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# CHAPTER 1: The Woods

## SCENE 1

The trees rustled in the delicate forest wind. The leaves hadn’t yet changed their color, but a lonely few gave in to the breeze and tumbled to the forest floor. A deer sauntered between the dense trees and fallen trunks, weaving its antlers through the branches with ease. It stopped and stooped its head low to the ground to nibble at the fallen leaves. Its ears perked up and it lifted its head as a girl’s voice booms through the forest. The deer reflexively turned and bounded back the way it came, tail flapping with every hop. Markus ran out from behind a tree, arrow nocked in his bow. He aimed at the deer and fired his shot. Chunks of wood go flying as the arrow embedded itself into a trunk just as the deer vanished into the sea of trees. The man slumped his shoulders, sighed, and turned to look at his younger sister sprawled out in the dirt, foot caught in a root snaking out of the ground.

“Damn it, Kursa! You have to watch where you step. Now we don’t have dinner.” She glared up at him in silence, then stood to free her foot. “What if it was our contract that heard you instead? We wouldn’t be able to surprise them and that would get us killed.” He continued. He walked forward and retrieved his arrow from the tree. Kursa fell backwards as she wrenched her foot out of the root.

“I get it, okay? It’s hard to watch in front of me and my feet at the same time!” She felt tears begin stinging her eyes, but she blinked them away before her brother could notice. He hated seeing her cry. Markus leaned his shoulder against the tree that defeated her. They stayed like that for a while, silent, until Kursa raised her arms and grasped at the air, playfully signaling her brother to help her up. She let her arms fall back onto her chest and let out a sigh when Markus didn’t move.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to be more careful next time,” She said. Satisfied with her apology, Markus grabbed her arms and hoisted her onto his back.

“Does your foot hurt?” He asked. She shook her head, forgetting he couldn’t see her face behind him.

“Not a lot, but thanks for the ride.” She wrapped her arms around his neck to ease the weight on his back. Markus didn’t mind either way. She wasn’t terribly heavy. He trudged through the woods carrying Kursa on his back, taking extra care to watch his footing. She was asleep by the time they made it back to camp. Markus worried that maybe he pushed her too hard today, but he’d rather she be exhausted than get hurt due to inexperience. Markus had learned to survive by trial and error. He wanted to save her from that pain.

Raz sat on the ground in a small clearing next to an even smaller fire. It burned inside a hole in the ground to make it less visible now that the sun was down. In one hand he held a large mushroom on a stick over the top of the flame and in the other he held open a title-less book. His face brightened as he saw of Markus carrying his sleeping sister.

“Nothing?” He asked, shutting his book and sitting up. Markus shook his head as he slipped Kursa off his back and laid her down on her. His gaze lingered on her for a second, then he walked over to join Raz at the fire. He unfastened his scabbard and tossed it on the ground next to where he sat.

“We nearly got this big buck, but we made a bit too much noise and it ran off.” Markus said. He stared off into the flames as they lapped at the sides of the hole.

“You mean Kursa made too much noise.” Raz said, grinning and looking over at her small frame rise and fall with each slow breath. Markus made an awkward shrug and nodded.

“I wanted to save her from your teasing.” Markus said. The man blew air out his nose in a quiet chuckle. Markus rubbed at his hands and looked down. “I don’t know, Raz, do you really think it’s better for her out here with us? I know she hasn’t been here long, but I’m really worried she’ll end up hurting herself”

“She’s definitely better off. You’ve heard about the orphanages in Woskom. Might be worse than living on the streets.” Raz plucked his mushroom off the stick and took large bite. “And you know how much fun that is.” He held it out to Markus, who grimaced and waved it away. Markus picked up a stick and poked at the embers.

“I know. I just don’t want to be the reason she gets more than hurt. She still has to learn so much before she can even hunt, let alone help us on a contract.” Raz threw the inedible parts of the mushroom off into the darkness, then laid back on his bedroll, his head resting on his hands and his leg balancing on the other knee.

“The endless wall wasn’t built in a day. These things take time. She’ll get the hang of it sooner or later. Hopefully sooner, but what can you do? In the meantime, we teach her what we know and make fun of her when she does it wrong.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Markus said, unaffected by Raz’s joke.

“I am.” Raz said. Markus didn’t know what else to say. He held his gaze on the flames and watched as they licked the air hypnotically.

That night, Markus dreamed of fire.



## SCENE 2

They awoke to a deafening crack echoing through the trees. Markus and Kursa jolted upright on their bedrolls. He didn’t remember falling asleep. Raz was already on his feet staring in the direction of the noise.

“What was that?” Kursa asked, sleep still heavy on her voice.

“Musket fire.” Raz said. He rushed to his bedroll, rummaged through his rucksack, and fished out a large dogeared tome. Excitement coursed through Markus’s veins as he worked quickly to refasten his sword to his waist.

“Wait, I don’t get it. What’s so bad about muskets?” Kursa asked, still sitting.

“Only two kinds of people have muskets, Kursa. Rekval Guardians and the criminals that steal from them. And I don’t see any guard dogs out here.” Raz said, packing his bedroll into his bag and slinging the long strap over his shoulder.

“Which means, we found our contract.” Markus said, kicking dirt on the smoldering embers. Kursa sat for a second registering what he said, cursed quietly, then rushed to pack up her things.

## SCENE 3

Markus and Kursa followed behind Raz as silently as they could. He led them through the woods at a brisk pace, vaulting over fallen logs, weaving through the trees and jogging up steep hills. They didn’t say a word, but Markus glanced back every so often to make sure Kursa was still behind him. She knew better than to speak when they could be within earshot of their target, but she was still annoyed she couldn’t complain about the burn in her legs.

When Raz reached the crest of a particularly steep incline, he laid down on his stomach, clicked his tongue twice and gestured at the other two. They joined him on the ground. A few dozen feet in front of them, sprawled out in a large clearing, was a camp. A big camp.

