

Chapter One

It was night, and the sky was burning.

Fire raced through the air like comets through the night. Cries of agony echoed across the battlefield along with the clashing of swords. The smell of blood permeated the air, filling up my lungs.

To my right, one man blocked the strike of a daemon's claws whilst his partner counterattacked, stabbing the daemon in the chest and ending it. A third man ran forward and threw oil over the corpse before setting it on fire with flint and steel.

The daemon roared, even as a sword was stuck in its lung. It wasn't done fighting.

Bird legs with wicked talons. Red skin, yellow eyes, long horns, and a forked tongue. Everything about them seemed to be as unnatural as physically possible.

It roared and raised its claws up.

This is where I came in, I supposed.

I stepped forward to aid in the charge when I caught a sight out of the corner of my eye.

A man was on his own, staring down a daemon. Behind him were the scattered bodies of a half dozen soldiers. His sword arm was trembling while his shield had long since been lost.

The daemon seemed almost amused by the man. It threw out a haphazard slash of its claws. The man tried to block. He flew to the ground like a rag doll from the attack.

The ground seemed to shake with each step of the daemon. The man was scrambling backward, crawling desperately in the other direction.

I twirled my staff. A spellcircle formed over my head.

A ball of water appeared before shooting out at max speed toward the daemon. The bolt of water stabbed through the daemon's chest in a single blow. After a few moments, the daemon's body fell to the ground in a dramatic fashion.

The man stared at the daemon's ruptured body in shock.

I stepped over to the man and held out a hand.

"You alright?"

The man stared up at me.

"T-the White Hurricane?"

A sinking feeling in my stomach. I supposed that most would recognize me, given my distinct white robes on a battlefield dominated by silver armor.

"Um," I said. "You plan to take my hand any time soon?"

The soldier looked at my hand like it was a solid gold block. After a moment, he reached out and grabbed it.

I grimaced at the blatant idolization, but quickly suppressed the expression. I pulled him to his feet.

“You killed it with a single spell,” he muttered. “How did you...? Heroes really are different.”

I pushed his shoulder gently. “Hey, give yourself some credit. You held out for some time. Listen, do you have a company?”

The man turned pale. His eyes flickered towards the bodies of the people I’d noticed earlier.

“I see,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

He gulped.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “ I—“

He froze.

A shadow loomed over me. A monster twice the size of the lesser daemons.

I turned around.

An archdaemon. It held a long trident with jagged points at the end. Its horns were intricate and branching, not unlike those of a deer. Its tail was longer and thicker than the lesser daemons.

And it was staring down at me, a grin on its face.

“S-Sir!” he shouted. “An archdaemon!”

“I noticed,” I said dryly. “The High One is throwing his best at us, it seems.”

It grinned.

“Give me a moment,” I said. “I’ll resume this conversation with you shortly.”

“But sir, it’s an archdaemon!”

I shut my eyes and then took a deep breath.

“Do have a bit of faith, my friend.”

There was a beat of silence.

The archdaemon took the first strike, stabbing out with its trident in an attempt to skewer me.

Rather than stand there, I dodged to the left, allowing the trident to slide past me. I then converted my dodge into a swing of my staff. Blue light lit up from the tip. Behind me, three spellcircles materialized with icicles poking out.

As I moved, I caught the soldier's wide-eyed stare, his breath catching in his throat. Ahead of me, the icicles shot out like crossbow bolts. The archdaemon dodged the first one, and blocked the second with his trident.

But the third it had no way to counter. The icicle flew forward and cut a deep gash across its side.

Behind me, the nameless soldier gasped. Ahead of me, the archdaemon roared with pain and swung its trident around like an animal. The trident smashed into a handful of soldiers and daemons alike.

I dodged the strike with ease, its movements far too predictable in its current state.

I growled. I couldn't let it rampage for much longer.

It shook its head and glared at me, its eyes like liquid hate.

I frowned and pointed my staff at it. Showing off isn't my style, but I figured I could make an exception, just this once.

One, six, twelve spellcircles materialized in quick succession around the archdaemon.

The thing barely had a moment to comprehend what was happening before a dozen

icicles shot out and impaled it from every direction.

It stood for a moment before toppling to the ground.

“He killed it! He killed the archdaemon!” someone yelled.

The soldier was staring at me in shock.

I took a deep breath—

Then the air caught in my throat. My eyes shot toward the soldier.

“Move!” I shouted.

He looked at me with confusion. There was the sound of rushing wind, and then a trident stabbed through his chest. The trident continued, embedding itself into the hard dirt.

Five archdaemons had dropped to the ground.

The lead one—the one that had stabbed the soldier—tugged on the trident, pulling it out of the ground. With a quick shake of its wrist, the soldier’s body flew off to parts unknown.

I stared blankly at the lead archdaemon. A cold, familiar feeling of numbness washed over me.

“Right then. I suppose that this would justify extreme measures,” I muttered.

One archdaemon began to step forward.

I held out my stave towards the sky.

“Abyssi Diluvio.”

For a moment, there was quiet.

The creatures grimaced, more than one holding their hands over their ears. The pressure stung at my ear as well, but I was far too used to it to have to cover my ears like them.

A cool wind washed over the battlefield.

Then an explosion of water erupted directly over my head. The first tendrils of the typhoon lashed out, whipping through the air. It fell onto the daemons, smashing two into the ground and sending the earth below them flying into the sky.

One attempted to flap its wings against the maelstrom. For a few split seconds, it looked like it would escape.

I turned my attention toward it and the force in that area doubled.

Instantly, the archdaemon was overpowered and swept up by the typhoon. They cried out in pain as rocks and water cut deep, gaping holes across their bodies. More than a few were reduced to limp rag dolls.

Overhead, the water spiraled upwards, moving toward the sky like a pillar.

Then the storm stopped.

One archdaemon was left, crawling away with its claws.

I stepped forward, pulled out my sword, and stabbed the creature in the head.

The urge to fall hit me like a wagon.

I gritted my teeth and stood up straight. It wouldn't do for the soldiers to believe that I was fallible. It would hurt morale, as Lorelei always said.

A cheer rang out. On the other side, the daemons cried with something between fury and despair.

They were being pushed back. The line continued to move forward.

I turned my eyes toward the opponents. The staff I was holding dematerialized. I did not need it. Instead, I twirled my blade.

In the distance, I saw waves of light rolling over the enemy army. Lorelei at work, killing

archdaemons by the legion, I suspected.

I grit my teeth and charged in.

It was a blur from that point. I fought with everything I had. I stabbed, cut, and cleaved daemons for every moment that I was fighting. When I lost my sword, I switched over to my dagger. At some point, I picked up a fallen comrade's sword and started using that instead.

Then it was over.

Exhaustion tore at me. My chest heaved, sucking in great gulps of air with every movement.

I put my sword's tip to the ground, using it as a support while my body shook.

"Already out of energy?"

I turned my head towards the voice and narrowed my eyes. The woman had long, straight black hair and tan skin. Her eyes were a dark brown, hard and steely. Black armor covered her body from neck to toe. There was also the black tail with a white tip—that was a pretty good indicator of who it was.

"...Lorelei?"

She shook her head, her wolf ears twitching atop her head.

"You pushed yourself too far again. You can't even see straight, can you?"

I shut my eyes.

"I had to. I'm the only one other than you left. We need every last bit of strength we can get."

She sighed and shook her head. A smirk appeared on her lips even as her eyebrows furrowed together.

“Imbecile,” she said. “Here. Wrap your arm around my shoulder. Let’s at least let you get some proper rest.”

I didn’t object as she maneuvered my arm around her and began to take me back to the castle where we’d taken up shop.

“How long do you think we have?”

“A few hours. If that. The High One knows this is the final battle. Once he’s mopped us up, there will be no one left to oppose him in the Midlands. As such, he’ll be coming in personally to finish the job.”

I groaned.

“I think I need more than a few hours,” I said.

Lorelei snorted, tossing her head back an inch.

“Well, that’s your own fault,” she said. “You shouldn’t have fought for as long as you did.”

I glared at her, though the effect was diminished by the fact that I couldn’t even stand straight.

“You wouldn’t have taken a break. I know for a fact that you didn’t.”

She gave a dry laugh.

“What a pair we make,” she said. “Hypocrites to the end.”

The battlefield gave way to the castle. It was quiet. Nothing could be heard but our footsteps treading the stone floor. Around us, ripped-up banners lined the walls. There were no valuables left, as they’d all been stolen ages ago.

After a few minutes, Lorelei opened her mouth.

“The contingency is almost finished?”

I didn’t respond.

She looked at me.

“Alexander?”

I shook my head.

“Not yet,” I said. “It’s still gathering mana. On top of that, there are a million little issues with it that take ages to iron out—especially because I’m not the intellectual type. It would’ve been easier if Cedric—“

“—it would’ve been easier if Cedric was the one doing it,” she said. “I know. But we don’t have that option. Not only that, but the High One will be arriving soon, anyway.”

I bit my lip and turned my eyes away from her.

“Are you certain that this is what you want to do?” I said. “There might be another way.”

A mournful smile crossed Lorelei’s face. She shook her head.

“Look at us, Alexander.” She waved her hand around us, pointing out how beaten the handful of men around us looked. “We’re done. The High One won long ago. All of this has been for naught. Even if we held out forever, we’d be alone in a hostile world. This is the only way.”

I closed my eyes.

Then I nodded.

“You’re right,” I said. “This is the only way. Once you use it, everything will be set right.”

At my words, there was a beat of silence from Lorelei.

I looked up at her to see a curious smile playing across her lips.

“Lorelei?” I said.

“Once I use it, hm?” she said. “Yes, it may be for the best.”

I nodded.

“We’ll buy you all the time you need, Lorelei.”

We were in our room now. Lorelei laid me down on my mat.

“That’s enough talk,” she said. “Rest.”

I nodded, and she stepped out of the room, leaving me in darkness.

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I was on top of the walls. From here, I had the perfect vantage point to see what was happening.

It was an ocean of red and silver. From a distance, they seemed impenetrable and unmovable.

A flicker of brown caught my attention.

I groaned.

“Ah, they’ve obtained siege weapons. We can’t have nice things, can we?” I said.

A soft chuckle echoed out to my side.

“Looks like we’re in for a bit of fun, doesn’t it?”

Lorelei stood to my right, dressed in her armor. Her long black hair fell gracefully against her back.

“More like a disaster waiting to happen,” I said.

“Come on, where’s your sense of adventure?”

I snorted. “Probably buried under one of those daemons you killed earlier.”

A horn blew out. Our archers raised their bows and launched, sending thousands of arrows into the sky.

A tidal wave of steel crashed into the army. From a distance, it looked devastating.

I knew better, however. They'd trained for this situation, and had simply raised their shields.

"Alexander," Lorelei said. "Do you mind doing something?"

I chuckled. I suppose that's where I step in.

My staff lifted towards the sky, its tip lighting up with a dark blue.

"Tempesti Reguma!"

Immediately, the clouds overhead began to swirl together. Energy crackled in the air. Flashes of lightning lit up the sky.

The daemons paused and looked up.

I allowed myself a smirk.

Lightning raced through the air, slamming into the siege towers with unerring accuracy. Fire and smoke raged across the legions of hell that now bordered our walls.

I looked up.

The clouds were already dissipating.

"Think you can pull that one off again?"

I snorted.

"Not today, unfortunately."

The daemons, of course, were undeterred. I could already see siege ladders being carried by them in the crowds below.

I drew my sword. I needed to conserve my mana for when the archdaemons strike.

They were on us in a moment.

I swung my sword, slashing through one in a single movement. Another one came and I repeated the motion.

Instinctively, I stabbed out at one that was about sneak up on Lorelei.

Lorelei did the same, flying forward and slashing one behind me.

We went back to back.

“Now how do we keep ending up in this position?” I muttered.

Lorelei snickered for a moment before she suppressed the noise.

I lunged forward, my blade cutting through the air with precision as I intercepted a daemon's attack aimed at Lorelei's flank. She rewarded my quick thinking with a nod of gratitude before seamlessly transitioning into a spinning kick, her boot connecting with the jaw of another daemon attempting to flank me.

Around me, other soldiers were doing their best to hold back the hordes. We kept on like this for ten or so minutes.

Then the wall to my right exploded into a pile of rubble.

Lorelei's eyes widened, then something stabbed toward her and she returned her focus back toward the fight.

“Stay there!” I shouted. “I'll take care of it!”

She nodded even as she blocked a strike.

I rushed over, stabbing and cleaving my way through the daemons. My staff materialized in my hand and I pointed it at the hole in the wall.

If they got through this early, we were done. We needed more time.

I grit my teeth.

My staff lit up blue.

An inferno washed over the daemons in one fell swoop like a tidal wave. Cries of agony and screeches like cats slammed into my ears. A chilling sensation washed down my spine. I'd used up a quarter of my mana in one go.

My staff lit up once more. The sound of a high-pitched crack echoed out before a wall of ice materialized into existence, blocking the daemons.

Half of my mana was used up in one go.

I was definitely off to a good start.

"Move!" I said. "Retreat to the inner keep!"

A handful of soldiers were staying behind to cover our retreat, continuing to block the siege ladders.

I turned my eyes away, focusing on moving.

The air was thick with the acrid scent of blood. The clash of metal on metal reverberated through the air.

Then I heard the sound of the wind, and my heart skipped a beat.

Archdaemons. Multiple.

"Damn it!" I said.

I stopped running, turned around, and lined up my staff.

I pumped another quarter into the spell. They would be fast. The fastest projectile spell I'd ever attempted.

A dozen icicles appeared behind me and shot into the air like ballista arrows, slamming into the chests of a dozen of the bastards. They dropped like flies, crashing into the daemons and

swarming the ground.

The aftereffects hit me in a moment. My muscles burned and seized up. Blood pounded against my head like a drum.

I grit my teeth. Got to keep moving. We didn't have much time.

Soon enough, everyone was inside the inner keep. Me and a handful of soldiers slammed the door shut.

I raced to the courtyard as the castle shook. They'd probably already breached the wall.

It was time for the final contingency.

Lorelei was already waiting.

She nodded.

"It's time," she said.

I nodded back at her.

The spell had just finished its preparations. It was now time for me to set the final parameters. I walked forward and set my arm down on the spellcircle.

The spellcircle flashed intermittently, sigils changing and shifting in response to my actions. The translucent clock at the center of the circle began to move its arms backward.

The flapping of wings echoed from above.

I looked up.

Overhead, a horde of archdaemons were circling us.

Lorelei smirked, her wolf ears twitching in response to the sound.

I twirled my staff.

The contingency must be activated, at all costs.

The horde surged forward.

Lorelei stepped forward. The ground cracked and she shot into the air.

She was like a beam of light, hopping from archdaemon to archdaemon like a frog on lily pads.

I wonder, would she take offense to that comparison?

I dropped my staff and drew my blade. A spellcircle appeared under my feet and I shot into the air like a rocket. I rolled in midair, then threw my sword out, slashing through an archdaemon's head.

Sword in hand, I lunged towards another, dodging the claws of one daemon while my blade sliced through the neck of another. A daemon lunged, its claws missing me by inches. I retaliated, thrusting my blade into its chest. The creature howled in agony.

Another daemon charged at me, and I sidestepped, driving my blade into its side. It roared in pain, but more were coming.

A sudden strike sent me flying.

The air rushed past me, filling my ears.

Then I crashed.

Spikes of pain stabbed into my back.

"Alexander!"

Lorelei fell to the ground, using an archdaemon as a makeshift glider. Once she was close enough to the ground, she stabbed the archdaemon in the chest and let go, falling onto the floor in front of me. She stared at me with worried eyes.

I pushed myself up and nodded.

“I’m alright,” I said. My eyes were drawn towards the speeding figures. “But it appears we have company.”

Lorelei shot her head back toward the enemies and growled. Her sword went back to a guard stance.

“Alexander,” she muttered. “He’s coming. I can sense it in the air. Please tell me that it’s almost done.”

I nodded.

“We just need to hold out a little longer.”

They were on us in seconds.

Steel clashed against steel as the daemons surged toward us. A daemon threw out its claws, fangs bared. Around me, another was coming from my side.

I sidestepped, dodging the first blow. With a quick flick of my wrist, steel cleaved through the flesh and bone of the daemon.

The other daemon charged, its fangs aimed at my neck.

I leaped back, dodging the blow. I could feel the fight draining my strength, each swing heavier than the last.

To the side, Lorelei somersaulted over a daemon's strike, landing behind it and driving her blade through its spine.

I glanced back. The spellcircle was finished.

“Lorelei!” I called out. “It’s time! We must go back!”

Time seemed to stop.

Lorelei was in front of me in a moment, parrying an attack and slicing through a daemon

about to gut me.

All of a sudden, the archdaemons flew off. I could see the fear in their eyes. They could sense the power flowing off of Lorelei.

She raised her blade, a purple glow coming off of the steel. Time slowed to a crawl. The destruction, the rain—it had all stopped. She turned back towards me.

I narrowed my eyes.

She wouldn't be able to maintain this spell for long. What was she thinking?

"Lorelei, what are you doing?" I said. "This is what we've been planning, right?"

She smirked.

"I do believe that there's something you've neglected to inform me of, Alexander."

My mouth was dry.

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that there's only room for one, isn't there?"

"...Fine," I said. "There's only room for one. So go. You're the best chance we have."

Lorelei smiled and turned her head toward the sky.

"You know, when we started this journey, I was truly just a girl," she said.

I blinked. Where was she going with this?

"Back then, I'd never been outside of my hometown," she said. "The farthest I'd traveled was to a nearby forest."

She looked into the distance.

"Then that emissary arrived, and everything changed," she said.

Time hung suspended around us, frozen in an eerie tableau. The raindrops were halted in

mid-air, glistening like crystalline jewels. Lorelei's blade shimmered with the faintest ethereal glow, casting a surreal light upon her face.

"I've learned much, Alexander," she said. "I've seen civilizations fall, tasted victory and defeat, and stood at the precipice of darkness. I've trained, honed my skills, and gathered knowledge. But..."

I shook my head, my face twisted in confusion.

"What are you talking about?! Lorelei, we don't have time for this! You told me that he's coming any second now—"

She looked back at me.

"Alexander, you are the key," she said. "You possess a resilience and a power that surpasses even my own. I can sense it. Destiny hangs about you like a thick cloud right now. This is what our entire journey has been leading up to. It was all so that you could be sent back. Not me."

I gritted my teeth together.

"You're wrong!" I said. "You're the strongest! You know you are! You're the best chance we have!"

She didn't say a word.

I shifted my left foot back, gripping my staff like it would fly out of my hands. "I won't let you do this."

Lorelei's eyes flickered with a purple light. "You're strong, Alexander, but you're not seeing the bigger picture."

She moved with a speed I couldn't track, lunging at me. Our blades clashed, and for a

moment, time seemed to resume its natural flow. The raindrops fell, the wind whispered through the trees, and the distant sounds of the daemonic army preparing for their final assault filled the air.

Her strikes were precise, every movement a testament to her years of training. I parried, dodged, and countered, struggling to keep up. She wasn't fighting with her full strength, but it was more than enough to push me on the defensive.

"Lorelei, damn it!" I said. "Think about this objectively! If you send me back, I'll doom us all!"

Her strikes paused, our blades locked in a tense standoff.

"That isn't true," she said. "You're amazing, Alexander. Stronger than even me in the ways that truly count."

I gritted my teeth, struggling to find words that would convince her.

"I don't care about strength!" I snapped out my blade, parrying another of her strikes. "I care about you. I can't let you sacrifice yourself!"

She countered with a swift kick to my chest, sending me stumbling backward. Her gaze never left mine, her tail flickering back and forth.

"And yet you want me to let you sacrifice yourself?" She smiled, as if this was nothing more than a casual spar between friends. "How cruel of you."

I lunged, aiming to disarm her, but she parried and countered, disarming me instead. My blade clattered to the ground, and she held her sword at my throat.

My breath came in ragged gasps. I'd lost.

She sheathed her blade and stepped close to me.

Her hand gently cupped my cheek, a touch that sent shivers down my spine.

“Goodbye, Alexander.”

I wasn't sure what happened then. My mind blanked for a moment. My heart was pounding. There was something wet streaming down my cheeks. She'd mouthed something, but I couldn't hear it.

And then, without a word, she pushed me toward the spellcircle.

My feet stumbled, my mind racing to process what had just happened. I glanced back at her, but she had already turned away.

A man dressed in gleaming black armor stepped forward out of the keep doors to meet her. Behind him was a legion of archdaemons.

Lorelei twirled her sword, looking for all the world as if she were completely unconcerned with what was about to happen.

I desperately reached out to her but instead plunged into the ethereal clock. A surge of energy washed over me as time began to shift and warp.

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“What the hell!?” I said.

Clocks surrounded me. I was falling backward and there were clocks everywhere. A white void of infinite nothingness with nothing but black, translucent clocks narrowing toward a point below me.

Panic clawed at my chest. What was happening? Was this part of the plan? Was this how the spell worked?

Memories flashed before my eyes—memories of Lorelei, of our comrades, of the battles

we had fought together. I remembered their faces, their laughter, their sacrifices.

I shut my eyes, trying to force the images away.

A blast of cold air slammed into me. Rushing wind beat against my ears.

I unfolded my eyes. Blue sky stretched over my head, surrounding me. My heart quickened in my chest and I flailed around. In the process, I caught a glimpse of the ground.

The ground that was very far away but still speeding toward me.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

A whoosh overhead caught my attention. I glanced up. The portal was still swirling, though it was on the verge of closing.

Could it be? Was Lorelei coming for me?

Then I saw what came through.

An archdaemon. Red skin and long, sharp talons. Oh, and wings.

I muffled a scream. Of course. I can't have nice things, can I?

As soon as it caught sight of me, it let out an infernal screech and rushed towards me.

Thinking quickly, I tried to draw on my mana as I'd done many times before to engage in aerial combat with my foe—

A sharp pain shot through my chest at my attempt and nothing happened.

My breath quickened. Why wasn't my magic working? I'd done this spell dozens of times before! It should've worked!

Air was being displaced. The daemon was approaching.

I readied my sword, only to do a double-take once I saw what I was holding. I wasn't holding my sword, but a staff I'd not used in the past four years.

I grunted. It would have to do.

The daemon slammed into a hastily cast mana shield, breaking it with ease and reaching out its long talons toward my body.

One second, I was falling. The next, the daemon had grabbed me and was taking me up and down and to the side, trying to make me lose consciousness.

Pain registered as its talons pressed across my back. Bad. As a cursed wound, I wouldn't be able to use healing magic to take care of that later.

I was going to lose consciousness if I didn't kill this guy.

I grit my teeth and winded my staff back, then swung it like a club towards the archdaemon's head.

The head should've been blown off, or at least damaged. Instead, the staff bounced off the creature's head with a dull thump.

I gripped my staff tightly. What the hell was going on? I'm weak, but not that weak. Perhaps the portal travel sapped my strength?

Blackness crawled at the edges of my vision. I didn't have much time. I needed to think of something quick.

I forced my eyes open and looked at the daemon's wings even as we darted back and forth through the air at random intervals.

I narrowed my eyes.

There it was, a pattern.

A small twitch right before it turned left.

I waited, and waited, then...

An Aqua Fulgara, or aqua bolt, a dead-simple spell with a surprisingly high attack value, appeared and launched towards the daemon's head right as it turned to the left.

The event seemed to happen in slow motion. Inch by inch the Aqua Fulgara approached the daemon's head.

The archdaemon's eyes widened. It desperately tried to throw itself out of the way—

And just barely made it, the Aqua Fulgara shaving off the daemon's long red ear instead of crushing its face.

It cried in anger and clenched its talons tighter, drawing more blood from my back and creating more unhealable cursed wounds.

I grunted from the pain. If this daemon didn't kill me after I was unconscious, the blood loss would.

What could I do? My powers were too weakened right now. I couldn't slice this thing apart. I couldn't beat it with my staff. I couldn't cast magic fast enough or strong enough to do any real damage.

A half-remembered spell clawed at the back of my head. Something that I'd used back when my only job was to ward off the stray goblin or two. Something I'd used when I was nothing more than a glorified well for my village.

I thrust the tip of my staff toward the thing's face.

I couldn't even remember what this spell did, but if I'd used it so often, it must be good, right?

The tip of my staff lit up with a brilliant white light, instantly blinding me. Judging from the sounds the daemon was making, it had also been blinded.

We began to dive uncontrollably. The daemon was flapping its wings in a desperate attempt to regain control, but it seemed like it was unable to.

The ground was rushing toward us.

I cussed out loud.

This was going to sting.

Chapter Two

“Lorelei!” A loud male voice said. “Where are you!? Barok says that you never gave him the produce!”

My ears twitched at the noise and my heart nearly leapt out of my chest. My eyes darted around for a hiding spot. I rushed to the right and wedged the sword I’d been practicing under a pile of straw.

I caught sight of my face in the sword’s reflection. I supposed that some might’ve called me pretty. A slightly tan complexion, different from most of the people in Adonia. Dark brown eyes. Short, black, voluminous hair.

The only problem was the two black wolf ears poking out of my head.

I then dashed out of the barn, my fluffy black tail streaming behind me.

As soon as I caught sight of my father’s expression, I knew that I was in trouble.

Pa—or as others knew, Wyrd—was a large man, well-muscled and strong. Gray streaks peppered his dark hair. His body was covered in scars from various bladed weapons—a sign of

his time as a soldier.

And unlike me or my mother, he was as human as human could get.

Father looked down at me with a disapproving stare as I slowed my pace.

I gave him an awkward smile.

“Pa!” I twiddled my fingers. “How was your meeting?”

“Oh, it was fine.” He crossed his arms, looking off at something in the distance with a bored expression.

Then he turned back and glared. “Except for the part where he explained that you were late by nearly three hours.”

I scratched the back of my head and looked away.

“Would you believe me if I said that I honestly didn’t even remember that I was supposed to do that?”

Pa sighed. “I might be able to believe that. If this wasn’t the third time.”

I crossed my arms and stared at him.

“Fine, I’ll admit it. I didn’t do it. I didn’t want to.”

His expression darkened. “Care to explain why?”

My face scrunched up.

“You know why.”

“I don’t.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared.

“Because every time that I go into the village, they look at me like a freak! They always mutter about my ears and my dark skin.” I clenched my hands, digging a groove into my tan-

colored arms. “It’s not my fault that I look like this!”

Pa’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I know, dear. But you’re going to have to overcome these issues eventually. These are the people you’ll be dealing with when I pass the farm onto you.”

I scoffed.

“That’s *if* you pass the farm on. Not *when*.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Lorelei, we’ve talked about this.”

I scowled. “No, we haven’t! Every time I bring it up you just tell me to go do my chores or something!”

Pa reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Things are awful right now, Lorelei. War is going to break out at any time. Monsters are swarming the roads. Bandits are taking advantage of the chaos and making things even worse. I can’t let you go out there, Lorelei.”

“I’m strong.” I clenched my fists. “I can take care of myself.”

“You are,” he said with a slight tilt of his head. “But not strong enough for a time like this, and we can’t afford a mercenary to protect you.”

I bit my lips.

“What about Alorm? He was allowed to go on his own.”

Pa sighed.

“Alorm is part of the village guard and has training defending himself and others. Not only that, but he’s *not* going alone. He’s going in a group with other members of the guard.”

I scoffed. “I’d have training if they’d have let me join the guard. And it’s not my fault that they won’t even consider letting me join one of their trade caravans.”

Pa shut his eyes and didn’t respond.

“Look, for now, can you just deliver the goods? I already loaded everything. You just need to get Koba saddled up.”

I groaned.

“Can’t you do it, Pa? Please?”

He shook his head.

“I can’t. I’m sorry, Lorelei.”

I turned away and stomped off.

“If you were sorry—“ I raised my voice. “—then you wouldn’t be making me do this!”

I didn’t bother to turn around and look at his face.

#

After saddling up Kobo, our kaba or domesticated direwolf, we began to head towards the village.

I sighed, my tail drooping behind me.

I understood Pa’s point. But there had to be a way out of these problems, and he wasn’t looking for it. Everything that he said was an excuse. The heart of the matter was that he didn’t trust me to go into the outside world. Or perhaps, he didn’t trust other people around me.

Either way, the result was the same. I was trapped here, surrounded by hostile jackasses that barely tolerated me. Thank goodness we at least live on a farm far from the village. I don’t think I’d survive if I had to see those people on a regular basis.

I had to get out of here.

A hand reached out to pet Kobo as I walked beside him, his large paws treading the ground with little noise.

Kobo. He was new to the farm, having been bought recently after our old animal died.

I smirked. Kobo the Kaba. Dad wasn't exactly imaginative.

But he wasn't a lot of things, either.

I sighed, the smirk dying on my lips. It was time to head to the village.

The walk was quiet and long. Each step seemed to get progressively harder. Soon enough, I'd slowed to barely making any progress at all.

Progress was still progress, unfortunately, and I was soon at the town.

Disapproving stares and glares washed over me with familiarity. Out of the corner of my eye, in front of me, off to my side, from every single direction.

"Freak," someone muttered off to my side.

I grit my teeth and held myself high. I wouldn't give these people the satisfaction of seeing me discouraged. I forced my ears into place, not letting them bend forward in a sign of aggression.

It wouldn't be long. Soon enough, I'd escape and finally be free.

As I kept my head forward, I wondered how my father persuaded my mother to come here. Surely things would've been better had they gone somewhere else?

Soon enough, I was in front of the store.

"Lan?" I said. "Hello?"

"Lorelei!" a voice called from within the store. "Hold on a moment, I'll be right with

you!”

Lan opened the door after a minute with a great smile on his face, his spectacles sitting on the edge of his nose.

In a moment, my tension drained away, a smile came to my face and I jumped forward, hugging him.

“Uncle Lan!” I said.

The key to my escape had appeared.

Lan was about to respond when he stopped and glanced around. As soon as he caught sight of the frowns being sent our way, he grimaced and stepped back, pulling me with him.

“Perhaps we should take our conversation indoors, dear,” he said, turning around. “Just leave your kaba right here and I’ll assign one of the boys to bring in the produce.”

I nodded and followed behind him.

Even here, however, I couldn’t escape the glares. A teenager around my age stared at me with barely concealed contempt.

I kept my eyes forward, even as sweat pooled at the back of my neck.

“Excuse me!” a voice called out. “Hello!? Lan!”

Lan’s eyes darted toward the front of his shop. Someone needed help.

He cursed.

“Apologies, Lorelei,” he said. “I’ll be right with you after I deal with this customer.”

He dashed over to a door and passed through, shutting it behind him.

Leaving me alone with Alfa.

#

“Lorelei.”

I gave him a stiff nod.

“Alfa.”

He gave me a sidelong glare before turning his attention back to the items stacked on the back of the wagon. He was looking over them with a careful eye, probably deciding which one to pick up.

I rolled my eyes and stepped forward, picking up a stack of produce at random. I gave a slight grunt as the weight settled in my hands. It was heavy, but not impossible.

Alfa looked at me with a sharp frown.

“Figures,” he muttered. “Of course, you would be freakishly strong.”

My face wrinkled up before I turned around and resumed my work.

He was quiet as he observed me. But he didn’t pick up any produce himself. Instead, he just continued to watch.

I walked back and forth between the wagon and the storeroom, picking up produce each time.

Still, he watched. After a few minutes of this, he frowned.

“What, no comment?” he said.

I walked inside the building, Alfa trailing me.

“Not even going to bother, Alfa.”

“Aw, why’s that? Scared?”

I put the produce inside of the storeroom, then moved back. My footsteps were heavy. My shoulders were getting tense.

“You sound like a child,” I said as I walked.

Alfa shrugged, a smug grin on his face.

“I’m a childish person. What can I say?”

Prick.

I continued moving towards the wagon.

“Animal.”

I stopped. My toes dug into the ground.

There was once a point at which I’d have yelled and screamed. I wasn’t an animal. I wasn’t a wolf out to get some mother’s child.

The pressure drained out of me.

Screaming and yelling never did anything.

“What did I ever do to you?” I said.

It wasn’t directed at him. More than anything it was simply an idle thought spoken aloud.

“You came here instead of staying in the Khanate like the rest of your kind.”

I groaned.

“Not this again!” I said. “What does that have to do with anything!?”

Alfa grabbed a wooden crate full of produce.

“Oh, it’s just common knowledge that people like you are bad news. Can’t argue with the rumors, can we?”

My heart picked up in speed at the accusation. I shot a glare at him.

“I am not a danger to you or to anyone else.”

Alfa scoffed and stopped moving.

“You know how it is, stories get passed down, especially with so many veterans in town. Can't help but wonder how much truth there is to them, though.”

I stopped moving and stared at him.

He... he had a point. The Khanate was mostly beastpeople, and they were well-known for their brutality in war. I gulped. My stomach dropped. There was a part of me that didn't blame him. His father probably lived every day with the scars brought about by beastpeople.

But even so, I wasn't a beastperson. I've never been a beastperson. I'm a human, through and through.

“Alfa, I...I'm not like them. When have I ever done anything even remotely like that?”

Alfa shrugged.

“Sure, you seem harmless now, but who knows when that'll change? It's just a matter of time, isn't it?”

I gritted my teeth together and dropped my produce to the ground. Vegetables rolled over the floor as I walked over to him, my fists clenched tightly.

My face was turned down, my eyes glaring up at him.

“I don't want to hear another word out of your mouth.”

He smirked.

“Or what? You'll hurt me? Go on. Prove me right. Do it.”

My fists shook. I was tempted. Then I caught sight of the look in his eyes. Triumph. He wanted me to explode.

Ah... of course. If I blow up here, then he'll finally have the evidence needed to run me and Pa out of the village.

I sighed, the anger flowing out of me, and leaned down to pick up the vegetables.

“What, nothing? You’re just done?”

He sounded confused.

I shrugged even as I continued to pick up the loose vegetables.

“Oh, you know. Just realized I needed to clean up my mess.”

Alfa snorted.

“Spirits, you really think you’re better than us, don’t you?” His voice was picking up in volume and speed, a slight frustration to his words. “Well, it's quite the act you've got going on. Must be exhausting, keeping up appearances all the time—“

A new voice interjected.

“Alfa, I would strongly encourage you not to finish that sentence.”

Alfa paled.

“Uh, sir—“

“Go get the rest of the produce. Now.”

Alfa stepped back and nodded. “Right, yep. Gotcha.”

He wandered off.

Lan reached out his hand.

“Come, let’s finish our conversation.”

#

Lan let out a sigh, then turned and gave me an apologetic smile.

“My sister’s son. She needs the money and I need the help. Otherwise, he’d be out of here in a heartbeat.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and clutched at my skin with my hands.

“I know. I get it, Uncle Lan. You’ve always been good to me. You wouldn’t let him treat me like that unless there were no other choices.”

He didn’t respond, though the way his eyes tightened made me think that I had somehow made things worse.

It made me feel bad. But it was for the best.

Because the guiltier he was, the more likely he’d be to help me.

He turned back around and motioned for me to follow. Soon enough, we were in the back of the shop where his actual house was at. He waved at his table.

“While you’re here, I’ll give you something to eat.”

My eyes widened. “I couldn’t, Uncle Lan! I know how tough things are right now, you shouldn’t—“

Lan held up his hand.

“Think of it as an apology for how that young man treated you.”

Despite myself, a smile worked its way up my face.

“...thank you, uncle.”

In minutes, Lan had prepared a humble meal of bread and cheese.

“Eat up, Lorelei.”

I hesitated only for a moment before I reached forward and started choking down the food as quickly as I could.

“Lorelei, you know I won’t steal the food off your plate, right?”

I blinked, then slowly chewed the chunk of food in my mouth.

“Right.” I gulped down the food. “Sorry. Bad habit.”

Lan chuckled. “I see. I suppose that’s what happens with no woman in the home, only example you’ve got is your old man.”

The mood fell in moments. My wolf ears drooped forward and I averted my eyes.

Lan’s eyes widened. “Oh my goodness, that was horrible of me. I’m sorry.”

I bit my lip.

“It’s fine. Normally I wouldn’t mind, but I’m just... really upset right now.”

“Oh?” he said. “Is it because of the villagers?”

I rubbed the back of my head.

“That’s part of it, but no,” I said. “It’s my Pa.”

Lan sighed.

“Old Wyrd up to his troubles again, eh?” he said. After a moment, he leaned back in his chair and shook his head. “Did he ever tell you how he got together with your mother?”

I shook my head. “I’ve asked, but he always avoids the question.”

Lan clicked his tongue.

“Old fool. I’m going to take a guess and say that he had another fight with you about leaving.”

“Dad’s such a... such a...” I slammed my hands onto the table. “Such a pain!”

Lan took a sip of a shot that he’d poured out in the five seconds I’d not been paying attention.

“Continue,” he said.

“He thinks I can’t defend myself, he thinks I can’t protect myself!” I stood to my feet.

“But I can! I’m strong!”

Lan hummed. “And that makes you strong, I presume.”

“Yes, exactly!” I looked at him with a grin. “Listen, Lan, I’m almost of age. Just a month and I’ll be old enough to do what I want.”

A look passed over Lan’s face quicker than I could identify it.

“...I see,” he said.

“Uncle Lan.”

I grabbed his hand.

He grimaced.

“The only thing I need is a way onto the next travel caravan,” I said. “You help direct the caravan. You could let me on, I’d—“

“Lorelei.”

His tone was sharp as a knife.

“Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?” he said.

Droplets of rain hit the outside of the house.

All of the energy disappeared out of me. I shrunk into myself.

“Um...” I twiddled my fingers, my wolf ears pointed forward. “...yes?”

Lan rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Lorelei, you’re asking me to go around your father’s back. Not only that, you’re asking me to throw you into the outside world when you’ve never been there without any kind of supervision!”

I stepped back and gulped.

“But... I thought you were on my side.”

Lan sighed and put his face in his hands.

“Of course I am, Lorelei. I love you like one of my own. But I also care for my friend, and having you vanish would destroy him.”

I bit my lip.

“I know you’re frustrated,” he said. “But Wyrd isn’t emotionless either. You’re the last thing that he has of her. If you were hurt... I don’t want to think about what he might do.”

“So I’m just supposed to stay here forever?” My heart began to slam in my chest. I clenched my fists. “Trapped like a bird in a cage?”

“And you’re asking me to betray my friend,” Lan said. “Someone I count as a brother. He made me promise to look out for you.”

The rain was picking up. It would be a heavy storm.

“But you would be looking out for me!” I said.

“I don’t think that this is quite what he had in mind.”

“And what about my mom?”

Lan’s breath caught in his mouth.

“...What about her?” he said.

“What would she want for me?”

Lan gulped and turned his eyes away.

“...I don’t know. That’s something to ask your father.”

His heart picked up in pace. He turned his eyes away. There was a minute twitch.

“Liar,” I said.

Lan opened his mouth, then averted his eyes.

I narrowed my eyes. “What, you aren’t gonna say anything?”

Lan nodded.

“I can’t believe you! I thought you would help me! I—“

“Damn it, Lorelei!” He smashed the table with his fist. “We’re doing this for your own good! You think here is bad!? You hate the way they look at you here!? They would eat you alive out there! Even if you went to the spirits-cursed Khanate they’d see you as filthy because you’re a halfbreed!”

He marched towards me, fury in his eyes.

Despite myself, my heart began to pick up and I stepped back.

“You think that your mother and father came here because she wanted to? Of course not! But there was no other option! Anywhere else would’ve led to her and you being hunted down! Damn it, girl, think—!”

He paused.

I was breathing quickly, my eyes wide as I leaned against the wall and as far from him as I could get.

A glimmer of regret flew across Lan’s eyes.

“I... I’m sorry Lorelei, that was—“ He reached out his hand.

I ducked to the side and marched off.

He tried to follow behind me.

“Wait, Lorelei, don’t—“

I didn’t respond, instead slamming the door open and smashing Alfa into the muddy

ground on the way out. It was storming now. Lightning lit up the sky in the distance. Thunder followed a few seconds afterward.

“Hey, what the hell was that for!?” Alfa said.

The rain hit my skin like cool needles. Ignoring the sensation, I quickly gave Kobo a check. He was ready.

“Sir, she slammed the door and hit me—“

“Not now, boy.” Lan stepped towards me. “Lorelei, let’s talk about this, please.”

I ignored him, hopped on the front of the wagon, then whipped the reins.

“Lorelei—!”

#

Kobo sped off at full sprint. The buildings blurred together around me. The faces and voices washed over me like the water soaking me to the bone.

After a few minutes, Kobo came to a stop. He gave me a confused look.

For a moment, I stared into the rain, my eyes and thoughts blank.

Then I screamed at the top of my lungs. Hot, ugly tears began to fall from my eyes in droplets.

Kobo whined.

I ignored him and rubbed my hands against my eyes, trying to stem the flow. I felt like grabbing my hair and ripping it out. Instead, I simply clenched my hair and tugged at it.

After several minutes of this, I looked up at the now-darkening sky.

The rain was dying away, slowing to a trickle.

I looked up.

The night sky was coming out, the clouds parting.

“What I wouldn’t give for an answer...” I reached my hand up and tried to grasp at the stars overhead. “To just fall from the sky—“

A noise. Like air being pushed out of billows.

My wolf ears twitched and I looked up.

“What?”

A glimpse of light caught my attention from the corner of my vision.

I darted my eyes towards it.

It was falling towards the ground.

A shooting star?

A moment later, a second star began to fall. It seemed to be dashing towards the first star.

They then collided and merged. The new star curved in the air, then darted back towards the sky.

I furrowed my eyebrows, a bewildered expression coming over my face. What the hell was I looking at right now?

After about a minute, the star increased in brightness. It was so bright that I had to shield my eyes.

I blinked away the pain and tried to look back at what had just happened.

The stars had separated. They were falling.

They were getting bigger too.

Actually, wait a second, aren’t they getting really big? Upon closer examination, that isn’t a star... it looks like a cloak?

The sound of rushing wind caught my ears.

My eyes widened.

It was going to crash near me!

The star(?) flew through the air in a flash, its landing destination seeming to be in a field of grass off the side of the road.

My heart was pounding. I covered my head with my arms. Behind me, my tail flared out, tense and stiff.

A massive boom echoed out and wind blasted against me, ruffling my clothes.

I opened my eyes.

Dust had flown into the air, creating a massive cloud that made it difficult to see where it had landed.

A moment later, another flash of light seemed to fall to the ground and I covered my face again. Once again, a boom echoed out and another cloud of dust appeared in the sky.

What just happened? Do stars normally fall from the sky? I think someone would've mentioned it to me if that was normal. So was it really a cloak? But that doesn't make sense either. What would a cloak be doing in the sky?

My thoughts spun in circles for a minute before I shook my head back and forth, expelling the loose thoughts.

I gulped.

This was dangerous. Whatever was going on was probably a bit too much for a small farm girl.

For a moment, I considered running back to Pa and asking him for help.

That thought was crushed. I didn't want to run to him like a scared little child. Besides, someone could've been hurt from the blast and need immediate medical attention.

I nodded to myself and began to step toward the field. My first step was slow and hesitant. After a few of these steps, I began to walk at a normal pace.

The first thing that I noticed was how damaged the ground was. Dirt, stones, and grass had been uplifted and thrown everywhere.

It was hard to make out where I was going due to the dust. I coughed and covered my mouth with my hand.

A quiet moan of pain entered my wolf ears. A male voice. Didn't sound like anyone I knew, though. In an instant, I'd pinpointed the source of the noise and was looking towards it.

"Hello?" I said. "Are you hurt? Keep talking so I can find you."

The man groaned again.

I narrowed my eyes. Who was this guy anyway? I didn't recognize the voice. Was he a passing mercenary? A trader?

Another groan.

I was getting closer to the source of the voice. He was right in front of me, I was sure.

"Listen, just hang tight. I promise that I'll take care of you," I said. "I'm almost there—"

A gust of wind kicked up. I shielded my face from the rough dust particles flying towards me.

I blinked a few times, clearing away the dirt that had gotten in my eye.

"Hey, are you okay?" I said as I looked back in the direction of the voice. "Tell me where it hurts—"

My breath stopped in my throat.

At the center of a small crater was a boy, barely older than me. In his left hand was a staff of some sort. His face was delicate, even handsome, despite the dirt covering it.

But most importantly, he was wearing a white cloak. The same cloak that I'd made out for just a split-second before it fell to the ground.

It wasn't just a cloak that had fallen. It was a person. No... an angel, maybe?

For a moment, it was quiet.

And then I heard him whisper a name.

"Lorelei..."

I blinked.

How did he know my name? Did I mishear something?

I was about to ask him when he let out a groan and his face twisted in pain.

"Ow," he said.

The illusion broke and I rushed towards him.

"Hey, are you okay?!" I said.

I leaned down to check over him.

"What... do you think?" He gasped and wheezed between words.

My eyes widened when I caught sight of red moisture seeping into the ground under him.

"I'm going to turn you over to check something, okay?"

He grunted, which I took as permission.

After a moment's hesitation, I reached down and slowly pushed his side so I could see his back.

I had the sudden urge to vomit everywhere as soon as I saw his injuries.

He had been pulverized. It looked like someone had taken a hacksaw and decided that his flesh needed rearranging.

My breathing was coming in quick movements and my heart was pounding. My hands shook as I pulled off his cloak.

Could I bandage it?

No, the wounds seem too severe. Besides, what would I bandage it with?

Burn it?

I have a dagger in my back pocket... But what about burnable material—

Everything around the boy was dry. It was as if all the liquid had been pushed away in a perfect circle surrounding him. Or perhaps it was drawn into him?

I grimaced, deciding not to think about it too hard and work on saving this boy.

Dry leaves and branches were sitting around. I quickly gathered together the ingredients to make a fire. I used a spare piece of flint and struck my dagger with it. Sparks flew off, lighting the tinder on fire.

In minutes, the fire was roaring.

I put my knife over the heat. Internally, I was thanking Pa for teaching me about this trick.

I grit my teeth.

“Here we go!”

I pressed the knife to the first bleeding wound, my hands shaking the whole time.

The boy squirmed and grunted. I knew that it probably felt awful, but this was the only

thing I could think of.

Tears came to my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t know what else to do.”

He didn’t respond.

One cut at a time, I worked as quickly as I could. If I was too slow, he’d lose all his blood.

But that’s if the stress from what I’m doing didn’t kill him.

I pushed the extra thoughts out of my head. No time for doubts.

After several tense moments, I’d burned the worst of the wounds to prevent bleeding.

I threw him over my shoulder and rushed back to the carriage. Once I got there, I slipped him into a spot on the wagon as carefully as I could, his back facing the air so that he wouldn’t lay on them and reopen his wounds.

He murmured as I put him down. He was barely moving now, his strength probably drained from my aid.

I scowled and rushed over to the front seat of the wagon, then jerked on the reigns.

Kobo followed the direction of the reins and tilted around.

“Kobo, we need to move fast! We need to get to Dad as soon as possible!”

Kobo huffed—then he took off.

The wagon bounced along the path at speeds so quick they threatened to rip the axles off. Still, I didn’t waver. This guy needed help.

Soon enough, we were back home. Pa marched out, anger and worry warring on his face.

“Lorelei?” he said. “What are you doing back here? There’s no way you made the

delivery—“

“Pa, there’s a man in the back of the wagon and he’s injured and we need to help him and —!”

Pa held up his hands.

“Wait, wait, hold up. Did you just say there’s a man? Slow down.”

I took a breath to center myself.

“There’s a man in the back wagon. He fell from the sky.”

“What?”

I gave him a look of dead seriousness.

“He’s hurt bad, Pa. I tried to help him as best I could, but the only thing I could think of was to burn his wounds like you taught me.”

Pa’s eyes widened.

“You did what!? You know how dangerous that is!”

Tears came to my eyes and my wolf ears folded forward.

“I know I shouldn’t have, Pa, but he was bleeding everywhere! I didn’t know what else to do!”

Pa didn’t seem to know how to react. After a moment, he sighed.

“Where did you say he was?” he said.

I rushed over and pointed at the back of the wagon.

“Over here,” I said.

Pa nodded and stepped over.

As soon as he circled the wagon and caught sight of the boy’s injuries, his breath was

taken away. His eyes widened and he took a step back.

“What the hell happened to this kid?” he said.

“I don’t know.” My voice quivered. “I don’t even know how he survived. He fell for leagues. He should be dead.”

Pa clenched his jaw and shook his head.

“We need to send him to the village.”

I turned towards Wyrd, my eyes widened.

“What?!”

Pa turned towards me. “This is nothing but trouble, Lorelei. We don’t know a damn thing about this kid. For all we know, he could be a criminal.”

“No!” I said. “You know how they are! At best, they’ll just send him to the city to get rid of him, and he won’t survive a trip like that. At worst, they’ll just throw him into a grave because he’s half-dead anyway!”

Pa grunted. “If they do, it won’t be any of our business then.”

I growled and stamped my foot, my tail flaring out behind me.

“Ma wouldn’t have left this kid to die!”

“Well she’s not here anymore, is she!?”

His voice echoed through the trees.

There was a beat of silence.

I stared at him without flinching, not changing my expression in the slightest.

The fight slipped out of his eyes. He sighed.

“You remind me too damn much of your mother.” He shut his eyes. “Fine. You win, you

brat. We'll take care of the kid."

I nodded gratefully.

"Thank you, Pa."

He clicked his tongue.

"You know that there's no guarantee he'll survive, right? Those wounds... you bought him time, but the treatment may very well have been worse than the disease."

I gulped. "You mean you can't save him?"

Pa shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe if it were a bit less severe, or if it were on a limb instead," he said. "Remember, I'm not a proper doctor. All I have are the things I picked up from my soldiering days. Usually, that's enough, but this..."

He gestured his hand over the boy's back.

"...is far over my pay grade."

He sighed and shook his head. "Well, let's take him in. You prepare a bedroll for him and I'll try to treat him the best I can."

As I watched Wyrd grab the boy, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd just doomed him, as opposed to saving him.

Chapter Three

After I crashed into the ground, things got hazy. I remembered the feeling of my mana disappearing as I threw together a barrier to protect me from the fall. In desperation, I threw my life force into the spell.

Big mistake.

Pain shot up my spine like a knife. It was like someone had set every inch of my skin on fire. My veins felt as if liquid magma had been injected directly into them.

I was conscious for a minute. My mind conjured an illusion—an image of Lorelei just before I was knocked out.

Unless... she came with me?

But before I could get any more information, it was too late. My brain shut down.

I phased in and out of consciousness for the next few days. Images haunted me at every turn. Battlefields from long ago (or was it the distant future?). Forgotten enemies and beloved friends.

Then, it all cleared away with the sound of her voice.

“Hello? Are you awake?” The girl clicked her tongue. “Uh, I mean, actually awake. Not like you were before.”

“I’m awake, Lorelei,” I muttered. “Just five more minutes.”

“Huh?”

The voice. Something about the voice was different.

My skin was itching. My back felt as if someone had decided to filet the skin off of it.

Why would that be?

I blinked, then pushed myself up.

Her face came into view after a moment. Wide chestnut eyes looked at me with short, rough black hair framing them. Wolf ears poked out from the top of her head, while a fluffy black tail wagged back and forth behind her.

She was clothed in a tan tunic. Rough, well-worn. A little dirty, even. Below that, she was wearing long brown pants that may’ve been a tad too big for her.

I blinked my eyes.

“...Lorelei?” I said.

