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Lyra's Candle

100 years before Aegorath's Fall

Damon gazed at the setting sun which lit the horizon ablaze with a gorgeous tangerine tint. It was beautiful, poetic even, albeit evanescent. He turned his sight overhead to see the orange sky swarmed with dozens of black ravens. They flew in circles, with no sign of slowing down. Faster and faster they soared, with the sound of flapping wings growing louder and louder. It could only mean one thing. Damon knew what was coming. He had faced it countless times before, but fear still suffused his being. It always did. He looked dead straight, mustering all the courage he could. Out from the horizon emerged horsemen, far more than Damon could count.

They wore beautiful, impermeable armors and carried the finest swords and spears. Their shields were adorned with an unforgettable symbol. It was the same notorious emblem of a fanged serpent that had struck fire into the hearts of the bravest. It was the symbol of the *Aegorath*.. Those symbols were etched into the oak trees and wooden houses of the quaint village in Lyra that he called home. It was forbidden to remove them for they were meant to be a reminder of what had happened there, but there was another resistance growing in *Lyra*. Although so many had been squashed far too easily, this one was different. No uprising hitherto had yielded an Aegorath offensive of such a massive scale. There was a flickering candle that warmed *Lyra*, and Damon knew he could not let it die. The only way for it to spread into something bigger was for them to stand their ground. He suppressed whatever fear he still felt, and in one swift motion pulled his sword out of its sheath. He looked beside him and saw his

dozen most trusted troops by his side; they were the last ones left standing. Even though the odds were stacked against them, they had hope for there was always something special about Damon, something extraordinary, and he channeled it with all his might.

It was like a dance. A dance of grace, of poise, of beauty. It was him against a thousand. He fought tirelessly, his mighty sword piercing the fragile bodies of the Aegorath troops. In a matter of minutes, half of the emergent horsemen were dead. The best swordsman to ever exist had truly earned that title. Perhaps, after decades of oppression, the Aegorath regime would finally fall. Or so they thought...

Legend has it that eventually he fell, like all men do. As brave as his feats were, the strength of the Aegorath overwhelmed him and his little group. Few know the truth of what happened there, but the Aegorath went on to completely obliterate all of *Lyra*. The Aegorath mercilessly slaughtered every single man, woman, and child, dumping their bodies into the river that passed by the village. The burdened river still carries those faces.

Yet, despite the defeat of Damon, the second, whispers on the street still honored the brave heart of *Lyra* for proving that the Aegorath regime was not completely unassailable. They prophesied of the one who would follow him; one who would bring an end to what he began; one who would strike fear into the heart of the mighty Aegorath like never before.

20 years before Aegorath's Fall

Little Damon rushed into his little cottage, frantically searching for his mother. He seemed afraid, pale as if he's seen a ghost.

"Mother, the faces-" he said, panting.

"What's wrong, my love?" Elayna said. She held him tightly in her arms, trying to comfort him.

"What are those faces in the river?" he said.

"I told you never to go there, Damon," Elayna said. "It's far too dangerous."

"But I want to know," he said.

She had been sheltering him from the truth. But he was a Thornhart, and perhaps now it was time. She drew a deep breath.

The corpses that stare at us, they speak of pain, my love," she said. "When the blue river touched by the sun sparkles, they gaze with their stare ever so stern and fixed. A gaze that hasn't diminished for ages. It's the remnant of that age. *His* age."

"Whose age, mother?" he said.

"Your great-grandfather's." she said. "Damon, the second, was the ruler of this land. He was the best swordsmen they ever saw. When he fought it was with such grace, such poise, such beauty. He cut through hordes of Aegorath troops with ease."

"Was he able to defeat them?" he said.

"He came close, the closest we've ever come, but he couldn't finish it," she lamented.

"They went on to incinerate our *Lyra*, and a reminder of what they did lies in that river."

Damon was taken aback. As young as he was, he'd still seen the atrocities of the Aegorath, but never heard of anything so extreme. Elayna could see the horror on his face.

"Don't be scared, my love," she said. "He brought hope to us, even though many fail to see it now. There is one who will bring back that hope."

"Who will, mother?" Damon said.