Six canvas tents lined the edge of the forest. Past the tents, four swordsmen illuminated by the light of a blazing campfire muttered to each other as they spun a slab of meat on a spit. Further still, a figure sat hunched over a long table that stretched out underneath a canopy. A cart full of what looked like trinkets and treasures stood nearby. A musket leaned up against the cart’s large wooden wheels. Huge spikes shoddily pointed outwards into the woods as a makeshift defense but left plenty of space to slip in unnoticed.

“Six tents for six men, you think?” Raz whispered. “They can clearly afford it.” He nodded towards the cart.

“We’ll have to take that chance. Pershiket could have more men, but we can’t lose this opportunity. They’re completely unprepared.” Markus said. He sat silent for a moment, contemplating. “Okay, here’s what we do. While they’re distracted, we go towards the fire. The dark will cover us until we’re right on top of them. I’ll take out the two on the right, you take out the two on the left. Either Pershiket is that person at the table or she’s in one of those tents. Either way, eyes peeled.” Markus felt a tug on the back of his shirt.

“What do I do?” Kursa asked. Markus took off his bag, removed the short bow and quiver off the side, unsheathed a small throwing knife off his belt and handed them all to her.

“You stay down and out of sight. Only use those if one of them notices you.” Markus said.

“But—” Kursa started, holding the items flat on her palms.

“No. you’re not ready to help us yet.” Markus said, being careful not to raise his voice above a firm whisper. “You remember how to use those?” He gestured to the weapons in her hand. She nodded.

“Good. Wait here, we’ll finish this as fast as we can. Stay hidden no matter what.” Markus said. “You ready, Raz?” Raz was flipping through the pages of his book. He stopped at one with a particularly big dog ear on the corner, and nodded back.

“Okay,” Markus said, unsheathing his long sword. He nodded at Raz and they both walked up and over the crest of the hill. Markus felt sweat beading on his back. But, despite everything, he was ecstatic. After three weeks of tracking, the time had finally come. Payday.

The two walked out of the forest and past the tents, silent. Just as they came into the light of the fire, they stopped. Markus’s sword glinted wildly in the firelight. Each man was more grizzled and scarred than the last. The four chattering men fell silent and turned to look at the newcomers. Raz cleared his throat.

“Gentlemen.” Raz said. Before the men had time to reach for their swords, Markus raked his sword across the first one’s chest. In one swift motion he reached to his belt, gripped a throwing knife and tossed it at the second man. The knife caught him in the throat, his sword hitting the ground as he grasped at his spewing neck. Raz kicked the third man square in the side of the head with his heel, causing him to collapse forward onto himself. As the fourth man stood, Raz stretched out his hand, holding the tome in the other and uttered a phrase off the page. A blast of searing hot energy shot out into the air in front of him, flashing the area with a bright blue light. It caught the man in the stomach, sending him flying backwards into the table, his clothes and skin smoldering. Blue particles floated like embers into the sky as they dissipated. The men lay crumpled on the ground Deep crimson blood pooled, staining the dirt. The figure at the table stood up and sauntered into the light of the fire, unsheathing a sword and tossing the scabbard aside. It was the contract. Harran Pershiket.

“Drop your weapons.” She said. She stood a head shorter than Markus, but a particular glint in her eye added to her menacing frame. Markus raised his sword in front of him, ready to strike.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” Markus said with a coy smile. Pershiket pouted.

“Maybe I can convince you.” She said, gesturing with her sword. Raz gasped. A man stood behind him with a long knife pressed up to his throat, cutting into him slightly.

“Good, good.” She said with a sharp smile. She raised the tip of her sword under Markus’s chin. “Now maybe we can have a chat.”

## SCENE 4

Kursa clasped her hands around her mouth as she watched Markus toss his sword down at their enemy’s feet. She stood there, frozen, unable to stop watching as her brother’s words bounced against the other thoughts screaming in her head. *If I try to help, they’d kill me too*, she thought. *If I do nothing, they die*. *If I run, I’d never find my way out of the forest, let alone survive on my own*. Weighing the options in her head, the reality crushing her, she picked up the bow and nocked an arrow. She stood up as tall as she could and drew back on the string. *What if I miss? They’ll die for sure. Then they’ll come after me.* *What if I hit Markus? Or Raz?* The thoughts made her queasy. Her arm started to shake from the strain.

Just before she shot the arrow, an enormous cloaked figure walked up next to her. A black hood concealed their face. The biggest sword Kursa had ever seen was strapped tight on their back. They held a musket out in front of them, the stock tucked firmly into their shoulder. Before Kursa could think, the hooded figure pulled the trigger.



## SCENE 5

“Let me guess. Bounty hunters?” Pershiket said, keeping her sword tucked underneath Markus’s chin. Markus raised an eyebrow and nodded slowly, careful to not cut himself on the sharp iron.

“We like ‘mercenaries’ better.” Raz said through gritted teeth. The man holding him pressed the knife harder into his neck and shushed him.

“I have to admit, I’m a little impressed. It can’t have been easy to find us this far out.” Pershiket said.

“You killed four of the high councilors. They were sure to put a lot of money on your head to keep us motivated.” Markus said, flashing a coy smile.

“Yeah…” She said, scratching at the back of her mop of curly hair. “I had good reasons. There’s things they’re hiding from us.” She twisted the sword under Markus’s chin and let the light from the fire glint off it. “Something worth killing over.”

In an instant, the familiar crack of musket fire rang out, just as a sickening wet thud landed behind Raz. The man holding him shuddered, let out a gurgled wheeze and slumped sideways onto the ground, dragging Raz down with him.

“What the fuck—” Pershiket started.