Her face brightened. “You remember me! I thought for sure that you wouldn’t, given how out of it you were.”

I frowned.

“How would I forget you—?” I pressed my hand to my head and scowled. “Also, did you do something to your hair?”

She tilted her head.

“No? Not to my knowledge. Say, have we met before?”

And in that one instant, my memories flew into my mind.

The battle. The daemons. Lorelei fighting me. Me being sent back in time.

This wasn't my Lorelei.

My head throbbed. I could hear the girl in front of me asking if I was okay.

I couldn't respond.

Instead, my consciousness left me, and I was out cold.

#

Though my body was unable to wake, my mind was as active as ever. In between the hallucinations, I was able to piece together a few important things.

I'd been sent back.

I'd been sent back, away from everyone I'd ever known and loved.

I'd been sent back, and I was completely and utterly alone.

My heart was pounding. Sweat pooled over my forehead.

I felt like I was about to die.

I took a few deep breaths. Calm. Lorelei can't have me melting down at this stage. I needed to distract myself.

What had gone wrong?

This was what we were planning, right?

But it wasn't what we were planning. That fight with the daemon proved it. It was an archdaemon, but even so, I should've been able to kill it in a second flat. However, none of my attacks had so much as scratched it. The only thing that had worked was blinding it with a spell I

hadn't used in so long, that I wasn't even sure what I'd been casting until the last second.

Not to mention, the equipment that I'd been using... I couldn't even remember the last time I'd had such a weak weapon.

Nothing made sense. I needed more information. I couldn't stay in this damn haze for much longer. I would die if I did.

I clenched my fists.

The air burned as it entered my lungs.

I managed to force my eyes open. Sweat poured around my face in drops. I was burning up. Around me, fabric cut against my arms and legs as if it were a dagger.

I pushed myself up—

“Wait, wait, don't do that! You don't want to fall unconscious again!”

Lorelei's bell-like voice pierced through my haze. Instead of following her orders, I pushed myself up all the way and looked in her direction.

The clouds that had been muddling my thoughts disappeared.

I clenched my head.

“I... won't fall asleep. I think I've passed that stage.”

Lorelei didn't respond, simply frowning and furrowing her eyebrows in my direction—

And all at once I was in a different time, staring at a different woman. My heart picked up pace. I drew in a deep breath as subtly as I could.

I wanted to beg her forgiveness. Apologize profusely. Cry, scream.

“So you took care of me?” I smiled. “Thank you.”

Her smile flickered and she looked at my heart before shaking her head and smiling.

“Of course!” she said. “I’d never let someone die if I could save them.”

I clicked my tongue.

“That’s how bad it was?”

Lorelei winced. “Your back had been torn to shreds. It was the worst injury I’ve ever seen.”

I hummed.

“Yep, that would do it.”

I looked around, taking in my surroundings. We were in a small, shady room with rough wood walls and a single window. The air carried the faint scent of herbs and potions, indicating some attempts at healing me.

My heart was still pounding. It was taking everything I had not to throw up in front of her.

"I appreciate your help, Lorelei," I said. "But I need to know more about this place. Can you tell me where we are?"

Lorelei's eyes widened with a mix of surprise and relief, perhaps grateful for the change of topic. "Oh, um, we're on the outskirts of Eldoria Village. It's a small community, not much happens here. I found you near the village outskirts and brought you to my home."

I nodded. "Right. Thank you, again."

“Soo...”

Lorelei skipped forward, shoving her face next to mine. “Mind telling me what happened, exactly? It’s not every day you find a boy falling out of the sky.”

I was about to open my mouth to respond when her eyes widened.

“Wait! Your name, first!” she said. “I shouldn’t skip ahead!”

I blinked, then nodded. Underneath the blanket, I clenched my fists so tight I could feel my nails cut into my hand.

“Right, I’m Alexander. Again, thank you for saving me. When it comes to your question, er...”

She wants to know how I ended up in the sky. How the hell am I supposed to answer that? I don’t even know *myself* how I ended up in the sky! The portal should’ve plopped me on the ground!

"Well, Lorelei, it's a bit complicated," I said. "You see, I was on a journey... uh, an adventure, if you will. And, well, things went south."

Lorelei had somehow gotten a chair and was now sitting on it, leaning forward on the edge. Her wolf ears were perked up, focused on me.

"Adventure?" she said, her eyes sparkling. "Like fighting monsters and exploring ancient ruins?"

“Uh, yeah, something like that,” I said.

It was an adventure when we started. By the end of it, we were fighting for survival.

"Tell me more!" she said. "I’ve always dreamed of being an adventurer. It must be amazing, right?"

I scratched my head. "Well, it's not all glory and excitement, you know. There are dangers, unexpected twists, and, um, falls from the sky."

Lorelei's eyes widened. "Falls from the sky? You’re talking about what happened earlier, right? How did you end up there anyway? We didn’t really cover that.”

I hesitated, trying to come up with a plausible explanation. "Well, it was like a... magical mishap. I was dealing with some powerful magical forces, and, uh, got caught up in a vortex or something. Next thing I knew, I was plummeting towards the ground."

What the hell was I even saying? I was just putting together words in a vague approximation of a story.

Lorelei, however, seemed to be buying all of it. Her eyes widened in amazement.

"Magical forces and vortexes?" she said. "That sounds incredible! I've never heard of anything like that. You must be a really skilled adventurer to handle such things."

I shrugged.

"Yeah, you could say that. It's not for the faint of heart, that's for sure."

She glanced at my chest, then bit her lips.

"But what about your injuries? Your back was torn to shreds. How did that happen?"

I winced, remembering the pain. "Ah, that... Well, there was this tough opponent that followed me through the portal. A bird thing with talons. I was disoriented from falling, so it got the drop on me, and things got messy."

Lorelei grinned. "But you killed it, right?"

I nodded.

"I did. Though it's more like it killed itself. But enough about me. Could you tell me about Eldora Village? What's it like around here?"

With that, Lorelei launched into an explanation of all the local landmarks, all the people she hated, and how boring it was here.

As she spoke, my heart rate slowly dropped. The tension finally was draining out of me.

Something was comforting and familiar about the gentle lilt in her voice. Something that drained away my fears. It was still hard to look at her, but if I didn't pay attention to her different looks, it was almost like...

I pushed the thoughts away.

Eventually, I raised my hand.

"I have a request."

Lorelei paused in her speech.

"Um, sure. What do you need?"

I rubbed the back of my head.

"Do you mind passing me a bowl of water? I want to check if my face has been messed up."

Lorelei smirked.

"The vain type, huh? I suppose that I can do that."

I shook my head. "No, that's not why I'm—whatever, just please give it to me."

Luckily there was a bowl of water that Lorelei had been about to use to clean my wounds. She passed it to me without another word.

As soon as I saw what had happened, my heart nearly burst out of my chest.

The scar under my eye was gone. Not only that, but I was younger. Much, much younger. In fact, I was about the age that I would've been at this time.

I was less muscular. My hair was a light brown. My eyes were a cool and clear teal color. I could see now that on the bedpost was a white cloak I'd used back before I ever met Lorelei.

I dropped the bowl to the floor.

“H-hey! Why’d you do that?”

I didn’t say anything, still processing the implications of what had happened.

The spell wasn’t supposed to work like this. I was supposed to be sent back in my future self’s body. Had something gone wrong?

Had I... possessed my past self? But wait, that makes no sense. If that were the case, then I wouldn’t have been miles in the sky. I should’ve been at my home village, or on the road. Unless my body had been teleported for some reason. That was nonsense though. Why would the spell work like that?

But then the implications if that *hadn’t* been the case would be even stranger. If I wasn’t possessing my past self, then that means my past self is somewhere around in Adonia, and there’s a very real chance I could run into him.

Yeah, that’ll be a fun one to explain to observers. Could I pass him off as a twin brother?

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

This is a disaster in the making.

Priorities.

I took a deep breath.

What events led to our defeat in the future?

The Unity bombing. At a celebration that was supposed to be about celebrating our shared culture and heritage with all the other Elda nations, we were instead attacked by explosive devices. The casualties weren’t actually that large, in the net scheme of things. The real problem was that the explosion damaged the relations between all the nations to an irreparable degree. I had to stop it if I wanted a unified effort against the High One.

This was soon. This would be my priority. I only had a couple of months, if I recall correctly.

The second issue was the assassination of the Lord Duke of Iulune. The Lord Duke was one of the few to understand the dangers of the High One. He was planning to rally the other nations and lead the effort to unify.

He was killed for his troubles.

The third issue was a bit stranger. The Great Spirit of the South was a valuable ally who was supposed to aid Adonia in times of great danger. He always appeared, historically speaking, when our need was greatest. But on the Day of Wrath, he didn't come. Why? This was worthy of further investigation.

Finally, the subjugation of the kingdom of Enat.

Enat was a weak country to the east. Economically, it was poor. Militarily, it was weak. But it had two things going for it.

Firstly, they were host to a family of oracles who were considered the best in the entire world. But that wasn't the important part.

The important part was that they had the strongest defenses in Adonia. the Syluan Empire had tried repeatedly to cross the border, but could never get farther than—say—three feet over it.

The High One, of course, didn't use such conventional means to attack. I didn't have the specifics. All I knew was that in a single night, the entire wall had become the High One's. He had the entire nation in a week. From there, he was able to build up his power until he was invincible.

The final thing that led to our defeat was ourselves.

We were weak. We'd started our journey too late and didn't have the time needed to grow to our maximum strength. There were powers and abilities we had that we didn't even *know* about until the very end.

I had to change that. I had to change all of it, starting with her—

Then I looked at Lorelei's confused face.

I'd left her in silence. She was looking at me with hints of worry in her eyes.

I looked at her hands.

They were rough, dirty, and calloused, but not from training with a blade. Instead, they were the hands of a farmer, of a rancher—not of a warrior.

Then I looked at her eyes.

Lorelei's eyes, in my time, were cold like ice and sharp as daggers. Her smiles were brief and subtle. She was quiet and reserved.

But the woman in front of me was completely different. Her eyes were warm and inviting, like the inside of a log cabin while a blizzard raged outside. Her smiles were so bright and honest they hurt to look at. She was bombastic and fiery, as if she were the sun itself.

Dozens of thoughts flew through my mind. Thoughts of impossibilities and destiny and whispered conversations in the night and rousing victory cries in the day and a thousand other little things that swirled in my brain.

Thoughts of all the little things I was already missing about my Lorelei.

I took a deep breath, letting all the thoughts leave my mind.

I'd already known my decision.

I couldn't take her with me.

#

As I recovered, I engaged in more conversations with Lorelei and got to meet her father.

Lorelei was different from how I remember. It was hard to be around her because parts of her were so familiar and yet different at the same time. I didn't know if I should cry, or scream, or what.

Instead, I chose to keep my distance and try not to think about it too much.

Wyrd, on the other hand, was far more cautious. He had the mark of a soldier on him. A sort of shifty weariness that marked our every interaction. He was polite, but I could tell he didn't trust me in the slightest.

Which was fine with me. Neither of them should be trusting a total stranger who fell from the sky.

Nonetheless, Lorelei was the more dangerous of the two.

Why?

Because the closer I got to her, the more carefully she would be able to read me. Those wolf ears weren't just for show. She could hear a heartbeat from a league away back in the future.

Right now, I was able to get away with my stupid lies because she hadn't established how I acted when I was telling the truth. The closer she got to me—the more time that she spent with me—the better she'd be able to read me. I wouldn't even be able to get away with half-truths, since her ability was to detect deception in general.

Eventually, the truth would come out, and it would be ugly.

As such, it was a top priority to avoid her in the future.

For now, however, it was fine. I wasn't planning on bringing her with me or anything. This Lorelei isn't a hardened warrior or a leader of men. She's a simple girl with simple aspirations. From both a moral and logical perspective, it was better for me not to bring her. Morally, I wasn't going to subject an innocent girl to the hell that was fighting the High One. Logically, she's too weak to be of aid to me right now. Besides that, she's a ticking time bomb with her ability to discern truth from lies.

I was ignoring the fact that Lorelei was the destined hero who was supposed to slay the High One. If destiny was that important I would've never been sent back because we would've defeated him in my timeline. Clearly the idea of prophecies and all that crap actually didn't hold that much water.

The plan was simple. Get better, repay Lorelei and her father somehow, and then stop the High One.

What's that?

Missing steps?

I can work on the finer details later.

I did have some key points down. For example, the daemon attack that took Lorelei's father would come in a year. I'd have to make sure to stop by here to take care of things. On top of that, the Unity bombing was coming soon. Within the next few months. I had to make my way up north and stop it.

Concerning recovery, I was getting better. I was still sleeping for ages, but each time I woke up I was able to move a little further and stay awake a little longer.

Most of the time, Lorelei was the one taking care of me and watching over me. When I

woke up, she'd greet me with question after question about the life of an adventurer and the types of monsters I'd slain. She'd even asked me to show her a few sword techniques, which I was fine with doing.

I just had to suppress the urge to vomit, that was all.

Wyrd appeared now and then, often using herbs to take care of my wounds and prevent them from getting worse. He didn't talk much, only giving me instructions related to my healing.

Then, one day, he changed his tune.

#

"So, my daughter's been telling me about your little stories," he said.

His tone was sharp, controlled.

I grimaced.

"What about them?"

Wyrd snorted.

"She may think you're the second coming of the spirits, but I'm not quite so naive. That entire story you fed her was kabacrap, wasn't it?"

Wyrd's piercing gaze bore into me, and I felt a bead of sweat forming on my forehead. I shifted in the bed, trying to maintain an air of nonchalance.

"Kabacrap? No, no, not at all," I said. "Just your typical adventurer's tale, you know? Monsters, magic mishaps, the whole shebang."

Wyrd frowned.

"Adventurers fight monsters and go into dungeons," he said. "And as such, they pick up habits that are conducive to fighting monsters and going into dungeons. They look at every room

as if there's a chance that secret passages might appear, or treasure might be hidden."

He crossed his arms.

I could feel my heart sinking in my chest.

"They develop a sense of curiosity and spontaneity that forces them to explore every nook and cranny," he said. "They also, as a rule of thumb, tend to be a nightmare to take care of because of that."

I narrowed my eyes. "What's your point?"

"My point is that you haven't moved an inch from that bed since you realized the situation you were in."

I grit my teeth. I'd been read like a book.

Wyrd leaned in, his eyes searching mine. "Adventurers are restless. They can't stay put, especially when faced with the unknown. They'd be inspecting the room, checking the window for potential escape routes, and questioning every detail. But you? You lie here quietly, waiting for someone else to take charge."

He leaned back.

"Soldiers, on the other hand, act differently. They're trained to be disciplined, stoic, and submissive to authority. Ask me how I know."

I clenched my fists.

"That doesn't mean a thing," I said. "I'm a strange adventurer, that's all."

Wyrd didn't say a thing.

I bit my bottom lip.

"I...I'll be out of your hair as soon as possible."

Wyrđ grunted. “Good.”

And with that, he left the room.

#

“You heal fast.” Lorelei didn’t face me, instead reaching for another egg.

My heart skipped a beat.

I took a deep breath.

I hummed and continued grabbing eggs from my side of the coop.

It was a day later when I’d managed to gain the strength to stand up. I’d first started by walking around the room a few laps before I tumbled to the ground.

Lorelei was fairly angry at me for this.

Nonetheless, it’d set the standard. I was now capable of walking. As soon as Wyrđ had caught wind of this, he’d informed me that I would be assisting Lorelei in the household chores in a matter of days.

“Well,” I said. “I would’ve healed faster if not for the type of wound I received.”

“What do you mean?” Lorelei turned around, her dress ruffling. “The type of wound?”

I nodded and turned towards her.

“Yes. See, I know healing magic. Unfortunately, the creature that inflicted my wound could curse said wounds, rendering them unhealable by magical means.”

Lorelei nodded, her eyes wide.

“I see!” she said. “But if it were another type of wound you could heal it in a moment?”

I tilted my palm back and forth.

“It depends. I’m no miracle healer, unfortunately. I can’t bring back someone on the edge

of death. But anything less than that I can handle.”

Of course, at my current ability, it would probably cost me my life, but that’s not relevant to the conversation.

Stars seemed to appear in Lorelei’s eyes. “Wow, real magic... I’ve never seen it before. Do you know any other spells?”

I shrugged.

“A handful. Nothing special.”

Especially if my repertoire is still locked to my past self.

Lorelei leaped towards me, a grin on her face.

“Can you show me!?” she said.

I shrugged.

“Let’s step out.”

We walked outside the coop.

I raised my hand. A familiar burning sensation raced along the insides of my veins. Heat spread across my muscles.

As a general rule of thumb, casting magic without a proper foci is a bad decision. However, my staff was somewhere inside the house and I didn’t feel like looking for it.

A shimmering ball of water appeared behind me and then shot forward into a tree. The tree exploded into shards of wood in one go.

I hummed. That wasn’t bad. Perhaps I’m not as limited as I thought.

Lorelei squealed off to my left. “Oh my gosh that was amazing!”

I turned towards her to see her grinning at the tree that had been decimated.

“You’re really magic!” she said. “Just like the books!”

I shrugged.

“This was nothing. It’s a beginner spell at best.”

“Well, I think it’s still really cool!” Lorelei said.

I smiled.

A calculating expression washed over her face and chills went down my spine.

“Say, have been looking for an apprentice?”

“U-um... no?” I said.

She marched up to me.

“But you aren’t opposed to the idea, right?”

I shrugged, confused.

“I guess not?”

She smiled.

“Excellent.”

Then she walked away without a word.

I had a very bad feeling now.

#

The next day, we were scheduled to head into town to deliver goods from the farm. Wyrd was coming along as well—most likely to meet with the man who runs the store, according to what Lorelei said.

I was healing rapidly. It wouldn’t be much longer until I could go to Joim and stop the Unity bombing.

The walk was quiet. Lorelei tried to engage in conversation, but Wyrd's silence as we conversed made things unbearably awkward.

Before long, we'd arrived at the location. On the way in, I noted that we were watched with wariness and even hate by the inhabitants. Was Wyrd disliked around here? Perhaps they don't come into town often?

Then one of them looked at Lorelei's tail and sneered.

My teeth ground together as my heart picked up pace.

I felt the urge to go over to that person and stomp him into the ground.

After a moment, I sighed, and the fight went out of me. I didn't think Lorelei would appreciate me causing chaos and madness.

An older man with spectacles stepped out of the shop. Lan, Lorelei's 'uncle'. He glanced at Lorelei with a guilty expression then turned his eyes back towards Wyrd. Behind him, a boy with dirty-looking hair glared at me and Lorelei.

"Wyrd, my old friend, come in."

The two men instantly got to speaking about business-related matters while we followed behind them. Before we could get much further, however, Wyrd turned around.

"Hold on," he said. "You three get to unloading the goods. There's no reason for you to be involved in this conversation."

Lorelei quirked her lips and puffed up her cheeks. After a moment she sighed and turned around. The boy sighed and followed after her.

Seeing nothing better to do, I turned and walked in their direction.

At first, the work was quiet, if awkward. We moved back and forth between a storage

room and the wagon, with the only noise coming from our footsteps and me asking for specifics on where to put the objects.

Then the brat opened his mouth.

“So, I heard some of your argument with the old man.”

Lorelei froze for a split second. An expression of cool neutrality quickly washed over her face.

“What of it?” she said.

“Oh, I just think it’s so tragic!” the boy—Alfa, was it?—said. “The way you’re trapped here with us small-minded villagers. So sad!”

I was confused but didn’t say anything.

Lorelei growled.

“Look, I didn’t do anything to you. Leave me alone.”

Alfa spat in her direction.

“Of course you did something. You existed.”

Lorelei flinched at the end of his sentence.

“You brought your filthy beasthuman paws around the rest of us. It’s a good thing that your mother—“

I stepped forward.

My heart was pounding in my ears. It was taking everything I had not to lunge at this brat.

“I would strongly recommend not finishing that sentence,” I said.

The boy scoffed.

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?”

Lorelei grit her teeth.

“He’s a wandering adventurer who’s really dangerous. I wouldn’t make him mad, Alfa.”

Alfa scoffed.

“Oh please, an adventurer? Here, of all places? Besides, he’s clearly injured!”

I smiled.

“Injuries or not, I can take on an oversized child like yourself.”

Alfa gave me a deadpan expression. “Was that supposed to be an insult?”

Lorelei looked at me, her eyelids attenuated. “Alexander, you’re still injured, is this a good idea—?”

I sighed. “I’ll be fine.”

Alfa rolled his eyes.

“Whatever.” He stepped forward and raised his fist. “I’m with the village guard, pal. I’m dangerous. But if you say you’re sorry and lick my boot, I might just—“

“For goodness’s sake, stop talking and get it over with!”

The boy snarled and lunged at me with a punch.

To his credit, he wasn’t half-bad. I could see decent technique and speed.

For a village guard, that is.

I tilted my head and twirled around his attack, sending him stumbling forward.

He looked at me and blinked in surprise. After a moment, the confusion slipped away, replaced with anger.

“Slippery bastard.” He marched up to me. “Stand still and take it like a man—!”

He threw another punch.

I dodged again.

He gritted his teeth together. All at once, he began throwing strikes at rapid speeds.

He'd learned from last time, he wasn't overcommitting and throwing himself into the blow, instead keeping his distance and more focusing on getting a hit of some sort.

Unfortunately, compared to the beings I'd fought, he just didn't measure up. Each blow was dodged with ease, though I was steadily backing up.

Then I was against the wall.

"Gotcha!" he said, throwing his fist forward.

I tilted my head and his fist slammed into the wood with a loud crunch.

There was a moment of silence.

Lorelei had her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock.

Alfa pulled his hand away, staring at it with a wide-eyed expression.

He looked up at me and gave me a manic grin.

"That's it!" A knife left his back pocket. He was holding it in his offhand, of course. "I won't kill ya, but I'll make you bleed for this!"

"Alfa, what are you doing!?" Lorelei said.

Alfa didn't respond, instead thrusting the knife at my arm.

I'd had enough fun.

I knocked the strike out of the way, sending his knife flying through the air. I then kicked him in the chest, knocking him onto the floor.

Alfa wheezed as the breath was slammed out of his lungs in one fell swoop.

Before the brat could get up, I'd already stepped forward and had put my foot on his chest.

"Don't try it, buddy."

Suddenly, we heard the sound of footsteps racing toward us. The door slammed open.

"Lorelei!" Wyrd said. "Is everything okay—"

He paused when he saw us, my foot on Alfa's chest while Lorelei was shuffling her feet with a cringing expression.

This would be fun to explain.

#

Wyrd crossed his arms.

"Right, what the hell happened here?" he said.

Alfa wheezed.

"They attacked me out of nowhere!"

He forced himself to his knees.

"Uncle, they're dangerous, especially the one with the bandages! I told you that beastpeople shouldn't be allowed—"

Lan's eyes narrowed.

"I see," he said. "Lorelei, what actually happened?"

Lorelei jumped at being called. After a moment, however, she began to speak.

"It was entirely Alfa's fault," she said.

Lan gave her a look. "Maybe it was, but I need more information."

Lorelei sighed.

“Well, it started like this...”

Lorelei explained how Alfa had begun mocking her. She then moved on to how Alfa had implied something rather unsavory about her and her mother.

Forget my wrath, Wyrd looked about ready to strangle Alfa himself.

“What the hell did you say, you little shit?” He marched forward. “I ought to finish the job—“

Lan held out his hand.

“As tempted as I am to see you beat up a teenager,” he said. “It probably wouldn’t be a wise idea in the long run.

Wyrd glared daggers at Lan. “So he’ll go unpunished?”

Lan shook his head. He then pushed his spectacles back up the bridge of his nose.

“No, I will ensure that he is suitably punished. But it can’t be you who does the punishing. It’ll damage your already fragile image.”

Lan smirked, and all at once I felt the air leave the room.

“Make no mistake, he will suffer for his actions.”

Alfa opened his mouth to protest, then shut it when Lan glared at him.

Wyrd growled. “He’d better.”

Lan nodded.

Wyrd was scanning across our faces when he paused and turned back towards me and Lorelei.

“But how did the boy get embedded into the floor?” he said.

I raised my hand.

“It was me, sir.”

Wyrd narrowed his eyes. “I see.”

I bit my lower lip.

Wyrd didn’t say anything more to me, instead hashing out a few more details with Lan before leaving.

And then, when we exited the store, Lorelei was asked to drive the wagon for a bit while Wyrd and I stayed in the back.

I gulped. This would be trouble.

#

“Why did you pick a fight with the brat?”

He was going to chew me out for starting a fight, wasn’t he?

“W-well... I guess I got mad and lost my temper—”

He held up his hand. “Whispers. I don’t want Lorelei to hear.”

I lowered my voice. “I lost my temper.”

“Why?”

His eyes were staring at me so intensely that it felt as if they were physically putting pressure on me.

I bit the bottom of my lip.

“I guess it was when he attacked her for being a beastperson. That made me upset.”

“Why? Out of principle?”

I shook my head, my eyes on the horizon as I contemplated my answer.

“No, not really. If I heard anyone else say that at another time I don’t think I would’ve

reacted that way. I guess it was...”

Wyrd’s eyes narrowed and we came to a stop.

“What? What was it?”

“It was because it was Lorelei!”

There was a beat of silence.

“She was so upset! That bastard was pushing all the buttons needed to make her break down on purpose, and it just... it just infuriated me! She’s my friend!”

After a moment, Wyrd’s frown softened. His eyes crinkled up.

“I see,” he said.

He turned back towards the wagon. We were walking quickly to catch up.

“I don’t know if you noticed this, but Lorelei is planning to follow you,” he said.

I almost stumbled from how suddenly he dropped that bombshell.

“Lorelei’s had a very difficult childhood,” he said. “She’s of a different species in a foreign land where almost everyone hates her. It’s not a surprise that she wants to leave.”

I bit my lip. “I see. It sounds awful.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Why won’t you let her?” I said.

Wyrd smiled, though the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Why won’t I let her leave?”

I nodded.

Wyrd sighed.

“There are a few reasons. Firstly, Lorelei’s spent her entire life in this village. Though

she's strong physically, I don't think she has the experience needed to navigate the complexities of the outside world. If I could, I'd simply go with her, but..."

He rubbed his thigh absentmindedly.

After a moment, he continued, saying, "My second reason is that nowhere will be safe for her, unfortunately. Here in Adonia as a beastperson, she'll be ignored at best or hated at worst. If she tried to head back to the Khanate, she'd be arrested on suspicion of treason. As sad as it is, out here in the middle of nowhere is probably the safest she can get."

"What's your final reason?"

"Simple," he said. "She's the last thing I have left of my wife. I can't afford to lose her."

I furrowed my eyebrows.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Didn't I say it earlier?" he said. "She's planning to run away with you. I want your assurance that you'll say no."

I shook my head.

"You don't have to worry about that."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

I rubbed at my arm.

"My lifestyle isn't conducive towards the health of people," I said. "And I'm not going to subject an innocent young woman to the challenges I'm going to face. Besides that, if I'm honest, she'd be a weight to me as she is."

Wyrd nodded, though he frowned and wrinkled his nose at my second reason.

"I see. I appreciate your candidness."

We continued walking in silence.

“Understand that this changes nothing,” he said. “I still want you out of here as soon as possible. I appreciate you defending my daughter, but my point still stands. You’re dangerous, and you make things dangerous for others.”

“I know.”

Our feet crunched against the ground.

“...but, if you’re ever passing by,” he said. “You’re welcome to stop in for a meal.”

I smiled.

“Thanks, Wyrđ.”

As we approached the home, I felt encouraged. It was nice to know that I no longer had Wyrđ’s enmity.

#

After a few minutes, Lorelei had stopped the wagon and more-or-less demanded that Wyrđ take her place.

In the past, I think Wyrđ might’ve been somewhat hesitant about leaving the two of us alone. But he didn’t hesitate now and simply nodded, switching out with Lorelei. So now, Lorelei and I were walking, the wagon rattling and crunching against the ground ahead of us.

Then the silence was broken.

“Thanks for that, by the way,” Lorelei said.

I turned towards her and blinked.

“For what?” I said.

Lorelei paused and gave me a wide-eyed look.

“Y-you know!”

I tilted my head. “I don’t know what I did.”

Lorelei groaned and looked up towards the sky. After a moment, she tilted her head back down and turned towards me, an embarrassed smile on her face. Her tail wagged behind her while her ears flickered and for a single moment I was staring at the woman who’d led me in a time long since past.

“You... you know... helped me out back there.”

“U-um,” I shook my head, casting the image out of my mind. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lorelei shook her hands back and forth, almost reaching them out as if to strangle me.

“Agh, you’re going to make me say it!” she said. “Fine! Because you defended me in Lan’s store!”

I blinked.

“Oh, that was nothing. No problem.”

“It wasn’t nothing!” She stopped and stamped her foot into the ground, glaring at me and pressing a finger into my chest. “My entire life here, people have been doing that to me. This is the first time anyone besides my dad and Uncle Lan tried to defend me!”

I frowned.

Lorelei in the future hadn’t talked about her past very much. I’d known that her father had perished in a daemon attack a year from now. I’d known that she was a farmer’s daughter.

In retrospect, it wasn’t exactly a surprise that she was despised for her heritage. She was hated in the future as well, so why would it be different in the past?

But still, I'd never thought to connect the dots.

I brushed aside the idle thoughts and shrugged.

"Well, you're welcome, in that case." I smiled. "I'm glad I could give you a hand."

Lorelei blinked, then smiled back. The edges of her lips quivered.

I poked her with my shoulder.

"Hey, everything okay?"

The smile melted off her face and she looked away.

"You're getting better, right?" she said.

I nodded. "Yes, thanks to your excellent caretaking. I will have to repay you for it, someday."

She pushed me with her hand. "Don't worry about it. With that little stunt you pulled, I don't think Dad cares about any debt you have to us."

I raised an eyebrow. "You heard our conversation?"

Lorelei giggled, holding her hand over her mouth.

"Dad thinks he knows my range, but he doesn't. Of course, I didn't catch everything, but I heard enough to know he likes you now."

She didn't hear the part where I affirmed that I wouldn't take her with me, otherwise, I think she'd be more frustrated.

I held up my hand. "Hold on, we're getting away from the topic. Why were you worried about me getting better?"

She laughed and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Well, I don't know. It's a little bit stupid. You might laugh at me for it—"

My eyes narrowed.

“I’d never do that.”

There was a beat of silence.

She sighed.

“Well, I guess that I’m just a little disappointed,” she said. “I’ve just... enjoyed the time you’ve been here with us. That’s all.”

My heart fluttered. I pressed down the emotion, strangled it, then threw it into a shallow grave.

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Well, I’ve enjoyed my time here as well, so you’re not alone in that.”

She mumbled something under her breath.

“What was that?” I said.

After a moment she looked up at me, fire burning in her eyes.

“Alexander,” she said. “Please, take me with—“

I held up my hand.

For a moment, she looked like she was about ready to murder me for my interruption.

“Something’s wrong,” I said.

Lorelei blinked, the anger fading away from her gaze. “What are you talking about?”

I turned my head back and forth.

“Don’t you hear it?”

Lorelei furrowed her eyebrows.

“What are you talking about? It’s completely quiet.”

I turned towards her. “Exactly. It’s completely quiet in a path in the woods.”

She looked at me with a confused face before the realization dawned on her.

“B-but... why? That doesn’t make any sense!”

I growled. I still didn’t see the source of the disturbance.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But we need to head to your dad and inform him.”

She nodded and we ran towards the wagon.

It was then that I heard something that sent shivers down my spine.

The sound of fire and claws as hard as metal. The sound of bestial breathing and scraping footsteps.

The scourge of everything good and pure in this world. A beast from the Abyss itself.

An archdaemon.

And now it was in front of Lorelei’s house.

Chapter Four

The wagon had ground to a halt, of course.

Lorelei's eyes were wide and twitchy. She glanced at the archdaemon, then back at me.

I pointed at the front of the wagon and mouthed, '*Your father.*'

Some of the fear disappeared and she nodded. We began to walk forward.

Was this my fault? Wasn't the archdaemon supposed to attack in a year? What the hell was that thing doing here? Did I get the timing wrong?

We were soon in front of Wyrd. He was staring at the archdaemon, his hand hovering over the grip of his sheathed blade.

I hissed at him, catching his attention. I waved him over and pointed back in the opposite direction of where we'd come from.

He sighed, then nodded. He stood up.

Then there was a sudden creak from a loose board.

Everyone flinched.

A snort echoed out from the creature ahead of us. It was staring idly into the distance without a care in the world. Its long claws hung by its side. Pus oozed from random spots along its red skin.

The hair rose on my skin.

How could I forget?

Archdaemons only truly die in two ways. Fire and holy water.

That was the archdaemon I'd fought when I first landed here!

"Come on, Wyrd," I whispered. "Let's go!"

Wyrd gave me a cautious nod.

I glanced back and forth between them and the archdaemon. If that thing caught wind of us, we'd be in danger.

A part of me railed against my cowardice. It's just an archdaemon, after all. Not even a greater archdaemon. But as injured as I was right now, I couldn't take it on.

"I'm sorry, everyone," I whispered. "I think that he came here for me."

Lorelei gave me a look of shock while Wyrd sighed.

"No time for that," Wyrd said. "We can talk about it later."

We all started to back away. If we were lucky, we'd be able to walk away from this and send word to the guard outpost. They were the only ones who had any chance of winning a confrontation with an archdaemon.

A sudden bark caused everyone to flinch.

The archdaemon looked at the source of the noise.

It was Kobo the kaba.

I cursed under my breath.

To my side, Lorelei had a wide-eyed look of terror while Wyrd was grinding his teeth together.

Kobo let out another bark. The archdaemon slowly stepped forward, its yellow eyes staring at the kaba with obvious bloodlust.

What do I do? Should I try to save the kaba? But wait, this might be a good thing. It'll buy us some time while we run.

I frowned at the thought. It was ugly, but it seemed like we had no choice.

Wyrd sucked in a breath and dashed forward, only slowing down for a moment to grab his short sword from the front of his wagon.

My jaw dropped. Wait, was he going to fight that thing!?

"Dad, what are you doing!?" Lorelei said.

Wyrd shouted back, "We sunk all of our savings into that kaba! If we lose it, we lose everything!"

The archdaemon stopped and focused its attention on Wyrd.

Wyrd stopped in front of Kobo, his blade out in the traditional Elda form that emphasized defense and group fighting.

Lorelei turned towards me, her eyes wide with fear.

"Alexander, do something!" she said.

My heart pounded in my chest. Sweat poured down my back.

I took a step back.

"I can't," I said. "Not against that."

Lorelei's eyes widened, her lips parting in disbelief. A fleeting flicker of pain crossed her features before she quickly averted her gaze, shoulders slumping ever so slightly.

I didn't have time to think about it, however, as the archdaemon was still approaching.

Wyrd readjusted his stance.

If archdaemons were capable of such a thing, I'd say that it was smiling. Then it shot out its claws.

Wyrd, to his credit, managed to throw his sword in the way of the strike. The archdaemon, in response, used its other hand to try to slash at Wyrd.

"Pa!" Lorelei said.

Wyrd smirked dodging the strike, causing the archdaemon to stumble forward.

For a moment, it seemed like Wyrd had the upper hand. His blade shifted. He was going to attack.

It was hard to tell what happened. One second he was thrusting into the archdaemon's chest. The next he was flying through the air. After a moment, he slammed into a tree, instantly knocking him unconscious.

Lorelei put her hands over her mouth and let out a muffled cry.

I was shivering. What do I do? I can't fight it. It's probably gotten even stronger, after all. Not only that, but it knows my tactics. Crap, crap, crap!

The archdaemon lumbered towards Wyrd's limp body.

To my side, Lorelei went still.

I glanced at her and sucked in a breath.

Her eyes were shrunk to pinpoints while her teeth were grit together. Behind her, her tail

was puffed up like a porcupine.

She rushed forward towards her father.

I reached out to stop her but didn't do anything beyond that.

Coward.

Lorelei dived and grabbed her father's sword, then rolled before shooting upwards into a standing position. It was a very fancy maneuver that spoke to her instincts. Unfortunately, I could tell instantly that her technique was far too lacking. Her left foot was in an awkward position. Her sword was angled too sharply. Dozens of little things that told me that she'd never been trained.

I took a step forward.

The archdaemon got closer. Its claws scraped against the ground, kicking up dirt.

I took another step forward.

The archdaemon growled, raising its hand for a strike. Lorelei gulped and redoubled her grip—

Only for me to break her grip and steal the sword from her hand with a deft maneuver.

My newly acquired blade parried the strike with ease. I stepped forward and slashed across the archdaemon's chest, carving a valley across its skin.

It roared, stumbling backward. It glared at me, murder bleeding from its every movement as its claws twitched.

"Alexander, you—!"

"Apologies," I said. "It took a minute for me to wake up. My injuries are still affecting my judgment. I'll take care of this"

Lorelei let in a quick breath.

“But your bandages...”

I grimaced. I could feel warm blood pooling behind me. This was going to set back all of my progress, wasn't it?

If I even survived.

I wanted to send Lorelei away with Wyrd, but I knew that the archdaemon would rush them as soon as I did. I couldn't take that risk. For now, I was their best shot at survival.

The archdaemon had recovered, and was now looking at me with a curious expression. It could tell that I was weak. Possibly even weaker than I was the first time I fought it.

After a moment, the archdaemon began to approach me, a more cautious look in its eyes.

I adjusted my stance. Arguably, Wyrd had made the right decision. A cautious, defensive style was the correct approach against an opponent of unknown capabilities with clear physical advantages.

But that wouldn't work for me, if for no other reason than that I'd run out of blood fighting that way. I needed to end this quickly.

So I shifted my stance to that of the Royal Way. Aggressive, energy-consuming, and fast.

Instead of blocking, or waiting, I dashed forward, my blade ripping through the air and straight toward the creature's chest.

There was a brief flash of surprise before the archdaemon threw up a parry with its claws, creating a loud ringing noise.

I pulled back my blade, then unleashed three slashes in quick succession.

Each one was parried by the creature, but it was close. One second faster and I'd have cut

it in two.

Pain shot up my back. My injuries were reopening.

This was an awful idea.

Sensing weakness, the archdaemon launched a counterattack, slashing at me from the left and the right.

Unblockable.

I ducked my head and the claws scraped against each other overhead. I then launched a thrust at the thing's heart.

It was a clear shot. My enemy was disoriented and vulnerable, and I was in the perfect position.

So of course, that was when my vision went dark and caused me to miss.

It was still devastating, but it didn't hit the heart. Instead, it cut into the creature's stomach.

The archdaemon roared in agony, then slammed the blunt side of its claws at me, sending me flying.

Spittle flew out of my mouth as I rolled against the ground.

"Alexander!" Lorelei shouted.

She hurried to my side.

"Did he get you!? Are you okay!?"

I pushed myself up to a sitting position, then slowly stood up.

Lorelei watched with a pained grimace. I was probably trickling blood right now.

"After he's dead, get your father to safety. I'll be out of commission," I said.

“What?”

I tightened my grip.

“I lost my opportunity earlier,” I said. “I had a shot but didn’t take it. I don’t think I have the energy to fight anymore. After this, I’ll be finished.”

“Alexander...” She recoiled, her eyes wide. “You aren’t saying...?”

I squeezed the handle of my blade.

“Please, Lorelei. At least let me do this much.”

I could see the conflict warring in her eyes.

“Think of your father,” I said.

And that sealed the deal. She paused, then slowly nodded her head.

“I... I understand,” she said.

She smiled, her eyes tearing up.

“Thank you, Alexander.”

I smiled back at her, then turned my eyes back towards my opponent.

The archdaemon was shaky, but still in better condition than me. It had been content to watch, clearly hesitant after the injury it had obtained.

I burst into action, rushing forward.

I didn’t bother to try to conserve any stamina or defend myself. My life was forfeit now. My goal was simply to kill this creature for Lorelei and her father to survive.

I had figured it out to some degree now. I had gotten the timing wrong, or I’d caused things to be accelerated by my presence. The point was that this archdaemon was the same one that Lorelei spoke of. I could feel it. This thing, in my timeline, was what killed Lorelei’s father. I

didn't have all the details, but I knew that much.

My sword crashed against the creature's claws. Metal ringed out.

I grinned.

The archdaemon paused.

History wouldn't repeat itself. Lorelei's father would live. If I truly believed that destiny was set in stone, I'd have never come back here.

A glancing parry. It was lining up a blow.

But I had one more trick up my sleeve.

"Aqua Fulgara," I whispered.

Fire raced inside my muscles. I was straining everything in my body to the limit. I wouldn't last long after this.

A blob of water shimmered behind the archdaemon.

It tilted its head, just as I knew it would, dodging the shot. It had detected the magic building behind it.

My left hand lashed out towards its chest.

The archdaemon was already in movement, and couldn't adjust. It didn't look panicked, however. Why would it? It was just my fist.

Then it saw the flash of steel and widened its eyes.

I grinned as my old knife sliced through the archdaemon in one fell swoop.

The archdaemon staggered backwards, gushing a yellow pus-like substance out from the wound. It fell to the ground a moment afterward.

I held my hand out. A spellcircle appeared in front of me, then fire blasted out and began

charring the archdaemon.

I'd rather not deal with another resurrection case.

"Alexander!" Lorelei shouted. "Oh my goodness, how are you still..."

I stumbled to the ground a moment afterward, my muscles giving out.

Every part of me was on fire. I'd given up everything just to defeat a single lesser archdaemon.

Lorelei—my Lorelei—would be disappointed in me.

But then again, she's not here, is she?

I chuckled.

I had such grand ambitions when I came back. Dreams of defeating the High One. Stopping the Unity Bombing. Preventing the attack on Cedric's clan.

I smiled. At the very least, I'd managed to save Lorelei's father. That was something worth being proud of.

I heard footsteps approach me.

"...Alexander?"

"Still alive," I muttered.

Lorelei dropped to her knees, a wide-eyed on her face. "You killed it. You saved my father."

I chuckled, though the motion hurt.

"I did."

A hint of fear entered her eyes.

"So... this is it?"

I nodded.

“I was in bad condition before entering the fight... there’s no way I’ll survive.”

Lorelei’s eyes crinkled.

“Couldn’t you heal yourself?”

I grunted. “The wounds created by an archdaemon can’t be healed.”

Lorelei gripped my arm, though I could scarcely feel it at this point over the pain.

“Alexander,” she said. “You bastard, you can’t give up now! Not after saving us like that!”

I grimaced. “Wow, rude much?”

“If you have the energy to backtalk, you have the energy to try!”

I sighed.

“I don’t—“

“Try, damn it!”

I chuckled, though it sounded more like a gasp.

I supposed that I could try.

Instead of tapping into my magic reserves, I used the last of my energy on a self-healing spell.

At least I can say that I tried—

Then, miraculously, I felt my flesh begin to stitch together.

My eyes widened, then I began to laugh.

Oh, of course.

The archdaemon never laid a hit on me directly.

It looks like I'll be holding on for a little bit longer.

#

My recovery this time was far worse than last time, and that's saying something. I hadn't just used up the last of my mana reserves, I'd tapped directly into my energy and used almost all of it. I should've died of exhaustion even if my wounds weren't as severe as they were.

But I didn't. I suppose I felt I couldn't disappoint Lorelei. Even here in the past, I was at her beck and call, as per usual.

I could hear Fiona laughing at me from the afterlife.

Either way, I was getting better, even if I couldn't keep my eyes open for more than a few minutes at a time. Eventually, I was able to croak out words.

"Water," I said.

Lorelei had been reading something by my bedside. As soon as I spoke, her book fell out of her hands.

"A-Alexander!" she said. "You spoke!"

"Water," I said.

"Oh, yeah!"

She dipped a bowl into a bucket of water, then brought the bowl to my lips.

I drank it, the cool liquid flowing down and relieving the pain in my throat.

"Thanks," I said.

"Of course," Lorelei said. "You saved me. You saved my father. As far as I'm concerned, this is the least I can do."

A faint smile crossed my face before my vision began to darken.

And then I was out like a light.

#

Soon enough, I was finally able to walk again because I was able to heal myself once my mana pool had recovered. My days were spent resting. Wyrd refused to put me to work considering how much they owed me.

When it came to conversation, Wyrd was far more hesitant now. Every time he came to check on my wounds, a flash of emotions would come from his eyes before being suppressed.

Even Lorelei was more reserved now. I could tell she was holding something back each time she changed my bandages. Multiple times I'd tried to engage in conversation, only for the awkwardness in the atmosphere to kill the attempt.

At first, I thought it was guilt. Perhaps, seeing my condition, they didn't know what to say or how to apologize.

But as the days stretched on, that hypothesis was being ripped to shreds. Surely Wyrd, a grown man who's seen injuries of this type before would've buckled down and given an apology.

Then I moved to suspecting that he was angry. Of course. He blamed me for the archdaemon. I was... fairly certain that in some way, somehow, the archdaemon I killed was the archdaemon that was destined to kill him. A voice deep within me that sounded suspiciously similar to my Lorelei reassured me that I'd done a good thing.

But I doubted Wyrd would see it that way. I didn't even see it that way.

However, Wyrd wasn't acting angry. I never felt any hostility from him. If anything, he was treating me better than he did before.

With that out the window, what could it be?

Maybe this is just what he's actually like, and he's become more comfortable with me. No, come on. Besides, I would have to apply that theory to Lorelei, and I *know* that's not her true personality.

At least, I think.

Putting that thought aside, what could it be?

I grimaced, putting away the thoughts.

The next day, all my worst nightmares came true at once.

Everything I'd ever feared.

I was recovered enough to head out and begin adventuring once more. I had my staff and my robes, along with a few smoked pieces of jerky and some water. I was on the edge of the door.

To my confusion, Lorelei had a pack on her back, as if she was planning on leaving.

It was then that Lorelei and Wyrd dropped a little, tiny *bombshell*.

"Alexander," Wyrd said. "How would you feel about taking on a companion?"

#

"Absolutely not," I said. "Out of the question."

Lorelei flinched as if she'd been struck.

"B-but why?" she said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Lorelei, you're not trained. I can't take someone with me who's not prepared for the battles I'll be facing."

"Okay, then train me," she said, a fire lighting in her eyes. "I'll be the best student you've

ever had. I'll work hard until I'm at your level!"

I gritted my teeth together.

"Wyrd!" I turned towards him and away from Lorelei. "Shouldn't you be protesting this!?"

Wyrd looked up towards the ceiling. "I've been considering the matter ever since you saved our lives. Though I would prefer Lorelei stays here... she's going to end up leaving no matter what. I would prefer that she's with someone who has the capabilities to protect her."

I stagger my hands back and forth. "B-But... I thought you wanted her to be safe?"

"She's not safe here," he said. "That archdaemon attack proved it."

"Oh come on, that was a freak accident! It was my fault if anything, remember?"

My words caused the conversation to grind to a halt.

Lorelei gave me an uncomfortable look while Wyrd went stony-faced.

"I'm not going to lie and say I'm not somewhat upset," Wyrd said. "But I'd accepted the risk of someone coming after you when I decided not to kick you out. I am just as much at fault for this."

I shifted. "I think I share a greater percentage of the fault."

"Did you know that the creature would follow you back to our home?"

I rubbed the back of my neck.

"Well, no," I said. "But I should've—"

"Then you screwed up. It wasn't out of malice, no one got hurt significantly—besides you—and I can move on from the issue."

I opened my mouth to protest, only to close it. I got the feeling that I wouldn't be

changing his mind on this thing.

“So, can you take me with you?” Lorelei said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“It won’t be a joy ride,” I said. “I’m going up against... some very dangerous people. You could die!”

“I’m not afraid of death.”

I turned to scoff, then paused.

It was the look in her eyes.

They were hard, unbending. Full of absolute conviction and belief in what one was saying.

A lot like my own Lorelei.

I turned my eyes away.

“I... I can’t afford to take on someone who doesn’t know how to fight.”

The words were nothing more than an excuse. Even to me, they were unconvincing.

“Then teach me!” Lorelei strode forward, getting in my face. “I can learn!”

I stepped back, my mind whirling.

“Wyrd, you were in complete support of me earlier! Come on!”

Wyrd shrugged.

“I changed my mind.”

I glared at him. Traitor!

Lorelei marched up to me.

I stepped back, but she continued. Soon enough, I was backed up against the wall, Lorelei

almost pressed against me with how close she was. Her tail wagged back and forth creating a rhythmic whooshing noise.

“Come on, Alexander!” she said. “You know that I’m a fast learner!”

I looked away.

“I mean, yeah, I guess,” I muttered.

“Not only that, but I’m naturally strong because of my beastperson heritage!” she said.

I groaned.

“I suppose.”

“Plus, you’ll probably get lonely on your trip!” Lorelei said. “Isn’t it better to travel with a friend?”

I opened my mouth to give a response, then stopped.

Memories flashed across my mind of everyone around a campfire after a long day of traveling. Cedric blushing as Fiona teased him. Gareth roasting meat over the campfire.

And Lorelei smiling at me.

For a moment, I was tempted to say yes.

Then I remembered what happened to all of them and all of those warm feelings popped like a bubble.

I slipped out to the side and began to walk off.

“Wait, Alexander—“

I didn’t pause, instead marching off.

“I can’t, I’m sorry. You’ll have to find someone else.”

I continued to walk off.

“B-but I—!”

I could hear Wyrd whispering something to her as I walked off. Probably telling her to give up and that he’ll help her—

Footsteps smashed across the ground at blistering speeds. In a moment, Lorelei was in front of me.

“Alexander, look at me.”

I turned my head away.

Her foot stomped on the ground, her hands clenched into fists. Her wolf ears were folded forward while her tail was puffed up in a straight line.

“If you’re going to say no, at least have the decency to look me in the eye!” she said.

I gritted my teeth together and lifted my head to look at her.

She looked so much like my Lorelei that it hurt. Her hair was shorter. Her face more youthful. But her eyes...

“I can’t—”

Say it.

“I can’t take—”

Say it, you selfish bastard. Don’t take her. If you take her, she’ll read you like a book given enough time, and you can’t afford anyone to be capable of doing that right now.

“I can’t take you with—”

You can’t afford to lose her.

I shut my eyes.

I could never say no to her.

She was waiting for my answer.

I groaned and rolled my head around. “Damn it all to hell!”

I then turned around and stomped off.

“Um, Alexander?”

I could feel Lorelei’s confused look. My heart pounding, I unstrapped my knife and chucked it behind me.

I could hear her fumble as she caught it.

“You’ll need some kind of weapon until we get you a proper sword, and we’re not stealing your dad’s,” I said. “That’ll have to do.”

There was a beat of silence as Lorelei processed what I’d said.

A cheer rang out from behind me.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Lorelei said. “Thank you, Alexander!”

I paused. “Say goodbye to your father before we go.”

Lorelei jumped. “Oh, yeah!”

I heard her run back. A whispered conversation that I had no right to listen to danced on the wind.

Then Lorelei dashed until she was beside me. She gave me a grin, her tail wagging behind her.

I averted my eyes. “You have everything ready?”

“Yep!” she said.

I sighed.

“Then let’s get going.”

Chapter Five

For the next several days as we traveled, I drilled Lorelei on the basics of swordsmanship and knife work. In addition, I had her work on her balance, since she seemed to struggle greatly with that particular matter.

“Move it, slug!” I shouted. “You want to be able to kill a dire wolf with that kind of speed? You won’t even be able to slay a tortoise!”