Elayna gently caressed Damon's head. She knew he was destined for great things, but she wanted to protect him. She'd have to tell him one day, for perhaps it was the very fate of *Lyra* that lay in his hands. But not today...

"You'll see one day, my love, when you're older." Elayna said. "I promise."

6 months before Aegorath's Fall

Damon, Bernard, and Gertrude walked briskly through the heart of *Lyra*. They were a bit far away from home, which lay on the outskirts. As heavily guarded as the city center was, they had no choice but to journey there. They were to gather supplies for the upcoming winter, which was predicted to be the harshest they had had in years.

As they approached the market, Bernard nudged Damon playfully.

"You know, for a blacksmith's son, you have quite the knack for strategy," Bernard said.

"Where did you learn all that?"

Damon shrugged, a slight smile on his face.

"Just observations and some old books," he said. "Nothing special."

Gertrude, overhearing the conversation, chimed in.

"Observations, huh?" she said. "You always had a way of seeing things others didn't, even when we were kids."

"Well, what can I say?" he said. "I do have a keen eye for what goes on around me. Speaking of which..."

Damon noticed a group of Aegorath soldiers eyeing them from a distance.

"We need to be careful," Damon whispered. "The Aegorath are watching."

"There are more here than I've ever seen before," Gertrude said.

"They're always lurking around," Bernard said. "Makes you wonder how we've lasted this long."

"Exactly, why haven't they just killed us and gotten over with it already?" Gertrude said.

"Well, they need people to rule over," Damon said. "They can't really rule over a graveyard, can they?"

"I guess so," said Gertrude. "They seem far more intimidating with the fancier armor."

Damon noticed there was something different about their armor today, it was thicker, stronger, and bore the emblem of a fanged serpent in place of the typical fangless one.

"Now that you mention it, I think they're preparing for something," Damon said. "Keep your guard up."

"Always," Bernard said.

Damon looked toward Gertrude and held her hand.

"Walk behind me, all right?" Damon said. "I'll keep you safe, my love. And you too, Bernard."

"I can take care of myself just fine," Gertrude said, smilingly.

"So can I," Bernard said, shadow punching in the air.

“I take it back,” Damon said. “I think you two will end up saving me.”

Their conversation was cut short when a familiar elderly merchant beckoned them. She wore a distinctive bejeweled hat, and her face was worn down with blisters and wrinkles. They had overtaken her face, leaving behind rough and scarred skin. The years had not been very kind to her.

"You three are always together, like the heroes in the old tales," she said. "Reminds me of a story my mother used to tell about Damon the Gallant."

Damon stiffened slightly, but Bernard laughed.

"Damon the Gallant, huh?" Bernard said. "Our Damon here might share the name, but I think he's got a long way to go before he becomes a legend."

Gertrude shot Bernard a playful glare.

"Don't underestimate him," she said. "He might surprise you."

"Thank you, Gertie," Damon said.

Gertrude smiled and looked back at the merchant.

"It's been a while since we've seen you," Gertrude said. "How have you been doing, Eleanor?"

"I've been surviving, loves." Eleanor said. "It's going to be a harsh winter, I heard. But my son came back from his voyage to the Aegorath capital, it's nice to have him back."

"If it's any consolation, I've heard that they were planning to withdraw troops from Lyra this winter," Bernard said. "It'll mean you could earn more, and not have to adhere to their ludicrous impositions."

"Oh wow, I guess that is true," Eleanor said. "It's always lovely seeing you kids. Would you like the usual?"

Damon nodded, and Eleanor handed them a basket full of supplies: several varieties of vegetables, fruits, and wood to keep them warm. Gertrude and the others were struck by her generosity.

“You didn’t have to get us so much, we only paid enough for the vegetables!” Gertrude said.

“I think of you three as my kids,” Eleanor said, smilingly. “Stay safe, my loves!”

“Goodbye Eleanor!” they said in unison. “We’ll see you next time around.”

As they left the market, laden with supplies, they noticed the sun beginning to set.

"Let's take the long way back," Bernard said. "Avoid the soldiers, perhaps."

“Probably the first good idea you’ve had in a while,” Damon said, playfully.