Taking the opportunity, Markus kicked the sword out of her hand and swung out his elbow at her face. He felt her nose crunch under the force of his jab. She fell to the ground and scrambled for her fallen sword. Raz pushed the dying man off of him, rushed over and kicked the blade far out of her reach. Pershiket froze, turned to smile at the two of them and chuckled. Markus kneeled onto the small of her back and crossed her hands behind her while Raz fished through his bag.

“That went surprisingly well!” Raz said, tossing Markus a bundle of rope then putting his hands on his hips. Markus tied her hands tightly. Raz glanced over at the meat on the spit over the fire, now mostly blackened.

“Payday … and a meal.” Markus said in between breaths, cracking a smile.



# CHAPTER 2 : The Job

## SCENE 1

Kursa stood frozen, bow and arrow in hand, looking up at the imposing cloaked figure. Markus and Raz stood in the clearing, mostly unscathed, now binding the hands of Harran Pershiket. She looked at the figure, who did not look back at her.

“You … helped us?” Kursa said, her voice wavering as her heart pumped. The figure nodded, almost indiscernible underneath the thick hood.

“She has something I need.” The figure said. Kursa was surprised. It was a woman; her voice raspy, but gentler than expected. She kept her gaze fixed on the clearing in front of them.

Kursa stammered, her words failing to form. She walked forwards towards the clearing, but before she crossed the forest’s edge, she turned back to the figure. Underneath the darkness of the hood she wore an angular ceramic mask. It looked like a crude recreation of a man’s face with an accentuated chin, large shut eyes and a shallow recess where the nose would have been. Something about the simplicity of its design made the hairs on the back of Kursa’s neck stand up.

“Thanks.” Kursa said, the word launching itself out of her mouth. Unnerved, she twisted back around and ran into the clearing. The figure stood in silence, observing, as Markus bound Pershiket’s hands and feet, tying a few extra knots for good measure. She watched Raz rifle through items around the camp as the cut on his neck slowly painted his skin a bright crimson. She watched Kursa weave past obstacles to join her family. She watched the sunlight peek just above the tree line. She slipped the musket over her shoulders, the carrying strap humming slightly as it scraped across her metal breastplate and nestled next to the long scabbard of her sword. Then, with hardly a breath, she moved into the clearing.

## SCENE 2

Kursa ran forward past the tents and stopped in front of Raz as he walked in the opposite direction.

“You good?” He said, looking down at Kursa as he towered over her. She nodded.

“Are you?” She asked, pointing at the gash on his neck. He grazed the cut with his fingertips and winced at the warmth flowing out of it.

“Yeah. Just have to go stop the bleeding.” He held out his fist in front of him. Kursa returned the gesture and bumped his fist with her own. Raz darted into one of the tents as Kursa continued into the clearing towards Markus.

“Are you okay?” Kursa said as she ran towards him. Markus knelt, and she slammed into him, giving him a hug. He let her go and put his hands on her shoulders.

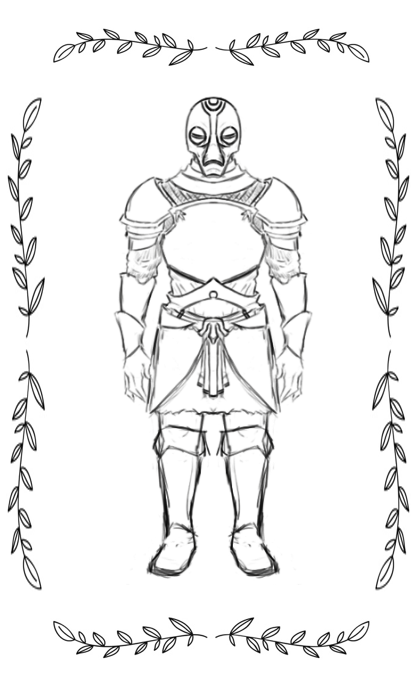
“Totally fine, just a few scratches. But fuck all that, where did that shot come from? Did you —” Markus trailed off as he saw the hooded figure walking towards them. Her armor shined in the light of the rising sun, framed by her cloak that hung loose at her sides and flapped against the back of her legs. Her boots clanked with each heavy step, but she moved with such ease that it looked as though the armor was a part of her. Markus cursed, leapt upwards, pushed Kursa away behind him and drew his sword.

“No, wait!” Kursa said. Markus ignored her. He held his sword at the ready in front of him. The hooded figure kept her pace and unsheathed her large two-handed broadsword. With a practiced elegance, she dug her foot into the dirt, sprang forwards and swung at Markus. He parried, but the force of her swing flung the sword out of his hand. Markus cursed again and swung his fist at her. His hit landed, knocking the mask off her face. Kursa saw that her face was heavily scarred. Burns and cuts woven into more burns and cuts. She planted her heavy metal boot in Markus’s chest and knocked him to the ground, then raised her sword above her head.

“Stop!” Kursa shouted, springing forward and putting herself in between the woman and Markus. The woman held her sword in place. Past her rough features Kursa looked into her eyes. She stared back, unblinking. The woman’s eye twitched, and she closed her lips tight. She stepped back and returned her sword to its sheath in one swift motion. Without a word she picked up her mask off the ground, walked further into the camp and began rummaging through the largest chest. Markus leaned himself up on his arm and watched her pick up an item, study it intensely, toss it aside, and return for another. A raspy cackle split the air behind them as Pershiket exploded into laughter, interlaced with painful coughing. She spat a red glob of spittle onto the ground.

“Bet you didn’t expect to get your ass kicked by a fucking guard dog today!” She shouted. Amused by herself, she burst into another fit of laughter. Markus glared at her as he wiped a trickle of blood from his lips. Raz pushed aside a flap on one of the tents and walked out carrying a handful of makeshift bandages, blood seeping through his newly bandaged neck. He glanced at the guard making a mess of the camp, raised his eyebrows and looked down at Markus and Kursa.

“What just happened?”