“Yes—hah—teacher!”

Lorelei was running laps at her maximum speed, her tail hopping up and down in pace with her movements.

She needed to be able to maintain her top performance for as long as possible in a fight.

I’ve seen many a warrior slain simply because they ran out of energy. As such: it was laps for Lorelei.

I idly thought of our journey thus far. I could tell that Lorelei was a bit uncomfortable. I, on the other hand, felt more comfortable than I’d ever felt thus far. I’d gotten so used to sleeping

outside that sleeping on a bed made me nervous.

After a few more minutes of sprinting, I called out for her to stop. She slammed into the ground, her chest heaving with exhaustion.

“You can already last a good twenty seconds longer than you did before,” I said.

“Excellent work.”

Lorelei tilted her matted, sweaty hair towards me. A grin was on her face despite her exhaustion.

“Thanks, teacher!”

“Not your teacher,” I said. “Anyway, we need to get a move on.”

Lorelei made a grunt.

“Why?”

Asking her to move was a bit of a surprise. We’d stayed here for several days already.

“Lorelei, we need supplies, for one. My cloak has been thoroughly torn to shreds. Any more and I’ll have to walk around naked.”

Lorelei nodded.

“Right, of course.”

“Second, we need to get you an actual sword. The ice blades I’ve been making do well in a pinch, but I would much rather have you with an actual steel blade.”

Lorelei jumped to her feet and gasped. “You’re saying that I’m good enough to get my own sword now! Oh, it’s just like the stories where the mentor gives the hero a congratulations gift!”

I blinked slowly.

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “Let’s just go with that.”

Packing up was relatively swift. I had a relatively nice backpack, while Lorelei just stuffed everything into her sack with straps.

She really needs an actual backpack.

Another thing I need to get her.

The trip to the nearest city would be at least six days of travel. If we push it, we can make it four.

Speaking of cities, I’ve been distracted. The Unity Celebration is in three months or so.

I remember the city lighting on fire. In a single moment—a moment that was supposed to be about the unity of all the Elda people—an entire city had been destroyed.

We were too late that day.

I wouldn’t be late this time.

Of course, there was still an issue.

I glanced back at Lorelei as we walked. She was chattering about something related to her swordsmanship and a trick that she wanted to learn.

She wasn’t ready yet. Of course she wasn’t. I’ve just started training her. Perhaps if Gareth was helping her, he would be able to whip her into shape in time for the challenges to come. I could do no such thing.

So that begged the question: what was I going to do with her?

I sighed.

I’ll just have to play it by ear. Perhaps she’ll be able to exceed my expectations anyway. She is the hero, after all.

Eventually, Lorelei's speech tattered off, leaving us in silence for the next hour or so. This would last right up until we heard a woman scream in the distance.

Lorelei's ears twitched as she honed in on the direction of the scream.

"Teacher, shouldn't we go take care of that?"

I looked at her.

"Why would you even ask that? Let's go."

We both bounded off. Lorelei easily outpaced me using her beastpeople heritage.

"Also, I'm still not your teacher damn it!" I said as I tried to keep up.

Ah crap, I haven't been training enough.

When I arrived, I spotted Lorelei holding off a single skeleton—a restless spirit of some sort—away from a wagon.

She was doing surprisingly well with just her (my) knife, but I could tell that she was being outmatched.

"Aqua Fulgara."

As usual, water formed behind me and shot like an arrow towards the head of the spirit, shattering it into hundreds of pieces.

"Teacher!" she shouted, looking at me. "I had him!"

I just stared at her.

She pouted and looked away.

"Anyway," I said. "We should probably attend to the person who was attacked."

The wagon looked like it was in good condition, and the domesticated kaba pulling it didn't look harmed.

“Hello? Miss, are you alright?”

A woman with red hair tied into a braid jumped out at me, wielding a dagger.

Old reflexes let me dodge and knock the woman on the head with my stave.

“Well that seemed a little rude,” I said.

The woman rubbed her head.

She was a somewhat strange-looking woman. Leather armor suited for an amateur adventurer covered her. As mentioned before, she had bright red hair and green eyes, marking her as someone with foreign blood. Despite that, her accent marked her as a native.

“Ouch...” She stopped and looked at me. “Wait, you’re not a skeleton!”

“Of course not, restless spirits can’t talk.”

She blinked.

“So you took care of the skeleton?”

I nodded.

“Oh, right.” The tension in her eyes suddenly reappeared. “So I assume you’ll want a reward of some sort for saving me?”

Lorelei’s eyes widened.

“What? Of course not! We’re heroes, right teach!?”

I sighed.

“Well, the lady has spoken. Apparently, we’re not taking payment.” I turned towards Lorelei. “And for the last damn time, I’m not your teacher!”

Throughout this exchange, the redheaded woman looked between the two of us with a confused face.

“Wait, you’re serious? You saved my life and you don’t want a thing?”

I shrugged. “I don’t need anything, and she—” I pointed at Lorelei. “—is too nice to ask for payment, so...”

Lorelei scowled. “I’m not nice. I’m dangerous! I mean, did you see me fighting that skeleton guy?”

She waved her knife around like a maniac while mimicking the noises that the knife made when it clanged against that monster’s rusty sword.

The blacksmith stepped forward out of nowhere and grabbed Lorelei’s wrist, stopping the motions.

Lorelei gave her a puzzled look, but the woman wasn’t looking at her.

She was looking at the knife.

“Hmm... well-kept. A few nicks, but that’s inevitable. Khanate forging but in an Elda mold...”

Lorelei pulled her wrist back, looking at the woman with offended eyes.

“Excuse me?”

The woman’s eyes shot into Lorelei’s.

“You, girl,” she said. “Whose knife is that?”

“Mine,” both Lorelei and I said.

I glared at her while Lorelei shot me a sheepish smile.

The woman rolled her eyes.

“Not the owner,” she said as if it were obvious. “I mean the forger!”

I blinked.

“It’s an old heirloom, passed down from my father’s side of the family,” I said. “I’m afraid that I can’t give you any more information than that.”

The woman sighed.

“That’s a shame. I would’ve liked to speak to the person who forged such a lovely knife.”

Lovely. Now that’s not a word I’ve ever heard used to describe a weapon.

Lorelei gave the woman a confused stare.

“Who on Lada are you?”

A surge of confidence seemed to fill the woman at the question. Her back straightened and she gave us a cocky grin.

“Who, you ask?” she said. She pointed a thumb at herself. “You’re looking at Eliza, the greatest blacksmith in Adonia!”

Lorelei blinked.

“Never heard of you.”

Eliza’s grin disappeared and she clutched her chest.

“Damn it! I knew I should’ve paid for a marketing team.”

She looked up at me.

“What about you? That girl’s just a greenhorn—“ “Hey!” “—but you’ve got the eyes of an experienced mercenary about you. Surely you recognize me!”

I was staring.

I slowly blinked.

“You don’t mean Eliza, the only blacksmith to ever create a magic sword from raw steel without any magical materials, right?”

Eliza's eyes widened.

"Wait, you actually recognize me—? I mean, erm, it was nothing." She rubbed the back of her neck and looked away. "Honestly it didn't even last for more than three hours before exploding, eheh..."

Of course, I knew who Eliza was. This was the woman who built almost all our weapons. Lorelei's Verdant Whisper, reforged from the remnants of the bones of a god. Cedric's Wand of Luna, capable of destroying armies. Even my own nameless stave—they were all crafted by this woman.

I'd never seen her—she was very reclusive due to the pressures of her fame—but we all knew of her.

And we'd just stumbled into her by total accident.

Out of the millions of people in Sylua alone, we ran into her and her specifically.

What the hell.

I looked up at the sky.

Destiny, is this you?

Can I ask what you're smoking?

...

Could I have some?

#

After that, Eliza had offered (read: demanded) that we ride in her wagon on the way back to her blacksmith shop.

The back was full of materials, so we couldn't sit there. That meant that we had to sit up

front.

Eliza immediately went off about some blacksmithing technique while Lorelei was more than happy to listen since she was in the market for a sword. Once Eliza discovered this, she promised Lorelei that she would give her one of her best mundane swords for free—something that Lorelei was quite pleased with.

Eventually, Lorelei asked the burning question on both our minds.

“Say, Eliza,” she said. “Why didn’t you have guards or something? You have to know how dangerous it is on the frontier.”

Eliza’s lips drew into a thin line.

“I couldn’t afford it.”

Lorelei tilted her head.

“Why not? You’re the greatest blacksmith, right?”

Eliza coughed.

“Well, greatest might be pushing it. Future-greatest is more correct, to be frank.”

Lorelei shook her head.

“Even so, you shouldn’t have gone to the frontier without a guard!”

Eliza sighed.

“Alright, the truth is that my shop has fallen on hard times.”

I blinked. That didn’t sound like the Eliza I’d known.

“Aren’t you the best magical blacksmith in Adonia?” I said. “Shouldn’t you be drowning in commissions?”

Eliza looked at me, a massive grin on her face.

“That’s damn right! I’m the best magical smith this side of the planet!” she said. Then her face fell. “Unfortunately, not everyone agrees. I... haven’t quite learned how to regulate the amount of mana that goes into the blade. They work well... until they explode in the person’s face.”

Lorelei looked down at Eliza’s hip, where Eliza had a dagger.

“Um, is that...?”

Eliza glared at her.

“It’s only for some of my blades! This one is stable!” She looked back at the road. “... Probably.”

Lorelei scooted away.

“Anyway, that wouldn’t be so bad in and of itself—the issue is that I use very expensive materials. Dragonsteel, Soulstone, stuff like that,” Eliza said. “So any money I get is immediately spent on more materials.”

“Why don’t you just... buy less expensive materials?” Lorelei said.

Eliza scowled. “That’s not an option. The only way I’ll get better at creating magical weapons with top-notch materials is by creating magical weapons with top-notch materials. There’s no shortcuts or a way to practice.”

After a moment, she sighed.

“The time will come when I break past this wall. When that time comes everyone will know me as the greatest blacksmith in Adonia. Until then, I’ll just need to tough it out.”

Lorelei nodded, a look of wonder in her eyes.

“That’s amazing!” she said. “It sounds like you know exactly what your goal is and

you're reaching for it with everything you've got!"

Eliza grinned.

"Exactly! You get it!"

A glint appeared in Lorelei's eyes. "Does all this mean I can get a magical sword?

Y'know, to help you practice?"

I butted into the conversation.

"Let me answer that for you. No."

Lorelei frowned. "And why not?"

"First of all, it's one thing for Eliza to gift you with a sword. But a magical sword is different. The forging process is hellish, both physically and monetarily. If we get a magical sword from her, we're paying full price."

Lorelei sighed. "I guess that's fair. What's the other reason?"

"Second," I said. "It'll stifle your development to learn spellsword techniques with a magical sword. It'll become a crutch and you won't develop as well as you would've if you'd learned how to do it with a mundane blade."

Eliza frowned.

"Wait, but it's really hard to try to run mana through steel or bronze," she said. "Almost impossible. That's part of what I had to do with the steel magical sword I made, and it was awful. You can't expect someone to do that regularly."

I shook my head.

"People are just taught wrong."

Eliza snorted.

“You’re being ridiculous. Nobody can pull off something like that, much less consistently.”

I gave a long sigh.

“That’s just a myth. I promise that it’s normal. Lots of people can do it.”

“Hmm, like you?”

I nodded.

“Yes.”

Eliza gave me a deadpan stare.

“Listen, buddy. I like you. Like, a lot. But I’m gonna have to call you out on that one. If you could do stuff like that, you’d be known across all of Adonia.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It’s really not as uncommon as you think.”

“It really is.”

We were glaring at each other at this point. Lorelei had been swinging her head back and forth, a worried frown building on her face.

“Alright, stop the wagon,” I said.

Eliza gave me a look, then pulled on the reins, slowing the wagon down.

I hopped off, then held out my hand.

“Lorelei, my knife please?”

Lorelei hopped off and handed me the knife with a worried look.

“Uh, Alexander, are you sure you can do this? In all the stories, they use a magic sword, not a random knife.”

“You too, Lorelei?”

Lorelei shifted her feet and looked away. “I just don’t want you to embarrass yourself or anything.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

Lorelei sighed and nodded.

“Right. Show us what you’re made of, teach.”

“Not your teacher.”

Eliza hopped off, her red braid bouncing on her shoulder, and walked to our side.

She smirked. “So, are you going to do it?”

“See that tree?” I pointed it out. It was a somewhat close distance away. Not too far, to where an actual ranged weapon would be better, but not too close, to where you’d be better off engaging in melee.

Eliza nodded.

I drew my arm inwards as if I was going to throw a disk. The knife glowed a deep blue.

Eliza’s jaw dropped.

“Wait, how are you—?”

I swung outwards, in the direction of the tree.

A bright blue arc of energy flew off. In a heartbeat, it had cleaved directly through the wood, continuing for a little bit of time before dissipating into the air.

Eliza turned towards me, her jaw dropped and her eyes wide.

“H-How? What? But I...”

Her eyes sharpened.

“Give me that knife!”

I passed it to her.

She immediately began to inspect it, looking at every facet of the steel. She scowled, then muttered some kind of incantation.

The knife glowed red for a moment before the light dimmed and disappeared.

“It’s just normal steel. You... you actually did that without a magical sword. How the hell —?”

Lorelei bounced and grabbed the knife. She then proceeded to draw her arm in like what I’d done, then slashed forward.

Nothing happened. She looked at me.

“How do I do it too?”

I rolled my eyes.

“In time, Lorelei. For now, let’s just make sure you know how to use a sword before you can throw spells from it.”

“But think about it!” she said. “I don’t need to know how to swing a sword if I can just blast people!”

I shook my head.

“You can’t rely only on magic blasts. If they’re in close, you have to use melee techniques, even if you’re supplementing your natural abilities with magic.”

She pouted. “I guess.”

I was turned away by Eliza’s hand on my shoulder.

She was looking down at the ground. Her movements were limp, mechanical.

“She called you teacher, right?”

I blinked. “Well, yes, but I’m not actually—“

“That means you’re accepting apprentices, right?”

“Hold on a moment—“

She looked up at my eyes.

“Please, be my teacher!”

Chapter Six

“Look, is it money?” Eliza said. “If it’s money, I can scrape something together. I have reserve funds—”

“No.”

“Are you worried about me sharing your techniques? I promise, I won’t tell anyone!”

“No.”

Eliza reached up and ruffled her hair whilst still holding the reins, causing the big furry kaba to veer off to the left and jerking everyone in their seats.

“Fine! Fine then, you’ve given me no option!” she shouted.

She looked at me and leaned in, a determined look in her eyes.

“You can have me!” she said.

I blinked.

“What?”

“I’ll admit, marriage has never really appealed to me. But for something like this, I’m

willing to make that sacrifice—!“

My jaw dropped. “Hell no!”

Eliza looked away and crossed her arms. “Well, that’s just rude.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and shut my eyes. This was giving me a killer headache.

“Can you please explain why you even want to be my apprentice?”

Eliza looked at me with wide eyes.

“Are you kidding me?!” she said. “If I can learn that technique you used, I’ll be set! The amount of control and power it takes to pull off what you just did will be more than enough to create my magical blades!”

I furrowed my eyebrows.

“If that’s all, why didn’t you just ask? I can teach you that without becoming your teacher.”

Eliza blinked.

“Wait, what? That’s the issue here?” she said. “A difference of terminology? Seriously?”

“I’m still learning. I can’t be a teacher whilst also being a student.”

Both Eliza and Lorelei gave me a deadpan look.

I turned my head away.

“Y’know, I am curious as to how you managed to do that,” said Eliza.

I blinked.

“What are you talking about?”

Eliza huffed.

“I mean, my point from earlier still holds. Are you a former famous adventurer? A

mercenary? Ex-soldier?”

Despite myself, I twitched.

“...None of the above. I just picked it up during my travels.”

Eliza looked at me for a few seconds before turning away with a shrug.

“Whatever you say.”

Lorelei looked over at me.

“Your heart skipped a beat,” she said. “So you’re an ex-soldier as well as being an adventurer?”

Agh. Her ability to detect deception is getting better. This is why I didn’t want her to come along.

“...I was a soldier, at one point.”

It was true. I was a soldier. In the future.

“You used to work for the Syluan Empire’s army?” Eliza said.

I shrugged. I shouldn’t talk anymore.

After a few minutes, Eliza looked towards the sun and frowned.

“It’s already evening. We should set up camp.”

We slowed to a stop. Eliza had a bedroll and other essentials underneath the bottom of her seat. Meanwhile, Lorelei got our bedrolls out while I set up our fire.

#

Soon enough, we were all gathered around the flames, drinking crappy soup. Even as the cold began to seep in, we were all relatively comfortable.

And so, night fell. Lorelei took the first watch, and I went to sleep.

But I was woken up by the sound of people speaking.

“You’re a lot nicer than I was expecting.”

Lorelei. She was speaking to someone.

“Oh, what do you mean?” Eliza said.

The two were talking.

“Well,” Lorelei said, poking at the fire with a stick. “I guess I was expecting you to hate me on sight like everyone else.”

Eliza snorted.

“Cause you’re a beastperson.”

I could hear Lorelei flinch at the blunt statement.

There was a beat of silence before Eliza responded.

“Well, I am a little uncomfortable, I guess,” Eliza said. “I’ve been told all my life about how evil the Khanate and beastpeople are. It’s hard for me to just shake it off.”

Lorelei bit the bottom of her lip. “I understand—“

“But that’s silly.” Eliza turned towards Lorelei and smiled. “You’re not a bad person. You saved my life. I think that if I treated you badly after that, I’d be ashamed of myself.”

Lorelei smiled. “Thank you.”

Eliza sighed and tapped her foot. She brushed her hair over her ear.

“I imagine that most people treat you poorly.”

Lorelei shrugged.

“They do. I’ve learned not to let it get to me so much. And anyway, I’m so happy that I’m traveling that I don’t care about that stuff anymore.”

She tapped her feet.

“And by the way, I’m a human, okay? Not a beastperson. I might have that heritage, but I’m a human.”

Eliza raised an eyebrow, then shrugged.

“Speaking of traveling, tell me a little about how you got together with that guy.”

Lorelei sputtered, waving her hands back and forth. “W-wait, don’t say it like that! And anyway, that’s none of your business!”

Eliza hummed. “Alright, answer me this, though. How long have you known him?”

“Not too long. Only a week or two.”

Eliza clicked her tongue, then tapped the ground with her foot.

“I see,” she said.

“Why do you ask?”

Eliza sighed, and I heard her scratch her head.

“Listen, Lorelei, that guy... there’s something up with him. I don’t know how much he’s at fault, or if he’s just a victim or what, but he’s probably got his past chasing after him.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Eliza was quiet for a moment.

“I don’t think he’s a soldier,” she said. “Or at least, not just any soldier, like the way he tried to pass it off.”

“But he said he was!” Lorelei said.

I heard Eliza’s clothes shift, indicating a shrug.

“And he probably was. At one point. But that’s not the whole story.”

“So then, what was he?”

Eliza brushed her hair back.

“I don’t know. The best I can think of is that he’s from the north, a former mercenary.”

Lorelei breathed sharply.

“That... that would explain a lot,” she said. “He acted calm around me like he’d lived all his life around... people like my mother. That doesn’t make sense if he was born in Adonia. But if he was born in the Khanate...”

“If he was born in the Khanate, things will turn ugly,” Eliza said. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of one of their top men deserting without being found and killed. You’re going to be dragged into it. On top of that, Khanate soldiers are... truly terrible. He’s probably got a lot of blood on his hands. Innocent blood.”

The fire crackled.

“Blood on his hands... that’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

Eliza sighed.

“War is a terrible thing,” Eliza said. “My brother was a mercenary. Fought in the Gundi civil war. He told me some of what he’d seen, especially among the Khanate soldiers. It turns them into animals.”

Lorelei growled.

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “We don’t know anything for sure. For all we know, all our suspicions are totally off!”

Her voice quieted down.

“Besides, he’s moved on from that life even if that’s true. He’s trying to be a good person

now. He saved my dad's life. He saved your life."

Eliza looked away and sighed.

"You're right. It's unfair to make assumptions like this. Just... be careful, okay? His past is going to catch up to him, regardless of the specifics, or even if he's not at fault. That's all I'm saying."

Lorelei shifted around a little.

"Right. You go to sleep. I'm supposed to be on watch anyway," she said.

There was the sound of Eliza getting into her bedroll. The fire crackled.

I bit my lip.

The strange part was how close Eliza was to the truth. I've done terrible things. I abandoned my friends to their death.

Their blood is on my hands.

And I do have enemies. They don't know about me, but I know about them, and now I'm about to turn Lorelei into a target for them as well.

I clenched my fists.

I won't let that happen. Lorelei won't be touched.

At all costs.

#

"Wait... the way you learned how to do that technique was by... being beaten up until it clicked? Are you joking?"

It was early morning, and Eliza said that the kaba still needed to rest. As such, this would be the perfect opportunity to get some practice in.

I shrugged.

“It’s the truth. You have the technique thrown at you enough times, and it’ll click. That’s the way all my friends learned as well.”

Eliza’s eyes widened. Lorelei, who was practicing her sword swings, slowed down and looked at me curiously.

“Friends? Your friends can also do this? How many friends do you have? Where are they?”

“...We separated.” I turned to Lorelei. “Keep practicing!”

“Yes teacher!”

“I’m not your teacher!” I yelled. “Three sprints from that tree to that rock at max speed. Now!”

“YES TEACHER!”

I groaned.

“Whatever,” I said, turning back to Eliza. “Yes. Me and my friends fought against spellswords regularly. We got hit with a lot of their attacks. We learned how to block. Then we learned how to block while absorbing the attack, and one day it just... made sense. We could sling mana arcs using steel blades.”

Eliza gulped.

“This is going to hurt, isn’t it?”

I coughed into my hand.

“A little, yeah.”

After a moment’s preparation, Eliza stood there, holding an extra steel sword she had in

the back.

I had taken my knife from Lorelei for some time so that we could practice this particular technique.

“Get ready!” I shouted.

Eliza was gritting her teeth and holding out her blade.

I drew my right hand into my left side, then slashed outwards.

An arc of blue light flew out. Eliza’s eyes widened and she gripped the sword as tightly as possible.

The blast of energy slammed into the steel. To her credit, Eliza was able to hold on for a second before the blast slammed her into the grass.

I flinched. I’d lowered the power, but it wouldn’t be fun to be on the other end of one of these blasts no matter how low the intensity was.

Eliza coughed and pushed herself off the ground. After a moment, she was back on her feet.

“Again.”

I drew my hand inwards, then slashed out.

She flew backward, hitting the dirt.

Eliza's frustration bubbled to the surface as she staggered to her feet, dirtied but determined.

“One more time.”

"Ready yourself," I said.

Eliza gripped her sword. She took a deep breath and focused her gaze.

With a swift motion, I unleashed another arc of energy, trying to control its power to lessen the impact on Eliza. The blue light streaked towards her blade.

And she slammed into the dirt.

Things continued in this manner for another hour. When it was clear that she wasn't going to get any more value out of this, I held up a hand and signaled for her to stop.

"That's enough."

Eliza scowled.

"What? Why?!" she said. "I'm fine! I've almost got it! Just a little bit more!"

I looked her over.

She was bleeding all over from dozens of scrapes. Her breath was coming in great gulps of air as her shoulders heaved.

I shook my head.

"You're not going to be able to learn if you're dead. We need to get a move on anyway."

I walked up to her and clasped her shoulder, pumping my magic into her.

Instantly, her wounds began to close up. Her cuts were mended in real time while she watched.

She looked at her glowing hands in wonder.

"That's a pretty neat trick," she said. "Couldn't we continue?"

I shook my head.

"You can't push healing magic too far. There's a hard limit on how much the body can take, healing magic or no. You need to rest."

Eliza looked as if she was about to protest, then nodded with a sigh.

“Fine,” she said. “I guess you’re right.”

I turned back.

“Lorelei! We’re done!”

Lorelei stopped her sword swings, gave me a thumbs up, then collapsed onto the ground.

I facepalmed.

“Idiots. I’m surrounded by idiots.”

#

For the next seven days, our mornings were defined by training. Eliza was getting increasingly nervous as we got closer to Chugrord, the home of her blacksmith shop.

“Right, it’s almost noon Eliza. Shouldn’t we get a move on?”

Eliza groaned from her place on the ground.

“Just one more try?” she said. “Please?”

I stepped closer and laid a hand on her back. Mana flowed out of me and into her, healing the many scrapes that she’d obtained.

“C’mon,” I said, slinging her arm over my shoulder. “Let’s get a move on.”

She sighed.

“Are you sure that this technique works? Shouldn’t I have gotten it by now?”

I shrugged.

“We all had different rates of learning when me and my friends did it. It only took L—our leader about five of these before she caught on. On the other hand, I took a good hundred or two hundred before I was able to do it.”

She clicked her tongue.

“I think I’ve passed a hundred already.”

I helped her onto the wagon.

“It’ll come with time,” I said. “Don’t stress yourself out.”

She opened her mouth, before shutting it and shaking her head.

Lorelei had already been waiting, obviously. She had been having some kind of staring contest with the kaba when we’d arrived.

“Uh, Lorelei?” I walked over to her.

“Hold on. I’m showing these pups who’s the boss.”

The dogs were staring at her with blank, brainless eyes. I strongly suspected that they didn’t care in the slightest about Lorelei.

“Yeah, c’mon. Get in the wagon.”

She pouted at me but acquiesced.

Soon enough we were back on the road. Eliza had been too exhausted to drive and had passed the reins to me.

“Why Chugrord?” I said.

Eliza blinked and looked up at me.

“What?”

I shrugged.

“I would think Joim would be the place to be. Y’know. Capital city and all that.”

Why the hell the capital city is named the same as the country is beyond me, but I digress.

Eliza clicked her tongue.

“If I could afford it I would, but the shipping of materials from down south would be hell. It’s easier to be here, near the boonies, and just ship the completed weapons.”

I hummed.

Lorelei gave Eliza an offended glare.

“Excuse me, boonies?”

Eliza averted her eyes.

“Frontier. I meant frontier.”

Lorelei nodded, then pointed at her eyes with her index and middle finger, then pointed them at Eliza.

We continued moving in silence. As we rolled along, the temperature began to drop. Overhead, clouds started to form and block out the sun.

Eliza wrapped her arms around herself.

“What the hell is happening?” she said. “It’s the warm season.”

Lorelei grimaced, her tail freezing.

“I have a bad feeling about this place,” she muttered.

My eyes scanned the horizon—a task that was surprisingly difficult due to the fog beginning to envelop us.

The kaba came to a sudden halt. Lorelei’s head whipped forward, nearly sending her off the wagon. Eliza grabbed onto the railing and avoided that fate.

Lorelei pushed herself back into her seat, then looked at me with a confused expression.

“Why did they stop?”

Eliza strained her eyes, looking out ahead on the road.

“There’s something up ahead!”

I bit my lip.

We got out of the wagon and approached the thing on the road. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a figure of some sort.

We continued moving, only for Lorelei to stop in place, eyes wide and teeth bared.

“Restless spirit!” she shouted.

Everyone drew their weapons. Lorelei pulled out my knife while Eliza pulled out the steel sword she’d been using earlier.

I heard a noise to my left and cursed.

“Two to our left!”

I raised my staff and got ready to attack.

Lorelei yelped, drawing my attention.

My eyes widened.

A skeleton wielding a blade had come out of nowhere and was preparing a strike at Lorelei.

I turned to help her, only for the ones I was facing to rush me. I swung my staff, knocking their swords out of the way.

“Eliza, you’ll have to take care of the one up ahead!”

Eliza gulped but nodded.

Lorelei was barely managing to block the attacks of her opponent. The restless spirit swung out towards her chest, and it was only thanks to Lorelei’s immense agility that she was able to jump back. She tried to counter with a swing of my knife, but she didn’t have the reach.

We really need to get to Eliza's blacksmith shop already so Lorelei can pick out a damn sword.

Eliza, meanwhile, was being pushed back. She was more running than she was fighting.

I dodged and weaved between the blows of my two enemies, unable to fight back due to the way they were alternating blows.

Then one of their swords lit up. The restless spirit swung outwards, sending an arc of green mana at me.

My staff flew up on instinct, intercepting the blow. The staff cut through the mana arc, shattering it into flecks of green glass-like shards.

"They're spellswords!" I yelled out. "This is the grave of a group of spellswords!"

Eliza cursed. "Damn it! You've got to be kidding me!"

As if on cue, the one Eliza was fighting jumped back and raised its sword overhead.

Eliza threw herself to the ground, narrowly dodging the arc of raw mana heading for her.

The restless spirit rushed forward, taking advantage of Eliza's prone body.

I dashed, slamming my staff into the restless spirit's ribcage and sending it flying back.

Eliza sighed.

"Thanks for the assist—!"

I felt something impact the back of my head. I fell to the ground.

"Alexander!" Lorelei said.

The ground was fading in and out. I could barely keep my eyes open.

There was a beat of quiet. They were staring each other down. Eliza looked at the one who'd attacked her originally, while Lorelei watched three on her side.

The one facing Eliza raised its blade overhead.

Eliza grit her teeth.

“Not like this!” She set her sword into a guard stance. “I refuse!”

The glow of the restless spirit’s blade increased in luminosity.

Eliza didn’t move, even as the light became near-blinding.

The spirit swung its sword down.

It was a massive arc of light, cutting up the ground as it moved. Roaring wind screamed out around it.

The blow smashed into Eliza’s sword at a perpendicular angle. Eliza shifted her stance, using her other hand to support her blade at the top.

Her feet dug into the ground as the arc pushed into her.

Then Eliza’s sword began to glow.

Eliza was pushed back a little, but each inch sucked away the power of the mana arc and increased the glow of her own sword. In a moment, the arc was gone, leaving only Eliza’s glowing bright red sword.

Eliza raised her sword back, grinned—

“My turn!”

—and swung down, creating an arc of red light directly towards the skeleton.

The skeleton didn’t even bother to put up a fight, simply allowing itself to be exploded into bits and pieces.

True mana reflection. It took someone with an exceptional understanding of their body, the weapon they were using, and of mana in general to pull something like that off.

Someone like Eliza.

Eliza took a few deep, heaving breaths.

“Ah... So that was the trick.”

She then fell over.

The fog began to clear up. The other restless spirits dissipated into ash on the spot, along with their weapons and armor.

Lorelei stared on in shock, before chuckling.

“Saved again, huh?” she muttered.

She turned around and looked at me.

I was rubbing the back of my head and looking at Eliza.

“C’mon, let’s set up camp and get her something to rest her head on, eh?”

Lorelei nodded.

“Right!” she said. “She’s probably exhausted after that!”

I scratched my head.

Never a dull moment, eh?

#

Eliza blearily opened her eyes and moaned, then pushed herself up.

“Yranluneriis,” she muttered. “What happened? I feel like I got run over by a wagon.”

I kept my hands by the fire as I said, “You don’t remember?”

Eliza blinked, then her eyes widened.

“Oh... oh my word!” She jumped to her feet. “I did it! I was able to control it perfectly! I can’t believe it!”

I nodded. “Yep. This is exactly what you needed, right?”

Eliza nodded rapidly.

“It’s perfect! It’ll take some practice, but I’ve figured out the trick. It’s... hard to describe, but it’s like I’ve found the exact key to open a lock or something, you know?”

I nodded.

Lorelei hummed. “Sure was lucky that we ran into that situation then. It was exactly what was needed to help.”

Eliza froze. Her eyes wandered to my face.

I continued staring at the fire.

“Alexander? Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Whatever could you mean?” I said.

Eliza’s eyes widened.

“Wait a second. You didn’t use your Aqua Fulgara thing. Why didn’t you use it?”

I shrugged.

“Didn’t think of it.”

“He’s lying,” Lorelei helpfully commented.

Eliza’s jaw dropped.

“You ass!” She smacked the back of my head. “You put my life in danger!”

I scratched the back of my head.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I said. “It was the only thing I could think of.”

“What if I’d died!? It wouldn’t have been very helpful, would it?”

I shook my head.

“You weren’t going to fail.”

Eliza flared her nostrils.

“How would you know that?!”

I turned towards her for the first time in our conversation.

“Because you already had all the keys in place. You had the knowledge, you had the base, the only thing keeping you from succeeding was yourself. And I was certain that you would overcome that block. The kind of woman willing to spend three hours being thrown into the ground for a glimmer of a chance at success is the kind of woman who can be trusted when things get tough.”

Eliza blinked, a tomato-red color growing up her cheeks. She looked away and scratched the back of her neck.

“Well damn,” she said. “Can’t argue with that.”

“Plus I was awake and ready to intercept in case you failed.”

“Never mind, you’re just a douchebag.”

We sat around the fire in silence, simply enjoying each other’s company after the long day.

“Y’know, you’re not a bad guy Alexander.” Eliza hit my shoulder. “If you ever need help, just send the word, okay? You’ve given me a hand, and I don’t let debts go unpaid. Got too much pride for that.”

I was about to respond when Lorelei snorted.

“Idiot. There’s no such thing as debts between friends.”

We both blinked and turned to Lorelei. She didn’t bother turning towards us or explaining

herself.

I shrugged.

“You heard the girl. You don’t owe us a thing.”

Eliza hummed. “Friends, huh? I guess I can live with that.”

#

“There are so many people!” Lorelei shouted.

Around us, dozens of people bumped into our wagon due to the sheer amount of bodies on the street. The smell of crap and piss was inescapable. My ears burned from the sheer amount of noise being generated by all of these people.

A long cloak was draped over Lorelei, hiding her ears and tail. Everyone had agreed that it was probably for the best to not attract attention by showing off Lorelei’s animal features.

Eliza nodded. “Yep! Welcome to Churgord, the workhorse of the south!”

People passed us by on the left with their own wagons, most using kaba like us.

I stared on in boredom. I’d seen even busier in my time. This was just another dirty town. Nothing special.

“Why workhorse?” Lorelei said.

Eliza hummed.

“There are only two major cities this far south. Krih and Churgord. Krih is in the Syluan Empire, so this means that when resources are extracted in the south, all of them pass through here at some point. This makes this place important for supporting the north, which doesn’t have as many natural resources.”

Lorelei tilted her head. “Wait, I don’t get it. Why can’t people go to the Syluan Empire?”

Weren't we just there? Isn't that where you came from with your resources?"

Eliza gave her a look.

"If the Syluan Empire discovers that my goods are going to Joim, they'd confiscate them on the spot."

Lorelei's eyes widened.

"What? Why?!"

"Good question," Eliza said. "It would help everybody if merchants could freely travel between Krih and Churgord and just conduct commerce without issue, but tensions are too high right now with the lords of Joim and the king of the Syluan Empire at odds right now."

"I see," Lorelei said, although I could tell that she didn't understand much of what had just been spoken.

I couldn't either, so I didn't blame her.

Although, there were parts of what she said that were familiar. I remember something about the lords of Joim refusing to ally with us during the early years of the campaign to stop the High One. It was either them or the Syluan Empire. The Syluan Empire had already shown loyalty to Lorelei's cause, so we chose them.

Joim did eventually change their mind, but only after all their lords had been killed by the High One.

Another reason to make sure that the unification bombing never takes place. It was one of the major reasons why Joim and the Syluan Empire wouldn't join hands.

"Ah, we're here!"

The wagon rolled to a stop. We all shuffled out.

Eliza stepped in front of a building and raised her hands out while looking at us.

“Welcome to the Dragonheart Forge!”

Overhead, there was a sign with the name written out in blocky, poorly painted letters.

The sign fell to the ground.

Lorelei held back a laugh and covered her mouth with her hands.

Eliza’s left eye twitched.

“I’m going to renovate. Once I make my new magical blades, I’m going to get a better sign.”

She led us in.

The building was in awful condition. There was no other way to describe it. Holes in the roof spackled the floor with sunshine. Dusty cobwebs hung in the corners, and the air was heavy with the scent of old metal and burnt wood. Lorelei wrinkled her nose, clearly put off by the state of the building.

Eliza, however, appeared completely unfazed as she moved through the cluttered workshop, navigating around discarded pieces of armor and piles of rusty tools.

She looked around.

“Right then,” she said. “Alexander. I have an offer to make.”

“What is it?” I said.

She picked up an apron and wrapped it around her neck.

“When I offered Lorelei a new sword, that was before you guys did everything you did for me. With the technique you’ve gifted me, I’ll be able to become the greatest blacksmith and everyone will know it.”

I could tell where this is going.

Lorelei jumped in. "We already said you don't owe us anything!"

She rolled her eyes.

"I'm not doing this because I owe you two. I'm doing this because I want to."

At the determination in her eyes, I couldn't do anything.

I sighed.

"Fine. What do you have in mind?"

She gave a bright grin.

"Now, I know you said that your apprentice—" "She's not my apprentice." "—shouldn't use a magical sword at first. It'll ruin her development is what you said. And after having done it the hard way with a normal sword, I see where you're coming from."

"But?" I said.

"So how about I pull a little trick?" she said. "I'll make her a blade with the full works. Dragonsteel, Minotaur's Blood—but I don't prime it."

Lorelei tilted her head.

"Prime it? What do you mean?"

Eliza adjusted her apron and said, "Priming a blade means activating the magical properties within the metal. It won't be magically conductive and it won't be able to amplify energy. The idea is that she won't use those powers until she's ready, until she's had ample training. That way, she learns the basics of swordsmanship first and gradually eases into the magical aspect without overwhelming her."

Lorelei's face lit up in understanding. "So, it's like getting a really fancy sword but with a

lock on the magic bits until I'm a bit more sword-savvy?"

Eliza smiled at the explanation. "Exactly! It'll be a magnificent blade, with top-tier materials and craftsmanship. When you're prepared, we can unlock its true potential."

I nodded.

"That sounds perfect, Eliza."

Eliza nodded and stared at me.

"As for you, Alexander..." She hummed and tapped her foot against the wood floor. "I would like to give you something, but you're a magic staff user, not a blade user. I'm afraid that I've never worked with wood. I wouldn't even know where to begin. The best I can do would be to enhance your current weapon. Perhaps add some foci to increase its power."

"Enhancing my staff would be greatly appreciated, Eliza," I said. "Thank you."

Eliza's eyes sparkled. "Excellent! I'll need to take a look at your staff to see what improvements we can make. It may take a bit of time, but I assure you it'll be worth it."

Eliza turned around and cracked her neck.

"I've already got the materials. You're welcome to stay or to go, just please don't distract me. You'll have your weapons in a few hours either way."

I dropped off my staff by the door.

"I don't think we should distract her. C'mon, Lorelei."

Lorelei frowned but nodded with a smile after a moment.

"Right! Let's go!"

Chapter Seven

We elected to rest and relax for the remaining couple of hours. Lorelei went out and killed a rabbit to make some food with.

The time flew by quickly enough, and we soon returned to Eliza's blacksmith shop.

At the sound of our footsteps, she turned around from her position at a table.

"Ah, you're back just in time!" she said. "I've finished!"

She hopped forward with a sword in her hands. The blade itself was pure shining white, while the hilt and guard were a subdued gold. There was no ornamentation or engravements, but I could tell that it was of excellent quality.

She handed Lorelei the blade, who looked at it in wonder.

"The blade is composed of multiple layers of metal to give it extra durability. On top of that, each layer increases the magical conductivity—although that won't be too relevant starting out."

Lorelei looked at the blade, a wide-eyed look on her face.

“Does it have a name?”

Elize chuckled.

“I’ll let you decide that. Consider it a little favor, from me to you.”

Lorelei nodded, even as she inspected the sword from top to bottom.

Eliza straightened her back and bowed.

“Now, my friend. Go and do great things with that blade.”

For a moment, Lorelei looked surprised at Eliza’s formality. Then Eliza winked.

“And when they ask about the sword, redirect them to me, ‘kay? I need the business.”

Lorelei giggled and nodded.

Eliza went up to her full height and turned to me.

“Now, as for you, buddy...”

She turned around and pulled out my staff. Metal bits had been driven into it at consistent intervals from top to bottom.

She bowed and presented it.

“For you, Alexander.”

I took the staff and could immediately tell the difference. It felt as if the staff was thrumming with energy just beneath my fingertips, ready to be unleashed upon my enemies.

“Beautiful work,” I muttered. “I can already tell that the foci have been placed at the optimum distance apart. And each one has been primed perfectly.”

I bowed in return to her.

“Thank you.”

Eliza straightened her back and gave me a cocked eyebrow before shaking her head.

“You’re welcome. Kick some butt. Okay?”

I nodded.

We stood around for a moment.

Lorelei frowned.

“This is the part where we say goodbye, isn’t it?”

Eliza flicked Lorelei in the forehead, causing Lorelei to clutch her head and glare at Eliza.

“What was that for!?”

Eliza smirked.

“It’s not goodbye. We’re going to see each other again. Maybe soon. You’ll eventually need to have a professional maintain your blade—who else but me, its maker?”

Lorelei’s frown shifted into a hesitant smile.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. We’ll see you again, Eliza.”

I nodded.

“Indeed. Thank you for everything.”

Eliza sighed.

“Alright. That’s enough of the sappy stuff. Get out of my shop. I’ve got things to do.”

Lorelei giggled as she turned around and we exited the building.

“So, teach,” Lorelei said. “Now what?”

I took a deep breath.

The Unity Celebration is coming soon. As she is, Lorelei isn’t strong enough to deal with it.

“Lorelei, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

#

“I haven’t been totally honest with you.”

We were back outside of the town, where there would be no distractions.

Lorelei narrowed her eyes. “How so?”

I scratched the back of my head.

“I’m... not just wandering around for no reason. The truth is that there’s an attack scheduled during the Unity celebration. A bombing. I’m the only one who knows and I have to stop it.”

“Okay.”

“Before you ask why I haven’t told anyone—wait, did you just say okay?”

Lorelei shrugged.

“I mean, I kind of figured that you had some kind of big and dramatic goal. Heroes don’t just wander around for no reason, like what you said. Obviously, there was some kind of major threat you were preparing for.”

I blinked.

She thought I was a hero? Well, whatever, it’s probably not important.

“...you don’t have any questions? Like... how do I know this stuff? Isn’t that, like, incredibly suspicious?”

“Nah.” She waved her hand. “Like what I said, you’re a hero. Of course you know about this stuff.”

I didn’t say a word before slapping my palm into my face.

How on earth did this girl turn into the Lorelei who questioned everybody? The Lorelei who was able to spot a threat from a mile away? Have I already changed things that much, or will she mature with time?

On the other hand, perhaps this isn't so bad? Lorelei had the weight of the world on her shoulders. It wore at her in my time. I get the feeling that this Lorelei wouldn't care in the slightest about that kind of issue.

"So, now that we're done with that, should we get a move on?" she said.

I bit my lip.

"There's more."

She tilted her head, her wolf ears twitching back and forth.

"Lorelei, the opponents that I'm going up against are extremely strong. They will try to kill you if I take you with me."

Her eyes narrowed and her wolf ears tilted forward.

"What's your point?"

I took a deep breath.

"My point is this," I said. "There's a battleground with restless spirits wandering a day's travel from here. I know how strong they are. If you want to become stronger and surpass your current limitations, you must defeat them."

Lorelei shut her eyes and then took in a deep breath.

"Is that it? I thought you were about to just drop me without even giving me a chance. If all I have to do is kill a few walking skeletons, I can handle it."

She opened her eyes, revealing fire and steel.

“Where’s the battlefield?”

Chapter Eight

I was fidgeting again. Just like Dad always said I did.

I took in a deep breath like Alexander had taught me to do. After a few moments, I breathed out, and all the worries and thoughts flowed out with my breath.

But they didn't.

Alexander was walking up ahead, leading us towards my test.

My heart was pumping loudly in my veins. I could feel sweat dripping down the back of my neck in clumps.

I kept moving forward.

Alexander was an unusual man.

When he'd first arrived, I didn't know what to make of him. The only thing I knew was that I couldn't leave someone to die.

I was expecting his hatred, despite my saving him. That's how everyone treated me.

Instead, he helped me, taught me. Looked out for me.

I'd forced myself onto his journey. I had to pull my weight and prove that his kindness wasn't being wasted.

As we walked, the sun was more and more obscured by clouds. A fog descended, making it more difficult to see around us.

Rattling bones echoed out to my side.

I turned and growled, my wolf ears folding forward instinctively.

The restless spirit stepped out of the fog. It wasn't anything unusual. A skeleton wielding a sword.

I needed to win.

We circled each other, the restless spirit and I.

I was clutching my sword in both hands, my palms sweaty and slick. A slight shake seemed to have come over me.

The restless spirit launched forward with an overhead strike.

Wait.

I've seen this before. I tried this on Alexander once, didn't I?

I parried the blow at an angle, allowing the enemy's blade to slip off and leave it staggered. I then swung my sword in a curve, slamming into the restless spirit's ribcage.

The restless spirit stumbled back.

I grinned and glanced at Alexander.

"Eyes on the target, Lorelei," he said.

He was smiling. He approved of my little theft.

My guard went into a solid position. Alexander would've told me to strike now, but I

didn't feel confident enough to try that.

I'll just stay on the defensive and pick him apart. It'll be fine.

The restless spirit's eyes glowed brighter, and then it launched forward, swinging once, then twice, then three times.

I cursed and threw my sword around in every single direction. It was all I could do to block and dodge.

It had been holding back earlier. Perhaps testing the waters to see how powerful I was.

The restless spirit suddenly thrust forward.

I sidestepped, but it was a second too late. The sword cut into my arm, creating an angry red line across my skin.

Bright blood began to flow freely from the cut.

It stung. I hissed.

"Don't lose focus," Alexander said. "You can't allow yourself to get distracted."

He was right.

If I got distracted, this superficial wound could lead to something much more permanent.

I took in a deep breath, then let it out. I could feel my wolf ears fold forward and reset to a neutral position.

My twitching drained away, and I was back in the fight.

Defense isn't working. It's like what Alexander said, I can't let my enemy dictate the pace of the fight.

I hadn't understood what he meant then, but I understood now that I'd been thoroughly thrashed for my mistake.

I rushed forward and swung my blade outwards. This time, the restless spirit was blocking and dodging.

I seemed to be in control now. It was on the run.

But something felt off. It was like the restless spirit didn't actually feel pressured?

Suddenly, the restless spirit raised its bony foot and slammed it into my chest.

I staggered backward, only managing to not fall on my butt.

The restless spirit ran towards me, raising its blade for a strike.

I swung my blade up into a parry, blocking the shot.

The restless spirit was going to knock me down because of my poor balance. Once I was down, it won the fight.

And then Alexander will leave me behind.

I growled. I won't let that happen. I let go of my blade, allowing it to fly away. With that extra bit of time I'd scored, I was able to jump back and gain some distance.

Then, I unsheathed Alexander's knife.

I wasn't as good with a knife as I was with a blade, but that didn't matter.

If I managed to get inside the restless spirit's guard, I win, even if my technique is less than adequate. The restless spirit can't fight effectively with its blade at that distance. If the restless spirit cuts me down first, well... I think it's pretty clear who wins in that scenario.

We circled each other like we had at the beginning of our fight.

"Oh my goodness, is that a female skeleton!?" I yelled out, pointing behind the restless spirit.

The restless spirit didn't respond.

Alexander slapped his palm into his face.

I shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

My knees bent and I dashed forward.

If a skeleton could be surprised, I think that this one would’ve been. I could see the hesitation in its movements, as if it wasn’t expecting me to rush in again.

It swung its blade out, but I could see the blow coming. I jumped up, allowing the swing to go under me.

I fell onto the skeleton, sending us rolling in a heap.

A bony elbow slammed into me. It was trying to separate us, trying to gain distance.

I wouldn’t let it.

I maneuvered myself on top of the skeleton, raised my knife—

And slammed it straight through the skeleton’s head.

My breath came in deep gulps. I felt as if I’d just done ten sprints in a row.

I looked back at Alexander.

He was disappointed.

“Lorelei... I—“

I got up to my feet and held up my hand.

“Wait.”

He tilted his head but nodded.

Five restless spirits stepped in around me.

Alexander looked alarmed. He raised his staff.

“Alexander, wait.”

He looked at me with wide eyes.

“Lorelei! There’s five! You can’t expect to go up against all of them!”

I snorted even as I bent my knees and settled into a fighting stance.

“Alexander, don’t you remember?” I said.

My eyes scanned each of the restless spirits, chronicling their weaknesses, strengths, and weapons.

I twirled the knife in my hand, a grin stretching across my face.

“I already said that I can handle it.”

It was a blur after that. At the start, I only had my knife. Eventually, I managed to maneuver and get my sword back. Bones broke. They all scored a dozen cuts each on me.

But in the end, I was the one standing and they weren’t.

I twirled my blade around like my teacher did, then sheathed it. I stood for a moment before staggering and falling, my consciousness slipping away.

Despite that, there was only joy flooding through my veins.

I might not be comparable to Alexander... but I could live with that if only it meant that I could follow him.

#

I caught Lorelei before she fell to the ground. I heaved her over my shoulder and started to move.

Of course. I forgot.

Lorelei learned best in a fight.

She’d never truly won a battle before this. She was always bailed out by external circumstances. As soon as she had won one battle, she was able to apply the lessons that she

learned from that battle immediately, increasing her capabilities tenfold.

It was this skill, more than any other, that had defined the heroes. All of us, even me, had prodigious growth rates that only activated under live combat conditions.

With that, there was no excuse I had. She wasn't at the level I wanted her to be, but she would be able to at least keep up.

I'd spent enough time running. It was time to stop the Unity bombing.

Chapter Nine

The trip would be eight days. Eight days of boredom and quiet. Eight days of preparation. Eight days of—

“Hey Alexander, can we fight another bunch of restless spirits?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Lorelei, we only have so much time. We really need to keep moving.”

Lorelei nodded.

“Right, right. Bombs in Joim. I get that, but for me to be tougher, I need to keep practicing, right?”

I groaned.

“We’re not going off the beaten path. Find a dire wolf pack or something and kill it. Just make it quick, for goodness’s sake.”

Lorelei nodded and gave me a salute. “Whatever you say, teach!”

“Not your teacher.”

Lorelei bounded off into the tall grass, searching for enemy tracks.

For the past four days, it'd been this on repeat. Lorelei would ask me every ten minutes if we could stop so that she could find something to kill.

It wasn't that she was a psychopath or something to that effect (though that bloodthirsty grin she gets scares me a little. Did she have that in my timeline?). She was just smart. She could visibly see her improvement with each battle.

If we had more time, then I'd be encouraging her to go for hours at a time.

Unfortunately, we didn't have time. The Unity bombing was in three months. If we didn't stop that, we'd make it so that the Council of Joim and the Syluan Empire would be at odds. If they're at odds, they won't join the alliance against the High One. If they don't join the alliance, then we've lost key players in the battle against the High One.

Oh, and thousands of people will die. Can't forget that.

"Alexander!" I heard Lorelei call out. "I found a thingy!"

I pushed through the tall grass and found Lorelei standing over the dissipating corpse of a dire wolf.

What drew my attention, however, wasn't the dire wolf. It was the sack of copper coins that had been sitting in that thing's stomach.

Lorelei eyed the sack.

"Is that safe to touch?"

I leaned down and grabbed the sack. I unwrapped the tie at the top, then dumped the copper into a side pocket on my backpack.

"That was in that thing's stomach," she said.