As they made their way back through the winding streets, they filled the air with the sound of laughter, something which Lyra had rarely seen in the past century. Born amid the Aegorath regime, none of them had experienced the slightest taste of freedom. They spoke of dreams, of a free Lyra, of what simpler times would perhaps look like. Alas, they could only dream.

Suddenly, a thunderous horn sounded in the distance, echoing ominously through the city. Instantly, the atmosphere shifted. They stopped in their tracks, completely on alert. The laughter gave way to a tense silence. Damon’s hand instinctively went to his sword, his eyes scanning the horizon.

"That horn... it's a signal from the Aegorath," Damon said. "Something's happening."

The horn sounded once again, reverberating through the city. They followed that haunting sound through the narrow winding streets of Lyra, as did the hordes of commoners who ran towards it in curiosity. It led them all to a huge square in the middle of the city, where a grim

spectacle was unfolding. A large wooden platform had been erected, a gallows standing ominously at its center. Damon, Bernard, and Gertrude pushed through the crowd, their hearts pounding with dread.

Atop the platform, several citizens were bound, their faces etched with trepidation. Damon looked at them closely but he was too far away to make out their faces. All he could see was their bodies trembling. A harsh voice cut through the murmurs of the crowd. An Aegorath commander, clad in armor emblazoned with the fanged serpent, stood before those to be hanged.

“People of Lyra,” he bellowed. “We have received reports about the presence of the great-grandson of Damon the second, traitor to the Aegorath empire, right here in Lyra.”

He paused, scanning the crowd with piercing eyes that were enough to strike fear into the hearts of even the most valiant.

“This traitor hides among you, and we will not rest till we find him,” he continued. “Reveal this person, and you shall be spared further punishment.”

He turned towards the eight people about to be hanged.

“Else, you’ll face the same fate as these eight. Let this be a warning to all those who dare oppose the Aegorath and harbor this criminal in your midst.”

He looked back at the crowd, his words ominously hanging in the air.

“And to the traitorous great-grandson of Damon, wherever you are, know that their blood is on your hands.”

Whispers rippled through the crowd, but no one spoke. Damon felt a cold grip of fear. He was the one they sought. Bernard and Gertrude exchanged worried glances.

The commander gestured, and the executioner, a massive figure shrouded in a black hood, stepped forward. The crowd gasped as he positioned the noose around the first victim’s

neck. She looked out at her fellow citizens, her eyes pleading for help that would never come; for mercy that would never be shown. Damon's hand clenched his sword's hilt tightly as though he were ready to charge. But he knew he could not reveal his identity. Bernard put a restraining hand on Damon's shoulder, nodding sideways. The Aegorath never took kindly to resistance.

"We can't save all of them, Damon," Gertrude whispered, tears in her eyes. "Not without dooming ourselves and all of Lyra."

The commander gave the order, and the executioner pulled the lever. The platform beneath the condemned gave way, and the crowd let out a collective scream as the bodies dropped all at the same time.

The commander's eyes continued to sweep over the crowd, searching. Damon felt as if those cold, calculating eyes could see right through him, and unveil his deepest secrets.

"Remember what happened here," the commander said. "And what will keep on happening, till we find who we're looking for. The descendent of Damon, the traitor, shall be brought to justice."

The commander turned around towards the hanging bodies. He approached the closest one, and slit his head, which he then threw far into the audience. His officials followed, and all the heads were thrown around like watermelons at a summer carnival. Damon stood in shock as one bloody head landed right in his hands, and splattered blood all over his clothes. He looked at the face in horror, and although it was almost unrecognizable, it was etched with ever so familiar wrinkles and blisters.

He ran as fast as he could. He picked a direction and ran. The sun went down, and he was still running. Eventually, he ambled his way back home for he had nowhere else to go. He

opened the door and stood in the doorway, stoic. Elayna was awaiting him worriedly. She saw his face and clothes, all drenched in blood.

“What happened, Damon?” she said, white with fear. “Where were you?”

He remained silent.

“Damon, speak to me,” she said.

“They killed her” he said, stammering.

“Killed whom?” she said.

“Eleanor,” he said.

She approached him, slowly, and wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m sorry, my love,” she said. “I know she meant a lot to you.”