*“The Guardians are essential in keeping order in our great cities. They follow our every command without question and keep the peace with an iron fist. Try not to be on the receiving end of their swift justice.”*

*- from “Commentary on Rekval Guardians” by High Councilor Chasti Zemel*

Kursa sat at the back of the cart, nibbling at a cut of meat. It was burnt and a little dry, but she hadn’t eaten in days, so she could hardly complain. She hung her legs off the side of the cart and kicked at the air as she watched Markus and Raz scavenge through the criminal’s camp. Pershiket sat on the ground, leaning up against the wooden bench in front of the long table. The guard rifled through every item and container in the camp, throwing aside everything that didn’t match her search. Markus and Raz did the same but searched for items they could make use of.

## SCENE 3

“What do you think about this?” Raz said, pulling an intricately designed chainmail shirt out of a satchel. Markus shook his head and said something dismissive, adding in how their employers would notice if they took too many of the costly items. Raz shrugged, placed it onto a neat pile next to him, and dumped the rest of the satchel’s contents onto the ground. He picked up a smooth oval shaped rock on a cord with a symbol engraved on one side. The symbol glowed a faint orange and looked like two triangles sharing one point with a line crossing through. Raz pocketed it, hoping to himself that no one would miss it.

The silence spoke louder than the noise did. They all found themselves looking up when the guard stopped searching and remained motionless. She stood up slowly and walked over to the end of the table with a metal cylinder in her hand, its surface matching the color of her gauntlet. She popped open a lid on one end and shook the contents out. With a solid thud, out fell a thick piece of parchment and a small black cube the size of a fingernail. Kursa took another quick bite of her food and jumped down from the cart. She gazed at the parchment as she walked, curiosity burning in her chest. Green blobs littered the blue background of the parchment. It was dominated by symbols that Kursa couldn’t understand.

“What is that?” Kursa said, taking a seat at the end of the table. The guard didn’t speak as her eyes pored over every inch of the parchment.

“It’s a map.” Pershiket spoke up from the other end of the table.

“Wow, no way.” Raz said, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he took a seat across from Kursa. Markus gave the guard a wide berth, eyes fixed on her sword as he walked around and sat next to Raz.

“You want to know why I did what I did? Put that square on the map.” Pershiket said, the defeat in her voice almost palpable. She stared ahead at the campfire where her comrades lay still. “It was all worth it, just to know what they’re hiding.” Kursa reached over and picked up the small black cube. It was heavier than it looked, the smooth faces cool to the touch. When she put the cube down on the map, it emitted three quick, high pitched tones. Then it erupted in brilliant blue light as an orb glided upwards out of it, growing larger as it rose. When it stopped growing, large chunks of the orb drifted outwards and took their places in its orbit. Green masses appeared on the orb in greater detail than they did on the map. When all the pieces were in place, the projection spun slowly around on its axis. It was a planet.

## SCENE 4

In that moment, something shifted inside the guard. In the midst of the bright blue light that shined off her eyes, and off of the awestruck faces of the people around her, a piece of her that had been forced down long ago broke free and worked its way to the surface. A feeling that she hadn’t experienced in a very long time. A sense of wonder.

She looked down at her hands, clenching and unclenching her fists. She watched the dazzling light dance off the metal of her gauntlets. A feeling of warmth and familiarity worked its way throughout her veins. She had forgotten what it was like to feel. Without so much as a second thought, she pulled the mask off of her face, slammed it on the table and punched it. She punched and punched until it was little more than pebbles and dust.

“My name,” She said, pulling the hood off her head. “Is Mae.”



# CHAPTER 3: Pay Day

## SCENE 1

Their eyes followed the bright glow of the globe as it rotated slowly around on its axis. The guardian, Mae, brushed the remains of her mask off the table and leaned in for a closer look. The projection hummed a gentle tune, partially pleasant, part unnerving. Kursa reached out a hand and prodded it. A dull buzz of electricity ran through her arm as the globe shimmered at her touch. She yanked her hand back and rubbed at her fingers. Her hair stood up as the static clung to her. She poked at it again, the buzz becoming somewhat pleasant.

“Is this…ours?” Markus said, swallowing hard and leaning in as well. “Our world, I mean.”

“It’s…” Kursa trailed off.

“Beautiful? Like nothing you’ve ever seen before?” Pershiket said, finishing Kursa’s sentence. “I know. I thought the same. This is only a hint of what the high council could be hiding.” She stared off, away from everyone gathered at the table, her voice now a low whisper. “I don’t regret killing any of them.”

“What language is this?” Raz said, pointing at an angular set of symbols floating above a large chunk drifting around the globe.

“I don’t know.” Mae said. Her words hung in the air for a moment before she grabbed the cube, rolled up the parchment and slipped both back into their metal tube. “I need to bring this to Novleik.” Everyone remained silent as the bright light of the orb faded away.

“Well that’s where we’re heading,” Markus said, rubbing at his eyes. “But what’s there for you?”

“The Scholar.” Mae said, grabbing a small satchel and gently placing the tube in it.

“Like *the* Scholar?” Raz asked. She nodded.

“Who’s the Scholar?” Kursa asked.

“One of the seven great explorers. They’re the only ones who’ve been outside the wall. He’s likely the only person in Rumelia who might know what this is.” Mae said, as she looked for more things to fill her bag with. “So, let’s go pay him a visit.”

## SCENE 2

The cart rumbled along the rough road. Kursa lay on her back in the bottom of the cart, watching the treetops drift by, trying to ignore every rock in the cart’s path that reminded her of the ache in her back. Mae sat at the back, feet dangling off the edge, holding a rope tied to Pershiket’s hands as she walked, trying to keep up with the cart.

“Lift your feet.” Mae said.

“What?” Pershiket asked, her voice full of malice.

“You drag your feet when you walk. It’s annoying. Lift them higher.” She yanked hard on the rope. Pershiket stumbled forward, spat on the ground and mumbled obscenities under her breath but ultimately did as she said. Kursa closed her eyes, enjoying the warm sunlight and the ambient chirp of bugs and birds in the rustling leaves. She liked the gentle murmur of Raz and Markus talking at the front of the cart as they ushered the horse forward.

