

Chapter 1

Ezlo hit the floor. Lloyd never held back, even during practice matches. As he lay on the ground looking towards the sky, he thought “*I don’t stand a chance*”, for what must have been the fifteenth time this week. For the last 5 years now he had sworn that he was just one match away from giving up entirely, but some part of him refused to quit no matter how many times his face met the dirt.

Was it determination? Anger? Jealousy? Spite? He wasn’t quite sure, but he never cared to think about it deeply enough to find out.

Magical flames danced around Lloyd’s blade like mad - one fierce swing could singe Ezlo’s eyebrows for a week, and a more dangerous blow would melt his skin. He had been taught to fight back with the same ferocity by his father, Lord Ibah, but he struggled to do so. Ibah taught both Ezlo and Lloyd the same relentless discipline, consisting of steadfast, immovable defense, followed by explosive leaps and strikes. Lloyd mastered it quickly, casting licks of flame around his sword with every slash, honing his techniques to a dangerous speed; Meanwhile, Ezlo was stuck, unable to coat his blade in flames, much less cast it forward. The one technique he could use was too dangerous to use in practice, so it was effectively useless. He felt worthless after every match, knowing his father was watching him get thoroughly kicked around every single afternoon.

He blamed the heavy armor his father forced him to wear. He was told that it was for his own safety – that it would save his life. The only thing it seemed to help him with, however, was getting beat. The weight on his legs and arms slowed him down so significantly that Lloyd could quite literally run circles around him. To make up for his lack of speed, Ezlo trained his defense to a tee. He could block even Lloyd’s most powerful strikes and counter with fierce blows, but it only took one mistake to end up on his rear once more.

“Damn it Lloyd!” Ezlo shouted.

He sat up and looked at his friend and sparring partner through disheveled blonde hair. He hated his hair in his face, but it was too much a part of his identity to give up. His father spoke up from the side of the sandpit to give his usual tips and advice.

“Lloyd! Great work son, you’ve gotten very powerful with your swings. Keep it up, but remember to always keep your feet anchored when you finish a slash - you’re getting knocked away far too often. Ezlo! Get it together, your defense is still lacking and your offense is nowhere to be seen. Now, one more time!”

Ezlo hated losing to Lloyd every day. But more than anything, he loathed his father.

I get my butt handed to me every single day, you make me wear this stupid armor that weighs me down so much, you won’t teach me anything, and you won’t let me get better. How come Lloyd gets stronger everyday while I haven’t improved in months? How come I’m not allowed to use the one technique I’m good at? How come Lloyd gets preferential treatment over your own son?... I hate you. What a pathetic excuse for a father. These were only a few of the thoughts that routinely bounced around Ezlo’s head during practice.

He seethed with rage. He stood up and squared up to Lloyd, both his feet square behind the line for their 3rd match today.

“3... 2... 1... Fight!” Ibah shouted.

Ezlo channeled all of his anger, jealousy, and rage into his blade, hoping that his emotions would spark and erupt his blade in flames for once.

Lloyd jumped forward, Ezlo stayed put. Lloyd swung his sword behind his ears, Ezlo braced his knees. Lloyd twisted his torso, Ezlo brought his blade to his side. At the same exact moment, they swung, Ezlo up from his hip, and Lloyd down from his shoulders.

Their metals collided with an explosive *clang*, and they pushed together tightly. Lloyd pulled back and slashed twice more, both of which Ezlo moved to block seamlessly.

Lloyd jumped to the side and threw a horizontal slice at his partner’s abdomen, but Ezlo saw it coming. He pivoted both feet and blocked again.

His fathers words echoed in Ezlo’s head. “*Your offense is nowhere to be seen.*”

You want offense? I’ll give you some offense. Ezlo thought.

He stepped forward, his heavy boot plunging into the sand beneath it as he brought his blade swiftly down, but it missed. Lloyd was already yards away, preparing his next lunge. He geared up, preparing for the next strike, but before he knew it his vision was filled with burning orange, and his feet left the ground.

Within only 30 seconds of standing back up, he was in the dirt once more.

Ibah sighed, “That’s enough for today. I’ll prepare some notes for both of you. Now go get some rest.”

“Yessir!” Hopped Lloyd. He reached his hand out to Ezlo, who promptly smacked it away.