Damon looked down at the floor in deep contemplation.

“They’re looking for the great-grandson of Damon, the second,” he said.

Elayna knew they would eventually find out, but not this soon. They needed more time; he needed more time. A pregnant pause followed as she drew a quick breath.

“Well, this means we have less time than we thought,” she said, pondering.

“I think I’m going to turn myself in,” Damon said.

“Turn yourself in?” Elayna said, surprised. “Damon, no, you can’t!”

“I can’t?” Damon said. “Why not?”

“You know why,” she said.

“But I’m not the one who can save Lyra, mother” Damon said.

“You are, my love, your great-grandfather’s blood runs in your veins,” Elayna said.

“I’m a murderer!” Damon said. “I watched them die and didn’t do a thing to help them.”

“You know we can’t save everyone,” Elayna said.

“I know, but...” Damon said.

“I know it’s hard, my love,” Elayna said. “But we just need to wait a little while longer.”

“A little while?” Damon said. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Do you know why your great-grandfather lost, Damon?” Elayna said.

“You never told me that,” he said.

“Because his wife was there fighting beside him, and she was flanked by an Aegorath spearman.” Elayna said. “A spear pierced her stomach, and your great-grandfather came running to save her. He lost focus, and all it took was two strikes to bring him down.”

“And she survived, mother?” he said.

“Barely,” Elayna said. “The Aegorath thought she was dead, so they let her be. But a few hours later, a couple of villagers carried her off the battlefield and tended to her wounds.”

“But why can’t you tell me more about who I am?” Damon said. “If I’m as special as you say I am, aren’t I better out there battling against the formidable Aegorath?”

“That was your father’s mistake,” Elayna said. “He also fell early in the battle of his time, all because he thought he had harnessed that special power, yet he was mistaken.”

“But when will I know I’ve unleashed it?” Damon said.

“Trust me, my love.” Elayna said. “You’ll know. But you can’t lose focus till then, or let matters like these distract you, hard as they may be. Nor can you rush into things.”

“I don’t know if I can do that for much longer, mother,” Damon said.

“You’re a Thornhart, my love,” Elayna said. “You have it in you.”

1 day before Aegorath's Fall

In the quiet of their room, illuminated only by the soft glow of a single candle, Gertrude and Damon lay side by side on their bed. The coarse sheets and a few sticks of wood were all they had, as the cruel winter coupled with the Aegorath's tyranny meant a dearth of supplies. But they didn't need much more than that. Damon's gaze was tender as he looked into Gertrude's eyes, finding there the same mix of strength and vulnerability that had first drawn him to her.

"Do you remember the first time we met by the old willow tree?" Gertrude said.

Damon smiled, his eyes lighting up with the memory.

"How could I forget?" Damon said. "You were trying to rescue that kitten stuck in the branches and I was...well, utterly entranced by your determination."

Gertrude chuckled softly.

"I was so focused on that poor kitten, that I didn't even notice you at first," she said. "But then, you climbed up there, fearless as ever."

"What can I say?" Damon said. "I had to meet my future wife and rescue the kitten."

"How were you so sure you were going to marry me?" Gertrude said.

"Well, I do have my way with the ladies." Damon said, smirking.

"You're never going to change," Gertrude said, rolling her eyes. "And I never want you to," she added, smiling.

Damon gently caressed Gertrude's soft, braided hair.

"I also asked you to marry me under that tree," Damon said.

"How could I ever forget that?" Gertrude said.

"I believe it's in heavily guarded Aegorath territory now, but we should visit that oak tree once everything is over," Damon said.

“Do you think it ever will be over?” Gertrude said.

“Some day,” Damon said.

Damon held Gertrude’s hand gently, tracing the lines of her palm that he had already memorized so well. Suddenly, the door burst open. Their friend, Mason, stood there, breathless.

“Bernard is missing!” Mason exclaimed.

“What?” Damon said. “Are you sure?”

“I am, I know something’s wrong,” Mason said.

“When’s the last time you saw him?” Gertrude said.

“It’s been two days,” Mason said. “I asked his mother, but he hasn’t gone back home either.”

“That’s very unlike him,” Damon said.