“And you’ve never seen anything like it before?” Markus said.

“No. Nothing. I’ve never even read about an object that could make something like that.” Raz said back.

Their words turned to mumbles as they talked quieter and as Kursa listened less. Shadow draped over the cart when the sun dipped behind something. Kursa reopened her eyes and saw it. The endless wall. She sat up, mouth agape. It was enormous. The wall reached upwards, higher than she’d ever seen anything reach, and it stretched out, infinite in both directions until it disappeared behind the trees. Markus stopped the cart in the middle of the trail and hopped off. He gestured for Kursa to follow him as he and Raz walked over to the wall.

Markus pressed two fingers to his lips, then gently touched them to the smooth stone brick. Raz stood next to him and did the same.

“Why are you doing that?” Kursa asked.

“Don’t you know? You went through commencement too, didn’t you?” Markus asked.

“Yeah, when I was like four. Mom never really taught me any of this stuff after Dad...” Kursa’s voice trailed off, and she looked down at her feet. Markus locked his eyes on the wall.

“Well … I guess that means I have to teach you now,” Markus said. “We do it out of respect. For Deshnaya. He’s the god who built this wall.” He showed her how to perform the ritual, and she mimicked his movements.

“Why did Deshnaya make the wall?” Kursa asked.

“To keep us safe from the dangers outside.” Markus said. “Shtalya, the god of creatures, gathered every decent person into Rumelia, and Deshnaya sealed us in with everything we’d ever need. We can’t leave, but nobody can enter.”

“‘Rumelia – The last bastion of human civility.’” Raz said dramatically. “Or so they say.”

“Doesn’t seem all that civil.” Kursa said, glancing at Pershiket as she sat on next to the cart, catching her breath.

“Some say that criminals like her are born outside the walls and worm their way in somehow.” Markus said. “I think she’s just an asshole.” He cracked a smile as Kursa let out a chuckle, then led her back to the cart.

## SCENE 3

A few hours down the path, nestled against the side of the endless wall, lay the city of Novleik. Its long and winding streets were designed like a maze. People flowed down the street, shifting like a river of frustrated guppies, getting caught in eddies that formed at the small stands lining the walls on either side. Faces glared up at them as Markus walked the horse forwards, forcing people to move around them. He stopped the cart in front of a large stone building. A set of stairs lead up to a its double doors.

“I got it this time.” Raz said. He hopped off the cart and took Pershiket from Mae.

“Even after what you saw, you’re still going to turn me in?” Pershiket said.

“Yup.” Raz said, putting a firm hand on her shoulder while ignoring her plea. She craned her neck around to face Kursa.

“Remember what you saw.” Pershiket said with wild eyes. Raz pushed her forward and forced her up the steps. Markus hitched the horse to a nearby pole and sat down on the building’s wide steps. Kursa laid down on the step above him, her muscles aching from travel.

Kursa jerked awake as the doors slammed open and Raz strutted out. He held a leather pouch that, while admittedly smaller than Kursa had expected, jingled all the same as Raz spun around on his heels, dancing to the beat of an invisible drum.

“How much?” Markus asked, craning his neck.

“Ten *entire* gold coins! We’ll live like kings for at least a week!” Raz said. Kursa cleared her throat and coughed. He stopped dancing and rolled his eyes. “Kings and lady kings.”

“Thank you.” Kursa said, chin raised high.

“Are you finished?” Mae asked, as she stood arms crossed next to the cart. Raz crossed his own arms and nodded. “Good. The Scholar’s shop is nearby. This way.” She said, starting off down the road.

## SCENE 4

Nestled far out of the way of the main drag of the city, the door to the Scholar’s shop lay one of the city’s seldom walked alleyways. The shop was small, made smaller still by the tall, chaotically stocked shelves that stood throughout the room, packed so close together there was barely enough room to walk. Jars filled with fluid, small oozing boxes, incredibly thick and dusty tomes, and other fleshy objects crowded each shelf. If you didn’t know before entering, it wouldn’t be obvious someone of such nobility worked the shop. A small bell jingled above them as they swung the door open and crammed themselves inside.

“Give me just a minute!” A voice shouted from a curtain behind the counter, accompanied by a hurried jostling of crates. A somewhat stout man wearing a short robe pushed the curtain aside, sauntered out, and took his place behind the counter as he wiped his hands with a rag.

“Okay! What can I do– ” He started. He adjusted his glasses and squinted his eyes at the newcomers. His eyes widened. “Gods grace me! Mae? Why are you here?”

“I’ve become somewhat untethered. It’s nice to see you, Jovick.” She said, her voice lighter than usual, but not by much. He paused, looking her up and down in disbelief.

“I didn’t know it was possible for a guardian to become untethered.” He said while staring at her, wide eyed.

“I don’t think they anticipated any of us seeing something like this.” She said, grabbing the metal tube out of her satchel. She slipped the map and the cube onto the counter.

“Oh.” He said, the joy in his voice gone. He picked up the cube and ran his fingers over it. He tipped his glasses further down on his nose and leaned in close. He let out a long, exasperated sigh. “Oh, seven flames.”

“So, what is that thing?” Kursa asked, just tall enough to peer over the counter. She winced as Markus elbowed her shoulder.

“It’s not easy to explain.” Jovick said, shaking his head. He placed the cube and map back in the cylinder and slipped them into a large pocket on his robe. “It’s simpler if I show you.”

“Did it come from outside the wall?” Raz asked, his voice quivering with excitement. Jovick stopped as his voice caught for a moment.

“In a way, yes. You’ll understand better if I show you. Come with me.” He walked back through the door behind the counter. Raz vaulted the counter and kept right on Jovick’s heels. The others, walking around the counter instead, followed behind them and disappeared behind the door’s red curtain.