I shrugged.

“You get used to it.”

Lorelei’s eyes widened.

“This is normal?”

“Monsters are attracted to precious metals, remember? Something about them being the greed of humanity?”

Lorelei hummed. “Oh, that makes sense. I guess I just never took those stories literally.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Old stories have more worth than you might think.”

Lorelei shrugged.

“I guess. But I mean, most of them are fake. Like the whole destined hero thing. That’s just obviously ridiculous. A random farmgirl? Saving Adonia? What a joke.”

I coughed loudly and doubled over.

“Oh no, Alexander, are you okay!?”

After a minute, I stopped hacking and gave her a thumbs-up.

We got back on the road and began to walk.

“Y’know, I still haven’t asked where you learned all your magic and stuff,” Lorelei said.

Huh. She’s curious about my magic? Not about the spellsword techniques?

I shook my head. “That’s nothing special. I had an affinity for water magic at an early age. The village decided to invest in getting me a spell book so that I could help and make sure that we get rain at the right time and in the right intervals.”

Lorelei looked at me with wide eyes.

“Wait, so you were able to fight like that when you were just a kid!?”

I snorted. “What? No. Where’d you get that idea from?”

She blinked.

“But you seemed so confident with your abilities. You’ve been using that technique for at least twelve years, maybe more. You seem to be around twenty-five. That means that you have to have started learning it around thirteen.” She paused. “I think.”

Ah, there was the Lorelei I knew. The one who could make wide-reaching inductions with unerring accuracy in seconds. Of course, some of her assumptions were rather rough. But she was on the right track.

I shook my head.

“I only started learning stuff like that when I was a bit older,” I said. “There were events that occurred that forced me to use spells of that power extremely often, more than would be advisable. As a result, I look more comfortable than I should.”

Half true. I didn’t learn it in thirteen years, that’s for sure. Didn’t have time for that.

Lorelei nodded. “Oh, that makes sense.”

I looked away and breathed a sigh of relief.

Her ability to discern truth was only going to get better the longer I spent around her. The day would come when I wouldn’t be able to hide. Because of that, there was a part of me that had contemplated just telling Lorelei everything. Telling her I was from the future, telling her of the doom to come.

But I always stopped those thoughts cold in their tracks.

Putting aside the issue of her even believing me, she can’t take all of that all at once. It

would be too much. She'd be overwhelmed.

With us in the future, we received the news about the true implications of our destiny and who we were fighting against in bits and pieces. This eased us into our roles.

It also may've made us complacent in our early years. But that's what I was here for.

As the sun wound its way through the sky, I grinned.

"It's just over that hill," I said.

Lorelei looked at me.

"Really?" she said. "Already?"

I nodded. "Go see for yourself."

She dashed up the hill, kicking up dust on the way.

"Oh my goodness! It's huge!"

I stepped up to the top and cast my eyes on Joim.

It wasn't huge, it was massive. A wall stretching to the sky circled the city. Houses and other buildings sprawled both on the outside and the inside of the walls. Even from here, we could see all the colors and decorations signaling that the Unity celebration was being prepared. Wagons with people were streaming in from every road for miles.

Sparkles seemed to be coming from Lorelei's eyes.

"This is so amazing!" she said. "We need to get closer!"

"Indeed," I said. "Let us do so."

#

"Ooh, Alexander, look at this thing!"

She held up a pineapple, her hood hiding most of her face. The poor shopkeeper yelled at

Lorelei to put down the pineapple.

She ignored the shopkeeper and simply stared at me as if expecting me to congratulate her.

“Lorelei, give the poor man his pineapple back.”

Lorelei blinked, then looked back at the shopkeeper.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, holding out the pineapple. “Here, have your spiky fruit back.”

The shopkeeper snatched it back, muttering about country bumpkins coming in from all over because of the celebration.

Before Lorelei could respond, I grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

She frowned and snatched her hand back.

“The shopkeepers here are so mean,” she said. “Why are we even here again?”

“Because this place is honey for thieves.” My eyes scanned our surroundings. “And that’s what we’re looking for.”

Lorelei yawned. “Remind me again why we’re looking for some random thief?”

I shook my head.

“She’s not just any thief.”

Fiona. Right now she’s a petty thief, but she later became the greatest stealth expert in all of Adonia. She could sneak into the High One’s throne room and walk out with everything the guy owned without alerting a single person.

She wasn’t half bad in a fight either, capable of moving around a massive battlefield in moments. The only problem was that she was a bit fragile, which was why she was always carrying around potions to increase her durability.

The problem was that Joim was massive. I had no doubt that it would be a nightmare to find her. But find her we would.

...

There was something important I was forgetting about her, but I put it to the side.

“She’s exceptionally talented,” I said. “And we can use her help now.”

Lorelei sighed.

“How long will we be here for?”

I shrugged.

“Could be as long as several hours.”

Lorelei groaned and leaned against a wall.

“Seriously? We’re just going to sit here, watching for some blond-haired thief?”

“Yep.”

And we did so. Eventually, Lorelei got bored and pulled out her (my) knife and started flipping it in the air.

After an hour, Lorelei turned towards me.

“Look, Alexander, this is getting ridiculous. I was excited when we saw this place, but we’ve just been sitting here. I want to go check out the sights, see what it’s like in a big city—where’s my knife?”

She had been holding it a second ago.

My eyes scanned back and forth.

The alley we were next to produced the sound of footsteps.

Both Lorelei and I poked our heads in there to see a blond-haired teenager running

through the alley at breakneck speed.

She turned her head towards us, waved my knife around, and stuck out her tongue.

Lorelei looked at me.

“She isn’t...?”

I sighed.

“She is.”

Lorelei cursed, then broke out in a dead sprint towards Fiona.

I clicked my tongue.

Even now, Fiona edged out Lorelei in speed. On top of that, Fiona knew these alleyways better than anyone.

To catch up with her, we’d need to think unconventionally.

I looked up and briefly contemplated flying, before knocking that idea away. Don’t have nearly enough mana to maintain that spell.

Instead, I applied a body enhancement spell to myself and ran up the side of the wall.

Once I was on top of the building, I continued dashing forward over the roof. I leaped up from one building to another, my eyes scanning for Fiona.

After a minute of this, I growled. It wasn’t working. I couldn’t see her.

There was nothing for it.

I jumped straight into the air, vertically, pumping my legs full of more mana than usual.

Where is she, where is she...?

A flash of blond.

I descended towards the roof, then immediately broke off in the direction I’d seen her.

The rooftops soared by me as I ran. I was catching up.

She was going to make a left turn, I could see it in the way she was shifting her feet.

I ran ahead of where she would be, dug in my feet to slow my momentum, and then fell straight down in front of her.

To her credit, she wasn't even phased. She somehow managed to lose all her velocity and turn on a dime.

My staff swung out and an incantation echoed out from my mind, creating an ice wall where she was going to run.

She stopped, then turned around.

Fiona was small, barely coming up to my chin. Short, wild blond hair framed a surprisingly soft-looking face. A single strand of hair poked upwards from her forehead toward the sky. Blue eyes stared at me, scanning me over for every scrap of information she could obtain. Her clothes seemed like new adventurer's clothes, but closer inspection showed that they were second-hand at best.

She smirked, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

Even though I'd prepared myself for this encounter, my heart still skipped a beat at her smirk. I thought that I'd never see it again. So to see her in front of me as if nothing had happened.

"Gotta say. I wasn't quite expecting to run into a mage today," she said. "Much less one capable of doing whatever that was."

She stepped forward.

"You probably ran after me thinking that I was nothing more than some random thief,

nothing an adventurer like you couldn't handle," she said. "Turn me into an icicle and call it a day, right?"

She threw my knife up into the air.

"Unfortunately..."

The knife rotated through the air, then dropped into her waiting hand.

"I don't think I'm up for that."

She launched forward, wind kicking up behind her.

A natural talent for wind magic. So natural that she never needed a single day of training to begin using it. Her ace in the hole, and what allowed her to move at such insane speeds.

I furrowed my eyebrows.

There was something wrong with it, though.

I dodged the knife strike, slamming her back with my staff and sending her sprawling.

"...Aren't you supposed to be faster?"

She swung her body around, a shocked expression on her face.

"How the hell did you dodge that?" she said.

She scowled.

"Whatever. It's a fluke. I'll take you out now!"

Wind kicked up around her in a burst. Suddenly, she shot forward at an even faster speed.

I tilted my head, allowing her to fly past me.

This time, she was better prepared and managed to find her footing in a moment.

She turned around and glared at me.

"Damn, you're the real deal, huh?" she said.

I blinked.

“Why exactly are we fighting? If you can’t kill me, could we just talk now instead?” I said.

Fiona cocked an eyebrow.

“Right, so that you can kill me or capture me?”

I shook my head.

“No, so that we can talk.”

I forgot something important about Fiona.

Now I remembered.

Even back in my time, Fiona wasn’t a good person...

Fiona chuckled. “Right. Sure, buddy. I’m not falling for that.”

...And because Fiona wasn’t a good person, or even a morally neutral person, she didn’t believe in the goodness of other people. Which means she couldn’t believe that I didn’t want revenge.

Really should’ve remembered that before going through this mess.

That freaking knife keeps causing me trouble.

“This is only going to end one way, huh?” I said.

Fiona shifted her left foot back.

“Exactly. If you can’t run, someone’s not walking away. That’s how it works. That’s how it always works.”

I sighed.

“Fine then.”

I swung my staff around.

Fiona was sweating, and her smile was brittle. I'd barely strained myself, where she'd thrown her strongest twice over. I was better. She knew that. Normally she would've run by now, but I'd eliminated that option.

"Alexander! Why did you leave me!?" a voice called out from behind me.

I didn't take my eyes away from Fiona, aware that she'd stick a knife in my back if I turned around.

"Lorelei, kind of busy here."

"Oh wait, you're the girl! Fiona!"

Fiona blinked and looked past me.

"Sorry, what?" she said.

Lorelei pranced up, then snatched the knife out of Fiona's hand. Fiona flinched and took a step back.

"Jerk! Don't just take other people's things!" she said.

Fiona furrowed her eyebrows and looked at me.

"What?"

Both of our guards were lowered at this point.

In one fell move, Lorelei had successfully deescalated tensions between the two of us. Inadvertently, as well. Pretty impressive stuff.

"You open to having that talk now?" I said.

#

We were seated at a table just outside a food stall selling some kind of cream bread. Lorelei was

wolfing (no pun intended) hers down with gusto, while both Fiona and I picked at our food.

“You called me Fiona. You knew my name. How?” she suddenly spoke.

I sighed.

Here comes the hard part.

“I’ll start from the beginning,” I said. “I’m Alexander. I am—was an adventurer. I will be clear. I am interested in hiring you.”

Fiona blinked.

“Sorry, what?”

“I am interested in hiring you.”

Fiona stuck her pinkie into her ear and twisted it back and forth.

“I think I have something in my ear. Say again?”

I groaned.

“What the hell is so hard to believe about me wanting to hire you?”

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Firstly, how did you even hear about me? I’ve taken great pains to stay under the radar, and then a perfect stranger comes up and asks for me by name? Tell me that isn’t suspicious. For all I know this could be a trap!”

I scoff.

“If this were a trap, you’d be dead already.”

Fiona’s right eye twitched.

“Try me, ice-boy.”

We were glaring daggers at each other. Lorelei sat off to the side, slowly chewing cream

bread while watching the two of us with wide, interested eyes.

I took a deep breath.

“Look, you have several skills that would be of great use to us. You’re a master thief. You’re handy in a fight. I think that you would be a great fit. Could you at least consider it?”

Fiona turned up her nose. “That’s right. I’m the best thief in the business.”

After a moment, she narrowed her eyes.

“Fine. What exactly would my job be?”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Some progress.

“A standard adventurer’s contract. You’d work with us as a member of our party for six months. You’d be entitled to a one-third share of any loot obtained—“

Fiona held up her hand.

“You can stop there. That’s great and all, but I’m more concerned about why you’re hiring me in the first place.”

I furrowed my eyebrows.

“I already told you. I think you’d be a great fit for the party—“

Fiona waved off the responses.

“Please, quit it with the bullshit. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

She leaned in.

“You need me. Me, specifically. That means you have a specific goal in mind. I’d bet good money that you’re fighting someone, aren’t you?”

I clenched my jaw.

Why did these two have to be so damn smart?

I sighed.

“I don’t know much—“ I had to choose my words carefully and control my bodily responses. Lorelei would be very mad if she found out that I was lying to her. “—but someone’s planning to bomb this city.”

Fiona hummed. “And you want to stop it, using me as an ally.”

“...that’s the idea, yes.”

Fiona leaned back and rested her chin in her hand. She gave off the impression of being bored, but her eyes were sharp and focused.

After a minute, Fiona scoffed. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

I groaned.

“May I ask why?”

Fiona smirked.

“Because your hand is shaking.”

At that, my eyes widened in surprise. Lorelei stopped munching on her food and looked up in surprise.

I glanced down at my hand.

It *was* shaking.

I smashed my other hand into the hand that was shaking, clamping it to the table.

“And?” I said.

Fiona’s smirk shifted into a soft smile and a hint of sympathy crossed her eyes.

“If someone as powerful as you is scared, then I don’t have a chance in hell of surviving whatever’s coming. Sorry, but I’m not going to risk my life.”

I gritted my teeth together.

“But you’ll be caught in the blast!” I said.

Fiona shook her head.

“No, I’ll be relocating out of the city, now that I’ve been given this warning.” She smirked. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

I clenched my fists.

“I think this has been a delightful conversation,” she said. “But I really must get a move on. Have a lovely day.”

Lorelei didn’t bat an eye and continued to chew on her cream bread.

I glared at her. “Thanks for the assistance.”

She shrugged, then continued eating.

Chapter Ten

With Fiona out of the picture, there was nothing left to do except to wait for the theft of the artifact. We decided to stay in a horribly overpriced inn, using the cash that we'd gotten from Lorelei's adventures in killing everything that she could get her hands on. It was a relief for Lorelei because she could finally take off the cloak and let her tail unwrap from around her waist.

The days flashed by in a pass. Lorelei had taken a break from training at my request to make sure that she was in tip-top shape.

This was good, since it meant that she wouldn't be demanding to run around outside the city to kill monsters.

This was also bad, since it meant she had nothing to do with her excess energy.

"Hey Alexander, hey Alexander, hey Alexander—"

"WHAT!?"

She tilted her head at me.

“I’m bored.”

I muttered dark things under my breath.

“Fine. Fine! Let’s go somewhere. Let’s go find something to do.”

Lorelei gave me a thumbs-up.

“Great!”

We stepped outside of the inn where the two of us were staying.

Lorelei looked at me.

“Do you have any fun things we could do?”

I sighed and looked up at the sky.

“Uh, how about...”

There was a fighting tournament here, I was pretty sure of that. It was kind of a bad idea though, considering that we were supposed to be resting up for the big battle.

We could gamble. There’s supposed to be a big poker game.

I glanced at Lorelei, who had a wide smile on her face.

Yeah, that probably wouldn’t work.

My eyes looked over Lorelei’s body for several seconds. I scanned her from top to bottom, then bottom to top.

“Um, Alexander?” A red glow started to emanate from her face. She wrapped her arms around herself. “What are you doing?”

I stared her in the face.

“Lorelei.”

“Yes...?”

I grabbed her shoulders.

She jumped up. “Yes!?”

“We need to get you armor.”

The red color disappeared and she let out a sigh of relief.

“Right. Of course. I guess that wouldn’t be a half-bad idea.”

#

The armor shop was busy. All the adventurers and knights were preparing to try to sell their services to the many, many nobles who would be showing up. As such, they probably wanted to appear in their finest armor.

Lorelei immediately stumbled upon a suit of plate armor with runes written into the side for magical enchantments.

“Look at this!” she said. “Can we get this one?”

I shrugged. “Sure. Once we make a little more cash.”

Lorelei tilted her head. “Oh, how much does it cost?”

I pointed at the sign overhead.

There was a moment of processing.

Her jaw dropped.

“Ten gold!?” She clutched her hair. “That would be enough for me to live comfortably for the rest of my life!”

I smirked. “Still want to get that armor?”

She reached out her hand and caressed the armor. “More than anything. Alas, I shall have to leave you behind, my dear.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed her hand.

“C’mon, let’s go look for something more within our price range.”

She sighed and nodded.

In a moment, we were in front of some less expensive normal armor. It wasn’t much, most of them only covering her essentials so that she wouldn’t be stabbed in the heart, but it was probably the best we could do.

“This type of armor suits your fighting style better anyway,” I said. “You’re agile. Maybe not as fast as Fiona, but full plate would only be a burden right now.”

Lorelei sighed. “I suppose.”

I smacked the back of her head.

“Don’t be silly. Pick one.”

At the prospect of having a choice, Lorelei’s eyes lit up and she began to scan the armor carefully.

“What about this one?”

She picked up a set of chainmail. It would do.

I nodded.

“That’ll be fine. I was hoping to put some runes on it, but I think I’ll be able to make do.”

Lorelei’s head twisted towards me.

“You can make my armor magic?”

I shrugged.

“A little. I won’t be able to do much. I’m not a true enchanter or runemaster, but I can certainly add a little bit of strength.”

“But you can’t do that with chainmail.”

I shook my head.

“No, but the effect would be negligible anyway—“

She set the chainmail back on its stand.

“I want something else.”

I sighed.

“Fine.”

We walked along the rows, most of the full-bodied steel armor being a bit too far outside our budget.

Lorelei picked one up, a sort of fabric-looking armor.

“What’s this?” she said. “It doesn’t look like armor, but it’s heavy.”

I smiled. “A jack of plate in your size. It’s fabric on the outside, but little squares of metal on the inside. I can do something with this.”

“And it’s in our price range!” Lorelei said, pointing at the little sign. “This is the one!”

We took it to the shopkeeper and bought the jack of plate. Lorelei put it on with a grunt.

“Oh wow, it’s kind of heavy.”

I shook my head. “It’s low enough in weight that I think I’ll be able to reduce it to a more comfortable amount—although you really need to practice wearing it so that you don’t have to rely on those enchantments.”

On top of that, even the five or so pounds I can reduce it to will still wear on Lorelei. Every bit counts.

Thinking about it in retrospect, I should’ve gotten her armor earlier so that she would

have time to practice. Oh well. No use crying over spilled milk.

The advantage she would get in not having to worry about being sliced to bits in seconds will hopefully outweigh the disadvantages.

We walked back to the inn, Lorelei jumping and weaving to try to get a handle on her new armor.

“This is pretty cool!” she said. “I feel like a real adventurer!”

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“You’ve been fighting monsters and saving people from harm. You’re a real adventurer.”

She blinked.

“Oh wow, I guess I am!” she said.

I shook my head with a smile and continued walking.

“Alright, pass me the armor,” I said. “I’ll need to apply those enchantments I told you about.”

Lorelei nodded and slipped off the jack of plate. She rolled her shoulders around, grimacing.

“It kind of hurts, having all that weight.”

I shrugged.

“It is what it is. My runes and enchantments should help a bit.”

Lorelei hummed. I began to walk back into the inn—

“Wait!” she said.

I turned towards her.

“What is it?” I said.

“We didn’t get you armor!”

I shook my head.

“Don’t need it.”

“You already have armor?”

I scratched my head. “I don’t have steel armor, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Her eyes widened.

“But isn’t that dangerous?”

I raised my arm out, formed an ice blade, then stabbed the tip towards my other hand.

“Alexander, what on earth—!?”

I revealed my hand, showing no wound.

“I have a passive mana shield at all times. Doesn’t block people who know how to get around it, but it’s more effective than regular armor anyway.”

Lorelei nodded slowly, then stopped.

“Wait, but what happens if you run out of mana?”

I snorted.

“If I run out of mana, I’m already dead. No use prolonging the suffering.”

Lorelei’s face went stiff while her forehead creased together.

“If you say so, teacher.”

#

We were waiting outside the home of the lord of Joim. We weren’t on the actual grounds—there was no way that the lord would permit it. We were random adventurers, and he was one of the most powerful figures on the continent right now.

Why were we here in the first place?

Simple, because in ten minutes, this place would be robbed by an agent of the High One.

The person in question would break into the noble's mansion and steal the last specks of the ashes of Fara.

The story goes that Fara was the first evil. He took over the world when he became material and caused indiscriminate destruction. To match him, the spirits chose a hero. The first hero. A girl with a pure soul, to match the pure evil of Fara. She defeated him, scattering his ashes to the wind.

And that's what is about to be stolen. Those ashes.

Supposedly.

I have no idea what they actually are. It's debatable if Fara even existed. Regardless of the truth, these grains have interesting properties when handled by the wrong people. Explosive properties.

Explosive enough to blow up a city or two.

And that was why we had to stop this agent from stealing these grains.

"Hey Alexander, is it time yet?" Lorelei whispered loudly.

I glared at her.

"It's been a minute since you last asked me that."

She nodded and continued looking at me.

I stared at her for several moments before drooping my head down and sighing.

"No, Lorelei, it's not time. Trust me. You'll know when it's time—"

The sound of glass shattering entered our ears.

Lorelei glanced at me.

“Why do you even have to ask!?” I said. “Go, go!”

She shot off, me closely behind her. We hopped the tall metal fence with ease.

When we arrived at the mansion, we could see a guard lying dead on the ground outside the broken window.

Lorelei snarled and shot her vision back towards the window, then hopped through.

I dashed behind her.

Lorelei turned a corner, and then yelped.

“You’re not getting away!” Lorelei said.

There was the sound of a snort, then I heard an impact.

Lorelei flew back through the corridor and crashed into a wall.

I grounded my feet to a stop when I reached the end of the corridor, taking up a defensive stance in front of Lorelei.

Who was it?

Who was the agent responsible for stealing the ashes of Fara?

He stopped.

A long black cloak seemed to envelop the man in question. The shadows stretched and weaved around him, hiding his identity and explicit facial features.

Even so, I could recognize the person in that cloak any day of the week.

“Brae.”

Brae tilted his head, an amused smirk.

“How interesting.”

#

The rest of the world faded away. Right now, it was just Brae and me.

“The companion born under the Aegis of Hope,” he said. “Alexander. I can’t say that I was expecting to see you here so early. Not only that, but the girl is the hero under the Aegis of Fate, correct?”

I snorted.

“Man, you never change, do you? Always talking about your cryptic bullcrap, even when nobody gives a damn.”

Brae cocked an eyebrow.

“You speak as if you know me, yet I believe that I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

I shrugged, twirling my staff.

“What can I say? I do my research.”

Brae hummed.

“Well, this has been a wonderful conversation, but I do believe that it’s about time for me to retrieve those ashes, yes? The High One won’t stand to wait much longer, I’m sure.”

“How about no?”

Water formed behind me in three balls then shot out towards Brae at lightning speed.

Brae maneuvered through each shot with ease, then dashed at me.

His left knife flew out towards my chest, only to be batted away by my staff.

He grinned.

His right knife then stabbed towards my neck—

Only for me to tilt my head and slam my staff into his back.

He staggered back.

“You hit me,” he muttered. “Not only that, but you predicted my attacks. How...?”

“Maybe you’re just predictable,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes.

“I think not.”

There was a moment where we stared each other down.

I heard creaking behind me.

“...Did you get the description of that wagon that ran me over?” Lorelei said.

I didn’t dare to take my eyes off Brae.

“I did,” I said. “It was a small wagon. Dressed really strange, covered in black cloth.”

Lorelei clicked her tongue.

“This guy’s strong,” she whispered. “Can we take him?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. “Just make sure to stay at the edges. Hit and run. Don’t rush in, he’ll destroy you.”

Lorelei nodded and adjusted her stance. “Got it.”

“You all done with your little strategy session back there?” Brae said. “I’d quite like to get this over with, if you don’t mind.”

I pointed my staff at Brae.

“Are you so eager to get your ass kicked?”

Brae rolled his eyes.

“Hardly. I am simply short on time, that’s all.”

Lorelei quietly disappeared into the room to my right. The walls were drywall, so she

would be able to jump out and deal damage when Brae wasn't expecting it.

I hoped.

I wasn't sure if Brae was as powerful as he was in the future. If he wasn't, then we'd have a shot.

If he was, then...

Well, it wouldn't be pretty.

We stared at each other for a moment.

The ground seemed to crack as we both flew into motion.

My staff swung out towards his head, only to be parried by both his daggers.

I grinned, and my staff lit up, signaling a spell activation.

Brae jumped back—then twisted his body in midair, his skin skimming against the icicles I'd formed to stab him from behind.

This bastard was responsible for the deaths of Fiona and Cedric. I'd make sure his end was painful.

I growled and cast another spell, trying to ice his feet.

The ice succeeded in grabbing him, but he easily broke it with a smirk.

“Really? Such a plebeian technique—“

Drywall cracked as Lorelei slammed through, sword pointed at Brae's throat.

Brae parried the shot and sidestepped forward.

Leading him to me. I swung my staff out, aiming for his head.

Once again, he dodged and countered with a serpent-like strike.

I was forced to cede ground and jump back with a snarl.

“It’s like fighting a fly!” Lorelei yelled. “We can’t pin him down!”

Brae was a master of ducking and weaving like a coward. I’d give him that. As we are now, we would be here for hours before we managed to land a hit conventionally.

But what about unconventionally?

“Lorelei, back up!” I yelled.

Lorelei obeyed, jumping back.

I raised my staff upwards, summoning water on the floor above. The water then crashed downwards, caving in the roof right on top of Brae.

The crash was loud and forceful, shaking me and almost making me fall.

Dust filled the air, forcing me and Lorelei to cough.

“Did we get him—?”

A dull impact echoed out as Lorelei was socked in the gut.

Brae was holding his knife to her throat.

My heart leaped into my throat.

“It was a good attempt,” he said. “But you were quite outmatched from the start.”

My hands were shaking. What was I thinking? I should’ve never brought Lorelei, damn it, damn it!

No, I knew what I was thinking.

I was thinking that Brae wouldn’t be here. I was thinking it would be some random grunt.

Not a goddamn Fury.

“I’ll have to ask you to drop your weapon,” he said.

“Don’t do it!” Lorelei yelled.

Brae put the knife closer to Lorelei's throat.

"Do it."

If I put down my staff, he would stab her. He would. I knew he would. It was what he did to Fiona last time.

So why was I sweating so much? Why couldn't I fire off another attack? Wasn't that my best chance?

Is this how Cedric felt, that day?

I tossed my staff to the side.

"No!"

Lorelei tried to push herself to the side, but Brae's grip was too strong.

"So troublesome," he muttered. "Here, you can have her back."

He pushed her, sending her crashing into me.

Wait, what? He's letting her go?

Lorelei tried to turn and pull her sword, only for me to grab her hand to keep it sheathed.

Lorelei glared at me.

I shook my head.

"We're beaten," I said. "We push him any further and he'll kill us."

Lorelei gave me a forlorn look, then looked back to Brae, then back to me.

I could see the indecision warring in her head.

"Ah, she can't decide?" Brae said. "I'll make it easy for her."

It happened in a flash. He reached for something from his belt, then threw it at me.

On instinct, I threw out my arm, catching it before it reached Lorelei's gut.

Lorelei's eyes widened.

Blood dripped to the floor.

"Cursed dagger, to ensure I can't just heal it, huh?" I said, bringing my arm closer to get a closer look.

Brae nodded.

"Indeed. You know your stuff, Hope-born."

I ignored the strange comment, like always, and stared at the dagger.

"Yeah, if we couldn't fight him before, we definitely can't fight him now."

Lorelei's jaw dropped.

"What the hell is wrong with you!?" she shouted. "There's a knife in your arm! Of course we can't fight!"

I shook my head.

"Not that. I'm going to die if we don't get me to a healer right now," I said. "It's cursed, remember? That means that my life force is being sapped away right now."

Lorelei paled.

"Oh spirits."

Footsteps echoed as Brae continued walking.

"You should probably stop panicking and get that boy to the city healer!" he called out.

Lorelei jumped, then grabbed me, slinging me over her back.

And from there, my consciousness began to fade.

"I'll leave it to you," I muttered, before blacking out.

Chapter Eleven

“Will he be okay? Please tell me he’ll be okay! If he dies, I don’t know what I’ll do!”

“Miss, for goodness’s sake. Your friend will be okay! We had the specific anticurse available, from there it was simply a matter of healing magic. He’ll be fine!”

“Right, but are you sure!? It’s been a day! If it had just been an hour or two, it’d be fine, but—”

My eyes opened.

“Lorelei, will you give the poor doctor a break?”

I was lying in a bed in a room with about a dozen other beds. Two of them were filled up by sickly individuals. The healer was dressed in the traditional white robes of a cleric. He looked quite relieved to see me up. Probably because Lorelei was being a menace.

“Alexander! You’re alive!”

Lorelei looked awful. There were massive black bags under her eyes. Her cloak was gone, exposing her beastpeople features to everyone there. She hadn’t slept a bit, I was sure.

She was like this in the future. She got better at hiding it, but she would ‘wake up’ exhausted when one of us was injured.

It felt gross this time.

I came back to save her. If I’m injured, that’s simply the cost of protecting her.

Making up for my mistakes, that’s all. She shouldn’t feel guilty about anything.

“Yes, I’m alive,” I said. “You got me to a healer as quickly as possible, so I was fine. Thank you.”

She blinked.

“Oh, um! Right, you’re welcome!”

The doctor looked between the two of us.

My opinion of the doctor was internally raised, given that he hadn’t commented on Lorelei’s ears or tail.

“If you don’t mind, could I go now? I really must attend to other matters.”

Lorelei opened her mouth. “Hold on—“

“Yes, healer. Thank you for your aid.”

“Of course, it was my pleasure.”

He bowed, then turned and walked away.

Lorelei scowled.

“Why did you send him away?!” she said. “He needs to look over you and make sure that you’re okay!”

I snorted.

“Lorelei, it didn’t hit anywhere vital. I’m fine.”

Lorelei looked like she wanted to argue, but shook her head.

“Fine. I guess you’d know better than me,” she said.

We sat in silence.

“That was awful,” Lorelei said. “We got destroyed. I couldn’t even do anything.”

It was.

When Brae had her in his clutches, it was like I was right back on the battlefield, the smell of smoke and blood permeating the air, Brae grinning while Cedric was—

I shook my head.

“No, this one is on me. I’d expected that the person we’d deal with would be some random individual. I didn’t expect Brae.”

Lorelei opened her mouth to argue, then blinked.

“By the way,” she said. “Who is he? You acted like you knew him.”

Ah, nuts. Probably shouldn’t have acted all familiar.

“I was just trying to throw him off.” The words rushed out. “It was a psychological tactic.”

Lorelei’s eyes brightened.

“Oh, like how he said each of our names!”

I nodded.

“Exactly.”

A little sigh of relief came out.

“We need more firepower,” Lorelei muttered. “There were points where we had him on the ropes. I know we did. But he was always able to bounce back. If we just had one more person

to turn the tides, we might've been able to win."

I sighed.

A familiar voice spoke up.

"Yep, if only I'd helped out, right?"

I turned my neck.

"Fiona."

She inclined her head, a smirk dancing across her face.

"Good afternoon, Alexander. It's been a little while, hasn't it?"

#

Lorelei growled.

"What do you want?" she said. "If you don't mind, my teacher is injured and he isn't seeing visitors."

I shook my head.

"No, Lorelei, it's fine. If she's here, it'll somehow benefit us. She wouldn't have showed up otherwise. Right?"

Fiona nodded and flipped her dagger in her hand.

"Exactly. Got it in one."

Lorelei glared at Fiona.

"I thought that you made yourself clear."

Fiona shrugged. Her eyes flickered to Lorelei's exposed wolf ears before darting back towards me.

"Well." She paused. "I was curious."

I shut my eyes.

“You followed us.”

Lorelei made an incredulous noise.

“You what!?”

Fiona hummed. “Yep. And what I saw was pretty wild. Mysterious fella stealing magic ashes, talking about the exact guy you told me about? Interesting stuff.”

She turned towards Lorelei. “Incidentally, nice ears. That about figures.”

Lorelei growled. “What’s that supposed to mean—!”

I held up my hand in Lorelei’s direction.

“I assume that you haven’t had a great moral awakening,” I said. “As I sincerely doubt you’ve come to tell us that you decided to join us. At least, not without some kind of condition.”

Fiona crossed her arms and smirked.

“Fine. I’ll cut to the chase. The two of you impressed me. You’re both strong, smart, and fast. Those are things I need right now, because I screwed up big time.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I did a job for the syndicate,” she said. “They requested collateral. I gave it to them. After I got what they wanted, they gave me back my collateral, right? Wrong.”

She snarled.

“Those bastards are refusing to give them back. They’re even threatening to destroy them if I try to go after them.”

Lorelei’s eyes widened.

“Wait, the collateral... is it your family—?”

“They’ve got my treasure!” she shouted. “My precious treasure! All my gold and diamonds!”

Lorelei’s face blanked.

“What.”

Fiona took out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

“I’ve spent years working on that collection, but they’re threatening to destroy the whole thing if I try and go after them.”

“Why didn’t you just steal it back?” I said.

Fiona shook her head.

“Are you kidding?” she said. “I have, like fifteen tons worth of gold alone. It would be impossible for me to smuggle that out.”

“Ah,” I said. “Is this what they refer to as ‘first world problems’?”

Fiona shrugged.

“I dunno. All I know is that I want my gold back. In exchange, I’ll join your little party. You scratch my back, I scratch yours, capiche?”

Lorelei shook her head.

“This seems unbelievably petty and stupid.”

Fiona shot Lorelei a grin. “Hey! Now you’re getting it!”

Lorelei looked at me.

“Are we actually going to agree to this? Please tell me no.”

I sighed and put out my hand.

“Welcome to the team, Fiona.”

Fiona grabbed my hand and gave it a hearty shake.

“Glad to be on it.”

Despite the poor circumstances of our meeting, I felt a small smile appear on my face. She may not be the Fiona I knew... but even so, it all felt so familiar that it was hard not to be a little happy.

#

“Right, so the syndicate headquarters is located in the industrial district. I’ve scoped out the place, and in terms of guards, they’re—”

We were outside. I was healed enough to walk. If I was healed enough to walk, I was healed enough to go out and fight, regardless of what the healer and Lorelei said.

I had my staff back as well, which I was happy about.

Lorelei was still glaring at me. She’d protested quite vehemently.

I, of course, had simply ignored her.

“Hold on, could we just go there?” I said.

Fiona tilted her head.

“Yeah, I suppose. We’re not that far,” she said. “That makes sense. You’ll be able to get a view of what’s happening for yourself.”

We began to walk.

“So, how did you get shackled up with ice-boy over here?” Fiona said.

Lorelei pointed at herself.

“Are you talking to me?”

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“No, I was talking to the giant mushroom. Yes, I was talking to you!”

Lorelei let out a puff of air through her nostrils while she scowled.

“There’s no need to be rude about things,” she said.

Fiona smirked.

“What, can’t take a little bit of attitude? Are you a princess or something?”

Lorelei’s eyebrows twisted up in confusion. “No, I’m a farmer’s daughter.”

“Oh great, a country hick.”

Lorelei gasped and I cut in.

“It’s around the corner, right?” I said.

Fiona nodded.

There was a beat of silence.

“Right... So we’re just going to scope out the place?” Lorelei said. “He just got out of the hospital. I understand that we’re on a schedule, but we can give him a week.”

Fiona nodded.

“Of course. I don’t expect him to break down the front door or something—“

I stepped out, pointing at a run-down building around the corner.

“Is that the place?”

Fiona’s eyes bulged.

“Yes. C’mon, get back over here before they spot you!”

I began to walk forward.

“Wait! What are you doing!?” she said.

I marched up to the front door.

Lorelei ran up behind me with a frustrated look, her wolf ears folded forward. After a moment, Fiona followed behind her.

“Oh my goodness, what the hell are you doing?” she said. “Why are we—and you’re knocking on the door.” She raised her hands in the air. “Great. Whatever. I give up.”

Two guards were standing to the left and the right, watching us with beady eyes. Suddenly, The door slammed open. A man was standing at the open entrance. A syndicate member. He was dressed strangely nice—a higher-up member, maybe?

“Fiona? Who the hell is the guy?” he said. “And what’s with the animal?”

Lorelei growled. Her wolf ears pointed forward and she clenched her sheathed sword.

I suppressed the urge to throttle the asshole. Before Fiona could respond, I spoke up.

“I’m here for her stuff,” I said, pointing at Fiona with my thumb.

Someone’s face impacted their palm.

The man looked at her, then looked back at me. He burst into laughter.

“What on earth are you doing!?” he shouted. “Were you planning to just walk up and ask nicely?!”

I nodded. “Yes. And if that failed, to ask less nicely.”

The man smirked and snapped his fingers. The two guys got closer. Two other men appeared, fully surrounding us.

Fiona scowled.

“Told you this was a bad idea,” she said.

The syndicate member cracked his neck.

“I don’t know what your game is,” the syndicate member said. “But I’ve about reached

my tolerance. Boys!”

The men tensed up.

“Get him—!”

Five bolts of aqua appeared in the air without a word, then launched into each of them.

Various yelps and groans echoed out as they flew backward and slammed into the ground.

“What the hell—?”

I walked forward and picked up the guy.

“Gold. Now.”

The man snarled.

“You think that you’re some big shot!? We’ve got people who can destroy you! And guess what, they know that you’re here! They’ve heard and seen all of this!”

“Uh-huh. Where gold?”

“Don’t you get it?! You’re dead—!”

I threw him to the ground, then turned around.

“Well? Are you coming?” I said.

Lorelei was giving me a strange look. Fiona looked surprised for a moment before it shifted into a glare.

“You idiot,” Fiona said. “He wasn’t lying. Our best shot was to pick them off one by one, not to alert the entire damn building to our existence!”

I blinked.

“But that would waste time.”

Fiona staggered.

“What?”

“If we did it that way, it would take forever,” I said. “We don’t have that kind of time. Instead, I’ll sweep them in one go.”

Fiona shouted into the sky.

“Sweet Starweavers, you’re insane!” she said. “I thought that you were at least a little sane, but I guess what was left of your rationality was kicked out of your head by the Brae guy!”

Lorelei gave me an uncomfortable look, then shook her head.

“This wasn’t a good idea,” she said.

I tilted my head.

“You don’t think I can take them?”

Her wolf ears tilted back and she shook her head rapidly. “No, no, that’s not what it is! It’s just... agh, I don’t know! It’s... it’s a lot of different things. The way you treated that guy... plus you’re still injured, it’s an unnecessary risk!”

I shook my head.

“We’ll talk about this later.”

Lorelei sighed.

“Whatever you say, teach.”

Fiona looked at Lorelei and waved her arms around. “What the hell!? Don’t let him do this!”

Lorelei shook her head.

I began to walk.

“There’s no one who can defeat him here,” she said.

“How do you know that?!”

Lorelei snorted.

“You’ll see.”

Chapter Twelve

The facility was a maze of twists and turns. I could tell that people had been here moments before, but they'd all vacated the rooms. It was probably because of that alert the man mentioned.

Lorelei was following behind me, dragging her feet and biting her lip. Fiona had cussed a few more times before reluctantly following along, citing that she'd run as soon I get my ass kicked.

"Spirits above, is he always this crazy?" Fiona said.

Lorelei giggled, her short black hair bobbing around.

"It's funny you bring that up. The first time I met him was when he fell out of the sky."

Fiona's eyes widened, before she shook her head.

"Whatever. I'll see it when I believe it. Besides, this seems like a different situation."

After a few more minutes, we'd arrived in front of a particularly large door.

"The people that they mentioned would be able to defeat me are past this door."

Fiona frowned.

“How do you know that?”

I turned and cocked an eyebrow.

“C’mon,” I said. “Big, intimidating door? Lack of any enemies to build tension?”

Fiona gave me an utterly confused look.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I sighed.

“Let’s just go inside.”

I pushed open the doors, revealing, a massive room with light streaming in from windows along the top. At the back of the room, a massive amount of treasure sat in a large pile.

Fiona gave an audible gasp. “Don’t worry! Mommy’s coming!”

A laugh.

A man was standing to the side of the gold, out of the light.

“Wow, don’t think that I’ve ever heard anyone refer to their cash as their children before.”

Fiona growled.

“Get away from my gold!”

The man stepped forward, allowing us to get a better look.

I blinked.

A distinctive white coat. A sword on his right hip. A cocky smirk. Blond hair that went down to his shoulders and bright blue eyes. He looked vaguely like a male version of Fiona, to be honest.

“Kendrick? What are you doing here?”

The man started.

“Wait, what? You recognize me?”

He shook his head, his blond locks waving around.

“Man, this is crazy! I’m finally famous enough that people I don’t know recognize me!”

Kendrick. He was a weird guy. He’d competed with Lorelei in my future for much of the same contracts and quests during our early years. The whole time, he would talk about how he was the Chosen Hero and say that Lorelei was a liar. As a result, we’d constantly butt heads, often ending up in a battle.

Credit where credit was due, he was an excellent warrior, often giving us a run for our money and even defeating us during our earliest times.

When the High One came, however, he changed his tune. He shaped up, matured, and helped fight wherever he could.

A good man, by all measures, just a bit... dull.

Case in point...

I cocked an eyebrow.

“Are you aware that you’re protecting the ill-gotten gains of a syndicate?”

His jaw dropped.

“Wait, what!? That’s not what the quest board said!”

I narrowed my eyes.

The thing is that where Kendrick is...

“You idiot, he’s lying!” a female voice said.

...his party follows.

A girl dressed in the traditional clothing of a mage. She had her red hair done up in twin tails—an unusual style.

“Aeliana! Don’t be mean to Kendrick!” A short-haired blond girl in white said.

Their cleric, if I’m not mistaken. She was holding a staff similar to my own.

“C’mon Seraphina, it was just a joke. Lighten up!” A third woman appeared.

The final member of their party. Lyria. A tanned brown-haired girl dressed in loose clothing that allowed her to move quietly.

Kendrick’s friends—or as amused onlookers sometimes called them, his harem.

All of them were nervous, each of them fidgeting or sweating, even if they hid it well.

I smirked. Some things never change.

“I’m going to take a guess and say that Kendrick misused your cash?”

Kendrick’s jaw dropped.

“How did you know that!?”

“Because each of your party members is currently covering for the fact that you’re helping a bunch of criminals right now. Ergo, you desperately need some cash.”

Each of them reddened and stammered out some excuse.

“It’s not his fault he’s terrible with money!” Seraphina shouted.

Kendrick turned toward her, his jaw open.

“Wait, it’s true!? We’re currently working for a bunch of criminals!?”

Everyone went quiet.

Fiona snorted.

Kendrick pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Okay, okay. Compartmentalize.” He looked up and glared at each of his party members.

“We’re talking about this later. Understand? I’m not going to let this fly. I don’t care how hard things get, we don’t work for criminals.”

Fiona tilted her head.

“I don’t suppose you can let me have my stuff back?”

Kendrick looked torn, but ultimately shook his head.

“Sorry, I need to verify who the rightful owners are.”

Fiona growled.

“Sorry, buddy. Not an option,” she said, pulling out her daggers.

Kendrick rested his hand on his sword.

“Very well,” he said. “I won’t hurt any of you too badly, since it seems like you’re good, if misguided.”

Funny.

I was about to say the same thing.

We all formed ranks.

“The cleric will support Kendrick, so I’ll deal with both of them. Fiona fights the rogue, while Lorelei takes out the mage. Don’t beat them up too badly—they’re good people, just confused and stupid. Understood?”

Each of them nodded.

There was a beat of silence.

Then we broke into movement. Both Kendrick and I dashed towards each other. His

sword swung out with a fancy twirl to disguise its true destination.

Of course, I'd seen the trick a hundred times before. I ducked underneath the strike and slammed my staff into his ribs.

Spittle flew from his mouth as the air was knocked out of him. He narrowed his eyes and swung out, even though I knew he was hurting right now.

I jumped back, dodging the strike.

"You perfectly read me!" He coughed and slammed his chest. "I'll admit, it's truly impressive!"

A glow came out of Seraphina's staff. Kendrick himself lit up in a similar glow.

Healing magic. Gotta love it.

"Unfortunately, you didn't account for one thing!" he said. "This glow—it is a representation of the bond that unites Seraphina and I!"

Seraphina blushed and looked away.

"And in the face of that, you don't stand a chance—"

"Do you... ever stop talking?"

Kendrick gave a cry of protest. "Oh come on! I barely got to the fifth line! For all you know, that could've been the last thing I was going to say!"

"But it wasn't, right?"

Kendrick pouted.

"It wasn't..."

"Hey, stop bullying Kendrick!" she shouted. "You're a fellow healer anyway, what are you doing, fighting him physically!? This is so weird!"

Kendrick's eyes widened.

"Huh, you are," he said. "To have those kinds of physical skills even as a healer—it's very impressive."

I nodded.

"Thank you. It's nothing special though."

Kendrick shook his head.

"No, really, the only other healer I know who can do that is—"

"Kendrick!" Seraphina said. "Focus!"

"Oh, right! Prepare for your end—!"

I raised my staff, causing five Aqua Fulgaras to appear in the air.

Kendrick looked at them, then blinked.

"Five!?" he said. "Oh come on, that's just not fair!"

The Aqua Fulgaras flew forward. Kendrick growled and slashed through the first one.

He lit up in time with Seraphina's staff and increased in speed, narrowly dodging the other three.

Seraphina was enchanting his movements. An old tactic. Kendrick dashed forward to try to regain the momentum.

I shifted my feet.

His sword swung out in a flurry of strikes. I dodged the ones I could and parried the ones I couldn't.

"Now, Seraphina!"

Seraphina was behind me and swinging down towards my head.

I threw myself to the right, barely dodging the attack.

She looked at me and grinned.

“You had me pegged from the start, didn’t you?”

I shrugged.

“Birds of a feather and all that,” I lied blatantly.

I’d had no idea she was a physical fighter when we’d first met. Unfortunately for her, this wasn’t our first meeting.

She hummed.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” she said. “You’re good, but this is my playground. You’ll also be fighting Kendrick. Sorry, but it’s over.”

I raised my staff.

Five more Aqua Fulgaras appeared behind me.

“You sure about that?”

Her smile became a little more strained.

They shot out in the middle, forcing the two of them apart. Divide and conquer, I believe Lorelei called it.

With them separated, I rushed towards Seraphina.

She swung at me, only for the blow to be parried.

I pivoted off her blow to send my own. She dodged underneath, then elbowed me.

I hissed as I jumped back. That would bruise.

She smiled. “You’re skilled. Very skilled, but you’re not at all strong.”

Clever girl.

I sidestepped, dodging the sword blow coming for my shoulder.

Kendrick gawked.

“How did you see that coming!? Seriously, this is ridiculous!”

I shrugged, even as I dodged another set of strikes from both him and Seraphina.

Is this how Brae feels? Huh. I can see why he acts like a douchebag now.

My fist shot out and slammed into Kendrick’s nose.

“Agh!”

I looked at my fist. Whoops. Looks like Brae is still a bit of a sore spot.

I was feeling less humorous. Time to wrap this up.

Seraphina growled and jumped at me.

I stepped back, then formed an Aqua Fulgara in a split second. It launched at her chest, sending her flying into the ground.

“Ow,” she said.

Kendrick clutched his nose.

“Fine. Fine! I admit it! You’re strong! Really, really strong!” he said, his voice coming out weird and nasally because his nose was broken. “But even so, the powers of our bonds will allow us to win!”

There was a beat of silence.

“Um, guys?” he said, looking back and forth. “That’s your cue...”

Lorelei wandered over.

“Is something supposed to happen?”

“Wait, you beat Aeliana?!” Kendrick said.

Lorelei shrugged.

“I mean, she’s a mage. I just had to get in close and then she was done for, just like teach taught me.”

That wasn’t strictly true. I knew for a fact that Aeliana had contingencies in place to avoid such a situation.

Kendrick seemed similarly confused, but he shook his head.

“Wait, is she at least okay?”

Lorelei nodded.

“She surrendered when I put my sword at her throat.”

She looked uncomfortable while saying that.

Odd.

Aeliana stepped out and pouted at Kendrick.

“This was so unfair!” she whined.

“Okay, um, Lyria’s fine though. Right?”

There was a beat of silence.

“Lyria?”

A thump caught our attention.

Lyria was clutching her chest and retreating backward while Fiona stalked her.

“You thought that you could bring up that shit without consequences?” she said as she stepped forward. “Thought you could get in my head? Well, congrats. You succeeded.”

She kicked Lyria to the ground.

Lorelei’s jaw dropped.

“Fiona, what on earth!?”

I marched forward, causing Fiona to stop moving.

She kept her eyes on Lyria.

I shook my head.

Fiona stared at me for a moment before shutting her eyes.

“Fine.”

“Lyria? Lyria!? Are you okay!?”

I looked back. Kendrick was panicking. Seraphina clearly wanted to help, but she’d probably used up all her magic.

I stepped forward.

Kendrick looked at me and growled.

“If you so much as touch her, you bastard—“

I put my hand on her wound and muttered an incantation. Kendrick reared his blade back to stab me. Lorelei reached for her own gleaming white sword—

Then Lyria’s wound began to stitch itself up.

Her eyes fluttered open.

“Ow,” she said.

Kendrick’s sword fell slowly.

“Oh,” he said.

Lyria’s breathing leveled out.

“Thanks,” he muttered. “Sorry about everything.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. You’re a good guy, Kendrick. We all make mistakes.”

He looked at me and then blinked.

“Just like that?”

I shrugged.

“Do you want to make it more complex?”

He stared at me before the tension drained out of him and he chuckled.

“No, I think not.”

Clap.

Clap.

All of our eyes were drawn to the sudden noise.

The man at the door. He was bruised from our brief encounter and looking at me with a sneer.

“What a wonderful performance you lot put on.” He kicked the ground, sending some of the rubble from our fight into the air. “We only paid you fifty silver, after all. I suppose we should’ve gone for a full gold piece if we wanted you to win.”

Kendrick growled.

“Are you serious right now?” he said. “After you tricked us into taking your job, you’re going to act as if you have some kind of right to our labor?”

“Yeah! You tell him, Kendrick!” Aeliana shouted.

The man rolled his eyes.

“Tricked *you*. Not all of you. Just you. Your girlfriends knew exactly what was happening.”

Poor Kendrick blushed and shook his head while each of the girls in his party pointedly

looked away.

“Wait, they’re not my girlfriends!”

“Save it,” the man said. “I don’t care.”

“What exactly is your plan here?” I said. “Make us angry? Why?”

The man smirked.

“Oh, it’s far worse than that. I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but...”

He snapped his fingers.

A hundred footsteps moved in tandem.

Oh, that’s where the rest of the men were.

We were surrounded.

Despite being exhausted, everyone—including Kendrick’s party—moved back to back.

Even Lyria, exhausted as she was, shifted into a fighting stance.

“You won’t touch them!” Kendrick said. “You’ll have to hurt them over my dead body!”

The man shrugged.

“I can live with that.”

The men advanced.

Kendrick readied his blade. Lorelei shifted her stance. Fiona twirled her knife. Seraphina gripped her staff.

Everyone had some kind of tick.

I raised my staff.

“Lorelei,” I said. “I’ll be out of commission after this one. Please protect me.”

Lorelei nodded.

“Of course, Alexander.”

Kendrick looked at me with a confused expression.

“What are you planning?” he said.

The man snorted.