Panic surged through Damon and Gertrude as they quickly dressed and followed Mason into the cool night. They rode on horseback, all the way to the center of Lyra. The city was eerily quiet as they hurried through its streets. The air was tense, and the streets were lined with whispers and wary glances. As they neared the town square, the murmurs grew louder, a cacophony of confusion and fear. They navigated the maze of alleys until they reached the town square, where a large crowd had gathered. The gallows loomed ominously ahead. They feared the worst, and the worst had come to pass.

Bernard stood on the platform, his hands bound, and a noose tied around his neck. The Aegorath commander barked his sadistic orders, his voice cold and merciless. Upon seeing Bernard on the platform, Damon's breath hitched in his throat as he drowned out the commander’s voice. Gertrude gripped his hand tightly, her nails digging into his skin. Damon’s heart started pounding, faster and faster. This was his moment, he had to act. After all, this was

no random passerby; this was Bernard. He couldn't leave one of his most trusted companions to the hands of the Aegorath. Who would he be then, if he couldn't save those who loved the most?

"It's me!" Damon shouted. "I am the great-grandson of Damon, the second, traitor to the Aegorath realm!"

The crowd gasped.

"Oh, so he's finally here, is he?" the Aegorath commander said.

Damon waded through the hordes of people, stopping short of the platform. The Aegorath guards pounced on him and tied his hands together.

"Free him now," Damon said. "Please. I've given you what you want."

"Of course," the commander said, with an ominous smile on his face. "I'll let him go."

Without hesitation, he signaled the executioner. The floor dropped, and Bernard's body swung lifelessly. The commander sliced off Bernard's head and shoved it in Damon's face, taunting him.

"I did what you asked," the commander said, grinning. "He's free now."

The sight of Bernard's headless body swinging from the noose ignited something primal within Damon. A surge of power, raw and untamed, coursed through him. He felt different now. He felt powerful. He felt something awoken deep inside his shattered soul.

It was like a dance. A dance of grace, of poise, of beauty. In one swift motion, Damon broke free of his shackles, unsheathed his sword, and obliterated the Aegorath guards. The square felt silent, the only sound was the heavy thud of bodies hitting the ground. The crowd was awestruck. As good a swordsman as he was, such a move spoke of a power much greater; one they had only heard of in the stories of old. The century-old flickering candle had finally burst into flame.

The Aegorath horn blew, louder and more vigorously than ever before. But for the first time, everyone stood their ground.

The day of Aegorath's Fall

Damon was rummaging through the chest underneath his bed, searching for the best weapons he could find. Although he didn't have many, he made sure to collect the sharpest blades and the strongest shields. Hearing the shuffling of metal, Elayna approached his room.

"Where were you, my love?" Elayna said.

Damon, invested in his search, didn't respond to her.

"Damon," Elayna repeated.

He looked around this time but kept searching through the chest for there was not a moment to lose. Elayna noticed something different in his demeanor.

"Did it happen?" Elayna said.

Suddenly, Damon stopped looking through the chest. He stood up and walked towards Elayna.

"It did, mother," he said. "How did you know?"

"Oh, my dear boy, a mother always knows," she said, embracing him. "I'm so sorry."

He looked down for a moment and drew a deep breath.

"They're going to pay for what they did," Damon said.

"They will, my love," Elayna said. "They must."

"They're going to come soon, mother," Damon said. "I should go."

"Of course," Elayna said. "But there's something I must tell you before you leave."

Damon nodded, waiting attentively for what she was about to say.

“You need to know where this power comes from,” Elayna said.

“I’ve been wanting to know for years, but you’ve never told me,” Damon said.

“I know, my love,” Elayna said. “And I’m sorry, but I couldn’t risk you getting hurt then.”

Damon looked at her in anticipation.

“Centuries ago, your great-great-grandfather fell in love with Amphitrite, the goddess of the sea,” Elayna said. “It was the first time a mortal had ever engaged in relations with a goddess. And their love bore them a child, your great-grandfather, who possessed powers of both man and god. That’s the blood that runs through your veins, my love. And therein lies the providence of those powers. Your abilities go beyond physical skills. You possess the power to bend minds, my love. There’s no power greater than that...but therein lies a caveat. Only after suffering a great loss does a Thornhart transcend into his divine being.”