# CHAPTER 4: The Decaying Forest

## SCENE 1

The back of the shop was much more chaotic than the front. Papers and books were strewn across the floor without a care. Boxes balanced haphazardly on top of each other, threatening to fall from any ill-fated breath. A few broken jars lay in puddles of their own contents. Woolen clothing riddled with moth holes and many unidentifiable items piled up high in the room’s many corners. Jovick rummaged through crate after crate, cursing quietly to himself. They stood in silence, watching and waiting.

“Ah, here we are.” Jovick said as he lifted a small metal box. He placed it gently on the lid of another crate and opened it. Inside was a pile of thin, rectangular stone slabs, each with a string attached. He picked out five and handed them out to each person, saving one for himself. On the front of each was a symbol that looked like a split circle contained inside of a larger circle, intersected by a line.

“Put it on like this.” Jovick said, placing the string around his neck. They all did the same. Satisfied, he nodded, then exited through the back door.

“What are they?” Kursa asked, staying close behind Raz as he followed close behind Jovick.

“They’re to protect us. The place we’re heading is dangerous, so I’m sure you’ve heard of it.” Jovick said as he walked to a small stable with a single horse inside. “The Forest of Decay.”

“What?” Markus said, aghast. “Why would we go there? We’ll just vanish like everyone else who goes in the forest.” Jovick opened the gate and led his horse out by the reins.

“Because that’s where the truth is. Don’t worry, we will be safe. These runes will keep us from being attacked by the dangers that dwell within.” Jovick said, patting the rune hanging on his chest. “Just be sure they’re clearly visible on your front. That much is vital.” He grabbed onto the saddle and hoisted himself up on his horse. “Do you have all that you need?”

Markus glanced towards their horse and cart hitched near the front end of the shop, shrugged and threw up his arms.

“I guess?” He said.

“Good. It’s better if we move quickly.” Jovick said as he glanced around. “It’s best if we’re not followed.” He turned and trotted his horse towards the road. They stood there for a moment and watched him ride.

“I can’t believe this.” Markus said.

“I can!” Raz said and rushed towards the cart. Mae and Kursa said nothing as they trailed behind him. Markus, while voicing his reluctance, followed.

## SCENE 2

They had travelled for a few hours when it finally began to get dark. Jovick rode his horse off the path and onto a flat stretch of grass nearby. The others did the same.

“We’ll stay here for the night. It’s not safe to enter the Forest of Decay at night, anyway.” Jovick said.

“Or ever.” Markus muttered under his breath as he climbed down from the cart. Raz snickered as he grabbed an armful of firewood from the back of the cart.

As darkness fell, they all sat around the fire together. On a spit was two skewered rabbits roasting over the open flame. Markus eyed Mae suspiciously as they spoke.

“So, you just…stopped being a guardian?” Raz said as he snapped his fingers. “Bang poof, just like that?”

“Don’t blame me if I don’t buy it.” Markus said, crossing his arms. “You tried to kill me like an hour before that.” Mae said nothing, just shrugged her shoulders and prodded at the spit.

“I’m just glad you don’t have a bloodlust for us anymore.” Raz said.

“The night is young.” Mae responded, not looking up from the fire.

“Was that…a joke?” Kursa asked in disbelief.

“Holy shit.” Raz said, as he reached both arms out and grabbed Markus and Kursa’s shoulders. “Did we just witness a guardian make a joke?” Then, ever so slightly, Mae smirked. Raz let out a loud, bellowing laugh.

“Get some rest, everyone. We reach the forest early tomorrow.” Jovick said as he stood up and carried his bedroll a fair distance away from the rest of them. Raz rolled his eyes and scoffed.

“What a buzzkill.” He said as he elbowed at Kursa.



## SCENE 3

The air surrounding the forest felt different. It was colder and quieter than anywhere they had been. No birds or bugs so much as chirped, even if there were any around to do so. The trees were stark white and leafless, with gnarled trunks adorned with thin, curled branches. It was as though nothing living dared approach the forest. Jovick stopped his horse just before the tree line and hopped off. They pulled up next to him and disembarked.

“Okay, now remember, keep the rune clearly visible the entire time we’re in there.” Jovick said, twirling his with his thumb and forefinger, then turning to walk inside.

“Wait.” Markus said. “I don’t feel good about this. It’s too risky.”

“I’m going in either way. You can follow me if you want. Only if you want to know the truth, that is.” Jovick said, raising his eyebrows. He took his horse by the reins and led it between the gnarled branches and twisted thickets plaguing the forest.

“I’m going in. You don’t have to come with me.” Raz said. Markus let out a long sigh and tied their horse to a nearby tree.

“No, if you’re going in, I’m going in.” He said. Raz smiled gently, clapped Markus on the back and led him into the trees.

The forest appeared to continue forever. While not very thick, the trees surrounded them, seemingly endless in every direction. The ground was hard and blackened. The air was eerily silent and still. Mae breathed in sharply and stopped walking. Now alert, she peered around, searching for something.

“What’s wrong?” Kursa asked her. Then she felt it. A steady rumbling, like a giant hammer slamming the ground to a beat. They all stopped and listened as the rumbling grew in intensity. A flash of white moved between the trees in the distance.

“There.” She said and pointed. Ahead of them, a huge egg-shaped mechanical beast weaved its way through the dying trunks with calculated ease. It propelled itself forward on four spider-like legs, each ending in a deadly point, twisting and bending like leather despite being metal. With incredible force, it slammed each leg far into the dirt as it barreled fast towards them. A few trees crashed to the side as the beast tossed its oblong body forward. Mae drew her sword.