“Just let me lay here for a minute.” He muttered. He knew if he spoke any louder that Lloyd would become the victim of a very angry outburst, as he had several times before.

“Come on Lolo, you don’t look *that* bad.” A sweet voice said jokingly. It was his twin sister, Thalia, who had been watching from the side. “I know you’re hellbent on being *oh so sad* after practice everyday, but shouldn’t you be used to this by now?”

Ezlo smiled. He had heard so many brutally sarcastic remarks from Thalia throughout his life that they just made him laugh anymore. As brutal as they were, she was always right. If Lloyd had been the one who said it he would have snapped back rudely, but since it came from Thalia, it didn’t bother him. Sparring aside, he liked Lloyd, but nobody compared to Thalia. They were best friends.

“Shut up,” Ezlo said with a smile, “You really do suck.”

“Excuse you.” Thalia kicked him. “Are you hungry?”

“Always.” Ezlo replied.

After an arduous 5 minutes of pulling, kicking, and begging Ezlo to get off the ground, Thalia managed to guide his weary body to the dining room. She was enthusiastic about cooking, and dedicated lots of time to making Ezlo delicious food after practice everyday. At first, he told her that she didn't have to, but she would always retort that it gave more meaning to her otherwise boring life.

"You boys get to go out and play with swords and train to be heroes every day, while I'm forced to practice the piano and act ladylike. Cooking is the one thing about it I like, so just shut up and eat."

And so he did. Today's specialty was a creamy potato soup, and he slurped down a whole bowl before Thalia could even serve herself.

"Tastes awful today, like always." Ezlo said sarcastically.

"That's because I made it just for you."

They sat in silence while Thalia ate her first bowl, and Ezlo ate his second a little more slowly. It was always a very comfortable silence between the two, after all they'd spent nearly every day of their lives together. They didn't have to speak to each other to know what the other was thinking, so much of their time together was completely silent, followed by eruptions of laughter or screams of disbelief at the other's offensive gestures. After a few minutes, Thalia spoke.

"Did you hear that the Chancellor is sending a new general out here?"

"All the way out here? What do we need a general in Ostend for? Is Dad not enough?" Ezlo asked.

"Apparently there's been an increase in monsters all over the nation. Father told me all about it this morning. Freile was completely overrun. Entire villages were burned. If not for the royal army showing up, everyone in the province could have died. So I guess they're bolstering some smaller provinces for protection."

"Huh..." Ezlo said. "How come he didn't tell me about it?"

"Maybe cuz you never talk to him."

"Yeah yeah, whatever." Another silence fell upon the two. Ezlo let out a long sigh before continuing.

"What do you think he'll be like?"

"Tall, dark and handsome hopefully. I've gotten sick of looking at all the boys here."

"I'll bet my left foot he's tall, dark, and smells like Lloyd's buttcrack. You always get your hopes up when a new boy comes around, and they never meet your expectations."

"You're just jealous that the only girl here your age is your sister. I bet if they sent a female general you'd fawn over her no matter what she smelled like."

"Not if she smells like you." Ezlo said. Thalia threw her spoon at him.

Ezlo spent the rest of his day laying in his room. His body hurt, his mind was exhausted. He stared at his self portrait on the wall that his father had commissioned for him last year, alongside the rest of his family.

Their lordship was not as vast as some others; Ibah ruled a province in the southeast end of the Grand Kingdom of Aldea called Ostend; A small countryside that only housed a few small towns, and wide expanses of farmland. Despite its small stature, his father took as much pride in his title as the lords of the grander provinces.

He was a respected man in all spheres, known for his bravery, commanding presence, and incredible strength. When their family would go to the capital for parties and meetings, the other lords would tell Ezlo and Thalia all about their father's incredible war stories. His defiant stand at Akah-lo, his brave march through the frozen wastes of Dedra, and his epic duel with a conspiring senator who sought to take the king's life. He left the military with more honor than any single man in Aldean History, and as such was offered a place as the heir to the province of Radia, the largest and most prosperous land in the kingdom. However, he turned that offer down to succeed the late lord of Ostend, his old mentor and friend.