“Then why did great-grandfather die if he had already transcended into his divine being?” Damon asked.

“Thornharts are half human after all, aren’t we?” Elayna said. “The gods frown upon emotions that don’t serve the greater good. A Thornhart then loses his divine powers.” Elayna’s voice quietened. “Your great-grandfather’s love for his wife was his Achilles heel, and that’s what led to his demise.”

“Be safe, my love”, she said. “And be careful of fire, it’s the one thing that even the great sea goddesses are vulnerable to.”

Damon left his home, carrying with him a bag of weapons that he distributed amongst his fellow citizens. There weren’t many left, but Damon is all they needed. Beside him stood Gertrude and Mason, manning the Lyra gates. It had been an hour since the horns sounded,

alerting Aegorath reinforcements. They would be there any moment, but Damon and his group were as ready as they would ever be.

It was as the legend said it would be...

Out from the horizon emerged horsemen, far more than Damon could count. They wore beautiful, impermeable armors and carried the finest swords and spears. Their shields adorned not with a fanged serpent but a far more fearsome fire-breathing dragon. The Aegorath had prepared for this, and the battle would be a close one.

It was a dance with death, as Damon had become so well versed with. A dance of beauty, of grace, of poise. Aegorath reinforcements fell like dominoes, succumbing to Damon's unmatched power. Casualties were few on Lyra's side, but the strength of Aegorath was in numbers, and more kept flowing in through the Lyra gates in an unending stream. They couldn't hold on forever, for it was dozens facing thousands.

Soon, the sky began to darken, the setting sun casted long shadows across the blood-stained ground. A pile of bodies lay at the center of Lyra, most of them belonging to the Aegorath. But amongst the unending tide of Aegorath soldiers, there was one spearman who managed to hurl his weapon with deadly accuracy. The spear found its mark, piercing Gertrude's armor and lodging itself deep into her side. Damon turned around in the heat of battle, sensing something amiss, and saw her stumble and fall.

"Gertrude!" he cried. He gestured Mason to watch his back and rushed towards Gertrude.

"Gertie," he said, panicking "You're going to be all right, okay? We'll get you to a nurse."

"Damon," she whispered, looking at him softly with those warm, brown eyes.

"No, don't give me those eyes," he said, crying. "You're going to be okay."

“It’s too late,” she said, barely stringing together a sentence.

“It’s not, don’t say that, my love,” he said, helplessly looking around. He felt like anything but a god in that moment.

“I am so proud of you,” she said, her breaths becoming few and far in between.

“Don’t,” he said, desperately. “We still have to go back to that oak tree, my love, you promised me.”

Gertrude gave a little smile, tears falling out of her eyes.

“I love you,” she said.

Tears streamed down Damon’s cold cheeks as he held her as tight as he could. He could feel the life ebbing from her body. He held her tighter. In that moment, it was just him and Gertrude. There was not a single other soul in the world.

“I love you too, Gertie,” he said.

“Gertie?” he said.

There was no response.

Yet, there was no time to mourn. A swordsman approached Damon from behind, breaking through Mason’s defense. His sword came down hard, striking Damon on the head. His world spun, and all became dark. As he slipped into unconsciousness, his last sight was the face of his beloved Gertrude, still and lifeless in his arms.

Damon woke up a few hours later in a dimly-lit marble room, hidden deep within Aegorath headquarters. His head was spinning, and his face was smeared with blood. There was a little wooden door, which was the only way in and out of the room that was seemingly aloof from the rest of the world. Damon's head throbbed with a pain that seemed to mirror the ache in his heart. His hands were bound tightly behind his back, the ropes biting into his skin. He

struggled to recall what had happened, but the memories came in flashes—Gertrude's gentle smile, her lifeless body in his arms, darkness...

The wooden door creaked open, and an old man stepped into the room. His curly, white hair was reminiscent of the gods. And despite his age, there lay not a single wrinkle on his unblemished face. His steps were slow and measured, and his eyes, keen and assessing.

"Hello, Damon," the old man said.

Damon glared at the man, his anger simmering.