“Wait!” Jovick yelled, raising his palm to her. “Trust me, just wait!” Mae stayed put, but still kept her sword ready. The beast skidded to a halt in front of them, spraying dirt over their heads. Four red lights lit up on its face like eyes, each nestled in a corner of two intersecting lines across its face. Metal plates covered the outside of its body like scales. A thin triangular beam of light shot out from between its eyes and shined up and down over Jovick. It made a short beep and moved to Markus, then to Kursa, and then to Raz. Then it looked to Mae, its gaze lingering on her. Her rune was being blocked by her arms as she held out her sword. The beast blared out a mechanical roar and its eyes grew brighter.

“Mae, your rune!” Jovick shouted. Mae, not wanting to leave herself vulnerable, stayed put. An orb of red light like fire grew in the space between its eyes. She could feel the heat radiating off it.

“Mae!” Jovick shouted again. Mae let out a frustrated grunt and dropped her arms to her side. The orb vanished as it shined the beam of light on her again. It found her rune, played the same short beep and remained silent. Then, keeping its legs still, its body flipped end over end until it faced the direction it came and stomped back into the trees.

“See? Told you we’d be safe.” Jovick said. Mae glared at him. “Let’s keep moving.” He started walking again before they had any time to process. Markus didn’t know what to say, he couldn’t think. He followed his instinct and walked behind Jovick as his head swam. He could barely hear Kursa calling his name.

“Markus!” She shouted at him, tugging on his hard leather bracer. He snapped back into his head and looked down at her. “Markus, what was that?” All he did was shake his head.

“I don’t know.”

## SCENE 4

The further in they traveled, the bleaker their surroundings became. Burnt trees long since smoldered out, only leaving behind their blackened husks, remained standing out of spite. Large divots in the ground filled with hardened black dirt, rock and glass grew more and more frequent until they stopped at the edge of a small clearing. A few patches of grass grew within, seemingly the only place in the whole forest where anything could grow.

“Okay,” Jovick said, stopping to tie his horse to a nearby tree. “This is the place.”

“Is this a joke?” Markus said, looking around at the empty field. “There’s nothing here.” Jovick approached a tall rock standing upright at one end of the clearing.

“Give me a little credit.” He said. He took his rune and pressed it to a flat face on top of the stone. As soon as they made contact, the ground shook. An oval of dirt in the center of the clearing started rising. A room rose out of the ground, walls made entirely of thick panels of glass. Two of the panels slid apart, forming a wide doorway.

“After you.” Jovick said, bowing slightly and gesturing towards the door. They made their way inside, cautious, but driven forward. The room hummed as they entered and lights flickered on overhead. Jovick walked in behind them and pressed a downwards facing triangle that glowed inside the glass. The doors hissed shut, sealed together and formed one single piece of glass. The room started descending back into the ground. As they drifted down, they passed floor after floor of a great facility. Chairs sat empty in front of terminals, terminals sat on top of dusty desks, desks sat unused, scattered across each floor. Huge screens hung on the walls, long dead and dark. The details of each floor became difficult to discern as the room sped down faster and faster, until all they could make out were the lights flashing by. Then, the room gave a great shudder, and everything outside went dark.

“Hey…uh…what’s that?” Kursa asked, her voice wavering as she looked out the window. Below them, a great blue green orb stretched out inexplicably far into the distance, dominating their view until it curved back on itself, giving way to the white speckle of stars scattered among the inky blackness of the void, ever beckoning. Fluffy white clouds littered the planet’s surface, high above the deep, turbulent, blue oceans, as black and grey storms spiraled above the landmasses, ravaging everything in its path.

“There she is. That’s where this map came from. Well, where everything came from, really.” Jovick said, nodding towards the windows and patting the map in his pocket. “That’s our planet. That’s Earth.” Innumerable chunks were missing out of the globe, as though bites had been taken out of the land. The chasms travelled deep, deep down into the planet. Boulders the size of small moons drifted around the planet, twisting and twirling in an endless dance. Asteroids, formed from the planet’s own flesh. The edges of the world expanded slowly as the elevator shot downwards, gaining speed with zero effort.

Above them, now dwarfed by the immensity of the world below, was the jagged, rocky underbelly of their home. Enormous bowl-shaped metal structures jutted out of the rock seemingly at random, each emitting a colossal, bright blue flame to keep Rumelia afloat above the Earth, fluttering in a windless storm, screaming silently into the night.

Markus stammered, his mouth failing to form the thoughts twisting in his mind. He steadied himself on a handrail as his legs threatened to give way. Raz was beaming. He had been waiting his whole life to bear witness to something of this scale.

The room shuddered hard as they passed through the upper stratosphere. Wind slammed into them hard enough to make the whole structure swing back and forth. Metal ground against metal as counterweights deployed above them to offset their swing. Their descent slowed as they grew closer to the ground.

“When the Seven travel outside the walls, they’re really going down there?” Raz asked.

“We are.” Jovick said, matter-of-factly.

“So Rumelia was never on the planet.” Raz said. Jovick shook his head.

“The Rumelia we know always been up there, far past the real sky, adrift around the ruins of our ancestors’ old home. But once, it was a part of the Earth. For an unknown reason, our ancestors uprooted the entire country out of the planet and flew it up there.” Jovick said, pointing up at Rumelia as it grew smaller and smaller. “Everything in Rumelia is fabricated. Controlled. The rivers, the weather, the wind. The sky is nothing more than a glass dome. Even the Endless Wall. Instead of keeping our enemies out, it’s meant to keep all of us in. All this was created just to keep us alive up there. But why? How long have we been there? Centuries? Millenia, maybe? To think of a civilization capable of a feat such as this.” He crossed his arms and looked out the window at the ever-approaching ground. “It frightens me. Why were they so desperate to leave?” The room shuddered again as gusts of wind slammed against the sides of the room, as though increasingly desperate to break through the thick glass.

Jovick pressed a button on the wall, and the room stopped its descent. He pressed another button, and the doors slid open. The wind jammed itself inside the room, nearly knocking everyone off their feet.