So, Ibah and his family lived life as humble and gracious rulers over their small province. But every single day, Ezlo wished his father was anyone else. He couldn't stand hearing tales of his bravery, when he had never even seen him draw a real sword. He loathed hearing the townspeople rave about the gracious and kind Ibah, while he was getting drilled into the ground every single day.

'How could he be so kind to the people, but so awful to his own son?' Was a thought that Occupied Ezlo's mind on a regular basis. He stared at his portrait still. He hated it. He looked too much like his father.

He sighed. Soon he would have to go downstairs, and sit through boring ceremonies and meals to welcome the new general. It's not all bad, he told himself. He could sit with Thalia, and make fun of all the ridiculous outfits worn by their houseguests. Their mother would of course bark at them to be nice, but they just couldn't help it. They knew their regulars by heart, and their delusional outfits never ceased to exceed their expectations.

The thought made Ezlo smirk. He got out of bed, grabbed his ceremonial uniform, and looked at himself in the mirror. He pulled his collar tight, straightened the edges, and left no ribbon out of place.

He left to go bug Thalia for the next hour, one of his favorite pastimes.

The hour had come and gone, and Ezlo and Thalia took their seats beside their father in the great hall. Thalia always jokingly called it the 'okay' hall, because the other lords' castles had far taller ceilings, golden statues, and marble floors, while Ostend's seemed more like an old chapel, with its bare stone floors and wooden rafters. The thrones, however, were a posh mahogany, tall and intricately carved into a powerful seat displaying the royal crest of Aldea. Their personal guard of 16 soldiers stood at the doors and along the sides of the hall.

"Are you excited?" Thalia asked Ezlo.

“Of *course*,” Ezlo Replied. “I can’t wait to see what awful costume the Baron of Vinivier has for us today.”

“You remember the time he wore the cloak with the duck feathers?” Thalia said. Ezlo snickered at the memory.

“Quiet you two, you know better.” Their father said to them. “Plus, the Barons aren’t coming tonight.”

“Awww why not?” said Thalia. “They’re the only reason I come to these things.”

She said no more, but Thalia fell silent when she saw her father’s face. He looked somber, almost as if he was afraid. It was no secret that he didn’t enjoy the bureaucratic meetings he was forced to sit through, but he usually just looked bored. Tonight though, he looked afraid.

The large door at the end of the hall opened. “My Lord!” A messenger shouted. “General Rieke of the Grand Aldean Kingdom and his soldiers have arrived. Shall I send them in?”

“Yes. Bring them in.” Said Lord Ibah.

Soldiers? Ezlo thought. *We have plenty of soldiers. Ostend is tiny.*

The doors opened wider now, and a tall, burly man dressed in shining platinum armor walked in. He was adorned with bright red and gold, and his breastplate bore the same intricately carved crest as their thrones. He wore no helmet, baring his long black hair for all to see, his powerful features on full display. His face was rough, with scars under both his eyes, and a scratchy stubble grew over his face and neck. He was intensely intimidating.

His steps echoed on the stone floor as he approached. As he got closer, Ezlo could see his eyes. Since he was a child, Ezlo had a particular gift for determining someone’s character just from how they looked. And when he looked at this man’s eyes he could see they were not the eyes of a kind man. Deep within them, there lived a terrible evil. Ezlo shuddered.

Behind the man walked several phalanx of soldiers, 8 wide and 4 deep. They walked in perfect unison, their marches echoing loudly against the wooden walls. When one group had finished walking in the door, another entered. And then, another, and another, until 30 rows of soldiers filled the hall. With every new set, Ezlo’s heart sank deeper.

When the marching stopped, the man knelt down before the throne. “Esteemed Lord Ibah, my name is Roe Rieke, general of the royal army of the Grand Kingdom of Aldea. I have been sent by the chancellor of the royal senate to assist in the protection of the province of Ostend. It is a pleasure to be in your service.”

Ezlo clenched his teeth. Every word the general spoke gave him chills. Every bone in his body told him that this man was not to be trusted. He looked at Thalia, whose eyes were wide, her shoulders sunk. She was afraid too. His father only looked on with his typical, skeptical stare.

“General Rieke, it is an honor to have you. However, I must ask – What is the purpose of bringing some 200 royal soldiers into my hall? I was not told that you would be bringing so many.” Ibah said purposefully, staring at the general through narrow eyes.