"And you are?" Damon demanded, his voice thick with contempt.

"Now, now, there's no need for hostilities," the old man said. He walked toward Damon. "I am the leader of the Aegorath."

Damon's eyes flared up in righteous indignation.

"I know what you're thinking," the old man said. "You hate me, don't you?"

"Hate you?" Damon said. "Hate you? You destroyed everything I loved!" he spat, his voice laced with pain and fury.

The man's expression softened slightly, an uncharacteristic gesture for a man known for his unyielding demeanor.

"I know about Gertrude," he said gently. "And I am sorry for your loss. Truly."

Damon's anger momentarily gave way to confusion.

"Why would you care?" Damon said. "Your conscience has never stopped you from tearing families apart and razing villages to the ground."

The leader sighed, the weight of centuries evident in his eyes.

"Because, Damon, I don't take pleasure in what I do," the man said. "Yet, I know I must, for it is my duty. It is my burden."

“Murder is your duty, you say?” Damon said, disgusted. “How do you live with yourself?”

The man gave a hint of a smile. He looked at Damon with fascination.

“You sound just like him,” the man said, reminiscing.

“Like who?” Damon said.

“Like your great-grandfather,” the man said. “We always locked horns over matters such as these.”

“He caused you a lot of trouble, didn’t he?” Damon said, smirking. “And I’m going to finish what he started.”

The man nodded disapprovingly. It was happening all over again.

“Join me, Damon,” the man said. “I’m doing all this so that we can thrive.”

“Thrive?” Damon said, his frustration exacerbating. “You call the love of my life dying in my arms thriving?”

“We need to make sacrifices,” the man said. “It’s in our blood.”

“Our blood?” Damon said, confused.

“Thornhart blood,” the man replied, his words hanging ominously in the air.

Damon’s world seemed to stop. He took a while to piece things together. The revelation hit him like a tidal wave, rendering him speechless.

“You’re Damon Thorhart, the first of his name,” Damon said, stammering.

“I am,” the man said. “And I’ve come here for a special purpose. To carry out the will of the gods.”

Damon gawked at the man, his eyes disbelieving.

“The gods envision an epoch of peace and order,” the man said. “And it is my duty as Amphitrite’s betrothed to bring their vision to fruition.”

“At what cost?” Damon exclaimed, indignant once again.

“At any,” the man said. He came closer to Damon. “Just imagine a future with naught but luscious fields of green, with the sound of laughter and melodies pervading the summer air. And laughter that shall be eternal, with no death to ever tarnish it. But the gods first demand the ultimate sacrifice of weening out the weaker, less deserving lives. And son, we are in the last stage of the purification crusade.”

Damon looked at the ground, deep in thought.

“All of this, all that I must do, is the first step to that,” the man said. “That is the true purpose of the Aegorath, and that’s why I convinced so many to join my cause. But tell me, what purpose is more noble than that?”

He paused, bending down towards Damon.

“But I need a Thorhart by my side,” the man said. “I need you beside me, son.”

For a while, the man believed that Damon was considering his offer. They would be unstoppable, wouldn’t they? They would truly become what they were destined to be. They would become the all-powerful, all-fearing gods that ruled all the peaceful kingdoms of man. But Damon could never forget those that he loved. Eleanor. Bernard. Gertrude. All who had become figments of his worst nightmares.

“If that is what it means to be a Thornhart...then I guess I’m no fucking Thornhart,” Damon said, projecting a good chunk of his spit onto the man.

For the first time, the godlike man was quick to anger. He wiped Damon’s spit off his face and grunted heavily.

“I’ll give you another chance,” he said. “Think it over.”

The man walked back toward the door. Just before he left he said his last words to Damon.

“Join me,” he said softly. “Please don’t make the same mistakes the last three generations of Thornharts made.”

He shut the door behind him, leaving Damon alone in the marble room once again. In the stillness of the room, he wrestled with his thoughts. The offer from his great-great-grandfather echoed in his mind, intermingling with the memories of those he had lost. But his resolve was unshaken; he could not join the man responsible for so much pain and suffering, even if he shared his blood. As night turned into dawn, Damon heard the distant sound of commotion outside. The Aegorath were mobilizing once again. This was an all-out Aegorath offensive which would be nothing short of cataclysmic. They had already taken over the majority of Lyra, and if it fell, the neighboring kingdoms of Miyasa and Gernan did not stand a chance. He knew what he had to do, and time was of the essence.