“I have no idea what you’re thinking. I don’t care.”

I hummed.

Familiar phrase. Didn’t he already say that?

My staff glowed.

Aeliana’s jaw dropped.

The water vapor in the air began to circulate, creating a slight breeze.

“No way! No freaking way!”

They started to turn into solid water drops, creating a watery shield between us and the enemy.

Kendrick looked back at her. “What?”

She stared at him, then shook her head.

“Look!”

The men were backing away, muttering to each other.

I smirked.

“Abyssi Diluvio.”

The water sped up for a moment before exploding in a roaring torrent, slamming into the men like a mini tsunami. Rubble kicked up and the wood boxes were ripped to shreds. When the deluge met the stone wall, there was a brief moment where it seemed like the stone would win.

Then the deluge ripped through it, causing the building to cave in.

Some of the people screamed behind me, seeing the roof begin falling.

I idly redirected a section of the water into the section of the roof about to fall on us, causing it to be swept into the hurricane.

The men were swept along. They were screaming and yelling as the water smashed them into obstacles and generally caused havoc.

Eventually, the spell came to a stop, leaving the ground shattered and wet. The men were all knocked out, every single one.

“A true archmage-level spell,” Aeliana muttered. “I never thought I would see one cast in front of me. This is the greatest day of my life.”

Kendrick gulped.

“Damn, he was holding back on us, wasn’t he?”

Seraphina nodded.

“...I think he was.”

I stood for a moment before coughing, red liquid flying out.

“Alexander!” Lorelei rushed over to me, catching me before I could crack my head on the pavement.

I touched my finger to the side of my mouth, then looked at the liquid.

Blood.

“You idiot!” Lorelei shouted. “You were in the hospital for a day after recovering from a curse! You can’t strain yourself like that!”

I heard someone make a choked sound.

“Wait, that was him after he’d been cursed!?” Kendrick said.

I ignored him.

“Fiona,” I wheezed out. “Your treasure.”

Fiona jolted.

“Right! Oh my goodness, you probably scattered everything!”

I shook my head.

Fiona turned and looked at the pile of treasure.

It was untouched.

She looked back at me.

“...Thanks.”

She then dashed off, searching through the pile for a specific thing.

Lorelei shook her head.

“You’re so damn stupid,” she muttered. “Stupid. So stupid.”

I hummed.

“I think I got the point,” I said.

There was a beat of silence.

“Are you going to take him back to the healer?” Kendrick said.

Lorelei’s eyes widened.

“Right!”

She slung me over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Kendrick and his party gave me a weird look.

I’d been saved too many times in this manner to have any objections at this point.

“You didn’t kill any of them,” Lorelei murmured.

I shook my head.

“Of course not. It wasn’t needed.”

Lorelei sighed.

“It was just... the way you manhandled that guy when we arrived—the way your eyes looked when you heard about the syndicate... it was really scary.”

I chuckled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

Lorelei opened her mouth to respond when the sound of rapid footsteps caught our attention.

We turned our heads to see Fiona running up, a smile on her face.

“Hey guys!” she said. “Found what I was looking for.”

“What about the treasure?” I said.

Fiona shrugged and reached up to fiddle with a necklace made of twine wrapped around her neck.

“I got the essentials out, so it’s fine.”

Kendrick groaned.

“We need to take care of those goods then and get them back to their rightful owners.”

A glint appeared in Aeliana’s eyes.

“Or we could keep it all.”

“We can’t do that!” Seraphina said. “That would be wrong!”

They both looked at Kendrick.

He made an expression of visible pain.

“...A little. We’ll keep a little.”

Aeliana whooped while Lyria sighed out of relief. Seraphina, on the other hand, was wearing a look of disapproval.

“Those are stolen goods!” she said. “We can’t just take it!”

I filtered out the rest of their conversation as we approached the healer.

“Aeliana and I will take care of the gold,” Kendrick said. “You two should get some rest.”

Lorelei leaned in.

“They kind of remind me of a live minstrel show.”

A small laugh bubbled out of my chest.

“They do, don’t they?”

Soon enough, I was back in bed and drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

This time, Lorelei refused to let me leave early, instead forcing me to stay the full week. As such, there was only one thing left to do.

Plan.

Fiona had already agreed to look into her underworld contacts to see where Brae was moving. Even he couldn't do everything on his own. He had to get help from someone, somewhere, especially for the grunt work.

With that taken care of, it was time to begin working on our personal abilities. Fiona was excellent, but she could use a little bit of help. Lorelei also had to brush up on her swordsmanship.

For a moment, I considered trying to track down Cedric or Gareth before shaking my head.

No, not yet. The Institute of Magic is far from here, at least a week's travel. Cedric isn't strictly necessary yet.

And for Gareth, I have no idea where he was before he joined Lorelei, so that's out.

No, for now at least, it's up to me, Lorelei, and Fiona.

The dream team, I guess.

I glanced at Lorelei, who was currently knocked out in a chair beside my bed.

She's already advanced in leaps and bounds. I didn't think she'd beat Kendrick's mage. I truly didn't—but she completely exceeded my expectations.

At the rate she was going, it wouldn't be long until she unlocked her old powers.

The Aegis of Fate, eh?

I'd need to look into that at some point.

Another time though. I had to focus on fixing everything.

#

I bent my body and cracked my back.

"That's nice," I said. "I've been in that bed for way too long."

Lorelei cocked an eyebrow at me.

"You needed it."

I sighed. "I know that. It's still nice to finally have it over with, you know?"

Fiona chuckled.

"Although I'm enjoying the banter," she said. "I didn't bring you to my hideout so we could goof off."

We were outside of the city in the thickest part of the forest. This was where Fiona was storing most of her possessions.

It was quiet, big, and secluded, which was exactly what we needed right now.

“Alright, I’m going to start with you, Lorelei,” I said. “You did well in that battle against Brae, but I noticed two major flaws.”

Lorelei’s face twisted up like a sour lemon.

“And what was that?” she said.

“First of all, you let down your guard in the middle of a battle. This was a fatal mistake. We were extremely lucky that Brae didn’t kill you.”

Lorelei gulped.

“Right, keep up my guard,” she said. “What’s the other mistake?”

“You didn’t hear him coming.”

Lorelei frowned.

“That’s not fair!” she said. “I can hear pretty much anyone else! That Brae guy was just... weird!”

I nodded.

“He was. And we will most likely face stranger opponents with similar capabilities. You must be able to pinpoint their location using nothing but your ears and nose.”

Lorelei pouted, then nodded.

“You’re right. How will we train that stuff though?”

“Usually skills like that are developed on the battlefield. Most people don’t train them explicitly.”

I grinned.

“However, I do believe that I’ve figured out a way to do so!”

I took a strip of cloth from a pocket in my robes.

“I’m going to blindfold you, then move around you in the trees. The whole time, you will be at risk of attack. I think that this way, you’ll learn how to pick up on the subtle cues telling you where I am. This doubles as training your defense. There will be periods where it seems like I’m gone when you’ll have to keep up your guard or I’ll attack.”

Lorelei blanched.

“But for a while, I’ll just keep on getting hit!”

I shrugged.

“Better get good quick then.”

I turned to Fiona. “Lorelei, get started by warming up before we begin.”

Lorelei sighed and nodded.

There was a mischievous grin on Fiona’s face.

“And what about me, teach?” she said, emphasizing the final word of her sentence.

“Not your teacher.”

Fiona snickered and shook her head. After a moment, she sighed and shrugged.

“Listen, I’m not sure why I’m here,” she said. “You don’t fight like me at all. There’s no way that you can train me.”

“That’s not true. If need be I’m certain I could emulate you to an acceptable level. I can even show you a thing or two about pickpocketing, I’m sure.”

Fiona snorted.

“Sure, buddy.”

I tilted my head. “It’s true.”

She sauntered up to me, putting her face right up against mine.

“If that’s the case, then how did I manage to take your money sack?”

She held up an empty hand. Her smile became a bit more strained.

I raised up the money sack that she’d tried to snatch off me.

“Nice try.”

She blinked.

“That’s... pretty good, I’ll admit. I didn’t even notice that it was gone from my hand until the last second.”

I smirked.

“I learned from the best.”

My Fiona had taught me how she fought. In between spars, she would mess with me by doing exactly what this Fiona had just done. Eventually, she had mercy on me and showed me what she was doing and how.

“Must’ve been one hell of a thief,” she muttered. “And I guess that makes you a street... but why do you act so different?”

I didn’t quite hear the last thing she said. I chose to ignore it and focus on her training.

“Anyway, do you see that I can help you?” I said.

She nodded.

“Yeah. You probably know what you’re doing...”

She grinned.

“Teach.”

I groaned and looked up at the sky.

“Not you too!”

She nodded. “Yep.”

I sighed and shook my head.

“Whatever. Let’s just get to training. I’ve got a simple set of exercises that you can go through while I work with Lorelei.”

Fiona nodded and I showed her the exercises. She didn’t look happy about them, but agreed to work hard.

I walked over to Lorelei, who was heaving hard.

“My turn?” she said.

“Your turn.”

I pulled out the strip of cloth and tossed it to her.

She grimaced, then tied it around her eyes.

After a moment of silence, she frowned. “This sucks.”

I laughed.

“It does. But the alternative is developing it over years of combat, and we just don’t have that luxury.”

Lorelei unsheathed her blade, setting it into a guard position.

I applied the lessons Fiona taught me in my time, getting onto the balls of my feet, lowering my center of gravity, and becoming impossibly quiet.

I crept around to Lorelei’s side.

Her ears flickered, but she didn’t respond. She was still as the grave.

Well, here’s hoping she knows where I am. I lashed out with my staff, hitting her back.

She yelped and toppled onto the ground.

“Back on your feet. Reset,” I said.

She muttered something under her breath before taking up a guard position once more.

I didn’t move at all, simply staying in the same position I did before.

Then I thrust forward my staff, slamming it into her side.

She grunted and flew backward before catching herself.

“This is stupid,” she said. “I can’t hear you at all.”

“You can. You just haven’t learned how to listen.”

Lorelei growled before shaking her head and resuming her guard stance.

It continued in this fashion for another hour, each time ending the way it did before.

She didn’t have an inch of success. Each hit hurt too. I was holding back, but I needed them to be strong enough to trigger her ability to learn under pressure.

I was certain she would be a web of bruises by the end of this if she wasn’t already one now.

The thought made me want to vomit in my mouth. How dare I hurt her like this?

I shook my head.

I have to. This is the only way.

She was gritting her teeth and sweating buckets as she stood.

“Do you want a break?” I said.

“No.” She panted, then wiped her forehead with her arm. “I’m fine. Keep going.”

I bit my lip.

“Alright. Tell me when you can’t take it anymore.”

Fiona had finished her exercises and was looking on in mild interest.

I would work with her in a bit, but not until Lorelei had blocked me once.

I circled her once more. Again, my staff lashed out. Again, she was hit.

After ten more minutes, I sighed.

“Alright, that’s enough.”

Lorelei growled, her ears pointing forward.

“No, one more time!”

I frowned.

“Lorelei, you’re going to collapse at any moment. It’s time to stop.”

“Wait! Just one more!”

I shut my eyes and sighed.

“Fine.”

I circled her, then stood still for a few seconds. I stepped a few steps.

Lorelei didn’t say anything or respond in any way.

My staff moved.

There was nothing different about this time. I was as imperceptible to her surface senses as I was before.

But Lorelei had jumped out of the way of the strike. It was sloppy, uncoordinated, and would never fly in a real fight.

I grinned.

“Did I do it?” she said. “Please tell me that I didn’t just dodge for no reason.”

I shook my head.

“You got it.”

I stepped down and took off her blindfold.

She looked up at me, a cheery expression on her face even with the tears from the pain she was in.

I sighed and placed a hand on her shoulder, flooding her with healing magic.

She let out a sigh of relief.

“Good work,” I said.

“Thanks, teach.”

I didn’t dispute the claim.

Fiona coughed.

“As entertaining as this is, you promised to show me a few tricks, didn’t you?” she said.

I rolled my eyes.

“Lorelei, seriously, take a break, okay?”

Lorelei nodded. “Yeah, I think I’m about done.”

I sighed.

This girl.

#

Fiona pulled out a dagger and twirled it around, a smirk on her face.

“Right then, what’s first?” she said.

I held out my right hand, crafting a similar dagger using my ice magic.

“Alright, first of all, let’s actually go through the fundamentals of how to use a dagger.

You kind of suck at it.”

Fiona gawked.

“Didn’t I kick that other rouge’s ass!?”

“I’m going to take a guess and say that you just ran at her over and over until you got lucky and she slipped up.”

Fiona scowled.

“That’s not luck! It’s a valid strategy.”

I inclined my head.

“It is. But it really isn’t an ideal strategy. Especially against opponents who are close to your reaction time. Against the common grunt, sure, rushing at them and ending it quick with a wide swing to the neck is perfectly fine,” I said. “But as soon as you encounter anyone skilled, well... you have no alternatives, right?”

Fiona clicked her tongue but didn’t dispute the point.

“Alright, fine. How do I use a knife, oh great teacher?”

I stared at her with an emotionless face before shaking my head.

“Don’t call me that,” I said. “Anyway, the first thing you need to understand is the chief advantage of the knife. Are you aware of what it is?”

Fiona shrugged, shifting her blond locks around.

“No, not really.”

“It’s simple,” I said. “Once you get inside their guard, you’ve got an overwhelming advantage. The reason for this is that they’re forced to use elbows and grappling while you can—
“

“While I can just stab them!”

I coughed into my fist.

"Yes, while you can just stab them."

I held out my left hand and bent my knees.

"Right then, let me show you where to start," I said.

I glanced over at Lorelei, who was sitting a bit back, her eyes wide with excitement and curiosity. Fiona, on the other hand, had an amused smirk on her face.

"Right, let's start with the grip," I said, shifting my focus back to the lesson at hand. "It's crucial for control and precision."

Fiona raised an eyebrow. "I know how to hold a knife, you know."

"Indulge me," I said, offering a small smile. "A proper grip allows for better maneuverability and accuracy. Here, like this." I showed her the correct grip, adjusting her hand to the right position.

Lorelei piped up from the side. "Oh, I've seen Alexander do this with a sword before! Grips are super important!"

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Oh, joy, the peanut gallery is joining in."

Lorelei gave an incredulous yelp.

Before she could respond, I continued to speak.

"Now, stance. It's all about balance and being ready to move quickly." I demonstrated the appropriate stance, knees slightly bent, body angled to present a smaller target.

I turned to Fiona.

"Getting inside an enemy's guard is the key technique here," I said. "It's about using your speed effectively. You're quick, Fiona, so you can capitalize on that. But it's not just about

rushing in blindly. You need to be strategic."

Fiona crossed her arms. "Enlighten me, oh wise one."

"It starts with feints and misdirection," I said, demonstrating a quick feint to the left before moving right. "Confuse your opponent, make them second-guess, then seize the opportunity to close in."

Fiona mimicked the movement. "Not bad. What's next?"

"Timing and rhythm," I said. "Use pauses and changes in pace to disrupt your opponent's anticipation."

Lorelei chimed in. "Like a harvest dance! Quick, quick, slow!"

Fiona smirked and looked off to the side. "Harvest dance, huh? You really are from the country, through and through."

Lorelei bristled, her wolf ears pointing forward. "I may be from the frontier, but that doesn't mean I don't know when I'm being insulted!"

I raised a hand to defuse the growing tension. "Alright, ladies, let's stay focused. Fiona, keep practicing those moves, and Lorelei, remember that you need to rest. Your body won't learn if it's exhausted."

And so, we practiced throughout the day. Eventually, Lorelei felt well enough to practice for a little bit. Rather than have me do it, I chose to make Fiona try to sneak up on Lorelei.

Fiona was expecting an easy target. I could tell from her massive smirk. Unfortunately for her, she'd probably underestimated her opponent.

Fiona burst forward towards Lorelei, stick in hand.

Lorelei jumped clear, easily dodging the strike.

As I had expected, now that Lorelei had managed to do it once against me, she would have no issues dodging out of pretty much anyone else's way. Once Fiona became better and gets some practice in, it'll be much closer. But for now? Lorelei wins.

And win she did. They repeated the exercise ten more times before I called it, with Fiona only managing to strike Lorelei once.

"Hah! I got you!" Fiona said.

Lorelei snorted. "Only because I was exhausted."

Fiona scoffed.

"A win's a win. Period."

Lorelei growled as she ripped off her blindfold.

"Right, and what are you going to say about the nine that I won?"

Fiona widened her lips into something distantly resembling a smile—if a smile involved the grinding of teeth and a death glare hot enough to melt steel.

"I was having an off day," she said.

Lorelei opened her mouth, presumably to put more oil on the fire.

I cut in.

"Right, it's almost evening. We should start getting some food. Lorelei, could you please hunt a rabbit or something for us?"

Lorelei's eyes widened. "Rabbit? I can find a rabbit. I'll be right back!"

She dashed into the tall grass like a cannonball.

Fiona stared after the trailing figure of Lorelei with a wrinkled nose and a frown.

"I don't care how well that girl fights, she's an idiot."

I turned towards her and glared.

“Can we not do the insults and provocations?”

Fiona raised her hands.

“Fine, fine,” she said. “I can play nice.”

I continued to stare.

“Please do. If you two keep this up, I’m going to go insane.”

Fiona shot me a sidelong glance. “I thought we’d already established that you’re at least a little insane.”

This woman. What the hell did Cedric see in her again?

Before I could turn my head to shout at her, a sudden noise caught both of our attentions.

It was Lorelei carrying two rabbits.

“We’ll be eating good tonight!” she said with a cheery grin.

Fiona sighed.

“That was quick.”

Lorelei smiled, a proud expression on her face.

“Of course! I’m a hunter, born and bred. Don’t you see the ears?”

Fiona’s eyes widened. “Oh my goodness, you’re a beastperson? I had no idea!”

Lorelei frowned for a split-second, then tilted her head.

“Really? How did you not notice?”

There was a beat of silence.

Fiona slammed her palm into her face.

A brief smirk flew across Lorelei’s face before vanishing.

I sighed.

#

We'd gutted and skinned the rabbits in a few minutes, Fiona looking on in morbid curiosity.

"You've never seen this done before?" Lorelei said.

Fiona shook my head. "Not once."

Lorelei gave a bright smile.

"Well, that's wonderful! It'll be a new experience!"

Blood from the bunny was slathered across Lorelei's face.

Fiona looked at Lorelei's smile, then down at the gruesome, half-skinned bunny corpse.

"Right, new experience, totally."

Soon enough we were finished and cooking the rabbits in a stew I'd thrown together using some of the surrounding greenery.

The smell wafted through the air in minutes.

I could see both Lorelei and Fiona looking at the stew with a tight focus.

The food was eventually cooked. I grabbed three of the wooden bowls I keep on hand and poured the soup into the bowls, then passed it out.

"Dig in," I said.

Lorelei, having tasted my cooking before, didn't hesitate even though it was still burning hot. Fiona looked down at her stew and blew on it before taking a sip.

"Huh," she said. "That's good. Scratch that: really good."

I smiled. I was mediocre at all the skills that counted. But cooking? Lorelei was hopeless in the kitchen, despite (or maybe because of) her father's best efforts. Fiona lived off street food

and scraps. Cedric had probably never even seen a spatula before, while Gareth could only cook simple camp food.

The kitchen was my domain.

I chuckled.

Fat lot of good that was, in the past. Though it did make hard nights a little easier, so I suppose it wasn't all that bad.

When we were about halfway through eating, Fiona stopped and looked at Lorelei.

"You never did answer my question earlier," she said.

Lorelei stopped and looked at Fiona, her cheeks still filled with food, soup dribbling down her face. She swallowed, then rubbed away the liquid.

"What question?" she said.

Fiona pointed at me with her thumb.

"How'd you end up traveling with teach over here?"

"Not your teacher," I said for what felt like the hundredth time.

They both ignored me.

Lorelei scratched her head.

"Well, it's a little bit crazy," she said. "I found him in my hometown."

Fiona's eyebrows furrowed together.

"Wait, what?" she said. "Explain."

Lorelei shrugged. "Let me start from the top. It all started when he fell out of the sky."

Fiona blinked.

"You know, I heard that before, but it didn't fully register. What the hell was he doing in

the sky?”

She turned towards me.

I shrugged.

“Actually, I have no clue,” I said. “I was supposed to be dropped off on the ground.

Something went wrong with the teleportation spell I was using.”

Fiona held her hand up. “Hold on, why were you being teleported at all?”

“Uh,” I said. “Bad situation. Had to run away.”

Technically accurate.

Fiona narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to speak—

“Anyway—“ Lorelei leaned in. “So there Alexander was, falling out of the sky like a star.

I was coming home with my wagon when I saw it.”

Fiona snorted. “Must’ve been one hell of a shock when you realized what it was.”

Lorelei nodded. “Yeah, it was terrifying! There was a big boom from him crashing and everything. I ran over to the crate when I realized that it was a person who had crashed.”

“Then you saved my life,” I said.

Lorelei rubbed the back of her head.

“Well, I wouldn’t put it that way, but I did lend you a hand.”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s understating it massively. She and her dad nursed me back to health.”

Lorelei grumbled and shook her head. “Well, anyway, we just really hit it off, especially after he saved our lives from a monster attack”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s debatable.”

Lorelei just barreled on.

“Since I’d been looking to leave home already and he was an adventurer, well...”

Fiona smirked and gave me a side-eye.

“An older man stealing a girl away from her home with promises of adventure... aren’t you quite the devious rascal?”

Lorelei choked on her soup and slammed her chest.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Right, back on topic. Do you have any questions?” I said.

Fiona raised a hand. “I do actually. How did you recognize me? I never got a proper explanation for that.”

I took a sip of my soup.

“An associate informed me of you and your location,” I said.

Technically true.

Kind of.

The Fiona of my timeline informed me of where she used to hunt for targets in the past.

Fiona hummed.

“A fair explanation,” she said. “One last question.”

I tilted my head.

“Yes?”

She looked at me. “Your skills. How did you get them? Mercenary? Former knight? You’re too skilled for a random adventurer.”

Ah, crap. This wasn’t an area I wanted to delve into.

“It’s really not that impressive,” I said. “There are several who outmatch me in their chosen fields.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

“I’m no wizard, but I heard what that mage girl said back at the factory. She said that you were using an archmage-level spell. There are only, three, maybe four archmages alive right now? That alone puts you at the top of all magic users.”

Crap.

Fiona scratched her chin.

“This all begs the question: how did you gain all these skills? You can fight with a knife, a sword, a staff, and magic. Is there any weapon you don’t know how to use?”

Lorelei was beginning to look uncomfortable, probably remembering Eliza’s suspicions about me being a Khanate soldier.

“More than that, how have we not heard of you?” she said. “People with those kinds of skills usually have a song or two dedicated to them. Why don’t you?”

I gave a brittle smile.

“You seem to have already made a conclusion,” I said. “Why don’t you share it with me?”

"Alright," Fiona said. "Here's my conclusion. You're not just some farm boy who stumbled into this. You've got the air of a seasoned warrior about you. My guess? You fought in the Gundi civil war about ten years ago."

Lorelei's eyes widened, and her spoon clattered onto the bowl as she gasped.

“Everything fits,” she said. “From the fact that no one knows about you to the level of

experience and ability you have—the bloodiest war in a century with the world’s greatest soldiers would probably do the trick.”

I hummed.

“Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but that’s pretty insane considering I would’ve been a prepubescent child at the time.”

Fiona’s eyebrows furrowed as she tried to comprehend what I’d just said.

“Wait, hold on, how old are you?”

“Not much older than you two,” I said. “Hell, I’m probably younger.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow. “That’s silly. You’re at least in your late twenties. How old are you?”

My mind raced back. How old was I when I left home?

“I’ve just entered my seventeenth cycle,” I said.

Lorelei spat out her food off to the side while Fiona’s jaw dropped.

“That makes me older than you!” Lorelei shouted. “I’m eighteen!”

Fiona had an uncomfortable look on her face.

“Crap, am I the creep?” she muttered. “I certainly feel like it right now.”

Lorelei was studying my face.

“You aren’t that old-looking,” she muttered. “You really do look like you’re seventeen. I just assumed because of how strong you are...”

Fiona sighed. “I’m such an idiot.”

Lorelei raised an eyebrow. “Well, this does mean one thing. As it turns out, Fiona can be wrong.”

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Oh, shut it. Go back to your farm."

The two began to trade jabs in a manner that reminded me of my own Fiona and Lorelei.

I watched the flickering flames and the dance of shadows on their faces.

There was a part of me that felt guilty—that told me I should just tell them the truth. But as soon as that part spoke, I felt sick to my stomach. The idea of talking about what had happened...

I grit my teeth and pushed away my thoughts.

I sighed, breaking into their banter. "Enough about age and wars for now. We should rest. We have a long day ahead of us."

Fiona grumbled something under her breath but complied, settling into her makeshift bedroll. Lorelei was still grinning, seemingly unaffected by the serious turn the conversation had taken.

"You're right, Alexander. Goodnight, both of you," she chirped.

I looked up at the stars and wondered if my Lorelei was looking at the same thing.

"...Goodnight, everyone," I muttered.

Chapter Fourteen

We trained hard for the rest of the week. Even me. Especially me. My stamina had to be brought back to the max if I wanted any chance at being useful in the coming battles. Unfortunately, I didn't see much progress.

Which was why I was feeling anxious about the coming mission.

Fiona had gone out to the town to obtain information and had come back with a bombshell. Some of Brae's underlings would be meeting tonight. This was a chance to gain valuable information if we played our cards right.

The plan was simple. Sneak in through the rafters. Wait, hide, then get out.

It was supposed to be simple.

So why did I have a sinking feeling in my stomach?

It was night. I looked up towards the building and climbed up easily.

Lorelei climbed behind me while Fiona hopped from brick to windowsill with ease.

"Alright, where to next?" I said.

Fiona pointed. "We keep going that way for about ten more buildings. After that, we just head in through the clerestory window."

I nodded.

The night air was crisp, charged with the anticipation of our mission. Lorelei fidgeted beside me.

"Let's make sure we keep up, Lorelei," I said, casting a glance her way.

"Got it, Alexander! Like a shadow in the night," she said.

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Just try not to trip over your own feet."

Lorelei shot Fiona a sharp look, her tail flaring behind her before she took a deep breath and forced a smile.

The buildings blurred into a seamless series of jumps and climbs. Fiona led the way, her movements confident and calculated. Lorelei followed closely behind, a tenseness to her movements. I lingered at the back, watching them with mild curiosity.

In my time, they snipped at each other quite a bit, but not to this degree. I was beginning to get concerned that this could cause issues.

But that was a problem for a later time. For now, we had a job to do.

As we reached the appointed building, Fiona signaled for us to halt. "Stay low and quiet."

The windows were small, but it would do. Fiona pulled out a bottle of oil and sprayed it over the hinges.

After a few seconds of this, she pulled on the window, allowing it to open without a single squeak.

She climbed in, dropping softly onto one of the rafters. Lorelei jumped in behind Fiona,

also not making a noise. She was a predatory animal in stance and ability. Perhaps a side effect of her beastperson heritage?

I followed behind them.

Now we just had to wait.

The minutes ticked by. I let out a quiet sigh.

Give it time.

I could hear their voices underneath the floor. They were talking about something.

“Did we head to the wrong floor?” Lorelei whispered.

I shrugged.

“No way to know,” I whispered back. “Let’s pray the information was correct.”

The voices were getting closer.

My eyes widened and I put my finger over my lips in a shushing motion. Lorelei nodded.

The door cracked open.

Brae stepped through, along with a man in a dirty brown cloak.

My heart skipped a beat. He wasn’t supposed to be here! It was just supposed to be his underling.

Lorelei stared at me, her eyes wide. Her fingers twitched, and her arm edged towards her weapon.

I shook my head. We weren’t strong enough yet. In time, hopefully by the time he plants the bombs. But not now.

“Lord Brae, the materials are here as instructed.”

Brae gave an eerie grin.

“That’s excellent. Well done.”

The man in the brown cloak bowed.

“I live to serve, my lord,” he said. “If I may ask, why did we need the extra materials? Did we not already have enough?”

Brae shook his head.

“There’s no guarantee that the bomb will work. We’ll have to test it. I think in a week will do.”

The man hummed.

“Where will it be tested?”

Brae leaned against a nearby table, tapping his fingers. "Oh, I think a populated area would be just perfect. Maximum impact, you see."

My heart quickened.

Lorelei had the angriest scowl I’d ever seen on her face.

“Why would you do that? Wouldn’t you risk tipping off the authorities?”

Brae laughed.

“Oh please, the lord of Joim can’t do anything. He’d have to cancel the celebration entirely, which he won’t do. It would be a massive waste of resources considering how much was invested into this celebration.”

I clenched my fist.

Fiona wasn’t angry. Instead, she was focused. Her eyes were narrowed as she absorbed the information.

Lorelei, on the other hand, was shaking. She was grinding her teeth together and

scowling.

One of her hands was wrapped around the rafter she was sitting on. She was gripping it.

I was about to speak in warning when the sound of a crack echoed out.

Lorelei looked down at the rafter she had been holding. The section of the beam she'd been grabbing had been crushed into splinters.

"Oops."

The rafter fell to the ground in slow motion. I tried to jump up and back onto the rafters, but missed my chance by a split-second.

In a moment we were on the ground, tangled in a pile.

"Oh dear, it appears we had some uninvited guests," Brae said.

I hopped back to my feet.

"Brae," I said. "How delightful to see you again."

Brae laughed.

"It's only been a few days. Could you not stand to be apart from me?"

My face whitened and I covered my mouth.

"Please. Don't even imply that," I said.

Brae laughed again.

Lorelei looked back and forth between the two of us, her hand on her sheathed sword.

There was a beat of silence.

"Is this the part where we fight?" Lorelei said.

Brae shook his head.

"Oh come now, must we? I've had some burning questions on my mind for a while now."

I tilted my head.

“Oh?”

He nodded.

“Indeed. For example... why are you different?”

For a moment I thought he was speaking to me.

“The both of you—“ I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. “You’re different. You’re not supposed to be this strong. I confirmed it with the High One. Destiny is in flux. Out of order. Why is that?”

The High One had some kind of future vision? Interesting. This may explain quite a bit, such as how he became so powerful. He was predicting how to avoid trouble and maximize his strength.

Lorelei spoke up. “What are you talking about? Out of order?”

Brae tilted his head.

“You are unaware? But if you’re battling, shouldn’t you have received a message from the seer about your destiny—?”

Lorelei was looking more and more confused.

I didn’t want to have that conversation yet. Lorelei wasn’t ready to hear about the prophecy. Besides that, it would raise questions that I wouldn’t have a good answer to.

I grimaced. “Yeah, how about we just take you out now rather than talking.”

Brae tilted his head.

“I’m quite afraid, Hope-born,” he said. “That you have no choice—“

An object clattered against the floor.

Brae's eyes widened.

Smoke exploded out of the object.

I dashed to my right and grabbed Lorelei.

"Let's go!" I said.

We dashed and smashed into a window. The open-air greeted us. We were falling, falling...

Until I remembered where I was and cast an air cushion below us.

The air cushion absorbed our fall, letting us land softly. Lorelei got up to her feet, then shook her head.

"That sucked," she said.

I glanced back and saw a black cloak jumping out the window.

"No time for that!" I shouted. "Let's go!"

We broke off into an alley. We went left, then right, then left.

Eventually, we couldn't hear footsteps behind us.

I turned around.

We'd lost him.

A figure jumped off the roof of a building beside us, and for a moment my heart skipped a beat. Then the figure landed, and I could see who it was.

"Fiona," I said. "Thanks for the save."

Fiona winked.

"You owe me one," she said.

I groaned.

She wasn't joking. I remembered this from the future. She would ruthlessly use her little favors to get us to do all of her work.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," I said. "We have bigger things to discuss."

"Like that bombing. What are we going to do?" Lorelei said. "We don't even know where it is."

I clicked my tongue.

There were reports of a smaller bombing before the real bombing from survivors. I even knew the location. I'd hoped that those reports were apocryphal, but that was clearly not the case. There was an issue with this information, however.

Could I just say it? There's no way for me to explain how I know this information. Inevitably, questions are going to pop up about how I know all these things. And the more that I abuse my future knowledge, the faster those questions will come.

But I don't have a choice, do I? I don't have time to obtain the information legitimately. I can't pass the buck either to the Lord of Joim and slip him secret information either. Why the hell would he believe some random guy, especially about something with such an important monetary cost?

I sighed.

"The bombing will be in the west district, near the gate," I said.

Fiona looked at me. "How did you know that?"

I looked back at her.

"You didn't hear him say it? I heard it loud and clear."

My heart was pounding—which would help because we'd been running so hard that any

variations in my heart rate could be dismissed as an anomaly.

Lorelei narrowed her eyes at me. She was suspicious. Of course she would be. It was a blatant lie. Not even a half-truth.

But she didn't know my natural bodily responses well enough to be certain I was lying. All she had was suspicions. Nothing firm.

"I never heard that," Lorelei said.

I shrugged.

"Well, it's the best piece of information we've got. Might as well go along with it, right?"

Fiona shut her eyes, then smirked.

"I suppose so."

I sighed. Did that work?

This mountain of lies I'm creating is eventually going to fall apart. when it does...

It won't be pretty.

"Right, we need to get ready."

Lorelei groaned.

"You don't mean—!"

I smiled.

"Training!"

#

For the next several days, we prepared extensively. We dialed back the physical training—everyone needed to be in tip-top condition. I couldn't afford to have anyone tired or exhausted from the previous day's training.

This didn't mean that everyone was simply lounging. I spent this time making sure everyone knew every detail of the plan that I'd put together.

For me, I'd increased in strength by a great deal. I was fairly certain that if I pushed it, I would be able to cast two Abyssal Diluvios, as opposed to the one I did in the past.

Eventually, the hour came.

"I feel like we do a lot of this," Lorelei muttered.

We were inside the house of a couple that had left on a trading trip. Specifically, we were on the roof. It was a good location that gave us a solid view of the surrounding area and would allow us to stay mobile and move depending on the situation. Fiona had taken a separate area to maximize our chances of spotting the bombers.

"A lot of what?" I said.

She tapped her foot.

"Waiting."

I shrugged.

"Sometimes you need to wait," I said. "It's irritating, but that's the way it is."

Lorelei pursed her lips.

"Do we, though?"

I turned towards her.

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes went focused in a manner that I'd seen from my own Lorelei when she went into deep thought. I could practically hear the steam coming from her head as her mind whirled with activity.

“I feel like we’ve been running around like headless chickens the whole time,” she said. “We’re constantly dodging around these bad guys or struggling to keep up, and I can’t help but feel like we’re making the wrong approach.”

And then the focus disappeared and she stared up at the ceiling.

“Also it’s super boring.” Her head shot over towards the window and her tail went stiff behind her. “There’s a squirrel over there.”

I sighed.

“Priorities, Lorelei.”

Lorelei blinked. “Right, right. Whatever you say, teach.”

That accursed title. Teach. The urge to scream at the top of my lungs passed over my mind before dissipating.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and opened my mouth to speak when Lorelei shot her hand out and covered my mouth.

My eyebrows shot up in surprise and I reached for her hand.

She glared at me and put her index finger to her lips in a shushing motion. She then pointed with her thumb to an alleyway.

She’d heard something.

I nodded and gently pried her hand off my lips. We both moved towards the edge of the roof.

“...And the boss said that we had to dial it this way, right?”

We listened in, but didn’t expose ourselves by poking our heads out over the roof.

“Yeah, it’s simple. You remember the schedule right? Ten minutes from now, on the dot.”

One of the men hummed.

“How are we going to keep the guards from coming after us? Once they spot us, they’ll have some questions.”

The other man snorted.

“Oh, please. Everyone knows the guards are a joke. We’ll either bribe them or beat them. Either way, we win. We’re Black Moon, the base of the High One’s strength. We won’t lose.”

I turned towards Lorelei and nodded.

She brought her hand to her sheathed sword and gripped it tightly. After that, she turned towards me and nodded.

I raised my fist.

I brought my index up.

One.

Two.

Three—

Lorelei jumped down towards the villains. Steel ringed against steel down below.

I gaped.

“Hey, who the hell are you!?” One of the men shouted.

I threw myself down and slammed my foot into the head of the one who had been facing off against Lorelei. He crashed into the concrete with a crack.

He was probably fine.

“Damn it, another one!?” the other man shouted.

“Alexander, where were you!?” Lorelei said. “I look around and you’re not there!”

I turned towards her with an irritated expression. “It was on the count of five, you dunce!”

She growled. “How was I supposed to know that!?”

“WE DRILLED IT FIFTEEN TIMES—! Agh, we don’t have time for this!”

I turned back towards the other guy. He was dressed in a black cloak similar to Brae’s, designed to conceal his features. In addition, he had a silver mask on his face.

Behind him sat a black metal sphere about half my size covered in dials, spikes, and small glowing magical circles.

The Black Moon growled.

“I heard of you two. The boss told us about some adventurers who were a bit too big for their britches getting involved.”

He reached into his cloak with both hands and pulled out two daggers with a flourish.

“If you seriously think you’ll be able to defeat the two of us on your own, you’re really stupid,” I said.

The man snorted.

“Of course not. I can’t.”

There was a pause, and I could hear various footsteps from all around. Up ahead, a group of seven turned a corner and walked up to the man. Behind us, I suspect it was a similar story due to Lorelei having turned around and snarled.

“But I think they can.”

Lorelei was shifting and darting her eyes around.

“Alexander, there’s a ton of people. Actually, that may be something of an

understatement.”

I didn’t move my eyes from the opponents I was facing.

“Center yourself. They’re going to be tough, but at the end of the day, Black Moons are the lowest-level grunts employed by the High One. They’re a dime a dozen.”

Lorelei clicked her tongue.

“Couldn’t you just use your hurricane thing?”

I stared at the man with the daggers.

“They’re not going to give me that chance, unfortunately. It would take too long to charge. Get ready, they’re about to strike.”

Lorelei gulped and tightened her hands around her sword.

The frontman rushed toward me.

I stepped inside his guard and blocked his first stab. As usual, he tried to stab with his other dagger. I kned him, sending him staggering back.

Another one swiped at my head, forcing me to tilt my head. I countered with a swing of my staff.

I clicked my tongue and magic lit up my staff. Three simple Aqua Fulgaras appeared behind me and shot out towards the enemies. The various group members jumped back. That was fine, it was just to gain time, not to hurt them.

I turned around and saw that Lorelei was struggling against three at the same time. I rushed forward and grabbed the back of Lorelei’s jack of plate.

“Switch!” I said as I threw her backward toward the enemy pursuing me.

“Alexander, you ass—!”

I engaged the Black Moon that she'd been fighting. It was a woman. Two animal ears on the top of her head. A beastperson.

I slammed my stave forward into her chest, breaking through her guard and sending her staggering.

Before I could capitalize on my opening, another Black Moon rushed forward and stabbed at me.

I hummed and dodged the strike, then counterattacked with a swing of my staff, only for that blow to be intercepted by another Black Moon.

One was coming from my side. It would miss my vital organs, but it would still hurt. I'll have to gain some distance after the wound to quickly heal myself—

The man froze in place.

He fell to the ground and Fiona was standing behind him.

"Honestly, I leave for ten minutes and everything falls apart."

I reached forward and blocked a dagger coming for her from behind.

"Let's save the banter for after the battle, yes?"

I threw the strike off, then slammed the other end of my stave into the Black Moon's head.

Fiona let out a puff of air as she turned around to face the enemy.

"I'm not gonna thank you," she muttered.

"That's fine. Let's focus on getting out of this for now, yes?"

Fiona grunted.

One of the Black Moon jumped forward towards Fiona.

In an instant, Fiona was inside his guard. She stabbed into his chest, then moved to the next one.

I turned around. Lorelei dodged the strike of one, then counterattacked with a clean swing across the chest, splattering blood across her. The man fell to the ground and she instantly moved to the next one.

In a minute, they were all gone. Lorelei was standing over the bodies while Fiona walked over to me.

“Right, so this is the bomb?” she said.

I nodded.

“Yes.”

“We should probably take care of this, yeah?” She turned to Lorelei. “Hey, what are you doing?”

Lorelei jumped in response to Fiona, then turned around. There was an unfocused look in her eyes.

“Yeah?”

Fiona walked over to Lorelei and snapped her fingers in front of Lorelei’s face.

“Get your head in the game. We have stuff we need to do.”

The light came back into Lorelei’s eyes and she shook her head.

“You’re right. What do we need to do?”

I pointed at the ominous black sphere.

“Well, we probably need to take care of this.”

Lorelei stepped back, her ears folding behind her.

“Is this the bomb thing?”

I nodded.

“Yep.”

We all stood around it for a moment.

Fiona looked up at me and raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know what you’re thinking of, but none of us have any experience with magic, remember? You’re the only guy who knows stuff about this.”

I blinked.

I suppose I was half-expecting Cedric to come up and begin analyzing the bomb.

“This isn’t my specialty,” I said as I stepped forward to look at the object. “Really, it’s so far outside the little talent I have it isn’t even funny. But this is our only option, isn’t it?”

My eyes wandered over the smattering of random spellcircles covering the sphere.

“Looks like it’s all stuff related to controlling the magical energy.”

“Can you disable it?” Fiona said.

I clicked my tongue.

“If I had a couple hours, maybe, but we don’t have that kind of time.”

Lorelei’s eyes widened. “Wait, how much time do we have?”

I looked over the dials and hummed.

“About five minutes.”

There was a beat of silence.

Fiona’s jaw dropped. Lorelei made a noise somewhere between a groan and a scream.

“What the hell are we doing!?” Lorelei said. “Let’s just throw it into the Bugli river and

run!”

I shook my head.

“Not an option. Dozens of farming villages rely on that river downstream. We’d be poisoning all of them with the ashes of Fara. Not a good idea.”

Fiona looked at me, her eyes wide and panicked.

“Can you try to disable it? Just try?”

I sighed.

“For someone like me to do it would be worse than just leaving it alone. I could accidentally trigger it earlier than normal.”

Fiona nodded. “Right. You just give it a shot while me and Lorelei run. That way if you fail it’s just you who dies.”

I gave her a deadpan look while Lorelei slapped the back of Fiona’s head.

Fiona winced and rubbed the back of her head.

“What was that for?”

Lorelei glared at her. “You know why. That’s not an option.”

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Whatever you say. Either way, we do need a plan. Like, now.”

“Four minutes,” I said.

Fiona groaned.

“Thank you for that reminder.”

We all stared at the bomb for a minute straight.

“We’re screwed, aren’t we?” Fiona said.

Lorelei blinked.

“Hey, Alexander, you once managed to make a magic shield made of water, remember?”

I turned towards her.

“Yeah, I did. What’s your point?”

She gave me a deadpan look.

I blinked.

“Oh, yeah, make a shield around the bomb. That’s a good idea.”

This was why Lorelei was the planner in the future.

“There’s no guarantee that it’ll be strong enough,” I said. “We have no idea how strong the blast is.”

Fiona perked up.

“We need to evacuate the surrounding area. Make sure that everybody is as far from the explosion as possible.”

Lorelei glared at Fiona. “You just want to get away from the blast.”

I shook my head.

“Fiona’s right.”

Lorelei turned back towards me, her eyes wide.

“Wait, what?”

I nodded. “She is. We need to minimize the casualties. Besides that, there’s no point in all of us dying if I fail. Especially you.”

Lorelei’s eyes shot forward and her tail flared out behind her.

“No way! That’s insane! We’d have no idea what to do without you!”

Steel entered my voice as I stared down Lorelei.

“Lorelei,” I said. “We can’t afford to argue. We have to save as many people as possible.”

I have to do this. Only me.

Lorelei’s eyes were unfocused as she glanced between the bomb and me. After a moment she kicked the ground and let out an angry snarl.

“Fine!” she said as her eyes focused back on me. “Fine, you win!”

I nodded. “Thank you—“

“Just... for goodness’s sake, come back alive, got it?”

“Of course.”

Fiona tugged on her.

“We need to start now if we want civilians out of the way.”

Lorelei stepped back, giving me a look before breaking off in a dead sprint.

Fiona looked at me, then nodded before running in the opposite direction of Lorelei.

I focused my eyes back on the bomb.

Right. Let’s get to work.

I held out my staff. Water appeared out of the air in droplets. They then surrounded the bomb. A mental command turned the water into ice.

I repeated this process, creating layer after layer after layer of ice.

Soon, my ice dome was butting up against the buildings.

I cast two Aqua Fulgaras and smashed the building’s walls open. I continued the process of making ice domes.

The dome was now twice my height in thickness.

Ten seconds.

I should probably start running.

I turned around and began to dash off. Lorelei had done a good job. The streets were deserted. I wasn't sure how she'd managed to convince everyone, but she'd succeeded thoroughly.

Three seconds.

I weaved through the alleyways like I was Fiona herself. I needed to get as far from the blast as possible.

I hadn't managed to cover very much ground. I'd waited too long.

Hopefully, that dome I'd made would do the trick.

There was a blast. Light. Sound.

Then darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

“—exander! Alexander, wake up!”

I blinked my eyes to be greeted by the sight of Lorelei hovering over me with a terrified face.

“We need to stop ending up in this situation,” I muttered.

“Yeah, he’s fine,” Fiona said.

I pushed myself up and rubbed the back of my head. I was bleeding.

“Oh my goodness, you’re bleeding!”

“Hmm, I noticed,” I said. “Don’t worry about it. If it was really bad I wouldn’t have woken up.”

Fiona gave me a raised eyebrow. “You have the strangest standards for bad, dude.”

I was about to reply when I looked around and saw the destruction of the surrounding district. Rubble coated the ground like the ocean covered the sea floor. Glass shards were everywhere. Half-broken buildings stood upright, barely hanging on by a thread.

Frankly, it was a miracle that I was still alive.

“Any casualties?” I said.

Lorelei shut her eyes and didn’t respond for a moment.

“Not everyone was able to shield themselves like you did, and we weren’t able to get everyone out of the blast.”

“Crap.”

We all stood in silence for a moment.

Fiona perked up and looked off to our side.

“Don’t look now, but we’ve got company.”

There was a group of people approaching us. Four guards, some random peasant, and a man in fine clothes.

The peasant pointed at us. “They’re the ones who told us to get out! Them, right there!”

The noble nodded at him.

“Thank you for this information. I will ensure that you and your family are compensated for this.”

The peasant bowed down, tears streaming across his face.

The noble turned towards us and stepped over the rubble, his expression dry and emotionless.

“So, you’re the ones responsible for this?”

Lorelei’s eyes widened.

“What? No! We stopped it!”

I raised an eyebrow.

“That guy just told you that we tried to get people out. If we were the bombers, then why would we try to reduce casualties?”

The noble snorted.

“I can’t confess to ever being able to understand the mind of the terminally insane, which, presumably, you would have to be to do something like this.”

I stood to my feet.

“Something like going up to three strangers and accusing them of being mass murderers?”

There was a flash of some emotion that I couldn’t recognize across the noble’s eyes.

Lorelei was looking between the two of us, a worried expression on her face.

“You have quite the mouth on you, hmm?”

I shrugged.

“What can I say? Getting a knock on your head does wonders for your impulse control.”

The man stared at me.

“A fellow noble? Perhaps a runaway?” he muttered.

What is he talking about?

He shook his head.

“Fine then. How did you know about the bombs?”

“Found ‘em.”

Fiona slapped her face.

The noble stared at me.

“You found them.”

I shrugged.

“What can I say? I have an extremely keen sense of danger.”

The noble shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Right, give me one good reason why I shouldn’t have you tried right now?”

Fiona’s hand drifted down to her dagger.

Right, I should probably figure out a way of resolving this that doesn’t end in our arrest.

It wouldn’t look good if half a dozen people were murdered by Fiona here and now.

“Because...”

I pointed behind the noble. “Oh my goodness, it’s a giant pile of gold!”

Both Fiona’s and the noble’s eyes shot toward the direction of my hand.

“Where!?” they both shouted.

Magic pumped through my staff. In a moment, fog had exploded out in front of me.

I grabbed Fiona and Lorelei’s hands and dashed off.

“Wait, but what about the gold!?” Fiona said.

“The gold was a lie! You fell for that!?” Lorelei said.

Fiona snatched her hand back with a groan. Lorelei tugged at my hand instead.

I let go of Lorelei’s hand and led the way forward.

It wasn’t long till we were far enough away to slow down.

Fiona glared at me.

“You idiot!” she said. “They’re going to have our face plastered on every wall in this city!”

I shook my head.

“No, they won’t.”

Both Fiona and Lorelei gave me a look.

“Why not?” Lorelei said.

“Because he’s not going to shut down the celebration. If he tries to get us, then he’ll be admitting that something happened, right?”

Lorelei looked thoughtful, but Fiona simply shook her head.

“Dead wrong,” she said. “He’ll just make up a trumped-up charge and say that he’s coming after us for unrelated reasons.”

My face blanked.

“Oh.”

She sighed.

“Granted, that guy was probably going to try to arrest us anyway. Still, you could’ve handled the situation a bit better. Instead, you were in full sarcasm mode. What the hell was that?”

I let out a puff of air and looked away from the both of them.

“I could see it in his eyes. He was like all the other nobles. He didn’t give a damn about what had happened. He was just out to grab a scapegoat and keep on moving forward.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

“And that pissed you off?”

Nobles stonewalling us had become an unfortunately common thing, especially during the early stages of the war. If they’d all just shut up and followed Lorelei, I probably wouldn’t have had to come back here.

I shut my eyes.

“Yeah, it pissed me off.”

Lorelei stepped forward and cut Fiona off.

“There’s no use arguing about it now. What’s done is done. We need to make our next step.”

I nodded.

“Yeah, I already have something in mind.”

Fiona narrowed her eyes at me while Lorelei’s ears flicked at my statement.

“Please tell me that this doesn’t involve mouthing off to more nobles.”

I rubbed the back of my head.

“Ah, well...”

Fiona gave me a deadpan look.

“Seriously? What?”

I shrugged.

“Most of the brats at the Institute are the sons of nobles, so...”

Lorelei tilted her head. “The Institute?”

Fiona glanced at Lorelei.

“The Central Institute of Magical Mastery?”

Lorelei stared at Fiona, her eyes empty.

“Y’know, the big university that all the archmages in Adonia have come from?”

Lorelei blinked.

“I give up.” Fiona raised her arms up, then turned to me. “There’s no helping her.”

Lorelei stared at me. “So why are we going to this instant toot thing?”

“Institute!” Fiona’s arms reached out as if to strangle Lorelei. “It’s institute! Agh!”

“It’s because of what you said, actually,” I said. “We need to hunt down Brae and stop letting him advance his plans forward.”

I gestured back in the direction where we’d run.

“Because we were just reacting, that happened. People got hurt. We can’t let something like this occur once more.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

“Explain how going to the Institute will help in this goal?”

I looked to the left and right before gesturing for my companions to follow behind me.

We walked out the gate with our hoods drawn up, catching no one’s notice.

“Well, if you’re hunting an animal, or even just a man, that’s one thing,” I said. “Me and Lorelei can do that easy enough. But we’re not hunting either of those things. We’re hunting an entire organization hidden deep within the criminal underbelly.”

Lorelei gave me a curious look.

“And there’s something at the Institute that will help us?”

I smirked.