“Breathe it in. That’s what real air smells like.” Jovick said, taking a deep breath. Holding onto the handrail, Raz inched forward towards the door. He stuck his head out, looked down at the earth and smiled. The others stood close behind him, staring out over the swaths of land before them.

Jovick gripped the handrail on the opposite wall so tight that his knuckles turned white. He grabbed a small book out of his robe and flittered through the pages. He glanced up at the four in front of him as they looked out over the far-off ground. He shut his eyes tight and started whispering an incantation from the book. A red orb winked into existence just above the paper, growing larger as he spoke. The pages fluttered as the wind whipped ferociously around him. Out of the corner of Markus’s eye, he noticed a flicker of red light.

“Mother fucker!” He shouted, reaching down for the hilt of his sword.

“I’m sorry.” Jovick said. In the blink of an eye, all the wind in the room was absorbed into the orb. For a moment, the room stood still, frozen in a cacophonous silence. Then, the orb exploded forwards in an enormous blast of energy. All four of them were tossed into the air and out the door, forced to plummet downwards towards the distant earth.

“I’m so sorry.” Jovick whispered to himself. He rummaged through the pocket on his robe, grabbed the metal cylinder holding the map and tossed it out the door behind them. He pulled a small rectangular box out of another pocket, flicked a switch on the side and held it up to his mouth.

“We have a problem. More people found out.” He pressed a button on the wall, sliding the doors closed. “This is bad.” The room shuddered in protest once again. Jovick took one last fleeting glance at the shattered earth before the room shot upwards, ascending back up to Rumelia.

And as he fell, when Raz finally lost consciousness, he dreamed of falling snow.



# CHAPTER 5: The Fall

## SCENE 1:

When Raz awoke, the only thing he could hear was the wind as it whipped past his ears. Everything in his view spun as his body tumbled end over end while he fell. He stretched out his limbs to right himself, the wind making his eyes water as he looked around to try and regain his bearings. In front of him, he saw Kursa tumbling head over heels as she fell. Raz angled himself forward and flew towards Kursa until he collided with her.

“Grab onto me!” He tried to yell over the roaring wind. He wasn’t sure if Kursa heard him, but she wasn’t letting go. He noticed the other two falling just below them, Markus held on tight to the back of Mae’s armor. Raz again angled himself and crashed into the other two. He positioned himself underneath them all and motioned for them to grab onto him. They did, tightly. The ground beneath them was approaching fast. They were falling right above a large pond.

*Perfect,* Raz thought. He took a deep breath and, with a practiced ease, cleared his head of any and all thoughts. With both arms outstretched he opened his eyes and blasted out a powerful stream of hot air towards the water. The recoil slowed them down and broke the water’s surface tension before they crashed into it, hard. He could only see bubbles and the subtle glint of sunlight through the dark, murky water. Raz felt all on him hands lessen their grip as he swam towards the shimmering surface. He broke through and gasped in quick, deep breaths while he whipped around in the water. Markus surfaced just in front of him, pulling Kursa up with him as she coughed up water.

“Maes…sinking!” Kursa shouted, in between coughing fits. Markus let go of Kursa and dove into the water. Raz grabbed Kursa before she sank and watched Markus vanish down into the depths. They waited there, treading water, hearing nothing but the gentle waves and Kursa’s coughs. There was a splash behind them as Markus resurfaced with Mae in his arms. Her eyes were wide as torrents of water streamed out of her nose and mouth while she gasped for breath.

“Help me with her. Her armors heavy.” Markus said, also catching his breath.

“Can you swim?” Raz said to Kursa. She nodded, and Raz let her go and grabbed ahold of Mae. They swam in silence, trying not to breath in mouthfuls of water as they held Mae afloat. Raz swam until his feet touched sand. He and Markus dragged her to the shore, then collapsed beside her themselves. They laid on their backs, chests rising and falling, covered in sand and gasping for air. Mae wheezed and coughed as she expelled the water from her lungs.

Raz gasped as something sharp and jagged pressed up against his throat. A man stood above him, holding a spear with a long shard of metal attached to the end. Four other men walked out from behind the trees lining the edge of the beach, spears at the ready.

“Gods, can we catch a break?” Raz sputtered. He wore garb unfamiliar to Raz. A tunic, interwoven with broken shards of metal, with even more shards woven into his tightly braided hair. He spoke in a language even more alien to him.

“I don’t understand.” Raz said. The man gestured with his head for them to stand. Mae worked her way up but looked unsteady on her feet. When all four were on their feet, the man gestured again, this time towards the forest behind. Reluctantly, but without another choice, the four were led further into an unfamiliar land.



SCENE 2

“Hm. They lived.”

A short, hooded man crouched in the brush and watched as the four were taken further into the forest. He placed his hand on the hilt of his dagger as he heard the branches crunch behind him. He eased when he saw a tall hooded man crouch down beside him.

“How many does that make, then? That survived, I mean.” The tall man asked. The other man shrugged.

“Plus these four? Eight, maybe nine.” He said, “Though, most of those ones were injured by the fall. They don’t tend to last long after that.”

“Are they injured?” The Tall man gestured to the four as they slipped out of sight into the trees.

“Don’t seem to be. Not seriously, anyway.” The short man said.

“Should we stop them?”

“No. Let them continue. They seem strong, they might be the ones that we want.”

“I hope so. We’re running out of time. I think the council is starting to catch on.”

“Then you should head back before they notice you’re gone. I’ll keep watch over them.”

“Right. Good luck.” The tall man stood up and turned to leave when the other man grabbed his arm.

“Be careful, okay? I don’t want to lose you too.” The short man said, gripping his arm harder. The tall man put his hand gently on top of the other’s.

“Don’t worry. When am I not careful?” The tall man flashed a grin, barely visible underneath his hood. The short man hid his own smile as he slacked his grip. He faced forward again as the other man returned the way he came, unbeknownst to each other, never to meet again.