."

SYNCHRONIZATION TERMINATED.

SUGGESTED TOPIC: THE FATE OF THE REAPER DIVISION.

DENIED, REPORT COMPLETE.

BLOOPERS

“Worst book in the series,” Eithan declared.

Lindon shrugged. “I don’t know, I liked it. Lots of powering up. What’s your criteria for a good book?”

“Percentage of Eithan. The more lines I have, the better the book. This one didn’t have nearly enough Eithan for my taste.”

“You weren’t in the first one either,” Lindon pointed out.

“Oh, but I was there in spirit.”

“How do you read other books without you in it?”

“I don’t.” Eithan held up a book with his own smiling face on it. “There’s only one other story worth reading. *From Conditioner to Executioner: A Story of Hair Spray and Spraying Blood – The Eithan Arelius Story, Collected Edition.*”

“That sounds...uh, fascinating. I’ll have to get a copy one day.”

“You have one! Check your pocket.”



Do you have an answer for me? Lindon asked.

[You’re not going to like it,] Dross said gravely. [It should be a gun.]

Lindon considered the Silent King’s binding. *Really? You don’t think something else, like a spear or a bow?*

[Nope, definitely a gun. In fact, they should all be guns.]

Why?

[Well, a gun is the most efficient weapon. It's just better in every single way. Also, Reigan Shen's gonna be shaking when you pull up to the fight with the Silent King Assault Rifle.]



"We're missing a name!" Mercy cried.

Dross drifted over. [Oh, I've been thinking about this! It's a chamber where we distort time, right? And that change is very dramatic, so I thought we could call it...] He spread boneless arms wide. [The Hyperbolic Time Ch—]

"No," Ziel interrupted. "No one uses the word 'hyperbolic.'"

[You do better, then.]

Ziel responded immediately. "The Danger Room."

"I like that one," Lindon said, "but for some reason, I get the feeling we shouldn't use it."

Mercy leaped up. "I like the room part! Let's go with that! What about the...Requirement Room? No, wait, I'll think of something else."

"We could say something about the way it functions," Lindon said, "but this is basically just a complex matrix of stolen constructs. And we wouldn't want to call it 'The Matrix.'"

Yerin patted the weapon at her waist. "We're training swords in here, aren't we? How about 'House of Blades'?"

Ziel pointed to her. "That's it!"



The Weeping Dragon was flying south over the Trackless Sea, following traces of its youngest brother. It felt the remainder of the Slumbering Wraith's power, tracking it to a cloud fortress drifting over the ocean.

As soon as the Dreadgod got close enough to see the house on its dark blue cloud, suddenly it felt seven new figures emerge from within. Seven terrifying figures, Monarchs stronger than anything it had ever felt.

At the sudden threat looming in the immediate future, the Weeping Dragon turned and ran.

Meanwhile, Ziel turned to Lindon. “This worked a lot better than I thought it would.”

“What do you mean? I told you, when we came out of there, the Weeping Dragon would run from us.”

“Yeah, I just...for some reason, I thought something would go wrong.”

“Nope. Smooth sailing.”

“Huh.”



To Yerin, the world turned colorless and very, very quiet. She realized something new. She saw a pattern so clear that she was shocked she hadn't noticed it before.

Yerin wasn't *just* the disciple of the Sage of the Endless Sword; she was also Eithan's apprentice. The student of the Reaper.

She had used Penance to strike down a Monarch. She had learned to imitate Ozriel's sword strike.

In a world that still seemed frozen, Yerin pulled her sword back almost casually. An image formed in the sky at the motion. Not a sword.

A vast, smiling face with twinkling blue eyes.

“**Die,**” Yerin ordered.

And at Yerin's command, the Eithan Icon descended on Akura Malice.



“Do you know anything about my father?” Mercy asked.

“They told me enough,” Lindon said. “They told me you killed him.”

“Wrong!” Mercy straightened up and raised a black-clad fist. “*You* are my father!”

Lindon staggered back, clutching a nearby pole for support. “No! That's not true! That's impossible!”

“Search your feelings. You know it to be true.”

“NOOOOOO!”

“Lindon...Join me, and together we can rule the world as father and daughter!”

Lindon leaped off the cloudship.



Yerin clung to the edge of the cliff by the tips of her fingers. Lindon peered down at her.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Yerin shrugged as best she could while still hanging onto the cliff. “Not sure. I hear we’re supposed to end books this way.”

“Not this one.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, this is the last book in the series.” He reached out a hand to pull her up. “Now we don’t hang onto cliffs, we rest on flat, open, empty ground with nothing left to look forward to and only an all-consuming sense of emptiness.”

Yerin looked around her, seeing nothing. “That sounds worse.”

“It is worse. But hey!” He clapped her on the shoulder. “At least we’re not hanging on a cliff.”



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Wight is the *New York Times* and #1 Kindle best-selling author of the *Cradle* series, a new space-fantasy series entitled *The Last Horizon*, and a handful of other books that he regularly forgets to mention. His true power is only unleashed during a full moon, when he transforms into a monstrous mongoose.

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Visit his website at WillWight.com for eldritch incantations, book news, and a blessing of prosperity for your crops. If you believe you have experienced a sighting of Will Wight, please report it to the agents listening from your attic.



ALSO BY WILL WIGHT

THE LAST HORIZON

The Captain

CRADLE

Unsouled

Soulsmith

Blackflame

Skysworn

Ghostwater

Underlord

Uncrowned

Wintersteel

Bloodline

Reaper

Dreadgod

Cradle: Foundation

Cradle: Path of Gold

Cradle: Rise of Lords

THE TRAVELER'S GATE TRILOGY

House of Blades

The Crimson Vault

City of Light

The Traveler's Gate Chronicles

The Traveler's Gate Trilogy (Collected Edition)

THE ELDER EMPIRE

Of Sea & Shadow

Of Dawn & Darkness

Of Kings & Killers
Of Shadow & Sea
Of Darkness & Dawn
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