“When you need to hunt a deer, you call any old bowman. When you’re hunting something a bit bigger, you call a specialist.”

#

There was about one month until the bombing, more or less. Luckily, it was a week’s travel to the Institute at the current moment, then a week’s travel back. That left two or so weeks to track

down and defeat Brae. Not great odds, but Lorelei had gone through worse.

I glanced at Lorelei as she stared at a particularly large tree.

Well, this Lorelei hadn't gone through worse. But she was the same person deep down. Probably.

Lorelei caught sight of me staring at her, then bounded up to me, her wolf tail wagging behind her like that of a dog.

"That's so cool!" she said. "Cool cool cool! I've never seen such a huge tree!"

On second thought, she's probably a different person. We're doomed.

"Can you please stop running around like an excited puppy?" Fiona said. "Yranlunerus, it's exhausting just to look at."

Lorelei turned towards Fiona and snarled.

"I'm not a puppy!" she said. "I'm a wolf!"

She ran up to Fiona and pointed at her ears. "See? Wolf!"

Fiona stared at Lorelei. A smug smirk grew on Fiona's face.

"Looks like dog ears to me."

Lorelei groaned and looked at me with a pout.

"Teacherrr!" she said. "Tell Fiona to stop being mean! I'm not a puppy!"

I reached up and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"For the last time..." I said. "I am NOT YOUR TEACHER—!"

A rumble drew everyone's attention.

"Hey, where's the Institute?" Fiona said.

I blinked and turned towards her.

“What do you mean?”

Lorelei looked around.

“Yeah, it’s flat everywhere except for the tree. Where’s the Inside Lute?”

Fiona’s eye twitched.

“...poor phrasing aside, she’s right. You said the giant tree was the marker, right? Where is it?”

I turned towards her.

“We’re right here? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lorelei’s eyes widened.

“Oh, I get it! The school is shrunk down and inside the tree!”

I snorted.

“Don’t be silly, Lorelei. That would be massively overcomplicated. Unfortunately, ideas like that are fictional for a reason.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. We’re here, but there’s clearly no giant magic school beside the tree.”

I tilted my head.

“Wait, I never said it would be beside the tree.”

Fiona furrowed her eyebrows.

“What? Then where else could it be?”

Wind kicked up as we were blanketed by the shadow of a passing cloud.

Lorelei grinned. “Wind! It’s been so hot. This is nice!”

I looked up.

“Ah, there’s our ride.”

I raised my magic staff, sending out a pulse.

Fiona followed the path of my staff, then looked further up.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

“The tree isn’t the location *of* the school,” I said. “It’s a relay for the teleporter *to* the school.”

A spell circle appeared under our feet. Fiona barely had time to widen her eyes and look down before it had activated.

#

I cracked my neck to the right.

The wind was roaring. There wasn’t a single cloud overhead. The air was completely fresh, free even from the smell of earth and stone.

Underneath me, the ground was unsteady by a minute degree. Not enough to knock me down, but enough to remind me that I’d left the surface.

There was a twisted sensation in my stomach, most likely from the spell.

“Looks like they still never worked out all the kinks, even this far back,” I muttered.

Lorelei was shivering. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked around.

“Where are we?” she said. “It’s so cold! And bright!”

I hummed.

“Well, that makes sense. After all, we’ve gone up a good five thousand feet or so.”

Lorelei turned towards me.

“What.”

Fiona had a pale face.

“He’s not joking,” she said. “I saw it. It was a floating piece of rock.”

Lorelei looked around us.

She saw the edge of the little island we were on and stepped forward.

After a few seconds, she could see over the edge and jumped back.

“Oh spirits!” she said. “Oh, sweet spirits above! The wolf was not designed to be this high! Take me down! Take me down now!”

Oh.

Lorelei was scared of heights.

In my time, she was still scared of heights, she was just better at managing it.

This one is on me, I really should’ve seen it coming, considering that the first time we went up here she had the same reaction.

I gave her an apologetic look.

“Unfortunately, the spell operates on a timer, we don’t have an option but to wait until tomorrow.”

Lorelei gave me the most betrayed stare I’ve ever seen as she clutched her stomach.

“You monster,” she choked out. “You’re the absolute worst!”

I sighed and held out my hand.

“C’mon, let’s head inside. Maybe you’ll feel better there.”

She pouted, then took my hand.

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, if you two are done with whatever the hell that was, I’d like it if we could get away from the open air?” She glanced at the open blue sky. “Like what Lorelei said, humanity was not designed to live this high up.”

“I’m feeling faint,” Lorelei said, her eyes fluttering. “Oh spirits, am I gonna die?!”

My lips stretched out across my face in a grimace.

“Please don’t throw up on me,” I said.

Her face turned green.

“Too late,” she said.

I’m sure that they heard my groan all the way in the seven towers.

#

After that lovely incident, we slowly made our way up the stairs—the only path available to us. Thankfully, Lorelei was no longer disabled, something that I was quite pleased about.

“Normally,” I said. “We’d have a key that would’ve acted as a relay and given us access to the Institute-proper, but that wasn’t an option.”

Lorelei looked at me curiously. “Because you don’t have a key?”

I shook my head. “Yes. I had a friend with one, but...”

But he died? But he was killed by a Fury with a sword to the gut?

“...I lost contact with him.”

Lorelei gave me a look, before nodding.

“Right, I see.”

Fiona hummed.

“So we have to take the long way as a result?”

I nodded. “Yup. Once we’re in they’ll probably give us a key, but we’ve got to get through all their little tests.”

“So... this place moves around, right?” Fiona said. “How do people get here in an emergency?”

“In a pinch, there is a set of floating relays spread out all over Adonia. If you have enough mana, you could theoretically go across the continent in an hour or so.”

Fiona whistled. “Damn. Why aren’t traders using that technique like crazy?”

I snorted.

“Mages are jealous bastards who don’t share their tricks with anyone. You can’t use the existing relays because trying to head to one of them requires an Institute key. Plus, it’s expensive to create, maintain, and use, making it wildly impractical for mass trade. ”

Lorelei groaned. “Could you guys stop talking about this stuff? My head hurts enough!”

I shrugged and continued walking while Fiona rolled her eyes.

The stairs led into a cave with a stone door. The stone door had a cross sigil carved into it.

I groaned.

“What?” Lorelei said.

“They changed the rooms!” I said. “This wasn’t the first challenge when we did it!”

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

“Is that a big deal?”

I grimaced.

“Someone far smarter than me defeated the challenges and it took him two days in total.”

“We’ll dehydrate in two days,” Fiona said.

Lorelei gave a shaky smile.

“C’mon, it can’t be that hard!” she said.

I stared at the cross on the door.

Fiona and Lorelei stared at it with me.

“Anybody have a giant cross-shaped key?” Fiona said.

No one answered.

“Maybe it’s a riddle?” Lorelei said.

“A giant stone door with a cross. I don’t see the riddle,” Fiona said.

Thirty minutes passed.

Lorelei had given up and was now throwing stones against the wall.

Another thirty minutes. Lorelei and Fiona were arguing. Again.

Another thirty minutes. Lorelei was asking if we had any food.

This triggered yet another argument between Fiona and Lorelei.

“Screw it,” I said.

Magic lit up my staff and an icicle formed behind me. It shot forward and slammed into the stone, breaking it apart with a loud boom.

A ring sounded in the distance.

“Um, that seemed a bit impulsive,” Lorelei said.

I hummed as I continued walking. There was some kind of sliding block puzzle with another door. Overhead, the sun streamed in through a glass roof.

I ignored the blocks and cast another icicle, slamming it straight through the door.

This time, there was a pedestal with three different doors.

Following my gut, I continued walking forward and slammed another icicle straight through the center.

This led out into a field where we could see the main Institute. It was all very pretty what with the seven towers reaching into the sky, but I honestly didn't care one bit.

Lorelei looked back and forth, then tugged at her wolf ears.

The ringing was deafening now, I'm not surprised that it was stinging her ears.

Golems started to march towards us.

Icicles slammed into dozens of them at a time, sending them flying off the island or stabbing them into the ground.

I walked up to the middle of the bridge and stopped, where a short, plump mage with red hair stared at me. He was covered in robes from head to toe. His face was red with anger and he was gripping his metal staff so tight that his fingers were white.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Look man, we were there for an hour and a half and I was just frustrated. I'll pay off the damages, I promise. Could I just meet with somebody?"

"Are you kidding me!?" the mage said. "Do you have any idea how old those rooms are!? They go back over a thousand years! They're irreplaceable."

"Ah," I said. "That's too bad."

Fiona had caught up with me and slapped her face with her palm. Lorelei groaned.

The man's left eye twitched.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said. “You’re going to sit there, nice and tight until the other professors get here. At that point, we’ll proceed to crush you into a paste, bring you back, then crush you again. Maybe, if you’re particularly lucky, we won’t kill you. Instead, we’ll just strip you of your magic by force over the next year or so.”

I hummed.

“And what if I decide not to go along with that?”

The man snarled.

“Unfortunately, you don’t have a choice!”

A bright glimmer caught my attention from behind me. A magical barrier.

I looked ahead and saw the same glimmer.

“This is the barrier of the first archmage,” the man said. “Professors have access to the controls, allowing us to trap people like I just did.”

I reached out my staff towards the barrier.

“Are you going to try to break it?!” The man laughed. “Please, by all means! No one has ever done so! Not even the first archmage could when he turned against the Institute—!”

My staff glowed and the barrier cracked.

The man’s face blanked.

“Huh?” he said.

In a moment, the barrier shattered both behind us and in front of us into ribbons of beautiful blue light.

The wind kicked up and carried the remnants of mana into the sky.

The man blinked.

“Okay, that’s a new one.”

I stepped forward.

Lorelei patted the guy on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, he does this regularly.”

Fiona walked up beside me and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Great, this is just great, I see no way in which this ends badly.”

I hummed.

“Would you have rather sat on your ass for another day whilst trying to figure out how to get past a door?”

Fiona’s face soured.

“Fine, point taken. Still, do you have a plan?”

Lorelei gave me a look.

“I’m kinda curious about that too. I hope you aren’t planning to just ask people—“

“Excuse me, do you know where Cedric the mage is?”

A man in wizard robes looked at me in horror.

“Oh sweet goodness!” he shouted. “You broke it! An archmage! I don’t—! I can’t...!”

He then fell over onto the grass.

I blinked.

“Well that’s not good,” I said. “It’ll make information-gathering much harder if people react like that.”

At this point, about four or five wizards were looking at the situation with curiosity.

“Excuse me, why is one of the professors knocked out?” a girl said as she approached us.

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. He just started muttering about me breaking something before falling over.”

The girl stared at me incredulously before shaking her head.

“Well, whatever.” She squinted her eyes. “Say, are you new? I don’t think I’ve ever met you before.”

I shook my head.

“No, I’m just here briefly to deal with some things.”

The girl tilted her head. “And I guess those girls behind you are your apprentices?”

Lorelei nodded her head while Fiona shrugged. “Yeah!” “More or less.”

I turned back and glared at them.

“Fine, whatever. Let’s just go with that,” I muttered.

The woman stroked her chin.

“So I guess you must be that guest lecturer who canceled at the last minute. I guess that’s why the professor fainted. He must’ve not been expecting you.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

“I’m not—oh, screw it. Sure, I’m a guest lecturer. I’m also looking for a student, could you give me a hand?”

The girl nodded. “Sure. What do you need, professor?”

I resisted the urge to grind my teeth.

“I’m looking for a student named Cedric. Do you know him?”

The girl blinked. “White hair, red eyes, big ears, bigger ego? That Cedric?”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

The girl snorted. “I’m not sure why you’re looking for him, but he should be in the library at about this time.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

We walked off.

“Huh, that girl didn’t like him,” Fiona said. “Like, a lot. She was suppressing it, but she couldn’t hide the look in her eyes.”

Lorelei looked at Fiona. “Yeah, I could see it too. She was one second away from clenching her fists.”

I hummed.

“That’s not too surprising. Cedric is a... a little grating if you don’t know him well.”

Lorelei gave a curious look. “I didn’t know you knew him.”

I bit my tongue.

“I don’t, I just know of him.”

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Let’s get back on topic, please? Can we find this guy? Where is the library anyway?”

I pointed up ahead.

“Right there,” I said.

Fiona looked where I’d pointed. “Oh.”

It was a beautiful building. Towering windows framed in wrought iron pierced the exterior. Ivy vines clung to the walls, weaving a natural tapestry around the structure. An intricate, weathered brass plaque near the entrance bore the university’s insignia—a cross with lines of equal length.

I opened the doors and stepped forward.

Inside, rows of towering bookshelves lined the walls, filled with worn tomes of forgotten lore. Dim light filtered through the high windows, casting a subdued glow on the organized chaos of books and journals. Dust motes danced in the sunbeams that managed to penetrate the ancient glass.

We continued stepping forward, Fiona uncaring while Lorelei looked around in wonder.

Eventually, we came to the central study area, where a man was sitting directly in the middle with his white hood drawn up. White hair and red eyes poked out from under the hood. A pair of half-moon spectacles sat on the bridge of his nose. Two pointed, elvish ears stretched out the hood. Nobody else was sitting. When someone caught sight of him, they quickly turned and walked away.

I walked up to him.

He didn't respond, instead focusing on the book he was studying. He turned a page.

"Excuse me?"

There was a beat of silence.

"Cedric?"

At this, he froze. He then looked up at me.

"May I inquire—" He adjusted his glasses back onto his face. "—as to why you are disturbing me?"

He was glaring at me.

I could already tell that this was gonna go poorly.

Chapter Sixteen

“My name is Alexander,” I said.

He didn’t respond.

“...usually this is the part where the other person says something.”

He looked down at his right hand and fiddled with the pen he was holding.

“That seems quite unnecessary, considering you already know my name.”

Crap, was he always like this? I couldn’t even remember. We’d been friends for so long that this part of him was completely gone when I knew him. I understood, intellectually, that he wouldn’t treat me well, but I guess it hadn’t fully settled in.

I cleared my throat.

“Cedric, we’re a group of adventurers who are looking for a mage to add to our group. I believe that you would be a good fit for us. Would you be willing to join?”

I held out my hand.

Cedric glanced at it before returning to his book.

“No.”

I sighed.

That was not entirely unexpected.

“Can you at least hear me out?” I said.

He shook his head.

“Not interested.”

“What if I told you that hundreds of people might be killed?”

His eyes froze on a specific section of his book, though his face was as stony as ever.

“Explain.”

“Me and my party have been tracking a real piece of work.” The words rushed out. “A monster, currently planning to blow up a city. You could do a lot of good.”

Cedric stared at me.

“Say that I’m willing to do this,” he said. “What reason do I have to believe you? For all I know, this could be a prank or a trap for me.”

Making progress. Cedric is a reasonable man. Er, elf.

“Firstly, my two companions—“ I pointed behind me and spotted that Fiona had disappeared. Lorelei waved at me. ”—erm, my one companion will testify to the fact that everything I’ve said is true.”

For a split second, Cedric’s eyebrows raised upwards.

“...a beastperson?” he muttered. “How curious...”

Before I could say a word, Cedric snorted.

“Words are cheap. You could’ve bought her off. I need something solid.”

I bit my lips.

“Something solid...”

The only thing I could think of was something related to the bomb, such as the ashes of Fara. But those were all blown up. Plus, how would I have gotten the opportunity to obtain them in the first place?

A droplet of sweat started to build up on my forehead. I hadn't thought this through. I could go back to the city and obtain evidence, but that would take too long.

I looked down at my hands. Was there anything that would substitute for an answer?

My eyes widened.

“My body.” I looked up at him. “Scan my body. I was caught in the blast. You'll find something that'll prove my story.”

Cedric nodded, his face as stoic as ever.

“Very well,” he said.

He raised his wand and waved it about, gold sparks of magic flying.

My body lit up with a yellow glow.

Cedric hummed as he went through the results.

“I see,” he said. “Yes, your story seems to match up. You were caught in a blast with an extraordinarily powerful magical substance. Something that I've never seen before.”

I grinned.

“Now that I've proved my story, would you be willing to join us?”

Cedric shook his head.

“Now that you've proven your story, it is all the more vital that I do not join you.”

My eyes widened.

“What?”

Cedric folded his arms, then shut his eyes.

“I am sure that you saw the way I was avoided by the other students, correct? There is a reason for that.”

My mouth was dry as I spoke.

“And what reason would that be?” I said.

He blinked slowly. His left ear twitched.

“Simple,” he said. “I’m a failure.”

I furrowed my eyebrows.

That doesn’t make sense. In my time, he was considered someone on par with the first archmage. How would he be considered a failure?

As if reading my thoughts, Cedric began to speak.

“I can cast simple spells well enough. But anything beyond that fizzles out. I’ve been here an unholy amount of time, but have yet to progress beyond the beginner stage.”

He sighed.

“So if you don’t mind, I’ll be heading out. I have studies to catch up on.”

I held out my hand. “Wait!”

Cedric looked back.

“Oh?”

“That book you were studying. I’ve seen it before,” I said. “Magical Transmutation in Folded Space.”

Cedric turned around and faced me.

“What about it?” he said.

“You were studying it, right?”

Cedric nodded. “I suppose. It won’t be of much use, considering I can’t apply a single bit of it.”

“But you understand it?” I said.

Cedric shrugged.

“Yeah, more or less.”

“That’s good, because I didn’t understand a single word.”

Cedric tilted his head, his facial expression distant and uninterested.

“What are you talking about?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“I mean that I’m terrible with magical theory. For goodness’s sake, I can barely read. I was raised in a small village and had to teach myself magic. I don’t understand all that complex theory stuff, damn it.”

Cedric bit his lip.

“What’s your point?”

I met his gaze. “There was a situation recently, a test bomb. Lives could’ve been saved if we had someone who knew magical theory like you do. Someone who could decipher the runes and the magic behind that thing. Besides that, you’re clearly intelligent beyond belief. We need someone like that.”

Cedric's eyes narrowed. "Are you telling the truth?"

I nodded. "I am. We were close, but without the right knowledge, we were powerless to stop it in time."

I could see the thoughts whirling in his mind.

"I don't know. How do you know that I am truly what you need?"

I put my hand on his shoulder.

"I just do. Trust me."

There was a beat of silence. Though his facial expression was as blank as ever, I could see in his eyes indecision warring.

"Hey, Alexander, are you almost done? This place is super boring. I managed to steal, like, five of the librarian's bracelets easy. Wasn't even a challenge."

Cedric's neck shot towards Fiona.

She raised her hand, wriggling the bracelets dangling on her wrist.

An invisible smirk crossed my face.

Cedric was focused on Fiona.

In my time, Cedric was hopelessly, completely in love with Fiona. From what I'd understood, he'd known as soon as he saw her. I wasn't certain of the veracity of this claim, however, so I didn't want to rely on it.

As it turns out, however, Lorelei was telling the truth.

Fiona caught sight of Cedric, then grinned.

She walked forward.

"Why hello there, handsome. You're going to be our new member?"

Cedric froze in place as Fiona stepped forward.

I was planning to use her as a last resort, but this works fine as well.

“What do you think? Would you be willing to give us a hand?” she said.

Hook. Line. Sinker.

Cedric nodded slowly.

“Very well. I will join you. Please, take care of me, Alexander.”

He held out his hand. I shook it with a smile.

“Glad to have you on board, buddy.”

He nodded.

“There is a slight problem,” he said.

My heart sank in an instant.

“What? What’s the issue?”

He gave me a serious look.

“If I leave in the middle of the semester, my grades will suffer.”

I slammed my face into my palm.

He was dead serious. I knew he was. He was like this in the future, always so fixated on the weirdest damn things.

“If that’s what you’re concerned about,” a voice spoke up. “I think we can work something out.”

We all turned towards the voice, revealing the short, plump mage who’d been standing in our way not so long ago.

“Headmaster Matar!” Cedric said. “What are you doing here?”

“So, Alexander, is it?” Matar said. “You want to take one of my students away, yes?”

I nodded. "Yes. I believe he will be of aid to me and my allies."

Matar shrugged.

"Very well," he said. "Cedric, we'd be willing to freeze your grades. The courses don't change in terms of content for the next ten years, so it should be fine. You'd be able to come back at any point and simply continue where you left off. Is that acceptable?"

Cedric nodded. "That would work perfectly, headmaster."

"However," Matar raised a finger. "There is a condition."

Cedric and I turned toward each other.

"What would this condition be?" I said.

Matar smirked.

"During your journey, I want you to learn something. And when you return to us, I want you to teach us what you learned."

Cedric furrowed his eyebrows.

"That's all?"

Matar smiled and nodded.

"That's all. Cedric, this university has failed you. Your failure is not because of a lack of hard work, or knowledge, but because we were unequipped to aid you. So know that as you leave us, I want you to learn something of value. That is all."

Cedric blinked.

"I... I see. I will learn something, professor, and bring it back."

"To light the way in a world of darkness," Matar said. "That is the Institute's motto. It is your motto as well, as a student of the Institute. Carry those words in your heart."

Cedric nodded.

“I will, professor.”

I smiled. The professor wasn’t such a bad guy after all.

#

By the time Cedric was done preparing, it was already evening. Nobody was feeling up to moving, so I begrudgingly agreed to stay the night. Come morning, however, everyone was ready to hit the road, including our newest member, Cedric.

He looked behind himself and stared at the school in the sky.

“I never realized how small it looks from a distance,” he muttered.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Already feeling homesick?”

He shrugged.

“A little, I suppose. I’ve been there for over a hundred years. It isn’t that big a surprise that I’d be somewhat nostalgic. Despite that, I’ve already committed myself. No time to look back.”

I nodded. “That’s the right approach.”

Right as we were about to continue talking, Fiona bounded up to the both of us and slung her arms around our shoulders. Cedric went stiff as a stone.

I just raised an eyebrow at Fiona.

“So, Cedric,” Fiona said. “You’re joining us, but I don’t think we’ve learned a single thing about you! I think we’re all hankering for answers, so...”

She looked at his pointed ears. It was a quick look, barely noticeable.

I wasn't surprised that she was curious. They'd both probably only seen elves in storybooks and from a distance. They were extremely rare everywhere, unlike beastpeople who were at least common in the Khanate.

Lorelei glanced over at us. For a while, she'd just been staring up at the horizon without a word.

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

"What about you?" Fiona said. "You curious, country girl?"

Lorelei blinked. "Sorry, what are we talking about?"

Fiona rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"What is up with you...? Whatever. Cedric, can you tell us about yourself?"

Cedric nodded. We all began to walk once more.

"Very well. My story is nothing interesting, however. Don't expect much."

Fiona grinned and slapped Cedric on the back, making him flinch.

"How about you let me be the judge of that, huh?"

"Well, I was raised in my early years by other members of my clan, the Albryx."

"The Albryx?" Lorelei said.

"They're a large elf clan separated from the rest of the world," I said "The main thing they're known for is their magical mastery and their physical appearance. You know, the white hair and red eyes."

Cedric nodded. "You are well informed. The only thing I would add is that only women are supposed to have white hair and red eyes."

Fiona raised an eyebrow as she walked.

“Wait, are you actually...?”

Cedric blinked.

“No,” he said. “I’m just the exception.”

Fiona nodded. “Right, gotcha.”

Lorelei raised her hand.

“What’s it like, being an elf? Is it true that your eyes shoot fire?”

Cedric gave Lorelei an incredulous look, his ears twitching in response to the question.

“What? No, I don’t have fire-shooting eyes. I’m long-lived and, in theory, should have an extremely powerful magical core. That’s it.”

“Long-lived?” Fiona said. “How old are you?”

Cedric’s face was as blank as usual.

“Oh, not very old,” he said. “Just two hundred.”

Lorelei and Fiona’s jaws dropped.

I suppressed a chuckle at their expense. I had much the same reaction upon running into Cedric for the first time.

“T-two hundred!?” Lorelei said.

Fiona grimaced. “Well... you look very good for your age.”

Cedric nodded.

“I thank you for the compliment.”

I raised my hand.

“Can we get back to your life in the Albryx clan?”

Cedric crossed his arms.

“For years, the elders in the clan had known that if a male was born with the features of the Albryx clan, it would symbolize the rise of a great evil. As such, I was trained as best they could to be ready for my role as a companion of the hero.”

Fiona’s eyes furrowed at the mention of a hero.

I coughed into my hand. Hopefully, she’d forget about that little bit.

“But it didn’t stick?” I said.

“It didn’t work.” Cedric shook his head. “I have a deft hand for anything that doesn’t require power, but anything besides that and I’m no better than a normal person.”

“Hey, like what Alexander said, we don’t need a mage,” Fiona said. “We need someone like you who can do all that intellectual stuff.”

“I see. I will endeavor to fulfill your expectations.”

I smiled. It looked like the group was getting along well.

“I believe it is my turn, now,” Cedric said. “May I inquire as to the origins of you two?”

Having already heard this conversation before, I tuned it out and focused on walking.

Lorelei was talking about her origins as a farm girl and how I fell out of the sky, though she was noticeably distracted. Fiona then spoke about how she was a thief and agreed to do a job for me.

Cedric accepted the story in stride, not even batting an eye at Lorelei’s mention of me falling out of the sky. He even noted that there are multiple historical examples of such an incident occurring.

Classic Cedric.

Eventually, the group was finished, and Cedric turned towards me.

“And what about you, Alexander? Where do you hail from?” Cedric said.

Fiona laughed. “I’m afraid, Cedric, that our mysterious teacher quite refuses to elaborate on his origins.”

I snorted. “You never asked.”

Fiona made an incredulous sound, scrunching up her face and gaping.

“Are you kidding me?! Of course we asked!”

I raised an eyebrow. “If I’m not mistaken, all you did was ask me about where I got my skills from and all that. You never actually asked where I was from.”

Fiona opened her mouth, then shut it.

“Oh.”

Lorelei grinned. “Alright, so where are you from?”

I shrugged.

“I’m very uninteresting, I’m afraid. I was born in a small village somewhere in...” I paused. Where was I from? My nationality had never been important to me or anyone in my family. I think I was somewhere on the border between Joim, Iulune, and the unsettled frontier, which further added to the confusion.

I shook my head.

“I’m not sure.”

Fiona and Lorelei shot each other a glance before returning their attention back to me.

“My parents learned that I had magical abilities,” I said. “In particular, I was good at water magic. The village realized that this could come in handy and agreed to pool money to get me a spell book. I taught myself the basics of water magic and that was that.”

“What was your family like?” Lorelei said.

I opened my mouth, only to pause.

Crap, what were they like?

It’d been so long since I last even thought of them. I’d pushed them out of my mind after finding that my village had been burned to the ground.

Seeing my visible frustration, Fiona grimaced.

“What about their names? Any siblings?”

Siblings!

“A sister!” I said. “I had a sister!”

“Oh?” Cedric said. “I do as well. She’s a little tyke. What about you?”

The memories trickled back in.

“Rose, her name was Rose,” I said. “She was a wild thing, if I remember correctly. Always running around and climbing trees. She liked... meat a great deal, I think.”

I rubbed my chin.

“Dad was a tanner. He was a good man. Very quiet, stoic, but always willing to lend an ear and help out around the village. Mom was the opposite. She worked part-time as a sewer, and she was extremely talkative. She would talk about anything and everything.”

Was there anything else?

Fiona furrowed her eyebrows and frowned.

“You know, you’re describing your family very—” She froze. “Oh, that’s how it is.”

She shut her mouth and looked away.

Lorelei bit her lip. Cedric seemed confused, but the abrupt change in mood was enough

to get him to stop talking.

Damn. I think I might've implied something different than what I'd intended. I wasn't sure how or where, but they all had entirely wrong ideas about me and my childhood, I was sure of it.

And here I was intending to assure them that I'd had a normal life. Well, that worked perfectly.

Crap.

Chapter Seventeen

“Is there, hah, any reason why—ack—we didn’t take a kaba carriage?”

I turned back towards Cedric and raised an eyebrow.

“Did you see something that I didn’t? As far as I can tell, it’s all been wilderness for the past 20 miles. If you spot a kaba carriage, point it out to me.”

Cedric had gone through challenges before. Tough challenges that stimulated his brain and his magical core to the extreme, I’m sure. Unfortunately, it looked like he’d never done physical labor once in his lifetime.

The first day had been tough, but manageable for him. Then he’d woken up and was instantly complaining of sore feet.

Lorelei turned towards Cedric and tilted her head.

“We’ve only been traveling for a day. How are you already tired?”

Cedric frowned. “I’m not a physical fighter. I spent every day in the library. I’m not cut out for this kind of stuff.”

“Hm, perhaps you ought to step out of that library once in a while.” Fiona smirked.

“Nonsense—“

I held up my hand.

“Alright, break. We’ve been going for an hour and we’re ahead of schedule anyway.”

Muttered agreement rang out as everyone walked away to find somewhere to rest.

Except Lorelei. She simply stopped in place.

Well, everyone had left. This was as good a time as any.

I steeled my nerves and stepped up to her.

“Lorelei.”

She didn’t respond.

“Lorelei!”

She jumped and turned around.

“What!? Why’d you shout!?”

I sighed. “Because you weren’t responding.”

She furrowed her eyebrows.

“I wasn’t?”

I shook my head. “You weren’t. Lorelei, we need to talk. You’ve been distracted and unfocused for the past week. What’s going on?”

Lorelei blinked.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Are you asking a question or stating a conclusion?”

She bit her lip.

“It’s what happened back with the bomb.”

I tilted my head and ran my memories back to our time with the bomb. She’d had to leave me behind to preserve her chances of survival. Was that it?

“Does this have anything to do with you running when I asked you to?”

Lorelei started and shook her head with a surprised look.

“No... Although now I’m feeling guilty about that too.”

“It’s guilt? Are you feeling guilty because of the people who were caught in the blast?”

She shook her head, a look of distress overcoming her features. “No, I... I don’t think so. I feel bad about that, but that’s not what it is.”

After a minute of thinking, I shook my head.

“I have no idea what the issue is, Lorelei,” I said. “As far as I can tell, you did the best you could.”

Her face twisted up and she looked down.

“Alexander... I killed those people.”

I blinked.

What was so strange about that?

“Okay...?”

Lorelei took a deep breath. "It's just... I didn't expect it to be so... so personal. I watched them fall, one by one, and I knew it was because of me. I saw the light leave their eyes,"

Oh crap.

She took someone’s life. She took several people’s lives. For people who’ve never done

that before, it can be terrifying, right?”

I shook my head.

“Lorelei, at the end of the day, those people made their choices. They chose to become thugs and grunts for the High One. They chose to fight,” I said. “They didn’t have to, but they did.”

I shut my eyes.

“They made their choices, Lorelei, and you did what you had to do. Sometimes, we're put in situations where we have to make choices we never thought we would.”

Lorelei clenched her fists.

“Even if I understand that, I still feel horrible.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across my face. “It's not easy, and that's a good thing. It means you still have your humanity, your conscience.”

There was a beat of silence.

Lorelei nodded slowly.

“Right. I... thank you, teacher.”

I didn’t dispute the title, instead smiling and putting my hand on her shoulder.

“It’ll go away in time. And we’ll be there to help you.”

She nodded, then looked away.

“Say... do you still...? When you kill, do you...”

Her voice trailed off and she shook her head.

“Never mind.”

When we got back, Fiona led us back into the city using a tunnel that she'd dug out for 'cases just like this one'. Cedric was quite shocked to learn that we were wanted by the Lords of Joim for the bombing.

"I'm sorry, what?" he said. "You're telling me that you three are criminals?"

I raised a finger. "Alleged criminals. Except for Fiona. She's just actually a criminal."

Cedric didn't change his facial expression in the slightest.

"Oh spirits, I'm screwed, aren't I?"

Soon enough, we were settled into another one of Fiona's myriad emergency safe houses.

"Right, so..." I said. "Goals. We need to find Brae and cut him and his buddies down before they ever wheel in that damn bomb."

Fiona raised a hand. "Right, so how are we going to do that?"

I nodded. "Good question. Cedric?"

Cedric's pointed at himself.

"Yes?"

I looked at him pointedly.

"So how do we find Brae?"

Cedric tilted his head.

"Why would I know?" he said. "I'm a mage, not an investigator."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "But you're smart, right?"

Cedric frowned slightly.

"Not like that. I'm a mage."

“Sure you have an idea or two? I mean, the bomb is magical. Can’t you come up with something?” I said.

He sighed. “I don’t know what you’re expecting from me.”

I scrunched up my face as I thought.

Oh, maybe that would work?

“Fiona will give you a kiss if you figure it out.”

Fiona glanced at me with a raised eyebrow while Lorelei squeaked and reddened at my words.

Cedric, meanwhile, simply froze in place. His head mechanically tilted towards Fiona.

“Is this true?”

Fiona shrugged, though she was visibly giving me a look of confusion.

“Sure. Why not?”

Cedric’s head swiveled back towards me.

I could see the gears in his brain turn at maximum capacity. After a minute, he stood up.

“The materials,” he said. “It takes a ton of magical materials of a very specific quality to regulate the energy of that level. If we can investigate who’s been selling in big doses, then we’ve found our bomb.”

I smirked. Just gotta apply the right type of pressure, and Cedric will never let you down.

“That’s exactly what we needed. Thanks, Cedric.”

He nodded.

Fiona got up and suddenly approached Cedric, causing him to freeze in place.

She gave him a smirk, pulled his collar to force him down to her level, then gave him a

peck on his cheek.

Lorelei squeaked and covered her eyes. I sighed. Those two would never change.

#

When Fiona got back, it was to the sight of Lorelei running laps back and forth.

“One more, then fifty pushups!” I shouted.

Fiona stepped to my side and smirked.

“Really putting her through the wringer, huh?”

“You have the information?”

Fiona nodded.

“As you know, there were three major targets. The Enchanted Emporium, Mystical Marvels Magic Store, and Spellbound Wonders Boutique.”

“They really roll off the tongue,” I said.

Fiona hummed and continued with her explanation.

“The Enchanted Emporium is the simplest one, by far. They rely on physical guards as opposed to magic, so it’ll be no trouble. Mystical Marvels Magic Store is weird. They use mechanical traps for some reason.”

She clicked her tongue.

“Spellbound Wonders Boutique is going to be an unknown factor. As soon as I stepped inside, I triggered some sort of magic alarm. It’s expensive to upkeep, but it works damn well.”

I nodded.

“This is where Cedric will be useful. He’ll be able to disable things like that quietly. The issue is that it’ll take quite a bit of time.”

Fiona stroked her chin.

“Perhaps it would be a good idea to go loud? Just break in through the front door?”

My lips drew tight against my face.

“Perhaps not,” I said. “We’d get every guard in the city on our tails in minutes.”

“So we’ll have to take—wait, we? Are you...?”

I nodded.

“I’m a deft hand at stealth. You’ve seen me. I can be of aid.”

Fiona shrugged.

“I’ve seen you sneak around in the forest, but an urban environment is different. I mean, have you ever been on a heist before?”

A dry smirk came over my face.

“I had a friend who often needed help with that sort of thing. She taught me the basics. I’m sure I’ll have no issue.”

Fiona smirked and tilted her head.

“Is this the same friend who taught you how to pickpocket?”

I nodded.

Fiona whistled. “She must’ve been one hell of a thief.”

I shut my eyes.

“She was. One of the best.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Right then, so tonight?”

I nodded.

“Tonight.”

Chapter Eighteen

The day passed quickly and soon enough night had fallen. Our footsteps pattered over the stone tiles as we leaped from roof to roof.

“Enchanted Emporium is up ahead,” Fiona said.

I nodded.

We both came to a stop and hid behind the edge of the building’s roof to hide from the lights illuminating the Enchanted Emporium.

I peeked my head over the edge and took a look.

It was an unusual design—essentially a giant tent with red and white stripes. Through the tent flap entrance, I could see that magical items were laid haphazardly on top of rugs.

“There’s no magical defenses, like what I said earlier. I did forget to mention, however, that their office area is in plain sight, which means that anyone taking them...”

“Would be instantly spotted. Great.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow.

“Already giving up?”

I shook my head. “No, just reconsidering our strategy. We could try to sneak in, but I think that would be too much of a pain.”

Fiona tilted her head.

“So what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that boldness is the name of the game, this time around.”

I leaped down and softened my fall with a quick application of a water shield.

Fiona scrambled down the building and followed after me.

“Alexander, what are you doing?”

“Hiding in plain sight,” I said.

We approached a guard, who perked up when he caught sight of us.

“Excuse me, we’re agents from the lords of Joim.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Can I ask why you’re here?” the guard said.

I gave the man an apologetic look.

“I think you know why. Sorry.”

The guard looked at us, then groaned.

“Again?! More noise complaints?! You people have been here twice already!”

I shrugged. “Honestly, between you and me? The higher-ups know that it’s all ridiculous. Unfortunately, we’re obligated to check things out.”

The guard snorted. “Ah, the life of a bureaucrat, eh?”

I laughed.

“Yeah, you get it. So can me and my partner take a quick look around?” I raised my hands. “We’ll be in and out, promise. I just need to be able to say that I went over the whole building.”

The guard nodded and stepped aside.

“Of course. Just head straight in and tell them what you told me. Everybody’s used to it by now.”

I nodded. “Thank you kindly.”

We both walked in.

Fiona raised an eyebrow. “How on earth did that work out so well?”

I shrugged.

“Pure luck. I took a gamble and it paid off.”

Fiona pinched the bridge of her nose. “Sometimes, Alexander, I question your good judgment.”

I smirked. “Good idea. I have no good judgment to speak of, so you’re probably making the right call.”

We walked straight to the back of the tent where there were some labeled file cabinets. I stepped up, plucked all the papers related to the past three months, and stuffed them into my bag. From there, we simply turned around and walked out.

“Thanks for the help,” I said to the guard as we walked by.

He nodded his head. “Of course, sir.”

In moments, we were back on the roofs, running towards our next destination.

“Great work,” Fiona said. “I had my doubts, but that went wonderfully.”

I smiled.

“Thank you.” I leaped to the next roof. “My teacher told me that confidence is key in things like this. If you just act like you’re supposed to be there, people will make their own assumptions.”

Fiona hummed.

“Sounds like something I’d say. Is your teacher a distant relative of mine?” Fiona said.

I coughed.

“Not to my knowledge.”

Fiona hummed.

Soon enough we were at the next location. Mystical Marvels Magic Store.

“This next woman was a bit smarter. Unlike the last one, she’s not relying on humans except to guard the outside. Instead, she elected to trust in mechanical traps.”

I snorted.

“Bad decision.”

Fiona flicked her wrist, revealing a set of lock-picking tools hidden in her sleeve. She grinned.

“That dungeon from earlier was a bit too strange for me to figure out. But something like this will be no issue.”

I nodded. “Excellent. Let’s get going.”

Fiona pointed at the roof of the building. We waited for the guard on top to turn around, which he did.

In a flash, we were both on the roof of Mystical Marvels Magic Store. I dashed forward

and cast a quick spell to knock the guard unconscious. He fell to the ground with a thump.

“Nice,” Fiona said as she approached the door leading down into the building. “Maybe I should pick up a spell or two if it can do things like that.”

I hummed. “That wouldn’t be a bad idea. Learn some of the basics, at least.”

Fiona didn’t respond, as she was engrossed in her lock-picking. In three seconds, it was done and the door clicked open.

“Nice,” I said as I walked past her.

“What can I say? It’s a gift.”

As we walked down the stairs, Fiona held up her hand, signaling for us to stop. She then cracked open one of the bricks in the wall, revealing some kind of pulley and gear mechanism.

She pulled out her tools and got back to work.

“I just know that if Lorelei were here, she’d be horrified,” Fiona muttered. “She always thinks she’s so much better than me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? I don’t think it’s that way at all.”

Fiona scoffed.

“Please. Every time I mention my skills with a lock-pick or whatever, she always gives me this look.”

I knew what she was talking about.

“Lorelei was raised in a small village on the frontier. It’s not surprising that she’d dislike thieving. I don’t think that means that she thinks of herself as better than you, though, she just disapproves of your life choices.”

“Yeah, well, those life choices are what’s about to save everyone’s ass.”

There was a click. She turned and nodded at me.

“We can move now.”

We continued walking down the stairs, leading us to a room full of drawers.

“Right, this one is labeled the current year.” I pointed at a drawer. “Is it trapped?”

Fiona nodded.

“Yeah. Give me a sec and I’ll have it fixed in a jiffy.”

She pulled out her tools and got to work.

“You were raised in a village too, right?” Fiona said.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“So then why don’t you dislike me or whatever?”

I leaned against one of the drawers and looked up towards the ceiling.

“I remember that I was raised similar to Lorelei,” I said. “If you’d asked me what I thought about thieves five years ago, I probably would’ve told you that they’re the scum of the earth.”

“What changed?” Fiona said.

I gave a smile.

“I met a woman. She was a thief, but she had a heart of gold. Really cared about the people around her. It was hard not to like her once I got to know her a bit better.”

Fiona snorted.

“You sound like you were in love with her.”

I choked on the air in my throat. Coughs slammed out of my chest and into the air. In desperation, I beat my fist against my solar plexus in an attempt to dislodge the spittle that was

now residing in my throat.

“Nope!” I said. “Nope! Absolutely not!”

Fiona stopped and gave me a raised eyebrow.

“Strong reaction,” she said. “Do you mind not having a freak out and triggering an alarm?”

I cleared my throat and shook my head.

“Right, sorry. It’s just that, well, she was like my older sister! Even the thought of a romantic relationship with her is weird. Besides, she had her eyes on someone else.”

Fiona smirked, even as she continued to disable the trap.

“And so did you, right?”

I furrowed my eyebrows.

“Not to my knowledge..”

Fiona turned. She raised her eyebrows.

“Nah, I’ve seen that look in your eyes before. You had someone.”

I sighed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Fiona rolled her eyes and returned her focus to her tools.

“Y’know, I’ve avoided asking because I always thought it would be mean, maybe even cruel, but I’ve got to know... what happened to all the people you used to travel with?”

I bit my bottom lip.

“What makes you think anything happened to them?”

Fiona sighed.

“You always use past tense when referring to them. Of course something happened.”

I clenched my fists.

What was I supposed to say? I left them behind like a coward?

Fiona glanced at me.

“Don’t answer that.”

I chuckled, the sound dead and lifeless.

“Most of them are dead.”

Fiona’s lock-pick froze in place. After a moment, she sighed.

“Damn. That, uh... that sucks.”

I gave a dry laugh.

“Understatement of the century.”

An uncomfortable grimace appeared over Fiona’s face.

“You said most. Are a few of them still alive?”

I nodded.

“One. And once we find her or she finds us, everything will be set right.”

“You have that much faith in her?”

I nodded.

“I do. She’s like Lorelei. It’s hard not to have faith in her, you know?” I laughed. “All of you remind me of them. Sometimes it’s like they’re still with me.”

Fiona furrowed her eyebrows, then opened her mouth to respond.

Just as she was about to talk, however, a soft click echoed out from her tools.

“That’s it,” she said. “We’re in.”

She slid the drawer open.

I stepped up to her side and began to sort through the documents.

“Right, we’ll just take everything like what we did with the last place,” I said.

Fiona nodded and in a moment we had all the relevant documents stuffed inside the bag slung around my neck.

Soon enough, we were back outside and dashing towards the final location.

“Cedric should be waiting there,” I said.

Fiona nodded.

“Good. You’re sure he’ll be able to deal with the magical defenses?”

“Certain. Say what you will about his power, but his knowledge of magical control and magical theory is unmatched.”

Fiona shook her head, a faint smile on her face.

“Y’know, that kind of trust will get you killed one day.”

I glanced at her as I leaped to the next roof.

“What do you mean?”

Fiona sighed, then casually did a flip as she went to the next roof.

“You never met the guy in person when you hired him. You haven’t seen him do magic yet. The best you have is secondhand information. But you seem certain about him.”

I shrugged.

“Well, I know that I can trust information. Never steered me wrong before.”

Fiona rolled her eyes. “Yeah, of course. But even if you understand something intellectually, there’s a big difference between that and believing it in your heart.”

I tilted my head.

“What do you mean?”

Fiona snorted.

"What I mean, Alexander, is that you can read about a bridge being safe all day long, understand its structure, and trust the engineering behind it. But until you step onto that bridge, feel its sway under your feet, and cross to the other side, most can't truly say they believe it'll hold their weight. That's what I mean."

She continued.

“But you believe in Cedric. You have the conviction that one has when they say that the sun will rise in the morning because they’ve seen it rise a hundred times before. It’s strange, honestly. I don’t think I’ve ever met a grown man who has that kind of attitude before.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t tell if you’re insulting me or complimenting me.”

Fiona smirked.

“Who knows? Perhaps I’m doing both at the same time.”

I opened my mouth to retort, when I caught sight of a figure waiting on the roof.

“Cedric,” I said as I came to a stop. “It’s good to see you.”

Cedric nodded.

“As requested, I’ve been waiting here.”

I noted that his hair was matted and he was sweating buckets.

“You climbed up here, didn’t you?”

Cedric nodded.

“Yes.”

I sighed.

“If you were having trouble getting up, then we would’ve spotted you in the alley and just taken you. You didn’t need to strain yourself.”

Cedric looked away.

“Ridiculous, I had no issues arriving up here.”

Fiona snickered into her hand.

“Yeah... well, the door’s over here. Can you do your stuff?” I said.

Cedric frowned.

“It’s a delicate magical process involving the manipulation of what can be as many as a hundred variables. I hold a four-dimensional image in my mind as I manipulate it. It’s far more than just doing ‘stuff’.”

I blinked.

“Right, so can you do it?”

Cedric’s nose twitched.

“Yes, I can do it. Give me a moment.”

Fiona gave him a thumbs up. “Yeah, you got it, Cedric!”

Cedric’s lips twitched at Fiona’s comment. He turned around and faced the door. After taking a breath, he put his hand against the door.

A spellcircle lit up on the wood.

“Hmm, interesting. It’s a modified lock with extra defenses,” Cedric said.

Fiona looked at the door and scrunched up her eyebrows. “Will it be an issue?”

Cedric shook his head.

“Maybe, if it were someone else. But for one of my caliber, this is child’s play.”

Fiona frowned at the arrogant words.

I just smirked. He more than deserved the praise, after all.

The spellcircle’s light increased in luminosity. The yellow sigils shifted and moved, switching positions at random. After a moment, the spellcircle stopped glowing. Cedric reached forward and unlocked the door.

He nodded.

“Mission accomplished.”

I nodded.

“Alright, you and Fiona head down. I’m kind of tired.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow while Cedric’s eyes widened by an inch.

“Is that a good idea?” Fiona said.

I shrugged.

“I’m just here for backup in case things get heavy. We’ve had no trouble. You and Cedric should be enough to deal with whatever they’ve got down there.”

Fiona cast a glance at Cedric before shrugging.

“Okay... what will you be doing while we’re off working?”

I shrugged.

“I’ll just stay up here and watch out for any problems.”

Fiona sighed.

“Fine. Let’s get going, Pages.”

Cedric frowned.

“My name is not Pages, it is Cedric—“

Fiona grabbed him and pulled him downstairs.

I smirked before sighing. My head tilted up towards the stars, glittering in the sky.

I hadn't been lying. I was tired. Perhaps not physically, but in a deeper way, down to my very bones. That conversation had just been a bit too much for me. I needed a break.

I had to admit it.

I missed Lorelei.

The Lorelei here was similar to her, but she was so different at the same time. For moments, I could sometimes pretend it was her. Then she would say something that my Lorelei would never say and the image would shatter. Why couldn't she be my Lorelei and not this Lorelei—?

The urge to vomit overcame me.

What was I thinking? That's equivalent to saying that I want the current Lorelei dead, isn't it? Maybe I miss mine, but not to the point where I'd sacrifice this Lorelei.

I shook my head and cleared my mind of my thoughts. I wasn't sure how long I'd stared up at the moon when I heard a strange noise.

A thud. Then a loud crash. A boom.

“Damn it, just let us have these documents, you jackass!”

I sighed.

Can't leave them alone for a minute, eh?

Chapter Nineteen

I dashed down the stairs, the sounds of smashing and crashing filling my ears.

“INTRUDERS DETECTED. COUNTERMEASURES DEPLOYED.”

I found myself in a dimly lit chamber filled with an array of arcane contraptions and glass display cases. In the center stood a tall steel golem with long, snake-like arms and legs. Black eyes focused on me in an instant. Fiona and Cedric stood near the center of the room, surrounded by cascading metal shards and flying sparks.

Fiona evaded a shower of razor-sharp shards with a quick sidestep. Cedric, on the other hand, had taken refuge behind a protective shimmering shield conjured from a hastily muttered incantation.

"About time you decided to join the party," Fiona said. "Any chance you can just blow this thing to shreds with your tsunami spell thing?"

I snorted.

“In a building like this? We’re going to attract attention from every guard in a mile’s

radius, if we haven't already. That's ignoring the chance of collateral damage."

Fiona cursed, then focused her eyes on the golem.

"Well, we'll have to do this the hard way. Where the hell is Lorelei when we need her?"

I turned my eyes towards her. "You're the one who argued that we shouldn't bring unnecessary people along."

She glared at me. "Thank you for that reminder."

The steel golem swung its massive arm at Fiona, who barely managed to duck beneath it. The air filled with the sound of rending metal as the golem's hand smashed into a nearby bookshelf, scattering ancient tomes and scrolls.

I had to act quickly. I raised my hand, focusing my energy. Water began to swirl and churn around me, forming into a dense mass. With a flick of my wrist, I directed it towards the golem's legs. The water slammed into its joints, freezing instantly upon contact.

For a moment, it seemed like the golem was stuck. Then it turned its eyes back at me.

"MOVEMENT HINDERED. INCREASING MANA FLOW COEFFICIENT."

The legs of the golem glowed with a red light, then it snapped the massive ice chunks off like they were nonexistent.

"Perhaps we can blind it?" Cedric said.

I nodded. "Do it!"

With a flick of his wrist, Cedric directed a sharp current of water at the golem's eyes. The water whipped forward, turning into ice shards that should have blinded the construct.

And it did. For a moment. Then the golem's eyes gleamed with a renewed intensity, and it blinked the ice shards away.

"ADJUSTING OPTICAL SENSORS," it said.

Cedric muttered under his breath, "I should have stayed at the university."

The golem lunged at Fiona, its snake-like limbs coiling around her.

I rushed forward, a plan forming in my mind. I focused my energy, causing the water around me to surge. In a single, fluid motion, I summoned a torrential downpour. The room transformed into a chaotic battleground of water, metal, and sparks.

The water threw the coiled arms away, allowing Fiona to jump back.

"Do we have any plan!?" Fiona shouted.

Cedric's voice cut in, "The golem's power source is at its core, but it's heavily shielded. I can disrupt its energy flow temporarily if I get close enough."

Fiona shot him a look. "And how do you plan on doing that!?"

Cedric glanced at the golem that was getting to its feet after my attack.

"I'm still working on that part," he said.

The golem surged forward with renewed vigor, its metal limbs clanging against the stone floor. Fiona darted away from its grasp, avoiding being crushed. Cedric simply threw himself backward, landing against the stone with a loud grunt.

I kept my eyes on the golem as I summoned more water, this time shaping it into a high-pressure jet. The stream of water blasted against the construct's chest, creating dents in the metal armor. But it still moved forward, undeterred.

"ADJUSTING DEFENSIVE SYSTEMS," the golem said, and a shimmering force field enveloped it. The water jet did not affect it, and the golem's progress continued.