“My Lord, it was the chancellor’s decision. The monsters in Freile were extremely powerful... I had the misfortune of witnessing the carnage firsthand. The chancellor knows that

Ostend's military force is small, and he wishes to bolster your forces before monsters ever arrive. I have a letter from him here," The general reached into his pocket and put forward an envelope. Ibah stood still as he read, looking as if he was scrutinizing every word.

He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. "Very well, General." Ibah said. "Welcome to our castle. You may guide your soldiers to our barracks, and we invite you and your most dedicated officials to join us for a feast at sundown."

"Thank you, sir." Rieke said. "Might I make my first suggestion now?"

Ibah squinted, and muttered, "You may."

"I noticed that your current forces are spread throughout the surrounding townships, leaving very few to defend the castle. If you wish me to, I will post a portion of my soldiers here for your protection."

"I suppose you are correct... Although, we are more than safe here. If you were unaware, living in this castle is the most decorated soldier in Aldean history..." Ibah said, with a sharpness in his voice, "and his two students of 5 years." Ezlo cringed, but Ibah continued.

"I would go so far as to say that this castle is the safest place in Aldea, save the King's own palace. I will allow you and your first officers to stay in the castle, but no more. The rest of your soldiers shall be stationed primarily at our towns and borders, and that is all. I will have them do no policing either - your soldiers shall be prepared only to serve in the event of a monster attack."

"Yes my lord. It will be as you wish." Rieke said slyly.

"Good. Then you may go."

The soldiers turned and left, with Rieke at their heels. "I don't trust him." Thalia whispered to Ezlo. "Me neither. I don't like any of this." Ezlo replied. At the first possible moment, they quickly went out the back of the great hall. They had made it halfway across the main courtyard before a booming voice yelled behind them.

"Kids!" It was their father. "Come here."

Thalia looked to Ezlo for a moment before turning around and walking back towards their father. Ezlo begrudgingly followed suit a few steps behind.

"Dad, what's going on?" Thalia asked.

"Kids, listen to me -"

"I don't trust him." Ezlo interrupted. "Something is wrong."

"Ezlo, please, I need you to listen to me." He knelt down. Ezlo and Thalia both went silent. Their father had not asked so politely in years - this was serious. "I know you do not trust that man. I do not trust him either. Believe me, if there was any way I could change this, I would. Ezlo, Thalia, please promise me that whatever happens, you will not insult or subvert Rieke's soldiers."

"But why would we -" Thalia started.

"Listen." Ibah cut her off sternly. "It is for your own safety. You need not obey the common soldiers; they are not your superiors. But I fear that... I fear just like you do that they

are here for a sinister purpose. I suspect that Rieke will not obey my orders, and his grip over Ostend and our castle will be far tighter than I would like. For your own safety, please do not rebel.”

“Dad, if they’re here to hurt us, I’m not going to just -” Ezlo said.

“Ezlo. Trust me.” Ibah said. A moment of somber silence followed. “They are not here to hurt us, but I cannot guarantee that Rieke is a good man. You two do not need to be at the feast tonight. I will handle the formalities and do everything in my power to make sure that you two are not affected by this change. But please, I can only keep you two safe if you help me.” There was a somber look in his eyes.

“Dad... what was in that letter?” Thalia said, clearly worried.

“...It was mostly nothing. Just bureaucratic nonsense, as usual.”

“It was from the chancellor, right? He cleared things up, right?”

“It was nothing, Thalia.” Ibah said sternly. “But it is crucial that you two do not disobey Rieke.” By now sorrow had washed over Ibah’s face. He looked at his children, tears swelling in his eyes. They watched him silently, worried. Not a single tear had crossed this man’s face since the day they were born. This tender moment lasted only a second, but it took all of Ibah’s power.

“Now go.” He finally said.

And so they did. As they walked away, Ibah called one last time.

“Ezlo!”

He drew a breath and turned. “Yeah?”

“If all else fails, you must keep her safe.”

Ezlo looked back, confused, but stalwart. “... I will.”

The two didn’t say another word to each other until they were back inside. They sat down for only a moment before Ezlo stood back up.

“That letter wasn’t nothing. Something’s going on, And I’m gonna find out what.”