Drawing on the Thornhart power within him, he focused his mind, channeling his rage, grief, and love into a force of indomitable will. The ropes binding him frayed and snapped, freeing him. He stood up, his body aching but his spirit unbroken. He approached the door, cautiously, ready for any surprise. He gave it a slight tug, and to his surprise, it flung open. As he stepped into the hallway, there was not a door in sight. He looked around once again, and noticed a small shaft, barely wide enough for a person to squeeze through. Without hesitation, he crawled through the shaft, eventually emerging into the Aegorath kitchen.

It was a huge room, adorned with intricate designs carved in the most beautiful white marble. Near the entrance lay a few barrels of oil, perhaps to be used to prepare meals for the

troops. He saw a box of matches lying on a table nearby, and an idea dawned upon him. He carved open one of the barrels with his bare hands and began walking through the hallways of the Aegorath building, pouring out the oil on the way. Fortunately, it seemed that not many Aegorath troops were left in the building, as they were ordered to launch a final attack on Lyra.

He reached the end of a massive hallway and looked at the trail of oil he had left along the floor. It was enough. It had to be. Damon took out a match from his pocket and lit it. With this, he thought, the reign of Damon, the first, would finally end. Wherever his great-great-grandfather was hiding in the gargantuan complex of the Aegorath, there would be no escape from this. After all, he was part sea-god, and if there was one thing that sea gods despised with all their might, it was fire.

Just when he was about to set fire to the oil trail, Damon, the first, appeared beside him.

"Damon," he began, his voice softer than Damon had ever heard it. "Don't do this. You are destroying more than just this building. You are destroying a legacy, our legacy."

Damon, match in hand, paused for a moment. The softness in the old man's voice was unexpected, but again, it did little to sway his resolve.

"This 'legacy' is built on blood and tyranny," Damon said resolutely. "And it ends with me."

The old man tried to stop Damon by force, but something came upon him. He looked at him and saw his own son, Damon, the second. He felt helpless and powerless, for he felt emotion beyond his control.

"Think of what you are doing," the old man said, urging Damon. "Think about the gods. You're ruining their plan; they will retaliate, and mankind will suffer. And think about the

Aegorath; they are not your enemy, son. Their biggest crime is fighting for a noble cause. They are our people, and our responsibility.”

Damon looked into the eyes of his great-great-grandfather, and saw in there the burden of centuries and the weight of countless decisions that he had struggled to make. But he also thought of Gertrude, her final words, and the unfulfilled promise of the oak tree. He thought of Bernard, the brother-in-arms whose life was snatched away so cruelly. And Eleanor, the ever so kind Eleanor who always shared a familial bond with Damon. Every memory fueled his determination. He could not let their sacrifices be in vain.

“Eleanor, Bernard, Gertrude,” Damon whispered. “Those were my people too.” And with that, he dropped the match, setting ablaze the candle that was warming Lyra, and turning it into an unstoppable forest fire.

Two months after Aegorath’s Fall

Elayna journeyed to the top of the mountain, huffing and puffing. It was a far longer and more arduous journey than she had thought, but a worthwhile one nonetheless. As she reached the peak of the mountain, she took out two golden urns from her knapsack and placed them beside the tall oak tree that stood above all of Lyra. But she was still missing something. She looked around, grabbing the first sharp stick that she found. She etched words into the oak tree, applying all her remnant strength. It took longer than expected, but it was ever so important to her.

She took a few steps back and looked at the oak tree. She saw the two golden urns sitting beside the tree’s carvings. It was perfect, she thought. Tears welled up in her eyes. She approached one of the urns, holding it tightly against her chest for one last time.

“I miss you, my love,” she said. “I know you’re going to inspire so many people.”

She was right. The oak tree stood firm, withstanding even the harshest weathering of time. And the inscription on the tree remained unscathed for centuries. It read,

“For Damon and Gertrude, who brought hope to Lyra.

All that is lost is brightly lost...”