I stopped the jet and cursed.

Fiona snarled. She lunged at the golem, her daggers gleaming in the dim light. She sliced at the construct's legs, leaving shallow scratches on its surface. The golem retaliated, its snake-like arm swinging towards her.

I had to act fast. With a wave of my hand, I conjured a turbulent whirlpool at Fiona's feet, yanking her out of the golem's path. She tumbled to safety as the golem's strike found nothing but air.

My eyes darted around the room, seeking an advantage. The shelves and display cases around us were filled with magical relics, some of them potentially powerful enough to disrupt the golem. I pointed to the nearest case, which held a fragile-looking crystal that radiated energy.

"Try breaking that crystal!" I said to Cedric. "It might be able to short-circuit the golem's systems!"

Cedric nodded, and with a flick of his wrist, he sent a bolt of magic toward the crystal. It shattered into a burst of shimmering light and released a wave of translucent arcane energy that surged toward the golem.

The wave washed over the golem. Sparks flew when it made contact.

"ERROR, MANA OVERFLOW."

"Now, Cedric!" I said.

Cedric dashed forward and slammed his hand against the golem's chest. There was a bright glow coming out of the joints of the golem.

For a brief second, I could see the golem attempt to stand up. Cedric grunted and pressed his hand deeper into the golem's chest.

The glow increased in luminosity before decreasing into nothingness.

Cedric staggered to his feet. Fiona glared at the thing, walked up, and kicked the golem.

We all looked completely beat.

“That was horrible,” I said.

Cedric sighed.

“At least it’s over. Can we get the documents and leave now?”

I nodded and stepped over to one of the drawers. I popped it open and stuffed the relevant papers into my bag.

The door then slammed open, revealing ten guards.

“Stop right there, criminal scum!”

I raised my eyes towards the heavens.

“Spirits, why do you do this to me?” I said.

#

We escaped, obviously, though it was a close thing. By the end of it, we were all bruised, cut, and exhausted. Lorelei had been furious, making us promise that she wouldn’t be excluded next time. I wasn’t quite sure if she was angry about our injuries or if she was angry about losing out on the chance to fight a golem, but I digress.

The next few days were spent searching the records for any hint of Brae. Eventually, we found it.

“H, One,” Cedric said. “Little bit on the nose there, hm?”

I snatched the paper out of his hand and scanned it over myself.

“Brae is not exactly known for his subtlety,” I said. “I suppose this checks out.”

Lorelei grinned.

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” she said. “It’s time to go hunting.”

The record of sale included the exact location and distance from Joim. It wasn’t far, thankfully, only a day’s travel.

“We’ll finally have the advantage,” Lorelei said. “There’s no way Brae will have seen us coming.”

I nodded.

“Right. We’ll have the advantage. We go in, take out Brae, get evidence, then have him imprisoned.”

I paused.

“Or killed. He’s more valuable because of his information, but if things turn out that way, I won’t mind.”

Both Cedric and Fiona gave me raised eyebrows, while Lorelei frowned before nodding sharply.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s get going.”

#

“So, are you excited?” Lorelei said.

We were walking along the road that would lead us to Brae’s hideout.

I snorted. “Excited is an odd choice of wording. I would say more... anticipatory.”

“I suppose that I can understand that,” Lorelei said. “It’s hard to feel excited about anything relating to that creep.”

I nodded.

Silence descended over us. Behind us, I could hear Cedric trying to engage Fiona in

conversation. Fiona was messing with him. She'd managed to convince him to give her half of everything he owned at this point, which was somewhat worrying.

"He's never going to see any of that stuff again," Lorelei said.

I laughed.

"Don't be so sure." I leaned in. "After all, if they do get together, then he'd probably end up getting everything back."

Lorelei gave me a raised eyebrow.

"Get together? What makes you say that?"

I tilted my head and smirked.

"What, you can't see the chemistry? They're perfect for each other."

Lorelei scrunched up her face as she looked at me.

"Yeah, I wouldn't count on it. She likes him about as much as a kaba likes a saddle."

I shrugged.

"For now. There's nothing saying that things can't change, right?"

Lorelei shrugged back.

"I suppose."

We continued walking.

"You do that a lot," Lorelei said.

"Do what?"

"Act like you know something we don't."

I blinked, then turned towards her.

"What do you mean?"

She gave me a pointed look.

“It’s weird. How do you know so much?”

Control my heartbeat. She’ll pick up on it and see through me instantly.

“I just have a good source of information, that’s all.”

Breath. Slow.

Lorelei nodded. “I see. That’s pretty amazing stuff.”

I nodded.

“It’s amazing how far we’ve come,” I said. “You’ve turned from a farm girl into a true warrior. I’m proud of you.”

Lorelei scratched her cheek and looked away. “Gosh. Thanks, Alexander. You know that it’s all thanks to you, though.”

I shook my head. “It isn’t. You would’ve become this strong with or without me.”

Lorelei sighed.

“You always say that, and you sound so sure of it. Can’t I just thank you, then you say ‘you’re welcome’ like a normal person?”

I sighed.

“Alright, can we stop dancing around the issue? What is it that you want to talk to me about?”

Lorelei sighed and looked away. “I thought I was being subtle.”

“Maybe you were. I don’t know. To me, it was like a blaring alarm.”

Lorelei bit her lip and stopped in place. Fiona and Cedric were so engrossed in their conversation that they simply walked by us.

“Fiona was drunk last night,” she said. “We talked and I got mad at her. She started insulting me. She said some... really strange things.”

“Like what?”

Lorelei gave me a fleeting glance.

“Is it true that you had comrades before us?”

I blinked.

“Wait, can we go back to what Fiona said?”

“Please, just answer my question first.”

I shrugged.

“Yeah, I used to have some comrades.”

“What were they like?”

I hummed.

“Perhaps I’ll tell you, one day. But not today.”

Lorelei pouted.

“Why not?”

I reached up and ruffled her hair, causing her to squeak and jump away.

“You’ll find out, one day,” I said.

She glared daggers at me as she tried to put her short black hair back in place.

#

“Inside the creepy forest, huh?” Fiona said. “I’m not much for the fairy tales, but even I can tell when we’re about to do something painfully stupid.”

‘Barnt Forest’ was where we were instructed to go on the little slip of paper telling us

where Brae was. The locals had given us worried looks and warned us to turn back. They spoke of ghosts and demons. We thought it was just superstition at the time. Now, I wasn't so sure.

The forest was almost hilariously creepy. Fog weaved in and out of dead, lifeless trees. Silence covered the area like a blanket, with nothing to be heard except our breathing. And while it was hard to notice, one couldn't help but smell the faintest scent of rotting flesh.

All in all, it seemed like a lovely place to go for a honeymoon or something.

"Right, can we just turn around now?" Lorelei said. "Like, is there any reason why we need to go in?"

"Gotta save Joim, remember?" I said.

Cedric glanced at Lorelei, then adjusted his glasses.

"As lovely an idea as walking away sounds, I must confess that I'd feel quite guilty if we simply left thousands to die due to our fear."

Fiona snorted. "That's a you thing. I'd be perfectly happy if that city was blown to pieces."

Cedric hummed. "Yes, well, we all have our quirks and all that business."

I rolled my eyes.

"We are not leaving. Can we quit it with the delaying and just head in already?"

Fiona looked up at the sky and then glared at me. "Fine, but if I die, I'm going to haunt you guys forever."

Lorelei walked past her.

"Restless spirits aren't that strong, Fiona."

Fiona turned around and glared at Lorelei. Another argument triggered which I simply

pushed out of my mind.

Cedric gave me a raised eyebrow.

“I swear, one of those two girls is going to kill the other one day.”

I shrugged. “You might be surprised.”

Cedric hummed and began to walk forward.

“Perhaps,” he said.

I followed in after them.

As we moved forward, the fog thickened, obscuring our vision and shrouding us in a mist.

Cedric, of course, was unconcerned by our surroundings, instead taking notes on the forest.

Lorelei groaned as she looked around. “Are we even sure we’re heading in the right direction? This place is like a maze!”

“Cheer up, farm girl,” Fiona said. “Maybe the ghosts in this place would love to hear one of your harvest songs.”

Lorelei shot her a withering glare before quickening her pace.

As we continued moving, a sinking feeling entered my chest.

“We’ve been here before,” I said as I stopped.

Fiona groaned and Lorelei kicked the ground.

“Yeah, I was suspecting the same,” Lorelei said. “It felt like we were going in loops.”

Cedric hummed.

“Could it be magical in origin? Some kind of trap?”

Fiona shook her head.

"If it was truly a trap, we'd be surrounded by Brae's men," she said. "There would've been an alarm."

I nodded. "Fiona's right. This is some kind of property of the forest itself. It's very clever when you think about it. Brae put himself out there because he knew anyone coming after him would simply starve to death in this forest."

Cedric pushed his glasses up.

"That sounds rather unpleasant."

Lorelei glanced around, her wolf tail flickering behind her.

"We can't give up," she said. "There's gotta be a way out of this mess!"

Fiona snorted. "Maybe we can ask the friendly forest ghosts for directions."

Lorelei sucked in a breath.

"That's it. Right there," she said.

Fiona raised an eyebrow as she stared at Lorelei. "Ask the ghosts? You are aware I was joking, right?"

"No, but we've got something better! Spirits!"

Cedric stopped what he was writing to look at Lorelei and shake his head. "Not likely. Even if spirits are real, they don't like meddling in mortal affairs. Even for heroes."

I raised my eyebrow in Cedric's direction.

Lorelei gave Cedric a confused look. "What are you talking about? Spirits are real! Dad always told me about spirits and all that and how they watch over us!"

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Get real. All of that is just fairy tales. Nobody’s ever actually seen a spirit.”

I hummed.

“I have.”

All of them shot their heads towards me.

“What?” Fiona said.

I nodded. “I have. They’ve arrived more than once to get me and my friends out of a jam.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow. “You’ll forgive my skepticism, but I’m extremely doubtful of that claim.”

Lorelei rolled her eyes. “Fiona, you’re doubtful of every claim.”

Before they could say anything, Cedric interrupted them by speaking.

“Very well. What will you require? I’m aware of the fact that there are rituals to contact them.”

“We need an offering of some sort. Something of emotional value to attract them. Nothing major, but at least somewhat important.”

Fiona reached up and held her amulet.

“I’ve got nothing like that,” she said. “Sorry.”

Lorelei looked at herself, then shrugged. “Can’t think of anything.”

Cedric shook his head. “The only thing I can think of is my notes or clothes, but we need those for future use. In addition, I don’t want to risk something when we don’t even know if it’ll work.”

I could see Fiona subtly nodding at Cedric’s statement.

I sighed and looked over myself.

I didn't have much of an attachment to anything on me right now. Perhaps if I'd come back with some of my items from the future, then I might have something to give.

Well, there goes that plan—

“Wait! I've got something!”

Lorelei pulled out my knife.

Fiona blinked. “Wait, isn't that the knife I tried to steal from you?”

“Huh?” Cedric said.

Lorelei nodded.

“Yeah, Alexander gave it to me!”

I shook my head. “I did not give it to you. I lent it to you. You just never gave it back.”

Lorelei ignored me.

“I see this as a symbol of how Alexander helped me. So, y'know... it's kinda important to me.”

Fiona opened her mouth to comment, then bit her tongue.

Cedric nodded.

“That will do perfectly.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Let me just get the ritual set up.”

I knelt down and carefully arranged a circle of small, smooth stones on the forest floor.

“Put the knife in the middle,” I said.

With the circle ready, I began to chant an incantation. My voice resonated through the eerie silence of the forest. As I continued, the stones began to emit a soft, ethereal glow.

The knife disintegrated into the air, dissipating into gold flecks.

Lorelei frowned, but didn't say anything.

A small, glowing, orb-like creature appeared in the center of the circle. It radiated a warm, gentle light.

Lorelei's eyes lit up with excitement, and even Fiona's jaw dropped as she gazed at the creature. Cedric, though his scholarly demeanor remained, couldn't hide the fascination in his expression.

I greeted the spirit with a nod. The spirit bobbed in response, acknowledging my presence.

"So, you're real," Fiona said.

The spirit, a minuscule being of pure light, flitted about, weaving intricate patterns in the air with its ephemeral form. She circled me like an excited dog.

I shook my head. These spirits were so strange.

Without speaking, I reached out and made a sweeping motion, indicating the knife that Lorelei had offered. The spirit, understanding my silent request, darted down with a flash and reappeared holding my knife.

"Wait, they give it back!?" Lorelei said.

I shrugged.

"Yeah, sometimes. Did I not mention that part?"

All three of my companions shook their heads.

"Oh, sorry," I said.

I took the knife and passed it to Lorelei, who put it back in her belt without even looking

at it.

Instead, she was focused on the spirit. She extended her hand towards her. But the spirit flitted away immediately. She hovered close to me, occasionally brushing against my hand or shoulder.

“Aww, why does it like you and not me?” Lorelei said.

Fiona smirked.

“It takes a more delicate hand. You can’t just reach out towards it like a maniac.”

Lorelei glared at Fiona before she made another attempt, extending her hand more cautiously. The spirit ducked away again in a repeat of earlier.

Cedric observed the scene with a curious gaze, but he refrained from trying to interact with the spirit. Fiona, on the other hand, sported a mischievous grin. She approached the spirit with an outstretched hand. The spirit, however, darted away, leaving Fiona with an indignant expression.

“How rude.” Fiona huffed. “Well, if it likes you so much, it probably has terrible taste anyway.”

“Her,” I said.

Fiona gave me a look. “What?”

“She’s a her. Right?” I looked at the spirit.

She bobbed up and down in a nodding motion, though I got the sense that she was just agreeing for the sake of agreeing, and not because she fully understood my question.

“How the hell did you even know that?” Fiona said.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I said, pointing at the spirit.

“No!” Fiona said. “No, it isn’t obvious! For goodness’s sake, it’s a glowing orb!”

I shrugged and continued to observe the spirit, which had now settled on my shoulder. She gently nuzzled my neck, creating a warm, tingly sensation. Lorelei watched with a mixture of fascination and frustration as she attempted to coax the spirit closer.

Cedric continued making notes in his journal as he glanced at what was happening.

"This behavior is quite unusual," he said. "Spirits are typically indifferent to human interactions, even when they help. There's no record of them showing affection like this."

I hummed.

“Its always been like this, as far as I remember,” I said. “Even when I was a kid, I remember spirits playing with me and keeping me out of trouble.”

Lorelei stopped reaching out towards the spirit.

“In trouble?”

I laughed.

“I was a stupid kid, and my parents didn’t give me enough supervision,” I said. “I remember almost running into a direwolf pack. A spirit took pity on me and guided me away from them before I could freak out.”

Cedric took a few notes. “Fascinating.”

The spirit had settled on top of my head and was now playing with my hair.

“Unfortunately, it’s not that useful,” I said.

Fiona raised an eyebrow. “Seems pretty useful right now.”

I shrugged.

“Sure, but only because we were lucky. We were lucky that this place was spiritually

dense enough to allow a spirit to enter the material plane. We were lucky that this one was willing to answer. We were lucky that a spirit was exactly what we needed for this situation.”

“Exactly what we needed?” Cedric said.

“Well,” I said. “Spirits are said to give blessings and stuff. I know that they also fought against Fara alongside the first hero. But at least in my case, I’ve never seen that happen. And I don’t think it’s that they don’t want to, but that they just can’t. So they’re only good for very specific situations that don’t require any power.”

Cedric hummed. “Perhaps they’ve lost power over the centuries?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Well, shall we get a move on?” Lorelei said.

The spirit popped out of my hair and moved forward.

“She’s guiding us. Follow her,” I said.

And so we did. We followed behind the spirit for about ten minutes.

Abruptly, the spirit froze in place. She seemed to turn towards me, nod, then disappear with a flash and some sparkles.

I covered Lorelei’s mouth before she could say anything.

I then tapped my ear.

Her eyes widened and she nodded.

Someone was talking.

It was right at the edge of our ability to hear, but we could hear it nonetheless.

“Yes, and the bomb will be placed right there,” one voice said.

“Right, for maximum damage?”

“Of course.”

There was a laugh.

“The High One will be most pleased with your performance. I will ensure that you are rewarded.”

Brae.

Based on Lorelei’s clenched fist and pointed-forward wolf ears, I could tell that she’d recognized the voice as well.

We crept towards the voices. As we did so, the fog slowly cleared away, revealing a camp with several tents and people, forcing us to hide. A bomb sat conspicuously in the center of the camp.

We were behind a crate when Fiona whispered.

“Do we have some sort of plan?” she said. “I hope we don’t plan to take on a camp of enemies on our own.”

“I would prefer to just raze this whole place to the ground in one go.” I glanced around, watching for prying eyes. “And I could do that, but it wouldn’t be enough to take out Brae, and I would be out of energy at that point.”

Cedric pushed up his glasses.

“Shock and awe would be ideal. Something big and flashy to drive them into the forest and buy us a little bit of time.”

“How do we know that they don’t have some way to navigate the forest?” Fiona said.

Cedric bit his lip and shrugged.

“We don’t.”

Lorelei looked around, then her eyes widened.

“Wait, what about the bomb?”

I poked my head over the box and glanced at it, then looked at Lorelei.

“What about the bomb?”

Fiona slammed her fist into her open palm.

“Lorelei, for once you’ve come up with something smart! We’ll set off the bomb, then come in and sweep up the rest of them!”

Lorelei’s jaw dropped. “Wait, no, that wasn’t what I was saying—“

Cedric nodded. “That sounds like a good plan. It eliminates the enemy in one fell swoop.”

This didn’t seem like a good idea, but everyone was already invested.

Lorelei stared at me with wide eyes.

I shrugged, a helpless expression on my face. They were already committed. Fiona wouldn’t back down now that an ‘easy’ alternative was found.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Right then, let’s plan this out,” I said.

Chapter Twenty

Fiona waltzed up to the bomb, ducking in between boxes and the occasional curious eye. As she did so, each of us was watching with clenched fists. Every time it seemed like Fiona was about to be caught, Lorelei would suck in air, then let it out in a sigh when it was shown that Fiona was fine.

Then Fiona was actually at the bomb.

She started clicking buttons and pushing dials.

Nothing was happening.

She was getting more frantic, clicking stuff at random and just hoping that one of them would work.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Intruder!” someone shouted.

Fiona turned around, blinked, then stabbed the guy in the chest.

“Right, plan B,” I said.

Lorelei groaned and unsheathed her sword, while Cedric pulled out his wand.

We dashed out into the battlefield. Cedric managed to knock someone out with a small rock-sized ball of ice while Lorelei had slashed straight through another person.

I'd managed to cut down two using two Aqua Fulgaras.

Then Brae rose out of his tent. He glanced around, then cracked his neck.

"I must admit, I was not expecting to see you again so soon," he said.

I cast three Aqua Fulgaras which flew towards him at lightning speed.

He leaned back, allowing the blows to slip past him.

"Man, this just keeps getting better and better," I said. "It's been so long!"

Cedric glanced between us.

"Do you two know each other?"

Lorelei elbowed him.

"That's Brae!" she said. "Y'know, the bomber guy?"

Cedric's eyes widened.

"Ah, him."

Brae snorted.

"You've gone and collected everyone, Hope-born. Knowledge, Shadow, and Destiny. You're missing one, though."

I nodded.

"I know. The final member. But even without him, we'll be strong enough to stop you."

Brae pulled out his twin daggers from his sleeves.

"Don't be so sure, Hope-born."

And the scene exploded into chaos.

Brae lunged at me.

I sidestepped his attack, my heart racing as the sharp blades sliced through the air where I had stood a moment before. I countered with a quick thrust of my magic staff, sending a torrent of water in his direction.

He rolled to the side, avoiding the attack.

Lorelei clashed with an enemy swordsman, her blade dancing through the melee. Off to the side, Fiona was going from opponent to opponent with ease. In her hands, her dagger whirled like an extension of herself. She engaged in a deadly game of cat and mouse with a group of assailants, her lithe figure a blur as she dodged and countered their attacks.

Cedric was having trouble. He wasn't able to muster up enough power to do serious damage, so he was forced to stick close to Lorelei and hope that she'd be able to keep an eye on him.

I stepped back and conjured a wall of water to shield myself from his next assault.

Brae's daggers sliced through the liquid, creating a cascade of splashes in all directions.

I needed a moment to think, to find a way to turn the tide of this battle.

With a quick flick of my staff, a torrent of water shot toward Brae, but he effortlessly deflected it with a fluid swing of his daggers.

Brae pressed the attack, his blades a deadly blur. I danced backward, narrowly avoiding his strikes.

"You are irritating," Brae said. "Normally, most people would've done me the courtesy of getting cut, but you read my attacks like an open book. It really is quite strange."

“You said that before,” I said, my staff up and ready to cast a quick water shield.

“Because it’s strange.” Brae tilted his head. “I spent years refining my style in the pits of Ulgad, where no other has gone besides my fellow Furies. And yet you fight as if you’ve seen those demons a hundred times before. But I know that this is impossible. That time has not yet come.”

I sighed.

“Could we quit it with the talk?”

Brae grinned. He lunged forward.

I stepped to the side, my staff arcing as I countered with a burst of water. Brae rolled aside with acrobatic finesse, his movements almost dance-like.

With a flick of my wrist, I sent a swirling vortex of water towards Brae, the liquid shimmering and undulating as it homed in on him.

He darted and swirled through the water with an easy grin. Suddenly, he dashed forward.

I parried his strike with my staff, the clash of metal and wood reverberating through the air. Using the momentum from his strike, I allowed myself to be pushed to the side, revealing an Aqua Fulgara behind me.

The Aqua Fulgara flew out and slammed into Brae, forcing a grunt out of him.

Now’s my chance.

A dozen Aqua Fulgaras formed up—the last of my mana. They shot forward and hit him with the force of a cannonball, embedding him into the ground.

There was a beat of silence.

The smoke and dust cleared, revealing his knocked-out, unconscious form.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

The men around us laid down their weapons.

Now, what to do with them?

#

I had briefly considered summary execution for the entire lot, but decided against it for two reasons.

First of all, they were more valuable alive than dead. With their “aid”, we’d be able to obtain information about the location of the High One, among other things. Not only that, but killing them at this point wouldn’t serve much of a goal. Sure, it would make me happy, but Brae is ultimately replaceable. The High One would simply get another Fury. As such, the usefulness in this case is a little suspect.

Secondly, it would’ve disgusted Cedric and disappointed Lorelei. And that’s important, not just me fearing their disapproval like a child.

I can’t afford to lose them this early in the battle. Even if they don’t leave, it could still harm our cohesion, as Lorelei put it back when I was in the future.

As such, Brae was alive. For now.

Brae groaned and slowly opened his eyes, drawing my attention.

He didn’t move a muscle. He could probably already feel the tightness of the ropes restraining him. He instead hummed after a moment of silence.

“Ah, so it seems I was defeated. Interesting. It appears that we’re in a wagon. Is that correct, Hope-born?”

I rolled my eyes.

“First of all, don’t call me that. I get enough stupid nicknames from my own people,” I said. “Second, yes, we’re in a wagon. I wasn’t going to carry you back to Joim.”

Brae laughed.

“But that’s what you are. It is no nickname. You are Hope’s delight, the embodiment of her beloved melody that moves men to be more than what they are. It’s just as your hero is the favored of Destiny, bending and shifting the world to her desires.”

“As usual, you talk in endless riddles,” I said. “It’s the same as ever.”

Brae glanced at me.

“So that’s what it is. I had my suspicions, but I was never sure.”

He smirked.

“It is the future that you’ve seen, correct?”

My heart sunk to the bottom of my chest. I gripped my staff hard.

“What did you just say?”

He giggled like a child.

“Oh, come now, you can’t believe that nobody would catch on, right?” he said. “It’s not like you even bothered to hide it. For goodness’s sake, you acted as if you’d known me the very instant you first met me. Did you really think that wouldn’t interest me? That it wouldn’t cause me to ask questions?”

This was not good. This was really, really not good. If Brae feeds back to the High One that I know their every move in explicit detail, I’d become an extremely hot target. The High One’s agents would throw everything they had at capturing me and turning me into their personal seer.

That's ignoring how the High One himself will act.

Even now, the High One rests, unwilling to move against the world until the time comes.

If it's revealed that I know everything, however, there's a chance that he may decide to just risk it all and invade early rather than wait until the conditions are ideal.

We need that extra time, and we need him to stay predictable.

And of course, there's the absolute worst-case scenario.

What if the High One fully grasps the implications of what I'd done?

I'd traveled back in time.

Think about that.

Who's to say he couldn't do the same, and make it so that he builds his power and becomes invincible years before Lorelei is ever born?

There would be nothing to stop him.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Bull."

I leaned back.

"Look, Brae. Are you sure you didn't take a few too many conks to the head? Maybe you're just woozy."

Brae hummed.

"The seer in the east hasn't given out her prophecy. How did you know what the other heroes look like?"

Well, that's it. Nothing for it.

I've got to kill Brae—

“You’re a seer.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“You’re a seer, correct?” he said. “Not only that, but one of the most powerful I’ve ever heard of. To see the future in such clarity... truly an astounding gift.”

I blinked again.

Okay... that’s still bad. That’s a lot less bad than him knowing that I’m a time traveler.

“Uh, right,” I said. “You got me.”

Brae grinned, the kind of grin that slithered under your skin and made you itch.

"You think this changes anything, Hope-born? Knowing the future doesn't guarantee your victory. It might just seal your fate."

I rolled my eyes.

"I'm not here to debate destiny with you, Brae. I'm here to stop your madness."

Brae chuckled.

Oh, you're adorable in your naivety. The future may be your ally, but it's also a cage. A cage that you've willingly stepped into."

The hell was he on about out?

"Save the philosophy for someone who cares. You're coming with us, and you're going to spill everything you know about the High One."

"But what if I refuse, Hope-born? What if I'd rather dance with death than betray my master?"

I met his gaze with an unwavering stare.

"Then I'll make sure the dance is short and painful."

Brae's laughter resonated in the cramped space.

"Ah, you truly mean that!" He looked up at the roof of the wagon. "This is the champion you've chosen, Hope? A ruthless executioner? How unusual."

I hummed.

"I never claimed to be a saint, Brae. Your master is a threat to this world, and I'll do what it takes to stop him."

"Stop him? Do you even comprehend the scale of what you're up against? The High One is beyond your grasp, beyond the reach of Destiny itself. You're a mere puppet in a grand play, dancing to a tune you can't hear."

"Don't care. I've seen the future, and I know what needs to be done."

Brae's eyes gleamed. "Ah, the blind conviction of a hero. Tell me, Hope-born, have you ever considered that your vision of the future might be nothing more than a fleeting illusion—"

I laughed, cutting him off.

The faintest expression of surprise could be seen on his face.

"No," I said. "I'm certain that what I've seen is true."

Under normal circumstances, he'd be somewhat right. There's always a chance that a seer was simply confused and never received a vision. But I'm not a seer. I saw those things happen in front of me. Not that he knows that.

Brae searched my eyes, then raised an eyebrow.

"Curious. Have you simply never had a failed vision, or do you have perfect future sight? Either way, I will be unable to convince you of anything regarding the future. Interesting."

I stood up and pointed my staff at his head.

"Enough with the build-up. Spill."

Brae's smirk widened, and he leaned back against the rough wooden walls of the wagon, as if relishing the discomfort of the situation.

"Alexander, you're a fascinating anomaly. Fearful, yet so certain. Burning with passion, but devoid of heart. The Aegidae of Hope, though you harbor so little hope yourself."

I ignored the comment.

"Enough games, Brae. I want every plan, every secret, every piece of information you have," I said.

"Secrets? Hope-born, the High One is not one for secrets. He revels in the inevitable, in the unfolding of destiny like a grand tapestry. But I suppose you wouldn't understand that."

I tightened my grip on the staff.

"Cut the theatrics and get to the point," I said.

Brae's grin widened, unfazed by my impatience.

"Very well, since you're so eager. The High One's plan is simplicity itself. He aims to exploit the fractures in the fabric of fate, to weave chaos into the world. And you, my unwitting puppet, are merely a thread in his grand design."

My staff shot forward and embedded itself into the wood of the floor, creating a loud crunch noise.

There was a beat of silence as I stared into Brae's eyes.

"Cut. The. Crap," I said. "I already know that. You know that I know that. Do you think that I'm joking? You think that I'm just making idle threats?"

My fist whitened as I gripped my staff and I leaned in towards Brae.

“Do you know what hell looks like, Brae?”

He wasn't responding.

I leaned away from him.

“Let me paint a picture. It's not that hole in the frozen south that you thought was hell.”

The corners of Brae's lips twitched, though he was able to maintain his smirk.

“It's not a fiery pit. It's not an endless abyss.”

Brae met my gaze with an unsettling calmness, as if my anger were a mere ripple in a pond.

"Do enlighten me, Hope-born. Paint this vivid picture of hell," he said.

I straightened, my staff still embedded in the wooden floor. My eyes locked onto Brae's.

"Hell," I began, my tone devoid of any warmth, "is the echo of a thousand dying screams, the bitter taste of regret that lingers on your tongue. It's a wet cloth that wraps around your soul, slowly choking you from the inside out. It's not a place; it's a state of being."

I grinned.

“And if it's not a place, that means anywhere we want can be a hell of our own creation.”

I pulled my staff out of the wood of the wagon, creating another crunching noise. I then pointed it at Brae.

“Shall we put my little belief to the test?” I said.

Brae opened his mouth—

“Alexander, is everything okay in there?”

Lorelei stepped through the back of the wagon.

“I heard a crunching noise while I was hunting,” she said. “So I came back as soon as possible.”

I stared at Brae, then shut my eyes and sighed.

“Yeah, I was walking around the wagon and my foot went straight through one of the planks,” I said.

Lorelei raised an eyebrow, obviously able to tell that I was lying. She shrugged.

“Whatever you say,” she said. “I’ll get the campfire started, okay?”

I nodded.

“I’ll be right out.”

She nodded and turned around.

I stepped out towards the exit, then leaned my head back to look at Brae.

“See you around, Brae.”

“Of course, Alexander.”

I walked out.

#

I didn’t get another chance to ‘talk’ to Brae, unfortunately. We were only a day’s travel away from Joim, and I wouldn’t have another opportunity where everyone but Fiona was away from the camp.

As such, nothing interesting happened on the journey back. We simply arrived at Joim without anything interesting happening.

Of course, the guards took heed of us when we strolled through the gates.

“Um, Alexander, what’s the plan?” Lorelei said.

I shrugged.

“I dunno. We have evidence of their plans, so hopefully that’s enough.”

Lorelei gave me an incredulous look.

Fiona glared at me. “You’ve got to be kidding. Do you seriously expect that the guards will listen to us?”

I blinked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Probably should’ve planned this out a bit better, eh?”

Before Lorelei could respond, we were stopped by a contingent of guards that had surrounded the wagon.

Cedric hummed.

“This is not good,” he said.

A guard in fancier clothing approached us.

“Excuse me, I’ll need to ask you to step out of the wagon.”

The guard's request hung in the air, and for a moment, we all exchanged uneasy glances.

I nodded, stepping down from the wagon with an air of calm I didn't entirely feel. Lorelei and Fiona followed suit, and even Cedric descended, his eyes scanning the surrounding guards with subtle disdain.

"State your business," the guard said, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

There was a crowd starting to grow around the guards. Curious onlookers wondering what the commotion is.

Cedric glanced at me. He wanted to take the lead—as a noble, he’s probably used to this kind of situation.

I nodded.

Cedric stepped forward. "We are here on a mission to prevent a catastrophe. The man in the wagon, Brae, is a threat to Joim and beyond. We have evidence to support our claims."

The guard nodded.

"Your evidence will be looked at. But for now, I must request that you lay down your arms and return with me to the guard's station."

Lorelei leaned in towards me. "He's lying. I can tell."

The guard was saying that to appease us. He didn't believe us in the slightest.

Fiona rolled her eyes.

"We won't disarm," I said. "We mean no harm, but we won't be defenseless. Now, let's get to the bottom of this."

The head guard, a stern-faced man with a hint of skepticism in his eyes, sighed. "You claim that you are not a threat, yet Lord Gideon demands your arrest. Why should we believe you?"

Cedric stepped forward, his voice refined and measured. "Believe the evidence. We have documents that testify to our innocence and to the bombing that they were planning."

Gasps echoed from the crowd. Multiple people were turned towards each other, discussing the word that Cedric had said. Bombing.

"There was a bomber?" someone said.

"Oh my goodness!" another person said.

The head guard let out a sharp puff of air.

"There is no evidence of any bombing. Do not fear. Please, do not spread undue rumors."

Before anyone could say anything, I raised my voice and spoke.

“But there was! And I have the evidence right here!” I raised the pack full of papers.

I could see their eyes widen.

The head guard cursed. “Damn it, why would you say that—!”

“But!” I said. “We stopped it! The men responsible for this bombing attempt have been subdued. The only thing left is to take them to prison!”

I looked at the head guard.

He was sweating.

“However, your guards wish to be just and impartial. That is why they wish to see our evidence. Correct?”

The head guard bit his lip.

A guard spoke up from behind the head guard.

“Shouldn’t we at least take a look, sir, before we condemn them? What’s the harm?”

After a moment, he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “Allow me to see these documents.”

I reached into my pack—

“Arrest them!”

Everyone turned to face the speaker. The head guard’s eyes widened and he turned around.

“Lord Gideon!” he said.

The lord of Joim was forcing his way through the crowd, his opulent jewelry and fine clothing making him easy to pick out.

“We have evidence!” Lorelei said. “Evidence Brae was planning to bomb Joim!”

Gideon scoffed. “Ridiculous accusations! These miscreants are trying to tarnish my city's reputation. A week before the Unity Celebration, no less!”

Gideon turned towards the crowd.

“Think about it! They’re probably foreign spies, seeking to disrupt your livelihoods and make a profit! Do not listen to them!”

The head guard turned towards Gideon.

"My lord, we must consider this evidence," he said.

Gideon sneered. "Do not be fooled by these tricksters! They aim to deceive and destabilize our city.”

I stepped forward, addressing Gideon directly. "We only seek justice, and we have proof of Brae's plans. Let us present the evidence, and the truth will prevail."

A murmur swept through the crowd, uncertainty hanging in the air like a heavy fog.

A voice rang out from the throng. A woman, eyes wide with urgency, pushed forward.

“I heard them! I heard Brae and his cronies talking about bombing the city!”

The woman's voice cut through the tension like a dagger, and the crowd's attention shifted to her. She was a middle-aged merchant, her face etched with both fear and determination.

"I was passing by when they were buying materials,” she said. "They spoke of explosives, plans, and the destruction of Joim. I swear it on my livelihood!"

The crowd murmured in disbelief, and even the head guard shot Gideon a stern look. Lorelei's eyes flashed with triumph, and Fiona smirked at Gideon.

I seized the moment, presenting the documents we had gathered. "Here is the proof. Plans, names, and their motivations."

Gideon tore the documents out of my hands and read through them with a neutral expression.

After a moment, he clicked his tongue.

"Well, damn."

He nodded at the head guard. "Take them away."

The head guard raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"The men they captured!"

The head guard nodded, and the guards moved forward to take custody of the captured group in the back of the wagon.

The onlooking crowd was muttering in approval. Lord Gideon had endeared himself to them with this action.

Gideon turned his attention back to us. "You," he pointed at me, "come with us. We need more information."

Lorelei gave me a worried look.

"It's just for questioning."

Lorelei nodded.

"Right. We'll be waiting at the inn we were staying in before, okay?"

I smiled.

"Alright, I'll see you in a bit Lorelei."

With that, I walked off with Gideon.

#

The walk to the prison was quiet. Brae had been shaken awake but wasn't saying anything, looking forward with a neutral expression. Soon enough, we were inside the actual prison. The door that we entered was several inches thick.

A suffocating feeling surrounded me from all sides, something akin to the humidity you would see in a rainforest but worse.

"Magic suppression," I said. "Good idea."

The head guard nodded.

"Indeed. Joim has its fair share of truly dangerous criminals, so we invested in as much protection as we could get."

I nodded. "A wise decision."

The corridor stretched on, dimly lit by flickering torches.

"Sir," someone said as they approached us.

The head guard frowned. "I'm in the middle of something."

The person leaned in and whispered something.

The head guard growled, then turned towards us.

"I apologize. It appears that there's an emergency. Continue without me."

The man whispered again.

The head guard frowned.

"I'll need assistance on this, but..."

One guard raised his hand. "If you need someone to stay with the prisoner, then I can take of things."

The head guard nodded.

“Right. That’s good. You two,” he pointed at two guards. “Stay with them as well. The rest of you come with me.”

He looked at Gideon and bowed. “Apologies, sir, but this must be taken care of.

Gideon nodded.

“Of course. Good luck.”

The head guard gave a quick salute, then walked off with the person from earlier.

The dimly lit corridor seemed to tighten as the head guard left, leaving us with a pair of guards I hadn't seen before.

I stole a glance at Brae, still eerily silent, his neutral expression now taking on a subtle smirk.

Why the hell is he smirking?

One of the guards, a burly man with a scar running across his cheek, exchanged a quick look with his companion. They both seemed different from the guards who had escorted us earlier—more rigid, more focused.

I tightened my grip on my staff, alert to the subtle shift in the atmosphere.

“May I inquire as to the details of your journey?” Gideon said.

I turned towards Gideon.

“Ah, there’s not much to tell,” I said as we walked.

Gideon laughed. “Surely not. There must’ve been something interesting that happened. At least tell me of the duel you had with Brae.”

I shrugged.

Ahead, one guard opened the next door.

“There wasn’t much to speak of,” I said. “Honestly, it was easier than I thought it would be.”

We stepped through the door. The guard shut it behind us, leading us into a barren stone room.

For a moment, no one moved.

I sighed.

“Well, crap,” I said.

One of the guards stepped up to Brae and undid his bindings.

“Oh, you realized what was happening?” Brae clenched and unclenched his fist. “Future vision or simple intuition?”

“Intuition,” I said. “It felt weird.”

Brae hummed.

I turned towards Gideon, who was looking on with a stoic face.

“May I inquire as to why you’re doing this?”

Gideon smirked.

“The High One is the future. The way I see it, I can either stand in his way and be crushed or join his side when he rules Adonia.”

I hummed in response.

The tip of my staff lit up with a dull light as I sent a pulse of mana into it.

“Well, there goes that plan,” I said.

Brae cracked his neck.

“Shall we get this over with?”

He rushed forward, swinging a fist at my head.

I dodged and attempted to counter with a staff to the chest.

Midway through its arc, my blow was stopped by one of the ‘guards’. The guard rushed forward and slammed his body into mine, sending me back.

I converted the blow into a roll. My back was now against the wall.

The second guard rushed towards me, throwing a straight to my head.

I tilted my head, allowing his gauntleted fist to slam into the wall.

He grunted and froze.

I took the opportunity to slam my staff into the back of his head, immediately making him go limp.

I didn’t have time to celebrate, because the first guard was rushing towards me.

Instinctively, I tried to summon an Aqua Fulgara.

It didn’t work.

He slammed me against the wall, driving the air out of my lungs. Immediately he maneuvered behind me, forcing my arms into shackles on the wall.

Brae stepped forward, picked up my staff, and twirled it around.

“So this is the favored tool of Hope?”

He raised his knee up and snapped my staff like a twig.

I shut my eyes, taking a moment to center myself.

“So—“ I took a deep gulp of air. “I presume that this was all a trap from the beginning?”

Brae drove a fist into my stomach, causing me to let out a harsh cough.

“Yep,” he said. “Once we figured out you were after us, we realized that it would be very beneficial to get you in our custody, especially given your... abilities.”

I smiled.

“You won’t win. Even if I die here, Lorelei will defeat you.”

Brae smirked.

“We’ll see.”

A thought flashed across my mind.

“You know that your bomb was disabled by Cedric, though, right?” I said. “I still win.”

Brae laughed.

“Hope-born...” he leaned towards my ear. “Whoever said that there was only one bomb?”

The smile slipped off my face.

Brae leaned back and walked towards the exit.

I rushed forward, only for me to be stopped by the shackles on the wall.

The knocked-out guard was dragged away by the other guard.

“I’ll be back in a bit!” Brae called out. “And when I do, I’ll bring you straight to the High One! I’m sure you’ll have a ball together!”

The door shut behind him, casting me in darkness.

Chapter Twenty-One

The High One would eventually find out that I was a time traveler.

I knew about his interrogation techniques. I can endure a lot. Can I endure someone prying open my head and simply extracting all the knowledge I have?

I can't.

I needed to either escape very, very soon or do something else.

Cedric studied a little bit of mind magic, so I knew some. It would be dangerous, but maybe I should forcibly delete the information on time travel from my brain?

I shifted from my position on the ground, creating a clinking sound as the chains shifted.

That's not a great idea. I don't have access to magic right now. Besides, there's a decent chance that I'd do it wrong and the memories would still be there.

There was one way to ensure that my knowledge never got back to the High One.

It was an ugly thing to do, especially since my magic was gone. It would also hurt a lot. But better that than the High One becoming ruler of Adonia.

I clenched my jaw open in place. My mouth opened—

“So, you also caught onto the noble’s treachery?”

It was a muffled male voice. Where was it coming from?

“Behind you.”

I turned my head, revealing nothing but a dim stone wall.

“There’s a crack. Don’t you see it?”

A faint shine.

He wasn’t lying. There was a crack.

Someone’s hair was visible even in the almost non-existent light.

“So? Am I correct? I couldn’t make out much earlier, but it seemed like you’d caught onto that bastard’s plans.”

The voice was familiar.

“...not quite. I was about to expose him by arresting one of his accomplices, however.”

The voice snorted.

“Yep. That would do it.”

I leaned against the wall.

“I take it that you found out and were arrested?” I said.

The man laughed.

“Yep. Not just that, but my family was caught in the crossfire while we were trying to flee.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

Another victim of the High One’s mad lust for power.

“And to think, that I was one of that bastard’s personal knights,” the man muttered. “Only to be repaid like this.”

He growled.

“I’ll kill him.”

That tone.

That voice.

That story.

I rolled my jaw around.

“Is your name Gareth, by any chance?”

There was a laugh.

“Ah, you’ve heard of me? Is my name being used as some kind of cautionary tale? Perhaps you learned about me from that stupid bard who followed me around when I was an adventurer?”

Should I say?

I guess it can’t hurt, at this point. He probably already knows from hearing what Brae said.

“This is going to sound crazy, but... I’m a seer,” I said. “I got a vision of the Fateforged and set out to look for them.”

“The ones from the prophecy?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me.

“That’s the one.”

“Okay,” Gareth said. “What does that have to do with me?”

“A knight of blood, an oath he repays,” I quoted. “That’s you. I had a vision of you.”

Gareth didn’t say anything. I got the impression that he was shrugging.

“Interesting. I suppose that’s just as likely as anything else. Not that it does us much good right now.”

I laughed, despite myself.

“Yes, I suppose it doesn’t.”

There was a beat of silence.

“That would make sense,” Gareth said. “Destiny takes away my wife and daughter, then demands that I dance to its tune.”

I should argue with him.

He’s not right, after all.

“It’s enraging, isn’t it?” The words slipped out of my mouth. “It puts us through all this crap, then expects us to save the day. Why doesn’t it deal with its own problems? Why does it use us so shamelessly?”

Gareth made a curious noise.

“You lost someone?” he said.

“I lost everyone.”

I clenched my fists.

“...No, not everyone. I don’t know where she is. But she has to be alive.”

The future Lorelei. My Lorelei.

“And you aren’t out searching for her? What are you doing here?”

I sighed.

“I considered that,” I said. “But she’d be angry at me forever for leaving all this work unfinished. So I’ve just got to wait for her.”

Gareth chuckled.

“Ah, you’re doing it for a woman, eh? I didn’t figure you for the type.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Not like that, idiot,” I said. “She’s my best friend.”

Gareth's chuckle rumbled through the cell.

“Still, though. Waiting for her... That's sweet, in a stupid sort of way,” he said.

I leaned against the wall, a sigh escaping me. “Yeah, well, sweet or not, it's all I've got. Goodness knows I’m apparently not good for anything else.”

Gareth snorted. He shifted around, causing the rocks underneath him to crunch. “It all feels rather hopeless, doesn’t it?”

I froze.

I hadn’t detected it earlier, but there was an undercurrent of despair in Gareth's’ voice.

I narrowed my eyes.

“So, what’s your plan to get out of here?” I said.

Gareth snorted.

“That’s not happening. I’m afraid we’re stuck here until they execute us.”

I sucked in a breath.

Gareth? The Mortal Demon?

This is him? Was he always so different in the past?

I scowled.

“That’s it?” I said. “You’re just going to give up?”

Gareth went silent.

“I don’t see you trying to get out.”

I slammed my fist against the wall, the chains of my shackles ringing off of each other.

“We’re not talking about me!” I said. “We’re talking about you!”

Gareth growled. “Where the hell do you get off on berating me like that? I don’t even know you.”

“But I know you!” I shouted. “The Gareth that I know will stare down an army without flinching! The Gareth I know fights like a demon, never giving in! He doesn’t sit here on his ass feeling sorry for himself!”

Gareth sighed and shuffled around.

“Look, kid,” he said. “I don’t know where you’ve heard all this from, but that time has long since passed. It was easy to act like that back when...”

He paused.

“Back when I had my family,” he said.

I shut my eyes.

“So you don’t have a good enough reason to fight anymore. That’s what you’re saying?”

A beat of silence.

“I suppose.”

“And what if I gave you a good enough reason?”

Gareth’s tone was long, his lumbering voice drawling out the words.

“Really?” he said. “Like what?”

“Simple.” I spat. “Revenge.”

I could imagine Gareth smirking even though I couldn’t see him.

“A nice dream,” he said. “I’ll admit that the idea appeals to me. But it’s not as if I haven’t considered the idea. When it comes down to it, there’s no way out of here—”

“Oh, would you shut the hell up!?”

I gritted my teeth together. Who the hell was this yellow-bellied defeatist I was hearing?

“I haven’t gone through hell, fought against impossible odds just to hear this crap! There’s always a way out. As long as you’re alive, you can move forward!”

Gareth was silent.

“It’s all just words,” he said. “Prove your conviction.”

I glanced at my chains.

Dozens of facts ran through my mind.

Rusty, but made of some kind of magical material. Looks tougher than it is.

My hand lit up blue.

“Fine. I’m about to do something incredibly stupid.”

“How so?”

I cracked my neck.

“I’m going to blow up my chains.”

There was a beat of silence.

“What?” Gareth said.

The chain started to glow blue.

“This is the only way. The magical material is stronger, but it’s also conductive. That

means I might be able to force it to blow up.”

Gareth shifted around.

“Wait, why would they leave such an obvious error in place?”

“Probably because the blast is going to kill us anyway. Normally, nobody would ever consider such an extreme measure.”

“Did you just say ‘kill us’?”

I pumped mana into the chains, causing the brightness to increase more and more. It was starting to become difficult to look at.

“Don’t worry, I think we might survive.”

Chains ringed. Gareth was trying to get away from the blast.

“Did you just say ‘might’?!” he shouted.

Even as he yelled, I could hear the slightest hint of hope.

I think.

The light was blinding now.

“Alright, here goes nothing—!”

The door creaked open.

I froze.

“Alternatively,” a voice said. “I could just let you out?”

I turned towards the voice. The light dimmed.

A small blond woman was staring at me with a smirk.

“Fiona?”

Fiona stepped forward, her hands on her hips.

“In the flesh,” she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief and held out my hands.

Without a word, she walked up to me and started picking my lock.

“What are you doing here?” I said. “How on earth did you know—?”

“Well, the first clue was Gideon himself. His attitude bothered me from the start. The way that he fought so hard to get us arrested... it bugged me. I dismissed it, of course. It was just my imagination, right?”

Fiona stuck out her tongue as she fiddled with the lock.

“But then, Cedric decoded some messages. He found out about several of the officials in the city being under Brae. That was a bit of a red flag.”

“I would imagine.”

Metal clicked and clinked as she worked.

“The damning piece of evidence, however, was the fact that Lorelei saw Brae while she was retrieving some supplies. Not only that, but with a massive package being carried by some of his goons. At that point, we realized that something must’ve gone terribly wrong.”

The lock clicked. The shackle fell off.

I pushed myself to my feet, then brushed myself off.

“Alright then, we’re all done!” she said. “Time to leave—!”

“Not yet!”

She furrowed her eyebrows.

“What? Why?” She shook her head. “Listen. We don’t have much time. They’re going to

figure out that I'm in here soon enough."

I shook my head.

"We need to get the guy in the cell behind me out of here."

Fiona scrunched up her face, raised her eyebrows, and glared at me.

"Why the hell would you want to get some random prisoner out of here?"

"How rude," Gareth said, speaking for the first time since Fiona arrived. "But the girl isn't wrong. You don't have time for me."

I rubbed my forehead.

"He's not a random prisoner, he's—" I sighed, then turned my eyes towards Fiona.

"Look, we don't have time to argue. I promise that this is important."

Fiona groaned and looked up at the ceiling before turning toward me and glaring.

"Fine. But when this goes wrong, I'm blaming you."

I nodded.

"Of course."

We stepped out of the door and turned around the corner, the two of us casting furtive glances.

Fiona cracked pulled out her lock-pick and started working at the door.

I glanced behind us and at Fiona, sweat pooling on the back of my neck.

In a moment, she was in. She pulled on the door.

I grabbed it and helped.

The door opened, making a groaning sound as we did so.

Gareth was a tall man. Even here, he'd been able to maintain his fitness, with cords of

muscle wrapping around his body. Despite that, his face was worn. He looked older than he actually was. grey hairs poked out between the black ones.

Shaggy, unkempt clothing was what he wore. He probably hadn't had a shower in months.

"This is the guy?" Fiona said. "Don't see what's so great about him."

Gareth chuckled. His eyes widened ever-so-slightly as he looked at us.

"How rude." A smirk played across his lips. "Can't you spare some kindness for a pitiable man like me?"

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Shut up. Show me your hands. I want to get this over with as quickly as possible."

Gareth revealed his shackled hands, as requested. Fiona put her tools inside of the lock and got to work. In a few moments, there was a click, and the chains fell off.

Gareth stood to his full height, towering over us. He rubbed his wrists and looked down at his manacle, his eyes wide. After that, he looked at me.

"Back there, you were planning to blow up the chains, weren't you?"

I narrowed my eyes.

"Of course."

There was a beat of silence.

"And you plan to defeat the man responsible for all this chaos?" he said.

I nodded.

He shut his eyes.

"I'm old. If not in body, then in spirit. But I think that I have enough in me for one last

fight. Get the vengeance that my family deserves.”

He held out his hand.

I grasped it tightly.

He gave a nod. “I look forward to working with you, friend.”

Fiona coughed.

“Look, we don’t have a lot of time here—“

A sharp whining noise drilled into my eardrums.

I grunted and grit my teeth.

Fiona looked at me with a strained facial expression.

“That would be the alarm!” she said. “I told you this was a bad idea!”

I sighed.

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t have to remind me.”

“What!?” she said, her hands over her ears.

I took a deep breath.

“I said, let’s stop wasting time and get out!”

Fiona nodded.

We broke off towards the exit.

Stone walls flew past us as we dashed forward. No guards yet, though that would doubtlessly change.

Gareth was stumbling awkwardly. He probably hadn’t sprinted in days. As such, we were forced to slow down.

I held up my hand, stopping us.

Fiona glared at me. “Why are we stopping?!”

Four guards turned a corner and stopped in front of us.

“Escapees!” one shouted.

“That’s why,” I said.

Gareth cracked his neck and took up a fighting stance. Fiona reached for her dagger.

I swung an experimental punch forward.

I then lost my balance and almost fell on my face.

Fiona gave me an incredulous look. Gareth raised an eyebrow.

I coughed into my hand.

“Normally, I use magic to augment my physical abilities and I’m not a hand-to-hand fighter. Sue me.”

Fiona turned her attention back to the guards.

“Sure man, whatever you say.”

“Don’t kill them,” I said. “These people probably have no idea that the lord they’re working for is evil.”

Fiona groaned.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said.

Gareth smirked.

“A good old-fashioned brawl. Just the way I like it.”

The guards approached us, sword and shield in hand.

“Surrender now!” the lead one said.

Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, how about no?” she said.

She dashed forward like the wind. Even without her innate magic, she was still devilishly quick. The guard’s eyes widened and he raised his shield. Fiona, however, had been aiming for his leg.

Her bodyweight slammed into the guard’s knees, sending him crumpling to the ground in a sack of metal.

One of the other guards raised his sword. Gareth was there just in time to grab the man’s hand before the man could swing it down.

The man tried to use his shield, only for his shield to be grabbed by Gareth.

Gareth grinned like a boy, then slammed his head against the man’s head, knocking the guard out.

There was one left. He dropped his sword and then started to flee in the other direction.

Gareth turned towards me and gave me a bright smile.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” he said. “Nothing like a good fight to wake up some tired joints, you know?”

I sighed.

“Yeah, no. I don’t know.”

Gareth slapped me on the back.

“One day, boy. When you’re my age.”

We continued running. Soon enough, we were at the exit.

There was nobody there.

“Really?” Fiona said. “That easy?”

I groaned. "You had to say it, didn't you?"

The sound of metal clinking entered my ears. On cue, a good ten guards appeared from the three different hallways and surrounded us on every side.

The head guard appeared.

"What the hell is going on here—!?"

He blinked.

"Wait, you're the man from earlier. The one who delivered us that bomber."

A guard leaned in and whispered to the head guard something.

His eyes widened.

"You're trying to break that criminal out!?" he said. "Why!?"

The head guard's eyes bore into me, searching for answers. I met his gaze with a straight face.

"He's no criminal," I said. "He's just a misunderstood guy caught in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Gareth crossed his arms, leaning against the wall, uninterested in the interrogation. The head guard's eyes flickered between us.

Fiona growled.

"We don't have time for explanations," she said. "But if you want the short version, we're here to save the day. Now, you can either join us or step aside."

The head guard snorted, a hint of laughter escaping him. "Save the day? Even if that were true, you're outnumbered and outmatched."

The guards tightened their formation, weapons at the ready. Gareth rolled his eyes.

"Look, pal," he said. "We're not here for a friendly chat. Either let us through, or we'll have to get rough."

Fiona looked, at me, then waved her daggers.

I nodded.

These guards were in on it. All of them besides the head guard. They all had the same sort of eyes that the two guards who imprisoned me did.

The guards closed in, their weapons glinting. Fiona tightened her grip on her dagger, Gareth cracked his knuckles, and I just stood there like an idiot.

The first strike came fast, catching me off guard. A gauntleted fist connected with my jaw, snapping my head to the side. I tasted blood. A growl came out of my lungs. I spat crimson onto the cold stone floor.

They swarmed. I stumbled, absorbing blow after blow. Fiona and Gareth fought fiercely, but I was the weak link, the easy target.

A guard swung a heavy boot into my gut, driving the air from my lungs. I crumpled to the ground, gasping for breath. Another blow, this time a mailed fist, struck me across the face. Stars exploded in my vision.

Through the haze, I saw a sword lying nearby, abandoned in the chaos. I reached for it, my fingers closing around the hilt.

The first guard swung a mace at my head. I rolled just in time, the weapon whistling above me. Using my other hand to push myself up, I leaped and jabbed the guard in a gap in his chainmail chest. Another guard lunged at me with a dagger, but I sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the blade.

“Boy, behind you!” Gareth said.

Too late. The guard was swinging a blade at my back. The blade sliced through the air as I tried to dodge, catching my arm. Blood seeped through my tattered clothing, but I gritted my teeth, ignoring the pain.

With newfound determination, I parried a series of strikes, the clash of steel ringing in the air.

Fiona dispatched one guard with a swift kick, her dagger finding its mark in another's throat.

A guard swung a battle ax, aiming for my head. I ducked and rolled, escaping the lethal arc.

A quick thrust disarmed another guard. With a fluid spin, I redirected a blade, sending it clattering against the stone floor.

A guard lunged with a spear.

I sidestepped and spun, my borrowed sword slashing across his chest. He winced, and I seized the opening to counterattack. The guards hesitated, their confidence waning.

Fiona shot me a surprised glance, her dagger poised for another strike. Gareth grinned, appreciating the unexpected turn of events. The head guard's eyes widened, disbelief etched on his face.

I pressed the assault, driving back the remaining guards with a flurry of strikes. Each movement flowed seamlessly. The tides had turned, and the guards found themselves on the defensive.

With a final, sweeping motion, I disarmed the last guard. The courtyard fell silent, save

for heavy breaths and the clatter of discarded weapons.

Fiona smirked, sheathing her dagger. "Well, I'll be damned. Didn't know you had it in you, Alexander. I knew that you were handy with a stave, but you might be even better with a blade."

Gareth clapped me on the back, a hearty laugh escaping him. "I'll admit, I thought that you were fairly pathetic back there, but you've shown that you're quite strong."

I looked up at him.

"Um, thanks?"

The head guard was glaring at us and gritting his teeth.

"You bastards!" he said. "I'll make sure all of you are put away for life because of what you've done here!"

The head guard's threat hung in the air like a storm cloud. I wiped blood from my split lip and met his gaze, unflinching.

"Save the idle threats for someone who gives a damn," Fiona said.

Gareth crossed his arms. "Look, mate, we're not playing your game. Either help us or get out of our way."

The head guard's anger simmered beneath the surface, but he glanced at the defeated soldiers around him and reconsidered. Pride swallowed, he begrudgingly nodded.

"Fine, go on," he said, his teeth grit. "But mark my words, you won't get far."

Without wasting another breath, we made our way through the exit. The city streets stretched before us like a labyrinth of shadows. Fiona led the way, her movements swift and purposeful.

Before long, we were in front of one of her safe houses.

“Right, let’s head in.”

She opened the doors.

I sighed.

Time to get to work.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lorelei looked up at Gareth. The man towered over her. She blinked.

“Who’s the giant?”

Gareth laughed while Fiona slapped her palm into her face.

“I’m flattered by the comparison, but I’m just a man,” Gareth said.

Lorelei didn’t pay him any mind and instead turned her gaze towards me. As soon as she saw my condition her eyes widened and her tail went stiff. She marched towards me, then circled me, eyeing me up and down the whole time.

“You’re hurt. Cedric was right about the noble being corrupt thing?”

I nodded.

“Yep. Brae threw me in prison. That’s where I picked up this guy.” I pointed at Gareth with my thumb.

Lorelei gasped. “A criminal!? Did he hurt you? Is he our prisoner now?”

I snorted.

“No, Gareth was not responsible for my injuries. He helped us to break out of jail.”

She nodded at Gareth. “Good job.”

Gareth opened his mouth only for Cedric to cut in.

“Have you been briefed on the situation?”

I shook my head. “I only know that Brae is out and active.”

Cedric gave a dry smile.

“It gets worse. I found out a nice little detail while Fiona was retrieving you two.”

He spoke a sentence that immediately made me groan.

“Did you just say one hour?” Gareth said.

I stared at Cedric.

He gave me a nod.

“Unfortunately. Assuming that Brae immediately began preparations after his escape—and all the evidence thus far seems to imply it—then he’s likely accelerated his plans. According to the documents, we have one hour to find and disable each bomb.”

I gave him a pleading look.

“Please give me some good news.”

Cedric nodded.

“Of course. Those same documents have the locations of each bomb.”

Gareth raised an eyebrow.

“I was a commander for missions like this. How do you know that those plans you got aren’t a red herring, or that there’s a hidden code of some type?”

Cedric turned his stony gaze towards Gareth.

“It was in code. Three different layers of code, in fact. But I saw through all of it.”

Lorelei nodded and gave me a bright grin.

“What he’s not telling you about is how he was screaming at the documents for an hour straight!”

Cedric pushed up his glasses and shut his eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Either way, I’m certain of the veracity of this information. They were not expecting a magical cryptographer.”

“I’m going to pretend that I understand what a cryptographer is and skip to the important part,” I said. “We have an hour and the locations. Details.”

“There are four bombs,” Cedric said. “Two scattered around the east side of the city and two scattered around the west side of the city.

“We’ll have to split up,” I said.

Lorelei gave me a look. “But who will go with who?”

I ran my eyes across each of my companions. Half-remembered tactical explanations by Lorelei filled my mind.

Gareth was the strongest one out of all of us. He had an enormous amount of combat experience and strength. But he needed someone who could handle the disarming of the bombs. On top of that, he’d been in prison for a while. I doubted that he was at his best.

Lorelei and Fiona weren’t strong... yet. But they’d be able to shore up each other’s weaknesses.

On my own, I could take care of quite a bit. I could do the heavy lifting and the deactivation, but I needed someone to watch my back...

Wait, deactivation. I can't deactivate them.

Unless...

"Cedric, were you able to find some kind of magical deactivation code?" I said.

Cedric nodded and drew a handful of glowing symbols in the air with his wand.

I scanned the symbols and nodded.

"Got it. Thanks."

I shut my eyes, then took a deep breath.

Alright.

My eyes shot open.

"Gareth. You're with me on the east end."

Gareth nodded. "Very well."

Lorelei piped up. "What about me?"

"You and Fiona are with Cedric."

Fiona glanced at Lorelei and looked as if she was about to protest, but then clamped her mouth down and nodded.

"Right, got it."

I smiled and gave everyone a nod.

"There's nothing for it, then. Ready to save Joim?"

Fiona raised an eyebrow. "Honestly, this city could burn to the ground for all I care, but I guess I'm in it for the long haul at this point."

I gave her a bright grin.

"That's the spirit!"

Fiona chuckled, the sound dying over time and leaving us in an awkward silence.

Lorelei walked up to me and smiled at me.

“Good luck, teach.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I thought I told you not to call me that.”

Lorelei giggled into her hand and nodded.

I looked around at everyone. Every single person from the prophecy had been assembled.

It was almost nostalgic.

“I’ll see you all soon enough,” I said. “Let’s get to it.”

#

There was no time to waste. Gareth and I broke off towards the first bomb on the list. It was supposed to be hidden in an alley just off a shopping district.

It was an explosion of color and sound. The Unity Celebration was truly kicking off. People crowded the streets, making it a pain to advance. The sound of talking and haggling filled our ears.

“Nothing to do but push forward,” I said.

Gareth nodded.

We tried to push through the crowd. We made a little bit of progress, getting closer to the alley. Then someone crossed in our way. Then another. Then another.

We wouldn’t get there any time soon.

“Tch, that’s just perfect,” Gareth said. “How are we supposed to get to that alley like this?”

I sighed.

“I suppose the end justifies the means and all that?”

Gareth gave me a look.

“What exactly are you planning?”

I raised my fingers and gave them a snap. Blue flecks of light popped into existence.

A large boom echoed out overhead, along with smoke and a flash of fire.

Screaming echoed out as everyone stampeded the ground to run away from the clear threat.

In moments, the entire street was abandoned.

Gareth gave me a raised eyebrow.

“Someone could’ve been hurt with that little stunt.”

I marched forward. “Yeah, and everyone could’ve died because we were late with the bombs.”

Gareth grumbled but didn’t dispute the point.

The alley was just to our left.

I raised my hand and blue light emanated from it.

Two ice swords appeared overhead. Gareth snatched one out of the air while the other fell into my waiting hand.

I held up my fist, then flipped my index finger.

One.

Two.

Three.

We burst into action.

As expected, about a dozen Black Moon were standing around. They'd been expecting us, as demonstrated by their fighting stances and weapons being unsheathed.

It was a bloodbath. We sliced through them in moments, leaving nothing but corpses in a matter of minutes.

Gareth flicked the ice sword, causing blood to splatter against the wall.

"I'm going to need to get a new sword," he said. "This one is poorly balanced."

I nodded.

"Agreed. Luckily, I do believe that we have the perfect replacements right here."

He furrowed his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

I reached down towards one of the corpses and took the sword out of its hand.

Gareth gave me a frown, but reached down and did the same as me anyway.

I stepped towards the bomb and touched my hand to the bomb.

"That swordsmanship you have is unique," Gareth said. "I saw traditional Elda forms, that heavy-handed Khanate style, a bit of the Royal Way, and something else I couldn't identify."

I shrugged as I continued to enter the code to disable the bomb.

"Me and my teacher had the chance to fight with a lot of people. We figured out that there was some pretty good stuff that each of them had, and tried to steal it for ourselves."

Gareth hummed.

"Mercenary, then?"

I snorted.

"Not in a million years."

Halfway done.

“What was your basic form? Who trained you?”

Lorelei. My Lorelei.

“A girl. The greatest warrior I’ve ever known. She learned a lot on her own, but was later taught formally by—“ You, Gareth, when you said that her swordsmanship looked like a drunken monkey swinging a stick. “—a Joim knight.”

Gareth nodded. “Interesting.”

There was a beat of silence. I could tell Gareth wanted to ask another question.

Unfortunately, he wouldn’t get the chance.

“Done,” I said. “Let’s move to the next one.”

As we dashed toward the next objective, I couldn’t help but wonder how Cedric, Fiona, and Lorelei were doing.

#

“There’s no one here,” I said.

Fiona rolled her eyes as we continued to dash through the street.

“Of course,” she said. “Everyone’s out right now, getting ready for the Unity Celebration.”

I coughed into my hand and averted my eyes. “Right, yeah. I forgot about that.”

Cedric panted as we ran. “Could we—hah—please stay on task?”

I grumbled but nodded.

A large boom drew all our attention.

My eyes darted towards the direction of the explosion. Blue light shone out.

“Did a bomb go off!?” Fiona said.

I shook my head.

“That was Alexander!” I said. “Come on, let’s keep moving!”

Fiona gaped.

“That man is insane!” she said as we continued running.

I let out a little giggle. He was. That was one of his best characteristics.

Soon enough, we were at the first location.

Black Moon stood ominously around a giant sphere with a tarp thrown over it.

We both stood there for a moment.

“It’s the heroes!” one yelled. “Activate the bomb!”

I cursed and dashed forward to stop the hand of the one reaching out towards the sphere.

But I was too late.

His hand impacted a button of some sort, and a beep rang out afterward.

My momentum couldn’t be stopped, however. I slammed into the man, bashing his head against the ground.

“Five minutes, you fools!” he cackled. “It’s over!”

“Crap!” Fiona said. “What now!?”

Cedric glanced at me.

“You two. Buy me time. I can salvage this.”

I shook myself out of my stupor and nodded at Cedric.

My first target was selected.

He was separate from the group. Same black hood as the others. The separation will make

it easier to take him out since I'll have a little time before the others try to attack me.

I dashed towards him and swung out my sword in a wide sweep.

The Black Moon swung out his dagger, parrying the blow.

I grinned. This technique was meant to be used with a staff, but I don't think Alexander would mind.

I slammed my pommel into the man's head, instantly knocking him out. Just in time for the next opponent to reach me.

He's bigger than the other one. But he's slower. Can't let him get a solid hit, or I'm finished.

I rolled out of the way of a heavy strike with his dagger. I bounded up to my feet and thrust out my sword.

The man blocked with his other dagger, then thrust out with his first one towards my head.

Crap. Didn't plan for this one. What can I do—?

A flash of yellow.

The man's blow stopped in midair, then he collapsed to the ground.

Fiona dashed back towards her opponent.

Thank goodness for comrades.

Cedric was still working on the bomb. Dozens of floating spellcircles hovered around him in midair. He was darting his hands back and forth, manipulating them in ways that I didn't understand.

What I did understand was that he was struggling. Droplets of sweat were pouring down

his head. His hair was matted and he looked pale.

A Black Moon dashed toward him.

I reacted and broke off in a sprint.

“Oh no you don’t!” I said.

The Black Moon's dagger scraped against my blade. Quick exchange, but I had the upper hand. I kicked him back, creating some space.

Cedric shot me a glance, a mix of gratitude and frustration. The bomb wasn't cooperating.

I locked eyes with Fiona. No words needed. We had a job to do, distractions to create. I sprinted toward the next hooded troublemaker. Big guy again.

He swung, slow and predictable. I danced around him. Another swing, a miss. My sword met his, and I aimed a kick at his gut. He grunted.

Cedric was sweating bullets, but his hands kept moving. The bomb blinked, a light flickering.

The big guy regained composure. Another swing, faster this time. I ducked and dodged, but his dagger scraped my shoulder. Pain flared, but I gritted my teeth.

I charged at the big guy, fueled by anger and adrenaline. No time for finesse.

The big guy stumbled backward under my assault. Fury burned in his eyes. I twisted my sword and landed a solid hit. He crumpled.

“How much time left!?” Fiona said.

Cedric grunted.

“One minute!”

Another Black Moon came at me. Quick footwork, a parry, and a counter. He hit the

ground, courtesy of my boot.

Fiona took on a new foe, leaving me to face the last one. A wiry guy, quick on his feet. I blocked his strikes, but he was slippery. No room for mistakes.

I glimpsed at Cedric. Thirty seconds. His face tightened, urgency etched in every line.

Wiry guy landed a hit on my side. Pain flared, but I couldn't afford to wince. I retaliated, a wild flurry of strikes. He crumbled, just as the bomb's countdown hit zero.

Silence.

Cedric gave a deep sigh.

I rubbed the sweat off my head.

"Cedric, you alright?" I said.

Cedric nodded.

"I'm alright. We need to move to the next one."

He was quivering. His breath was coming in harsh, rapid gulps.

"Are you sure?" I said.

He shook his head and marched forward.

"We don't have another option," he said.

I nodded. "Right."

Nothing for it then. One down, two left to go.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“They dropped it in Gideon’s personal wine cellar?” Gareth said.

We were both staring up at the location of the last bomb. A large building decorated with ornaments and built out of shining marble.

Gareth smirked. “I think I’m going to enjoy destroying that bastard’s home.”

I looked around at the abandoned streets.

“I suppose that everyone here is in on it—or are personal friends of Gideon—considering that they’ve all left.”

Gideon lumbered forward with his longsword.

“I don’t care. Let’s blow this place to the ground.”

A glint shined out of the corner of my eye.

My sword cut through the air, blocking a crossbow bolt from entering my neck.

Gareth’s eyes sharpened.

Dozens of glints shone around us.

“Damn! Run for cover!” Gareth said.

I broke off alongside him.

In moments the twang of dozens of crossbow strings vibrating echoed out. One shaved past my cloak. Gareth leaped into the window of a house, shattering the glass.

I followed behind him, rolling, then shooting myself into a crouch behind a wall.

“They must’ve heard about us stopping the other bombs,” I said.

Gareth peaked over the top of the window. “They’re not ones to play fair.”

I glanced at my hand. No staff. Aqua Fulgara would have to do without its usual finesse.

“Should’ve known they wouldn’t face us head-on,” I said, my gaze fixed on the window, wary of any lurking shadows.

Gareth’s eyes met mine. “They’re waiting for us to step out, want us in the open where their arrows cut us to shreds. Even if we survive, they still win because the bombs go off when we lose time fighting them.”

His words hung in the air.

“Got a plan, Alexander?” Gareth said, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

I narrowed my eyes.

“When in doubt, excessive force usually does the trick,” I said. “I’ll blast them out of their hiding holes.”

“How?” Gareth said.

I raised my hand and it glowed bright blue. Four blobs of water materialized out of the air.

I shut my hand and clenched my heart. My teeth slammed together from the hot, roaring

pain.

Casting spells without a proper foci is extremely inefficient. Mana, rather than going into the spell, is lost from the blood and soaked up by my muscles and bones, causing a...
discomforting sensation.

Gareth narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything.

I took a deep breath, then looked out the window towards the glints.

The bolts shot through the air. They slammed into the hiding spots of the Black Moon, a symphony of shattering wood and surprised yelps.

Gareth grinned, a cold curve on his face. "Well, I'll be damned. That's one way to shake rats from their nests."

I ignored the throbbing in my hand, the side effect of my makeshift magic. The glints were replaced by flashes of cloth as they ran outside and into the open.

"Here they come," Gareth said.

We dashed out.

The first kill was easy. The Black Moon member was running from the aftereffects of my spell and wasn't prepared for combat.

All I did was cleave through his chest, dropping him to the ground.

A dagger flew towards my face.

I grunted and avoided the blow while parrying. I slammed the pommel against the woman's face, then sliced through her.

A hooded figure lunged at Gareth, daggers gleaming in the dim light. Gareth sidestepped, a grin on his face as his blade met its mark. The assailant crumpled.

I spotted a silhouette in the periphery, cloak billowing. A quick turn and my blade met the intruder's. Dagger against sword. I deflected another strike and countered with a swift kick to the gut. The cloaked figure staggered, and my blade found its mark.

I looked around.

“Done,” I said. “Let’s move to the mansion.”

Gareth nodded.

We stepped inside the opulent halls. Polished silver objects lined the walls. The sound of pacing footsteps echoed through the building.

We approached.

“Oh dear, oh dear, where are they? Why is it so quiet?” A voice said.

Gareth burst down the door.

Gideon turned towards us. Behind him sat the bomb.

His face paled.

He reached for his pocket—

An Aqua Fulgara appeared behind me and slammed into the object, sending it flying into the wall.

“Gideon,” I said. “Am I to presume that the bomb is that large sphere behind you?”

Gideon stammered. “I—erm—“

I walked behind him and took a look at the object that I’d smashed out of his hand.

“An enchanted object that allows for personal teleportation,” I said. “To get you out of the city before the bomb blows? Expensive, but I’d guess that for one like you, it’s no skin off your back.”

I stepped toward the bomb and put my hand over it. Symbols flew overhead. I gave a mental command, instantly disabling the bomb.

Gareth raised his blade overhead.

Gideon fell to the ground and raised his hands. “Wait wait wait!”

Gareth rolled his eyes.

“As if. Goodbye—” He grinned. “—My lord!”

“There’s another bomb!”

Gareth’s blade stopped in mid-air.

“What?”

#

“That’s right!” he said. “There’s another bomb, and if you kill me, you’ll never find it!”

Gareth snorted.

“Sure, buddy,” he said. “Excuse me if I don’t believe the words of a traitor!”

He lowered his blade, only for me to block the shot with my sword.

Gareth looked up at me with a deadpan expression.

“Don’t tell me you believe this idiot.”

I sighed.

“This is exactly the sort of thing Brae would do. In fact, I suspect it gets worse.” I turned towards Gideon. “Am I correct?”

Gideon shook his head up and down like a spring.

“The final bomb that your allies are approaching—we knew that they would go after that one last. It’s—“

“—Boobytrapped, yeah, I know.” I sighed. “He’s telling the truth, Gareth.”

Gareth groaned and pulled his blade away.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. They accounted for us? I bet the other bombs were decoys all along, weren’t they?”

Gideon’s eyes widened. “Y—yes! That’s true! How did you know?”

Gareth glared at Gideon. “I would think you’d know that I have that kind of experience, given the amount of subversives I took care of on your behalf.”

Gideon opened his mouth, then shut it.

I looked at Gareth, who simply raised an eyebrow.

“So, what now?” he said. “We probably don’t have enough time to rescue the group and save your allies.”

I clicked my tongue.

“Gideon?”

Gideon nodded. “He’s right. Brae set it up on purpose so that you’d have to pick.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“There’s only one choice,” I said. “We’ll have to split up. I’ll take the bomb because I’m the only one that can disable it.”

Gideon’s eyes widened. “That’s a death sentence! Brae himself is guarding the final bomb!”

I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t care about your opinion. Kindly lead me to the appropriate location.”

Gareth looked at me.

“Are you sure about this? Brae is the fellow that defeated you at the jail, right?”

I sighed.

“It probably isn’t a good idea. But losing either the city or the other heroes would be awful. There’s nothing for it but to at least try.”

Gareth gave me a nod.

“I’ll find your students and save them.”

Wait, students?

I groaned. “Not you too!”

Gareth gave me a mystified look before slapping me on the back and dashing out the door.

I sighed and turned towards Gideon.

“Right then,” I said. “I believe that you have a bomb to take me to.”

Gideon gulped.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I’ll be fine, as long as they don’t activate it. If it isn’t activated, then I can just disable it with the command code,” Cedric said.

I nodded.

Fiona gave Cedric a doubtful look but didn’t comment, instead focusing on jogging ahead to find our next target.

“They’ll be waiting for us,” Fiona said.

I glanced at her. “Don’t jinx it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not jinxing it. These guys are too well coordinated not to have some kind of communication device.”

I bit my lips.

“Maybe they don’t know about activating the bomb being our weak spot?”

“Even if that’s the case, that still means they’ve set up a trap of some sort.”

I groaned.

“We’ll figure it out when we get there, okay?”

Fiona rolled her eyes. “Typical. What a brilliant plan. I hate you all.”

My left wolf ear twitched and I stopped.

My companions looked back at me.

I looked to my left. A glint of steel caught my eye.

“They’re in the alleys!” I yelled.

At that exact moment, I heard footsteps explode from every direction around me. An attacker was coming for my back.

I snarled and swung out my blade in a hasty block. The dagger crashed against my sword, creating a screeching metal sound.

The Black Moon smirked, then swung out his second dagger towards my chest.

My heart slammed against my ribs. I kicked him back while he was mid-attack, then dashed forward and swung my blade towards his chest. The attack struck true, cleaving through him instantly.

Off to the side, I could see Fiona fighting with her dagger, going back and forth between three attackers. She was sweating. We’d already fought hard against those other Black Moon.

Cedric was barely dodging their strikes. Probably trying to conserve mana.

I stared at the three who were circling me.

My breath came in heavy gasps. I adjusted my grip on my sword as I stared down each of my opponents. Suddenly, I was rather thankful for all those sprints that Alexander made me do.

I adjusted my jaw. I needed to finish this soon. Even if I won, we’d run out of time. Not to mention, the longer this goes on, the higher the chance that Cedric gets injured.

But how? How to end it quickly?

My eyes scanned the town's surroundings, searching for something, anything, that could help us get out of this situation.

One of them approached me. I backed up, a wagon full of hay preventing me from moving.

Thinking quickly, I sliced the lock on the back of the wagon, letting the hay fall onto the Black Moon member.

Taking advantage of the chaos, I rushed forward and sliced my sword.

That was when I felt a dagger at my back.

"Showtime's over, girl," the man said. "Say goodbye."

He sunk the dagger past my clothing.

My heart jumped, and for one long second, I thought I was dead.

Then the dagger stopped, prevented from going any further by my jack of plate.

I heard him make a noise of confusion. Wasting no time, I swung my sword around.

He threw up a hasty block, only for the weight of my sword to slam straight through his dagger and into his neck. He crumpled to the ground.

My heart was pumping so hard that my chest was starting to hurt. My legs were aching so bad I wanted to collapse.

But I couldn't, because four people had cornered me.

"This isn't going to work," I muttered.

I swallowed my spit. Was this actually where my life ended?

My hands were quivering. I forced them to stop and gave a defiant look at my opponents.

There was a flash of gold light. Ice flew along the ground, freezing my opponents in place.

“Now, Lorelei!” Cedric yelled.

I took the opportunity. One down. Two. Three—

The woman freed herself and jumped out of the way. The other one I hadn’t taken care of smashed his dagger against the ice, then jumped clear.

I took a few deep breaths. Two on two. Good odds.

Cedric made a gargling sound. I turned towards him just in time to see him collapse to the ground.

“Cedric!” I said.

A gust of wind.

I’d let down my guard, exactly how Alexander told me never to do. He warned me, over and over.

But as soon as pressure came in, I crumpled.

Damn it.

A glint of steel. An enemy was sent flying by a large, shadowed figure. The last one screamed, only for him to be sliced through in a single blow.

The figure stepped into the light.

I blinked.

“Gareth?” I said.

“Unfortunately so, yeah.”

I looked around.

“Where’s Alexander?”

Gareth shook his head.

“We can talk about that later. For now, he sent you three an important message.”

Fiona stepped up, looking exhausted from her own battle. I could see that it looked like Gareth had helped her as well.

“What would that be?” she said.

“I’m afraid,” he said. “That your final bomb is boobytrapped.”

I glanced at Cedric. My eyes widened and I dashed over to him.

He was out cold.

I shook him.

“Cedric? Cedric!” I yelled.

Fiona frowned and approached, only to be stopped by Gareth. He stepped forward and pushed me out of the way, then put his fingers to his neck.

“He’s alive. Knocked out cold, but alive. I reckon he’ll be fine once he has some rest.”

I glared at him. “How do you know that?!”

He looked at me. “I have some medical training. It’s expected for all knights to know the essentials.”

I gave him a doubtful look, but didn’t argue the point.

“Well, we’re screwed,” Fiona said.

I looked at her.

She pointed at Cedric. “That was our magic trap-disabler. Without him, we have no way to deal with the final bomb.”

Gareth sighed.

“Well damn, Alexander’s in trouble then.”

My eyes shot toward Gareth and I clenched my sword. “What does that mean?”

Gareth scratched his head and looked off towards the distance.

“There was another bomb. A hidden one. Alexander’s dealing with it, but I was hoping to give him some backup. That’s pretty meaningless, though, since we don’t even know what to do with the bomb we have.”

I kicked the stone and gritted my teeth together.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! They’ve completely outplayed us!”

Fiona piped up.

“Could we help Alexander, then have him disable the bomb here?”

Gareth shook his head.

“Not happening. He’s on the other side of the city. We won’t have enough time to double back towards this one. We need to figure this out, then go to Alexander.”

I mauled my hair back and forth with my hand.

“This is insane!” I said. “How the hell are we supposed to do this!?”

Fiona raised her hand.

“I vote we leave the city.”

I glared at her. “Funny.”

“I’m not joking,” she said. “Seriously. If we have no options, we should run. Better live to fight another day than die here for no reason.”

I scowled.

“Fiona, we can’t just leave all these people behind!”

Fiona glared at me. “And dying here is also stupid! Damn it Lorelei, don’t you see how dumb that would be? Seriously, even if you play the goody-two-shoes, running still makes sense! We’ll do more good if we run and warn people of what’s happened than being shredded by a bomb!”

“That’s not why you want to run, though,” Gareth said, glancing at Fiona out of the corner of his eye.”

Fiona glared at him. “Yeah. I don’t want to die. Sue me for being selfish.”

“Don’t we owe it to the people here to at least try!?” I said.

Fiona marched up to me.

“Try what?” she said. “If you have a reasonable idea, then we can talk about it. But you don’t!”

She slammed a finger into my chest.

“You don’t have the slightest clue what to do! You’re just arguing with me when you don’t even have the faintest idea for an alternative plan!”

I leaned in towards her and opened my mouth to respond—

“I’m awake...”

I looked over towards the voice.

Cedric was rubbing his head.

“Damn, that smarts,” he muttered.

A half-remembered conversation floated to the top of my head.

Cedric was from the Institute, right?

We teleported there.

Fiona started to argue with me, but I was no longer paying attention. I was staring at Cedric.

“Cedric,” I said. “Do you have a—what was it called...? An Institute key?”

Cedric blinked. “Uh... Yeah, yeah, I think so. Not like we can use it though. The Institute is out of range right now. Besides, what would we even use it for?”

My eyes narrowed.

There was something there. Alexander mentioned it briefly. What was it—!

I sucked in a breath.

“What about the relays?”

Cedric gave me an inquisitive look.

“The relays? What do you...” He blinked, and a spark of comprehension entered his eyes.

“Right, the relays. I never used them, so I forgot.”

“Is there one in range that you can use?”

Cedric frowned. “That’s unlikely. There are only a handful, and they move around like the Institute so that their range is maximized. Again, why do you want to use it?”

“Please, Cedric,” I said. “Can you just check?”

Fiona and Gareth were both giving me confused looks at this point.

Cedric shrugged and reached into his pocket. A small gold seal with inscriptions written across it was held in his hand when he pulled it out.

It glowed bright yellow after a moment.

Cedric blinked.

“The hell?”

“What?” I said.

He shook his head.

“The odds of this are insane, but... it looks like a relay is directly overhead. It’ll take almost no mana to go up. Even in my current state, I would be able to activate it.”

I grinned.

“Perfect.” I turned towards Fiona. “You wanted a plan, right? Well, let me explain...”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Keep moving, Gideon.”

“I already am, you bastard! Stop digging that thing into my back!”

We’d been walking towards the location of the final bomb, my sword pointed at Gideon’s back the entire time. Gotta remind him that the wrong move will result in his death.

We turned a corner. Gideon stopped.

A sphere with dials and inscriptions, and a man in a black hood with belts circling his body while a cloak wrapped around him. He took off his hood, revealing his identity.

“Alexander,” Brae said. “Lovely to see you.”

I tilted my head. “I’m afraid I can’t say the same.”

Brae gripped his heart and groaned. “Oh, the pain! Such cutting ruthlessness!”

I sighed.

Gideon raised a hand. “Pardon, but can I go now?”

I glanced up at Brae.

“Do you really want this guy?”

Brae shrugged.

“I suppose that he hasn’t outlived his usefulness. Unless you’re planning to execute him, there’s not much to do but give him to me.”

For a brief moment, I honestly considered cutting him down then and there.

I twisted my lips to the side, then drew my sword away from Gideon.

“C’m on. Go, before I change my mind.”

Gideon gave me a look, then dashed towards Brae. As soon as he got to him, he fell to his knees and bowed.

“Seventh of the Furies, I beg your forgiveness!” he said. “I had no idea this would happen!”

Brae rolled his eyes. He kicked Gideon away.

“Stop sniveling.” He threw Gideon a small emblem of some sort. “Activate that and get out of my sight.”

“Thank you, Seventh Fury!”

Gideon held the emblem in his hand. It glowed, and he disappeared into flecks of purple.

“Honestly, men like that disgust me,” Brae said. “No conviction of any kind.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And you’re different?”

Brae gave me an incredulous look.

“Of course!” he said. “Just because you believe my principles are evil doesn’t mean I don’t have them!”

I snorted.

“You’ll forgive me if I have some doubts about that.”

Brae stepped forward and drew his daggers out of his sheaths.

“Well, I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree.”

I readjusted the grip on my cheap stolen sword.

“So, we’re done talking?” I said.

Brae cracked his neck.

“Indeed. Let’s get started.”

I took the first strike. Momentum, momentum, momentum, as Lorelei used to put it. My sword stabbed forward. A good, solid opening that allowed for very little reprisal from the enemy.

Brae smirked and parried the attack. He then thrust out with his other dagger.

Predictable. I dodged to the side with a flourish, then slammed the pommel of my blade into his head.

Or at least, I tried to. Brae simply tilted his head.

We both jumped back.

“I can hardly believe it, but you’re almost as good with a sword as you are with that stave,” Brae said.

I shrugged.

“I’m flattered.”

Brae twirled his daggers in his hands.

“Of course, the issue is that you’ve lost your magic capabilities. That’s probably why you stick to the stave.”

Well, I could've used a wand, or gotten a sword that contained a foci. But those are rare, not exactly the kind of weapon I could've picked up on the way here.

"Was this your future vision at work?" he said. "Did you read the future to find a master swordsman who could teach you?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're overthinking this."

Brae shrugged. "Perhaps I am. What can I say? You intrigue me."

I made a vomiting motion and made a few hurling sounds.

Brae smirked and readied his daggers.

I slipped back into my fighting stance.

My eyes scanned the surrounding environment. We were in the middle of a street. There was nothing particularly interesting around us besides the buildings that had been cleared out in advance.

Brae lunged at me, daggers gleaming in the setting sun.

I dodged towards the building, whipping out my sword to block any future attacks.

Footsteps slammed against the ground as Brae approached me. This time he didn't hold back and lunged as quickly as he could.

I dodged to the side, allowing him to embed his dagger into the wooden plank behind me.

Brae barely had a moment to widen his eyes before my sword was swinging down on him like an executioner's axe.

I could see the calculations run through his eyes in milliseconds.

Rather than hold onto the dagger, he leaped back. But it was too late. My sword was coming down too quickly.

It sliced into his arm, splattering blood across the stone street.

Brae glared at me and held his arm. Red light flashed out, and the wound was healed.

“Of course you can heal,” I muttered.

Brae cracked his neck. “First thing the High One taught me. It’s important to be in top physical condition.”

His eyes focused on me. “Now then, it’s my turn.”

He rushed at me with his one remaining dagger. It flew out towards my face.

A deft parry knocked it aside, only for me to miss the kick to my shin.

Spikes of pain flew across my leg. I clenched the muscles in my leg instinctively and looked down.

Crap, I was falling.

Brae was already lining up his next attack. It was coming for my shoulder.

I rolled to the side. Too slow. The dagger cut through the edge of my shoulder with a single slice.

I popped back up to a standing position and put my hand over my wound. Blue light lit up the street just like Brae’s did earlier.

Pain lit up my hand and arm. The excess mana had nowhere to go except my muscles.

When I took my hand away, the wound was gone.

Brae raised an eyebrow.

“You have an extra foci?”

I shrugged. “Always come prepared.”

Brae's eyes narrowed, the fight's tempo quickening.

"Always prepared, huh?" His dagger slashed through the air.

I sidestepped, avoiding the glinting blade, then lunged at him, aiming for his side. Brae danced away, the fabric of his cloak billowing like a ghost's whisper. His counterattack came swift and low, aiming for my legs.

I leaped, narrowly avoiding the dagger.

With a sudden burst of energy, Brae unleashed a whirlwind of strikes, forcing me on the defensive.

I blocked, parried, and dodged. But my energy was waning. I was exhausted, I could tell. It was a miracle that I'd managed to keep up.

A dagger grazed my cheek, leaving a trail of warmth. I tasted the metallic tang of blood.

"Not done yet," I said, wiping away the blood.

He chuckled, then lunged, daggers slashing in an arc. I sidestepped, my blade aiming for his exposed flank. Steel met steel, the clash resonating through the air.

A feigned retreat, then a sudden surge forward—my blade clashed with Brae's, the force sending shockwaves through my arms. Pain flared, but I gritted my teeth, determination burning like a smoldering ember.

A flash of steel, a blur of movement—I felt the impact, a searing pain in my side. Brae had found his mark, and blood painted the ground beneath me.

I staggered, then grit my teeth. With a surge of determination, I retaliated, my blade finding its mark.

Brae grunted, a dagger slipping from his grip.

In the lull, I panted, blood mixing with sweat. Brae's eyes burned with a renewed fire.

"Impressive," he admitted, retrieving his fallen dagger.

I wanted to heal the half a dozen cuts, but I couldn't shake the feeling that because Brae knew more of my capabilities, he wouldn't give me the time to heal. And what's more, I think Brae had the same belief. I would attack him if he slowed down for a second. We only had a one-time heal. That was it, and we'd already used it up.

So as it was, we were both forced to push past the pain and keep fighting.

I took a deep breath and readied my sword.

"Face it, Alexander," Brae said, giving me a dull look. "You're not going to win. Five minutes left on the clock. You won't be able to disable the final bomb. I can at least outlast you for that long."

"My allies will come soon enough, at which point we'll rout you."

Brae laughed. "For goodness's sake man, they haven't even disabled their own bomb."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And how do you know they haven't disabled their bomb?"

Brae tapped a small metal device on his side.

"This little baby tells me the status of each bomb. Each time one is disabled, it gives me a little buzz."

"I see," I said.

"And guess what?" he said. "I still haven't received that buzz. Either the Black Moon slowed them down enough, or your ace-in-the-hole—what was his name, Cedric?—was knocked out or worse."

I scanned his eyes. Was this one of his famous mind games? A ploy to reduce my morale?

No. Unlikely. He really seemed to believe that they hadn't done anything.

Crap.

"Well, there's nothing for it, then," I said.

"Oh, so you'll surrender?"

I snorted.

"Nope. I'll just have to take you out here and now."

Brae blinked. Then he burst out laughing.

"Oh, that's so much more fun!" he said. "You are truly one of the most entertaining creatures I've ever had the joy of meeting."

Brae twirled his daggers.

"Even so, I'm afraid that I must wrap this up quickly. I really must get going before the bombs go off."

I tightened my grip on the stolen sword, eyeing Brae with a cool resolve.

"Clock's ticking. Let's get this over with." I said, stepping into a defensive stance.

Brae lunged forward, his daggers flashing.

I dodged, then counterattacked.

He blocked the strike with ease. "You can't keep this up forever, Alexander. You're running out of time."

I parried and struck back, pushing against the relentless onslaught. My breaths were heavy, exhausted.

"You're not the only one with a clock ticking down." I deflected his attack. "Your precious bombs won't wait for you."

Brae chuckled, sidestepping my thrust. "I'll be gone before then. And when the bombs go off, this city will crumble."

We clashed. Sweat mixed with blood, determination etched on our faces.

Brae's eyes glinted with a predatory gleam. "Let's end this, Alexander."

He surged forward. I fought back, but fatigue clawed at my muscles.

In a swift move, Brae gained the upper hand, disarming me with a strike. My sword clattered to the ground.

Brae's laughter echoed, triumphant. He held a dagger to my throat, a sinister smile playing on his lips.

"It's over, Alexander," he said. "I'll be taking you back with me. I'm certain that the High One would love to pick your brain."

I locked eyes with him.

Brae's dagger pressed against my skin, the metal biting into flesh. The countdown to destruction continued, the distant hum of the bombs growing louder.

The shadows deepened as Brae leaned in, his voice a low whisper.

"Any last words before you're taken away, Alexander?"

I grinned, a flicker of mischief in my eyes.

"Yes."

Brae raised an eyebrow.

"Overconfidence is a dangerous thing."

Before Brae could react, Fiona's knife whizzed through the air, aimed at Brae's hand. It missed its mark, but the surprise was enough to force him back.

#

I sprung towards my sword.

My companions stepped out of the shadows. Lorelei looked like she was two seconds away from turning Brae into slices of bread. Fiona cracked her neck, a smirk playing across her face. When she caught sight of my stare, she winked at me. Gareth looked bored, his longsword looking small in his massive hands. Lung across his shoulder was Cedric, clearly knocked out cold.

Brae's eyes narrowed.

"The bomb hasn't been disabled. Why haven't you dealt with it?"

Lorelei dashed towards Brae, not even bothering to respond to the question. Her sword swung out clumsily. Brae sneered and raised his dagger, only for his eyes to widen and for him to throw out a frantic block to protect him from Fiona.

But Lorelei was still coming, and Brae could see that. He snarled and threw himself to the side.

He clicked his tongue.

"I know when I'm outnumbered." He smirked. "Though, I would like to note that even so, you still lose. The bombs haven't been disabled, and the final bomb has a different code. In other words, you're screwed."

He gave me a mock salute, then disappeared into red flecks.

I stood in place for a moment, then began to lean over precariously.

Lorelei rushed towards me, keeping me from collapsing. Her eyes were widened as she looked over me.

“Spirits above, you’re covered in cuts!”

“The bomb.” I tried to take a step forward, Lorelei supporting me. “We need to disable the bomb.”

Lorelei had a conflicted look on her face, before nodding.

I stepped away from her with a slow and deliberate movement. After having gained a little bit of confidence, I staggered towards the sphere.

After getting close enough to read the dials, I groaned.

“Two minutes. Please tell me Cedric will wake up.”

Gareth walked up and shook his head. “Nope. He’s out cold for at least a day if he’s anything like other mages I’ve seen.”

I took a deep breath.

“There’s nothing we can do.”

Lorelei’s eyes shot towards me.

“What?”

I shook my head.

“I can’t do that careful defusal stuff. I just don’t know how.”

“Can’t you at least try!?” Lorelei said.

“If you want me to doom us all to death, sure.”

Lorelei’s head snapped toward Cedric.

“...it’s keyed to him, no one else can use it,” she said.

Lorelei gritted her teeth together. After a moment, she stomped the ground and yelled.

“Damn it! This is how it ends?!”

Fiona snapped her fingers.

“Wait, this whole area’s been cleared out. If we could just suppress the blast, we might be able to get away with no casualties.”

“And how would we do that?” Gareth said.

Fiona pointed at me. “Can’t you cover it in ice, like what you did last time?”

I shrugged.

“If I had a foci, maybe. But I don’t have any. Brae broke my staff. I’d barely make a layer at this point before collapsing.”

Fiona froze in place.

She ran over to Cedric, reached into his sleeve, and pulled something out. She then walked over to me, presenting the object.

Lorelei gave her a strange look until she saw what it was.

“Cedric’s wand!” Lorelei said. “Of course!”

I blinked.

“That could work.”

I took the wand out of Fiona’s hand.

“Right then, how do I use this thing again?” I muttered as I waved the wand around.

“One turn counterclockwise, flick, then—“

A bright blue glow lit up the now night sky. Water materialized in front of me. With a swish of the wand, it arranged itself into a layer on top of the bomb.

And I repeated the process. Again. And again. And again. The whole time, my companions watched with bated breaths. Except for Gareth, who seemed wholly uninterested in

what was happening.

I nodded. “Right, it’s time to run.”

Lorelei took a slow step back—then broke off into a sprint. Fiona sped ahead of all of us, abusing her wind magic to the extreme.

“Three seconds, find somewhere to hunker down!” I said.

Three.

I dashed towards an alley.

Two.

Gareth and Lorelei did the same as me.

One.

Fiona ground to a halt, then ducked behind a wall.

The bomb went off. A huge boom. The shockwave slammed into me, sending me flying forward, along with most of my companions.

I coughed and tried my best to get the dust out of my eyes. After a moment, I pushed myself to my feet.

“Lorelei, Gareth!” I shouted. “Are you okay!?”

A cough was my response.

“We’re fine!” Lorelei said.

The dust was clearing.

I blinked.

The city was intact.

It looked like a mob had blown through the area. Bad, certainly, but not complete

destruction.

I looked towards the direction of the bomb. Closer to the bomb, it actually looked worse. But that area had been cleared already.

Fiona poked her head out from behind the wall, a slack jawed expression on her face.

“Holy crap, we’re actually alive!”

Lorelei wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“That was a little too close for me,” she said.

Gareth looked out at the blown-over carts, various broken wood pieces, and random pieces of rubble. “Are we sure we won?”

Lorelei turned towards Gareth with an offended look on her face.

“Of course we won! No casualties! That’s the best we could hope for.”

I raised my hand. “Hey, I have a question.”

Lorelei turned towards me.

“Yes?”

“Brae said you guys didn’t disable the other bomb. Was he right?”

Fiona, who’d been approaching us from her position at the well, suddenly stopped and began to scoot away.

Lorelei looked away from me, pointing her face at a sign and whistling.

“Lorelei?” I said, stepping in front of her. “What happened to the bomb?”

She raised a finger.

“In my defense... we did take care of it.”

My eyes widened slowly.

“Lorelei... how did you take care of it if you didn’t disable it?”

She opened her mouth to respond.

Light flashed out of the corner of my eye. A boom drew both our attentions away. It was coming from the sky. A huge red cloud of fire and smoke was in the air. Burning pieces of rock and dust were sailing down towards the city and breaking apart in the air.

I blinked.

“Lorelei, what the hell?”

She looked away and avoided my eye contact.

“Remember the relays those Institute people use to go across Adonia quickly?”

My jaw dropped.

“You didn’t,” I said. “Oh spirits, please tell me you didn’t.”

Lorelei gave an awkward grin. “On the plus side, Cedric was pretty sure that the rubble would break apart in the atmosphere!”

Behind me, a rock slammed through the roof of a house, creating a massive crashing noise and causing everyone to flinch.

I glared at Lorelei.

“...Most of the rubble,” she said.

I looked around. There was a fair amount of houses already lit on fire.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“We are in so much trouble,” I muttered.

Epilogue

Five men and two women sat around a flickering campfire. They were all dressed in black, making it difficult to tell what they were like in the darkness.

One of the women laughed.

“Honestly Brae, you were defeated by the heroes?” she said. “This early? I imagine the High One wasn’t pleased.”

Brae rolled his eyes.

“Seren, must you be so insufferable?”

A tall tree of a man shifted around.

“She has a point, Brae,” A thick, deep voice grumbled. “You are a Fury. And yet you were defeated? If this is the strength of one of our members, then it bodes poorly for our organization.”

A petite wisp of a woman stared at the man. “Don’t be so mean to Brae! He was doing the best he could. It wasn’t his fault that things went so off-script,” she said. “Besides. Brute

strength isn't his forte. That was never why he became a fury. You know this."

The giant man bowed his head.

"You're right. Even so, I would expect you to be strong enough to hold your own against these amateur heroes," he said. "I understand that you couldn't have killed them this early. Destiny wouldn't have allowed you to do that. But they shouldn't have forced you to run."

Brae smirked.

"Indeed. It's rather strange, is it not?" he said. "How powerful they are?"

A tall man with lanky features and red hair hummed.

"Unusual," his lilting voice said. "Very unusual. I will take the bait. Why were they stronger than they were supposed to be?"

Brae rolled his head around.

"The water mage," he said. "He's better than he has any right to be. Not only that, but he knows too much. He's been training all of the other heroes. Pushing them to be better than they should've been."

"But why?" The third man, unassuming in stature or appearance. "That's absurd. What reason could—"

The fourth man, a long-haired blond, smirked.

"Perfect future vision," he said.

There was a beat of silence.

The wisp of a woman gaped.

"That's impossible! There's no way!"

Brae's lips curled into a grin, the firelight dancing in his eyes.

"Impossible isn't in the boy's vocabulary," he said, leaning back against the shadows.

"He's seen it all, every move before it's made. Makes him a real pain in the ass to deal with.

What's more, I suspect that he's been training for the past several years, using his future vision to obtain knowledge while avoiding death."

The taller woman scoffed, tossing her dark hair over her shoulder.

"And you didn't think it necessary to share this little nugget of information as soon as you found out? We could've assisted you," she said, eyes narrowing.

Brae shrugged.

"Didn't think it'd come to this. Thought I could handle a bunch of greenhorns without pulling out all the cards, even if they had one veteran among them," he said.

The tall man with the deep voice rumbled, "And now?"

"Now we adjust," Brae said, his smirk widening. "We find a way to clip Alexander's foresight. Make the playing field a bit more even."

The wisp of a woman, still grappling with the revelation, stammered, "But how can you beat someone who's already seen the ending?"

"Simple," a new voice said.

The fifth man stood up, his star-like pupils flickering in the campfire light.

"You change the script."

Hey there! Thank you for reading my novel. If you enjoyed it, please consider joining my emailing list. If you do that, you'll get regular updates on the second book of the series, hesitantly titled:

Just Past the Present: Book 2 of the Adonia Saga

To join the mailing list, simply go to liamlawless.me and scroll down past the advertisement. You'll see a small box asking for your email. Enter it in, and you're set!

Feel free to shoot me an email at liam@liamlawless.me. I would love to hear your thoughts.

I'll see you later, and again. Thank you for reading.

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Cover Design by Thejan

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